

The Weir: Storytelling that Transforms

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ABSTRACT

Through the acts of telling our stories, writing our stories, and reading others' stories, we become known both to others and to ourselves. Drawing on the theme of transformation in the recent play *The Weir*, this article explores the place of story in adult and continuing education and considers how story told by students can break through the dam of resistance to learning and create a classroom space of trust, sharing, mutual regard, and engagement that is both sustaining and transformative.

RÉSUMÉ

C'est en racontant et en écrivant nos histoires, et en lisant celles des autres qu'on se connaît et qu'on connaît les autres. En s'inspirant du thème de la transformation dans la pièce récente *The Weir* [Le barrage], les auteurs de cet article examinent la place des histoires dans l'éducation permanente et l'éducation aux adultes, et considèrent les façons par lesquelles une histoire racontée par des étudiants peut briser le barrage de résistance à l'apprentissage, et créer un espace de salle de classe de confiance, de partage, de respect réciproque, et de participation durables et transformatifs.

INTRODUCTION

It has been suggested that we live in story, we act in story, and we remember in story (Randall, 1995); storytelling echoes our humanness. Story is a fundamental way in which we order our experiences. We tell a story of what happened recently or long ago. We retell and embellish another's story. Sometimes our story unfolds around an event in the boardroom or a tense moment in the classroom, or it may simply share a sighting on our way home. In some cases, our story is meant to unburden us or to vent or discharge the emotions tied to the happenings of the day. And story can also serve to promote intimacy, as when two people exchange personal histories at the first stages of a developing relationship. To bring another into our inner circle usually signals that the relationship is moving to a deeper level, and in this case, story is understood to be part of our intimate life, our life of friendship and trust. In telling our story, we reveal what we know and who we are (Jackson, 2007).

Perhaps because of this power of story, when we come as students to a classroom we come armed to protect this part of ourselves, our story, close within. In a recent article, educator Svetlana Nikitina (2004) decried "the wall" that students erect against sharing their personal, yet pertinent stories. Students appear to distrust personal narratives as legitimate sources of knowledge, she observed, and this distrust gives academic learning from books and journals power over their "learning in the flesh," leaving their personal stories to remain not revealed, but rather "under their skin" (Nikitina, 2004, p. 251). Yet, could the telling of stories serve to help students negotiate their way through the class and open themselves to its challenges? Could the sharing of stories alter the space of the classroom? In this article, I explore the power of story to open up the possibilities for learning, especially learning that challenges previously held perspectives. For this purpose, I draw on my experiences as an instructor who has begun to incorporate story early into the introductory phase of the classroom experience, among both graduate and adult and continuing education students. As a possible metaphor for education, I draw on the weir—the dam that regulates the river's flow of water; *The Weir* is also the central theme and title of a recent play by Conor McPherson, a young Irish playwright.

TRANSFORMATION IN *THE WEIR*

Some years ago, while in Dublin at an educational conference, I found myself in possession of a single ticket to the Gate Theatre to see the first production in Ireland of *The Weir*. I sat entranced by the play and by the events

that unfolded. As the curtain closed, I knew that I had witnessed the power of story to transform a space and those in it.

The Weir opens with the scene of a down-at-the-heel Irish pub in rural, remote northwest Ireland; there, the bartender and a few area bachelors engage in small talk of weather and broken farm ware. The talk turns to gossip and to the subject of the female who has just purchased a nearby house. Onto this scene arrive the real estate agent, Finbar, accompanied by Valerie, the new homeowner, she being newly arrived from Dublin. The small talk and gossip of the earlier evening shift to bantering, posturing, and rivalry among the men, who now compete for the new female's attention. They turn the conversation to Valerie's newly purchased house and, for her edification, the men recount the ghostly history of this house, a house still possessed by its past. The story leaves Valerie spellbound. More folklore follows. Then Jim tells his gravedigger's story of a little girl, whose peace is disturbed by an intruder to her grave. Visibly distressed, Valerie leaves the stage. Abruptly, the mood shifts and the play builds to a climax as Valerie returns, free now to reveal "something that happened to me" (McPherson, 1999, p. 53). As her audience sits still as stone, Valerie expels the story surrounding the drowning of her only child, who, even in death, still calls out for her.

With this tragic telling, everything changes—the mood, the manner, and the rapport among those present. The men's behaviour toward Valerie and then toward one another begins to take on a quality of tenderness, generosity, and empathy, previously unapparent, seemingly held back. Valerie's story, in its manner of telling to the patrons of that Irish pub, incites a change among them and in the quality of the stories that follow. Whereas the earlier stories, mixed with Irish folklore, focused on events and happenings outside of themselves, what follows begins a turn inward, to the personal and to the telling of stories previously untold. With each sequent story comes a deeper measure of revelation, no longer of events external to the teller but of those inside and more deeply personal, of loneliness and loss. Jack, the pub's owner, follows Valerie's story with his own story, which unwinds into his past and to the forfeiture of the only woman he ever loved, lost through the immaturity, callousness, and arrogance of his youth. At the close of his story, he offers up his "retrospective evaluation" and owns up to the painful lessons learned: "You should only catch someone's eye for the right reason" (p. 67). At the play's end, the space reverberates with greater humanness and connection.

Several years after seeing this production, I was conducting a continuing education class with a group of Canadian students, and as I listened to their personal introductions through story, I realized that I was witnessing once again this power of story in human interaction. As I tuned in to each student's story, as I felt the impact of each one's life, and as I observed how

it changed the mood and quality of the classroom, I knew that I had been there before—at the Gate Theatre, where Valerie’s story of personal heart-break had captured me. Now something was happening here in the class, as it had happened in the earlier setting when the dam of resistance burst in the production of *The Weir*.

The Weir’s theme centres on the power of story to bring about a transformation, not only in the teller but also in the listener and in the space between them. Through each respective telling, its characters exemplify this power of story to transform, as well as to empower others similarly to tell their stories and so to find understanding and acceptance. *The Weir* highlights the possible parallels of the happenings between the patrons of the Irish pub and the students in a classroom.

BARRIERS TO LEARNING/SOURCES OF THE WEIR

The weir, or dam, appears in the classroom in many forms, oftentimes constructed of the rigidity of content and formality of process, the “on-task” communications, the formal testing, the “focused” discussion, and the pre-determined goals. Melanie Walker (2004) observed that higher education is less the “practice of freedom” that bell hooks (1994) advocated and more “a practice of rejection and silencing” (p. 140). In a typical classroom, students sit in idle rows, masking their yawns and frequent glances at the clock, their mind trailing off in all directions as the instructor labours through the lecture. Notes are taken on various points, mostly in anticipation of easy retrieval for future tests. Whereas some students may know one another outside the classroom, more of them are and will remain strangers to each other throughout the term. And many will take refuge behind the weir, protecting themselves against criticism and error.

Ambivalence, obstacles, and resistances to learning can take various forms to block or derail learning. Knud Illeris (2004) outlined some types of such obstacles and resistances. He noted that when learning is directed to the cognitive domain, obstacles may arise from a lack of understanding of the message, a lack of involvement, or a lack of previous knowledge. However, in the transformative realm, where learners encounter a more personally challenging circumstance, other obstacles come into play. These may include strong motives and defences that are mobilized to avoid this type of learning in order to maintain a mental balance and a sense of identity. Further, these defences may become exacerbated by the personal and work-related stresses of adults’ daily lives.

Britzman (1998) moved deeper into the unconscious and focused on “the primal scene of learning” (p. 3), that is, the unconscious elements associated with learning. Among these are learners’ histories of learning and with

learning—how the conditions of their upbringing accompany them in the classroom. Britzman further reminded us that education intrudes; clashes may ensue as the learner is confronted with new knowledge; feelings and emotions may rise and become “interferences” in the learning. The title of Britzman’s 1998 book, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects*, captures the tensions, resistances, and disruptions that can occur when the subject of the learning (the student) encounters the object of the learning (the new knowledge). Britzman consistently acknowledged the power of the learner’s inner world to “complicate” the learning. Earlier, Nikitina (2004), who decried the reluctance of students to share their personal stories, posed the challenge: “How do we open doors for personal stories in education?” (p. 263). She called on both students and educators to become aware of the wall and its power to quiet the voices of hesitation, fear, frustration, and self-silencing. “Probe the wall,” she prods, “throw some stones at it. . . . but learn to recognize the difficulty with sharing a personal story, and ponder the hard questions regarding what might help to ease it down” (p. 251).

These perspectives on the various obstacles and interferences to learning invite the question of what it might take for learners to move beyond their own histories and their defensive postures and become open to the world of ideas in education. Given the many resistances to personal learning, how can motivation be directed away from defensiveness and self-protection and toward engagement and involvement? By telling our stories, might we permit these resistances, histories, and attitudes to surface and become known both to ourselves and to others? Might we, in the process, discover that we are not alone, that others also know these feelings of impostorship and alienation? Could story open up the gates for a kind of transformation?

STORIES TOLD “AGAINST THE GRAIN”

My beginnings with the use and power of story occurred while teaching a class in Canada. Our continuing education class on adult learning and development has just begun and I have suggested to my class of Canadian students, for whom I am the guest course instructor, that for our next class meeting we begin with personal introductions, adding that these take the form of telling our story. (It seems fitting that a course on adult learning and development would touch upon our own personhood.) This story, I clarify, can be accompanied by photos or personal items that might help in the telling. That evening I search around, at times frantically, for something to bring to accompany my story. I am not in my permanent place of residence and the choices are few. I notice in the corner of one room my old childhood, life-sized baby doll, newly outfitted in a bonnet and pink hand-crocheted dress. I consider bringing her and just as quickly dismiss as silly the notion

of carrying a doll to class—hardly fitting for the teacher. So I consider other items—something that would help me tell my story. I know that I will be going first, as it is my general practice to be the first when asking my students to do something out of the ordinary. And the doll seems to be looking at me, insisting that it is she who should be brought to class. I wrap her up along with a book about writing, and the next morning I trudge into my morning class with doll and book in hand.

I begin by introducing her. She is, I say, the very first personal item that I received when I came to Canada at the age of five, having arrived from Austria, following the Second World War. My family had been living there, in the tiny town of Bach, near Salzburg, for several years following our escape from war-torn Eastern Europe, as the Soviet front moved westward, seeking to repatriate its “citizens.” We were among those seeking escape, my parents being Ukrainian and Ukraine being under Soviet occupation. The fortuitous move to Canada, as “Displaced Persons,” afforded us safety, as it also reshaped every facet of our life. My parents had to make the difficult adjustment to life in a strange country and to the loss of their careers, family ties, and life-world as they had known it. And we, my brother and I, went about our adjustment to life in two worlds—the world of “English,” outside in our school and neighbourhood, and the world of Ukrainian, in our home and ethnic community. The consequences of this move were many for us all, and for me it left two trails that have remained to this day: the experience of being ever the “stranger,” with half of me continuing to exist in one culture and the other half yearning for home but often being part of neither; and my love of books and writing, as these and learning were what my parents valued and nurtured above all else.

I am done, and now the other students of the class begin, one by one telling their story, some with photographs, others with cherished objects. We hear stories of individuals similarly displaced by war, this time in a more recent war that brought them to North America as “Boat People.” One woman takes us far back to the story of her grandfather’s birth in Eastern Europe to an unmarried young woman and the legacy this left for her family; one man recounts how the difficult birth of his daughter caused him to rethink his life priorities and vocational direction; and a mother reveals how the special needs of her young son presented immense challenges that, in turn, opened up new life directions for work and community service. Each one takes a turn and unweaves a story—of childhood trials, of life’s dreams, of unexpected crossroads, of finally finding a place. Like those patrons of the Irish pub, these students mirror through their stories their own encounters with loneliness, loss, struggle, destiny, and love.

With each respective telling of a story, I note a shift in the classroom space in a way similar to the space in *The Weir’s* Irish pub. It seems that the class is

being brought closer together, bonding its members to each other and creating a place of greater trust, sharing, care, and heightened anticipation of what might be ahead. As the course progresses, students speak of the sense of community that they now feel and that they believe has to do with the stories they have been telling and hearing. For the remainder of the course, the class continues with this willingness to listen closely when others speak, to be receptive to other points of view, and to acknowledge others' thoughts and ideas. This, in turn, invites further sharing as if, having heard their personal stories, they now are more interested in others and what others have to say. Moreover, they willingly put forth personal examples and illustrations to the course-related themes that are discussed, adding their perspective, piecing together alternative views, and thereby enriching the material.

Armed with this experience, I introduce the storytelling exercise to students in a subsequent graduate seminar in adult education when I return to teach in the United States. Once again, I note the growth of community and care among the students. In one particular class, the theme of oppression in education heightens the emotional charge, as students openly recall their experiences with oppression as children, as students, and as citizens. Some share their personal efforts to confront it. Each personal narrative of oppression builds on the previous, adding something new, and I, their instructor, watch in awe as oppression, in its many faces and facets, reveals itself to us all. Throughout the rest of this seminar, their performance, as well as their mid-term and final evaluations, affirm the deep connection that these students have felt both in relation to one another and to the course.

I have noted that even though it is now behind them, students continue to refer to "*that course*" as if it were one where something special had happened, as one where their view of oppression and of its presence and pervasiveness in our culture had changed. They insist that in *that class* they had learned more about oppression through the dialogue and sharing than they would ever have done through the readings alone. By defining the class as "*that class*," they are echoing Dewey's (1964) observation that when we accord an experience the special quality of "*that*," it is, in some measure, transformative. Moreover, they continue to affirm that by introducing themselves through their story and by bringing others into their life, they had entered deeper into participation and engagement in the content and processes of the class; they had opened themselves up to a deeper learning.

OUR LIFE AS STORY

Without an informing idea, the details of real life are clutter, noise, chaos. We need an idea given form for things to make sense. And that's what stories are: ideas given form, ideas given breath. (Jackson, 2007, p. x)

William Randall (1995) examined life-as-story through a psychological, developmental, and learning perspective, and observed that the way we make sense of the events of our life, how we interpret them, constitutes our identity, our unique self. In this sense, we *are* our stories. The unity of these smaller stories gives rise to our more unified, larger story that becomes the *novel* of our life (Randall, 1995). Randall highlights the significance of our stories to our becoming co-authors of our life:

The story untold is the life un-lived. The more un-storied existence we can transform into experience, that is, and the more untold experience we are able to express, then the more powerfully and profoundly can our self-creation proceed: the more authority we have over the storying and re-storying of our own lives. (p. 281)

Jackson (2007), like Randall (1995), acknowledged the presence of an audience—that we need an audience—listeners, in order to tell our story and, without such listeners, our stories die. In his recent book, Jackson commented on the importance of both hearing what stories tell and of telling one's own story. Stories do something; they are instrumental, having some motive or intent; and they are at once reactive and active. Moreover, stories change over our sense of time, of contexts, and of what mattered.

Finally, the stories told by others can stimulate the telling of our own, as happened among the characters in *The Weir*. Jackson (2007) further highlighted the effect of the listener to modulate what stories are told and how we tell them. In the case of my story and those of my students, I suspect that the willingness of each one of us to listen, to truly take in the story of the other, served to bring each student to speak.

A second feature of both the Canadian and American classes' experiences with story concerned the qualities of story—how we tell our stories, how we use stories to create a sense of self, and how through story we interpret the lives of others. Psychologist Jerome Bruner (2002) summarized the characteristics of story: a) its characters are free agents, that is, with minds to decide; b) these characters have some expectations of life and of the state of the world; c) something goes awry, some breach occurs—what Aristotle termed *peripeteia*—a sudden reversal in circumstances, in expectations; d) the characters undergo and make efforts to cope with the situation; and e) an outcome or resolution follows. Bruner adds, further, that f) in story there is a listener and a teller, the latter having some knowledge of the world, some point of view. Then there is the aspect g) of some moral insight into the human condition, rather than a simple restoration of what was. Finally, there is the h) “retrospective evaluation” of the possible meaning of the story with respect to a larger human problem (p. 20).

In this list of qualities, it is apparent that for there to be a story, something unforeseen must happen; story is “a recounting of human plans gone off track, of expectations gone awry” (Bruner, 2002, p. 31). There are then the subsequent efforts to mend and overcome and the importance of sharing our story and also its meaning. Turning to the stories told, I noted that the students’ introductions were neither limited to a simple recounting of their interests and professional goals nor to a simple description of events related to their presence in each respective class. Their stories of loss, struggle, and suffering had encompassed “expectations gone awry” and of subsequent efforts to mend.

A further feature apparent in our stories in both classrooms involved their quality of being contrary to or apart from what was the norm or expected. In the case of my story, I am aware that it was hardly the conventional one of life begun in North America, nor of being born of parents who themselves had their citizenship, history, and identity on this continent. In revealing my immigrant history, I had positioned myself apart from the majority culture. I had placed my history and identity, as author Julie Rak (2004) once described, “against the grain” of what my students might have expected to hear. Rak observed that when we tell our story, we acknowledge our position within the majority culture and we enter into a negotiation between *our* history, identity, and nationality and that of the conventional, majority culture. In turn, my students who narrated their story were doing the same—negotiating their identity, struggles, and displacements against the prevailing versions of their North American culture, a culture that values healthy children, normal childbirths, long-standing marriages, citizenship by birth, and new loves under conventional conditions. Their stories, in contrast, included childhood trauma, unexpected pregnancies, encounters with racism, struggles with identity, and love found on the Internet. Evidently, my students were willing to tell their story “against the grain” of what is generally assumed and accepted to be the norm.

By incorporating story into the introductory phase of my classes, I have come to appreciate the shift that story can precipitate, within both the speaker and listener, and how story can promote a corresponding shift in a classroom, especially where our hope includes increased engagement, the overcoming of the many obstacles to learning, and a willingness to venture beyond certain firmly held notions and ideas. I have discovered that story can burst the weir, thereby permitting further personal sharing and also learning that is oftentimes deeper, for some, even transformative. My completion of this article corresponded with the publication of a book on story in education with adult learners by authors Marsha Rossiter and Carolyn Clark (2007), a book that provides a most comprehensive and timely review of the power of the various uses of narrative and story in teaching and learning.

Stories, they observed, capture both the cognitive and the affective dimensions of learning, they engage the personal with the educational, and they open up the possibility for one's critical reflection on one's story. They concluded that "stories touch our hearts and activate our emotions, even as they inform us with new knowledge. As a result, stories are a powerful medium for transformative learning and growth" (p. 73).

And yet, the use of story in the classroom, as I have described it, has limits to be recognized. To begin with, every class has its own flavour, its own quality, its own expectations and sense of safety. In some classes, the stories that are told have the quality of personal richness and depth that I have noted throughout this article; in other classes, the telling, while it is in narrative form, in the sense of events being ordered and recalled, is less so a story in the sense of "expectations gone awry," as described by Bruner (2002). Some students, evidently uncomfortable with this exercise as tellers or as listeners, seem to have an effect on the character of this exercise's touching less close to the heart. I have felt, also, my dismay in reading the final evaluations of one such class and noting that, whereas I had listened, enthralled, at least one other student had become bored, writing that the stories "took too long." I have been left to struggle to determine when to use story in the introductory phase and when not. I have no clear answer. Each new class is an experiment with story. I have, with time, come to recognize that when a class ends, the mould breaks and each class begins anew; and much as I would like, what has happened will not and cannot be recreated.

USES OF STORY IN VARIED FORMS

It may be that education can only take place when we can be the friends of one another's minds. Surely, there will be much to discover if we put stories next to the stories ... (Maxine Greene, 1991, p. xi)

More and more educators, such as Jane Tompkins, Parker Palmer, and Deborah Britzman, are describing the processes through which transformative change occurs in the classroom and are outlining the characteristics of learning environments that promote transformation. Palmer (1998), who envisions knowing as a process in which the objective and subjective interact, offered the following possible scenario of education that allows students not only to know but also to become known:

Students and subject would meet in ways that allow our passions to be tempered by facts and the facts to be warmed up, made fit for human habitation, by passions. In this kind of education we would not merely know the world. We ourselves, our inner secrets, would become known; we would be brought into the community of mutual knowing called truth. (p. 36)

Stories Told by Students and Teachers

Various ways are open to how story can be introduced into the classroom. The first may be the stories that students tell as they introduce themselves, as has been the focus of this article. In this case, directions have been quite simple: students are asked to “tell their story” and to incorporate, if they so choose, cherished objects, photos, or other mementos that might suggest a possible focus. I would include also the stories, both personal and public, that instructors tell in the context of their exploration and discussion of various topics and themes related to their course. As so many students affirm, long after the course is done and the grades are in, what remains are the stories. Perhaps wise was the teacher who proclaimed that if you want your students to remember something, don’t tell them a fact; tell them a story.

Stories Written: Five Chapters of a Life

A second form of story is the autobiography that students write about themselves, where life is transformed into text. As one frequent elective final assignment, I ask students to write five chapters of the story of their life or, alternatively, five chapters of their life as learners. I have described this process and its benefit to personal learning in earlier articles (Karpiak, 2000, 2003). The directions are simple: imagine that a publisher has given you the option of writing five chapters of your life story; what would be the titles of the five chapters? Now, write two or three pages on each chapter. When students write these five chapters of their life, they draw together onto paper the seemingly scattered episodes of their life and they reflect upon their life over time, as a whole. Some are able to see the connections between their history and their present situation; some come to see the roles they have inadvertently played; some take a stand and make decisions for their future. But all have gained new insights and understandings. Often, the last chapter pulls together the various threads and adds the author’s “take on things,” on what this life has meant and what is still ahead.

Stories Revealed through Literature

“Reading is a mode of active imagination,” observed writer Robert Sardello (1985, p. 429), and the book gives birth to a world. This third variation of story may include works of fiction, personal narratives, and memoirs and autobiographies of historical figures and lesser-known individuals, read in an educational context. As Maxine Greene (1990) remarked, “Encounters with fiction can and do acquaint people with alternative ways of seeing, feeling, and understanding” (p. 263). And Merriam (1983) observed that fictional literature can be a medium for understanding the human condition, human development, and the workings of the human psyche. She noted that in contrast to the perspective and models of human development provided

by social scientists, literary artists provide a picture that is often complex, multi-dimensional, and imaginative, each of which is important to a full perspective on the life experience. For students in a class on adult learning and development, the opening pages of Marilyn French's *The Woman's Room* (1977) portray the protagonist self-blockaded in the women's wash-room, terrified of entering the classroom in which she has already enrolled but believes she does not belong. As students read this passage, they may remember their own first day as adult learners and the confusion and ambivalence they felt, or they may gain an appreciation of what other adult learners might experience. Through reading Margaret Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers* (1988), students come to know about the mid-life experience of one woman and what it reveals about this phase of adulthood. And Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) offers students a glimpse into the struggles of women at the turn of the last century and provides the means for dialogue concerning what gains have yet to be made for women. These works present opportunities for learning that are deeper than is generally anticipated or assumed. As the characters change and develop new perspectives, they invite the readers to reflect on their own life. As Sardello (1985) observed, "What matters is how an individual life has been radically transformed and now speaks in a new way, and it is this new speaking that makes a claim on us" (p. 429).

STORY AND TRANSFORMATION

Higher education is the place where reading and listening transform the soul.

(Robert Sardello, 1985, p. 432)

Through the acts of telling our stories, writing our stories, or reading the stories of others, we become known both to others and to ourselves. When we tell our story, we change in some way not only the environment of learning but also our perception of others and ourselves. Through stories, our own or others, and through our listening, we further a classroom space that is more accepting, more sustaining, more respectful, and more caring—a space in which we as learners and as teachers open ourselves to others' views and thereby to enlarging our own. It is perhaps not so much stories themselves that effect a change, but what stories make possible for the teller and for the audience—a glimpse into the past, a playing out of old conflicts, a soothing of emotional scars, a further piecing of our identity. Story, first plied from the lips of our parents and later lifted from the written page, touches our emotions and engages our memory throughout our life. Story, the desire for which comes so early in our life, has the force to burst through the dam of resistance and open us up to learning and understanding, even such that might, as Sardello suggested, "transform the soul."

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BIOGRAPHY

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