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Tell me a story!

Lee Bartel

Tell me about a memorable music class. What was your best experience at a music festival? Have you ever felt insecure teaching a class? Please tell me about it. What mythic character is most like you as a teacher? If you were a car, what make and model would you be? What is your earliest memory of a music lesson or class? What comes to your mind when you are faced with these sorts of questions?

When I taught in Steinbach in a small private school I tried to involve all the kids who played instruments in small ensembles. When a specific instrument was not represented among the students to make up a balanced ensemble, I played an appropriate instrument myself. As the groups required I played euphonium, double bass, cello, viola, violin, guitar, French horn, trumpet, clarinet, and even tympani.

This is a story about my teaching experience I have told often. Why would I tell this? Why does this experience seem important to me? What does it represent about my self-concept as a teacher and musician?

Why would one tell a story about one's teaching? Is it bragging? A power party game? Identity reinforcement? Therapy session? In-service professional development? Research? Stories can be all of these. Stories about one's teaching and learning have a strong connection to professional practice, to who we are, and how we see ourselves. Being conscious of how and what we "tell" about our lives as teachers can be a revelation to ourselves as to how we define and identify ourselves, what we value, and what our philosophy is. But you might argue, this is practice, this may be professional development -- but it isn't research!

What is research? Fundamentally research is developing new knowledge. The issue then is, new knowledge about what. Traditionally we have held that it is knowledge about phenomena, process, systems, and theories of cause and effect -- with implications about

practice, about what works, what action results in what reaction, what our practice ought to be. "Research" is also often a manifestation of power -- controlled and exercised by the ones who have their hands on the levers of scientific knowledge. "Research" usually means: formal, systematic, scientific, objective, distanced, dis-interested, unbiased, university. So teachers who read the title of this column may infer that it is about the university folks telling them how to conduct their practice.

Research IS about NEW knowledge. But it may be about what really matters most in professional development and practice: NEW KNOWLEDGE ABOUT YOURSELF. Research can be new knowledge of who are you, what you value, why you make the choices you do, what you are sure about, what you are unsure about, what you want to change, what you want to preserve, why you are fearful of some things, and why some things make you angry. It is not the sort of new knowledge you can gain by reading the latest study of significant difference between the effect of one sight reading method and another, or by digesting Elliott's latest praxial pronouncements. Rather it is new knowledge you can gain through a process of storying your life.

Commonly "story" is perceived in two ways: (1) fiction, not true, only a story, myth, entertainment, gossip, or as (2) history, record, truth, fact. However, every history book, news story, "factual account" is interpretive -- it adds "spin" by what it includes and what it leaves out, by the rhetoric inherent in how it is told, by the associations and connections it is given. And, often "a particular story," a particular explanation or interpretation, is "bought into," is owned, by a whole group, a whole profession, or a whole society and serves as the touchstone for other perceptions and interpretations, then taken as fact. These "stories" can be called grand narratives.

For example, Haroon Siddiqui, writing in the *Toronto Star*, discusses the interpretation given to the Beslan school tragedy in Chechnya by the press. He says: "Commentary on the Beslan tragedy fell into two camps, attributing the terrorism either to the so-called Islamic culture of death or to the Russian brutality in Chechnya. The first is a replay of the neo-con mantra over 9/11 and the Israeli-Arab conflict. It blames "militant Islam" or "jihadist Islam," or Islam itself, whose adherents are said to want to kill the infidels to impose their rule. That is true of some crazies. But the narrative is so sweeping as to

demonize all Muslims, except those ready to grovel and apologize for their faith."

Neil Postman uses the term "narrative" to mean the "sweeping" narratives, the grand narratives. In *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century* (1999) he writes: "I mean by 'narrative' a story. But not any kind of story. I refer to big stories -- stories that are sufficiently profound and complex to offer explanations of the origins and future of a people; stories that construct ideals, prescribe rules of conduct, specify sources of authority, and in doing all this, provide a sense of continuity and purpose" (p 101).

We have "broad sweeping narratives" in music education. We have the "story," the narrative with its interpreted view-point that we as a group have "bought into," that sets ideals, prescribes rules of conduct, specifies sources of authority, and in doing all this, provides a sense of continuity and purpose. We see it in the ideals of performance excellence, in the behaviours we expect at concerts, the belief in the value of adjudicators, and in the maintenance of our strong tradition of music education.

More important as a starting point for developing your own new knowledge is your "personal narrative," your own set of stories, your own interpretations of what counts and matters in your experience, and especially what it means. In them you will be able to find signs of your adherence or your struggle with the "grand narrative" of music education. And, if you begin to listen to your colleagues, you will hear others' narratives and see yourself reflected in them, shaped by them, or possibly even at odds with them.

Narrative inquiry, the process of making sense out of your experience by crafting it as "story," is a form of qualitative research. Creating your personal story is a process of interpretation of experience, or in fancy academic language, hermeneutic (interpretation) phenomenology (experience). And to the extent that this process of "storying your life," or the intentional examination (analysis) of the stories of your life, leads to new knowledge about yourself, it is clearly research. It is

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research that has strong implication for practice, because it is a process that inevitably leads to transformation.

How do you engage in personal narrative research? Fundamentally it requires what most basically turns general everyday inquiry into research -- intentionality. Research is an intentional process of inquiry. You can begin narrative research by writing down your stories. These can be your immediate stories in the form of journaling at the end of a day. Or, these can be the stories of your memories. The very process of writing is the process of interpretation, the very process of research -- making meaning of something. So to engage in writing one's experience, creating the story of one's life, is to interpret. But, as one accumulates these accounts, one is building a set of "data" for further analysis and interpretation. The review of a set of personal stories can lead to the perception of patterns, trends, themes, connections -- NEW KNOWLEDGE.

When I reflect on the story of my teaching in Steinbach, I realize that it involves some ego and a lot of my self-identity. When I was growing up, I did not have opportunity to take music lessons. My family "defined" musical talent as the ability to learn to play an instrument quickly, and particularly several instruments. Therefore, describing a teaching situation in which I play a variety of instruments confirms my "talent" status. The fact that I may have played them imperfectly by established adjudication standards is less important to me, and is probably telling to my colleagues. This story; therefore, also expresses an important aspect of my music education philosophy -- the preference for chamber music over large ensemble, the role of teacher as mentor and "participant," the priority of participation over perfection, and the importance of adapting instructional context to the needs of the students.

So tell yourself a story. This process of research will directly affect your practice.

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