

A PINCH OF OLD, A DASH OF NEW: TEACHERS BLENDING THEIR AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL VOICES

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Introduction

In this paper we discuss the complexities that arise when teachers and teacher educators use autobiographical texts as a method of research to reflect on their personal/professional selves as teachers. Our discussion of these issues is drawn from an ongoing research project on teachers' autobiographies that involves members of a group of educators at various stages in their career who have been meeting regularly to write and share their autobiographies. The impetus behind the group is to investigate teaching as a reflective activity; if this is true, we need to find ways to reflect more deeply on the connection between our own autobiographies and those of our students as we work to become more effective educators. To do this, it is vital that we present ourselves in the process of working through issues of personal and professional identity. In an attempt to do this here, we experimented with a format that strives to capture multiple perspectives of our autobiographical community by presenting the actual voices of the participants.

We feel that it is important to collect data and present the findings of groups such as ours since there is very little public documentation of this type of research. The literature is silent on the existence of this type of democratic teacher driven autobiographical work. Making our work public in this way can, we believe, perform two services. In the current climate of the importance of research-based teaching (Cochran-Smith, 2002), it is essential to hear and validate teachers' voices and experiences. In addition, this type of work adds significantly to the debate on what constitutes research into teachers' lives and work.

Bomer (1995) writes,

The stories we tell, more than any other act of language reveal our most dearly held theories about 'how life goes' or at least 'how life might go.' Our experience forms us; what we understand of experience is what we understand ourselves to be, our identities. We are the stories we tell" (p. 156).

For the purposes of our research, autobiographical reflection is first and foremost undertaken with the intention of making sense, or making meaning, of one's own life as an educator. The educational significance of autobiography lies in its ability to help us understand our present experiences and those yet to occur (Abbs, 1974). Stories about the past are also about the future. It is this insight that motivated us to use autobiographical reflection in our writing group.

Autobiography is a narrative method that encourages educators to critically reflect on their experiences in theoretical and social contexts. As Ritchie and Wilson (2000) state, "Without the opportunity for critical analysis of experience, teachers and students have no way to see how their experience is itself constructed in and through language and through institutional and cultural ideologies"(p. 15). Teachers are traditionally seen as lacking agency. Sunstein (1994) states that "a teacher is marginalized in the system of the schools; she must muffle her voice most of the time" (p. 47). Writing autobiography enables us to focus on our own experiences and set our own agendas, encouraging the process of *conscientization* (Freire, 1970) or the power to understand and know through reflection and action. As experiences are discussed and analyzed, we are able to name, reflect, and reinterpret our own actions and practices. Autobiographical writing objectifies occurrences in our lives so that we can become spectators looking in from the outside. It provides us with a space to explore our experiences and beliefs freely, to encourage a "consciousness of possibility" (Greene, 1988, p. 16).

We choose autobiography as a vehicle because while we believe it to be a powerful form of self-reflection, we are very aware of the dangers of promoting an individualism antithetical to many of our beliefs about professional collaboration and community building. We are especially interested in what happens when teachers come together and share their autobiographies, and in fact construct their autobiographies collaboratively. What happens to the idea of the self as essentially private? Do we overlook our differences in the desire for community? Is our writing different when we write for an audience of our peers as opposed to our selves alone?

Although autobiography is traditionally considered an individual and private endeavor, for reflective educational practice we recognize the importance of writing autobiographies in a collaborative community of learners. Florio-Ruane (2000) asserts, "Personal narratives have been criticized for their tendency to isolate the teacher as both source of and solution to the problems of her practice" (p. xxii). Teachers who write autobiography for self-reflection are often viewed as "Lone Ranger" figures heroically solving their pedagogical dilemmas in isolation. Rather than taking a dualistic perspective that opposes the personal and the social, we believe that the use of autobiography in teacher reflection relies on a complex interplay of the personal and social. We believe that it is the interaction between personal writing and dialogue among members of a supportive community that push us to reflect deeply and critically.

Who We Are: What We Do

Our writing group, located in the New York City area, is composed of ten educators at various stages of their careers, including new teachers who have recently graduated from teacher education programs, veteran teachers, staff developers, and teacher educators. Although there is only one male teacher in the group, we are quite diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, and teaching experience. Our writing group emerged from an informal partnership that developed between the education department of a small liberal arts college and a local urban public school that offers a kindergarten through twelfth grade education. Prior to the organization of the writing group, a trusting and respectful relationship was nurtured between teacher educators, cooperating teachers, and pre-service teachers. It was during this rapport-building period that the formation of an autobiographical writing group that would meet periodically to share and discuss writing was proposed. The initial intention was to provide a time and space when educators could write personal narratives and come together to talk about their pieces. The concept of the group was embraced and we began meeting biweekly.

During our first session, we brainstormed possible topics but since then the topics of our pieces have developed from the individual writer, either in response to issues raised in previous sessions or independently. The format for our meetings is quite unstructured, and may involve the oral reading of either parts or full autobiographical texts and group discussions. The shared texts are either new pieces or the rewriting of a draft. The discussions address the themes and experiences on which the writing focuses or ideas for further composing. Usually, all of the members do not share writing at each meeting. At the end of each session, we reflect in writing about the purpose and process of our endeavors.

As we continually negotiate both our purpose for the writing group and the direction in which it will take, we have grown to become a strong, supportive learning community. As our community develops, our members often look to the sessions as a time to reflect on our experiences and pedagogy and reinvent our identity as teachers. We have grown to rely on our discussions as a form of support and an outlet for meditation as was the case after the September 11th incident when our members anxiously looked forward to meeting as a group to talk in a different manner (this topic was one that was discussed continually in other parts of our lives) about the impact on our teaching and our classrooms.

Methodology and Analysis

The data for this research project, drawn qualitatively from our writing group, encompassed a collection of our written autobiographical pieces, reflective field notes on the process of writing autobiographically in a collaborative setting and the place of personal narratives in teacher self reflection, and transcribed audio tapes of our meetings. This research provides, as Merriam (1988) writes, "a rich, "thick" description" (p. 11) of the ways in which educators use autobiography as a tool for reflection in a community of learners. Because all of the members of the writing group contributed to the data with their writings, reflections, and transcribed dialogues and actively participated in the analysis of the data, the mode of our analysis was participatory and introspective. We moved beyond the role of "observant participant" (Erickson, 1996) and acted as both researchers and informants. The data collection and analysis for this study occurred simultaneously. As a group, we examined data as they were collected and then arranged the data into "manageable units, synthesizing them, searching for patterns, discovering what's important and what is to be learned" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 153). As the research progressed, the data were analyzed inductively by means of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and by means of triangulation (Gordon, 1980). Our inferences became categories once they were crosschecked across data sources for continuity. In other words, as the data were examined, we looked for regularities and patterns of words, phrases, behaviors, images, and perspectives. These categories were further developed through dialogic analysis when as both the researchers and the researched, we discussed and crosschecked the emergence of themes.

Our autobiographical reflections have progressed from individual writing to collaborative analysis of our narratives. As mentioned above, the group was initially set up with very little structure on what and how the autobiographies would be written in order to allow the members to determine the shape and outcomes. As a group, we knew several other members of the group in various capacities, but we did not all know each other equally well. While we had all worked in the same public school, some of us had mentored others as university faculty and as co-operating teachers, others were colleagues, and some were recent student teachers. The very formation of the group and the building of a sense of common purpose and mission were important given

these relationships which, as we shall show, had important implications for our findings.

This is a work in progress. We present findings on the formation of identity through autobiographical reflection in a group setting around common concerns. Our findings, on the conception of the self as it is rewritten around our own professional concerns, reveal the promises as well as some of the challenges raised by the use of the autobiographical method in our desire to become more effective educators.

Perspectives

In this article, we share four distinct perspectives on the issues of audience, self-censorship, collaborative writing, and the value of community that have emerged through the analysis of the autobiographical writing we produced and the reflections occasioned by these writings (from the transcripts of the audio tapes and field notes). One of the unique aspects of our work is the way in which we collectively examine and analyze the data; we are both researchers and the researched. Through this process, we discovered the emergent themes presented here. By presenting four different perspectives we hope to show the complexities of the autobiographical method, how it raises issues of personal and professional identity in a context that has implications for teaching and learning K-16.

We present this section of perspectives in a variety of styles to capture the distinct voices represented in our community of autobiographers. These examples most clearly represent the themes that emerged from our sessions and our subsequent analysis of the data. Each perspective is written in a format that we believe is most appropriate to the content of its author/s. Each reflects a particular experience, however the perspectives are not particular to the author/s: the emerging themes overlap and are expressed by the distinct voices of the members of our autobiographical community.

We begin with Jeanine's illustration of her reflective process and writing. She provides a sample of her autobiographical writing as well as her actual reflections both before and after her piece is shared. Vinni and Allison collaboratively write the second perspective as they examine the ways in which their writing has been affected from their move as lifelong writers of reflective journals to autobiographers within a community of teachers. The third section is a dialogic e-mail interaction between Monica and Lesley that addresses the ways in which their narratives have developed as they strive to move from their roles as teacher educators to co-autobiographers in the community. The final section, written collaboratively by Maria and Dave, is an historical account of the journey that our group has traveled through the bumps and turns of establishing a trusting, safe community of writers.

The newbie: Jeanine

We begin the discussion with an autobiographical piece that Jeanine wrote and shared with our group for the first time during a collaborative presentation at the *University of Pennsylvania Urban Ethnography Conference* in the spring of 2002. We incorporated this reading into our presentation in order to provide the audience with a sample of our group at work. The audience was able to witness the ways in which we respond to a piece of writing and participate in that response. We include this series of writings here for much the same reasons: to provide a context for our collaborative endeavor, set the stage for the perspectives that follow, and to demonstrate Jeanine's viewpoint as she went through the process of composing, writing, and sharing the autobiographical piece publicly with a wide audience and later reflecting on the experience. Jeanine includes a reflection both before and after the narrative is shared to capture her process and perceptions as she moves through the various writing stages. Her narrative is in response to a discussion we had at meeting the previous December about the feelings that we have on Sunday evenings.

Pre-reflective writing. I sat down to write this piece as I had so many times before. Nothing was really different. I knew that I could scribble some thoughts down on paper that would capture the way that I was feeling at that particular moment. I would be able to measure the validity of my feelings when a few days later I would read this piece to the group.

Pre-presenting writing. When we decided as a group to present an unshared written piece and carry on our autobiographical research in front of an audience, I knew that doing so would be a powerful way to show people how the group works. The difficulty came when I realized it would be my piece that would be shared. It was hard for me to look at this piece that was already written and intended for an audience of "friends" in mind, and now see it as my deepest thoughts spread out amongst strangers. With this difficulty in mind however, I knew that I had to hold strong against my urges to look at the piece before the presentation. I knew that if I did, that I would make inevitable changes and it would no longer be authentic. As difficult as this was, I resisted.

Autobiographical writing. It's Sunday night. I'm watching *The Practice* and not sure what I feel like writing about. I'm refusing to

do any schoolwork. I'm not too backed up though, because we've been spending the last few weeks prepping for the English Language Arts test. I'm scared of this test. I want my kids to do well. I've been with them for two years now and I feel that they could be doing better, therefore, I spend most of my time beating myself up about this. I'm sitting here thinking about our last meeting and what I want to write about. I know that we reflected on the past five months or gearing up for the next five, but I'm finding it difficult to think of either on any academic terms. Maybe its due to the overwhelming preparation for this test that has got my brain fried, but at THIS very moment, when thinking of my kids, I can only reflect on my emotional connections with them. While the first half of this year bound all of us to our children in a unique way that will never be lost, other losses have tied me to my little ones this year. My class for the last year and a half cannot be defined by academics, I feel.

When I think of my class I feel it has been driven by and in a sense taken over by emotion, both theirs and mine. At this time, all I can see are two children suspended for pulling down one another's pants; anxiety attacks; and two students now left to a single parent home, due to a sudden death. I reflect on my class and can only see John asking my advice on how to stop his chest pains, Kyla needing so desperately to be a kid and to hear the words "no one could take the place of mommy," and finally, I see a kid whose name made me shiver when learning he would be mine, stroll into my class after hours and show signs of feelings. In one word, EMOTIONAL. It's the only word that I could use to describe my reflections of the first half of this year, at this time anyway. I wonder if they could see it, or will they suddenly be able to one day. While my emotional connections are very important to me, I can't help but to be bothered by the fact that I am not able to reflect on the curricular areas met, or even care about the academics. It's bothering me right now. The fact is, I don't even know yet if I like my job, but I do know that I'm not ready to leave just yet, and that's because I never know who might be lurking at the door come 3:00. So I'll keep trying and keep learning and learn the curriculum better so that I will be able to reflect academically more often, but, if it's okay, I'll lead with the emotions at the wheel. I'm at the point where I am still a newbie, but I know the ropes. Yet, for as much as I teach, there is so much more for me to learn.

When will I stop questioning myself? I know that the answer to this question is that a good teacher will never stop questioning herself, but it is difficult to feel comfortable with that answer. When I am the teacher, aren't I supposed to have the answers?

Post-sharing writing. As difficult as I thought that this experience of reading my personal thoughts was, it would prove to be both nerve racking and exciting. As I read my piece aloud to this small audience, I realized the fear expressed by Vinni, one of the other group members. Are they hearing what I am saying, or are they hearing what they think that I am saying? There wasn't a sense of security anymore. I felt that these people would judge me on what they heard. As I continued to read, I became very nervous and uncomfortable.

However, at the same time being surrounded by my group gave me a sense of security. It was wonderful to realize the sense of trust I felt for my autobiographical group. As I finished reading, the floor was opened up to discussion of my piece. It started as it normally would, with pieces of advice and the shared opinions of the writing. I immediately began to calm down. As the session went on it was thrilling to see this audience becoming involved and taking part in this process of sharing along with us. I was grateful for this, for it allowed me to experience even more objective feedback to my writing. I heard wonderful things from our new expanded autobiographical group. In the end, I took away important ideas and objective opinions about the kind of person that I am.

The journalers: Vinni and Allison

Vinni and Allison collaboratively wrote the next perspective, which examines the common and different ways in which they have responded to moving from writing privately to writing for a more public audience. As they prepared this perspective, they analyzed their autobiographical pieces, reflections on writing as members of a group, and the transcripts of our discussions. They realized through this process that they both greatly valued autobiographical writing but that they reacted to similar issues, especially that of audience, in very different ways. The following is their analysis of their perspectives of being lifelong autobiographers who are now sharing private writing with an audience.

Vinni and Allison. Last year we worked very closely, teaching multiage classes (first and second grades) which allowed us to plan our lessons and activities together. It was during this time we realized that we both shared a love of writing. We often found ourselves discussing our journaling and deciding on the best way to express our passion to our students. We shared our writing but only writing that we would share with the students. We each kept a "school journal" that contained some insightful writing but mostly around topics and stories that the students could hear. This "safe" writing was the only kind shared between the two of us. It seemed obvious to us that the next step in this process would be to join this autobiography group.

Besides writing for this group, we also analyze our autobiographical pieces and reflect on the process. We are very interested in the process of our writing and more specifically in examining the course of our own development as writers throughout this process. As a result, we decided to write this perspective about our writing and how it has changed or been affected by a public

audience.

Joining the group generated many different topics and stories from the past. It became evident in our sharing sessions that some people in the group enjoyed sharing more than others. As a group, we eventually spent a session discussing how we felt in the sharing process. We wrote about our experiences and noticed that the common thread in our writing, unlike other group members, was the issue of "voice." We shared both similar and different perceptions. We decided to read our work aloud in hopes of finding themes that emerged. We soon realized our perceptions revolved around similar themes but often in very different ways.

We have discovered that writing autobiography has always been a part of our lives and that our writing has gone through change and transition throughout this process of being members of an autobiography group. In addition, we have become **very** aware of our audience. Allison believes that she continues to write about issues on which she would have focused in her private writing. Vinni, in contrast, has noticed that her writing continues to contain safe topics, often stories that at some point may have come up in conversation. This issue of writing safely particularly stands out to her as she compares her public writing with years of reflective, private journaling.

As for the differences, Vinni has been struggling with reading the writing aloud to the group. She finds it very difficult to let out her personal feelings in the group setting. The reading aloud part is the area that causes her the most anxiety. The anxiety comes from the fear that what is being read differs for the reader from what she intends it to mean. As Vinni writes in one reflection, "Will they hear what I am saying? Will they hear what I really meant? Or will they create their own meaning?" The new voice that Vinni experiences in the group setting is the one that she hears when she is writing for the group sessions. She feels as if she hears an audible voice, the one that she uses when she is reading to the group. She reflects, "The 'aloud' voice makes my writing seem different since I know that others will be listening. The 'reading aloud' voice in my head is not necessarily one of censorship but an audible voice that drives my writing. I have been asked whether I was now writing for others or am I still writing for myself. I don't think that I could write for others. The confusion is that I know that the writing is now going to be reviewed by others."

On the other hand, Allison feels that reading her autobiographical writing aloud is the best part. She believes that writing things down before actually saying them out loud is extremely beneficial because writing things down make her thoughts more clear and concise. She gives examples of how she has felt that had she been given the opportunity to write before speaking her ideas would have been clearer to the audience. She writes, "I feel like I have been blowing up a balloon, and when I read my writing aloud, the balloon finally pops." In her eyes, when she reads her autobiographical pieces, "others can share my thoughts, my feelings, and my fears about teaching."

We have discovered the distinct ways we respond to issues of audience only through the analysis and discussion of our individual texts, reflections, and transcripts. Up until this point, we believed we felt similarly about writing reflectively because we view ourselves as lifelong journalers. But interestingly, we have very divergent responses to writing autobiographically for an audience. Our perspectives on audience resonate with those described by our colleagues in the preceding and following sections. Indeed, they fall along a dynamic continuum with our perspectives at the two extremes.

The dialoguers: Lesley and Monica

The following dialogue is taken from Monica and Lesley's e-mails to each other before and after sessions with the group. The e-mails have been edited to exclude parts of the conversations that deal with issues not relevant to this paper. Lesley and Monica were both public school teachers and are now teacher educators. They use a dialogue format to capture the particular nuances of their perspective, which is characterized by both an awareness of similarity in response and an appreciation of how their similar viewpoints gave them the opportunity, which they clearly take, to delve into the differences that make for the unique perspective they bring to the group. Initially they were unsure how best to convey this complexity, quickly realizing that a traditional narrative format would flatten out their differences into one voice or give one voice more prominence. They therefore decided on a dialogue since this is most natural to them and reflects the way they work together.

We hope that this dialogue shows both how Lesley and Monica's perspectives are similar and distinct. We all feel that this feeling of sympathy and difference is something important that has come from our group and something we increasingly draw on as our work broadens and deepens. We hope this dialogue helps to reveal at least part of this process and an intimation of our life as part of the autobiography group.

Dialogue. Lesley: Monica, the one thing that has been overwhelming for me, is how your perspective has turned out to be so similar to mine. Or rather I should say that our perspectives are so similar. I've been thinking about how wonderful it is that we

think the same about so many things, but also that the particular way you express things give me a slightly different view on problems I grapple with.

Monica: *I agree. The whole experience reminds me of when I taught at the University of Arizona as a graduate student. I would celebrate the end of class with a party, and this always began uncomfortably because of that boundary breaking. It usually took me some time to get comfortable. So in a way when we began this group in July, I felt pretty nervous that first day of sharing - especially when you and I weren't in the same group. I think being involved in this writing group together gives us another person to talk to who is coming from the same place. I never dreamt that I would be uncomfortable but again I chalk that up to my 'jumping- into- things' nature.*

Lesley: What is interesting for me is that the similarity is not a negative, only a positive. I feel it is something we build on, not something that detracts from what we think and our experiences in the group. It is not that I think our perspective is "one" - that somehow Monica and Lesley think as one - but that the similarities actually help us go deeper into the issues. For example, when we were talking in *Starbucks* after one of the sessions and were looking at how your writing has changed over time - I don't think this would have come up or have been so interesting to both of us, if we had had to deal with big differences in our perspectives.

One of the most difficult things for both of us early on was the idea of self-censoring. I suppose, a little arrogantly, we had not considered that this would be an issue for the others and yet it has been of course (Allison and Vinni mention it for example). It was through our discussions that I came to understand how multifaceted this problem was. For example, I think it was after the second session, we were standing outside and you mentioned how you were having a problem with how much of your personal life to include and said that it was hard to draw a line as you increasingly realized that to explain or describe teaching episodes needed more of a personal context.

Monica: *I think that that was the first time I realized that so much of who I am as a teacher is who I am as a person. I think that this realization also reflects thirteen years of experience. I did not hold such a deep sense of myself as teacher when I first started teaching. Although I loved teaching, I felt like it was a game - I was playing a role rather than it being my life. Now it permeates my every move - even the people with whom I choose to associate. And so many of my beliefs about social justice and other issues stem from my experiences as a child - How could I air my dirty laundry with past students? Would they think differently of me? Do they want to know me in that way? I don't even like to share my personal life with people at work - I usually stick to talking about Michael (my son) because it is a relatively safe topic.*

Of course it was very naive of us to think that everyone else was not going through the same thing. Interesting how equalizing the process of writing and sharing autobiographies is. Why don't we strive to do this more in our classrooms? Isn't this what Nancie Atwell advocates in writing workshop? Maybe we need to rethink our pedagogy? Maybe when we were using personal narrative in our courses, we didn't let it go far enough?

Lesley: That makes me think again about our writing, about how both of us have changed how we write with you loosening up and me enjoying the actual writing more and more, editing less and telling little stories more often with less commentary.

Monica: *Yes - this is amazing - I guess I began to let my hair down and stop overanalyzing. Maybe we needed to stop thinking so much and start telling stories - show me rather than tell me.*

Lesley: I have also been thinking about how my perspective was initially informed primarily by my pedagogical goals - I really didn't consider the effect on me, what it would mean to me to write an autobiography. I was much more interested in what would happen in the group - what the effect of the process would be on teachers' thinking. There was a joining of something - a self-forgetting as well as a self-remembering that was absolutely fascinating.

Monica: *I know exactly what you mean. I too went into it thinking from a pedagogical perspective and less from the idea of my own growth as the autobiographer. I really think that so much of our perspective stems from the experience of also sharing and participating in the group. It really is the vehicle that perpetuates the democratic process because it sends the message that we are also willing to be vulnerable and put ourselves out there.*

The discovers: Maria and Dave

Maria and Dave share a concluding perspective in a collective voice, reflecting on the historical development of the group and the purposes that sharing our autobiographies in a community of teachers serve. They capture the continual reflective probing

that occurs throughout our process as we write personal narratives individually, share in our group sessions, construct our autobiographies collaboratively, reflect on the process, and return to our own private writing. They actively explore: How and why does the group work? What do we bring to it? What do we get out of it?

Maria and Dave. Each of us in the group has a different perspective, a different background. We are all at different stages of our teaching careers and that brings a certain perspective to the group. Whether we are new teachers, teachers with a few years experience, teachers at a career crossroads, teacher educators, second career teachers, or staff developers we all seem to need a place where we are comfortable asking questions and sharing our thoughts and observations, and reflecting on our practice.

Over the past eight months since the conception of this group, many things have changed. Some of the original group have left, some more joined late but the group has now evolved into a cohesive unit that works extremely well in accomplishing our goals, which seem to change as we go along. We often stop and ask why have we come together? How have we moved forward? Where are we going? What have not changed are the connections the members of the group feel and the benefits that they have derived from the group.

We came together for so many different reasons. Our first meetings seemed like many undirected meanderings. We didn't know what we needed or wanted from the group we didn't know what direction our writings would take, or even at the time, how to proceed. Somehow we knew that the writing was key. But even that concept floated around, not knowing where to touch ground. We were to write autobiographies but found, at the start, that the confidence and comfort level that needed to be there for that kind of intimate sharing fell short. Even the journalers among us had difficulty with this. Those of us who had never really journaled much found autobiographical writing and sharing intimidating. We often felt we had to write for the group or to the group, though it was not what we sought in the inception of the group. Fear of others' judgments or critiques and a lack of trust were probably at the crux of this dilemma. Gradually, however, the group evolved, the trust developed, and the judgments never came. And we moved forward.

The group was becoming a unit. The words "community," "support," "voice," "confidence," and "validation" crept into our writings and into our discussions. We began to write for ourselves and began to share our ideas and feelings with the others because we grew in confidence and trust. We did less and less self-censoring as we realized that we needed to only be ourselves. We discovered that our words and thoughts would be valued and accepted, and that through our writings we could grow as individuals, as teachers, and as professionals.

In addition to that sense of family and confidence, this group provided all of us with an outlet for our feelings and a mechanism to explore our teaching experiences. In each of our situations we found the need to share our experiences and feelings. While colleagues are kind and empathetic, the kind of in-depth sharing we do within the group is not possible at work. Friends and family try to be sympathetic but since most are not in the education field, they often just don't "get it." In the group, it is different. In our sessions there is freedom to express doubts, fears, concerns, plans, goals, and philosophies as they apply to our work. We find a voice there - a place and means to explore our innermost feelings and thoughts about our lives as teachers. This is a powerful thing. We become more aware of our feelings and clearer about our perspectives. Especially for those of us who did not journal much before this project got underway, the group meetings give direction and purpose to our writing. The group provides us with the incentive to write about who we are and what we do as teachers. The journaling, followed by the sharing and discussions have been a good way for us to reflect on the practice of teaching, our perceptions of teaching, and the directions each of us want our careers to take.

In addition to voice, the group sessions provide validation. Teaching is a solitary practice in many ways. It's you in a classroom with your students. For the most part there is no collaboration, no partnership - just you. This often results in feeling as though you're in it all alone. In our sessions, as others share their writings and reflections, we see our own experiences validated in theirs and that is a most comforting thing.

The group is a family which gives us confidence and a voice and which provides validation. If we look at what constitutes this group, you can see that this is a true example of when the whole is more than the sum of its parts. The group consists of its participants, the autobiographical writings and reflections, the sharing and discussions. Each of these components alone is ineffective. The individuals just gathering together and discussing could not get to the level we achieve in this group. The writings, themselves alone, could not get us to the level we achieve in this group. The discussions, in and of themselves, could not get us to the level we achieve in this group. It is the combination of all three -- the people, the reflective writings, the sharing and discussions together -- that have an incredible effect. The experience offers so much more than self reflection ever could. Often too, as we listen to the reflections and revelations of others, they spark a revelation in ourselves and inspire writing along the lines of a new perspective.

So we continue to ask the questions of each other and ourselves. We continue to explore our beliefs and philosophies and perspectives on our profession, all within the community we have created - a community that supports and encourages that exploration. We continue the journey that we started eight months ago, plotting our course as we go. Our journey, an unwritten journal that will be written as time goes on.

What Have We Learned From This Community of Autobiographical Writers?

Although our perspectives have differed in terms of our individual experiences in the group, our autobiographical writing in a social setting has been successful in that we have met our goals. We have developed new reflective and analytical lenses that we continually adjust, focus, and refocus to better understand as well as renew our teaching beliefs and practice. To what do we attribute this success? Over the course of nine months, our work has revealed a number of interrelated tenets that both strengthen our endeavors as well as set us apart from other educators who utilize personal narrative. We attribute our success to the following interdependent processes that have developed naturally within this particular group of educators: a truly democratic process where all members take on the various roles of writers, readers, reflectors, and researchers; our unique autobiographical process where we write, share, and reflect on our personal narratives within a community of writers; and the utilization of an unusual research methodology that has each member act as both the researcher as well as the researched.

Why does democracy work for us? From the very inception of this autobiographical writing group, we have continually striven to maintain a democratic framework. In fact, this commitment began as a struggle for all involved as Monica, Lesley and Vinni refrained from taking roles of leadership and Jeanine, Allison, Maria, and Dave diverged from their comfort zone as "students." In fact, the focus of struggle became the impact of audience, something we had not seriously considered prior to the experience. As we met and shared our autobiographies with others, whether colleagues, friends, former students, or former professors, unsettling tensions emerged. Unplanned, these tensions brought about the mechanisms necessary to eliminate our discomfort and build a democratic model for our autobiographical writing community.

The shared revealing of ourselves through the reading/hearing of our personal narratives led to the realization of a shared vulnerability and insecurity. This served as the most important vehicle in establishing a democratic community. Our democratic model was further enhanced by the human elements that emerged as we continued to build our community: our dedication to meeting regularly over time; the development of strong rapport; and our genuine interests in each another's narratives. The sharing of responsibilities such as writing, reading, leading discussions, conducting research on ourselves, presenting, and writing for publication has led to shared ownership of the writing community and its goals.

Our democratic community could not have developed without the unique procedures established by the members of our autobiographical community. Again, the format for our meetings was not pre-planned, rather the improvised recipe of the rituals of our meetings developed through discussion and interaction. When we meet, we share our narratives, discuss our responses, and most importantly reflect on our autobiographical process. Each session takes on a different flavor as it reflects the varied stories and concerns brought to the table.

Our self-reflection *en masse*, in our small trusting community of educators, drives us to look deeper and more analytically at our teaching beliefs, experiences, and practice. It is in this space that we truly connect as well as discover aspects of ourselves that set us apart, but the distinctions do not feel as drastic or isolating because usually there is at least one other person that feels the way that we do and because the setting is so nurturing that we embrace and try to understand our differences. We have created a community where everyone has something to contribute - where everyone is a learner, an expert, a pinch of old and a dash of new. We bring to the table various talents and strengths that are not set up hierarchically but rather in a community that relies on the participation of all involved.

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