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## **Breaking the Boundaries of Professional ‘Knowing’ Through Alternative Narratives: or learning to love Michael Gove**

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*Professional doctorate programmes are designed to produce researching professionals: professionals who are truly reflective in their practice; can address professional judgments in a critical and informed way; and can bring new insights to their profession through consideration of fresh perspectives, new ideas, and alternative approaches. They are encouraged to view their profession through a ‘fresh lens’. However, the very nature of being an established professional means that often individuals are blinkered to these alternative perspectives by the established norms, language, behaviours and culture of their own community of practice. An inability to be able to see different ways of doing things can be detrimental to professional learning and to the growing trend of interprofessional working. The unfreezing of established ways of professional thinking in order to open minds to different ideas can be a very difficult challenge for educators, especially as the established practices of teaching and assessment have been designed largely to reinforce discipline or professional-specific knowledge and behaviours. This paper considers how alternative approaches can be used to encourage professional doctorate candidates to think differently, using the particular technique of storytelling to demonstrate how an established professional manager was able to achieve a better understanding of his own professional world through development of empathy with a partner professional.*

**Key words:** Professional doctorate; Storytelling; Empathy; Transformative learning; Interprofessional working

### **Background**

The Professional Doctorate programme on which this paper is based is designed to produce researching professionals. One of our aims is to encourage candidates to adopt fresh approaches to work issues and consider the workplace through what we describe as a 'fresh lens'. We introduce them to the idea that often solutions to problems within a profession can be found outside the boundaries of that profession, and we encourage them to explore different disciplines and working environments. We are assisted in this by the fact that our candidates are from a wide range of backgrounds, and all have considerable experience within their particular profession. As such, they bring with them a wealth of knowledge and experience that we seek to utilize and share within each cohort.

The programme is underpinned by a module of Reflective Practice through which we start the process of development of enhanced reflexivity through activities that engage candidates in interprofessional dialogues and critical enquiry. They are assessed through two pieces of written work, one which asks them to explore the underpinning values, beliefs and behaviours of their profession through critical incident technique, and the other which asks them to interrogate their own values, beliefs and behaviours through professional autobiography and definition of professional identity. One of the key problems that we have found since the programme started more than seven years ago is that many of our professionals have great difficulty in being properly reflective because lack of an ability to see alternative perspectives; it seems that their strength is also their weakness; the depth of their knowledge about their own profession seems to form a barrier to understanding and empathizing with others. Their 'reflective' writing tends to be descriptive. Because of this, we have experimented with a range of techniques to try to release the reflective practitioner in our candidates; use of metaphor, philosophical enquiry, and creative techniques such as photography have all achieved some degree of success. In this paper we demonstrate one of the techniques that has worked for a number of candidates, that of storytelling.

Our subject is Richard, a head teacher with many years experience and an unconventional approach to his job. His first draft of his Reflective Practice work turned out to be overly descriptive and rather defensive of his professional behaviours, although given the

constant attack over many years that the teaching profession has endured from both politicians and the government inspection agency, OFSTED, defensive behaviours are not unreasonable. According to Chater (2006) teachers feel so threatened during the inspection process that they actually use the terminology of war. Richard, however, showed little consideration of how his different style may be perceived by and therefore affect, others within his community of practice. Here we describe how Richard managed to develop his critical reflective skills through the use of storytelling from his own and another's perspective.

### **Professional Knowing**

Being an effective member of a community of practice involves adopting the unique language and culture of the community, and adhering to the values, beliefs and behaviours that the community accepts as the norm (Wenger 2008; Ibarra 1999). Profession-specific training and education help to prepare individuals for this rite of passage into their chosen field by equipping them with the requisite knowledge and skills that make them competent to practice, but much of the knowledge that an individual needs to truly become a member of their community is behavioural and tacit, and only achieved by observation and role-modelling during practice (Bandura 1977; Ibarra *ibid*). This process in itself creates issues that may be disadvantageous to the practitioner.

Baumard argues that experienced professionals can become what he calls 'territorialised'; that is, their knowledge and therefore their strategic approach to professional practice is bounded by the cognitive map that they create within that context, which can be a barrier to the creation of new knowledge in different situations. In her study of mindful learning, Langer proposes that individuals get locked into single-minded views, and members of the community reinforce those views, so that the entire culture suffers the same 'mindlessness' (Langer, 1997: 3). Indeed, this is one of the common drawbacks of strong organizational cultures, used in the sense of 'the way we see and do things around here' (Needham *et al*, 1995), for whilst it gives an organisation a sense of identity through shared legends, rituals, beliefs, meanings, norms, values and language, these can often be accepted without question by members of an organisation and inhibit desired or necessary change. For

example, scientists continue to gather data built upon the existing accepted wisdom, until once every so often someone will draw the community's attention to a very different view of the previously acknowledged 'truth'. Technical and professional knowledge is not the only aspect to suffer this phenomenon: Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991) have described how people are constrained by their system of thoughts and feelings, which include personal myths, beliefs, values, insights and prejudices, and during learning they more or less consciously build operational models of each situation. They argue that as part of the process of learning each of us must recognize how much we are influenced by the tacit understandings that shape our thoughts and behaviours.

This issue of territorialisation is perhaps a greater problem in the modern world than ever before; few professionals will escape the impact of change over the course of their career. This could happen gradually over time, for example in the case of engineering, which typically is associated with technical problem-solving and construction based on specialized knowledge, but is changing in nature due to the advancements in technology (Olesen 2001); or radically through political intervention such as we are currently seeing in the Police Service, where a service little changed since the 1940s is being fundamentally overhauled in response to a very different social environment and some high-profile failures in the existing system (Neyroud 2011). Additionally, in education and increasingly in other caring professions, the assimilation into mechanistic and standardized cultures via the pressures of continuous inspection leave professionals under a state of perpetual mental siege, forever under surveillance, even when the watchers are, for the moment at least, physically absent, as in Bentham's *Panopticon* (Foucault 1977).

A particular driver for change is the trend for interprofessional working, seen most powerfully in the public service professions. For example, since 2000 the National Health Service in the UK has been adopting a modernization agenda, which is demanding more interdisciplinary working and the development of new roles and initiatives demanding that staff cross traditional professional boundaries (Department of Health 2000, 2001, 2004). However, it can be an intimidating, disconcerting and even frightening process to cross borders out of one's comfort zone into another's expert area, whether this be into a

different discipline area or even simply into the same discipline area set within a different context where the culture is very different, for example when someone moves from public to private sector, or to another country with alternative work processes and regulatory frameworks. Trust and reassurance created through positive interaction in working and study groups can allay anxiety in these situations (Cooper et al 2008).

Greater communication, understanding and empathy are needed between each of the professionals involved to ensure that their service is delivered effectively. Profound empathy (Cooper 2011) involves creating a rich a mental model of the other which incorporates both thinking and feeling. Nevertheless working conditions and cultures can severely constrain the development of empathy and disinterested, 'too busy to care' models are easily emulated, as financial priorities take precedence over those of human beings. When Noddings (1986) describes 'caring', the concept of empathy is central to her argument. Empathetic feeling leads to moral behaviour. Our professionals therefore, need to understand each other from an emotional as well as intellectual perspective, although Aspy (1972) would argue that people are not always able to carry out emotionally what they are able to understand intellectually.

When Wenger discusses the development of the identity of a particular community of practice, he talks about a 'shared repertoire', that is, over time, members of the community, through pursuit of joint enterprise, negotiate meanings of their experience that are often tacit, but which all members of the community will understand (Wenger, 2008). However, in a system of interprofessional working, each member will have their own repertoire which will not be shared by others working within the new, mixed community. Different professions use different words to convey the same meanings, and, potentially more dangerous, the same words to convey different meanings (Barr *et al* 2005). Barr suggests that cognitive blindness can also be a problem, where one profession filters out information, which might prompt actions beyond its perception of the role or competence of the other profession. Pietroni (1992) argues that for a true interprofessional system to be successful, communication has to take place not through

profession-specific language, but rather that each profession must be conversant with a number of different languages.

The demands that these issues of change place upon practitioners should not be underestimated; encouraged to adapt to the specific norms, language and behaviours of their chosen profession so that they are accepted, they now have to break out of that mould, learn different ways of communicating, and new ways of thinking. Yet all of this is at odds with the way they are educated and trained; by and large the educational system has not kept pace with the new ways of professional working. Barr *et al* (2008) argue that despite a recognition that interprofessional working and understanding is becoming increasingly part of the role of modern professionals, the education system, at least at the stage of pre-qualifying studies, (i.e those that qualify individuals to practice at the basic level) has been slow to respond. With our Professional Doctorate programme we aim to fill that gap by helping our candidates to break out of their professional 'ways of knowing' and develop greater and broader understanding to help them cope with ongoing change.

### **Challenging the robots**

What we are seeking to achieve with the Professional Doctorate is true transformation, an enhanced learning performance that involves serious personal change. We aim to achieve mindful learning in our candidates, which requires three characteristics: the continuous creation of new categories, openness to new information, and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective (Langer 1997). It involves the disruption and breaking of existing, poorly organized skills and the establishment of new attitudes and personally valid ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving (Harri-Augstein *et al* 1991). Harri-Augstein calls this 'challenging the robots'. However, for those deeply entrenched in a particular professional 'way of knowing', this task is far from easy, and can be painful. With our professional doctorate programme we have sought to encourage our candidates to challenge traditional ways of knowing by writing critically reflective pieces based on a selected critical incident in the career, and around their professional autobiography and identity. However, we have realized that, by asking our candidates to write about what they know, we have allowed

them to stay within their comfort zone where there is no catalyst for transformative learning. Literature has long told us that truly transformative learning only takes place from a place of discomfort, where an individual's ways of thinking and knowing are challenged and they are forced through that discomfort to reconstruct their knowledge (Dewey, 1910; Vygotsky 1978; Halliday & Hager 2002) and for learning to occur the learner must experience variation (Taylor, 2007). Moreover any individual must be able to feel as the other in order to really understand another's position (Rogers 1975). Thinking and feeling are continuously interrelated, yet often cognition is treated with more significance. Vygotsky (1986) for example, argued that the separation of cognition and affect was one of psychology's greatest failings.

Our programme is taught on a cohort basis, and in the early years we had hoped (naively) that multiprofessional learning sets would encourage the development of alternative perspectives and facilitate transformative learning. However, although discussions and activities during classroom sessions fostered lively debate, written work still proved overly-descriptive, and many of the candidates did not demonstrate the type of learning that we sought to achieve. Candidates seem to struggle with writing in a properly reflective and personal way about themselves; alternative techniques needed to be found to help them break through the barriers. Storytelling is one such technique that has worked very effectively for some of our learners.

Ibarra (2009) tells us that all of us construct narratives about ourselves, and that the kind of stories we tell make an enormous difference to how well we cope with change. Bruner (1986) considers that stories have enormous importance in the understanding of self and in bringing cognition, emotion and action together to give experience cultural relevance. There is also considerable evidence that story-telling and writing encourages perspective taking (Heathcote 1971; Grainger 1997). This is a particularly human skill, embedded deep in the human psyche and according to research in neuroscience, the brain conducts itself like a narrative, adapting its understanding of self at every interaction like an ongoing story (Damasio 1999). According to D'Arcy (1998) stories are all about human relationships and in order to invent creative stories students must think themselves into the minds of their



characters and create mental representations of people and events. Story creation enables students to enact, reflect on and re-enact complex intellectual, social, emotional and moral situations, which is particularly helpful when students are considering their values and beliefs in higher levels of study.

McDrury and Alterio (2003) explain that as a 'way to knowing' storytelling has the capacity to uncover, discover, freeze, create, or re-imagine meaning and to enable the articulation of subsequent learning. Patterns can be re-created. They argue that if educators are taught through narrative processes their students may be better prepared for both personal and professional life. Storytelling appears to offer a promising technique for breaking through professional territories and helping our candidates to explore alternative approaches which may help them to acquire new knowledge that can add to and enhance, rather than be restricted by, their professional 'way of knowing'. The success of this approach is not automatic of course – Ibarra (2005) describes management seminars where, when asked to tell stories of their professional careers, person after person stood up to deliver what she describes as a 'laundry list' of credentials and jobs, in chronological order. A common problem, it seems! Nevertheless, when used well, the approach can have great success in helping students to see a different way of knowing. In this paper, we offer a practical example of where this has worked.

Richard was asked to reflect on a critical incident from his career story as a way of exploring underpinning belief and values systems of his profession. Richard's first account was typically descriptive and considered the incident only from his point of view. When asked to revisit the work he chose a storytelling approach. He selected as his incident a project trip to Washington DC to visit a partner school. The trip had gone quite spectacularly wrong, partly because it happened during an enormous snowfall, but mainly because the partner head teacher in the US seemed less than welcoming. Here Richard picks up the tale.

**Richard's story: 'Incorrigibly Plural'**

In my first draft of my assignment I made the mistake of taking as my critical incident the most challenging and difficult situation I have encountered as a head; which also happened to be current and unresolved. The whole thing was too complex and detailed and I had no critical distance. In choosing a new critical incident I referred to the advice given by Gillie Bolton in *Reflective Practice* (Bolton 2005):

*This is probably a return to the original meaning of **critical incident**: critical processes are brought to bear upon what might have a routine or typical event, rather than the event itself being critical. A problem has arisen with the term, leading many reflective practitioner students to think they must focus upon the dramatic, disturbing, or otherwise seemingly significant. We need to be critical **about** incidents.*

**Looking deeper**

In the poem 'Snow' Louis MacNeice writes about the transformative power of a snowfall. The worlds of indoors and outdoors which had seemed compatible become suddenly contrasted and separate, yet one can still be seen in the context of the other and the boundaries are blurred by the glass of the window:

**Snow**

*The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was  
Spawning snow and pink roses against it  
Soundlessly collateral and incompatible:  
World is suddener than we fancy it.  
World is crazier and more of it than we think,  
Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion  
A tangerine and spit the pips and feel  
The drunkenness of things being various.  
And the fire flames with a bubbling sound for world  
Is more spiteful and gay than one supposes -  
On the tongue on the eyes on the ears in the palms of one's hands -*

*There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses.*

The snow has changed nothing, but it has transformed his perception of the world and made him aware that it is full of multiple possibilities and potentials that he had been ignoring. This realisation is both bewildering and exhilarating.

We experienced the transformative power of snow in Washington. A great city ground to a standstill. Museums were shut. Galleries were shut. Schools were shut. Behaviour was transformed. We saw a man being towed on a snowboard down an empty four-lane highway like a water-skier. Hundreds of people gathered at Dupont Circle for a mass snowball fight. Young men handed out free mugs of hot chocolate to passing strangers. Our little expedition was completely transformed. Our week establishing relationships and understanding in schools became a week snowbound in a hotel. Our elaborate plans and presentations lay in our suitcases abandoned. Thinking about *'The drunkenness of things being various'* led me to reflect on a story told by Gillie Bolton in *Reflective Practice* (Bolton 2005). Bolton tells the story of Sam, a midwife, who still felt resentful 25 years after attending an angry mother. After discussion Sam wrote an account from the mother's perspective:

*The following week saw a very different Sam: 'I don't know exactly what was wrong, but I do know, having relived it from this mother's point of view, that she was upset and confused. Because I saw her as a stupid, middle-class bitch who thought she could have everything she wanted her way, I never listened to her properly. I think I'll see demanding mothers in a different way in the future.'*

I read this alongside a statement that Bolton makes in the same book, looking at the process of critical reflection:

*Seemingly innocent details might prove to be the key; seemingly vital details may be irrelevant.*

These two ideas prompted me to step back from looking at the macro issues of educational systems and practice and to focus on my personal relationship with my

partner principal. I realised that I was nursing a strong grudge against her, - which is unlike me - and that this was perhaps an issue I ought to address.

First I am going to explain the root of my grudge against her, and then, like Sam, I am going to have a go at telling the same story from her point of view. You will need to get the voices right: the knight speaks RP (received pronunciation, ie posh British) and Brenda speaks slightly colloquial American.

***The Knight's Tale:***

What happened	<i>How I felt</i>
<p>My school was first linked with B High School because another school had withdrawn from a video-link project at the last minute, and we stepped in. Sixth form students from B High School linked with year 10 students from my school over a period of six months to discuss current affairs issues as part of the American students' International Baccalaureate.</p>	<p><i>We rescued their project: they owed us.</i></p>
<p>I had a windfall. Though my school had a very tight budget I was given £10,000 for some consultancy work with another school. I saw this as 'free' money that was not constrained by the usual commitment to spend it within school, and I chose to spend it on sending this group of students to Washington DC to meet their American digital friends.</p>	<p><i>I invested a large amount of money in developing the relationship.</i></p>
<p>Because of my existing involvement with a Washington school I was selected to be one of a delegation of heads to visit Washington. My instinct was to choose a different school and not to work with the existing link because the two schools were very different demographically. However I was not given a choice.</p>	<p><i>Torn and guilty; keen to develop an existing link, but keen to work with a school more like my own.</i></p>
<p>Before travelling to the States all the heads prepared</p>	<p><i>Badly let down.</i></p>

<p>detailed profiles of themselves and their schools to send to their partners. I took great care with mine to send a detailed, frank and open picture of myself and my school. I looked forward eagerly to the reply; which never came.</p>	<p><i>Rejected.</i></p>
<p>We arrived in Washington at an awful time for the schools. There was two foot of snow and all the schools were closed. My partner head, Brenda, had 7 foot drifts across her street. I realise we would be fairly low on principals' agendas, but they knew we were coming. They expected us. But not one of them made any effort to get in touch or to find out what had happened to us.</p>	<p><i>Disappointed.</i> <i>Insulted.</i></p>
<p>I got through to Brenda after a couple of days of phone calls and messages and arranged to come in and visit the school. In school she was very welcoming. She was friendly and helpful, showed me round the school and spoke fairly positively about the forthcoming visit of our students.</p>	<p><i>Reassured; excited about future possibilities.</i></p>
<p>When I got back to England I followed up the contact with a couple of emails which combined personal writing about the lanterns on Hadrian's Wall with information about the planned visit. I received no reply. My international coordinator, organising the visit, was increasingly alarmed because nobody replied to her emails. I telephoned and managed to talk to Brenda and to make some basic arrangements, but there were many complications and little enthusiasm.</p>	<p><i>Disappointed.</i> <i>Rejected.</i></p>
<p>Our students visited Washington. Though I had made it clear how important it was for our students to</p>	<p><i>Angry. Ashamed that I had failed to</i></p>

<p>experience life in an American High School, they were only allowed to visit B High School after the school day had ended. And Brenda did not even arrange to meet them. The students managed to spend an evening going to a baseball match with their digital friends, but only because the students organised it: the school did nothing to support.</p> <p>The plan was that my visit would be followed up by teachers from the two schools organising a joint project with their classes. An art teacher from my school prepared a detailed proposal for a joint project which we emailed to B High School. He received no response. I supported him by sending a personal letter to Brenda along with another copy of his proposal. I never received a reply.</p> <p>My experience of working with B High School was mirrored by each of my head teacher colleagues. I don't think any of them invested so much work or energy or commitment into it as I did, but they were equally unsuccessful.</p>	<p><i>establish a lifetime opportunity for our students.</i></p> <p><i>Resigned.</i></p> <p><i>Unsurprised.</i></p> <p><i>Bitter.</i></p> <p><i>Reassured; I was not alone. Still bitter.</i></p>
<p><b>Brenda's Tale:</b></p> <p>Sun-der-land? It's a joke! I dunno where it is, but they got some place called 'Washington' there and they think 'cause of that they important and we gotta be interested. Well we ain't.</p> <p>Jerry set up a video link with one of our IB groups, but they screw it up and we end up with another school. In the end it work out OK.</p> <p>So I get this email from DCPS (District of Columbia public schools): visiting principals from Old England. Here come the bloody Redcoats: and I'm supposed to leap up and cheer and write a personal profile and description of the school and what-the-heck-else. And meanwhile DCPS want our budget</p>	

figures and our Impact figures and our teacher assessments and by the way did we mention we'll sack you if you don't meet this, that and the other target, to say nothing of your staff . . . So that email goes where the sun don't shine.

And then the snow comes. Snowmageddon! Wow! Seven foot of snow across our street. School closed and so much to do . . . informing staff and parents; liaising with DCPS; simple tasks like shopping take hours and are exhausting. And then there's my own kids. And my own parents who are trapped in their house and we can't get to 'em to dig 'em out.

Well: enough, and to be going on with.

And in the middle of this I get these whining phone messages from some English arsehole who wants to visit the school! He must be kiddin'! He *must* be kiddin' . . . He ain't kiddin'. I guess he reckon he come 4000 mile or whatever it is and he ain't wanna go home empty handed. I guess he got a point.

So. I make an appointment for him to come in Friday when we got the staff in for training – if anyone can get in through the snow. Bloody awkward though. I gotta sort my kids; get out my street, then into school; I got this training to run; I gotta sort things with the janitors: we got fire doors blocked, we got collapsing gutters, we got leaks in the roof and we got no car park: and what I got? I got a bloody Englishman wanna talk at me.

He comes in and he talks. British. Posh. What an accent! He wants to do this project and that project. He wants to send students to visit. He wants me to come to Sun-der-land. I don't know what it's like in English schools, but it seem to me they must be in some kinda fairyland where you can swan in and outta projects and never face the bottom line. My bottom line is graduation. Every one of my students goes on to university. Every one. And every one of them gets a scholarship. Now you don't get that by arsing 'round with projects. You get that by discipline and focus and examinations and passion and motivation. I try to tell him, but he don't listen much and you can't be outright rude can you?

Coupl'a weeks later I get this smarmy email 'thanking' me and sending pictures of him and his wife on some old Roman wall. I envy him the history and the countryside but I'm not here to socialise: I got kids to care for, I got DCPS breathing down my neck and if we don't meet our bloody targets I get the sack.

And then there he is on the phone fussing in his prissy accent over his students coming to visit. It's not a good week: it's the week before exams and I need the kids to be focused. I try to put him off nicely, but they got the tickets and they wanna come in school. I guess he think my whole school gonna stop so his ten kids can ponce round and ask daft questions. I pass it over to Jerry – it's his students who done the video-conferencing, he can sort it.

And then they come. Right before our exams. Jerry gives them a tour of the school after hours and I bump into them in the canteen. All white, and with them crazy British accents. And fussin' 'bout some baseball game. I tell Jerry his students better focus on their examinations 'cause if they don't graduate he's the one carry the can.

So that's all over; but it's not. I get letters, I get emails. I get proposals. They wanna do this, they wanna do that. Christ! Don't they have kids to teach? First they got a history project then they got some art project. Well I got a *real* project: I got children's lives; children's education depends on me. Mebbe, mebbe if there was time, but there ain't time and there ain't gonna be time anytime soon. So I junk the emails.

And that, boys and girls, is that.

You gotta laugh though: seven foot o' snow and he wants to come in school to chat!

### **Reflection**

Sam, the midwife, learned to understand and forgive the angry mother through the process of writing from the mother's point of view. Have I learned to understand and forgive Brenda by writing from her point of view? Have I learned to accept *The*



*drunkenness of things being various?* Well, yes; it has helped. I still feel disappointed for what might have been, but I don't feel personally affronted any more. What has been interesting though is to start to reflect on why I was nursing a grudge in the first place. Something must have touched a nerve, for, as I say, nursing grudges is most unlike me. What was it that made me so sensitive?

I put it down to several things. A 'balls up' compounded by Mother Nature. The whole enterprise was ill conceived. The schools and the cities – despite the 'Washington' link – were ill matched. Whilst there was clear personal commitment from all the heads from Sunderland, the Washington principals were simply instructed to be involved; we were volunteers, they were conscripts. For us there was the excitement of a 'jolly' to the capital of the western world; for them there was extra work for the benefit of strangers from the back end of nowhere. Whilst we had a disposition to partnership and collaboration and the emotional space to entertain it, they had no such pre-disposition and were so much 'under the cosh' that they could not afford to entertain it even if they had it. Whilst we had secure funding from the British Council, they had only the prospect of expense. I like to think that our enthusiasm and charm could have overcome some of these obstacles if we had had a full week in our partner schools to establish understanding and relationships, but the snow put paid to that. Unfairly and unreasonably I had been blaming Brenda personally for being an inadequate part of something that was probably doomed to failure anyway and that she had never chosen to be part of.

**A clash of cultures:**

As a head I have become increasingly outward looking. I seek opportunities to reach out to and cooperate with other schools. Though all the heads on our visit shared some of this outlook, I held it most strongly; probably this outward focus is what is most distinctive about my headship. Reaching out across the Atlantic was a particularly exciting opportunity and I was frustrated and resentful at finding that opportunity balked.

The Washington schools and the Washington principals seemed terribly insular. It's

not just that they weren't interested in us; they weren't even interested in each other. Partnership and cooperation between schools appeared to be minimal. Each principal was narrowly focused on achieving the best for her own students with little regard for the effect on other schools. This insularity was not just alien to me, it was anathema. And Brenda became, for me, the embodiment of that anathema.

### **A failure of empathy**

As a head in a fairly successful school I failed to understand the extreme pressure Washington principals were under. The Washington schools had been nationally pilloried. The mayor had been elected on an education ticket. Principals could be – and were being – summarily dismissed. Teachers were being assessed five times a year and sacked if they failed to meet the grade. I knew all this, but I failed to really *feel* it.

Since my visit the political climate in English schools has changed significantly and some of those pressures are starting to hit us. The government has raised 'floor targets' which all schools are required to meet or face threat of closure. Ofsted are threatening no-notice inspections from next year. The grade of 'satisfactory' has been changed to 'in need of improvement'. The level of Ofsted gradings has been significantly raised and it is much harder for a school to be good or outstanding than it was before. And Ofsted now say that if any significant group of students has inadequate performance in any major subject, then the whole school is considered to be inadequate. I suspect that to some extent I transferred my hostility to a cruel, unfair and insensitive system to Brenda, a victim of that system who ought really have excited my sympathy.

### **A difference of focus**

I remember going to a training session where another head teacher presented his monitoring and intervention systems. He said over and over again that his school had a relentless focus on raising achievement. I came out of the training wanting desperately to relent; education is so much more than just passing exams and his approach appeared to me to be narrow and sterile. Since then I have read repeated

Ofsted documents which demand a 'relentless' focus on standards and I'm afraid I have developed an almost visceral response to the word 'relentless'. I want a school which is rich and diverse and challenging and outward looking and achieves high standards through promoting creativity and independence. I do not want to run an exam factory. As the political climate changes I can see the naïveté in my own approach and I am more sympathetic to Brenda's relentless focus on examinations. I think at the time I saw her as someone who had capitulated to the system and I blamed her personally.

### **A failure of understanding**

I observed that the Washington school system was highly stratified. I saw the contrast between the private schools, the charter schools and the state schools with the high degree of selection within the state schools. I saw the marked racial and social distinctions. I disliked it; I disliked it intensely, but I didn't really *feel* it. I knew vaguely that the charter schools were similar to the free schools being touted by the (then) Conservative opposition, but I found the whole idea distant and unreal. Since then the Conservative opposition has metamorphosed into a coalition government and free schools have become a reality and even a direct threat: Sunderland will have a free school within the catchment area of my own school in September this year. Whilst Sunderland had 3 academies in 2010 it acquired its fourth secondary academy along with three primary academies in September 2011. At least two more secondary schools will become academies next September.

I think I saw the Washington principals, and specifically Brenda, as *choosing* a bunker mentality, as *choosing* to be competitive and insular. I observed, but did not sufficiently recognise, that the principals had much less power and independence than British heads. I saw them as actors, when they were really victims. And now that I too am becoming a victim . . .

I can taste the rage and bitterness as I write it.

### **Conclusion**

I suppose I could sum it up by saying that poor Brenda, *dear* Brenda, has been acting

in my subconscious as a Michael Gove substitute to absorb my growing anger and frustration at the senseless depredations of a philistine and manipulative government cynically deploying a supine inspection system to impose a mechanistic model of learning whilst turning schools against each other and forcing them to compete rather than to cooperate. But some people would think I was being unfair.

Or you might just say that *World is crazier and more of it than we think, incorrigibly plural.*

### **Discussion**

Richard begins the story from his own perspective, imbued with culture of education in the UK but coupled with his own outward looking approach which is not entirely unusual in UK educators. He expects to find in his American educational encounter, similar values and practice to his own, expects to have shared understandings and shared repertoires as Wenger describes and he feels disappointed, even rejected when he does not. In this sense he is clearly a member of a community of practice, and could possibly be described in the Baumard phrase as 'territorialised'. However his outward looking approach does counteract this view to some extent as he explains that he is keen to collaborate and have new experiences and interaction, indeed this is one of the reasons for embarking on the American visit. Perhaps the most 'territorialized' individuals would not even have contemplated this trip. Part of the joy of international travel is the delight in the cultural differences and perhaps Richard's previous experiences had been more positive, so it was all the more disappointing for the experiences to be negative, especially after all his work and personal and financial investment in it. His own strongly held values of 'partnership and cooperation' embedded to a greater extent in the British educational culture were not apparent in the behaviour and thinking of the USA head teachers whom he found were 'insular' and only 'concerned with achieving the best for (their) own students'.

Initially Richard is entrenched in his own perspective, his own expectations and excitement for the trip which are followed by his increased lowering of expectations as the both the trip and the post-trip relationships flounder. Noddings (1986) argues that if we are in danger of being damaged by someone's unresponsiveness we have to retract in order to protect ourselves. Richard recoiled eventually because repeated telephone calls and emails with no response effectively give the message that, in the eyes of the 'other', you simply do not exist. This must be a difficult feeling for a head teacher who normally receives continual affirmation of his personhood and status through the attentions of students, staff and parents. A non-response can be even more damaging than a negative response for at least in the latter the other acknowledges your personhood. Richard's only consolation was that his fellow heads had experienced the same disinterest. The only time the American head showed any interest was in the face to face meeting when she was friendly and very welcoming.

Richard's articulation of his emotions in the face of his experience, probably enable him to let go of the more negative feelings. Subsequently, his immersion in poetry, reading and rewriting of the story from Brenda's perspective, result in a transformation in both his thinking and feeling. Through his imaginative rewriting of Brenda's story, it becomes abundantly clear that taking time to step back, to consider more deeply and to use his moral imagination ( Haste, 1997) he is able to reassess his experience and his own negative feelings towards Brenda and more deeply understand and 'feel' her situation as she experiences it. His account is the richer for his obvious delight in language and use of poetry which assists his deeper levels of thinking, feeling and reflection.

Initially, Richard links his extraordinary snowbound experience with the poem in which snow transforms the world, illuminating its multiple perspectives. Then Bolton's (2005) account of the midwife's change of perspective supports further reflection on his critical incident. Noddings (1986) argues that provided we remain 'receptive' it only takes a small piece of additional knowledge about someone to start feeling more empathy with them

which allows us to see them in a different, often less negative light. It could be argued that this was true in both the midwife's and Richard's case.

Through the process of rewriting the story, Richard builds a more profound empathy and develops a richer mental model of Brenda, enabling him to see more clearly through her eyes and to feel more closely the possibilities of her lived experience. He also sees himself very differently through her eyes. As MacNeice says in the poem, 'the room was suddenly rich'. He has traversed the mental boundary from his world into hers. A usual way to develop profound empathy is through positive face to face interaction (Cooper, 2011). Being with people, experiencing their world through verbal and non-verbal interaction gives you repeated windows on their world, repeated opportunities to understand their feelings and appreciate their knowledge, skills and experiences as well as their problems and vulnerabilities. When face to face contact is not possible however, Brenda, in this case, being 4,000 miles distant, story-writing, is another way to develop empathy with a character. In a sense Richard has imagined a detailed knowledge of Brenda and her feelings about her situation and her relationship to him and this is what D'Arcy argues stories are about.

He begins by assuming her American-centric view of the world and the insignificance of the English, 'Sunderland' and close by 'Washington', accusing him and his colleagues of self-importance. He highlights the fact that she is informed by her DCPS of the forthcoming visitation, participation is not a choice for her but an obligation and he cleverly gets inside her imagined historical prejudices about Old England and the redcoats whilst coping with the relentless demands for figures and paperwork and with the threat of redundancy hanging over her. Like her English counterparts she resorts to the language of war (Chater, 2006) when under threat. This Richard decides is her reason for the lack of response to his email –it is not personal. He follows up with the snow calamity from her perspective and implies she is battling the chaos of the snow, the chaos of running a school in the snow, coping with her own family and parents in the snow, placating the DCPS in the snow and training her staff in the snow. Snow, as in the poem, has transformed perceptions of and relations between everything. The normal has become infinitely difficult. She is physically

and emotionally drained and the last thing she needs is a visitation from a group of English head teachers.

Richard cleverly imagines her response to his accent, his Englishness and his class in relation to hers and all the emotional, social and historical baggage that comes with those characteristics. Even worse, he wants to send his students to visit as well. He imagines all the pressing issues that dominate her agenda, mainly about her students and their achievement but not least the threat of losing her job if the test scores do not come up to scratch. He portrays himself through her eyes as having his own agenda and not listening to her problems. He articulates her scornful response to his attempts to form a relationship through sending pictures of himself and his wife on Hadrian's wall and the inconvenience of the subsequent visit of his students. He recognizes how she might see the English education system as 'fairyland' where time and resources can be devoted to non-essential luxuries. He portrays her life and concerns as 'real' and his as distinctly unreal.

It's a lovely piece of imaginative work if very self-deprecating. Richard has successfully entered her world as fully as he might, given he is inside his imagination. His views have been turned around from a situation where Brenda embodied the American system to where he now embodies the British system – he has certainly in his imagination at least, achieved a profound level of empathy. Rogers (1975) described empathy in this way,

'It means entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment by moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person, to the fear or rage or tenderness or confusion or whatever, that he/she is experiencing' (p 4).

In this sense Richard has coupled his knowledge of her school and the American education system and linked it to his own emotions about the recent changes in the British system in order to enter Brenda's private perceptual world. He has walked through those few weeks with her, experiencing her frustrations and pressures as she grappled with the challenge of snow, piling up in drifts over the existing challenges of the values of a Fordist system of education which constrains empathy (Cooper 2011). He articulates his powerful negative

feelings and does not envy her the 'exam factory' and the 'relentless' emphasis on standards, which however, are increasingly part of his own obligations.

Profound empathy leads to greater understanding and it seems that Richard is now not only aware of Brenda's situation but has a more heightened awareness of his own predicament and that of his fellow educators in the UK and is able to envisage more clearly, his own future as a result. Noddings (1986) explains how this empathetic caring, when we can imagine ourselves experiencing the others difficulties, leads to moral action: 'For if I take on the other's reality as possibility and begin to feel as reality, I feel also that I must act accordingly. (Noddings 1986: 16). Richard has turned from anger to sympathy but the question is what moral action has Richard taken as a result. In one sense he has already begun, simply by writing Brenda's story so thoughtfully but what else might he do as a result of his newfound understanding?

Perhaps Brenda disliked the values of her local authorities and the need for compliance and loss of autonomy, as much as Richard now despises his (though she may have be perfectly in tune with them –we cannot be sure). Through his reassessment he manages to temper his negative feelings for her, turning to sympathy rather than rejection. He blames the system she worked under rather than the woman herself. He has moved from the personal to the political, seeing Brenda as a victim of the system, culture and values in a more Marxist vein,

'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living (Marx 1852: 1).

Despite the differences of class, culture, nationality and distance, Richard can now understand the similarities rather than the differences between them. Initially, Richard has a superficial awareness that the educational environment in the USA is somehow different. However after the process of story-telling and reflection he begins to perceive



that the behaviour of the people he meets is perhaps determined less by their individual personalities and more by the systems and pressures which constrain them. This leads him to reflect more closely on his own behaviour and his own constraints. Heathcote (Hesten 1995: § 3.3.1) explains that empathy, developed through story and drama, enables the sharing of common human experiences and emotions. She uses the phrase the 'Brotherhood's code', whereby experiences in our own lives have similar or parallel experiences in the lives of others, enabling us to understand them. She defined this code as: 'Jumping sideways through time and across social strata, hanging on all the while to one constant element in the situation.' The predicament of Cinderella, for example can represent at one level: 'all those who [suffer] at the hands of their siblings'. Brenda, her motivation rewritten, is now a more sympathetic 'Cinderella' figure with whom Richard can identify, enabling him to more deeply reflect upon his own situation.

Additionally, it seems that in the process of this story-telling, and coming to more deeply understand his own predicament through the development of a greater empathy with Brenda, Richard has, in the process, transferred his negative feelings onto the current UK secretary of state for Education, who he envisages controlling his own future. Just as Orwell's unfortunate protagonist Winston Smith is obliged to learn to love his controller, big brother (Orwell, 1949) under the regime of O' Brien the torturer, will it be possible for Richard's empathy or perhaps alternatively his need for compliance, to extend so far that he can also 'learn to love' Michael Gove.

### **Conclusion**

If profound empathy, through its development of deep levels of care for the other, drives people into moral action and Richard has already shifted plains from the personal to the political through his development of deeper understanding, it is possible that the story-telling techniques employed on the professional doctorate and their emphasis on the affective nature of understanding will have longer term implications for his practice and for those with whom he works alongside. In some sections of educational theory there have long been advocates for a greater emphasis on affective issues in learning and their

powerful and transformative effects (Best 2000; Lang *et al* 1998). This has developed from a long tradition of transformative and holistic, person-centred education proposed by people such as Freire (1970), Fröbel (1826), and Montessori (1967). Though educational research is often focused on compulsory education, examples such as Richard's make it increasingly clear that deeper learning at all levels is more than just an intellectual process if we are really to 'challenge the robots' (Harri-Augstein *et al* 1991). We need to recognize and value the significance of affective aspects of learning.

Sometimes it is easier to blame the individual than to seek to understand the bigger picture and sometimes those in authority encourage a culture of individual blame to prevent people perceiving their shared victimhood and to stop them collaborating to challenge systems and threaten existing power bases. When we interact with individuals we expect them to treat us as another human being, when in fact they can be tightly constrained by their environment (Cooper 2011) and effectively embody and represent the wider values of their organization and society in general. The role modelling described by Bandura (1977) and the norms and behaviours described by Wenger (2008) and Ibarra (1999) can be produced by the system people work within. If no-one in authority has time for individuals or their own working time is very constrained, they are likely to have no time for others and so they emulate the values of the system. According to Aspy (1972) teachers cannot be expected to run humane classrooms unless they are treated humanely and in this regard, educators at every level must choose to adopt some responsibility for this. The 'mindlessness' discussed by Langer (1997) is very easy to produce and we need deep and thoughtful reflection, followed by action to prevent it occurring.

Brenda, it seems to Richard, experiences alienation in relation to her system. However hard she works, her position, her security is threatened at every turn and it is very hard to look outwardly when you are under threat (Damasio 1999). The constant surveillance and monitoring of the authorities helps to produce Baumard's 'territorialised' mentality. It seems to Richard that her human needs and those of her staff are disregarded by the system and in turn she discounts Richard's feelings by simply ignoring his emails and then in turn he too experiences alienation. Noddings (*ibid*) would argue that you have to cut off

your feelings for others and protect yourself to survive, though this can be damaging according to Chater (2006). This seems to Richard to be what both he and Brenda have done. However, through the story-telling process Richard develops more empathy with Brenda and begins to see her as a sentient human being and a product of her environment. Rogers (1975) argues that empathy dissolves 'alienation' and 'values the other person and their world, accepts the person as he is,' (5-6).

A highly competitive culture such as Brenda experiences and Richard fears, encourages opposition not dialogue, creates threat and anxiety. It inhibits learning, favouring short-term over longer-term gains and relies more on base instincts of survival rather than the more generative instincts of collaboration and communication. The values of the market and cultures of performativity and competition between schools have been a growing problem over the last thirty years both in the USA and previously to a lesser extent in the UK (Apple 2005; Ball 1990; 2000; Fielding 2007; Keat, 1996; Sandel 2009) although this is now changing rapidly.

The use of story-telling in higher education appears to be one way in which professionals can begin to see beyond their own environments and to 'discover' their own and others predicaments as McDrury and Alterio (2003) suggest. In the first instance, Richard now understands both his and Brenda's positions more fully. If her actions are constrained by her environment, culture and values, then his actions must equally be so. In the piece he starts to look those constraints in the face and consequently he becomes aware of a degree of rage and bitterness in himself which he was not previously aware of, and which he feels are quite uncharacteristic of him. The question then is what he goes on to do with that awareness. Further research might examine the longer term effects of such writing. As an educational leader how might this experience influence his future leadership practices, his staff and his students? Perhaps using his leadership skills he could ignite the educational fraternity through extraordinary moral courage (Haste, 1997) to challenge inept policies and prevent educators from becoming victims like Brenda.

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