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Dialogue

Narrative Inquiry: Toward Understanding Life's Artistry

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ABSTRACT

As we entered into Eisner and Powell's exploration of the artistic and aesthetic qualities of the work of researchers, we were drawn toward deeper questions of our own lives as narrative inquirers. In particular, we thought about a metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space as a way to explore the aesthetic and artistic dimensions of experience. By returning to field texts of our recent work alongside Darlene, a mother we met on the landscape of an inner-city school context, we show how she was engaged in an artistic and aesthetic composition of her life experience. Our account also reveals how, as narrative inquirers engaged with Darlene, we, too, were composing artistic and aesthetic stories to live by.

For years now we have been composing lives as narrative inquirers, that is, understanding experience narratively. Understanding ourselves and our worlds narratively, our attention is turned to how we are engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving our lives within particular social and cultural plotlines (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, 2000). In our studies with teachers and teacher educators, we have come to see teacher knowledge in terms of narrative life histories. Teachers' stories, their narratives of experience, are both personal—reflecting teachers' life histories—and social—reflecting the milieu, the contexts in which teachers live. We see teachers' social contexts as a landscape, also narratively constructed. We developed the concepts of personal practical knowledge and professional knowledge landscape, narrative educational concepts, as a way of understanding teacher knowledge. These narrative understandings of knowledge and context are linked to identity. For us, identity is a storied life composition, a story to live by. Stories to live by are shaped in places and lived in places. They live in actions, in relationships with others, in language, including silences, in

gaps and vacancies, in continuities and discontinuities (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, 1999).

Through our research we have come to understand experience as narratively constructed and narratively lived. Because we see experience narratively, we study experience narratively. In other words, we see narrative as both phenomenon and method (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Experience, understood narratively, has both artistic and aesthetic dimensions. In this article, we illustrate a metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space as a way to attend more closely to the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of experience.

A THREE-DIMENSIONAL NARRATIVE INQUIRY SPACE

While Dewey's work *Art as Experience* (1934) has, from our first studies, lived in the background of our thinking, Eisner and Powell's article calls us to attend more purposefully to artistry and aesthetics. We were drawn into two of Eisner and Powell's thoughts as places of beginning this process. They, drawing on Dewey, wrote that:

art is a particular quality of human experience that to some degree could be present in any interaction an individual had with the world. Art . . . [is] a living process that humans experienced when a certain quality of attentiveness and emotion were a part of the engagement. (p. 133)

Further, Eisner and Powell, in describing the aesthetic, wrote: "By aesthetic experience we mean forms of experience that possess an emotional quality that is both feelingful and satisfying" (p. 135). In their article they show both the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of the research process of several social science researchers. One of the ways they illustrate how researcher thinking embodies these two dimensions is through the researchers' use of various metaphors.

As we laid the various researchers' accounts alongside our own we noticed connections between our thinking as narrative inquirers and theirs. While for the researchers in the Eisner and Powell article, artistry and aesthetics were only visible in the doing of their research, in our work, artistry and aesthetics are both in the lives we are studying and in the doing of narrative inquiry. In our inquiries, we need always to be attentive to narrative as both phenomenon and method.

Drawing on the Eisner and Powell's researchers' use of metaphor, we turned our attention to the metaphor that guides our thinking as narrative inquirers. Thinking narratively, for us, is thinking within a metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. Dewey's work forms our foundation for thinking about narrative inquiry. Using his concept of experience

our terms are personal and social (interaction); past, present, and future (continuity); combined with the notion of place (situation). This set of terms creates a metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, with temporality along one dimension, the personal and social along a second dimension, and place along

the third. Using this set of terms, any particular inquiry is defined by this three-dimensional space: studies have temporal dimensions and address temporal matters; they focus on the personal and the social in a balance appropriate to the inquiry; and they occur in specific places or sequences of places. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50)

The personal-social dimension points us inward and outward, inward “toward the internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions” (p. 50), and outward “toward the existential conditions” (p. 50). Moving backward and forward points us “to temporality—past, present, and future” (p. 50). Place “attends to the specific concrete physical and topological boundaries of inquiry landscapes” (p. 51).

We had not made this metaphor explicit in our early studies. It was as we worked and lived alongside teachers that we realized we needed a metaphor to help us represent the wholeness of our lives and the lives of the participants with whom we engaged. Even in our early work as narrative inquirers we wanted to represent people, not as taken apart by analytic categories, but as people who were composing lives full of richness and complexity, lives with artistic and aesthetic dimensions. For example, when Clandinin (1986) was working on her doctoral dissertation, at one point she realized she had analyzed the lives of her two participants into their images but had lost sight of the wholeness of their lives. In an attempt to give an account of each of them she struggled with what she called a “characterization, an holistic account.” She wrote that the interpretive accounts did not “allow me to give a picture of Stephanie that reflects the harmony and flow I saw in her practices and in her personal practical knowledge which minds those practices” (p. 120). Later, as we continued to struggle with how to understand storied life experiences, stories to live by, as whole life compositions, we developed the metaphor of a three dimensional narrative inquiry space.

STORIES TO LIVE BY AS ARTISTIC AND AESTHETIC COMPOSITIONS

In our response to Eisner and Powell we show how the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space allows us to understand and to represent the aesthetic and artistic dimensions of people’s stories to live by. We attend to our stories to live by as narrative inquirers and to the stories to live by of children and families whose lives intermingled with ours in a year long study at City Heights,¹ an inner-city school. Attending to a mother’s, Darlene’s, stories to live by as they found expression helps us to do this.

Attending to Darlene’s Story to Live By

As we started to live on the landscape of City Heights, Darlene was a mother we came to know because of her work as an artist. She became involved in the Year 3–4² classroom where we worked as she shared her knowledge of the Inuit culture. When she learned about our research she

was interested in reflecting on who she could be, as a mother of a child in the school and as a member of the community, in relation with diverse children's experiences at school. Although she had younger children, she had one child who attended the school. She was frequently involved in school activities and worked on the parent advisory council. Darlene was known by teachers and children in the school.

When we met for our first tape-recorded research conversation with Darlene, we revisited our research intentions, that is, to learn about the experiences of diverse children, families, and teacher-researchers as their lives met on school landscapes. In her soft-spoken way, Darlene's initial storytelling drew us toward her present life as a parent and her hope that learning about different cultures would shape school contexts so that "all children feel comfortable and secure." Sharing these thoughts took Darlene backward in time and place as she shared stories of being taken from her family at a young age and placed in a series of foster homes.

I mean I was a foster child and it wasn't easy learning the different cultures and learning a different life. Since I was two until I was eight I learned from living in a French family and I learned French. I spoke English and then I spoke French at home. Speaking English was outside the home. [Then I went to a Ukrainian home]. But in the Ukrainian family it was, "you work hard and you do your school work." Your values aren't as lenient. . . . I didn't really have a culture living with a French family, then a Ukrainian family.

In her telling, Darlene described a sense of having other cultural narratives written on her body, of being given other culture's stories to live by. She had no sense of her own place but tried to situate herself in the cultures of her many foster families. She lived this way until she found a picture in a school textbook of someone who, she realized, looked like her and began to ask questions about who she was. As Darlene composed her life in these early years, we see her struggling for a coherent plotline as she moved from one family, from one culture, to another family, to another culture. In this narrative fragment of her life she only hinted at how deep the emotional reaction was to this dislocation of who she was.

I think the only way I learned my culture was in school. I realized at 16 or 18 that I was Eskimo. I realized I looked Eskimo. So I was left with the choice just knowing that I was different. I spoke English, I read English. I felt English wasn't forced on me. [At 16 or 18] I had the choice. . . . I didn't want to let go, because that was my home. . . . When I found out I was Eskimo I really wanted children. . . . You can still hold onto your culture.

As Darlene learned that she did have a physical and cultural place, she struggled with what she had to give up of the other cultural narratives she had tried to claim as her own. By now she was an English speaker and familiar with urban landscapes. Any memory she might have carried forward from her earliest years was written over, blanked out. She had no story to guide her into the future if she were to choose to return to the place of

her birth. However, she eventually returned to her homeland in the North and described her homecoming in the following way:

[I returned to my Inuit culture when I was 16 or 18]. I didn't know until I was 16 that I was from Inuvik. When someone said that I was from Inuvik, I said, "What's that place?" They said, "You don't know your place?" And I said, "No, I've been in another place." And then I looked it up on a map to find out where I was from. So to me I think the most important thing wasn't the language or the food. The most important thing to me is culture. [When I returned to an Inuit community] my most fear, I think, was drowning, you know. So I didn't want to drown so I had better learn quick the values of my culture. My parents or aunts and uncles said, "You need to think things twice or a few times over before you go into the bush. Bring your supplies out here and then we will check your supplies." You know, you've got to know you've got your supplies. So for me to learn that, I was just used to living in a house, always had water, electricity. All I had to do was turn a light on. To eat, for me, I could go to the store and say, "Okay, this is what I want." When I had got back to the North I had to go and my family said, "This is your first time out." They said, "Go get a rabbit. This is the trail, go and get the rabbit." I went. I'd seen how they snared rabbits. I went at night I think and I was in snow about up to my knees. When you're up North you have to dress warm but there was not a day in two months that I wasn't learning.

We metaphorically traveled with Darlene as she shared stories of this time in her life—a time significantly attached with learning where she had come from, who she was, and who she might become. As she shared memories of these experiences, we sensed she stood on uncertain ground, already knowing herself as multicultural. Now, she was awakened to another possible story of herself, a story of herself as "Eskimo." She realized that when someone named her birth place she did not know that place but said, "I've been in another place." While she did not share her inner reaction at this moment, we can only imagine her emotional response to finding out she could be someone other than the person who was in a story she had told herself for 16 or 18 years.

The artistry of Darlene's narrative life composition is strongly visible in this section of the research conversation. Thoughtfully attending to Janice's story of learning how to be a teacher, Darlene laid Janice's expression of the tenuous, uncertain nature of life in classrooms and schools alongside her memories of learning her birth culture. As she described this experience of reimagining and retelling herself, Darlene brought to this new story—a story of living among her birth people—all the other stories she had learned to live. She took who she was as an English-speaking urban dweller and opened herself to learning from other people, from the land, and from attending closely to the knowing she carried in her body.

When she left the North as an adult, she became a mother and thought hard about the stories she wanted to live by. Having lived so long without a place for her story to live by, she seemed awake to the possibility of creating places for others to figure out their own stories to live by. For example, she talked in the following transcript fragment about the need for a multicultural narrative in which all people can find a place:

Ever since [my son] has gone to school here, since grade 2, I see all these mothers who are Vietnamese, Chinese, Native. Because I'm Eskimo, Inuit, I'm labeled as Vietnamese, Chinese, Cambodian. They come to me. They speak their language but I'm not able to respond so their reaction is, "Why didn't she say anything? Why isn't she doing anything?" They come to me because they think I'm one of them. [Even though Darlene can't understand them] I don't want to shy away from that cause I'm used to it but for other cultures we are told not to speak to a certain person or not to associate with other people and there again it's something that's been going on for thousands of years. "Don't you speak with people of that culture. You don't do this." Nowadays it's different . . . for Canada to be a gateway for everyone.

When she told of how she now lives in a multicultural community, Darlene brought forward her intimate bodily knowledge, learned as a child and young adult, of the possibility of embodying different cultural narratives. When people of visible minorities approached her she knew the importance of not "shy[ing] away." Even when language was a barrier, as it was in her childhood, she stayed open to encouraging connection across diversity. In one place in our research conversation, Darlene described that one of the ways she tried to become connected with mothers on the playground with whom she could not yet speak was through drawing messages "out on the sand." Reaching out for connections across cultures was something Darlene wanted people in the school to do. When Janice described her ethical concerns about whether she could teach the Inuit culture to children in the Year 3–4 classroom or whether another person of Inuit culture, such as Darlene, needed to teach her culture, Darlene said:

Yes, you can't take my place and I can't take your place. It's good to be open and find out facts about different cultures. That's the only way each one of us can learn no matter where you go in the world or what you are doing or what you hear. . . . It would be really neat for you and I or any other teacher, no matter who they are, to learn different cultures in school because children are from different cultures. That way we could teach other children the values. And you respect that, you learn from experience so that they can't say they haven't learned this.

Darlene moved inward to her own feelings as she thought about what we could do in schools as a parallel process to her own narrative of learning to respect cultural multiplicity. She moved outward to try to help Janice see that she could teach about the Inuit and other cultures. She thought teachers and children should learn different cultures *and* learn that children are from different cultures. She was stressing the importance of children learning multiple cultures. However, what seemed to live at the heart of her views about teaching and learning was the need to be respectful of each other's cultures.

As our conversation continued, we saw Darlene moving backward and forward in time, moving from her inward emotions in the past to her actions in the past to her present reimagining of school as a public home place, a place where all children are valued and feel secure:

School doesn't just end at the playground. School ends when you are off on your own. I love all the kids because I've learned about different families, different cultures and I walk to school with them, and play on the playground. When I was a child, as a foster child, I taught myself to talk, that was my only sense of security. [As she thought about herself and other children and the place of their voices in shaping their stories to live by, she wondered how long children would stay silent without acknowledging who they were.] It depends how long they'll hold it. I held it until I was 21. I finally spoke out because there are so many things a child will hold. But when I spoke out it was like a relief. There was something that had happened so I had to speak out for that sense of security. I was worth something. What I had gone through was wrong because a lot of times children will think it is their fault and there's not a lot of research on that because not a whole lot of kids will say a lot. So I think school is a second home for a child.

It is here that Darlene tells us most about her story to live by, a story of growing up in which she composed a story using fragments of other's stories. As she described, she was finally, at 21, confident to speak of who she was. Travelling back in time through memory, Darlene explained that in this retelling she let go of the nonsensical plotlines holding her and preventing her from composing and living a story with narrative coherence. She then moved inward to name what happened to her as "wrong" as she named herself as "worth something." Darlene drew on this story to move outward to give an account of what she saw her work at City Heights school to be, that is, to "love all the kids" because of their cultures and families, their diverse voices. In so doing, she was trying to create school as a place that is a second home for children.

AN INUKSHUK AS A METAPHOR FOR DARLENE'S STORY TO LIVE BY

Attending to Darlene's life through the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space allowed us to see the unfolding (temporal), situatedness (place) of stories to live by. As we attended to Darlene's life composition narratively, we noticed a fluid movement between what was happening in her body, the personal, and what was happening in the social situations around her, the social. Because our research is about studying lives, the metaphor of a three-dimensional space provides a way to attend to the inner emotions, to the aesthetic reactions woven across time, place, and events. It is a metaphor that allows us, as researchers, to understand Darlene's and other's life compositions as filled with artistic and aesthetic dimensions.

Both as we lived alongside Darlene in the school and as we read field texts in order to represent her story to live by for this response, we realized it was the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of her life that kept calling to us. It is the beauty that she has composed in her story to live by that holds our attention. As Darlene yearned to make meaningful, coherent sense of what were seemingly nonsensical life situations, she composed a life that is an artistic composition. If, as described in Eisner and Powell's article, an artistic composition is a "living process," then the artistry in Darlene's life

illustrates a deep attentiveness to her own experience as a child and to the kind of spaces we need to create for children and for one another. The quiet passion with which Darlene lives her life shows that emotion is integral to the artistic composition of her life.

Most people at City Heights knew that representing her experiences among her Inuit people and on the Northern landscape was one of Darlene's passions. We have each carried some of Darlene's passion with us, both into our home and university spaces. The painting in the room where we worked on this response is of an Inukshuk against a backdrop of shimmering Northern lights. It is one of many paintings in which Darlene recreated an image of the Inukshuk from her Northern homeland. As we tried to recreate, portray, a holistic sense of Darlene's story to live by, it is, perhaps, an Inukshuk that might metaphorically describe who she is, who she is becoming. A stone structure, often built in the shape of a human, an Inukshuk acts as a guide for travelers across Darlene's Northern birthplace. We, too, know Darlene's story to live by as it finds expression on the landscape of City Heights school as a kind of Inukshuk for children, families, and teacher-researchers such as ourselves. In living, telling, and re-telling her stories to live by, Darlene guided us toward deeper thinking about school landscapes as places intimately textured with a multiplicity of life-story possibilities. Travelers on this kind of school landscape would find their way by knowing themselves and one another.

NOTES

1. City Heights is the name we gave to the inner-city school where this narrative inquiry unfolded. Located in a Canadian city, the community surrounding City Heights school was developed in the early 1900s, with some ongoing redevelopment since that time. The most recent neighborhood profile indicates that the number of single-parent, transient, low-income, and unemployed families are a high proportion of the neighborhood. Property is described as dilapidated and poorly maintained. There is little green space, a high crime rate, and high traffic noise and congestion; the ethnicity of the community is diverse, with many people of Chinese and Aboriginal backgrounds. Nearly one-quarter of the community's adults are described as having less than a Grade 9 education.
2. Because of the multi-age organization of the school, we refer to the children's year in school rather than grade.

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