

Editorial: An Invitation

by
Guest Editors,
Susan G. Nummedal
and Diane Gillespie

Susan D. Nummedal is Professor of Psychology at California State University Long Beach.

Diane Gillespie is Professor in the Goodrich Scholarship Program at the University of Nebraska-Omaha.

We began this Special Issue with an invitation quite different from the one faculty so often receive. This was not an invitation to document teaching excellence, nor was it an invitation to tell an "institutionalized story," the "right story," the story that goes in a personnel file. Rather, it was an invitation to tell the story behind that story, the story of transformation that deepens understanding of the practice of teaching and learning. This is the story located in the web of connections among what is being taught, the sense of self, and the values that create the context for teaching and learning. This is the story about the most private world of teaching. This is a story seldom asked for. As a colleague recently noted, "It's not often that an institution asks who you are" (R. Brophy, personal communication, November 20, 1993).

As uncommon as this invitation might be, we believed there were faculty who had been waiting a long time for just this invitation. If the number of submissions for this Special Issue can be taken as an indication of this longing, then we were right. Still, to be invited is one thing; to tell the story is quite another.

As the "Call for Narratives" went out, so too calls--and e-mails--about narratives began to come in. Some asked, "Just what do you want? What do

you mean by teaching and learning stories?" These questions and the discussions that followed taught us yet again that narrative is not a scholarly form familiar to many. Indeed, some of the submissions "didn't fit" the Special Issue because they were not narratives. Rather, they were akin to Russell Baker's first draft of what was to become his powerful boyhood memoir, "Growing Up." Zinsser (1995) describes Baker's first attempt as a "reporters book." It provided the historical context of Baker's boyhood—in this case, the Depression—and reported the experiences of those who lived during that time, much as a professor might describe a classroom and the experiences of those within it. But, as Zinsser notes, "What [Baker] left out... was his mother and himself—in short, the story" (p. 13). And so, too, many of the manuscripts we received were about interesting teaching situations, ones we and the reviewers wanted to know more about—and so often even wanted to be a part of. But they were "reporters' books," not narratives. The story simply wasn't there.

Others did submit storied accounts, but as Diane Gillespie tells us in her article in this issue on writing narratives, these stories were still in the process of chewing themselves

out. To move from the deeply private to the public telling itself requires transformation or reinvention. To tell the past, as Zinsser (1995) puts it, is to become the editor of that past, "imposing a narrative pattern and an organizing idea on an unwieldy mass of half-remembered events" (p. 13). These submissions were still in the process of transformation, not yet ready for the telling. They were the first bites of what might well turn into a delectable feast. We are hopeful that some of them will appear in future issues of *Reflections*.

Moving from the private to the public telling requires something more. It requires great courage. As one of our storytellers said quite early in the process, "I feel so naked doing this. How will I feel if my story is rejected? Even more, how will I feel if it is accepted and placed before a community of strangers?" Parker Palmer (1990) reminds us that teaching itself is a courageous undertaking. Telling the story of teaching and learning takes no less courage. Our authors are most courageous. They tell stories that go beyond the "confessional," as one of our reviewers noted, to provide a reflective context, creating a shared space for inquiry with the reader. And as you, the reader, enter that space, you too are invited to dig deeply for the courage to engage in your own inquiry within that shared space. As Native-American novelist Leslie Marmon Silko (1977, p. 2) cautions:

*I will tell you something
about stories:
They aren't just entertainment.
Don't be fooled.*

An essential tension in storytelling is self-disclosure, a theme woven throughout many of the stories told in this Special Issue. How much do I reveal about myself? Not only have we as teachers been reluctant to speak out about the private world of the classroom, but we have also been reluctant to speak out about ourselves within the classroom. In Elizabeth Young's "The Farming of a Verse," she writes, "Talking about myself in class felt like a leap into the dark, where I might be exposed and left hanging in the wind." And even though a recent study of teacher self-disclosure (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994) reported that it increased the level of student participation in classrooms, talking about personal experience can be a dangerous move. Neither students nor teachers have many good models and markers to guide the process.

Some of the stories move us beyond the self-consciousness of self-revelation, inviting us to think about when and how and for what purposes we tell our stories. As Judith Levin explores the telling and retelling of her story within different contexts, she finds ways to help her students tell their own stories—to connect their private experiences to their public voices. Clearly, she tells her story to do far more than simply increase student participation (Goldstein

& Benassi, 1994). By telling, she draws "students and their stories into the conversation called truth" (Palmer, 1990, p. 14).

Indeed, transformative teaching stories seem to be about classroom experiences for which there are no safe scripts; teachers find themselves engaged with students in authentic conversation. In stories such as Levin's, Holody's, Aaen's, DiBernard's, the "engagement" becomes transactional and fluid: the teacher becomes learner, the learner becomes teacher. This movement between teacher and learner disrupts the conventional "monologue" of the traditional classroom and forces dialogue. In his analysis of teachers in films, James Rhem states it this way: "... good teachers are not simply figures who facilitate transformation in others, but also figures willing to change in response to their experiences, figures who learn and often as unwillingly as their students."

In fact, the stories of Aaen, Holody, and DiBernard remind us that we must often fight off: the tendency to see students as passive, incapable of participation in authentic dialogue. Their narratives tell of the struggle to privilege student life experiences in the curriculum and the classroom. Richard Holoday, for example, wrestles with the perspectives and experiences of students of color, historically underrepresented in institutions of higher education. And Barbara DiBernard pushes against conventional frameworks of gender analysis, even within feminism

itself. Each story reveals the process of discovery, much akin to the one encountered with *matreshka*, the inlaid Russian dolls. At each contextual level, these authors explore the doll, and then when students raise new issues, they are willing to look inside and explore the next doll, even when its not the one expected. Along the way, they come to understand the necessity of being with their students long enough to know where and when to enter as an empowering agent and how to use their privilege as teachers in the service of their learning.

We invite you to join the community of teachers and learners that honors the connections between our practice and who we are. As Takaki (1993, p. 50) writes:

*In the telling and retelling
of their stories,
They create communities
of memory.*

We are hopeful that the stories of this Special Issue will enter the collective memory of all who read them. The authors of these stories have done quite bravely what Laurel Richardson (1990, p. 28) has urged:

They have used their skills and privileges to "give voice to those whose narratives have been excluded from the public domain and civic discourse. Writing collective stories enlists our sociological imagination as we convert private problems into public issues, thereby making collective identity, and collective solutions possible." □

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