

*Shadow and Substance: What can classroom researchers see in doing classroom-
based research?*

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I want to thank the Graham Nuthall Trust for this invitation to continue the critical conversation about learning in classrooms that my late colleague and friend, Graham Nuthall, seeded through his rich classroom-based research work with his collaborators. It is a privilege and pleasure to join in this conversation with you by sharing some of my experiences in classrooms in the United States and in New Zealand over the last twenty years.

As you know in Plato's classic cave allegory he describes the conditions of imprisonment that give rise to false learning and the conditions of emancipation from the 'cave prison' in which genuine learning or enlightenment can eventually occur. For those individuals imprisoned in a den or cave since childhood and restrained from moving their legs and necks, their own shadows that appear on the wall in front of them are taken to be the real. Plato argues that if these people are liberated from their cave existence and brought out into the light, the real objects and their forms appear at first as an illusion, while from their long experiences with and of the shadows of their cave existence they appear more real; only gradually are the liberated individuals able to exist in the light of being, for Plato, the good.

In an analogous manner, as children we are like the cave dwellers whose perceptions of learning are gradually formed through participating in the cultural rituals and myths, as Graham describes them, in our schooling experiences. These cultural rituals and myths create our sense of belonging to a community of learning,

but unknowingly to us they also limit or constrain our understandings of the possibilities of *other* kinds of communities of learning. While it is true that as children we experience different forms of learning outside of formal school, such as in extracurricular activities in our families and neighbourhoods, it is in the systematic instantiation of schooling practices that we come to experience most fully a particular culture's way of seeing learning. In our schooling experiences we learn how to think about learning and what counts as real learning, and through these experiences our identities as learners gradually develop.

In thinking about the ways children are acculturated into ideas of learning and being learners, I would like to recount briefly my personal experiences with an array of different forms of school learning into which I was acculturated. I have chosen to do this because I now understand, after much reflection, that these experiences profoundly affected the ways I approached my classroom research. Further, I have come to appreciate that the ideas of learning I brought into my work, also, powerfully impacted on processes of forgetting and remembering the shadows and substance of learning.

I spent my first six years of schooling in an inner city, working class school in Chicago in the 1950s in the United States. Here I experienced learning as being essentially related to hygiene, obedience, and conformity, with strict gender positioning rules, a process of acculturation that 'fit' us into working class a priori positions through *seeing* our teachers and administrators as servants to those positions. As a young child, this kind of learning evoked in me a feeling of comfortable entrapment and an accompanying hunger for something more -more

stimulation and more possibilities for adventure. These longings were met in a series of extracurricular activities such as ballet, baton, theatre, acrobatics, and Sunday school. In these activities, I experienced a different kind of learning, one in which others, both teachers and children, seemed to enjoy their learning practices; as I now understand, it was in these experiences that I came to experience learning as apprenticeship.

As an early adolescent I spent the next three years in an elementary school in a primarily Jewish neighbourhood with middle class pretensions in Chicago. Here I learned a different kind of learning, one that was related to the successful engagement in school tasks –scoring well on tests, moving up in reading groups, and winning spelling bees, as if our job was to ride the scholastic waves with ever increasing prowess. We saw our best teachers happily engaged in teaching us the disciplinary skills to do that, and our worst ones coddling us like Mother hens. Those children that succeeded in this context were heralded as the ‘right kind of student’ and rewarded with ribbons, stars and a privileged status - while those that failed were publicly humiliated. My recollection of this kind of learning carried in it coldness, an intellectual emptiness at its centre, as if learning was akin to balancing an accounting sheet, over and over. This kind of learning once again left me hungry for something more, propelling me to seek out again the full range of free extracurricular activities in my neighbourhood, and to engage in more elaborate imaginative activities on my own.

As a secondary student in a solidly upper middle class, well-established suburban neighbourhood in Chicago, my previous senses of learning were radically transformed. In this privileged socio-economic context I learned that complex learning was an entitlement of being human, and that it was experienced most fully as

one travelled into unknown disciplinary territories with knowledgeable teachers who esteemed and most often loved their disciplines. I became slowly acculturated to this kind of learning through seeing my teachers enthusiastically engage with their subject matter as teacher/learners, people who enacted in the classrooms what it is like to think, believe and act as botanists, writers, historians, journalists, dramatists, etc., teachers who taught me how to experience the sheer joy of complex learning and how to be that kind a learner

From these diverse schooling experiences I came to feel a range of the meanings of learning, their purposes and their effects on my emerging identities. I also sensed that the different kinds of learning that I had been exposed to were related to teachers' ideas of best practices derived from their own cultural experiences as women and men of various ethnicities and socio-economic classes, and that specific ideas about learning and people 'fit' like hands in kid gloves.

As an adolescent fortunate to have experienced the challenges and pleasures of complex, transformative learning in secondary school, the choice was a clear one— from that point forward my hunger could be satisfied through learning as a way of flying, a going beyond the given, an emancipation from learning practices in school contexts that had previously restrained my intellectual vision. This way of thinking about learning paved the way for me to come to see it ultimately as, also, being inextricably related to ideas of democracy; democracy was dependent on the development of persons whose intellectual potentials developed in contexts free of restraint but with guidance by socially conscious and more expert others. This idea of learning acquired in an enlightened school was the 'form' and 'substance' that created both the fabric of my personal life and motivated my work in the profession of education over the last thirty-five years. From having been acculturated into varying

experiences of school learning, I had concluded that if I could choose undeniably the most favourable one, the one with substance, without a doubt so would others. But the error in my thinking about learning in this way was that it created the condition of forgetting too much.

However, on my sabbatical last year while working on a book with my colleagues about our classroom-based research project at a primary school in New Zealand, I remembered what I had forgotten, and the experience of remembering was painful, indeed. I remembered that schools can create the conditions of Plato's cave by acculturating children and adolescents into forms of learning that limit their intellectual potentialities, deprive them of their human entitlement for complex learning, and, further impoverish democratic possibilities. Children, unable to see and interrogate their specific school learning acculturation, are like the cave dwellers.

I would now like to turn to briefly describe three classroom research projects that I was involved in, two in the United States and one in New Zealand, that illustrate a number of complex dynamics at work in classroom research. First, in accord with the understandings of the interpretive nature of research in the human world as illuminated by the post-positivistic human philosophers and scientists, I, too, have come to appreciate that it was my history of the experiences of the truth and power of transformative learning that informed my classroom research projects with a passion; this history became a belief, a substance or form that was projected into the design, implementation, and interpretation of my classroom research projects. But the transformative learning form that I embodied, also, interacted with the embodied and materialized discourses of learning in each specific research classroom that were

constructed from the socio-cultural values of each school community. And it was in these interactions over the course of each research project that processes of *forgetting and remembering* as a classroom researcher were elicited, processes that impacted on my interpretive analyses of the constructions of learning in schooling through sometimes *dismissing* data relating to the diverse permutations of learning and their material effects on children's intellectual and identity development *or* in *embracing* the same data for complex analyses.

Classroom-based research project 1.

To begin. At the University of Michigan in the 1990s my colleagues and I undertook a study of the role of interest in fostering middle school students' identities as competent learners, drawing on the burgeoning literature relative to the motivational, intellectual and social benefits of self-selected interest-based learning. This work was motivated by my passion to create enriched contexts of learning for early adolescents in light of their well-documented, growing disenchantment with school learning.

This study took place in an exurban school in the American Midwest with 47 middle school students and two teachers who team-taught their classes. Both of the teachers were veteran teachers with over 10 years of experience who were eager to participate in the project because of their interest in Gardner's ideas about multiple intelligences.

The findings relative to the powerful role of interest-based learning were riveting. Among the findings were understandings that middle school students knew what they were interested in and would tell you if asked (we had four interest-based inquiries in science, theatre arts, animal studies and movement studies), that their

interests were long-term and reflected how they were drawn to be intellectually and socially engaged in the world, such as budding experimental scientists, artists, zoologists, and kinesiologists, and middle school students' motivation, persistence and learning increased in complex interest-based learning contexts. Further Dewey's hypothesis about intrinsic interest as having a person/subject-matter/materials and ways of knowing *unity* appeared to be confirmed in this study. Finally, we saw that the children who had been identified with a range of learning problems emerged as leaders in these interest-based learning contexts.

As we wanted the teachers to be directly involved in this research we arranged to have them work with us in various aspects of the project. Once a week we met with them in the early morning before school to discuss the project and elicit their ideas. At first they were enthusiastic and interested, but as the project evolved, we could feel them withdrawing more and more. While we were encouraged by the students' positive responses in their interest-based learning contexts, the teachers appeared *to become less interested* in the project in response to the changes in the students.

Our interpretation of this phenomena circled around our thinking that in reshaping the teaching/learning dynamics to centre on the middle school students intrinsically motivated ways of thinking we had significantly altered the linguistic and non-verbal practices that the teachers had designed together as their *form* of classroom learning and that positioned them in particular ways as teachers. Our redesign motivated by transformative ideas of learning for the students had successfully repositioned them as competent learners but had inadvertently repositioned the teachers to feel less competent.

In essence, in this project's design, I had remembered the power of transformative learning for myself as an adolescent, but had forgotten that classrooms

are complex cultural constructions that are infused with ideas and practices related to particular forms of learning that teachers ‘count’ on and from which they derive their professional satisfaction.

Classroom-based research project 2

Next I embarked on another classroom-based research project with my colleagues at Michigan as we were keen to build on the findings from our previous project. In having experienced the leadership roles that middle school students with a range of learning difficulties assumed in self-selected contexts of interest, we wanted to explore more intensively the ways interest-based learning might facilitate their transformative learning. We were invited to undertake this work in a private school for students identified with specific learning disabilities in the midwestern part of the United States, working with five teachers, 31 students and the director of the school. As we thought about this project, however, it was critical for us to *remember* what we had *forgotten* in our previous research project about teachers’ cherished ways of thinking about learning and the significance of those ways of thinking to their identities as teachers.

As a consequence, we changed three aspects of our previous project. First, we did not want to begin the interest-based inquiries with the students until we had created a working community with the teachers and the director of the school. Here we drew on the growing literature related to the importance of developing communities of learners with teachers and researchers to develop shared understandings of pedagogy and research objectives. We wanted them to become actively engaged in all aspects of the project before beginning it, and hopefully become as enthusiastic as we were.

Thus, we spent the first half of one year meeting with the five participating teachers and the director in bi-weekly meetings during school and three workshop dinner meetings after school to discuss the theoretical bases of the project and its aims and to collaboratively design the interest-based apprenticeships. Further, we engaged the teachers in the same activities designed to elicit students' genuine interests in learning *before* we worked with the students. This provided us an opportunity to get to know more about the teachers' interests in learning and it became a fertile springboard for discussing the role of interest in complex learning, in general.

Second, we wanted to provide the 31 participating middle school students with the richest possible interest-based learning contexts so we decided to employ experts from the community in the identified students' areas of genuine interest (these were sculpture, automotive engineering, performance comedy, and movement science). Here we drew on the apprenticeship literature and further asked the mentors to design a real problem for the students to solve, and not to think of the students as 'problem learners' but rather as people who shared their passionate interest in learning.

Finally, we thought that we wanted the teachers to fully participate in the interest-based learning dynamics led by experts in their field, so we asked the teachers to choose one of the four interest-based learning contexts identified by the students and to learn with them in that context, to be a co-learner. Here we were thinking that relieving the teachers from their daily duties in the capacity of 'teachers' and creating possibilities for them to be 'active and engaged learners' would yield another interpretive lens on the role of interest-based learning from the teachers' perspective.

Thus, in the second half of the year we created four apprenticeships that met for eight weeks every Thursday and Friday afternoon for two hours during regular school hours. The teachers and students were co-learners in each of these

apprenticeships, the mentors guided these learners in ways of thinking about and acting in their professional fields, and the five researchers collected video and audio data and served as supports for the mentors.

Here again the results were captivating in the same ways as in our previous project but this time there was an additional finding. The outcomes of the interest-based learning guided by mentors who designed complex, problem-based contexts of learning as apprenticeships for the teachers/co-learners *and* their middle school students were so powerful *for the teachers* that they reconstituted their ideas of school learning to include ideas and understandings of interest-based learning and its positive effects.

Our interpretation of this positive response from the 4 teachers who participated fully in this project is that they engaged with us as eager partners in all phases of the project; they joined us enthusiastically in a small democratic community in which they were teachers, teacher-researchers, learners and co-learners. This time we did not forget that teachers' identities have been constituted *before* we arrived as classroom researchers. Instead, we understood that the positive findings of a classroom-based research project are likely to be appropriated by the teachers only if they have been involved in the intellectual and social conversations and practices associated with new teaching/learning dynamics, if they have experienced again, or remembered themselves the exhilaration of learning new ideas and of being changed by those new ways of thinking. .

As a corollary, however, what I had forgotten about as a classroom-based researcher in this project is that complex disciplinary contexts of learning are not easily interpretable from outside of a discipline. Thus, faced with the requirement to 'make sense' of the data from this project, I experienced a sense of incompetency.

Thus, to learn more about the disciplinary complexities involved in transformative learning in sculpture, such as ways of thinking, acting, feeling and talking as a sculpture, I took a class in human form sculpture with the mentor who led that apprenticeship in this project. Without understanding that discourse I realized I could not do justice to the teaching/learning dynamics in this apprenticeship.

Classroom-based project 3

Finally, while time limits my possibilities for discussing with you the complex and provocative aspects of the longitudinal project that my colleagues, Baljit Kaur, Ruth Boyask and Kane O'Connell, and I embarked on at a special character school in New Zealand from 2001 to 2005, to inquire about the meanings of the special character learning and their relationships, if any, to complex interest-based learning, I can say that it was in this classroom research project that, as I mentioned before, I had to confront what I knew in my bones but what I had forgotten in my educational utopian zeal –ideas of what counts as learning are carried in specific schooling contexts by teachers whose identities have been shaped through complex acculturation processes. There was a blinding sense about *remembering* in the context of classroom-based research in NZ because the research approaches I had honed through the forgetting and remembering processes involved in doing classroom based research in the United States did not fully transfer to this NZ schooling context.

While time does not allow me to touch on all of the ambiguities and conflicts that I encountered in this cross-cultural research project, I can illustrate the confrontation of different educational discourses with one example. Whereas in my classroom-based research experiences in the United States there had been a taken-for-granted esteem afforded to educational scholarship by the participating schools and its

members, particularly as it impacted on their teaching/learning dilemmas, in this New Zealand context from the beginning there was an antipathy towards theoretical formulations of educational practices and educational research associated with universities relative to their application to real classrooms and schools. This anti-intellectual orientation towards pedagogy meant that the unique teacher-parent researcher collaborative research project that we had forged together, with great hopes on both sides of the partnership, was continually plagued with issues of power about 'whose learning counts' –the craft knowledge of classroom teachers or the more formal knowledge of the university educational intellectuals –creating a climate of unresolved intellectual and social tensions that resulted in a non-democratic context for collaborative research.

Taking up pedagogical challenges

As I conclude I would like to take up the challenges that I have encountered in the United States and in New Zealand relative to engaging in school-university partnerships as fertile grounds for transformative, democratic learning for all students in our schools. In beginning to address this challenge, I turn to the book, *Educating Clergy, Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination*¹, the first book in a series of comparative studies by The Carnegie Foundation for The Advancement of Teaching that examine how people in different professions are educated to meet their responsibilities for the communities they serve; subsequent studies in this series will focus on the professional preparation of engineers, lawyers, nurses and physicians. It seems to me, and others I have talked to, that the profession of teaching and the clergy are similar in that persons in these professions share the sense of 'being called to a human service.' As a consequence this book may be of particular use in thinking

¹ Foster, C.R., Dahill, L.E., Goleman, L. A. and Tolentino, B. W. (2006). *Educating Clergy, Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

about ways to reconstruct our teacher preparation programmes to include elements in the curricula that would inform people about different kinds of learning in schools and outside of schools, their histories and their appearance in particular socio-cultural and historical periods.

In the forward to this book, Lee Shulman who is the president of the Carnegie Foundation, asks this question: *How does a professional school prepare its students both for the specific skills needed to perform the functions they must enact, while also preparing them to become the kinds of human beings – morally, experientially, intellectually – to whom others are ready to entrust the performance of their functions?* (p. X) Based on extensive research with faculty, students and administrators in diverse seminaries in the Judeo-Christian heritage, from Roman Catholic to Conservative Jewish, there appears to be four pedagogies of theological education – pedagogies of interpretation which instruct students in the interpretation of the sacred texts; pedagogies of formation which teach about pastoral identities, dispositions and values; pedagogies of conceptualisation which engage students in coming to understandings of the complex social, political, personal and community conditions that surround them; and pedagogies of performance that focus on the skills necessary to carry out their responsibilities. Shulman would argue that these pedagogies apply to all professions.

In applying these ideas to the professional preparation of teachers, it would appear critical that students in a teacher preparation programme know the history of their own profession as well as understand the range of diverse approaches to thinking about what learning is, and engage in discussion and debate about these critical aspects of their profession – pedagogies of interpretation. Second, it would be of great significance that students in a teacher preparation programme master those texts

that underpin their professions' history and thinking so that as teachers they can be trusted to know and act responsibly in the classroom – pedagogies of formation. Third, it is paramount that pre-service teachers can critically understand the forces that constitute the society that they are called upon to serve, otherwise as Dewey suggests, they are mere slaves to that society – pedagogies of contextualisation. Last, it is important for teachers to practice the skills necessary to carry out the responsibilities of the teaching profession – pedagogies of performance. What was particularly striking to the authors of this text is that the intellectual pedagogical core of teaching budding clergy lies with a concern with the significance and practical implications of the *interpretation* of texts, customary practices and experience.

In thinking about this kind of professional preparation, I must confess that mine was deficient in several respects, in particular in knowing the history of my profession, in interpretation of texts that theorized different ideas, and in understanding the inextricable ties of schooling to socio-cultural and historical contexts. In short this amounted to the experience of being in Plato's cave deprived of a whole range of knowledge and understandings that restrained my intellect and those of my peers in educational programs of study. In face of these deficiencies in knowledge, in understandings and ways of thinking in and about my profession, I had to encounter and grapple with them on my own in complex interactions in classroom teaching and in classroom-based research over my professional life.

As I think about this situation, I would like to leave us all with a question to ponder, one with numerous and significant possibilities and challenges that would honour our professional preparation programme as a call to intellectual, experiential and moral service. *Wouldn't it be possible for the profession of education to craft a programme of studies that is akin to the one in the clergy so that the recursive*

processes of forgetting and remembering differing kinds of historical, social and cultural learning are built into our shared professional identities to be used as intellectual and social resources in the creation of transformative learning contexts for all?