

## Pictures of Practice

### Use of Anecdote to Investigate Pedagogical Practices

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*Abstract: Anecdote, a specific form of narrative writing, can be used to spotlight, magnify and explore events and their meanings in teachers' lives. The writing and re-writing of an anecdote about teaching or learning experiences provides an opportunity and means to assist teachers to reconsider what happened and what it means for their practice. This paper reports on the value and use of anecdote as a research tool, assisting teachers, from beginner to experienced, to access and understand specific critical incidents in their own teaching or learning. There have been two phases to this research. The first phase involved the writing and re-writing of anecdotes and a theoretical coda. This sample of Tasmanian teachers was later interviewed as to the effects of the process and how their practice has been affected. The second phase involved the reading of the phase 1 anecdotes by a group of Queensland beginning and experienced teachers. This group was to identify one anecdote that 'spoke' to their particular pedagogical beliefs and practices. The point at issue in this second phase of the research centres on an investigation into the extent to which other teachers' anecdotes may have an impact on their colleagues practice.*

Keywords: Narrative, Research methodology, Pedagogy, Teacher practices

### Introduction

TEACHING HAS BEEN described as '...the most privatized of all public professions' (Palmer, 1999, p. 142). For many teachers, their understanding, skills, knowledge, values and intents become overlaid with the daily experiences of classroom life and become part of their tacit knowledge of teaching. Teachers often do things because they feel right and they work (Freire, 1972; Schön, 1983 & 1990; Tochon & Munby, 1993; Wasley, 1994). As teachers progress through their teaching careers they tend to accumulate 'stories' of experiences that guide their practice (Loughran and Northfield, 1996). However, these 'stories' can be both a benefit and a hindrance. The stories may be used to illuminate current problems and, as a result of experience also frame understandings into models of pedagogy that guide practice (Russell & Munby, 1991). However, these frames built over years of experience can 'solidify' and run ahead of the specific current events and context and result in a response that may well become habitual rather than necessarily reflective.

It is possible that an over-dependence on unquestioned fluent, well-learned practices based on assumptions can result in 'blinkering' of those previously valuable expert teaching skills. Dislodging those beliefs, and even illusions, is difficult, some times painful or even dangerous (Eraut, 1994; Gore & Zeichner 1995; Olson, 1992; Schön, 1983). For many teachers these beliefs are part of who they are, part

of their self-concept. They can give direction and meaning to the teacher role. Yet when there is an opportunity to reflect on practice this tacit knowledge can be tapped, examined and re-valued as the blinkers are occasionally dropped. By looking and re-looking at their experiences through these 'stories', teachers may begin to find their 'voice', the 'sound' of their beliefs about what they do as teachers when they interact with learners and peers.

Narrative, teacher stories, and critical incidents have been used for a number of years as research tools to access memories, reflections on experiences and that tacit pedagogical knowledge of learners and teachers (Beattie & Conle, 1996; Brookfield, 1995; Carter, 1993 & 1995. Clandinin, 1992; Cortazzi, 1989; Jalongo, Isenberg & Gerbracht, 1995; Stake, 1995; Tripp, 1993; van Manen, 1999). Narratives are:

... one of the essential constituents of our understanding of reality. From the time we begin to understand language until our death, we are perpetually surrounded by narratives, first of all in our families, then at school, then through our encounters with people...(Butor, 1969, p.26).

The use of narratives such as stories, critical incidents and, anecdotes can provide an entry into teachers' lives and their understanding of those events which have shaped or are shaping their understandings of their professional practice and pedagogy (Connelly



& Clandinin, 1990; Doecke, Brown & Loughran, 2000; Jalongo, et al, 1995; Lancy 1993). The use of anecdote (van Manen, 1989 & 1999), a specialised form of narrative or story, can be used spotlight, magnify and explore events and their meaning in teachers' lives. Because of the very specific 'grammar', i.e. key features, the brevity of the 'tale', its immediacy and personal perspective, and the requirement of the punch line, many teachers have found anecdotes to be an interesting and inviting way of reconsidering practice (van Manen, 1989 & 1999).

This paper describes research in progress used with a group of beginning, up-grading and post-graduate education students to develop and refine their approach to the reflective process through the writing and re-writing of their anecdotes about their teaching and learning experiences.

### **Anecdotes: A Reflective Turn**

An anecdote as defined by the OED is a "narrative of a detached incident, or a single event, told as being in itself interesting and striking". These 'short' tales produce clear, powerful and often poignant reflections despite sometime being reviled as the "...dime store of history" (de Goncourt, E. & J 1904 as cited in Gossman 2003, p. 152).

The telling, writing, re-writing and discussion of an anecdote is just one tool which can be used to bring interpretations of an experience into a visible, discussable and tangible form. Anecdotes are constructed in a specific manner and have been pioneered by van Manen (1989 & 1999). They appear to work well for teachers because:

1. The fairly strict guidelines of the genre of anecdote force the writer to focus, to distill the essence of the event. There is no room for extra information to cloud, obscure or even conceal the meaning.
2. The telling, writing and multiple re-writings reinforces this distilling of the essence of the tale. Within words and sentences are 'our pre-understandings and distortions (Gitlin and Goldstein, 1987, p. 106) and these need to be spotlighted. The telling, writing and analysis of the anecdote provides a vehicle for what Shor described as an 'illumination of reality' (1986, p. 422); a way to make sense of our experiences to ourselves (Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo 2000); an organising concept to develop critical thinking and critical reflection (Brookfield, 1995; Jalongo et al, 1995; van Manen 1989 & 1999). This re-writing process provides a framework to analyse, frame and re-frame the events and responses. The sharing, re-writing and editing processes enables and encourages the teachers to move through the technical, contextual and

confrontational levels of reflection (Smyth, 1987) to uncover and clarify their understandings of the events described in the anecdote.

The use of concrete details and quotes provides the opportunity for personal response and immediacy for both writer and reader. The tales gain a presence, a present reality whereby the writer and the reader may become a part of that experience, albeit vicariously.

The discussion with peers and the process of horizontal evaluation with peers (Gitlin and Goldstein, 1987) provides space for the teacher to step away from the event, to verbalise to others and themselves what is essential about the tale. Reflection through private journalling can lead to a one-way conversation with one-self. Through discussion with others a 'conversation' (Yinger, 1990) is generated in spoken and written form which provides a vehicle for the writer and listener/reader to critically reflect on their own and other tales, a means to unlock beliefs, perceptions, assumptions and experiences (Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo, 2001), a direction to focus their reflection and lastly, a strategy to encourage teachers to move beyond the technical to the contextual and especially confrontational levels of reflection.

An anecdote is about a past event -often one when the writer was a learner, observing another teacher or an event - in the teaching life of the writer. This literary genre requires one to focus on specifics - the events, persons, the details of context. The 'tight' structure of an anecdote with its dramatic three-part structure of situation, encounter or crisis and resolution marked by a 'pointe' (Gossman, 2003) provides a perimeter to frame that specific event, to give it 'concrete' form and allow the writer the opportunity to climb Dewey's metaphorical tree (Dewey, 1933). During the writing and re-writing stage the writer/teacher is dealing with his/her responses to that event. How that anecdote is related and structured reflects the writer/teacher's perspective and understanding of that event. The conversation which follows, be that as a written coda or a discussion with a colleague, provides an opportunity to reach levels beyond the descriptive, to explore why that event is of such significance and how those understandings are related to current practice. The anecdote and the following conversation offer a space in which to revisit, re-experience and re-frame one's pictures of practice. The outcome or resolution may be a reinforcement of one's beliefs, a change to one's practice, a different understanding of that event or a reflexive conversation as the event is re-framed and new understandings are developed.

### Anecdotes as a Teaching & Research Methodology

The purpose of this research was to investigate how teachers can reframe their intentions and beliefs about their practice through the processes of reading, writing and re-writing of anecdotes about personal learning or teaching experiences. Central to the process and purpose of anecdotes is reflection. However, to define reflection can be somewhat problematic as definitions of reflection, its application within learning, teaching and even teacher education abound with little consensus (Calderhead, 1989; Grimmett, Erickson, MacKinnon & Riecken, 1990, Munby & Russell, 1993; Phelan, 1997; Tom, 1985). However, across the diversity of definitions for reflection, there appears to be an underlying assumption that teachers should use logical, rational, step-by-step analyses of their own teaching and the contexts in which the teaching occurs (Korthagen, 1993). This common-sense definition can be expanded to include and value the exploration of one's perceptions and understandings of a specific experience (Dewey, 1933, p. 14) and regard the experience in a critical manner and maybe change behaviour based on that critical reflection. Reflection could therefore be regarded as the process whereby one frames and re-frames problematic experiences and understandings. To find answers to a problematic experience one has to cope with uncertainty, disequilibrium and even confusion as a new way of 'seeing, hearing and feeling' past events (Schön, 1983; Lee & Loughran, 2000).

The value of reflection in teaching is in challenging notions of doing something because it 'feels right' or what Schön (1990, p 137) calls 'learning blind'. Reflection is an opportunity to learn what Schön (1990, p.125) describes as 'disciplined freedom'. As teachers develop their voice - the way they describe their understandings, confusions, successes and failures- these understandings can be 'reproductive' in that they describe what has occurred or they can be 'transformative' and create new realities. Learning can then become a dialogue where teachers can name, honour and understand their own experience (Wasley, 1994). It is in this active stage that teachers can re-frame their practice.

### Anecdotes as a Teaching Methodology

However, a strategy or process is needed to guide and even discipline the reflective process or the result may well be described as unchallenged 'navel gazing' with little direction or outcome other than a sense of self-exploration. For a number of years, as a teacher educator, I have used the strategies of stories and critical incident files to provide an entrée into the reflective process with the teachers and student-teachers with whom I have worked. Through

this process, teachers were able to step back and look at the belief systems which had guided or affected their decisions, actions or responses. However, my experience was that for the majority (Novice and Competent and even Proficient) they remained at the descriptive level: "*What I did*". (King & Kitchener, 1994; LaBoskey, 1993; Smyth, 1987) The challenge for me then was how to encourage more teachers to begin to ask, "*What did this mean? How did I come to be like this? and, How might I do things differently?*" (Smyth, 1987). The use of anecdotes, I have found, has provided a process to access the understandings of teachers about their practice and a means to enable them to frame and reframe those understandings.

### Rationale

For the last five years when working with beginning, upgrading and experienced teachers I have used the framework of critical incident, in particular that described by Brookfield (1995) and Tripp (1993) as a means to develop and guide the reflective process. The program included compiling a critical incident file over a period of six months and the concepts and applications of the reflective process to teaching and learning to be teachers.

In order to 'begin at the beginning' we used a commonsense starting point for 'reflection', of 'looking back on an experience, trying to understand what happened and why' To explore this somewhat basic definition a whimsical, but no less serious 'tale' was used to identify a number of the key features of reflection, both 'in' and 'on' action.

One day Pooh and Piglet were in the forest following the track of a strange visitor. Soon another set joined the single set of tracks. The two animals became frightened as the tracks began to multiply: first one set, then two, then four! (Milne, 1965)

Trapped in their own 'actions' Pooh and Piglet were unable to understand what was happening, why these 'things' were happening and more importantly how they could stop or change them.

It was only when Christopher Robin, sitting in a tree observing their behaviour, intervened saying "Silly old Bear. What are you doing?" (Milne, 1965, p. 37) that Pooh could understand and act upon his experience. Brookfield (1995) suggests that through reflection and its linkage to theory, we, as teachers, gain a language to name our practice and a way to break the circle of familiarity so that unlike Pooh and Piglet we do not fruitlessly continue to 'hunt' ourselves!

The initial commonsense definition could now be expanded to include and value the exploration of

one's perceptions and understandings of a specific experience; the ability to climb Dewey's (1933, p. 14) metaphorical tree and regard the experience in a critical manner and lastly to change behaviour based on that critical reflection. Thus the definition of reflection could be extended to include the process whereby we respond to experience, explore our learning and teaching practices, when we begin to reframe our understandings of why we do what we do so that we may better understand the reasons for change to our practice (Brookfield, 1995 & 1990; Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985; Tripp, 1993; van Manen, 1991; Wilson & WingJan, 1993). The use of critical incident and in particular the construction of a critical incident file was the means to achieve these ends.

However, given the pressures of the 'press' of the first few years of teaching, does reflection have a place in learning to become a teacher? McIntyre (1993) and Calderhead (1989) have stated that beginning teachers are not particularly reflective about their practice, let alone the cultural and social underpinnings to those decisions. Their focus is on delivering, not asking questions about how it is 'going'! Each halting step is a consequence of deliberate planning by Novices. The building of a repertoire of alternative teaching approaches is the top priority if they are to survive. There is a high level of ego-involvement at this time and thus a reluctance to be self-critical when one's confidence is under threat. One might deduce that reflection would appear to become possible only when teachers can draw upon an extensive repertoire of past experiences built up over time and when they have the confidence, and analytical and linguistic skills to talk about their teaching (Calderhead, 1989; McIntyre, 1993). Yet it is at this very early stage of one's career that this 'habit of mind', the ability to critically reflect, needs to become an integral component of becoming a proficient or even expert teacher.

The in-service and postgraduate teachers I worked with had both the benefit and hindrance of experience. They were able to draw on their experience to illuminate current problems and had the ability and confidence to reframe their understandings (Russell & Munby, 1991). However, these frames built over years of experience could run ahead of experience by defining and guiding decisions on practice. For example, the way one conceptualises a problem affects what is noticed; which features are recorded and valued; the solution developed, the level of cognitive and affective investment expended to achieve the pre-specified outcomes (Barnes, 1992; Boud and Walker, 1991). Examples of these frames could be how to ask open and closed questions; beliefs about classroom management strategies, curriculum organisation and modes of delivery and just

what do teachers do in classrooms. However, over-dependence on unquestioned fluent, well-learned practices based on assumptions no longer valid in the current context can result in 'blinkers' and even 'mummification' of those previously valuable expert teaching skills. The development of a new frame does not mean an end to puzzles and problems. One needs to continue the scrutiny and reflective judgement of one's own practices in order to move to even more elaborated views of practice: "...new actions and new frames for practice go hand in hand" (Russell & Munby, 1991, p. 185).

Therefore, for all the learners reflection was, and is, a means of sustaining their professional health and competence (Day, 1999); a means to clear the tangle of espoused theory and actions and create space for coherence and cohesiveness (Carson, 1995), a time when they could "...construct and reconstruct (*their*) understandings of (*themselves*)" (Beattie & Conle, 1996, p. 312).

For some the process of using critical incident file was successful and they were able to step back and look at their own belief systems which had guided or affected their decisions, actions or responses. However, the majority (Novice and Competent and even Proficient) remained at the descriptive level: "*What I did*". The challenge was how to encourage more to take the steps to asking "*What did this mean? How did I come to be like this? and How might I do things differently?*" (Smyth, 1987).

What was needed was an opportunity and means to assist the learners to comprehend what had happened; to appreciate and accept that their view is always partial (in both senses of the word), and that through dialogue with their peers they could perceive, understand and capture both the complexity and 'accuracy' of the incident. The writing and re-writing of an anecdote and the benefit of discussion with one's peers on the 'meaning' of their tale provided that opportunity and means.

## Process

Before summarising this process it seems appropriate to begin with one of the student's 'polished' anecdotes.

It is a single room school with a fireplace separating the two sections. The primary and infant. There are twenty students. My brother, my cousins and our neighbours. I am in grade three with Rodney and we are doing Drill with our number facts. It is an orange striped booklet and I hate it. I can get as far as  $9+3$  and then I am confused. My brain can't get past it. I only ever get  $5/10$ , or maybe  $6/10$  for mental arithmetic. Everyone knows I can't do any better. I never ask for help because we are never asked if we need it. Suddenly Rodney and I are asked to go to

the blackboard. We stand anxiously waiting for our teacher. She says we have done so well that she is going to show us some grade 4 arithmetic. I panic. I can't do grade 3 arithmetic! Rodney catches on very quickly and goes back to our desk. I stare at the numbers and my mind is full of a redness that grows. The whole school knows I can't work it out. My brother, my cousins and our neighbours. The redness grows. The teacher's voice gets louder but farther away. I lose focus on the numbers on the blackboard. The redness explodes and I call the teacher 'an old bugger'. My legs sting with the thwack of the ruler. I'm outside on the verandah. I cry ... not for the sting, not for the fact that the whole school knows I can't do arithmetic, not because of my anger, but ... what do I tell mum?

There were three key steps to the process: the development of the skills to write an anecdote; the discussion with one's peers of the meaning of the tale and its re-writing with a coda which linked the research literature to the theoretical, conceptual and value issues raised in the anecdote.

The first step was how to write an anecdote. The students were provided with a detailed article (van Manen 1999) on how to write an anecdote i.e. the key features and a number of examples which exemplified those features. The features as defined by van Manen (1999, p.20) of an anecdote are as follows:

1. It is a very short and simple story
2. It usually relates one incident
3. It begins close to the central idea
4. Includes important concrete detail
5. It often contains several quotes
6. It closes quickly after the climax
7. It requires punctum for the punch line

Prior to the first class the students were required to write a draft anecdote which was to be shared with the group. The second stage, the in-class work, involved the sharing, polishing and clarifying of the intention of the writer and the meaning of the tale, in a supportive and yet critically reflective manner. The last stage was the final editing and publishing of their 'tales' and a critical reflection on the issues raised by the anecdote in terms of published research as a coda to their tale.

Students all came with drafts hidden in folders. To ease the pressure and to model the process an anecdote from my teaching career was used as a starter. We explored the issues raised – the actions and reactions of the participants and theirs as observers, what 'lessons' were being taught and learnt, why some events stick in our memories; what I learnt from the event and how it has since affected my practice; what was in the event which has caused me to retell and share and finally which values or beliefs, my philosophy of teaching and learning, were being

tested. We then broke into groups of six to share our anecdotes and to clarify understandings. The students then re-wrote (many times) their anecdotes for final submission.

## Anecdotes as a Research Methodology

### Phase 1

There were 20 participants from Tasmania in this phase of data collection. The group included male and female respondents: representatives from the following teaching sectors: teacher aide, early childhood, primary, secondary, college and Technical and Further Education; teachers in state and private school systems, full time and part time teachers; and beginning and experienced teachers.

An interview time was established and the interviews were conducted by telephone and recorded. Prior to the interview being formally tape recorded, a brief data sheet was completed to provide details on gender, teaching sector, any area of teaching expertise, years of teaching, whether a formal teaching qualification had been completed, whether they taught full time or part time or relief and a self-report on where they would place themselves on the Novice-Expert continuum (Berliner, 2004 & 1988). The completion of the data sheet served three functions: the time was used to ensure volume levels were satisfactory for recording in a non-threatening manner; important contextual data was collected and a comfortable non-threatening conversational 'climate' was established (Shuy, 2002). This was completed in 6-10 minutes. The interview was conducted using the previously sent schedule of questions as the interview framework with probe questions and clarifications introduced as prompted by each respondent's answers. Respondents were informed that notes were being taken during the interview to provide clarification in case the tape recording was unclear and to assist the interviewer in the final re-cap. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes for the formal recording phase. Prior to the conclusion of each interview, the responses to each question were re-capped by the interviewer and respondents were given the opportunity to add to or clarify any of their responses. This process of re-capping provided a space for initial data analysis by beginning to clarify potential ambiguities and confusions and to check if the interviewer's interpretations were what the interviewee had intended. (Rosenblatt, 2003) The final question "Are there any last things you would like to add?" provided the opportunity for the respondents to synthesise their thoughts and to add other information not elicited by the formal questions. At this stage the tape was stopped and the next stage of verification was explained.

It was necessary to use telephone interviews as I had re-located to Queensland and all the respondents lived in various locations in Tasmania. Initially this was viewed as a potential limitation, however the use of telephone interviews overcame constraints of location, economics and time in terms of travel and time zones (Shuy, 2002). Each interview required approximately 30 minutes, but because of our prior working relationship and the desire of the participants to discuss in detail their responses (many had made detailed notes prior to the interview) the usual arguments against long telephone interviews were not realised (Shuy, 2002). In addition, a professional relationship had been established with the cohorts through our time together in the Tasmanian Summer School residential; all were volunteers; the teacher-student power relationship had had time to become blurred and fade; and the non face-to-face context provided unexpected advantages. The respondents could be in their homes (a safe and comfortable context), they had the time to consider their answers and consult their notes in privacy, and to not have to feel they had to look at the interviewer when constructing their responses. The benefits to the interviewer were being able to take detailed notes in an unobtrusive manner; to feel comfortable in allowing those spaces for thought and silence and to focus on the responses and not on the personal distractions and social protocols of conversation which can occur in face-to-face interviews (Burns, 2000). This last benefit was invaluable when needing to re-cap the responses and in drawing out and clarifying the meaning of specific responses and the use of specific words and phrases (Judd, Smith & Kidder, 1991).

### **Phase 2**

Prior to seeking volunteers for this phase, it was necessary to collate a case book of 11 anecdotes written by Phase 1 participants. Initially the framework for the compilation was to have been based on a series of categories with three in each category

1. Abuse of power
2. Pedagogy
3. Pedagogical tact

However, this framework was not used in the final compilation as the potential for researcher bias, misunderstanding and subjectivity in terms of the themes was too great. This became very clear once interviews in Phase 1 had been conducted and participants' explanations and understandings of events in an anecdote were not necessarily that of the researcher (Peshkin, 1994). Instead the compilation needed to include a balance of anecdotes with a positive and negative content and tone; anecdotes with similar themes but different outcomes for indi-

viduals; anecdotes written by males and females; and experienced and beginner teachers. It was decided to include the anecdote used by the researcher with the Phase 1 participants as the researcher was also part of this research into the use of anecdotes to explore teacher's practice. Initially there was concern that 11 anecdotes would prove to be too heavy a reading load, but the enthusiasm of the readers and interviewees in Phase 2 soon dispelled that concern.

Once volunteers had agreed to participate, a copy of the compilation of anecdotes and the interview schedule was mailed. The individuals were asked to read the compilation and to select one anecdote which had particular meaning for them. The interview was conducted in face-to-face mode two weeks later at a time and place decided upon by the interviewee, usually their place of work. The data sheet from Phase 1 had been modified and all questions related to the writing, re-writing of anecdotes etc had been deleted. As in Phase 1, the interview began with responses to the data sheet to establish a context and to place interviewee and researcher into a more comfortable conversational frame. Details on gender, teaching sector, any area of teaching expertise, years of teaching, whether a formal teaching qualification had been completed, whether they taught full time or part time or relief and a self-report on where they would place themselves on the Novice-Expert continuum (Berliner, 1988, 2004) was collected. These interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and sent for verification as for Phase 1 participants. Field notes were taken during the interview to assist with clarification of difficulties associated with the taping and as prompts for the re-cap process to clarify any ambiguities and to give the interviewee an opportunity to review the key points they wished to make before the interview was concluded.

There were 22 participants in this phase of data collection. The group included male and female respondents; representatives from primary and secondary teaching sectors; private and state school systems, and pre-service, beginning and experienced teachers. Volunteers were sought from schools in the XXXX District of Education Queensland. A small group of pre-service teachers were included as they paralleled many of the participants in Phase 1 in that they were about to graduate with their Bachelor of Education, plus age and gender similarities and amount of teaching experience.

The face-to-face mode was chosen for Phase 2 for the following reasons:

1. Ease of access – all participants were located within 30 minutes drive of the researcher's base.
2. The participants and researcher did not know each other, personally or professionally (except in the case of the pre-service teachers), as had been the case with the Phase 1 participants.

Hence there was a need to establish a climate of trust and potential for a conversational con-

text which could be best served through a face-to-face interview.

**Table 1: Summary of Data Collection Processes**

	Location	Initial data source	Participants	Mode of Interview
Phase 1	Tasmania	Personal anecdotes	20	Telephone
Phase 2	Queensland	Compilation of anecdotes based on Phase 1 participants	22	Face-to-face

### Limitations

When listening to or reading anecdotes, stories or even life histories the issues of accuracy of memory is of concern. Is this story a 'snapshot' accurately frozen in time, a recollection, a 'flashbulb memory' (Brewer, 1996), an interpreted representation (Brewer, 1996) or is it a '...present construction of a past, present and future life' (Rosenthal, 1993, p.60)? Conway (1996) proposes that we have three types of autobiographical memories:

1. Lifetime periods which are general, often abstract and measured in years. e.g My teen years, when the kids were little.
2. General events which are measured in months and are often events repeated in one's life. e.g. Birthdays, family celebrations, and maybe weddings, learning to drive.
3. Specific events which are often clearly recalled in terms of exact time, location and people present. These are often those 'flashbulb' memories such as a response to the question 'What were you doing when you first heard about September 11?' These are often accompanied by sensory recall. e. g Remembering smells, sounds (Brewer, 1996).

How we tell or write these narratives depends on the present context of place, time and 'players' (Freeman, 1993; Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992). Our memories become multilevel and 'movable' in terms of how they are recalled, understood and told. Subjectivity and positionality are at the centre of the process (Reissman, 1993). Mishler, (1992) would claim one's past is viewed and understood by one's present sense of self, a position supported by psychologists and philosophers such as Brewer (1996) and Freeman (1993). The anecdotes told by Phase 1 interviewees fitted into Conway's (1996) category 3. Many commented on how they could see the event, hear the words and even see themselves in the context of the anecdote. However, it became clear in the interviews that their understandings were influenced by the writing and re-writing in a current context of becoming a teacher. These were recollections (Freeman, 1993) which were being selected and reinter-

preted by adults for a particular audience. This does not mean that they are 'fiction' rather they are the truth as the teller now remembers and understands it in their current context.

### Results and Discussion

Why does this form of narrative appear to produce such clear, powerful and often poignant reflections in comparison to those previously observed through compilation of a critical incident file or collections of narratives? The four reasons detailed earlier in this paper were:

1. The guidelines of the genre of anecdote force the writer to focus, to distill the essence of the event.
2. The writing and multiple re-writings reinforces this distilling of the essence of the tale.
3. The use of concrete details and quotes provides the opportunity for personal response and immediacy for both writer and reader. There is a presence, a present reality where we become a part of that experience, albeit vicariously.
4. Discussion with peers and the process of horizontal evaluation with peers (Gitlin and Goldstein, 1987) provided space for the teacher to step away from the event, to verbalise to others and themselves what was essential about the tale.

The topics of the anecdotes were varied, written from the perspectives of themselves as learners, as teachers and observers of other teachers. Life in the classroom is "...shot through with uncertainty" (Bauman 1993 as cited in Buzelli & Johnston 2002, p. 11). The classroom is an arena where teachers' personal and professional beliefs and values; the ways they engage in the constant moment-to-moment, day-to-day negotiations, the appropriateness and meaningfulness of solutions reached to solve immediate contextualised problems- the what and how we teach-and how they treat children - are on public display (Buzelli & Johnston 2002).

Nearly all of the anecdotes had comments on the social values, codes of conduct (Kwamena Kwansah-

Aidoo 2001) and moral implications of teaching and learning as learners and practitioners. "Teaching is a moral activity, because it is founded upon a relationship which involves making decisions and taking actions that influence the social, emotional, intellectual and moral development of others in one's care (Buzelli & Johnston 2002, p.10). The themes addressed justice and more often injustice in a classroom; how a sense of self was supported or undermined; the discrepancies between what was said and what was done; the role of one's values and beliefs being challenged or supported and how a single event can make a difference.

### Key Findings from Phase 1.

I have only included quotes from Robert, Rose, Terry (female), Susan, Shelley and Clare. We began with the participants briefly re-capping their anecdote. The purpose was to settle us into the interview and for me to compare their synopsis with the original written form. All retained the essence of the original story and re-emphasised the punch lines.

#### *Why did you choose to Write about that Particular Incident?*

The emotional impact of the events was the primary reason for the choice. Participants mentioned feeling inadequate, intimidated, elated, scared, angry etc or because it was 'safe' to share. Ironically as a consequence of the conversation, the 'safe' one revealed and learnt far more than the writer initially intended. For many the experiences had remained throughout their lives, guiding choices or even limiting opportunities for some.

Robert

I probably didn't recognise it then but I do now that it was really about having some sort of relationship with a teacher and obviously there was no relationship here and that made a big difference. An experience I'll never forget.

Clare

It affected the rest of my life because I didn't realise the implications. Very soon after the incident I gave up maths. I was allowed to give up maths. I didn't ask anybody about it I just announced I was giving it up. No career counselling. My parents didn't take any notice of it and I didn't realise how significant it would be later in life.

Shelley

James stayed in my mind. The main reason I chose this one was because of the effect it had

on me and to remind me of how to teach children when I am a teacher.

Rose

It was safe. Non-threatening. I thought it would be easy to share with large groups I didn't know. And it wasn't personal. And I think I thought it would be quite simple and I wouldn't have to delve too deeply.

#### *How did the Writing and Re-writing process Change the Anecdote?*

It is in the writing and re-writing that the key benefits of the anecdotes were realised. Many commented that the word limit forced them to focus, to distil the essence of the tale and that during this process they became very clear in their own minds why this 'tale' had meant so much to them, what their role was within it, how their understandings as a child were not those of the 'present' adult and for some an understanding of why that teacher may have behaved in that manner. This was particularly clear for a person who had been demeaned by an expert maths teacher and who now is an expert German teacher. The past actions were not condoned, but now there was some understanding of why they had happened and how the writer planned to avoid making the same mistakes.

Clare

Well certainly I was able to refine the whole process. When I first wrote it, it was probably twice as long and quite frankly it was full of quite a lot of stuff that wasn't necessary or didn't need to be there. At the end when I had finished, it was a product that really just said what needed to be said and what the listener needed to read or know and so because of that the impact was there and the interest. When I first started there was a lot of background. But at the end of the product at the end I had something less than a page that said it all and had impact with it.

Robert

I started to think about what was important about it. I started to think about and reflect upon some of the meaning and some lessons from it as well. When it happened of course that was the last thing on my mind and it was really just that the teacher's an arsehole basically but now when now when I can reflect back on it by using this I am able to learn some things for myself about myself and also about how important it



is from a teaching perspective to form relationships and have trust and integrity.

***How did the Discussion or Feedback Influence your Understanding of the Events in the Anecdote? Did you Receive this Feedback Face-to-Face or in Written Comments.***

The most prevalent comments were about validation and perspective. Some mentioned that after having written the anecdote, discussed it and then going onto the course readings helped them gain perspective, a greater understanding, they were able to re-frame the event and their understandings.

Susan

I don't think it changed it a great deal but the readings that we were doing at the time helped me understand a lot and helped me get the thoughts in my head together. And actually it was really interesting to have written that anecdote and then go and do the readings and it suddenly clicks because I mean hadn't actually thought about the pedagogical aspects of it before.

Terry

I think that talking about it with your colleagues helped me to sort of see it in relation to everybody else's experiences which was good. And then I think I got validated a lot from your comments that my coda was pretty good.

***How did the Re-Writing Process Change your Understanding of the Events and Meaning of your Anecdote?***

This question prompted some fascinating revelations. They began to question themselves why the story had remained so strong in their memories; was their memory accurate and how did that memory connect with their understandings of themselves as teachers in the present.

Rose

Well I couldn't work out why I possibly remembered that incident because it just seemed so simple. But I realise now that it wasn't that simple. I had remembered it for a very good reason. I realised how self-centred my incident was. I didn't know what anyone else was doing in the class. I couldn't remember any of that. How they reacted to my pat on the back. Where the boys were. Why we had another teacher at all because she wasn't actually my class teacher. I started looking at other facets I guess. And

wondering whether the way I remembered it was the way it had happened.

Clare

I'd been living in Germany for 14 years so I could speak German very well. And the only job I seemed to be able to get was in teaching language. And it is so frustrating not being able to hold a proper conversation with somebody when all I do in most lessons is say very simple phrases like 'Hello' 'How are you?' and 'What's your name?' and 'My name is ..' and 'I have blonde hair and blue eyes'. I can appreciate the frustration of that teacher who was teaching at a very high level and once a week or twice a week she had to come and sit with the dimmos. And really bring herself down to the level. Although I felt I have always felt that she didn't really bring herself down to our level.

***Tell me about the Writing of the coda. How did it Influence your Understandings***

In terms of the reflective levels, the writing of the coda enabled the participants to verbalise their understandings at the contextual and confrontational levels (Smyth, 1987).

Rose

I wondered why I remembered the incident and I had previously thought it was a random memory, now I have realised it wasn't. And I guess that writing the coda had the greatest influence over me because it involved a lot of reflection over lots of days and even now I still sort of think back to that incident and relate it to others. I guess I really had an AHA moment when I realised that it had influenced what I do and that I was passively evaluating the teacher's performance. I think that without the need to write it I wouldn't have reflected as deeply and started remembering other incidents and analysing them in the same way, though not in writing. And I guess listening to, going back and hearing what the teacher said and having a focus on the positives I have realised what the power of, the power of the word, is. How powerful that little bit of praise can be and how damaging it is if it is a negative. Because I didn't want to finish that knitting. I think I would have probably thrown it away. But once she said it was good, I was actually quite happy to go on and I went on a knitted a jumper after that.

Robert

The coda was good actually because that really forced me to reflect on the things behind the anecdote and I can only go back again to what I said about integrity and trust being authentic being a fundamental part of good teaching or of a good teacher. Then I was able to reflect from a different perspective this time being a trainee teacher at the time. I was able to reflect on the fact that only trust or that trust makes an authentic teacher and that to gain trust teachers have to positively recognise students. They have to the thing about being a positive role model is also essential to building trust and those sorts of elements came out when I started to reflect about this teacher and all the things he was not. I was also forced though to think about the way I contributed to the situation too because of the negative expectations that I had about what we were doing. That actually contributed to the breakdown in the trust.

***How has your Practice been Affected through this Process of Writing and Re-Writing an Anecdote? Give me an Example.***

All were able to articulate clearly how their practice had been affected and provided concrete examples. In addition, it was noted that words such as 'understanding', 'trust' and 'relationship' which occurred in the anecdote re-occurred in this aspect of their responses.

Robert

This really has had a huge impact on me because the one thing that has really come through since I started teaching is that real learning really doesn't begin until you have a relationship or trust with your students and in actual fact it pays to spend more time on that at the beginning of the year before you even get in and start doing some actual teaching and learning stuff.

Rose

I also realise that many things shape student's experience. I can't remember who said that quote about everything we do, every little thing has an impact on students. I didn't really believe that before I wrote the anecdote and thought about it. But now I do I really do. I really think that every little thing we do does make a difference or can make a difference. They don't always remember it, but they might. And I guess that we bring all our own experiences to everything we do. That we can really make a difference. And I think that is how I measure

my success whether I can make a difference to someone.

In summary for the Phase 1 findings it was the emotional impact of the event which was the major trigger for the anecdote even when playing it safe. The writing and re-writing was critical for the quality and depth of reflection and the participants were able to clearly articulate why and how this experience had influenced their pedagogical practices and beliefs. The conversation with self and others helped to clarify understandings and created an arena where the event and associated feelings could be viewed in a relatively dispassionate manner. The writing of the coda created a space to verbalise those new understandings and apply them to practice "What I will do", the active phase of the reflective process.

**Key Findings from Phase 2.**

There were only three questions for this group. Data analysis is still in the early stages, but the following key findings have already been identified.

***Why did you Select that Particular Anecdote?***

Many commented that it had been difficult to select one. Some chose two with common themes e.g. The effects, positive and negative, of praise. Others selected anecdotes because they had had similar experiences and could relate well to the events and emotions. Of particular interest was the difference in choice between experienced and beginner teachers. Experienced teachers selected anecdotes where the focus was on relationships, classroom environment, being a relief teacher or the responsibility to ensure learners really understood. The beginners tended to select one anecdote about another teacher (they did not know she was a beginner) who tried a grouping strategy for a co-operative learning activity which went very wrong and a child was badly hurt by the nasty behaviour of some other children. Initially it was thought this was random, but analysis so far has confirmed it was the technical aspect of how to group children which attracted their attention. This is not a surprising finding when one considers the focus of beginner teachers – themselves. However, one beginner, Susan (a mature age student teacher) expressed beliefs and values more in line with the experienced teachers.

Yvette

I selected the one about the manual arts teacher. I have been there. As a relief teacher and handling a class as a relief teacher. I could take it back to my personal experience. Horrible stuff. I suppose when I relate back to my situation I

didn't have the opportunity to look at what I was supposed to teach and I don't know if this person in this scenario did. But you just look at it and you go "Oh God". Have I really got to cope with these kids all myself in this situation. And I thought these poor kids they're disengaged straight away because a) They are a relief teacher and b) They are doing theory and it is seen as not important if your own teacher doesn't teach it to you

Susan

I picked it because of probably similarities or stuff that I could recognise from when I was in maths at school, and also by what I'm seeing in math teaching with kids now, when I have been on pracs.

***What was the Pedagogical Issue that Attracted your Attention?***

Again the difference between beginners and experienced teachers became apparent. For the experienced teachers they were able to see the big picture and their role within it whereas for the beginning teachers it was about surviving in the classroom, learning how to be a teacher except again in the case of Susan who was able to step beyond the immediate press of daily life in the classroom. The manner in which these beliefs were expressed also demonstrated a difference in terms of the fluidity of the articulation and the recognition of the interconnectedness of lives beyond the classroom.

Yvette

Disengagement. And the concept of theory, practical and no integration of the two. Yes I suppose that's the main two issues. I hate kids not learning. I can't stand the fact that some teachers actually give them the opportunities to sit back and not learn. I suppose I love learning myself so I can't see why students can't have that love of learning. And I never go into a class thinking these dummies in there will never learn. I have never had that perspective. And I love working with those kids and that's my challenge to make them learn.

Mary

I sometimes think that teachers put themselves on an equal footing with the kids and think that the child is insulting them personally, and if they were out in the real world they could sue them or they could get them charged or whatever, but it's not the case when we've been trained to deal with children, and that's our job

then we have to do that job, and it's like a parent who lets their child rule them. You can say to them, 'Who's the adult in this situation?' The adult's responsibility is different from the child's responsibility and the adult has to be the example, has to be the role model. You have to be the expert or the counsellor, the person in charge here and there's no getting out of it. You can't just hand it over to the children!

Taylor

Probably what stuck out the most was the co-operative learning strategy, these kids can't work co-operatively and I related to that very quickly. Like we used to do literacy rotations and I just threw it out the window in this last term because it won't work if you don't have enough people in the room, especially when it was just me for the first hour and then I'd have a teacher aide for the second hour and it's just impossible so, that sort of stuck out and said 'Hello!' because it related to what I was going through.

Susan

I think it's important that they understand why we do the math because they won't be able to transfer that knowledge, if they don't have that understanding they can't transfer that knowledge into other math concepts. So when it comes to problem solving or bigger things, if they can just do it on a bit of paper and follow the steps, you know first I do this and then I do that, then I do this, and they don't understand why, when it comes to actually transferring and trying to do a problem solving activity or anything that takes a bit more thinking they won't be able to manipulate the problem or something to so they can work it out.

***How might the Reading of this Specific Anecdote Affect your Practice?***

This question prompted interesting reflections and it was often in the last statements that the real issues became apparent. It is as if the 'conversation' in the interview began to replicate the writing process in Phase 1. That is, they had focussed on the point of the anecdote on a deeper level and continued reflecting more deeply whilst discussing it with the interviewer. For many of the experienced teachers who had commented the anecdote linked to their own teaching lives, it was reminder, a wake-up call to return to those tacit values which sometimes become swamped in the press of daily classroom life. For the

beginners it was an expression of commitment to the kind of teacher they wanted to become.

Yvette

I think my second thing would be I would never throw my own teaching practices out the door just for the sake of being in someone else's classroom. I would still take my beliefs in. I think you build a better rapport with kids. They understand and you build that relationship and that rapport with kids. I mean. They know that you aren't going to take any garbage, but it can be fun. And I think that the whole thing just makes you think that you have to be reflective all the time on your classroom practices. If you want the kids to be higher order thinkers, you want them to have that deep knowledge and deep understanding and have conversations that are relevant in the classroom – substantive conversations whatever. The whole learning process has to be relevant.

Mary

I guess I just might have just reflected again on the situations. That what's happened to me, and it brought back some memories like incidents from a while back. And to again caution myself not to do the same kind of thing and to always remember that my head has to rule my emotions and to not let my emotions be in control of me.

Susan

I feel in my teaching that I want them always to get to that point where the light bulb clicks and they do understand it. So whether or not that's a challenge that's not going to always happen when you do teach but it should! I feel like my job as part of teacher is to keep going, and keep trying different ways until the light bulb finally clicks and they do get it, because I think if they don't get it in my class, then the

next work they do in the next class is not going to make sense.

## Conclusion

In summary the use of anecdote has proven a successful teaching and research tool to provide a safe and valuable arena for teachers to explore and discuss their pedagogical beliefs and how these beliefs influence their practices in classrooms. Overall, the writing and re-writing appears to result in deeper levels of reflection, beyond "What did I do?". These results may, however, be the outcome of the relationship and trust established earlier between the researcher and the Tasmanian students. The differences in reflective levels and ability to articulate those understandings were also more pronounced with the Phase 2 experienced teachers. The outcomes of this research, that is the use of anecdote to tap into tacit beliefs and values about teaching and learning, are already being applied in our Bachelor of Education program at USQ with our first and fourth year students as the quote below demonstrates:

Writing an anecdote of the incident has allowed me time for me to reflect on the exact events as they happened. It has allowed me to read over the incident as though I am looking at it from an external perspective. This way, I have been able to offer input and advice to the situation, which actually helps me for future reference.  
(4<sup>th</sup> Year student in B.Ed at USQ, 2005)

In the process of telling, writing and re-writing the anecdotes there was the opportunity for the teachers to ask themselves "Why is this still important to me now" (van Manen, 1999). Common throughout the anecdotes and both sets of interviews was the sense that "...students experience instructional relations as personal relations. It matters to them how they matter to their teachers" (van Manen, 1999, p.23). The quality of the relationship was paramount, they remembered if they were treated with respect, dignity and care.

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