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9 Writing and Professional Learning
A “Dialogic Interaction”

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INTRODUCTION

People hardly get by without the clichés and other formulaic phrasing they use from day to day. Greeting someone by asking “How are you?” does not imply a request for a detailed account of his or her health. To respond to such a greeting by listing your physical ailments would be to break with social conventions (at least in Australia, where an appropriate response to this salutation would be: “Yeah, I’m okay, thanks. How are you?”). Language of this kind conceals as much as it reveals, allowing people to defer grappling with all sorts of unpalatable truths as they go about the business of their lives.

It seems that words and phrases are continually being put into currency, passed from mouth to mouth, paradoxically binding people together in a shared misrecognition of the world around them. And this misrecognition extends beyond their immediate settings, mediating their participation in the larger society. This is especially the case with the sloganeering of politicians and the big bold print of newspaper headlines that people take up in their daily conversations, as though these slogans give meaning to their lives and contemporary experiences. Sebastian Haffner recounts how his childhood was rudely interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War, when as a 7-year-old he found himself constantly hearing new words: “Ultimatum,” “Mobilization,” “Alliance,” “Entente” (Haffner, 2002, p. 14). He recalls the language of the crowd as they cheered on those going off to the front: “Be brave!” “Stay safe and healthy!” “Come back soon!” “Smash the Serbs!” (p. 14). Has our so-called ‘war on terror’ been any different? In educational landscapes, can we not pose a similar question about language such as ‘standards,’ ‘accountability,’ ‘learning outcomes’ and ‘transparency’?

Yet language, as Terry Eagleton observed, is also “a way of being among things in the world” (2007, p. 69). While language may indeed serve to shut people off from reality, it can also yield “the deepest access to it” (p. 69). Eagleton is making a claim about the value of poetry, but his account of the way poets reflexively use words, inquiring into experience by working
at the interface between words and things—between 'inside' and 'outside,' 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity'—might be extended to include other writing. It might also embrace the social relationships and transactions in which people engage from day to day, such as those which constitute the institutional settings where they work, not only the world of 'things' that Eagleton invokes.

Wherever we find ourselves, and whatever linguistic resources we have at our disposal—whether writing a poem, a report about conditions in our workplace or a syllabus document mapping out the learning we anticipate our students will achieve over the next term—it is valuable to pause occasionally in order to reflexively monitor our language, interrogating the clichés and phrasing that we use in our everyday life. This does not presume that we can ever get at the 'truth,' as though an individual writer or speaker can simply clear away the jargon that others use in an effort to achieve some kind of authentic communication or—dare we say it?—a "plain language statement." Bakhtin (1984) says that truth "is not born, nor is it to be found inside the head [or the words] of an individual person." Rather, it is "born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of dialogic interaction" (p. 110). This means resisting any notion that there can ever be a final word on any matter, as though somehow our language and ideas might be made to correspond with 'reality.' It also means cultivating a reflexive stance towards the language of "the day and hour" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293), even as we contribute to it by participating in a variety of social activities in a variety of settings.

In this chapter, we aim to investigate the nature and role of writing in relation to educators' professional learning. As part of this investigation, we seek to enact and in a sense capture a process of 'dialogic interaction' as we experienced it in conversations among the four of us about the role of writing in professional learning. Claire and Sidra are English teachers in secondary schools, while Graham and Brenton are English teacher educators working in university settings. Through our conversations, we have been striving to heighten our sensitivity towards the multiple ways that language mediates our relationships with ourselves and others, and how this language shapes our view of the world and the activities in which we engage, specifically our work as language educators. By enacting a process of 'dialogic interaction,' we shall try to gesture towards larger complexities than might be conveyed by definitive statements or what Schwab calls a "rhetoric of conclusions" (1964). By and large, we shall use the first-person plural (as we are doing now) and write in an analytical mode in an effort to express some of the understandings we have reached about the nature of writing and professional learning. However, we also incorporate snippets of narratives that convey our individual perspectives and interact with the analytical writing. These narratives are taken from texts each of us produced separately over recent years and in different contexts.
The interleaving narratives are not presented as best-practice models of writing that have spawned quality learning, but as part of our ongoing investigation into the nature and possibilities of writing as a form of inquiry for teachers and researchers in education. Although this narrative writing might be read as being prompted by the reflections surrounding them, it does more than simply illustrate the arguments presented in the more analytical passages. Rather than producing a seamless text in which everything folds into everything else (as in a "rhetoric of conclusions"), we work with juxtaposition and contrast, contradiction and difference, affirming the irreducibility of each of our individual voices as opposed to the universalizing pretensions that inhere within the first-person plural. In this way, we hope to prompt further reflections in the minds of our readers that point beyond this discussion, contributing to a larger conversation that will continue, even when we have put a full stop after the final sentence of this chapter.

**CONFRONTING GENERALIZATIONS**

What we have said thus far shows we are not arguing a case for writing in addition to other forms of professional learning in which educators might engage. We see writing as a condition for professional inquiry and learning and not a mere tool for reflecting that learning or for 'writing up' the results. As language educators, we believe language is an inescapable condition for all our work, and for our engagement with the world. Language is there, to borrow loosely from Roland Barthes (1977), like life itself. Writing—and the kind of struggle with words and meaning that writing involves (Doecke & Parr, 2005)—is a crucial means by which to inquire into the way language mediates our understanding of our work as educators, our professional identity and our relationships with each other.

Yet in a paradoxical way, we are obliged to confront the fact that writing and textual work of various kinds figure very prominently in the standards-based environment in which educators must currently operate (cf. Smith, 2005). It is unlikely that anyone would dispute the textually mediated nature of the policy environment in which teachers in both schools and universities are obliged to operate. Educators already engage in arguably an unprecedented amount of textual work—our conversations with each other over the past few months have been interrupted by the fact that Sidra and Claire have had to, for instance, write reports, mark exams, plan lessons (at one point, Sidra observed in an email that a single round of her report writing had amounted to almost 10,000 words, an observation that clearly resonated with Claire). At a schoolwide and system-wide level there is increasing emphasis on performance appraisal, involving the preparation of portfolios and other textual artifacts supposedly to demonstrate that teachers are working at a certain level of accomplishment. Any claim about the value of writing for critical inquiry must be made against a backdrop...
where writing is increasingly used by teachers, school administrators and
bureaucrats for decidedly uncritical purposes, in order to demonstrate the
achievement of outcomes that the system demands (cf. Parr, 2007).

The texts and textual work that typify standards-based reforms are shot
through with a generalizing rhetoric involving statements about what teach­
ers should supposedly ‘know and be able to do’ (to borrow a cliché from the
discourse of professional standards), as though everything can be pinned
down in advance and in a way that comprehends the practice of educa­
tors everywhere, regardless of the specific nature of the school communi­
ties in which they work. Such standards are sometimes presented as ideals
towards which teachers might aspire without necessarily being expected to
achieve them, not as benchmarks against which their performance must be
judged. But even when standards take an aspirational form, they run the
risk of embodying an authoritarian knowledge or discourse that brooks no
challenging, as though they are literally the final word. To borrow again
from Bakhtin, such discourse tends to reify into language that is:

 sharply demarcated, compact and inert.... it demands our uncondi­
tional allegiance.... Authoritative discourse [or knowledge] permits
no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no grad­
ual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing vari­
ants on it. (1981, p. 343)

The knowledge reified by so-called ‘standards’ sees more value in com­
pliance than in dialogue. It does not invite inquiry into, or conversation
about, the particulars of educational experience. It is not interested in the
ambiguities and the inconsistencies of the social and cultural worlds that
might problematize the production of that knowledge; nor is it interested in
the mediating role of language in the production or reproduction (or chal­
lenging) of knowledge.

Delandshere and Arens (2003) and others (e.g., Tillema & Smith, 2007;
cf. Bellis, 2004; Doecke, 2005; Hay & Moss, 2005; Lyons, 1998; Piva,
2005) have charted the way ‘standards’ produce a rhetoric of conformity in
the form of teachers’ professional portfolios. The potentiality of writing in
these portfolios as a vehicle for critical engagement has been undermined by
the discourses of standards-based reforms, which reduce writing to simply
an exercise in demonstrating professional accomplishment. Writing, there­
fore, is ‘manufactured’; it is standardized into a generic set of texts that
wrench experience out of the richly particular contexts that have given rise
to it. The historical moment of professional portfolios in the United States
and in Australia has quickly spawned formulae that encourage teachers to
try to account for their practice by using language that has been prescribed
for them, tying their descriptions and reflections about their work to a set
of standards statements, as if these descriptions could then demonstrate
what they ‘know and are able to do.’ Questions about the complexity of
representing professional practice have gone begging. Rather than treating
writing as a means to critically inquire into aspects of their professional practice and to make connections with individual experience, portfolios are reduced to a proliferation of generalizations. The writing begins to look the same and sound the same, and thus is emptied of meaning.

By contrast, the kind of textual work that we are envisaging is prompted by Bakhtin's (1986) notion of "dialogic potential," a potential that always escapes being defined beforehand as what teachers 'should know and be able to do.' We value writing that promotes inquiry into and dialogue about the particularity and the distinctiveness of experience and practice at all levels of educational work, and that conveys a reflexive awareness of the role of language in describing and engaging with this experience.

A Grammar Lesson (Claire)

In a quiet room in the late afternoon, I sit in exam-style rows and nervous look at my colleagues around me. I’m waiting to receive the results of my test on the new grammar I was supposed to learn in our last class: adjectival clauses, intensifiers and coordinating conjunctions. This professional development workshop is designed to respond to the emphasis on grammar teaching in our new Australian Curriculum: English. The problems of the past have been identified and they will be solved... with grammar. This is what we need, according to the media and politicians. As English teachers we are apparently supposed to believe that all other educational issues can be swept aside while we concentrate on the curative power of grammar knowledge.

And thus my grammar class comes to order again. In a sense, I am thankful. I am apparently one of the thousands of qualified, professional and active English teachers in Australia who didn’t get a ‘proper’ English education when I was a school student. But, as I am told, it’s not our fault. It simply wasn’t part of the curriculum during the 1980s and 1990s. This makes me feel better as a senior teacher participating in this workshop gives the correct answers to the test that we sat last week. We sit and listen and we smile and nod our heads as we quickly correct the errors that have been made on our own test sheets.

But my smile betrays my uncertainty. For the first time since finishing secondary school in the early 1990s, I have an overwhelming sense of dread. I am using all of the energy I can muster to appear relaxed and to try and look as though I understand everything being taught to me. It is significant that I am being taught in traditional, ‘chalk and talk’ pedagogy. Whatever happened to the social construction of knowledge? Some other participants seem to revel in the opportunity to ask complex questions about morphemes and lexemes. A colleague near me exclaims, “Why wasn’t I taught this at school? My life would be so much easier if I knew grammar properly!” The comments that
follow echo this lament. The assumption seems to be that our students will have a better experience of English when taught this grammar as per the National Curriculum guidelines. I'm not convinced.

While I acknowledge that the grammar I have been teaching through my relatively short career isn't as detailed as what I am learning in my after-school grammar workshops, I am uncomfortable. My perception of what subject English is doesn't focus on grammar in the way that many of my colleagues appear to think is desirable. I enjoy literary and textual analysis that I engage in with my whole class. I think of this kind of textual play in terms of an investigator searching for clues to an ancient mystery: the connections between language and experience.

Today in my own classroom with my students, I can sense when these pivotal moments are about to take place; when my students suddenly gain an insight into something that they either hadn't really thought of before or that they didn’t perceive as being of value. The confidence that they bring into the classroom and exhibit in their discussion and writing illustrates that something important and unique has happened to their perception of what makes them speakers of English. As I witness these moments I think of the way the students' feelings of accomplishment, unlike my own feelings in my after-school class, suggest that subject English plays some sort of role in their developments as people and their identity. I think of the way in which students perceive English and what it means to be an English student.

I sit and smile and wonder how my newfound knowledge of grammar will help in this...

This kind of writing foregrounds the individual's experience; it never loses sight of "where an individual is," as Dorothy Smith puts it (2006, p. 3). Yet it also posits individual experience as something that necessarily eludes any attempt to pin it down. This is partly explained by the sense in which any experience is embedded within the "ongoing, never-stand-still of the social" (Smith, 2006, p. 2).

Claire's narrative begins with a sense of investigating a 'problematic' (Smith, 1987, 2005). This is Dorothy Smith's term, which she coins in contradistinction to traditional forms of research that emphasize the importance of formulating a research question and engaging in an inquiry that is concluded by reaching an 'answer' to that question (Smith, 2005; cf. Hamilton, 2005, pp. 288–289). Smith envisages inquiry quite differently, as involving, in the first instance, a refusal of what is immediately given to you. This is akin to an ethnographer's stance, in that it involves a disposition to inquire into accepted meanings, as expressed in Claire's colleagues' enthusiasm for grammar teaching. By writing her narrative she wants to create a distance between herself and the values and beliefs that appear to shape the community of practice to which she belongs. And yet it is not as though she adopts a standpoint from which she judges her colleagues' views
as hopelessly mistaken. She is “not convinced”; she is “uncomfortable.” She places her own self under scrutiny. Her narration involves a split between the ‘I’ who is doing the telling and the ‘I’ who smiles in agreement along with everyone else about the transformative effects of learning grammar.

Claire’s writing is also an essay in thinking ‘relationally’ (another word that we associate with Dorothy Smith and the intellectual tradition in which she situates her work). And this extends far beyond her relationships with her colleagues and her reflections about whether her ‘I’ can connect with the collective identity that they apparently share. Claire’s irony creates a space in which she is able to raise questions about the meaning and full implication of grammar teaching for her sense of purpose and identity as a teacher of English. Although the concrete detail of her narrative evokes a particular time and place, her story is located within a larger network of relationships that stretch beyond the here and now. We sense how this professional development (PD) session on grammar teaching is mediated by standards-based reforms, including the economic scenarios that are used to justify them. Through its rich particularity, Claire’s story resists the claims about the efficacy of teaching grammar, while simultaneously prompting reflection about the social and economic determinants that have produced the here and now as she experiences it.

CONFRONTING AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Such subjectively intense engagements with the here and now raise questions about who we are and the values and beliefs we bring to our teaching. Standards-based reforms have marginalized any sense of teaching as “a confrontation with one’s own autobiography,” as William Ayers puts it (1993). Thus teaching is reduced to a set of discrete skills that can be applied by an individual teacher in an ideologically neutral manner, without regard to the specific nature of the community in which that teacher is working. Teachers are supposed to ‘make the difference’ (cf. Hattie, 2009; Rowe, 2003)—yet another cliché that typifies standards-based reforms—but this ‘difference’ is conceived almost exclusively in terms of the achievement of prescribed and very narrowly defined learning outcomes. If we conceive of curriculum as a form of communication (Barnes, 1992), and of classrooms as sites where learning is negotiated, we presuppose a capacity on the part of teachers and educators to acknowledge all that their students bring to their exchanges with them. It then becomes necessary to reflect on how our values and beliefs might be shaping that conversation.

Monsieur Patrick (Brenton)

Murray Bridge High in the 1960s was endless rows of portables and asphalt, with weekly assemblies where our Headmaster told us to aim
for the stars—the school motto was ‘sic itur ad astra’—and not to smoke in the toilets. When we started high school, we were tested and yarded into classes ranging from 1A to 1G. Those who got into 1A stream held vague notions of going to teachers’ college or university; those who landed in 1G had more limited prospects. Collectively, we somehow made sense of the world in which we found ourselves. Every morning boys and girls were bused in from nearby farming communities like Jervois and Pompoota and Mypolonga, while the kids from Tailem Bend rowdily lugged their bags on the long march from the railway station to school. For years the railway town of Tailem Bend had been promised a high school of its own, but successive governments had done nothing about it. So the Tailem Bend kids were forced to get up early every day to catch a slow train to Murray Bridge.

Our teachers were likewise creatures of this world, and it would be easy to rattle off any number of horror stories about them. Yet by and large they supported our fumbling attempts to imagine our lives differently, even as they administered a fairly nasty system of branding and culling, and I remember several of them fondly, especially my English teachers.

The one I want to tell you about was not trained as an English teacher; in fact, he did not have any formal teaching qualifications at all, something not uncommon in the 1960s. Although born in Australia, he had apparently done a degree in Music at the University of Lyons, and was employed to teach French, something he did pretty badly. However, as part of his job, Monsieur Patrick was given 2A English, a lively bunch of 15-year-olds that included me, and his approach would consist largely of reading to us any book that he was reading at the moment. He always presented whatever he read as a discovery, as something he had only just found himself.

Anyway, Monsieur Patrick would walk in, and start reading from The Catcher in the Rye, and Holden Caulfield would be telling us about that madman stuff that happened last Christmas, and then Patrick would have us writing stories about all the crap that was happening in our own lives. I mean, it wasn’t stuff I could show my parents ‘cause they were quite touchy about anything like that, especially my father, and so like Holden I lived a double life, pouring out all these thoughts about myself and being a phony at home.

Patrick brought Down and Out in Paris and London to class and, as with The Catcher in the Rye, for a week Orwell’s style enveloped me, as I recorded my impressions of life in Murray Bridge. The main street of Murray Bridge at eight in the morning. Only a few people about. The muffled shriek of a saw in a butcher shop. The only shops that are open are the butcher shops, etc.

On yet another day Patrick brought along a copy of Arthur Rimbaud’s prose poems, so that the following morning when I went to
check my traps before going to school (I lived on a property some miles out of the town), I held the summer dawn in my arms, along with a couple of dead bunnies.

* * *

'Be Educated' (Sidra)

My parents (as children) and grandparents came to Australia as Jewish refugees after World War II. They came with no English, very few possessions, plenty of emotional and physical scars, but, like so many before and since, with much hope in their hearts.

Our grandparents talked to us a great deal, telling us their stories. In a way, I think they found it easier to talk about their youth, even of their experiences during the war, to us rather than to their children. Perhaps because their children were part of the story and its trauma, they felt a need to protect them through not dwelling on the past. These stories skipped a generation, so to speak.

The stories contain too much loss and pain to repeat here. I even struggle with whether I will tell them to my children. To what end? But one element drawn out from my family's experiences of dislocation that was stressed to me was: Be educated. That's what 'they' can never take away from you. My grandparents were so proud when I excelled academically. It was difficult to resist the expectation that I study Law when I got the marks. I went along with it for a couple of years until I could no longer ignore the fact that their dreams weren't my dreams. Although they respected education as a goal, they didn't seem to think much of teaching as a profession. "Better you be independent...."

In so many ways, where I've come from, generationally, has shaped the person I am . . . but also the person I'm trying hard not to be. There's a push and a pull. I like to think that my family's history makes me more sensitive, empathetic and idealistic (although it also has the potential to lead to cynicism and despair). At this stage, I am not sure if or how I as a preservice teacher can channel these values into my teaching practice.

Determining the context in which I teach would help clarify things, but I'm not ready to decide on that yet. A part of me would like to teach English in a place that would make a difference. I look at today's refugee and immigrant children and see repetitions. I'd like to be able to communicate through what happens in the classroom that these young people can have a future with choices. In reality, though, I accept that there's a limit to what a teacher can do, given the inequalities of the education system and many other complicating factors. As you yourself write, Bella, putting "beliefs about social justice and equity
"Into practice" is fraught with complexities when the second chances on offer are themselves second rate (Illesca, 2003, pp. 9-11).

Another part of me derives much strength, orientation and joy from my heritage. For this reason, a Jewish school is a potential teaching context, also providing a space for me to express ideals and values, albeit different ones from those I've just mentioned. How to choose? The two subjects I elected to study for my teacher education course were emblematic of two sides of myself (and there are many more). I struggle with these different perspectives as I seek to write about life and identity. I empathize with Katherine Mansfield's questioning of the aphorism, "To thine own self be true."

"True to oneself!" she muses. "Which self? Which of my many—well really, that's what it looks like coming to—hundreds of selves?"

Brenton's autobiographical text here is taken from the opening of a chapter entitled "Teacher Quality: Beyond the Rhetoric" (Doecke, 2006). In that chapter he inquires critically and creatively into memories of his own schooling in response to the mantra so often chanted by politicians and still today reproduced in newspaper headlines that "teacher quality" is a "key determinant of students' outcomes and schooling." Monsieur Patrick was a teacher who certainly enhanced Brenton's awareness of life's possibilities, but whose influence on an adolescent's growing sensibility cannot be captured by crude notions of 'value adding' and 'performance appraisal.'

Sidra's text, originally written for an autobiographical assignment during her preservice teacher education, is framed as part of an ongoing conversation with her lecturer at the time, Bella Illesca, whose work she refers to in the writing. She borrows the rhetoric that has come to be associated with standards-based reforms—that she might 'make a difference'—and even as she says this she is suggesting the paradoxes of such a claim.

Each text, Brenton's and Sidra's, shuttles between a distant but still very much living past and a discomforted present inflected by tensions and complexity. Brenton brings his contemporary professional self into contact with the sociality of the young Brenton in an English classroom in Murray Bridge High with M. Patrick reading the words and worlds of Holden Caulfield. Part of his focus on this sociality is to draw into explicit tension different language and worlds with which he was grappling then, and with which he grapples now as he writes of Rimbaud's transcendent "summer dawn in his arms" (J'ai embrassé l'aube d'été) along with "a couple of dead bunnies."

Sidra, writing as a preservice teacher and a mother of three children, situates her younger self as part of an ongoing conversation with her grandparents as they tell their stories of loss and pain. (She wonders whether she will pass these stories on to her own children.) And whereas she allows these stories to remain unspoken in this piece of writing, she does quote particular words from a different conversation with a grandparent: "Be educated" and later "Better you be independent"—presumably in response
to a younger Sidra’s suggestion that she’d rather teach than pursue a legal career. These few words have particular irony and resonance. They bespeak the multiple tensions and convictions that continue to inform Sidra’s present and evolving self . . . or selves. For in Sidra’s, as in Brenton’s text, the richly dialogic sense that imbues her representation of her younger past selves lives on and speaks powerfully to a dynamic dialogic present self. It is a self whose identity gains meaning from the past, through the autobiographical glimpses, but also a self whose professional educator identity is a response to both the metaphorical and the flesh-and-blood selves of the past.

In her conception of ‘memory work,’ Frigga Haug (1992) sees such writing as part of a continuing inquiry into the determinants of one’s ‘self’ (or many ‘selves’), opening up a rich and more generative alternative to romantic traditions of re-creating the past. For Haug, as for Sidra and Brenton, writing is an inquiry into the past that seeks to establish dialogue between the past and the present. It is never a matter of trying to pin the past down and show “how it really was” (Haug, 1992, p. 20). The link between the past and the present is continually renegotiated and revitalized, as new dimensions of memory reveal themselves, and new questions emerge that in turn raise questions about one’s sense of ‘self’ or identity as an actor in the present. Ricoeur (2004) writes, in Memory, History, Forgetting, about the Platonic aspiration to capture “[in] the present representation the absent thing” (p. 8), i.e., the past. But the past in Sidra’s and Brenton’s writing does not exist as a separate bounded time-space. It is not something that happened to them: Rather they are active participants in their pasts, a status that is reinforced by the active role of writing in the construction of the past. In this understanding of memory, and memory work, experiences are neither a prison house for nor a direct window into the soul. Sidra’s conversations with her grandparents (and the stories within their stories), like Brenton’s interweaving literary language and narrative fragments of life in Murray Bridge, exist as living traces in their respective interpretations and constructions of identity. Their emphasis is less on capturing or even deconstructing the past and more on constructing identity, as they interpret and “reinterpret themselves and see what benefits may be derived from doing so” (Haug, 1992, p. 20).

Writing to all of us, in the process of engaging in the conversation that led to this chapter, Sidra comments on the ‘push and pull’ of her past on the present, and on what she calls “the blend of biography and practice” in her earlier writing:

I can see that I’m still negotiating many of these questions over how to express who I am, the different parts of myself, how to channel my values and hopes into my professional practice. After 2 years of teaching English at an independent girls’ school, a very positive experience in so many ways, I decided to move to a Jewish school. I guess the part of me that needed to give expression to my identity and heritage through my
teaching and through the context in which I was teaching became too
strong. And yet I stand back now, having made the move, and I can see
that things are not so simple.

In the more extended writing from which Brenton's and Sidra's texts were
excerpted, each of them proceeds to reflect on the social justice 'perspec­
tives' that characterize and inform so much of their professional work and
their identities. While it is possible to trace the elements in their memories
that help to understand this, their writing about these memories does not
constitute "direct quotations from experience" (Schratz & Walker, 1995, p.
42). The writing has not begun with what we might call 'the social justice
I,' and proceeded through a process of defining and illustrating that 'I,' as
though in some self-righteous way to affirm a commitment to social equity.
Ultimately, this social justice perspective does not translate into a neat and
tidy single self 'I.' Haug would say the writing has sought to explore the
particular and contradictory "worlds of experience" (1992, p. 155) and to
show how these worlds continue to influence Sidra's and Brenton's ongoing
professional and identity work in their different educational settings.

... AND CONFRONTING SITUATIONS

The kind of professional writing the four of us engage in works with more
nuanced understandings of language and narrative than standards-based
conceptions of professional learning. But we would hasten to stress that
ours is not necessarily a new development in writing practices for educa-
tors. Writing about his own early experiences in education and about the
politics of schooling in the 1980s, Harold Rosen has said it all before us.
He shows how "narratives in all their diversity and multiplicity make up
the fabric of our lives; they are the constitutive moments in the formation
of our identities and our sense of [social] affiliations" (Doecke & Parr,
2009, p. 66). In addition to prompting us to consider our own educational
experiences and biographies, Rosen advocates a more prominent role for
storytelling in all forms of writing pedagogy in schools, and in teachers'
professional lives. He urges "a resolute insistence on narrative and [more
dialogic paradigms of] education in defiance of other priorities," as one
way to challenge what he calls "rule-governed settings" (Rosen, 1985, p.
26), the sort of settings that would seem to be the goal of standards-based
educational reforms. Narrative writing, as Rosen understands it, can con-
nnect with the complexity of those rule-governed settings, so that both the
writing and the setting escape being classified and typified in the way that
standards-based reforms presume they should be. Within those settings,
educators are obliged to renew their lives each day, and narrative writing
can enable them to revisit the values and beliefs they bring to their work,
and to ask questions about the meaning of what is happening.
For the last 2 years in August, Graham’s work as a university-based teacher educator has taken him to Johannesburg for a month at a time. Here he encountered people and settings that have continually prompted him to think about the growing pervasiveness of standards-based reforms and rule-governed settings. His role involved coordinating and mentoring a small group of Australian preservice teachers undertaking a teaching practicum in South Africa, while conducting research into these experiences. He writes elsewhere of his mixed feelings about this work: on the one hand his excitement in exploring and developing educational partnerships in different educational cultures and spaces, but also his concern whether it is possible to challenge the abiding and destructive colonial traditions of white middle-class missionaries and educators imposing their values and knowledge on communities and individuals in developing countries (cf. Parr, forthcoming).

A week into his first trip, he wrote the following to a colleague back in Melbourne.

**Negotiating Boundaries in Johannesburg (Graham)**

We drive onto a dusty potholed roadway leading to Mahena K–12 state school. My South African colleagues have described Mahena to me as a “farm school,” set up to educate the children of the surrounding farming areas. We slowly pass through rickety cyclone-wire fencing that surrounds the school, topped with the coils of that ubiquitous razor wire. I can only imagine the lifeworlds of the individual students and teachers within the school. How do they interact with each other? How do they negotiate the social relationships that constitute their school?

Later I find myself crouched, knees up to my shoulders, in a typical Grade 2 classroom chair. Moments earlier, I had appeared at the door of the classroom with one of the deputy principals of the school, and the Grade 2 teacher had responded by instructing her students to stop what they were doing, to close their books and say good morning to Dr. Parr. “Good morning, Dr. Parr,” the children chorused. So much for my hopes to experience some ‘everyday’ teaching and learning dynamics and practices. Having completely disrupted ‘normal’ classroom practices, I had then sat down with a group of four children (two boys and two girls) whose tables were connected together ready for group work.

The children seem happy for me to join them; they want to read me a story. They draw a book from a nearby bookshelf of class readers. I don’t want to pry too closely, but it seems many of the readers on the bookshelf are Western fairy tales. I wonder for a brief moment how (or if) these students have been able to connect the British characters,
animals and countryside depicted in these stories with their own farms and their home life on the periphery of Johannesburg. But I am quickly distracted from this wondering as the children throw themselves into their reading.

The story they choose to read to me is “The Boy Who Cried Wolf.” The reading proves to be a wonderful collective effort. One boy, who tells me his name is Amos, begins to read. His excitement is flecked by incipient anxiety. Soon into the story, he falters over a particular word, hesitates, but is soon prompted by his peers and is able to continue reading. The others in the group are jointly monitoring both Amos’s reading (looking over his shoulder), but also my responses (casting furtive glances at me to see how I am responding). They gently offer suggestions to Amos and so maintain the flow of the narrative. Amos soon founders more seriously over a difficult phrase. A girl finally makes a decision to take over the reading in a way that seems accepted by Amos. This process continues with two subsequent readers ‘taking over’ in turn, until the group completes the story. Their beaming faces celebrate the journey to the end of the story.

Then they show me their workbooks. In almost all cases, boys’ and girls’ books are beautifully presented... I have joined in celebration of their collective reading of the story, but when I see these workbooks I have to confess to a feeling of deflation as I see only page after page of drills and language exercises. Not a hint of any stories they may have been reading. Not a hint of their own narratives, their own lives, their own words on the page. Wait! On one page I see a drawing. But only one. And yet the energy of these children and their ‘spark’ (like most children at this school) spoke of other futures and possibilities... perhaps.

As in the texts of Claire, Sidra and Brenton, this writing reveals some stories and keeps others hidden. It concentrates on the particularity of Graham’s experience, this time in the very recent past, and yet it shuttles across space and time, between Australia and South Africa, between past and present, between the self and others. Here again is a ‘push and pull’ story. It is a story of the tension-ridden and contradictory worlds and values with which Graham is grappling as he seeks to make sense of his first experiences of education in South Africa with its distinctive social and cultural contexts and its history. At the same time that Graham’s writing bespeaks his desire to interpret razor wire, education and social worlds of South Africa, it is also providing a language and space-time wherein he can engage with social conditions in Australia. The words ‘razor wire’ also evoke for him (as becomes explicit in another part of his journal) the image of detention camps and the social refugees in Australia, and where his work as an educator might sit in relation to this. It seems that governments the world over are investing significant amounts of time and money in erecting barriers between people.
But Graham’s story is also one about stepping in, of moving from a familiar world into one where he self-consciously needs to interpret the signs with which he is confronted. Yes, the world over is the ‘same’—the existence of razor wire and PISA testing tells us that—and yet the experience of any educator beginning work in a new institution, let alone crossing oceans and cultures in the way that Graham records in his narrative, always involves a curious tension between sameness and difference. Graham is actively ‘making sense’ of the experience, and this active sense making is also critical to the development of his identity. He struggles to find his coordinates by engaging with the children in the reading group. Yet he is finally left with questions about the literacy practices he sees being enacted, about the hope invested in those practices and about the larger socioeconomic forces that are not visible from within this setting.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

The value of written narratives aim to unsettle the ‘wisdom’ that people accept without question. Terry Eagleton observed that “an image of the truth that language is not what shuts us off from reality, but what yields us the deepest access to it” (2007, p. 69). Written language, then, serves to better understand the subtle play between words and meanings that it involves.

We have been weighing up the meaning of words of our own narratives that provide a focus for scrutiny, tracing the multiple contexts in which they resonate. Ultimately, words can provide a means of challenging the sweeping generalizations of standards-based reforms, and of registering the impact of these reforms on the experiences of those whose everyday lives are being mediated by them. Yes, there are all sorts of ‘truths’ here—often invoked by words like globalization—yet in the first instance, we are affirming the value of individuals cultivating a receptivity to the world around, to their current situation, and raising questions about the language offered to them.

Our inquiry into the nature and role of writing in educators’ professional learning has presented and critiqued the language of standards-based reforms, words that offer little more than empty clichés, formulaic phrasing and generalizations that remain at a remove from the particularities of experience they are intended to influence. As part of that inquiry, we have presented and reflected upon words of a very different character. And we have sought to show how our writing is a process of grappling with all manner of words, of investigating and being sensitive to the multiple ways in which language in all its diversity mediates our work and our learning conversations. In the end, each narrative excerpt in this chapter is less an individual set piece that represents or learns from the past and more a space for enacting a dialogue between the past and the present. Such writing does not pin down or spawn professional learning;
it constitutes a fundamental dimension of professional learning. Indeed, the value of the writing inheres not so much in the 'wisdom' or learning within the piece itself than in the role the writing might play in a dialogic conversation amongst colleagues about reflexivity, identity and professional practice.

As one of us observed as we concluded the journey of writing this chapter: “I feel I have arrived at a starting-over-again point from which I might reflect anew on the work I do now and on the work I will do in the future.”

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NOTES

1. For an example of a set of professional standards that attempt to ‘play with the context framing it,’ and that try to conceptualize standards in a more dialogical and exploratory manner, see www.stella.org.au. These standards were developed by English teachers in Australia in an attempt to provide an alternative to standards developed only for regulatory purposes.

2. Mahena K–12 is a fictionalized name.

3. The Program for International Student Assessment (or PISA), administered by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), is a major instrument of standards-based reforms. Ken Jones provides a trenchant critique of PISA’s impact on European educational communities (Jones, 2010, pp.13-16). See also Van de Ven and Doecke (forthcoming) for a critique of the assumptions underpinning PISA.

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