

Analysis of Four Songs about My B.Ed. Year
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Art, as many have said, makes visible what was not visible before. (Greene, 2007, p. 660)

I decided to write songs related to teaching for the final assignment. As Bartel (2005) made clear in “Tell me a story!” creating personal narratives is a form of qualitative research that can help you make sense of events in your life and develop a “new knowledge of yourself” (p. 14). So, hopefully, creating these songs will help me to better understand myself and through this make me a better teacher by making some things visible of myself which were not visible before.

I started work by making a list of moments in my life that related to teaching or being taught, and I soon had a long and eclectic collection of thoughts and experiences. This seemed a little overwhelming, so I tried to think of a way to narrow it down. I noticed that many of my ideas were based around my time in the B. Ed. program and decided to focus on that eight month period. I wrote down more ideas about my B. Ed. year and noticed that most were specific moments in time that stood out: experiences that I had that had changed something. The result is the following collection of songs, which I present in roughly chronological order.

Looking For a Room on the Second Floor

Looking for a room on the second floor
Don't know what I came here for
All I know is that I made a choice

Am I here 'cause I'm curious?
Are my motivations spurious?
Can't quite make the sound of my own voice

If you asked me why
I'd say I didn't know
If you asked me why
I'd say it's just time for me to go

Don't know if I've been pushed or pulled
Don't know if maybe I'm too old
Don't know if something new is out of reach

Maybe I'm tired of running around
Maybe I want to share what I've found
Maybe I want to teach

If you asked me why
I'd say I didn't know
If you asked me why
I'd say it's just time for me to go

Found the room on the second floor
Time to go through the door

Many of the moments that stood out for me on the list I'd made were moments of transition. Finding my very first class of the year was certainly one of the largest of these transitions. Although I had already formally committed to attending the program, the physical act of walking into the class was when I realized the enormity of that commitment.

The ACE program started before the regular B. Ed. program so West Campus was empty and eerie as I tried to find the room. The unwelcoming layout of the building, combined with my lack of a sense of direction, made my search difficult and stressful. I eventually found the little map, made sure I was in the right wing, went up the stairs, and quickly got lost again. I soon heard some noise from down the hall and finally found the room I'd been looking for which I entered in a poor imitation of nonchalance.

By re-entering school, after so many years away, I've gained perspective and sympathy for students who have trouble figuring out what path they want to take. There is a great deal of pressure in high school for students to figure out their career path early (I would be a part of this pressure later in my B. Ed. year when I helped teach "Careers" during my last practicum placement), and I think it's important to let students know there are second chances, and that sometimes you do things first and figure out why you did them later. Everyone is faced with those moments of opening the door to a new experience and sometimes you just have to step through.

Mr. Strong

Mr. Strong, Mr. Strong
Never thought that I'd be called
Mr. Strong
It seems so weird, it seems so wrong
Class, here's our new teacher candidate, Mr. Strong

Mr. Strong, Mr. Strong
It says it right here on my nametag
Mr. Strong
Well, my first name, it seems to be gone
All that's left is Mr. Strong

Mr. Strong, Mr. Strong
Why does everybody call me
Mr. Strong?
Is it respect or the institution's brawn?
Say goodbye to Trevor, and hello to Mr. Strong

Although going back to university was a bit of a shock it was nothing compared to going back to high school. I'd graduated back in 1988 and pretty much never wanted to stop foot in a high school again for the rest of my life. Entering the high school on the first day of my placement left me stunned. Everything seemed somewhat familiar, but, at the same time, I had the feeling of being from an alien world.

On my initial list of song ideas for this project, I had written the words, "Mr. Strong," and this seemed to encapsulate the mini identity-crisis I had on my first practicum placement. I had spent twenty years making a living in as informal a way as possible—no boss, no workers, no set hours—and now I had to show up at a certain time, and a certain place, where most of the people I was dealing with couldn't even call me by my first name; something I found very strange. I'd heard some of the justification for this: that it was to separate you as a teacher from

the students, that it was done to ensure respect—but it seemed to me just an anachronistic hangover from the hierarchical days of old, where kids had to stay in line or get the strap.

So for me to go from making fun of people with arbitrary titles, to someone who had an arbitrary title was a bit of a leap. I know the students are used to it (I'm sure they'd find it a little weird if a student teacher came in and asked to be called by his first name) and I soon got (mostly) used to it. Still, I think by coming into a situation from the outside can let you see some things that people on the inside have become blind to.

Writing this song re-enforced my belief that using authority to create order is an act of last resort. This philosophy of lessening the power difference to create a more creative classroom environment is supported by Rautins & Ibrahim (2011) who said “by deconstructing the tensions between authority and freedom, teachers can encourage a reciprocal student-teacher interchange of fearlessness and authentic learning experiences” (p. 32). I think this explains some of the discomfort I have with being called “mister.” It situates the teacher-student relationship as one based on authority more than trust. Judith Thompson (2003) said, “I realized that if I truly valued the students, they would value me” (p. 29), and I feel the same way. I want the students to respect me because I respect them, not because they have to call me “mister.”

Empty Reflection

Look in the mirror, what do I see?
An empty reflection is staring at me
You say it's for me, but I give it to you
It's an empty reflection but what can I do?
It's an empty reflection but what can I do?

How can I stop to rest when I'm still in the race?
How can I place the name when I don't know the face?
I try hard to find what I think you want me to
And by the time I'm finished, I don't know if it's true

Look in the mirror, what do I see
An empty reflection is staring at me
You say it's for me, but I give it to you
It's an empty reflection but what can I do?
It's an empty reflection but what can I do?

When I was on tour in March, I got to talk to a friend, who was just finishing off his year at OISE, about what he'd gone through. When the topic of “reflection” came up, he had the same look of queasiness and mild distaste that I remember having at the end of my B.Ed. year.

This song isn't about a single incident, but the overall effect of all these forced “reflections” over the course of the eight months. Doing them became depressing—something I'm certain wasn't the result the teacher education program was looking for. I now know there are very good reasons to embrace reflective practice and to encourage its use in teacher education. To create reflective practitioners, Beattie (1997), said that schools for education “need to provide multiple opportunities for prospective teachers to articulate their philosophies of teaching and learning, to connect theory and practice, and to describe and analyse the social and

cultural context of teaching” (p. 119). This is all well and good, but the devil, they say, is in the details.

Looking back I can see why the majority of the reflections I was made to do seemed like such a waste of time. There seemed to have been little actual thought in the context and details of their implementation. Good reflection requires some sort of distance from the event (in time or space) and, if the reflection is to be shared, a great deal of trust amongst whom you are sharing it with. The frantic nature of the B. Ed. program almost never provided the distance, and there were few classes where a sense of trust was established. Most of these reflections were graded, so I had to decide whether I was writing them for myself or to get a good grade. I know these two purposes can overlap, but that can only happen if trust and understanding has been established between the teacher and the student. I remember thinking, “Do I write what I really think? Or do I write what I think they want me to say and just get this damn thing over with?” I usually chose something in the middle. It’s quite possible that it would have been fine if I’d only written what I felt, but there were only a few classes where I felt safe in making that decision.

The quantity of reflections seemed like a case of “if one pill is good, twenty is great!” There was so much else going on during the program, that the reflections began to feel like unnecessary hoop-jumping instead of a chance to reach a deeper understanding. Less would have been much, much more.

Through writing this song, I can see that I learned a valuable lesson: that having good ideas and good intentions isn’t enough. You have to implement your idea properly. Also, there is an inherent conflict between encouraging independent thought and then judging that thought against certain criteria. This tension is apparent across all educational assessment, but it is especially apparent when trying to encourage students to express themselves. And it’s one of the reasons I am leaning towards developing workshop-based teaching where I can encourage thought and help develop creativity without ever having to rank anyone.

Everybody has a song

Everybody has a song
Everyone can sing
Just take down the walls
And all the pointless questioning

Everybody has a song
To sing their own way
A music that is theirs
If you just get out of the way

Everybody has a song
A song that is their truth
Though they might have been told
That it’s just noise and of no use

Everybody has a song (x3)
They’ve had it all along

Everybody has a song
Listen and you’ll hear
Sometimes it’s very soft
Sometimes it isn’t clear

Everybody has a song
Why don't you let them know?
You want them to sing it louder
Their music's beautiful

Everybody has a song (x3)
They've had it all along
Everybody has a song (x3)
Why don't you sing along?

My previous songs might give the impression that my B. Ed. year was nothing but angst and frustration; but I had many wonderful experiences as well. One of these experiences was teaching a song writing class for the Specialist High Skills Major arts students. This was a three hour workshop and it was the only time during my B. Ed. that I taught entirely on my own. It was also the only time I felt truly confident in what I was teaching. The students were extremely enthusiastic and every single one of them had created a song by the end of the workshop. The styles were wildly different, which I found even more rewarding, and I could tell they'd all come away more confident in their ability to create. I did very little formal teaching; all I did was set up a situation where they could express themselves.

Another highlight for me occurred during my practicum in a grade 8 class. I created a history assignment that was to be presented orally with the students allowed to choose to present a slide show, a song, or a speech as an historical character. There was one student in the class who became so excited at the chance of presenting a speech as an historical character that he read an entire book of primary source materials (letters to the editor from the 1800s) because he wanted to get his speech right. This was a student who had a reading IEP and seldom read even simple books, let alone a collection of letters in Victorian English. His speech was surprise to everyone; a moment, like those mentioned by Judith Thompson (2003), which shows that "every person in the world has talent, because there is pure genius in each person" (p. 30).

Originally I intended to write a separate song about each of these experiences. But as the song about the song writing workshop developed I realized that it was actually about both experiences. As the song grew further I realized that it was about even more than that: it was about my whole philosophy about teaching and life. I want to help students find their way and help them get there. "We are interested in helping children become who they are," said Eisner (2005, p.18).

I couldn't agree more.

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