

# The Never-ending Story: One person's journey into teacher education in the lifelong learning sector.

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## Abstract

This study presents the on-going narrative construction of one person's identity as a teacher educator in the lifelong learning sector. Key points and themes in her development are identified. Suggestions are offered about which of these themes might be extrapolated to inform the continuing professional development of existing and intending teacher educators in the sector.

## Key words

Learning, professional identity, narrative, teacher education.

## Context

The impetus for this article arose from undertaking case study research funded by the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) into the workforce reforms of the Learning and Skills sector. In the context of the government's determination to professionalise the Further Education System's workforce, (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2004), there has been considerable interest shown in the development of teacher educators who are key figures in the move to ensure that teachers throughout the sector are appropriately qualified (Harkin et al, 2008). This study is offered now as the narrative of the construction of a particular identity as teacher educator in the lifelong learning sector as a contribution to the growing body of knowledge about how individuals develop to become teacher educators.

## Methods

This teacher educator, whom we will call Beth, is a white, middle-aged, middle class woman, as are so many of us in the field (Harkin et al, 2008, p3), agreed to live, tell, retell and relive her story following Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) method of narrative enquiry. The living had taken place, as had to a large extent the telling, as Beth had kept detailed journals in which she reflected in depth on different aspects of her life and development. Retelling her story occurred in her handing over the journals to the authors and in the conversations we had about the journals' contents. In these conversations, her living was interpreted by the authors and articulated by them and by Beth and, in the process of making that living 'strange' again, (Jackobsen, 1960; cited in Bruner, 1986: p22), her experience was constructed and reconstructed in order to generate the narrative of her development.

The approach taken in writing this case study is, as far as possible, to narrate Beth's own story, as told in some of her reflective journals and during an unstructured, focussed interview. Beginning with a chronology, emerging themes were identified, together with the formal and informal processes, intrinsic and extrinsic drivers, and deliberate choices and happenstances which made up Beth's life and career pathway to her current post as a teacher educator in Higher Education.

Validity is claimed for this study as, although it might be possible for the interview to contain a measure of post hoc rationalisation, the journal entries were made at significant points in Beth's life, and, to cite one of her journal entries from April 2nd 2002, a reflection on having read a piece by Dominice (1990):

*To have authority I do not need to use academic language or speak with official vocabulary and phraseology. My authentic voice, that springs from my experience and the triangulation of that experience through interaction with colleagues and published work, gives validity to what I say and think. **My metaphors and images have validity because they are mine. They give and receive authority to and from my experience***

(Journal entry)

The concern of the study is to seek to understand some of the influences which contributed to Beth's emerging identity as a teacher educator by exploring what was involved in the process, focusing on significant people, events and the development of understandings as she moved from the periphery of teacher education toward participation at the centre of a particular community of practice (Wenger,1998) of a post-compulsory teacher education team.

No claims are made for generalisability but it is hoped that one person's story, told through the eyes of others, may offer some insights into the complexity of the journey to become a teacher educator and, along the way, engage the interest of the reader.

### Why Beth?

Beth is considered by colleagues and students to be a 'good' teacher. Student evaluations consistently rate her highly in terms of her knowledge of the subject matter, her teaching skills and her ability to model good practice. Her colleagues acknowledge her as an 'expert' in the field of reflective practice, one of the conceptual pillars of the particular Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme on which she works. Her colleagues additionally value the thoroughness of her planning and preparation for programmes, schemes of work and lesson plans, and particularly the collegiality which leads her to share her knowledge and understandings, participating fully in both formal planning sessions and in the informal 'photocopier' and end of day professional discussions which are part of the practices of this particular community of teacher educators (Wenger 1998).

Beth is willing to share the results of her reflection, particularly in relation to potential improvements to programmes and to students' learning experiences, and possibly more importantly, in terms of central participation in this particular community of practice, she has a sense of fun, humour and mischief which makes her a valued colleague.

### Findings

A number of key themes emerged in our conversations and reading of journals. These are:

- making the most of opportunities
- twin drivers: hard work and perfection
- organisational skills
- people skills
- knowledge and understanding and reflective practice.

### Making the most of opportunities

The first inkling Beth seems to have had that she would like to teach came when she was a child of around ten years old on her way to church group. In passing through to her designated room she came across a group of younger children with no leader and instead of going to inform an adult, stepped in and took the session with the group. This incident exemplifies the first of the themes running through the story of Beth's journey to teacher educator: her ability to notice fortuitous circumstances, to pay attention to them, perceive their relevance, and make meaning from them (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). In Beth's words:

*'I suppose I made the most of opportunities'*

(interview)

Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) have written of how personal stories engage with, and reflect, personal values. In Beth's case, she suspects that her development of what she terms *teacher values* began as an Advanced level student at her grammar school. For two of the subjects she studied she was one of only two students in the classes, and the only student studying both subjects. She felt an affinity for the teacher whom she perceived as a role model she would like to emulate and formed the plan to become a teacher.

It is Beth who uses the phrase *teacher values* and distinguishes between *teacher, trainer, learner and academic values*. Although she now sees these values as integrated into her *teacher educator values*, they developed separately and Beth attributes her current role as teacher educator, in part at least, to their separate development through the opportunities she encountered and seized. They mark stages *in an unplanned learning journey*.

Beth describes these values:

*'The teacher has and shares expert, disciplinary knowledge. Knowing, really knowing, having found out for oneself, is essential. Sharing inducts learners into that knowledge and into the process of finding it out. The teacher fosters skills of independent learning and a thirst for knowledge and the search for knowledge. The teacher's power is based on expert knowledge and an ability to inspire. There is two-way communication, but the teacher retains control of subject and learner and engagement.'*

(interview)

There followed a Classics degree at Cambridge and marriage, during which time she had not been paying attention to the radical developments in education, so on completing her PGCE immediately after university, and being geographically constrained by her husband's job and her own inability to drive, she was unable to find a teaching post, Classics having disappeared as a subject in the newly created comprehensive schools. Although her teacher training course had been ahead of its time and had enabled her to experience student-centred learning for the first time, she was not immediately able to practise as a teacher.

At this point Beth diverted from her chosen pathway and, through the patronage of a family friend, obtained a post in a locally-based international computing firm where she worked in customer relations

responding to telephone queries from around the world. With a background in Classics and no specialist knowledge of computing, Beth's success in this firm is attributable to the second of the identified themes running through her career: her drive to work hard, to exceed expectations in work roles, and to produce perfection.

### **Twin drivers: hard work and perfection**

*'If I'm told to do something, I do it right'*

(interview)

Drivers, in Transactional Analysis, are identified as being developed in childhood as a response to the 'messages' we receive from 'parental' figures (Stewart and Joines, 1987). This is something which Beth links with her highly developed sense of 'duty' and which can be identified consistently in the chronology of her career development. It is something which led to her performing beyond the expectations of employers, from her being noticed for the ability to organise filing systems in holiday jobs as a student, through being noticed as a self-trained customer relations worker in the computing firm, making recommendations for improvements to their systems and being promoted to manager. Subsequently, she moved, initially as a volunteer, taking increasing degrees of responsibility, through the management structures of Toddler Group and Pre-School Playgroup Alliance (PPA) organisations before taking on a training role for the PPA and then being identified as a potential teacher trainer by her tutors when herself a student on a stage 1 teacher training course.

Beth's drive for perfection and her capacity to work hard in the effort to attain a perfect and therefore, to her, acceptable product are graphically illustrated in a journal entry reflecting on her negative experience of attempting an IT qualification as an adult.

*'...I found myself reverting to a pattern of behaviour I had adopted as a child when under pressure to learn the piano. I was aged between 8 and 11 at the time and set myself very high standards. Pieces of music had to be played perfectly (as I had to do well in all school work and even Sunday school tests...) If I made a mistake the piece had to be played twice in a row perfectly before I allowed myself to leave the piano.'*

### **Organisational Skills**

Also emerging from Beth's narrative, and linked to the perfectionist and hard worker aspects of her performance at work, is the ability to organise and manage; to follow systems laid down by the employer and to create systems where none exist.

It was during her period at the computer firm that Beth had the opportunity to attend management training sessions in which she *really took an interest*, and made a conscious decision to pursue the route to becoming a trainer. Circumstances (inability to drive) made this impossible, but it was at this stage that Beth feels she began to absorb *training values* as distinct from the teaching values she experienced as an Advanced level student. Beth identifies that experience as a source of learning is at the heart of these values. She says:

*'Management training led me to experience experiential learning – learning to interview and appraise through observation, experience and feedback. I recognised what was happening but could not articulate it until I attended a Training for Trainers course at a later date.'*

(interview)

It is interesting to note that as Beth develops new sets of values they are influenced by her previously acquired *teacher values*. She says:

*'The teacher values influenced and tempered my absorption of trainer values. Yes, I saw the importance of outcomes when learning aims to enable the learner to carry out a specific role or task. I recognised the importance and potential of experience as a source of learning. I acknowledged the need to contract with adult learners. But I still saw power as resting in expertise, in this case more expertise as a facilitator. I still saw knowledge and understanding as a vital part of learning from experience.'*

(interview)

During her time with Adult and Community Learning (ACL), Beth assimilated what she terms *learner values*:

*'I recognised that learners were taking from their learning much more than knowledge and skills. Personal development was key. I saw lives changed. The teacher cannot hide behind or in the knowledge but must engage with the learner as a person. But I notice that my initial teacher values are still strong. I do not step into the role of co-learner. I cannot hide in my expert knowledge but it is essential to my teaching role.'*

(interview)

It appears that this development occurred partly through the student-focussed training she participated in, and subsequently ran, and partly through a real commitment to community learning which saw her, as a centre manager, making coffee and serving it to learners during the break in order to keep in touch with them, hand delivering six thousand ACL brochures so that she could go out and meet and talk to people in

the community in which she worked, and, far beyond the call of duty and job description, taking the extra step for the learners by cleaning the toilets in the centre.

This would seem to indicate a combination of commitment to her role and desire to respond to the needs of learners – at various levels of Maslow’s hierarchy (1943).

### **People skills**

The communication skills of creating rapport and speaking and listening with learners – people skills – also transferred into work with colleagues. As a member of the teacher training team with which she worked and subsequently managed, she mentioned that colleagues always seemed to *look up to* her and that she has been *well-respected* in the organisations in which she has worked.

The combination of communication skills which enable her to create rapport with others, fortuitous circumstances and Beth’s ability to seize and make the most of them is a theme that runs through her career. From the early years in the computing firm, a job she ‘fell into’, and in which, through application and commitment, she achieved manager status in a short space of time, through the happenstances of volunteering to become secretary of the toddler group *because no-one else would*, and from there becoming Chair within a year, Beth’s pathway through pre-school playgroup and ACL was a mixture of fortuitous circumstances, (being in the right place when a leader was needed for the PPA, a temporary centre manager for ACL), combined more significantly with skills and drive which brought her to the attention of employers, taking her rapidly, for example, from contributing to the City & Guilds Further and Adult Education Teachers Certificate (FAETC), to leading the programme. Beth is of the opinion that these rapid advancements in career came about – ‘*Because I was organised. I got things done*’. (interview)

She also identifies as significant in her career path, the encounters with individuals she chanced to meet: the student-centred teacher on the PGCE she chose because of its geographical proximity rather than its pedagogy, the woman who befriended her as a new and uncertain mother at Toddler Group and encouraged her to attend a committee meeting, the teachers who talent-spotted her on FAETC stage 1 and suggested she apply to teach on the course, the friend and colleague with whom she was having lunch and who happened to have seen the advertisement for her current post and brought it to her attention three days before the closing date. The significance lies, one might suspect, not in the chance nature of some of these meetings and occurrences, but in the communication skills and warmth that encourage people to respond to her, and in Beth’s ability to seize the moment when it presented.

### **Knowledge and understanding and reflective practice**

While working with ACL, a particularly significant point was reached in her career development when she embarked on an MA. This is the period during which Beth identifies that focus was on the development of *academic values*.

The thirst for knowledge identified in the *teacher values* is echoed in the *academic values*. Beth acknowledges that the *academic values* were latent in the years between completing an undergraduate degree and masters degree. She says:

*‘At this point I reclaimed my academic values, which I had hidden in order not to be too different in cultures that emphasised experience over scholarship. And yet these values developed. I needed the experiential years to take me across Belenky et al’s (1986) divide between being a receiver of knowledge to a creator and critiquer of knowledge. That gave me the confidence not to be the only one in control of the knowledge, all of the time.’*  
(interview)

In talking about this period Beth is animated. She talks about *lapping up* masters level study, using her leave from ACL to travel to, and lodge in, the university town and *loving reading* in the university library for ten hour stretches, engaging in a level of thinking far beyond that of her first degree.

*‘I was so alive at that period’*

(interview)

Beth speaks of

*‘...a very strong need to come to learning through in depth analysis – to find what’s there at its very centre.’*

(interview)

For her, having knowledge is *‘to know something to its very core.’*

An illustration of her thoroughness and tenacity in working towards understanding comes from her reflective journal of the period. She was working to *pin down* the meaning of ‘dialectic’ and with typical diligence she searched for definitions in a large Greek lexicon and then reviewed its use in context in the work of a number of writers considered key within the sector: Kolb (1984), Usher and Bryant (1997) and Mezirow (1990).

A short section from the journal is reproduced below.

*'Discovering a use of the Greek word – clearly not in regular use, to mean sexual intercourse, has given me a visual image that helps to illuminate this idea of conflicting but potentially fitting. In some senses, in sexual intercourse, there is a fitting together as opposites...'*

Uncovering Plato's slang usage of 'dialectic' – or more properly the corresponding verb in Greek - in order to come to an understanding, at a deep level, of the meaning of the word in current educational discourse, appears to be typical of Beth's determined and persistent pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

The journals also evidence a consistently reflective approach to teaching and learning. They contain much discussion of the complexities of Reflective Practice as subject matter - different perspectives, methods, purposes, frameworks – and as professional practice, considering, giving attention to, and drawing learning from the revisiting of thoughts, feelings and experiences in order to improve her own learning and her teaching. A further journal extract illustrates this.

*'I would have said for some time that deep learning was the goal for my learners but I had not appreciated the barriers that I was tempted to raise against deep learning. It involves a letting go of the training by the trainer/mentor. This involves letting go of the need to 'cover' the syllabus, to ensure learners have learnt about everything, to start filling empty vessels. It means letting go of the detailed structuring of activities to ensure learners arrive at the 'right' point of learning ... it cuts across meticulous planning and teaching systems.'*

*'Reflection has nudged me into a divergent rather than a convergent mode. The tendency towards convergence, compliance, fitting into the mould had crept up on me and I hadn't noticed...'*

A further facet of Beth's practice is the fact that her desire to understand underpins all her teaching.

*'I don't like teaching something I don't understand to the core of its nature'*

(interview)

Arriving at this understanding is linked with perfectionism and a particular perception of what 'doing the job' entails. This might be perceived as an over-extended professionalism in which there is a tendency to *wear myself out with overwork*, but it is a key ingredient of her performance as a teacher educator valued by students and colleagues.

It seems pertinent, and given that Beth's first teaching was 'Music with Mum' sessions, satisfyingly circular, to reprise here the arguments of Sloboda et al (1994; in Murphy (ed), 1999). Sloboda and his colleagues were exploring the notion of 'musicality', that there exists in some people a 'talent' for music. They posit the notion that:

*'The rate of learning will depend, not only on the amount of exposure, but also on the degree of attention that the individual pays to the material'*

(p. 54)

This argument holds true for Beth's learning to be a teacher educator. Throughout, development as a teacher educator has been attached not just to experience as a student and a teacher, but to paying close attention to these experiences.

Further parallels might be drawn between Sloboda et al's discussion of the two types of motivation to engage with any activity (such as music and teaching) in which creativity may be displayed. One motivation is intrinsic; it:

*'...develops from intense pleasurable experiences... (of a sensual, aesthetic or emotional kind) and contributes to a personal commitment (to music) in and of itself'*

(p 54)

Beth demonstrates a similar degree of motivation in her academic studies – 'never having felt so alive' as when working for her MA, and her stated *craving* for access to academic journals. The other motivation, extrinsic motivation, Sloboda suggests, is concerned with achievement:

*'achieving certain goals such as the approval of parents, identification with role models and winning competitions'*

(p54)

The separation of aspects of motivation into intrinsic and extrinsic is perhaps not straightforward – when does a desire to win parental approval become sufficiently ingrained in the adult to become part of intrinsic motivation: an inner driver? Both of these elements would appear to be important aspects of Beth's developing an identity as teacher educator. She has a deep joy in academic study and learning from reflection and an impulsion to hard work and perfection which have undoubtedly contributed to her status as a central participant in the community of practice of post compulsory teacher educators in which she works.

## Conclusion

The study has presented an individual narrative based in aspects of the life history of a single teacher educator. If elements can be extrapolated from this study to be generalisable and of significance to and for existing and intending teacher educators, it might be that what is important is the capacity to grow oneself as a teacher educator. Components of Beth's growth might be summarised as the following:

- reflection. The importance of paying attention to experience, learning from it and applying learning in practice
- academic study. The need to be familiar with and come to understandings of theories underpinning the subject specialism of teacher education and the ability to apply this understanding in practice
- hard work. The ability consistently to give more to the job, the role and tasks of teacher educator than is anywhere specified.

In giving a partial look into the narrative of the learning and development of one teacher educator, we hope that glimpse has been allowed of aspects of practice which may illuminate the development of other and intending teacher educators. As Wenger states:

*'It is the learning of mature members and of their communities that invites the learning of newcomers. As a consequence, it is as learners that we become educators.'*

(Wenger, 1998, p277).

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