

***'How can the bird that is born for joy sit in a cage and sing?':  
The Role of Stories and Imagination in Teaching***



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How can the bird that is born for joy  
Sit in a cage and sing?

William Blake, *Songs of Experience*

# The discourse of imagination

We are less creative than we were 140 years ago. But we tell ourselves the obverse of this. The rhetoric of the creative society has become a consolation for a decline of creative intensity. Ever-more sophisticated means of mechanical and digital distribution, remediation, and recycling of ideas have masked the fact that creative copyright and patent industries and institutions, not least of all the universities, produce fewer and fewer serious works per capita at greater and greater cost per unit.

Peter Murphy (2010)

# Classrooms as 'locations of possibility'

The classroom, with all of its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.

bell hooks (1994)

# Learning with and through narratives



If we believe that stories are vital to who we are, and how we are in the world, that these stories change over time, and that they are both unique and culturally inscribed, then it follows that these stories have a great potential for making vital connections between individuals and the world of ideas. They serve as a key for unlocking an oftentimes blocked door for making sense.

# The relationship between selves and stories

- *Who* tells their stories? Who remains silent? Who do they tell their stories to? Who are the main characters in the stories? Who are absent, but were present? Who drives the motion of the story? Who has power and how is it negotiated?
- *What* stories do we tell? How do students decide which experiences of theirs they are willing to bring into the classroom and why? Which stories must forever stay outside the gates of the school, or university?
- *Where* does the story take place? Where is it recounted? How similar or different are these worlds?
- *When* do the stories start, and critically, where do they end? How does this construction help to create the very point of the story?
- *Why* is this story being told? What is its strategic function for the speaker?
- *How* is the story interpreted? By the speaker? By the listeners?

# Getting to know the world(s) of our students



Educators need to know what happens in the world of the [students] with whom they work. They need to know the universe of their dreams, the language with which they skillfully defend themselves from the aggressiveness of their world, what they know independently of the school, and how they know it.

Paulo Freire

# We as teachers have something to learn



“...teaching cannot be a process of transference of knowledge from the one teaching to the learner. ... Learning is a process where knowledge is presented to us, then shaped through understanding, discussion and reflection”

Paulo Freire



# Told and untold stories

- Relationship between told and untold aspects of experience; social conditions and tellable stories
- How does one see oneself in relation to what one feels is expected?
- What makes some stories more ‘tellable’ than others?
- Opaque boundaries between individual and social
- Role of memory; relationship between individual and cultural memory/amnesia; memory frames and social practices
- Rupture and continuity of narratives

# Cultural scripts



“The story of an individual life – and the coherence of individual identity – depends, for its very intelligibility, on the stories of collective identity that constitute a culture. ... cultures and societies organize individual identity”

Rice (2002)

# Moving from the known to the unknown

- Importance of positioning; acquiring knowledge is a fundamentally dynamic task; unless students can locate themselves in relation to the topic, they will not engage
- Igniting curiosity: why does this subject actually matter?
- Placing one's own story in relation to stories of others
- Moving beyond the self and known others to abstract others and principles



# Imagination is always involved in the action of narration



Which elements of our experience do we bring together and why?

# The narrative imagination

...narrative imagination... compels us to imagine what is not the self, what is the Other, the uncharted terrain – and what's more, to familiarize the strange. It is the fabric of that personal experience, that subjectivity, that becomes the focus of narrative imagination. ... Reaching for meaning might be the ultimate form of human agency and nothing is more suited to display this potential as being, in fact, integral to the human condition than the narrative imagination.

-Jens Brockmeier

# The challenge/promise of personal narratives

- How do we access the meaning of experiences of others, esp. when they are distant from our own?
- ‘truth’ and ‘truths’ ; deceiving ourselves and others
- Narrative imagination and possible selves; uncovering not only the facts of someone’s life, but their dreams, who they might have been (Brockmeier)
- Taking time; working to the syllabus

I think the trouble is that there's not time for most teachers to explore or really get to know what will fire off their individual pupils, and I think this is one of the troubles, so that it becomes just a form where you hand out, like handing out a bit of paper, to a whole class ... the same bit of paper to a whole lot of people.

Mary Warnock(2011) interview

# Self-knowledge through imagination and story

...there is an existential onus on each individual “to know thyself” – to tell his or her own story ...The full of this can be achieved only through recourse to the Imagination: to provide guidance and opportunity for this to happen must, one would have thought, be the primary concern of genuine education...[when] the individual is cut off from the Imagination ... his or her story is suspended”

John Moat (2012)

# First assignment for Political Psychology class

What are your political beliefs and where do they come from? Have these evolved over the course of your lifetime? What were the most significant influences on your political beliefs? how do these beliefs correspond to the actions in your daily life? What experiences have been most influential in forming your ideas, and why did you make sense of these experiences in the way(s) in which you did? What might have been another way of interpreting those critical experiences? What role did other individuals and/or groups play in the development of your political psychology? Using your own biography as a case study, examine how your experiences compare with a) the assigned readings b) outside readings c) class discussions and d) lectures. You will be assessed on your ability to apply key concepts and debates to your own life.



# Teaching aging to young people

Interview three people who are, from your point of view, “young” “middle-aged” and “old”. Find out what “age” means to the person with whom you are speaking. What is their chronological age and what, if anything, does this age mean to them? These conversations do not need to be recorded, but you should take notes during and afterwards. Following this, write in your journal about the meaning of age and aging. How do your ideas compare with the people you interviewed? What is old? Are you old? What is the meaning of life in old age? In middle age? In youth? Moody suggests that we think about “life as a whole” and focus on “unity of human life.” What aspects of your life help you to do this? What hinders you? Is this a desirable goal, and is it realizable?

# Your story

In about 500 words, write a story about something that happened to you in your past. The event can be as small or large as you wish. Be aware that someone else will read your story

- How did you pick this particular story?
- Who did you think of as your audience
- Difference between writing and telling of story
- The past in the present
- Considerations of 'tellability' ; cultural context, emotional exposure, etc.

I got the news that I was pregnant which had the effects of making me shake with terror and anxiety partly because of my grandmother and parent's reaction, and partly because of the impact this would have on my life as a whole... The rest of the pregnancy passed with me caught up in depression and wondering if I had made the right decision, as I was being bombarded, right left and centre by different emotions, hospitalisation at some point because of the trauma I was going through at home

“At the break they ate all the biscuits and they did not give one to me!”



...the disappointment was bigger than I thought. He just answered “I can’t believe that they have taken my biscuits.” I replied to him: “you know sometimes people close to you may hurt you, but you need to forgive them and let it go. I know it is not easy because you are hurt but let it go. Ok.”

# Collecting/listening to stories of others

Interview someone for twenty minutes about an experience they had between the days of August 6-10, 2011, the days of the ‘London riots’. Bring two copies of the transcript with you to class next week.



*More than 3000 people were arrested in connection with the riots. Were they members of a ferral underclass or victims of socio-economic blight?*

# Reading the London Riots

Straight away I had a sense of it being um... like really... I kind of... I didn't feel "what are those looters doing?", "why are they doing this?" "Put them in jail", "Poor police guys" ... I didn't. I kind of more sympathized with the people that were doing it. The rioters... not the looters. But the people in the riots, the rioters, because they have a different like um... mindset behind it.



Cos I think, I mean seriously they don't have... I mean, I can definitely understand why this is going on – it's a political thing, it's frustration of... They have never ever been... no one has ever ever looked to their side of things or given them... they're not really a part of the society in some ways. No one really thinks like they do. Cos no one in power would ever be able to know how their situation is. So I was a bit, that's what I instantly felt like. I can actually understand this.

**T:** So you seem to have a lot of sympathy with the rioters, would you say that?

**R:** Yeah, yeah I do.

**T:** Do you think what they were doing can be justified?

**R:** I actually think it can be justified. It is... I don't know if I can say that it wasn't right. The looting wasn't right, the rioting was right and that can be justified.





# Education and the feeling of infinity

The belief that there is more in our experience of the world than can possibly meet the unreflecting eye, that our experience is significant for us, and worth the attempt to understand it... this kind of belief may be referred to as the feeling of infinity. Without some such sense, even at the quite human level of there being something which deeply absorbs our interest, human life becomes perhaps not actually futile or pointless, but experienced as if it were. It becomes, that is to say, boring. ... it is the main purpose of education to give people the opportunity of never ever being, in this sense, bored: or not ever succumbing to a feeling of futility, or to the belief that they have come to an end of what is worth having... if education has a justification, this salvation for those who need it must be its justification.

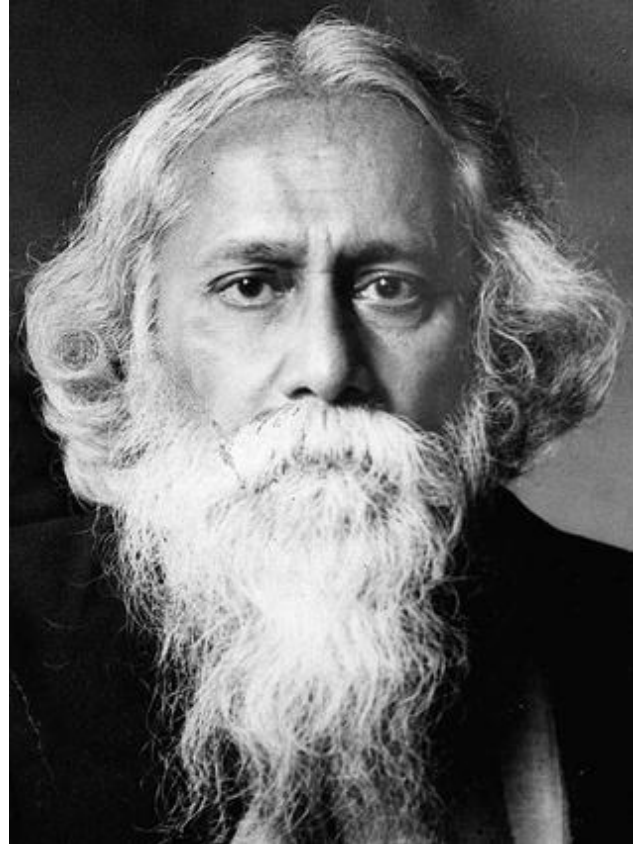
Mary Warnock (1976) *Imagination*

# “Cultivating humanity” (Nussbaum)

If our first challenge is to connect with our students and to enable them to think critically about the world they know, then our greatest challenge is to extend their thought to that which lies beyond the familiar. At the heart of this is learning how to live in a world of different others, recognizing that one’s location, with its particular claims, is just one amongst millions.



# Nourishing the world of 'as if'



“We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy”

Rabindranath Tagore



“to think with an enlarged mentality means to train one’s imagination to go visiting”

Hannah Arendt

*The End*