

**ARTS-BASED INQUIRY AND TEACHER REFLECTION:  
A TEACHER INSTITUTE (LAEL, PUC-SP)\***

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**Abstract**

*A three-week Teacher Education and Reflection Institute (TERI97) was trialled at LAEL, Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo (PUC-SP) in 1997. This Institute was designed around principles specific to qualitative arts-based inquiry and teacher development. The textual, allegorical strategies that were used to raise teachers' conscious awareness of self-practice included: professional self-characterizations; sorting these different aspects of teacher self; mapping the development of a teaching career (extensively using timelines and intensively using river roads or snake trails); and subject autobiographies and metaphor-making. These activities and questions enabled teachers to reflect upon the teacher I am, the teacher I hope to become, and the teacher I fear to be as crucial aspects of a developing teacher self. Construing development as self-multiplication allowed both charges of narcissism and inadequacy (the inner critic) to be answered. By looking at ourselves as teachers in the act of looking, we acquire second sight. As teacher inquirers, we are obliged to self-reflect, since by looking at ourselves we come to know our teaching in new ways.*

**Key-words:** *teacher development; narrative; arts-based research.*

**Resumo**

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*Universidade Católica de São Paulo desenvolveu um curso de três semanas sobre "Formação de professor e reflexão" em 1997. Este curso foi fundamentado em princípios específicos da pesquisa qualitativa baseada em arte e do desenvolvimento de professores. As estratégias textuais e alegóricas que foram utilizadas para despertar a conscientização do professor sobre a sua própria prática incluíram: auto-caracterização profissional; consideração de diferentes aspectos do eu-professor; mapeamento do desenvolvimento da carreira de professor (de forma extensiva, usando linhas de tempo e, de forma intensiva, usando river roads e snake trails); além de autobiografia e criação de metáforas. Essas atividades e questionamentos possibilitaram aos participantes a reflexão sobre o tipo de professor que eram, o tipo de professor que queriam se tornar e o tipo de professor que receavam ser como aspectos cruciais de um eu-professor em desenvolvimento. Moldando o desenvolvimento como multiplicação do eu permitiu que cobranças do narcisismo e de inadequação (o crítico interior) fossem satisfeitas. Ao nos olharmos como professores adquirimos, nesse ato, uma segunda visão. Como professores-pesquisadores, obrigamo-nos à auto-reflexão, uma vez que ao nos olharmos, nos damos conta da maneira que ensinamos a partir de novos prismas.*

**Palavras-chave:** *desenvolvimento do professor; narrativa; pesquisa baseada em arte.*

## 1. Introduction

This paper refers to an intensive Teacher Education and Reflection Institute (TERI97) that was trialled over a three week period in 1997 by the author at LAEL, Graduate Studies Program of Applied Linguistics, Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo (PUC-SP). The Institute was hosted by João A. Telles and is referred to as TERI97. It was designed around principles specific to arts-based inquiry and teacher development (see Diamond & Mullen, in press). These principles, and especially the primacy of a teacher self, are discussed

and then illustrated by contributions from participants in TERI97.

## **2. Arts-based teacher education**

Duignan and Bollinger (1995) used the arts-based form of a dramatic monologue to develop future professionals' oral skills. Each participant chose one character for study, examining and speculating about his or her thoughts, feelings, desires, and reactions. Duignan and Bollinger (1995) recommended that all teachers use written inquiry and not just to improve their communication skills. In this present paper, I contend that theater or art is not just a metaphor for what teachers do. They are literally artistic practitioners and the mirroring made possible by arts-based techniques helps them as inquirers to represent and improve their self-defined versions of effectiveness. Self-inquiry or reflexivity is thus central to teacher development. By shaping and reconstruing their experience of multiple teacher selves, teachers can answer charges of narcissism and inadequacy (see inner critic below). Some of the textual, allegorical strategies that were used to raise teachers' conscious awareness of self-practice during TERI97 included: self-characterizations; sorting different aspects of teacher self; mapping the development of a teaching career (using timelines and river roads or snake trails); and subject autobiographies and metaphor-making. In the arts-based approaches that I have developed, teacher participants are helped to reflect on the development of their own teacher selves.

## **3. The self in teacher development**

Teacher self seems traditionally excluded from many teacher education programs. But self is not only ignored — it is also elusive. As Borges (1974: 67) warned, there "was a shifting and shining creature that nobody had ever caught but that many said they had glimpsed in the depth of the mirrors." It is in the act of seeking a teacher self that we create it (Randall, 1995). Whenever teachers want to improve their teaching, they first need to look at how they view their practice and then to watch for the effects of trying alternatives. Although we experience a self every morning as

we shave or do our hair, self remains a fugitive construct and any coming and going between the world of mirrors and development is not without its risks. But it is only by representing and reinventing our experience of self as a teacher that we can promote our development. We assemble and reconstruct a teacher self as we build and renovate any other idea, that is, as a continuing journey of selfhood, undertaken through making and sharing texts about it, and within supportive contexts provided by others. If by definition self is socially constructed, a postmodern self also involves individual artifice. Arts-based approaches provide textual strategies which enable us to project greater meaning upon our experience of teaching and of our development.

If we accept the claim that reflective interchanges between the worlds of teaching and of mirrors can be productive, the term, "development" may be in danger of becoming yet another catchphrase. Traces of the nineteenth century myth of progress may intrude so that to be "more developed" or forward-looking carries with it more prestige than does to remain "less developed" or "backward." There can also be something condescending in the unthinking use of the term "less developed," whether applied to a teacher or a region. There is the implication that to be "developed" is better than not to be and an expectation that the "less developed" will 'get with it' and develop — usually by falling in behind the lead of a more powerful other.

Jackson (1992) uses the term "teacher development" to refer to how individual teachers change in the course of their careers. He limits its use to changes that are desirable and positive in quality, including increases in ability, skill, power, strength, wisdom, insight, virtue, and happiness. I believe that development also needs to be reserved for teacher learning that is self-directed and that cannot be imitated or imposed. What develops is neither a collection of treasured "tips" nor a hoard of guarded self-deceptions but rather a theory of a more effective teacher-self that is constantly put to the test so that richer explanations of ongoing practice can be yielded. However, a teacher's self-movement is not relentlessly unilinear,

excluding pauses and cyclic returns.

Development means that teachers are "free to choose personally relevant issues of research, to draw on and make more explicit, personal experience, to enjoy the wisdom and companionship of their 'subject' " (Bannister cited in Reason & Rowan, 1981: 199), including their teacher self. Arts-based approaches allow them to experience and demonstrate the insights that they gain from such inquiries. As teachers, they learn best as we all do, that is, "through using their own experience ... through active involvement and through thinking about and becoming articulate about what they have learned" (Lieberman, 1995: 591-592). Developmental learning is an active process whereby we learn to make more conscious the meanings that we make out of a lifetime of teaching.

Traditional "outside-in" approaches to teacher education and teacher change seem to infer that teachers can simply have things "done" to them by external forces. These more powerful others can include: subject heads, consultants, curriculum specialists, administrators, parents, public opinion leaders, legislators, and teacher educator-researchers. When internalized, oppression is personified as a harshly demoralizing inner critic whose undermining allegation is that self-concern is "mere narcissism." Borges's teasing refutation of this charge is that "the existence of a single 'I' at any given moment can be the only measure of reality" (Woodall, 1996: 167). "Indigenous", "inside-out" strategies that provide release from the unreasonable demands of others and our own feelings of inadequacy are outlined below.

#### **4. Mirrors and self-reflections**

Although a personalistic methodology remains a matter of strategy and not of morality, the charge of self-infatuation stings. As Virginia Woolf (1976: 67-68) recalls, "there was a small looking-glass in the hall (...). By standing on tiptoe I could see my face in the glass. When I was six or seven perhaps (...). I only did this if I was sure I was alone. I was ashamed of it. A strong feeling of guilt

seemed naturally attached to it." Okely (1992: 2) defends reflexive approaches against the charge of self-absorbed deviance since "self-adoration is quite different from self-awareness and a critical scrutiny of the self." Those who would protect the self from scrutiny could be as easily labeled as self-satisfied and arrogant in presuming that their presence and relations with others are unproblematic. If self-agnosia leads to professional blindness, multiplication of teacher selves constitutes teacher development.

By looking at ourselves as teachers in the act of looking we acquire double or second sight. We are obliged to self-reflect, since it is by looking at ourselves that we come to know our teaching in new ways. In writing about our reflections, we reveal our understandings to ourselves. But self-regard in a moment of being is not easily accomplished as the failure of Narcissus prefigures. It is as impossible to reach out to any final or "real" self as it is crucial to struggle to do so. The mirror tale from Borges's (1974) *Book of imaginary beings* illustrates how a self presupposes reflection on a representation of experience as that of an experiencing self (Dews, 1986). Subject matter and method then come together more closely. The artist and the model more nearly coincide but never totally. There always remains a barrier between the representation and the represented.

## **5. Professional self-characterizations**

In the next sections, textual strategies are outlined that can raise the level of teachers' conscious awareness of self-practice. But, while some aspects of self may be revealed, others are concealed. We wonder what part of self is writing about or representing what other part of self in order to reclaim and reflect upon the representation. Even autobiographical approaches can provide only rough mirrors to reflect our Heraclitan images, including dreams and fears. If our thoughts, connected as we feel them to be, are what we mean by selves, the worst that could be done by teacher education and teacher critics would be to so devalue these selves as to rob them of primacy and worth. We can resist the suppression of

our developing teacher self by reflecting on its different refractions, including: the ideal teacher self that we envision becoming; the "real" or present teacher self that we feel we are; and the shadowy or darker teacher self that we fear to remain. We seek below to mirror these aspects of our teacher identities and their interconnections by using self-descriptions, sorting, mapping, and metaphor-making activities.

**6. The teacher I am, the teacher I hope to become, and the teacher I fear to be**

These three reflections of self represent leading players in the unfolding drama of our development as teachers. Other prominent cast members include family, teacher colleagues, students, and teacher education-researchers. By exploring the contributions of a multiplicity of selves and others, we counter the charge that even considering a self-conscious, self-identical subject implies a modernist and a coercive unification (Dews, 1986). Like Borges, we experiment with permutations of self to explore their developmental possibilities. In the following activities, the use of "we" and "you" invites the reader also to co-participate in self-chosen ways.

The teacher I am

- List six ways (use adjectives) that you think now describe you as a teacher. These descriptors show which teacher qualities you now perceive yourself as embodying.

The teacher I hope to become

- List six ways that describe for you the kind of teacher you hope to become. These descriptors show which teacher qualities you perceive are important for you to acquire.

The teacher I fear to be

- List six ways that describe for you the kind of teacher you fear to remain. These descriptors show which teacher qualities you perceive are important for you to shed.

A personal reflection on your teaching

Using the above listings, you have described three different aspects of your teacher self. By reflecting on these self-characterizations you can specify the qualities you want to affirm or change in your teaching.

- Thinking about the teacher you are, the teacher you hope to become, and the teacher you fear to become, now describe how any two of these aspects of self are alike in some important way in relation to teaching and at the same time different from the third aspect.

The bipolar dimension or present pre-occupation that you devise provides an important clue to how you are plotting the scenario of your teaching. For example, you might be contrasting enthusiastic, indirect, and learner-centered teaching with teacher-centered instruction that is routinized, directive, and entirely skills based. You might also be contrasting the cultivation of the personal with an over-emphasis on the cognitive, knowledge-based outcomes of teaching. However we choose to depict ourselves as teachers, eventual transformation will consist of movement away from the kinds of teachers that we believe that we now are and that we fear to be but toward the kinds of teachers that one day we want to become. During TERI97, Dilma framed her account of this aspect of teacher self in a poem reminiscent of Borges:

*I don't know  
 what sort of teacher I want to become  
 I want to be a different one  
 but I think  
 There are so many things to become  
 that I'd rather continue being a walking teacher  
 Maybe I'd like to be  
 the teacher I am (at that future moment)  
 Thinking about  
 The teacher I hope to become.*



## 7. Answering your inner critic

The inner custodian or guardian gatekeeper may have its origins in the too fearful demands that some adults make of children. The teacher you fear to be may be sabotaging your best efforts at self-chosen movement, dismissing them as inadequate. It acts as a severe faultfinder or angry tyrant. Talking back to it helps you regain control:

- What does your critic say about you and your teaching ("Listen, you're out of luck. You know you'll never make it. Why bother?")? What does that tell you? When you attend carefully to the tone and words, whose negative voice is this? Is it that of a discouraging parent, a teacher, a so-called expert, an instructor, a coach or a supervisor? What usually begins a critical attack? Looking back over such episodes, what does your critic really want from you? How can you divorce yourself from this depressing critic or at least put it on hold? How can you enlist even an adversary as an active collaborator in your teacher development? What other aspects of your evolving community of selves can you encourage to talk out in your defense?

The three teacher self components, the teacher you are, the teacher you hope to become, and the teacher you fear to become, are derived from Rank's (1936) notions of positive will, creative will, and counter-will. As in Rogers' self-concept theory, reconciling the tensions between them could lead to transformation. In this romantic struggle between good and evil, the hero(ine) does not regress but, filled with hope, takes command and vigorously engages in the adventure of self-discovery. But the forces opposed to our dreams may not be foes with whom we can readily do battle. Rather than confronting a wall of illusions, we may face tragic inner contradictions. Failure may not be imposed on us from without but rather stem from flaws within. Depending on the plot we impose on our story of self, we experience romance, tragedy or satire. Whatever its quality, no one form or style of inquiry can provide the last word.

## 8. **Autobiography: spin yourself a lifeline**

- Take a journey in your own mind through your life as a teacher to devise connections between your beginnings and endings. Draw a horizontal line stretching from your birth year to the present to chart the course of your learning-teaching life so far. Leave space to locate positive (helping) events above the line and negative (hindering) ones below it. Group these sets of events into phases, and name them. What overall pattern can you devise to make sense of it all? Is it one of general turnings or sudden swervings? Focus on the watersheds, turning points, memorable moments, or marker events in your development. These could occur through a single experience or as a gradual shift. What was the effect of your first day at school either as a student in front of the teacher desk or behind it as a beginning teacher? When did you first decide to become a teacher? Does your teaching narrative so far resemble one of development or of loss?

If, in this extensive mapping, the balance of your entries favors difficulties rather than successes, perhaps you are playing out an unsatisfying teaching scenario. How you choose to group and interpret events depends on the vantage point that you are using to view them in the present. What might once have seemed like a professional earthquake (for example, a resignation from an existing position) might subsequently be reconstrued as a hiccup, if you were subsequently promoted or gained a more satisfying position! When the perceived ending changes, so does the meaning of the preceding events. In a story of self as thwarted and underappreciated, instances of help can become visible when the tale is more happily restoried.

Casting an autobiographical timeline provides a thread along which events can be strung to form a narrative of personal significance. Until sorted like beads onto a chain, events have no inevitable order. They remain separate, haphazard, episodic, and broken until, like a newspaper or film editor, we impose on them a

sense of unfolding or collapsed purpose. We can keep re-arranging the pieces until the order suits our interpretation. We project meaning onto our development to see it as flowing or blocked, smooth or abrupt, lush or arid, intense or deadened, causal or random, isolated or patterned, sad or happy. The above self-portraits and charts of self constitute fragments from the book of our teaching that is illustrated from our image-system of selves.

## 9. The river road to development

Explorers have persistently sought to find navigable river roads leading from coasts into unknown interiors. Lured by the mystery of their sources and by the promise of trade, they have gone upstream along the Congo, the Amazon, the Nile, the Ganges, the Yangtze, the Danube, the Mississippi, and the Murray. In the largest and most blank spaces on the childhood maps poured over by Marlow, the narrator in *Heart of darkness*, there was "a mighty big river,... resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest far over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land" (Conrad, 1902/1990: 5-6). Both river and snake can be considered sacred sources of wisdom since the whole length of their bodies is always in contact with the Earth and its secrets.

As teachers, we can visualize and draw our teaching life as a winding river or snake (Pope & Denicolo, 1993). This intensive map can chart the stages of our development from the source (or tail) at the top of the page to the mouth of the present at the bottom. What will you name your river? Geertz (1995: 2) called his *After the fact* since it consisted of "hindsight accounts of the connectedness of things that seem to have happened: pieced together patternings."

- Will you journey up or downstream? Where does your river come from and go to? Are you cut off from or connected with what you have known? If each turn represents a shaping experience or critical incident that influenced the direction of your teaching, what

proper names can you assign to these different points along the length of your river? Where is it swift, where slowed? What are the side streams? Where can you locate your main channel? Marlow's led to a heart of darkness and horror impenetrable to human thought. But can something else be glimpsed, some shining reflection of self? Can the course of your river be changed so that it joins a Milky Way glittering with promise?

Each river self provides a distinctively reflecting and coloring medium. Each teacher self entertains and records, amplifies and interprets self and others in its own individual ways. We can scrutinize how we use words and interpretations in deciding and naming which moments and aspects of self are important for us. By seeking the connecting threads in our lives we have already created connections that we are now putting into words. The segments formed by our conceptions of a teacher self hold present and part events together in common meaning. These events are lent special significance both in themselves and for the passage of our careers.

The experiences of discovering emerging patterns of personal meaning within one's self and by one's self enable an individual to set out on a new voyage. Accounts of a teacher self and its up-river odysseys also reveal more than just a singular pattern. Our stories connect and resonate with those of others. In grasping the particular, we apprehend the universal along with it. An estimated 1,100 tributaries flow into the 6,275 kilometers long Amazon to make it the world's largest river. However, Geertz (1995) rejects any overly explanatory image of development that is cast in terms of a vast river combining multiple side channels. This may entail too much order and too tidy an ending.

#### **10. Subject matter or content autobiographies and metaphors**

Using autoethnographic methods (Diamond, 1992) we can self-disclose, retrace, and revise our meanings. While not everybody may feel comfortable as writers experimenting with scriptocentric

approaches, we can all tell our stories. Frank Leddy, a head of a high school mathematics department, described the current emphasis in his subject as no longer on transmitting an established body of knowledge but rather on helping teachers and students to become better problem solvers, more inquisitive, and capable of making their own sense of it. To engage his teacher colleagues and students in dialogue about the subject, Frank shares his self-story with them and then invites them to write their mathematical autobiographies. You might choose to explore your own subject area:

- Write about your successes and failures in any school subject. We all have both. Recall your earliest memories of this subject. What are the things that you like and dislike about it? Explain how you believe that you best learn this subject. What have your high school, university, and teaching experiences of it been like?

Having charted our development and that of our teaching subject, images such as the teacher as mirror reflection or earnest explorer provide us with compacted, imaginative ways of thinking about and re-directing our understandings. We can pessimistically use Conrad's (1902/1990: 31) image of the little steam boat "hugging the bank against the stream, like a sluggish beetle crawling on the floor" to represent the teacher as a self-doubting, lonely inquirer. In the opening scene of Kafka's novella, *The metamorphosis*, Gregor awakes to find that he has apparently been transformed into a monstrous beetle. His plight may parallel that of some teachers who are oppressed by isolation or alienation. Using a contrasting image from Walt Whitman, the teacher can be more optimistically depicted as a courageous spider spinning tales, and persistently launching forth the delicate gossamer thread of inquiry, supported by its own webs of significance.

- What is your metaphor for your development as a teacher ?

Teachers always need to listen to their own inner rhythms or voices. During TERI97, Lucilia's metaphor was that of a Pegasus, Maria Cristina's that of an elephant, and Fernando's that of

an architect. For other participants, the teacher was a leavening bread-maker or a fragile, emerging butterfly. Teacher self needs to be let develop, being trusted to unfold gradually from its cocoon. As an impatient helper (or teacher educator) found to his dismay, "my breath had forced the butterfly to appear, all crumpled, before its time. It struggled desperately and, a few seconds later, died in the palm of my hand" (Kazantzakis, 1959: 129-130). The beetle or butterfly, as an extended metaphor, develops into an allegory of development, providing a teacher story in which the characters and events acquire double meaning as in a fable or parable (Clifford, 1984). The local story of a teacher, whether set in Sao Paulo or Toronto, cannot resist becoming a more general one of teaching.

## **11. Conclusion**

Even though an inquiring teacher self can only be glimpsed and never finally caught in his or her shifting depths, teachers become more self-fashioning and responsible through the uses of reflexive, arts-based inquiry. By working with refracted self-images and with the support of others, they can critique and transform their teaching. By devising professional self-portraits through spinning autobiographies, timelines, charts, maps, and metaphors, they can avoid the traps set by others and by their own self-imposed limitations. Whatever allegorical form they use to shape the story of their struggle to develop, once they reflect on what teaching now means to them, what it has and may come to, they become better able to recast its outcomes.

I began this paper with a concern for the self that has gone missing from much teacher education. I have portrayed teachers as artists, as delicate, elusive quarry, and as intrepid explorers. It is all too easy to caricature such a personalistic perspective as a form of adulation or unreflecting egoism in which all experience is relentlessly funneled into the workings of an individual's understandings. But, although self is readily acknowledged as a co-construction, its meanings are embodied as well as embedded. Within the narrow accountability ethos that characterizes recent

moves against teacher education in many parts of the world, teachers' individual passions and creativities are in danger of being squeezed out by a barrage of external requirements. During TER197, Diogo reported that he was able to get back in touch with previously missing aspects of his teacher self, including: path-finder, artistic, inquiring, in-waiting, struggling to understand, "would it be possible?" and "the penny has dropped" selves. Dilma thanked me as author-instructor with a poem called "Give the teachers a blank sheet":

*Next time you go to teacher training  
You don't have to do anything  
Just sit down and wait*

*Some of them will do nothing  
Some of them will wait for the directions  
Some will try to guess what you expect them to do  
Some will try the same picture they have been trained to do*

*But, maybe on the second session  
Some of them may think that  
you are such a crazy "expert"  
Then they may start doing whatever they want  
A house, a road, a butterfly .....*

*I was given a blank sheet  
And I realized  
how many beautiful things  
I was able to draw  
I was an artist and I didn't know that!*

*Next time you go to teacher training  
give the teachers a blank sheet  
Some of them may throw it away  
Some may pour their theories on it  
Some may just fly ....*

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