

A Continuum of Learning: Enhancing Connections Between Teacher Candidates and Graduate Students in Education Through a Narrative Framework

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Abstract

This paper was written to complement the book review; "[What's Your Story? A Book Review of Leah Fowler's A Curriculum of Difficulty: Narrative Research in Education and the Practice of Teaching](#)" (2006), which can also be found in this issue of *in education*. This paper challenges teacher-education professionals to consider the benefits of creating and facilitating meaningful mentorship opportunities between teacher-candidates and education graduate students. This paper discusses Fowler's (2006) model for narrative inquiry and its relationship to the formation of teacher identity and explores whether or not this particular model can support the creation of sustainable and effective mentoring relationships in current teacher-education programs. Teacher-candidates and graduate students alike will both come to a "deeper understanding of the relationship among past, present, and projected senses of self" (Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 1996) as they engage in mutually beneficial, critically reflective learning practices. Purposeful construction of mentorship opportunities that honour the experiential stories of individuals may serve to further increase education students' awareness of their dynamic position along a continuum of learning in both undergraduate and graduate contexts.

Keywords: narrative research; mentorship; teacher identity



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Born in 1928 in Nice, France, artist Yves Klein is known for his dramatic and largely unexplainable postmodern paintings. My first interaction with Klein's work was in 2007 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. After spending the morning staring at strangely proportioned statues, peculiarly arranged electrical materials, garish and flashing light patterns, and living works of art that literally included people in their composition, I arrived at the portrait gallery. There, I found artwork that captured moments of history through oil and canvas, which told stories I could more easily relate to than the elusive stories of the strobing lights and tangled electrical wires of the previous gallery. As I made my way through the gallery, I noticed a large group of people standing around one particular painting by Yves Klein. Wondering what all the lively chatter was about, I approached the group and expected to be immediately struck by a vivid painting of a mother, a child, a knight in shining armour; the usual expectation of someone in a portrait gallery. Instead, what I encountered was a huge blue rectangle with a tiny white sign below that read: "Yves Klein, *Blue Monochrome*, 1958."

After staring at the giant blue rectangle for not more than a few seconds, I was prepared to walk away. Was this a portrait? Was it even art? Given some brushes, a few tubes of cerulean blue oil paint, and a giant canvas, couldn't I have done that too? Why was this piece here in one of the most heralded art museums in North America? I was dumbfounded. I turned away from the painting, and took a seat along the far wall of the gallery, hoping to find answers in the museum guidebook that I had hastily stuffed in my backpack earlier that morning. As I searched through my bag, something interesting happened: I began to listen to the conversations that were taking place around and about the *Monochrome*. There were multiple languages, multiple interpretations, multiple arguments, hands flying, feet stomping, and erroneous laughter: What did it all mean? I decided to abandon my search for the guidebook, and instead, I allowed the stories of the people viewing the art to be my guide as I returned to the *Monochrome* and joined the lively conversation.

Here, in a museum full of artwork that apparently defied explanation, I found a dynamic, fascinating, vibrant human interaction that had been sparked by a common viewing of the most seemingly dull piece of artwork in the museum. People were searching for meaning. They were drawn, as I was, to seeking out that which was previously assumed to be intangible, and in that moment they successfully disproved a personal hypothesis that I had held dear for years: Given a choice, people are naturally drawn to that which makes them comfortable. However, when they find that comfortable place (as they found the *Monochrome*), they are left feeling drawn to searching anew for a deeper meaning, an alternative explanation, someone else's story and interpretation. This homogenous, predictable blue rectangle was actually the most complex, unpredictable piece of artwork I encountered that day in the museum, thanks to the genius of a man who had probably learned this lesson long before I had. What is routinely labelled as plain and uninteresting still carries the inherent potential to be a complex, reflective learning tool for those who choose to embrace the possibility to engage in a deeper learning experience. Given this understanding, this paper discusses the idea that creating meaningful opportunities between teacher candidates and graduate students in education which include purposeful sharing of reflective stories about the teaching profession, will result in multi-dimensional, lifelong learning about the nature of teaching and learning for all participants. Fowler's (2006) book entitled, "A Curriculum of Difficulty: Narrative Research and the Practice of Teaching," offers a substantial

framework for facilitating such opportunities for lifelong learning within the field of teacher education. Although the use of mentoring is not a new concept in teacher education programming, it is nonetheless underconsidered with regards to the creation of partnerships between teacher candidates and graduate students in education. Just as my encounter with Klein's artwork in the museum prompted me to re-envision my conceptualization of modern art, Fowler's (2006) conceptualization of narrative inquiry offers an opportunity for education professionals to re-envision their use of mentoring partnerships between teacher candidates and graduate students in education.

Assumptions and (Mis)understandings

Recently, I submitted a proposal for this paper to an academic conference on teaching and learning. The paper was accepted, pending a minor revision that was suggested by the only reviewer: "While your idea is interesting and clearly supported by your conceptual framework, it isn't immediately apparent to me why you would attempt to bring these two groups of students together at all since teacher-candidates and education graduate students are on completely different career paths and don't share the same goals for learning" (L. Mitchell, personal communication, 2010).

This reaction to the idea of reciprocal mentorship between teacher candidates and education graduate students is perhaps based on a set of false assumptions. One can either be a teacher candidate, or an education graduate student. No consideration is given to the idea that one can be both-and, depending on the contextual journey of the student. And while this perspective cannot really be faulted, given the paucity of literature that endeavours to link learning between teacher candidates and education graduate students, the inherent polarity between these roles does not have to continue. The reviewer's comment reinforces why, as both a teacher and a teacher educator, I felt compelled to write a paper that explores a continuum of common learning through the sharing of experiences rather than relies on the previously understood polarized model where the learners operate in their respective silos. Although the use of mentorship strategies in teacher-education programming is hardly a novel idea, the potential for reciprocal learning between teacher candidates and education graduate students through socially constructed knowledge and narrative inquiry remains largely unexplored.

Widely held, long-standing assumptions about the roles and goals of teacher candidates and education graduate students are perhaps serving as barriers to a deeper investigation of the more subtle, intertwined relationship between the two. As someone who has experienced the roles of teacher candidate and education graduate student, it is my belief that these two sets of goals are neither mutually exclusive, nor do they exist as parallel, inherently non-intersecting paths. Teacher candidates and education graduate students are on a common continuum—though perhaps at distinctly different points along that continuum—and have much to learn from each other. The image of two parallel, non-permeable lines that separate the two groups of learners from each other needs to be re-envisioned to reflect a more fluid, permeable continuum where the edges of the territories are not so easily defined. Not every teacher candidate simply wants to be awarded a teaching certificate and then head straight to a classroom, and not every education graduate student wants to be committed to a life in academia. If only the goals and roles were so clearly defined! It would certainly make the process easier to navigate for teacher candidates and education graduate students alike (and for those who guide them through the process), but it would also successfully exterminate personal creativity, diffuse self-exploration, discredit

lifelong learning, and rule out the possibility for renegotiation of an ever-evolving teaching identity in the process.

Mentorship: Not Just for Masters and Subjects!

Traditionally, the term mentorship has been defined as:

[A] relationship-driven, personal concept showing reciprocity between two or more individuals [that] facilitates goal accomplishment, provides emotional and psychological support, assists with professional development, and offers role-modeling [for the mentee]...mentors tend to have experience and influence greater than their mentee. (Barker & Pitts, 1997, p. 222)

Even a simple dictionary definition of mentorship is often limited to a clearly defined, unidirectional form of knowledge transmission whereby an experienced person in an organization or institution trains and advises new employees or students. While this notion of the nature of mentorship may reflect a more traditional mode of understanding, the nature of mentorship in education is changing to reflect a more mutually beneficial relationship, where the roles of mentor and mentee are not so easily delineated, and a more equal distribution of engagement and learning can occur.

Although mentoring has traditionally been referred to as a formalized process whereby a more experienced person transmits unidirectional knowledge to a less experienced person (Le Cornu, 2005), that definition is indeed changing—though somewhat slowly—in regards to teacher education. In current models of teacher education, mentoring largely takes place between the teacher candidate and their sponsor teacher, between the teacher candidate and their Faculty of Education professors, and in turn, between the teacher candidate and their own students during their field experiences. Fortunately, mentoring relationships that are purposefully created with equal partnerships in mind are beginning to take root. The term *mentorship* is being replaced with concepts of *co-mentoring*, *mutual mentoring*, *peer mentoring*, *collaborative mentoring*, and *constructivist learning processes*. “Regardless of the name, the work of such [mentorship] is to promote professional dialogue ... so that learning outcomes are maximized for all learners” (Le Cornu, 2005, p. 356). According to Bruner (as cited in Le Cornu, 2005), socially constructed knowledge centres on the concept that new knowledge is created through dynamic social interactions between people, and as such, is “participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative and given over to the construction of meanings rather than receiving them” (p. 357).

Mentorship that is participatory—reciprocal learning with emergent knowledge through socially constructed experiences—is the kind of mentorship I propose as the most effective and appropriate model in which teacher candidates and education graduate students can engage. Teacher candidates and graduate students alike will both come to a “deeper understanding of the relationship among past, present, and projected senses of self” (Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 1996, p. 71), as they engage in mutually beneficial, critically reflective learning practices. As such, purposeful construction of reciprocal mentoring relationships that employ narrative strategies, and which honour the experiential stories of individuals, may serve to further increase education students’ awareness of their dynamic position along a professional continuum of learning. It is for this reason that I propose using the term co-intentional mentorship. Based loosely on Freire’s (1970) concept of co-intentional pedagogy, in which he advocates for a dialogue where a multiplicity of voices are engaged and honoured, co-intentional mentorship would follow a

similar principle: That which necessarily provides equal opportunity for reciprocal learning and critical reflection for all participants engaged in the process (in this case, teacher candidates and graduate students) with the ultimate goal being the creation and subsequent application of new, transformative knowledge.

What's Your Vision?

In order to gain a better understanding of how a shift to co-intentional mentorship is beginning to take root as a goal of many Canadian universities, I offer the example of Queen's University as a starting point for further discussion. In January of 2010, the Principal of Queen's University, Daniel Woolf, released a *Vision Statement* which was meant to act as a catalyst for debate across the university: What kind of institution do we want to be? What kind of academic goals should we be aspiring to? How do we envision ourselves as learners? What is our contextual position in the worldwide community of higher education? While these questions are certainly conducive to provoking discussions on a wide range of topics (academic, professional, political, personal), it is Woolf's statements on *mentoring* and *voice* respectively that need to be addressed more deeply and are of particular relevance to this paper.

The *Vision Statement* only just touches the periphery of the need for the creation of collaborative, mentoring partnerships between students in the university setting:

We need to find new and creative ways to link teaching and research in organic ways, in whatever discipline or interdisciplinary program. Undergraduates doing summer internships in labs are an obvious one; undergraduates working on social projects of interest to our communities and to professors in the human sciences are another. Graduate students could play a strong mentoring role here. (Woolf, 2010, p. 10)

While this particular document does attempt to encourage faculty to construct ways in which to co-learn from each other (p. 4), this is the only acknowledgement in the *Vision Statement* that hints at the vital role of creating opportunities for students to engage in supportive, mutually beneficial learning partnerships with each other. And in addition, this particular "we need" statement is neither written in a compelling manner that demonstrates grounding in lived experience in order to emphasize the point, nor is it supported by any kind of formal research or data that may serve to further legitimize its goals. Mentoring relationships are not something to be entered into on a whim without further discussion of both the benefits and challenges that are inherently a part of their creation. The implementation of such mentoring strategies in teacher education is no exception in this regard.

Principal Woolf (2010) goes on to say: "We need a way to reinvigorate this culture of just talking" (p. 12). This brings up the subject of voice and the corresponding challenges that are not addressed in the *Vision Statement*. By proposing that we just talk to each other, some vital questions must be asked before we rely on the ideal of just talking as a catalyst for creating mutually beneficial learning. The assumption that just talking will inevitably create meaningful learning for all participants in a mentoring relationship is erroneous and perhaps borne from behind rose-coloured glasses. For example, whose voice are we inviting to participate in the dialogue, and in effect, whose voice are we leaving out? Whose voice is being privileged and whose is being marginalized (whether we are aware of it or not)? What power dynamics might be at work in such a situation? Whose interests are being served (either overtly or subconsciously)? And more specifically in the case of teacher education, what are the dangers of

hermeneutic enterprise (Fowler, 2006) when we consider the continuum of learning between teacher candidates and education graduate students? These kinds of deeper questions about the inherent need humans have to just talk must be unpacked and clearly examined before we assume that just talking is the answer to creating co-intentional mentoring relationships.

Jones (as cited in Boler, 2004), asks us to consider a similar cautionary note where the need for dialogue is concerned. She refers to humans' natural tendency to be drawn toward seeking understanding through dialogue as the *talking cure*. While there is an acknowledgement that people are drawn to wanting to attempt to understand and learn from the stories of others, if we are going to move forward with dialogue as a tool for learning, we must not forget to question the very nature of why we are choosing such a tool in the first place. Why should we automatically embrace the idea that the cure for (mis)understanding in dialogue is through more dialogue? Perhaps the answer lies in the idea that learning can only truly occur when all voices have equal opportunity to be heard:

For progressive educators, particularly at the university level, such communication is not merely an exercise in 'learning more about our world.' Talking together is a truly progressive educational exercise that offers to promote identification with others and to create a less divided and ultimately more just society. (Boler, 2004, p. 58)

While the concept of just talking clearly does not go uncontested, actively listening to the viewpoint of the other does not necessarily mean we have to fall victim to long-standing patterns of hierarchical power and behaviour. An awareness of the power imbalance in a traditional mentor-mentee relationship for example, may serve to help us re-envision mentorship in the ways that have previously suggested: as mutual, co-, or reciprocal in nature. It may be impossible to entirely mitigate the risk of power imbalance in dialogue, but there are ways in which we can begin to rethink our construction of what it means to engage in co-intentional mentoring relationships within a teacher education program.

What's Your Story?

The use of a carefully constructed narrative framework might provide the best model in which mutually beneficial learning can occur between teacher candidates and education graduate students. Given the fact that "people are storytelling beings who understand and impose order on our own and others' actions—organizing our experiences—by telling about them" (MacIntyre, as cited in Gomez, Walker, & Page, 2000, p. 733), it seems appropriate that we take advantage of this natural predisposition, and construct co-intentional mentorship opportunities that are emergent in nature and, therefore, based on practices of mutual storytelling and socially constructed reflection.

Narrative offers us "a fertile ground for listening and witnessing all lives in a world where all beings matter" (Fowler, 2006, p. vii). However, just as we must consider more deeply the dangers of privileging one voice over another, we must also be acutely aware of the dangers associated with engaging in narrative analysis that is applied on a whim and does not adequately take into account a multiplicity of voices and alternative ways of knowing. Fowler (2006) expresses this concern when she writes:

Narrative research can be an authentic, autobiographical project which requires ethical stewardship, literary skill, intelligent attention, erudite writing craft, and a persistent, sentient, honest hermeneutic vision [but it can also be] too narcissistic, a

banal project that involves mostly self-interest, lack of scholarly discipline, misappropriation of the experiences of [others], and simplistic, weak, reflective interpretation and facile judgment. (p. 7)

Fowler (2006) clearly makes the point that she is not proposing that her model of narrative inquiry and analysis should be the only model of narrative inquiry and analysis. However, she does use her model as an example of how others might construct narrative frameworks through emergent methods based on the legitimacy of lived experience as a source of knowledge and learning. An emergent approach to the creation of co-intentional mentoring opportunities between teacher candidates and education graduate students (which can be designed by using a socially constructed approach that engages all participants on equal footing) could prove to be extremely effective in addressing the aforementioned issues of voice where teacher-identity and co-intentional learning are concerned.

I have chosen to focus on Fowler's (2006) model since it sets the bar high in terms of how narrative analysis can be implemented, allowing for a multiplicity of voices to be honoured and engaged, with equal opportunity for criticism, interpretation, and reflection. Her model includes seven spheres of engagement, each of which I will briefly outline here and describe how they offer the opportunity for co-intentional learning between teacher candidates and education graduate students:

1. *Naïve Storying*, in which participants find the courage to break initial silence and take risks in sharing basic stories of personal experience (which can include stories of difficulty or counternarratives that raise previously unaddressed issues by both new and experienced teachers).
2. *Psychological De/Re-Construction*, which addresses issues of both an affective and cognitive nature (i.e., How do we feel about what we are experiencing, and what are we doing in order to process the emotions in a constructive, healthy manner?) This sphere addresses the cognitive processes of making sense of previously misunderstood, unexpressed, or marginalized perspectives and experiences.
3. *Psychotherapeutic Ethics*, which asks all participants engaged in the interpretive experience to consider issues surrounding professional ethics and morality (and as such, forces us to confront our own potential for transference, projection, or for doing harm to others). In the case of teacher education, for example, we can consider our professional relationships with students, colleagues, parents, administration, governing bodies, and so forth.
4. *Narrative Craft*, which is concerned with individual contexts. This is the sphere of inquiry in which we must consider and identify the elements of convention, structure, and previously understood assumptions that hold the context together long enough for us to study it and learn from it.
5. *Hermeneutic Enterprise*, which involves a careful interpretive exploration, inevitably encouraging us to seek a deeper message that lies below the surface of the obvious, and to attempt to uncover that which is either imbedded or contextual in nature (the ultimate goal of which is to reveal multiple layers of dynamic interpretation as opposed to relying on a single, static truth). This is especially important for teacher candidates while they

begin to formulate their ideas on teaching philosophy and to develop a heightened sense of flexibility in the classroom.

6. *Curriculum and Pedagogy*, in which we discover ways in which we can apply what we've learned in pragmatic ways in our complex teaching and learning environments.
7. *Aesthetics and Mindfulness*, which is concerned with how we might be willing to release the hermeneutic narrative into a more public domain, and as such, begs the question: What are the possible creative and interesting ways in which we can communicate the importance of addressing a multiplicity of voices in our professional environments and perhaps demonstrate the incredible wealth of socially constructed knowledge that can be borne from co-intentional mentoring experiences between teacher candidates and education graduate students?

Again, while Fowler (2006) states that such a model should not be implemented as the only model for hermeneutic discovery and co-intentional learning through the use of narrative, she does, nonetheless, encourage us as educational professionals to construct similar models that can be implemented within our own unique educational environments:

Narrative analysis is not for the faint of heart, certainly not for those seeking escape from [more quantitative methods]. Horizons unfamiliar will emerge, some daunting, some redemptive. A choice to engage in narrative should arise out of authentic research questions. It is the very difficulty itself revealed in emerging narrative that draws deeper study, luring [our] minds to more benthic zones of the self and profession. (p. 29)

Should we accept the challenge to engage in an emergent, unpredictable process, the continuum of learning that can occur between teacher candidates and education graduate students, through the use of a narrative framework, and is highly flexible and rife with possibilities for transformational learning.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge here (as Fowler does often in her book), that no narrative model is ideal; no model is free from challenges, and no model should be used as a sort of panacea to achieving greater understanding in educational learning environments. However, if we are willing to acknowledge that we live in a pluralistic society that is inherently subject to re-interpretation and to the potential for misunderstanding, we may be better equipped to achieve a higher degree of learning where hermeneutic enterprise, socially-constructed knowledge, and the formation of teacher-identity is concerned. Palmer (1998) succinctly and thoughtfully sums up this concept for educators when he writes:

As long as we inhabit a universe made homogeneous by our refusal to admit otherness, we can maintain the illusion that we possess the truth about ourselves and the world—after all, there is no other to challenge us! But as soon as we admit pluralism, we are forced to admit that ours is not the only standpoint, the only experience, the only way. (p. 38)

Rewriting a New Vision Statement for the Guidebook

During that chance encounter with Yves Klein's artwork at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, suppose I had ignored the dynamic social learning that was emerging right in front of me, and had continued to search for the museum guidebook in my bag. What would I have found? The museum guidebook provided a practical, factual description of the blue rectangle:

Yves Klein, *Blue Monochrome*, 1958. The same information that was mounted on the little white card below the painting was indeed found verbatim in the guidebook. Given what I experienced at the museum that day, I would now be inclined to rewrite the contents of that guidebook. And given further attention to co-intentional strategies in teacher-education programs through the use of a narrative framework such as Fowler's (2006), I would now be inclined to rewrite the contents of those teacher-education programs. Perhaps a definition of *socially constructed knowledge* would have made for better reading at the museum, or a suggestion for the pursuance of narrative inquiry and dialogue with others who are interested in seeking a common learning experience might have better served Klein's original vision for the interpretation of his artistic statement. Then again, is it asking too much of a layperson purveyor of modern art to encourage them to seek a deeper analysis? Similarly, is it asking too much of a teacher candidate or education graduate student to want to invest time into creating co-intentional mentoring opportunities that rely on honest self-reflection and the purposeful challenging of preconceived notions of teaching and learning? Perhaps. But at least the catalyst for sparking such an adventure would be there, and those who are interested in engaging in a wider debate might passionately seize the opportunity to do so. Fostering mutually beneficial learning experiences between teacher candidates and education graduate students cannot (and should not) be borne from a guidebook steeped in traditional vision statements and static descriptions of roles and goals. Given our natural tendency to be drawn to storytelling and the rigorous debate that so often ensues as a result, purposeful construction of mutual learning opportunities that engage teacher candidates and education graduate students in the sharing of personal narratives, with the goal of co-intentional mentorship in mind, should be a priority of the powers-that-be in any faculty of education.

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