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Agitations and animations

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Abstract

As educators, we write about how we teach and how our students learn, but often there are some things missing from these accounts. These ‘somethings’ are the animations and agitations that attend most deep learning. These are not easy to describe, particularly because they are often only visible in passing moments. I argue that story-telling is one way in which these animations and agitations can be seen, and that story telling therefore plays a part in discovering and communicating some of the more subtle aspects of the teaching and learning experience. In this article, therefore, I tell a story about a teacher and some of his students, in an attempt to identify some of these subtle aspects, and then provide a commentary on what I think the story tells us.

Part 1: The method

At the beginning of 2010, I taught a first-year undergraduate unit called ‘Literacy for Teachers’. Something of significance in relation to the student’s learning seemed to have happened during this unit, something worth writing about.

This ‘something’ has not been easy to describe. Descriptions of content, structure and student responses (all of which are provided in Part 3) are relatively easy to write about and tell a part of the story. But there’s an elusive something else.

This ‘something else’ is connected to the lived life of the classroom: the moments of uncertainty and embarrassment; the false starts (by teachers and students); the yearnings and little risks taken; the personal projections and identifications; the wrong assumptions; the missed moments. The agitations and animations. These agitations and animations, felt and expressed more in passing moments than in statistics and questionnaires, have always seemed to me to be essential elements in the learning drama. These animations and agitations are part

of the 'something of significance'. I want to foreground them in this account of what happened in our 'Literacy for Teachers' unit.

But how?

There is a chapter called 'Storytelling as inquiry' in an early publication on action research (Reason & Hawkins, 1988) in which the authors make the following claim:

Expression is the mode of allowing the meaning of experience to become manifest. It requires the inquirer to partake deeply of experience, rather than stand back in order to analyse. Meaning is part and parcel of all experience, although it may be so interwoven with that experience that it is hidden: it needs to be discovered, created, or made manifest, and communicated. We work with the meaning of experience when we tell stories ... (p. 80)

Stories help us make manifest meanings which otherwise might be hidden. They help us foreground important agitations and animations. So, in an attempt to get closer to the deeper meaning of the experience, I have written a story.

This story is part-fiction, though it is based on my experience and the reported experiences of a number of my students in the 'Literacy for Teachers' unit. In this story I have imagined myself into the heads of some of my students, and I have taken a fiction writer's license to shape conversations and scenes in an attempt to communicate the meaning of the experience. It is my attempt to capture the 'something significant'.

In Part 3 of the paper, I attempt to corroborate my story by supplying supporting evidence: students' responses in questionnaires and conversations. I supplement this with my own commentary, drawing on the work of a number of educational theorists like Elizabeth Birr Moje and Yoram Harpaz.

Part 2: The story

Alison sat in the pale green vinyl-covered 1970s armchair outside her lecturer's office, drumming her fingers impatiently on the thin wooden arm rest. 'This was such a stupid idea,' she thought bitterly to herself. Everything about this was stupid. The decision to email Steve to ask for an appointment. The risky admission that she found the idea of having to write an essay terrifying. The humiliating and demeaning situation where she, an experienced teacher who was only doing the unit because she

had to update qualifications, was having to demonstrate she knew the theory she'd been practising for twenty years in actual classrooms with real children.

The door opened and Steve invited her in.

'How can I help?' he asked.

Steve listened carefully. This student was one of nearly two hundred and fifty doing his unit on 'Literacy for Teachers'. They'd only been going for a week, yet this student had already made an initial impression. She'd spoken up in the single tutorial they'd had together. And he'd heard her greeting another student in the lecture with an ambiguous 'Well, I wonder what we're going to learn in *this* one!' She seemed confident, obviously older than most of the other students. He'd noted a kind of breezy cynicism in her tone, but guessed this wasn't the whole story.

Now, here, in his office, Alison was telling him that she was terrified about having to write an essay. 'Essays don't suit the way I express myself,' she was saying. 'I'm not that organised, I'm more intuitive, more articulate when I'm arguing with someone than when I'm alone. I have thoughts that tumble out but I don't know how to structure them. I don't know how to do this.'

Steve could see that she was nervous, but these weren't the nerves of the fresh-out-of-school undergraduate. She seemed uncomfortable in this university environment, tentative about whether her experience would be seen as relevant or valuable, indeed maybe unsure about this herself. As she talked, it was as if she didn't know whether to be angry or dismissive or open, and was at times a halting mixture of all three. She was interesting, he thought. She reminded him of his younger self.

Alison sat grumpily at her desk. It was now over a fortnight since what had been a surprisingly reassuring chat with Steve. It wasn't so much what he had said. He didn't say much, she recalled. It was just that he seemed to listen, to be interested in her experience and her thoughts.

And then there was the lecture, the one called 'Literacy: goal or gateway?'

In the lecture Steve had told the story of Eloise, the conscientious teacher of literacy who had mastered the recommended strategies and who knew the theory well, but whose students were restless, even anxious, and who were not progressing well. What was going wrong?

The problem, Steve had suggested in the lecture, was that Eloise was seeing literacy as the goal rather than as a gateway. The focus was on learning to read better; what was missing was any notion that literacy was the gateway to exciting and desired worlds. She was confusing means with ends.

Alison had found this revelatory. Obvious, in retrospect; but it had helped her understand exactly why things weren't humming along in her own classroom, why all those reading strategies which she knew so well weren't quite hitting the spot.

She had followed Steve after the lecture and asked him some questions. He'd replied courteously, sitting with her for twenty minutes on a seat in the pale winter sun. Again he hadn't said much; Alison had done most of the talking. But he'd seemed to enjoy the conversation.

But now, sitting at her desk in the small hours of a chilly night, she was stuck. Stuck and tired and resentful. She had begun to work on her essay a couple of days earlier, and at first it was as if the topic was tailor-made for her. 'Is literacy teachable? If so, how? If not, what is our task?' She had wanted to argue that of course literacy was teachable. She'd been successfully teaching it for decades, and she could draw from her experiences in ways that would be deeply satisfying. But as she began to write, doubts began to eat away at her. She was writing about actual students she had taught, and while she was writing she was trying (as the task required) to allow the various theorists to inform her account. She had begun to feel uncomfortable about the word 'teach'. It seemed to imply transmission, or demonstration, or explanation ... and that's not quite the right explanation for why these children had progressed. Was it more to do with the environment that Alison had set up in her classroom? But if that were the case, why didn't *all* the children progress? Was it more to do with skills and attributes that these children brought with them from home? But if that were the case, what was her task? She was starting to go round in circles. And the more she wrote, the more her words seemed stilted, lifeless, alienating.

She read with a heavy heart the sentence she had just completed:

It could be argued (with Schickendanz, 1999) that the ability to read is more the result of the teacher's establishment of an environment conducive to literacy development than it is the direct result of an adult's direct instruction, though it is also arguable that without knowledgeable guidance from a trained professional the students' progress might not proceed as successfully as might otherwise be the case.

It was sludge; she knew it was sludge. The whole essay was sludge and she was sick of it.

At that moment - at 1.16 am to be precise - a message appeared on her screen, alerting her to a new posting on the Ning, the social networking site that Steve had created for online conversations about the coursework. 'An online hub where we meet and learn from each other,' Steve had explained, and at first Alison had been sceptical. But the site had been surprisingly lively and Alison had been drawn into some interesting discussions. Again, Steve had been present online and clearly interested in what was developing there, and his engagement with the evolving community of learners and his obvious interest in the ideas that were being explored were a part of what had made it such a lively place. But more than anything directly connected with Steve, it was the fact that Alison had found herself connecting with students she'd never met face-to-face that surprised and stimulated her.

She looked briefly at the posting. Then, on impulse, she started a blog post herself, called 'FRUSTRATED!!!' She copied out the sentence she'd just written, and then vented her frustration:

I HATE this sentence! I HATE writing essays. For some reason I can argue what I know face-to-face, but I can't write it in an essay. When I try, it comes out all artificial and horrible, as you can see. HELP!!

Before her family woke up the next morning, Alison switched on her computer to see if there was any response. 'Bloody stupid thing to do,' she thought, 'opening myself up

like that. These smart young things, fresh out of school, will see this for the rubbish it so obviously is.' She felt faintly nauseous. Was it fear? Anticipation? Could it possibly be hope?

There were four responses. Four! And one of them was from Steve! She could feel the panic rise. She felt so exposed! She turned off the screen - the words were swimming and she couldn't focus. She knew she needed to settle herself if she were going to take in whatever it was that her respondents had written.

Alison took three deep, slow breaths, noted that she was indeed feeling calmer, and then turned the screen back on.

The first response was from Mark, someone from her tutorial group with whom she often had animated discussions:

I love that stuff about whether we can teach literacy! I didn't know you were doing this topic!! I've got a copy of an article here that argues that our ability to become literate is innate, wired into our brains. It's very interesting. Makes me wonder what we're doing in our classrooms. Let me know if you're interested and I'll send you the link. It's a great topic! Mark.

The second was from someone called Annie. Alison was pretty sure she'd never met Annie:

I know what you mean. I can't write essays either. It got drilled into me at school that there was this essay formula - 5 paragraphs: introduction defines the issues, three body paragraphs, conclusion that restates the argument. Never use the word 'I'. Assemble your evidence. Prove your point. It just doesn't work for me. Let me know if you discover how to solve this one! Cheers, Annie

Alison's good friend Tina, a fellow mature-aged student, wrote the third response:

Hey Alison, good to see you here! Coffee tomorrow? Same place, same time? Maybe Mark and Annie might want to join us???? Btw. I thought your sentence was AMAZING. It sounded so intelligent! Wish I could write like that. My teachers used to love that kind of stuff. I'll bet you'll get a High D for sure!

And finally from Steve:

Here's a thought. Imagine you're sitting having coffee with Tina. Annie and Mark have come along too, and you sense that they're interested in your thoughts about teaching literacy. Mark says: 'Can you say some more? What kind of 'knowledgeable guidance from a trained professional' do kids need? Write it down as if you were talking to him, to them, over coffee.

Alison reached for the keyboard. She felt an unusual lightness and freedom in her body.

For the next hour or so, she played with words. Her first draft was written as she imagined she would say it, as Steve had suggested, and it was certainly more direct and alive than the original. But it was also undisciplined and meandering, so in her second draft she tightened it up. She found herself using some of Steve's phrases from his earlier lecture, trying them on for size, eventually adjusting some and turfing out others. She realised, to her surprise, that she was having fun, and she remembered

suddenly how much she used to enjoy writing, during the first years of her adolescence.

Finally, with about the fourth draft, she pressed the 'Submit' button.

I'd say something like this:

The more I think about what happens in my classroom and the kids who flourish in it, and the more I read of the theorists, the more I start to think that literacy is hard-wired into our brains. All humans have this biological urge to communicate and to learn, and it seems as though some theorists are presenting us with evidence that the human brain has built into it the capacity to use language. I've been reading Daniel Pinker's 'The Language Instinct', and there's some extraordinary stuff in there that I want to talk about in my essay. This has been really unsettling for me, as well as stimulating, because it's made me think about the way I set things up in my classroom, and it's made me wonder whether in fact literacy is actually teachable. We spend so much time delivering structured reading programs to our kids, but what if the structure that we're providing is not in alignment with the innate structures of the language instinct? And how would I know? This whole topic has made me watch the kids in my class more closely, to see if they're really responding and absorbed in their learning or if they're just going through the motions to get a literacy job ticked off or to please me. I feel that it's changing the way I teach, in some subtle way that I don't quite understand yet.

And it wasn't until I wrote this post that I realized that I was actually noticing more in my classrooms, that it was having an effect on my teaching practice!

At 2.34 am the following morning, another student, Andrew, read Alison's post and the four responses.

Andrew was often up at this hour; it was his best thinking time. The world was silent outside, but the Internet was alive. He liked to chat with American friends, people he'd never meet but with whom he felt a bond. Introverts like him, probably. They shared ideas about stuff; there seemed, oddly, to be fewer masks.

Andrew liked the site that Steve had set up. He never wrote anything on it, but he found it stimulating the way he was getting to know the other students through their posts and responses. Their ideas fuelled his thoughts.

He read Alison's post three times.

The first time it made him think about the idea of a language instinct. He quickly googled Steven Pinker and found a YouTube video of Pinker giving one of the TED talks on his latest book: 'The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature'

The second time Andrew read Alison's post, he thought about his own fumbling attempts on teaching practice to encourage literacy. He'd brought in some books to share with the students. He'd given out some sheets. He'd got the kids doing some writing and he'd responded to each piece of writing. But nothing had really caught on, nothing had

particularly interested either him or the kids. What was he doing wrong? He wondered if Alison would let him come and sit in her class for a bit, just to watch.

Now, as he read it for the third time, he paid particular attention to Steve's response. Andrew imagined the students at the cafe. He imagined the expansive and outgoing Alison explaining her alive thoughts about Pinker's book. He'd like to be a fly on the wall at a conversation like that one. No, more than a fly on the wall ... he'd actually like to be at the table, joining in on the talk, talking about Pinker's video. He wondered if he would ever be so brave.

Janine left Steve's room in a fury. 'Supercilious arsehole,' she muttered to herself, and then imagined using the phrase in a pithy posting on Steve's beloved online site. She started to construct in her mind a post which exposed Steve for the fake that he so clearly was. He'd failed her first essay, but had offered no guidance on how it should be written. At an earlier meeting he'd expressed some reservations about the five paragraph essay format that had served her so well at school (she'd been top of her year, for goodness sake, and there'd been an article about her in the local paper). He'd even encouraged her to use the first person pronoun, and clearly hadn't grasped her point about the need to be objective. It seems he'd taken a particular dislike to her use of the passive voice, yet she could point to a plethora (she liked that word) of academic articles that were given a kind of gravitas with phrases like 'it can be assumed ...' 'it will be noted ...' 'it will be established ...'. She felt comfortable with phrases like these; they helped her feel a connection to an academic community she longed to join.

Didn't he know how hard she had worked to get where she was? The country town had a small school with no stability in the staff, and for many years she'd been lost, along with most of her classmates. But then there was Mrs Steward, the English teacher, who had taken an interest in Janine, told her she was clever, shown her how to structure an essay so that it flowed ... and her success and excitement had sky-rocketed. Her parents were proud, and at last she could see a brighter future. She was looking forward to becoming a teacher herself.

She had thought that a unit called 'Literacy for teachers' would allow her to shine. Her spelling and grammar had always been excellent, she had always been a thorough and accurate reader and invariably got an A for her English assignments. She had been captain of the school debating team, and her essay writing skills were now very good.

But what she'd found in Steve's unit was a mess. Instead of teaching them anything practical, Steve had got them all talking about these airy-fairy questions that had nothing to do with the real world of teaching literacy skills to children. All this talk about 'a language instinct' and 'the teacher's task' left her cold. Steve offered no visible or comprehensible guidelines for a student who just wanted to get on and do well. His lectures were meandering and ungraspable; his advice was tentative and contradictory. Janine had tried to get him to help her choose an essay topic, but he kept pushing it back on her.

'What do you think?' he asked during one fraught conversation.

'You're the expert,' she had said exasperatedly, trying to smile but feeling her eyes betraying her fury.

'Not when it comes to what you'd find most useful.'

'What I'd find useful,' she thought to herself, 'would be a bit of direction, a bit of advice about how to do well in this subject!'

So she'd tried - how she'd tried! - to find a question that 'interested' her. One of the options was a question which asked if reading and writing skills could be broken up into sequences of teachable bits. Well of course they could! She had documents from her last teaching prac that did exactly this. She had already constructed a draft essay along the lines that Mrs Steward had shown her. She'd even sent a draft to Mrs Steward who had thought it was excellent: thorough, accurate and clear. But Steve had seen the draft and had been critical.

Was it too late to drop out of this unit and find something more relevant? Janine headed towards Student Services.

Part 3: The commentary

A story allows the meaning of experience to become manifest. There are four 'meanings' or general themes that I think my story attempts to illustrate.

Theme 1: Learning begins in a charged field of unknowing.

Theme 2: Learning can only take place where the learner senses the presence of valued knowledge.

Theme 3: Learning takes places within communities of thinkers.

Theme 4: Learning happens when epistemological values are shared between teacher and learner.

I want to discuss each of these in turn.

Theme 1: Learning begins in a charged field of unknowing

The metaphor is deliberately electrical. Our lack of knowledge creates a current that electrifies our experience in all kinds of alarming and exciting ways. All learning begins in this charged field of unknowing. Too much of our literature and school practice ignores this, instead imagining that learning takes place when a teacher is able to chop up learning into a sequenced series of logical, learnable bits (Doll, 2000, p. xviii). Learning never takes place without some bodily agitation and sense of inadequacy.

Our ignorance makes us anxious and animated, and then we become aware of the possibility of something new coming in. The educational literature calls this 'motivation' and speaks of

it as though it's the prime mover, but in fact motivation is the consequence of our awareness that we're standing in the charged field of unknowing with some prospect of relief. As Yoram Harpaz puts it: 'Striving for renewed equilibrium, for an acceptable answer or solution, motivates human learning.' [Harpaz 2005 p13]

What is the nature of this unknowing? What is it that we don't know?

It is always about both the subject matter and ourselves. The Alison in my story didn't know enough about why her literacy program at school didn't deeply engage her students. She didn't know Steve or whether she could learn from him. She didn't know if she would cope. She didn't know how to write an essay. She didn't know how to impress Steve, once creating an impression had become important to her. She didn't know if she was making a fool of herself in posting. Her body was full of tensions and she needed a way of expressing them that allowed for some relief from the tension.

Occasionally Alison had an impulse to release these tensions in ways that had the potential to shut her off from the world. Her initial resentment with the Steve in my story and her fear of essays might have led to educational dead-ends had she let them. Janine, indeed, gave herself over to these kinds of unproductive releases, and consequently little apparent learning took place.

At other times Alison's charged impulses led her to take risks and open herself up: the email asking for an appointment, initiating a conversation after the lecture, posting her frustration on the website.

This risk-taking led, in my story, to a productive intellectual relationship between the teacher and Alison. This was a relationship with many visible and sublimated aspects. The teacher found Alison interesting; she reminded him of aspects of his younger self. Alison found Steve useful and wanted his approval. Andrew, too, experienced some of these feelings, less directly but probably no less strongly or potentially potently, in his lonely chamber as he thought about Daniel Pinker, or tried to imagine himself as brave and extraverted and successful like Alison. The relationships that surround learning are infused with recognitions,

yearnings, desires, projections, identifications; this is the charge in the electrified field of the classroom, but which is rarely written about for fear that it's confused with the necessary existence of sexual taboos around teachers and their students.

In a recent edition of the *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, two authors (Sameshima & Leggo, 2010) exchanged thoughts about the link between love and learning:

... our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence. ... How do we encourage educators to love the people they aspire to teach; to know their students; to enter imaginatively into the lived experience of others; to listen to others; to learn from others in a system that is always seeking accountability and control? (pp. 66–78)

A part, then, of the 'charged field of unknowing' is the lived experience of others, and a part of the excitement of learning is the discoveries we make in one another's presence.

My real students wrote about this. Two of the students on whom I first based the character of Alison wrote about their experience of the online Internet site I set up for our unit as follows:

... my involvement on the Ning [the online platform we were using] has been hugely enjoyable. I feel that I know people who I've never even met, and I'm interested to read the ideas of others and develop my own opinions and beliefs ... I have never really valued my own ideas that much, and while I am constantly amazed by the ideas of others, I often feel that my own are quite insignificant in comparison. Yet the frequent writing on the Ning, combined with the encouragement from all of you, has assisted me to see that my ideas are both worthwhile and valuable for others to hear.

I think I've written so much more on this Ning about education than I ever have written before. I'm finding my phrases are sometimes better than they were initially. I'm editing much more than before because I don't like having mistakes in my work ... I'm also experimenting with using phrases that I like from other people's work – using them in other pieces of writing and trying them on for size. I've remembered how much I like to write.

Theme 2: Learning can only take place where the learner senses the presence of valued knowledge.

The field of pedagogical potential is only charged when there's a prospect of gaining valuable knowledge. It is never a content-free zone. The learner needs to know that the teacher, the texts, or the community of learners (and preferably all three) hold some yet-to-be-grasped knowledge that is worthwhile. Alison's love of the literacy unit would have been a pale thing had it been based only on the fact that teacher in my story listened to her: she also desired his knowledge about literacy and his experience about teaching. Teachers carry with them the authority of their discipline, an authority that is attractive to students with its implied access to desired knowledge.

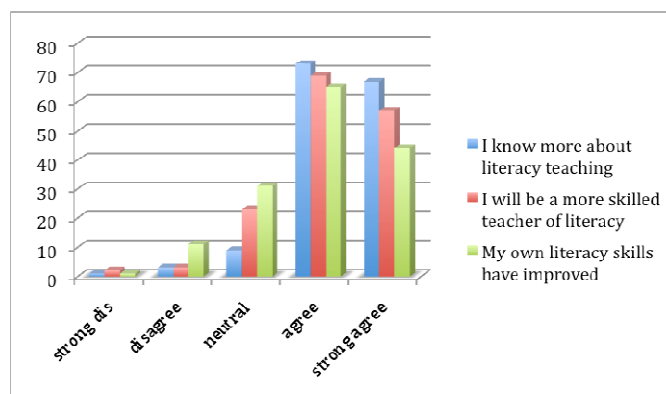
In our 'Literacy for Teachers' unit, it wasn't simply the teacher who possessed desired knowledge; the students came to see early on that their community possessed it too. Our first weeks were spent telling stories of our own literacy experiences when growing up, and the stories of other family members. Those students who had children of their own, or who had already spent some time teaching in classrooms, shared their own struggles and successes. These stories, along with the texts and the five teachers' input, were all sources that individual students drew on as they chose one of the following 'fertile' questions to investigate:

1. Is literacy teachable? If so, how? If not, what is our task?
2. What early experiences help to support the development of literacy?
3. Are there cultural, gender and/or social differences that we need to know about?
4. Is there an ideal age for a child to begin to read and write?
5. How important is intrinsic motivation? How might we increase student motivation?
6. Are some literacy approaches and/or programs better than others?
7. Is the reading and telling of stories just an optional extra in a literacy program?
8. Can reading and writing skills be broken up into sequences of teachable bits?
9. Does technology help or hinder the learning of reading and writing?

Fertile questions like these have a direct connection to the charged field of unknowing. Good questions excite sluggish molecules; they get things moving, they animate and unbalance (Shann, 2000; Burke, 2010). Fertile questions shepherd students into alive fields of relevant inquiry and lead to the gaining of desired knowledge.

‘Before doing this unit,’ one student wrote in an anonymous survey conducted at the end of the semester ‘I don’t think I had any real ideas on how literacy is introduced, developed and furthered in children at school. It was sort of a mystery to me as to how children picked up such skills.’ By the end of the unit, the majority of students were reporting (again anonymously) that they’d gained valuable knowledge:

Figure 1: Results of student survey



This perceived improvement in the students’ own literacy was not the result of any explicit teaching of skills. Rather it was the by-product of a community of learners keen to learn more, through reading each others’ writing and through writing about their own experiences and insights for a wider audience. The students’ growing sense of being in the presence of valued knowledge had, as these survey results show, an animating effect.

Theme 3: Learning takes places within communities of thinkers

In the charged atmosphere where anxieties and desires are awakened, where there is valued knowledge to be gained and room for different approaches and personalities, there is potential for community to be formed. The urge to know more is another form of the urge to connect, which is always an attempt to establish relationships (Shann, 2000).

In 'Literacy for Teachers' we established a framework around which a community could form. The elements of this framework included a discipline (teacher education), a topic (literacy), a specific research question (see Theme 2 above), communal spaces (the lecture hall, the tutorial room, the coffee shop, an online platform), events (lectures, assessments), processes (online and face-to-face discussions, resource and idea sharing, responses to postings and drafts), choice (around the fertile research questions) and an explicit valuing of collaboration as a form of inquiry.

This sense of community was most visible as the students explored their research questions, both in the imagined world of my story (note the way small groups formed themselves around Alison's question) and in the real university unit which inspired it. I want to illustrate the way this happened in the real world of our unit by quoting from an online conversation between three of the students, students who only met face-to-face after the online conversation was over.

The conversation began (rather like Alison's, in my fictional story) with two of the students airing their agitations.

Kathy on 10 May: Hi anyone, I'm just writing because I am trying to work out what [question] I'm going to do ... and I find myself feeling sick at the very thought of it

Ruth on 10 May at 9:17 am: ... As for my progress on this assessment, I seem to be a little stuck. I've done a lot of thinking about it, but I'm unsure of what I've learnt or where I'm headed now. I feel like some of my ideas don't really relate to my question at all, but rather our education systems as a whole, and I'm wondering how dangerous it would be to wander a bit away from the question ...

Kathy on 10 May at 11:27 pm: Thanks Ruth ... That's exactly where I am – unsure of what I've learnt and how this is guiding my learning to the next phase ...

This airing of fears led then to the next stage in the forming of an animated and animating relationship, the 'hearing one another's voices, ... recognizing one another's presence' (Sameshima and Leggo, 2010, p66).

Ruth on 11 May at 12.20 am: Out of interest, which two questions are you trying to decide between? ...

Kathy on 11 May at 1:20 am: I'm going between 'Is literacy teachable?' and the technology one. I did the story one last time which I loved but I'm just not sure about this one. I keep wanting to say Literacy isn't teachable and I think we find too many 'magical' moments with technology that good teaching does anyway. And I think the argument about students being engaged through technology can be an excuse [for] poor teachers [to] use computers without real purpose ... What question are you looking at Ruth?

Ruth on 11 May at 8:49 pm: Hi Kathy, I'm looking at question 5, [on] intrinsic motivation. And as bizarre as it sounds, I've been exceptionally motivated to study motivation. Really, I'm loving it ... It sounds like you've got some interesting ideas on both questions. You're the first one I've chatted to who wants to argue that literacy isn't teachable, and so I'm interested to hear your ideas ...

Kathy on 11 May at 10:16 pm: Hi Ruth ... I'm beginning to think literacy isn't exactly teachable but acquired. And this is a blurred line I know ... I really believe the ability to learn to be literate is innate and that the belief that we will be [literate] is embodied in parents, family, friends and teachers ... I think – that's where I'm heading. I'm gathering theorists as I go ...

I wrote in the previous section about the way learning takes place when the learner senses the presence of valued knowledge, and Kathy's 'I'm gathering theorists as I go' hinted, to those who were reading this online discussion, at the existence of desired knowledge. This hook was enough to snare a third contributor.

Mandy on 20 May at 4:55 pm: Wow, great discussion guys! I really like some of the ideas you've got bouncing around here. I might have to pinch one or two of those ... Just a few of my own that I can't help adding. Kathy, I recommend looking at a few links that I've come across while looking at the ideal age question. [There is one which] discusses 'unschooling', which is basically when children aren't taught to read, and still learn. I think it brings up an interesting point or two – and maybe, you could try an approach like 'does literacy need to be taught' instead of 'is it teachable'? On a similar note, I recommend all of the external links at the bottom of the Wikipedia article on Steiner education ...

This discussion, which had begun with an expression of a personal fear and a quickening interest in each other's presence, was now bringing new knowledge and insights to the participants.

Kathy on 20 May at 7:08 pm: Thanks Mandy. Thank you for this link. I was watching TV the other day and discovered this whole program on unschooling as well – I'd never heard of it before and now I've heard it twice in a week ...

I suggested above that the nature of our unknowing is about both the subject matter and ourselves, and Mandy in particular was finding the discussion helping her to articulate some half-realized insights about herself.

Mandy on 20 May at 8:22 pm: I find it really helps to get it [my thinking] written down – that's why I think the Ning is such a good learning resource ... [Perhaps] literacy doesn't need to be taught in all cases (but might in some)? Does that make sense – i.e. people like myself who need rules and regulations to feel comfortable might learn better inside the framework of a traditional curriculum ..., whereas more creative thinkers who struggle with a 'traditional' system would learn better without formal instruction ...

And two days later she wrote:

Mandy on 22 May at 12:08 pm: I find that I'm struggling a lot to approach these topics from a ... personal? level (I think that's the word), rather I find myself thinking, in a fairly over-generalising tone ... I suspect I struggle to be practical – I've never been good at thinking realistically! ...

Kathy on 22 May at 1:26 pm: ... It's funny how we are all different learners. I base everything that I know on how I feel and relate to it. It can sound most conceited sometimes. Often my more 'academic' friends will say something – and I'll argue and it will turn out that my response is more on the money than their thoughts. They ask how I know all of this stuff and my only come back is I feel it. This is probably the first subject I've been in where that counts for something

Ruth later wrote about the relationship between her literacy, her thinking and this learning community.

I cannot even begin to describe how much I have gained from my participation on the Ning. ...[It] has helped me immensely with my assessment. As I write my ideas out, and others respond to them, I manage to sort out my thoughts and solidify my main points. Some of my ideas which didn't seem to fit together are suddenly inextricably linked as I write. And then, somewhat magically, by the time I get to writing my assignment, I have thousands of ideas which have appeared through my writing. Furthermore, my enjoyment of writing on the Ning has translated to

an enjoyment in learning, analysing and hypothesizing [sic] ideas and perspectives.

This online conversation, then, was a window through which I could observe the agitations and animations of these students as they confessed their fears, formed their connections and ventured out together into a pleasurable and productive collaboration.

Theme 4: Learning happens when epistemological values are shared between teacher and learner

Janine might be the product of my imagination, but there are Janines in all our classes. Here is what one of the ‘Literacy for Teachers’ students wrote in the anonymous survey:

I didn't think this unit helped me enough with literacy skills. I do not feel confident in teaching a literacy lesson. I thought that in this unit I would be able to gain knowledge on basic literacy concepts such as teaching people to read, quick revision on sounds, spelling, eg tips for teaching people how to spell and sound letters.

What are we to make of the disparity between this student’s experience and the experience of the majority of the students as shown in Figure 1?

I want to suggest that learning only takes place when epistemological values are shared between teacher and student. Janine saw the world through a traditional lens which sees knowledge as an object and skills as directly transferable. For her, teaching was about telling and learning was about listening, and if she absorbed enough of the learning that the teacher was transferring, then she would be successful. But the Steve in the story saw teaching and learning differently. For him, and for students like Alison, knowledge is constructed within communities rather than transferred from expert to novice. When we wish to teach complex ideas, as Yoram Harpaz explains,

... telling them is simply not enough. Instead of declaiming information, we must create the conditions for the creative criticism of ideas, or for their critical creation. Instead of declaiming knowledge, we must create conditions for effective, involved learning ... A community of thinking is a framework for

convening learners and content for the purpose of joint construction. (Harpaz 2005 p7)

Elizabeth Birr Moje, in an article called 'Foregrounding the disciplines in secondary literacy teaching and learning: a call for change', echoes the need for a non-traditional epistemology:

A number of theorists have argued that the subject areas can be viewed as spaces in which knowledge is produced or constructed, rather than as repositories of content knowledge or information (Foucault, Teh 1972; Halliday & Martin, 1993; Hicks, 1995; Lemke, 1990; Luke, 2001). Even more important, knowledge production in the disciplines needs to be understood to be the result of human interaction. (Moje, 2008, p100)

Knowledge production is the result of human interactions, the agitations and animations which I have attempted to foreground in this article, moments which become learning opportunities when epistemological values are shared between teacher and student.

Clearly, then, the Janines of our classroom have as central a place in this account of the life-world of the classroom as the Alisons and Andrews. Her relative failure is as real a phenomenon as Alison's relative success (Grant, 2008). The experiences of students like Janine are further illustrations of our four themes. Learning begins in a charged field of unknowing, and Janine felt that she had nothing new to learn. Learning takes place where someone is seen to possess valued knowledge, and neither the teacher in the story nor the other students knew anything that mattered to her. Learning takes place in a community of thinkers but Janine felt no sense of connection with the community. And Janine saw knowledge and skills as being objects capable of being transferred from those who have them to those who want them, but the unit – both as portrayed in the story and in the real world – was structured according to quite different epistemological values.

Learning begins when students find themselves in the charged field of unknowing. The nature of their unknowing is both the subject and themselves. They are drawn into the world of learning by the lure of desired knowledge, which they sense present in the discipline, the

teachers and the learning community. Students discover and create this desired knowledge only when they share epistemological values with their teachers.

Without an awareness of the agitations and animations that attend learning, teachers run the risk of teaching into a partial vacuum.

Acknowledgements

This is an article which explores the sometimes-unacknowledged lived life of students and teachers – the animations and agitations – and so I have concentrated on the experiences (fictional and real) of just one teacher and a handful of students. In the actual ‘Literacy for Teachers’ unit, there were five teachers involved, and had this been an article describing all aspects of how the unit was taught, then the wonderful work of Associate Professor Kaye Lowe, Dr Marina Houston, Dr Jaky Troy and Jann Carroll would be foregrounded. Such an article is being planned.

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