Storytelling for ordinary, practical purposes (Walter Benjamin's 'The Storyteller')

Íris Susana Pires Pereira^a and Brenton Doecke^b

^aInstitute of Education, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal; ^bFaculty of Arts and Education, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the role that storytelling can play in teachers' learning. Walter Benjamin's 'The Storyteller' provides a theoretical framework that enables us to highlight the complexity of the professional learning of teachers when they share stories about their everyday lives. We develop our argument by presenting two instances of teachers representing their professional experiences through storytelling, using these examples (which are drawn from two distinct research projects) to reflect on the learning they accomplish by telling their stories. In the first example, Portuguese teachers involved in a professional learning programme use storytelling to develop their understanding of their practice as literacy educators. In the second example, Australian teachers who participated in a research project tell stories that challenge the way standardised literacy testing devalues their experience as educators. The lesson we draw from these examples affirms the socially grounded character of storytelling for the professional learning and renewal of teachers vis-à-vis a policy environment that privileges other forms of knowledge.

KEYWORDS

Storytelling; narrative; teachers; experience; professional learning; political critique

1. Introduction

So much has been written about the dire nature of Walter Benjamin's situation and the series of incidents that ultimately led to his taking his own life (Arendt [1968] 1973; Eagleton [1981] 1988). Indeed, Benjamin lived in 'finsternen Zeiten' or 'dark times' (to borrow the words of his contemporary, Brecht [1947, 172]), and this has understandably led to an emphasis on those writings that have a messianic or apocalyptic character. We need only think of Benjamin's image of the Angel of History being blasted backwards into the future, and his look of astonishment at the wreckage of the past that keeps piling up before him (Benjamin [1968] 1973, 259). Benjamin's consciousness of living at a juncture in human history where everything was at stake undoubtedly shapes all his writing.

Yet Benjamin also wrote about wreckage in other contexts, when he affirmed people's capacity in everyday settings to make sense of disparate or heterogeneous phenomena and thus to gain insight into the world around them. In *One Way Street*, for example, he evokes an image of how children haunt 'any site where things are being visibly worked on':

They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognize the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things, they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artefact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. (Benjamin [1996] 2004, 449–450)

The challenge of Benjamin's writing lies precisely in the way it requires us to refocus on moments that offer glimpses of other alternatives, other ways of engaging in the world as it presents itself to us than what conventional expectations and practices demand. This is a positive message, one that opens up the possibility of resisting all that is arrayed against educators in their efforts to be responsive to the needs of the children and young people in their care (cf. Doecke and Pereira 2012).

Our aim in this essay might be said to be to reaffirm the possibility of tracing in classroom phenomena 'new intuitive relationships', even on the part of teachers who may have become habituated to viewing the world through the lens of conventional habits and expectations. Crucial to such a project of renewal is the role of telling stories as they emerge out of their everyday lives. For underpinning Benjamin's recognition of the utopian dimensions that inhere within ordinary life is a belief in the potential of everyday social exchanges to give rise to new understandings and forms of belonging (cf. Roberts 2006, 47–48). This is the focus of 'The Storyteller', an essay that characteristically conveys the same tension between melancholy and hope for cultural renewal that we have just been considering. Literary theorists have long recognised the value of this essay, locating it within the dramatic events of Benjamin's life (see, e.g. Jameson [1971] 1974; Eagleton [1981] 1988), which has arguably obscured its positive message about the use of storytelling for ordinary, practical purposes.

Our reading of 'The Storyteller' will show how it provides teachers with a valuable resource for rethinking the possibilities of language and learning at the current moment through sharing stories about their work. This is vis-à-vis a huge machinery of measurement that seeks to undermine the knowledge and experience that teachers generate in their everyday life.

2. Storytelling and 'experience'

An entry point into Walter Benjamin's essay, 'The Storyteller', that will help us to identify the lessons we might draw from it today is provided by the way he uses the word 'experience'. Benjamin begins his essay by speculating that a decline in the value of 'experience' ('Erfahrung') is the reason why people no longer share stories with one another as they once did (see Benjamin [1977] 1991a, 439). This, as David Ferris has noted, is more than a concept of experience 'as something lived or witnessed' (which might be expressed by the German word, 'Erlebnis'), but invokes a sense of 'a wisdom drawn and communicated from experience' (as expressed by the word, 'Erfahrung') (Ferris 2008, 111).

To show the decline in value of 'experience', Benjamin instances the incapacity of soldiers returning home from the Front at the end of the First World War to speak about what they had endured – an example that has become increasingly remote with the passing of time, though not for those of us who have recently escaped social turmoil as it has erupted in different parts of the globe. But the other key instance Benjamin provides, namely the way the press represents people and events, is as familiar to us as the headlines that stream past us every day. We are all more or less hostage to the immediacy of news as it is reported from day to day, rendered almost incapable of processing all the information thrown at us. A newsworthy item one day is forgotten the next. All this news, according to Benjamin, burdens us with a proliferation of 'information' (Benjamin [1970] 1973, 88) with which we can connect only in the most arbitrary manner, as we distractedly read about the events of the last 24 hours over our morning coffee. By choosing to use the word 'information' and not 'stories' to characterise the form and content of the modern newspaper, Benjamin highlights the unanchored quality of news items and our struggle to make anything meaningful from them, something that Frigga Haug has also observed (Haug 1990, 42; cf. Doecke and McClenaghan 2011, 1–7). Your attention might be caught by this or that story, but those stories typically float across the surface of your life without ever prompting you to reflexively engage with who you are, why you lead the life you do, or how you might lead a better life.

The situation when someone decides to share a story with others, as Benjamin evokes it through his meditations on Nikolai Lesskov's stories, the ostensible focus of his essay, is quite different. Benjamin begins his essay by remarking on Lesskov's remoteness from us, saying that this is a sign that 'the art of storytelling is coming to an end' (Benjamin 1970/1973, 83) ('Sie sagt uns, dass es mit der Kunst des Erzählens zu Ende geht' (Benjamin [1977] 1991a, 439)). This comment has prompted critics to interpret

his essay as expressing nostalgia for a time that has gone by (cf. Rosen [n.d.](#), 9; Jameson [[1971](#)] 1974, 82). The essay, however, unfolds through a contrapuntal movement, whereby the characteristic features of storytelling emerge through their contrast with other types of narration, enabling Benjamin to gesture towards situations in which storytelling might remain a vital means of representing and communicating experience. As we have just noted, Benjamin contrasts storytelling with the 'information' that features in newspapers. He also distinguishes storytelling from the novel as the paramount literary form of modern times, arguing that the rise of the novel signals the decline of storytelling (Benjamin [[1970](#)] 1973, 87). What distinguishes storytelling from the novel is the latter's 'dependence on the book' (87). Storytelling presupposes a situation where someone is sharing a story with listeners who in turn take up that story and make it their own. As Benjamin remarks, 'the storyteller takes what he tells from experience' and 'he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale' (87). Storytelling presupposes a sense of community identity and shared experience from which everyone can learn. Benjamin also highlights the craft-like nature of storytelling, the fact that it 'thrives for a long time in the milieu of work', and thus might be characterised as 'an artisan form of communication' (91). The novel, by contrast, evokes an image of the author as a solitary individual at a remove from his or her readers, whose situation is likewise one of isolation, at a remove from the kinds of community settings and activities in which stories are typically exchanged.

What emerges, as 'The Storyteller' unfolds, is less an elegy for storytelling than an inquiry into those social settings where people come together to share their experiences by telling stories to one another, when its practical significance might be recognised once more. The idea that the art of storytelling might be coming to an end prompts Benjamin to reflect on what we would lose if that were indeed the case. Far from being irretrievable, the storytelling situation emerges as a possibility that might still be available to us if we were to try to give meaning to our experiences through telling stories, engaging with others in a 'full knowing way' that gives point to sharing stories with one another. We have borrowed the phrase, in a 'fully knowing way', from Kemmis ([2005](#)), for Benjamin's essay not only prompts us to be aware of the multiple ways in which stories constitute the fabric of our lives, but enables us to be more fully aware of what we might learn through sharing stories about our workplace experiences.

3. Two types of storytellers

Early in 'The Storyteller', Benjamin invokes 'the many nameless storytellers' over the ages, differentiating between two types. The first type is embodied in the resident master craftsman, who, as a well respected and knowledgeable practitioner, draws on local tales and traditions as a source of wisdom in the course of his everyday life (Benjamin [[1970](#)] 1973, 84). The other type is the travelling journeyman, who travels afar and learns new knowledge that he brings and shares with others when he eventually settles down. It is not as though these two types of storyteller remain distinct. Benjamin imagines a situation where 'the resident master craftsman and the travelling journeyman worked together in the same rooms' (85). Indeed, 'every master had been a travelling journeyman before he settled down in his home town or somewhere else' (85), bringing together 'the lore of faraway places, such as a much-travelled man brings home', with 'the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place' (85).

We think that we can identify these two types of storytellers in Maria and Almar, two early childhood educators in Portugal who have recently been involved in a project that Iris has coordinated. The conversations and written reflections on which we draw have their origin in in-service learning settings that were part of that project (cf. Pereira, Parente, and Silva [in press](#)). The project involved facilitating professional learning by supporting selected elementary teachers to study literacy education outside their school settings (at the university, with Iris) and then to return to their contexts of work (as in the example of a 'travelling journeyman') in order to support the learning of colleagues (either pre-school or primary teachers) by sharing the specialised new knowledge with them. Yet the learning that was accomplished was not something that was simply imported from the outside. For it to have any value it had to connect with the experiences of teachers in their particular school settings.

Central to Benjamin's understanding of storytelling is the role that it plays in imparting knowledge to members of a community: he writes about the 'lore of faraway places' and the 'lore of the past' as fundamental sources of a practitioner's learning (85). In the cases of both Maria and Almar, they are engaging with new theoretical knowledge produced by researchers that they are able to connect with their former knowledge and accumulated experience. The key aspect of their learning, as it is reflected in their storytelling, are the links they are able to establish between their everyday experiences and the theoretical knowledge that they have acquired. They are able to make these links at an experiential level through storytelling, and not simply through the propositional logic that characterises the 'knowledge' of academics. Another way to put this is to say that it is through storytelling that Maria and Almar are finally able represent *the new ways of seeing their professional worlds* which they have built for themselves.

3.1. A resident craftsman's story

Maria is a kindergarten teacher, and one of the 'stay-at-home' teachers who benefited from the support of a travelling journeyman, a teacher who was her peer in their school centre but who 'travelled' away in order to learn 'afar'. Maria's story took the form of a learning portfolio that she assembled in the course of her involvement in the programme, which Darling (2001, 111), referring specifically to student teachers in pre-service settings, defines as a:

narrative that tells a coherent story of student teachers' learning experiences (...) and highlights thoughtful reflection on, and analysis of, those experiences. It is not simply an accumulation of pieces and products; it is an unfolding [of their] understandings about teaching and learning, and about their development as a professional.

If you read Maria's story, you can hear the voice of a 'resident craftsman' who transforms her practice and herself as a practitioner in very significant ways through interacting with her 'traveling' colleague, namely the teacher who had engaged in the formal learning provided outside their school setting.

Benjamin describes the combination of the traveller's stories with those of the resident master craftsman as occurring in the 'university' of the 'artisan class' (85). The artisan class in which Maria took part was the site of her learning and professional renewal as she reflected on her practice with the guidance of another who had ventured beyond their institutional setting and brought back the experiences of the traveller. The story that she wrote through her portfolio was a coherent representation of that process. She structured it clearly by closely following the sequence of the programme as it progressed, exploring the themes of oral language development, language awareness and emergent literacy in turn, followed by a section that was devoted to her self-assessment (Pereira, Parente, and Silva *in press*).

The voice of the storyteller lends coherence to her story as it unfolds, though it is also noteworthy that her portfolio contains components of more analytical writing, when she engages in more general reflections. This is apparent when she writes about emergent literacy in the pre-school years:

There is continuity between children's oral language practices and the learning of reading and writing ... The pre-school teacher must interact with the children, promote interactions among them and with other people in order to promote the advance of children's emergent literacy.

At other moments in the story of her learning, she tells how she used the knowledge she was developing, integrating it with her previous knowledge in order to transform her practice. She reports how she used this knowledge to plan, enact and analyse her practice. When her writing takes this turn, her voice mixes with an echo of the voices of children, creating an idea of the actual chorus of voices in the classroom:

The aim was for the children to identify equal oral segments in words. By directing their attention to these oral segments (those which rhyme), children begin to be aware of the sounds in words...

She then details the sequence of activities that comprised the task in question, when we gain an impression of how the children chanted words that rhyme:

Some drawings were presented to children on a blank page, 12 drawings with an empty square next to them. The children said, aloud and together, the names of the objects that were represented in the drawings: spinning top, violin, cat, bottle, ball, scissors, carrot, shoe, bell, lion, giraffe, coil [pião, violino, gato, garrafa, bola, tesoura/leão,

sino, sapato, girafa, mola, cenoura, pairs of rhyming words in Portuguese]. Then, each was supposed to use the same colours to paint the squares corresponding to the pair of rhyming words.

This passage is followed by an analysis of the children's performances, when she assesses the value of this experimental task:

The attempt to carry out this task with the four [three year-old] children was by and large unfruitful. It was almost a painful experience to see these children try and do the task. [Yet] there was an exception. (...) This child developed awareness of the sound segments in words that rhymed. That was the objective: To begin to be aware of the sound segments in words. One is led to conclude that, although age is an important factor, it is not absolutely determining. If that was so, there would be no exceptions. Probably there are other factors ... Most of the four year-olds had no difficulty.

In her story, Maria also tells how she confronted her preconceptions and practices as a language educator, using her new knowledge and experience to highlight the main areas of her learning. The following passage shows her reflecting on the intellectual growth she has experienced, when she uses the first person singular ('I') to signal how she has made this new knowledge her own because of the way it has illuminated aspects of her professional practice. Her personal voice is most clearly audible as an 'I', affirming that this is her story, while also linking this new knowledge with the specific context of her professional setting:

Yet the substantial difference between the first and the second tasks lies in the idea that led them. Initially I understood 'literacy' as knowing how to read and write. I had not assimilated the concept of 'emergent literacy'. To learn how to read and write is a second phase, a more advanced one, of literacy [learning]. Literacy in pre-school – emergent literacy – is a set of ideas about reading and writing upon which the [formal] learning of reading and writing will be constructed. Literacy does not start by the learning of reading and writing, but by the construction of a set of ideas about reading and writing. The distinction between 'literacy' and 'emergent literacy', as well as the importance of the latter, were learnings I constructed ...

Maria's portfolio might be read as a resident craftman's story that contains practical advice for others in her community. She has counsel to give, in the same spirit that Benjamin characterises the storyteller as offering counselling of practical value. In this particular instance, her counsel concerns not only what she has learned but how she has learned. Both the 'what' and the 'how' of learning are of abiding interest to the community of practitioners (her fellow resident craftsmen) to which she belongs.

3.2. *Stories by a teacher traveller*

The other story is told by Almar, an elementary school teacher who belonged to the group of teacher 'travellers' mentioned earlier. During the learning programme, she first learned new knowledge about language education in the elementary grades, which she then shared with her peer 'resident craftsmen' on returning to her school (during seminars and peer class supervision). When the programme came to an end, Almar resumed her practice as an ordinary classroom teacher.

In the course of her transition back to the classroom, she experienced further professional learning of a very intense kind, and she tells about this in a story she shared, when she was prompted to do some preliminary writing in preparation for an interview that Iris conducted with her. In response to a prompt to tell about her most significant learning over the four years since returning to school after her experience as a 'traveller', Almar identified her experience of teaching first graders how to read and write, though she also refers to other dimensions of her transformed practice:

Right after the in-service was over, I decided to teach a 1st grade. I felt professionally and personally secure to do that. I have always considered that this is the most difficult year of teaching in the elementary school, and I am still convinced today that my confidence stemmed from the vast professional knowledge acquired with the in-service programme. During the four years following the in-service programme I realized how important it was so that I could help children with more difficulties by building on their educational background in a slow but successful way.

Almar lets Iris know how she learned to identify areas of difficulty in children's language competence and how to act to deal with this, referring to the fact that she drew on her new knowledge to design her own curriculum:

One of my initial concerns was to know the early conceptions about varied aspects of writing my group of students had. With some inquiry I did based on Emilia Ferreiro's work, I got to know their conceptions and could intentionally plan my educational action in an objective and effective way.

She also refers to a transformation she produced in her teaching methods, showing how she was able to focus on the individual needs of her children:

I focus my reflection in the 1st grade for the reasons I have outlined, but also because I know that my work was very important for a particular child. She began elementary school without attending preschool. Being from quite a disadvantaged socio-cultural environment, her communicative competence was so poor that initially only one classmate understood her and served as a 'translator'. The child produced two syllables for words, pronouncing only the vowels and some stops and nasal consonants [p, m]. I confess that before the in-service I would have panicked and probably would have appealed to the Special Needs services, which would have certainly taken her. After the in-service I faced this case as a challenge. Modesty aside, I am aware that my professional and personal work contributed a lot so that this child could enjoy some success in her learning. At the time of this reflection she is enrolled in 5th grade now and in her own right, as she was able to succeed in the Portuguese exam (at the end of 4th grade).

Almar explicitly attributed her capacity to engage with her professional world afresh to her theoretical learning, but in the interview with Iris she was also keen to emphasise the role of her peer resident craftsmen's practices in her professional renewal. It was not only a matter of bringing back new theoretical knowledge to her professional setting, but of becoming attuned to the complexity of the professional experiences of those about her through the lenses of her new theoretical framework. In the following excerpt, she tells about the learning she achieved by observing one of her very experienced colleagues teaching a first grade class. Almar found out that her colleague was actually already putting into practice much of the theoretical knowledge that she had brought back from her travels. This was something her colleague had developed during her own long years of experience as a 'resident master craftsman'. The key difference was that her colleague simply did not know the name for what she was doing, whereas Almar was able to make sense of what she was witnessing within her new theoretical framework:

I had a colleague who used a special method for teaching reading. She was a source of advice in the school centre long before the in-service began. The practice that I observed was very inspiring for me. The way she applied in practice what we had talked about [in the seminars we held in the school] with respect to the initial teaching of reading was very interesting. From observing her classes and from what she shared with me (she was always happy to share her practical knowledge with her colleagues a lot, and to make explicit how she proceeded), I filtered what I was interested in. That was why I changed and adopted her method for my own practice. Before I used to teach starting by the letters, following the textbook ... which was also the easiest way to do it. Now I am sure that if I had not invested in a new way of teaching ... I wouldn't have known how to face the challenges as I have.

Both Maria and Almar show how educators can make connections between their theoretical knowledge and their specific settings, developing and applying the insights that such knowledge makes available to them. They both reveal what and how they learned. A key vehicle for making that knowledge their own is through telling stories about their work, using the first person (what 'I' have seen and done), as well as by evoking particular scenes and personalities, most notably the children with whom they have been interacting, to register the experiences that have been opened up to them by applying that knowledge. Their professional discourse is, in short, characterised by the application of concepts to the contexts in which they work, which they are able to use to name aspects of their practice without abstracting from those contexts or leaving the rich particularities of their professional world behind them. In both cases practical knowledge is the source and the result of learning, the source and the result of the stories they share, a fact that Benjamin also highlights as a feature of storytelling, when he describes stories as being 'rich in communicable experience' (84). He says that the narrator's task consists in working 'the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful and unique way' (108).

4. Refocusing on 'experience'

The example of the Australian teachers' conversation to which we would now like to turn can be used to illustrate the same aspects of storytelling that we have observed in the accounts that Maria and Almar

have given of their professional learning. May, Gina and Sue all work at a primary school in a socially disadvantaged suburb in Melbourne. The school is experiencing an influx of middle class families with tertiary qualifications due to its nearness to the city centre, but is otherwise a scene of linguistic and cultural diversity. As a result, many of its pupils are struggling to meet the norms of Standard Australian English imposed by nation-wide standardised literacy testing.

May, Gina and Sue might all be characterised as fitting the type of 'resident master craftsman': each has taught for over thirty years in a variety of schools in the northern suburbs, but they have now all been working at this particular institution for several years. Their conversation shows them drawing on this knowledge and experience in their efforts to understand the impact that standardised testing is having on their lives as teachers. The conversation you are about to hear was the last of several conversations in which these teachers participated over a period of some eighteen months as part of a larger research project investigating the impact of the then newly introduced National Assessment Programme – Literacy and Numeracy (known as NAPLAN) on the everyday world of schools.

So the nature of the professional learning in which May, Gina and Sue are engaging through participating in this conversation is quite different from the professional learning that Almar and Maria were experiencing. Their conversation provides a nice example of 'teacher talk' (Doecke, Brown, and Loughran 2000; Clark 2001), with the teachers sharing stories about their professional experiences, and collaboratively building on each other's insights in an effort to arrive at a judgement about the value of NAPLAN. Such talk is far from the easy familiarity of swapping anecdotes about their daily lives, as when teachers engage in conversation around morning tea, though it presupposes a community in which teachers trust one another and feel that they can freely share stories about their experiences. The conversation reflects the teachers' desire to inquire into how their work had been affected by the introduction of standardised testing and the psychometric mindset that accompanies it, and serves as a further illustration of the practical value of storytelling as Benjamin conceives it.

We are posing this example of storytelling, however, because in many ways the teachers are effectively confronting the question of the preconditions necessary for storytelling to have any practical value within their workplace. The teachers saw the machinery of standardised testing and the knowledge of the measurement experts who supposedly vouchsafe the validity of the tests as denying the value of their experience. Their conversation shows them reflexively weighing up whether their stories can any longer serve to represent their experience and knowledge. Their talk might thus be said to echo the opening of Walter Benjamin's 'The Storyteller', since it is largely motivated by a sense on their part that 'experience has fallen in value', to use Benjamin's words (Benjamin [1970] 1973, 83–84), involving a loss of the knowledge that has traditionally been embodied in the stories that teachers share about their everyday lives.

'Experience' is a word that the teachers use repeatedly in their opening exchanges. May talks about her 'experience' as going 'up' (i.e. increasing), at the same time expressing her frustration that this does not involve any positive recognition from those around her:

May: My confidence over the years of teaching has gone down rather than going up. I know my experience goes up but we don't get any positive feedback. Once in a while parents will say: 'Oh my kid is very happy, my kid really loved that unit of work'. We get two or three parents but usually would get all the negatives and we don't hear positives.

Sue then remarks:

Sue: I mean we're all getting older and all that, but we've got all this experience like May says; we've got all this breadth of knowledge and things like that. We've dealt with God knows how many hundreds of children but you're not getting the same satisfaction out of our job and we feel like without patting ourselves on the back but we've got so much experience and we are an asset, but no one recognizes that and no one ever says: 'Well you guys are getting ready to retire – we'd like to offer you some part time work'.

May: Yes.

Sue: You know in business they would do it quite often; they would say: 'Look listen, we've trained these people – these people have got experience. Let's grab them – they are an asset.' But not in our job. It's not seen like that. It's like 'Well all right, you are costing us so many dollars – we could get three graduates for what we pay you'.

All the teachers are conscious of how 'old' they are in comparison with the graduates who have just joined their staff, and they express some anxiety about the difference between their attitudes and values and those of the new teachers. This is not to say that they do not appreciate the energy and enthusiasm that early career teachers bring to their work, but they are conscious that these new teachers speak a language of 'data' and performance appraisal that is foreign to them. May, for example, recounts how an early career teacher had come back from a PD (a professional development day), 'with knowledge of how to improve data', confessing to feeling 'demoralised' by this attitude:

May: like I thought that's not what we are on about you know. I don't think it's to improve data. It's something else that I value and so nevertheless this teacher is going to make a fantastic teacher but there's this ethos in that these people get influenced by and it's all around them because that's what gets rewarded.

Their 'experience' is not something they carry around with them as individuals, as though it were simply their personal property. Rather, it is something that has emerged out of the school community in which they have been working, a product of the collaborative relationships they have enjoyed for a long period of time (something of which we are reminded repeatedly through their use of the first person plural). For them, it is almost as tangible as bricks and mortar, although they are concerned because this is not necessarily something that young teachers can see, as becomes apparent when Gina observes how young teachers look at them:

Gina: We've been in the same game for nearly thirty years. We are physically old and all that sort of stuff, but I'm thinking you're looking at us as old teachers and our ideas and our ways are old but those ideas and ways that we have developed have made this school. Like we are a team that have been here for such a long time. We have made the school the way it is. Our ideas and strategies and the way we approach things is based on experience.

You might say that the point of the conversation is to try to determine what this word 'experience' might mean. Although the conversation is occurring between like-minded people, the word does not mean exactly the same thing for everyone: May, for example, through her comments about her experience 'going up' and other remarks she makes in this conversation registers a sense of 'experience' as a continuum that is akin to Dewey's understanding of the word ([1938] 1997), a meaning that is perhaps not so evident in what Sue or Gina has to say. Each person picks up the word 'experience' to inject it with slightly different meanings or to tease out further dimensions of the word in an effort to understand their situation better.

Throughout their conversation you get a sense of the way the particularities of their situation, as they register them through the anecdotes they share with one another, conflict with the views that others might have of their work, especially judgments about the effectiveness or otherwise of their teaching as measured by standardised literacy tests. Against the big picture (typically expressed in the form of graphs representing the performance of their pupils in comparison with both a national benchmark and the performance of pupils in so-called 'like' schools), they offer accounts of the day-to-day rhythms of their lives, of their interactions with children, and what they learn from their exchanges with them.

By exploring various facets of the word, 'experience', May, Gina and Sue are impelled to tell stories that confront all those forces that would reduce them to dumb compliance. They not only affirm the value of 'experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth' (to borrow Benjamin's words ([1970] 1973, 84)) but they are enacting such communication by participating in this discussion with one another. This is not to say that their stories are always fully formed. Their conversation comprises story fragments, traces of people and situations that evoke the world they know, with their stories tumbling over each other in a way that sometimes makes it difficult for an outsider to comprehend. Often they interrupt one another without allowing a story to be brought to its conclusion. There were, however, moments when they each took an opportunity to tell more fully developed stories about their experiences of working at this particular school.

May, for instance, would occasionally hold the floor, articulating insights into her professional practice in story form, especially as it contrasted with the routines imposed by standardised testing. On one occasion she was particularly critical of the way standardised testing takes 'just one snapshot' of a student's writing, whereas she and her colleagues draw on interactions with their students throughout the course of a year:

It's a whole year of observing, listening to these kids, getting them to read their stories, and once in a while you see it and you think, 'Oh my God, I didn't know that this kid could write like that.' And why can that kid write like that? Because you just gave a topic, for example, that they really, really loved. And something has just happened. Like, I've got a boy who is dyslexic, and his father came and saw me a week ago. He said, 'May, I don't know what has happened, but my kid is up to his 20th page of writing.' And I said, 'I saw it the moment that question went out.' It just happened. We read the stories and stuff like that. I said, 'How about if we write stories about a dragon?' And that kid just loved it. So after that, it's just on and on and on and he wants to publish it and make a book. So maybe I wouldn't have been lucky enough to see that in this kid this year, and I would have gone on thinking that this kid, nothing. But I saw it and I thought, 'Wow!' And of course he's got his words back-to-front and whatever, but who cares?! He's writing. And what is he going to get back from the NAPLAN? Nothing. He's going to get nothing. Whereas, from me, at least I can say, 'Look, he did this fantastic story this year.'

May also remarks on the way that the children in her class 'just love the sharing and listening to each other', when she also elaborates on the stance she has cultivated when listening to the children's stories:

And sometimes when I think the stories are a little bit silly or not really good, the way that they respond to each other, the way that they like each other's stories, I think, you know, I'm two or three generations older than them, so I don't get the same interpretation. So it's good for me to listen to what they have to say about each other's stories, because it teaches me something. It teaches me quite a bit about, they are nine years old after all, and that's what they're interested in and that's what is meaningful for them. And I'm judging it as an adult, not as a kid. That's what is really meaningful to them. So that comes out through a discussion. So assessing kids, you've got to be their teacher to assess kids. You cannot be somebody else. You cannot be somebody else.

May's story arises spontaneously out of the story telling situation in which she is participating. Yet in some respects the notion of spontaneity fails to do justice to the work that she invests in telling this tale. This becomes evident from the learning that she articulates on the basis of her interactions with children when she engages in general reflections about the need to avoid judging their work solely as an 'adult' – a standpoint that is akin to the responsiveness that Benjamin shows towards the way children make meaning from the rubbish left at building sites and other settings. You can see from these reflections how she is constructing knowledge about her work, how her story is invested with 'practical interests' and 'wisdom' (Benjamin [1970] 1973, 86–87) that she is able to articulate through reflecting on her experiences.

Her authority as a teacher and storyteller also derives from the way she registers the richly specific character of the interactions in which she has engaged. That specificity resists the statistics and generalisations produced through standardised literacy testing, which by its very nature has no capacity to recognise the boy whom she is talking about or his enthusiasm for dragons or indeed why a father might feel happy to see his son writing page after page of a dragon story. The richly situated character of her narrative represents a counter-discourse or alternative form of 'knowing' to the 'knowledge' embodied in the machinery of standardised testing. She is engaging in a 'knowing' practice (Kemmis 2005), expressing insights that arise from practice and then return to it as a framework that enables her to interpret the social world of her classroom and remain an active participant in that world.

5. Teachers' storytelling, practical learning and resistance

In 'The Storyteller', Benjamin inquires into how we represent ourselves to ourselves and to others and collaboratively learn from our experiences through telling stories to one another. Underpinning his exploration of the uses of storytelling, as exemplified by Lesskov's work, is a vision of how people create the world in which they find themselves, participating in a history that is of their own making. This history provides the content of the stories that people share with one another in an effort to understand their lives. A story that someone tells comprises more than simply 'information' about a world that might be posited as existing independently of any observer, but it emerges out of 'the life of the storyteller', whose life is present as 'traces' in the story (Benjamin [1970] 1973, 91–92). Yet, as Benjamin's opening reflections on the situation of troops returning home after the Great War show, that history is never fully transparent to us, but always involves a dialectic between consciousness and being, challenging our capacity to understand and shape the world according to socially desirable goals. This gives rise to a situation where the very products of our work can appear to be beyond our control, when individuals

are driven inward vis-à-vis reified structures that they no longer experience as the products of their own making (cf. Lukács 1971, 83–110).

Such scenarios appear to render ordinary people powerless, the victims of world historical forces that they can barely understand, let alone shape according to their own desires. But the beauty of 'The Storyteller' lies in the way it can evoke the momentous historical changes that occurred in the first half of the twentieth century without being in thrall to them. Here and in the other major essays that Benjamin wrote during the 1930s, he sees himself, not as occupying a position vis-à-vis those changes but as attempting to understand his situation *within* them (to borrow phrasing from 'The Author as Producer' (Benjamin [1934] 1973, 87)). So in 'The Storyteller', he is able to avoid succumbing to the prospect of the end of storytelling by teasing out the uses of storytelling in everyday life as exemplified by Lesskov's work.

It is, after all, significant that the occasion for writing this essay should be Nikolai Lesskov's stories, a writer whose first published work, as Benjamin remarks, was entitled 'Why are Books Expensive in Kiev?' (Benjamin [1970] 1973, 86). A contemporary of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, Lesskov was clearly not of their stature, but his stories serve Benjamin's purpose beautifully in showing how storytelling is a 'popular possession' (cf. Rosen n.d., 25) directed towards socially productive goals. Benjamin grounds Lesskov's storytelling in the everyday world that he had experienced through his commercial travels that enabled him to cultivate a 'worldly wisdom', as well as a 'knowledge of conditions in Russia' (85). Rather than simply locating Lesskov's stories within a literary tradition that treats his texts as though they simply emerge in dialogue with other texts, Benjamin shows how they are infused with ordinary purposes that emerge out of the world that Lesskov knew as a commercial traveller. As we have seen, he repeatedly emphasises how storytelling is bound up with the social and economic life of people. He thus transcends formal analyses that would treat texts simply as examples of other texts, revealing how Lesskov's stories engage with the social and historical conditions out of which they emerged, providing a standpoint or perspective on what was happening.

This is not to say that such formal analyses have no relevance to an understanding of how these stories speak to people. That would be to treat stories as though they provide a direct window on experience, without acknowledging the work that people actually do with stories when they are trying to convey important aspects of their lives to one another. We can sense the intellectual and imaginative work that Maria, Almar and May invest in their storytelling. When people tell stories they draw on the linguistic resources available to them in order to give an account of themselves. Benjamin's stance throughout his essay is that experience is not to be equated with storytelling – there are, after all, plenty of stories that circulate in the daily media that have nothing to do with experience as he understands it, which provide little more than isolated scraps of 'information'. Experience, as Benjamin uses this word, is only fully won through the labour of storytelling, through a sustained attempt to ask questions about what the world presents to you and to represent your struggle to understand what it all means. Stories cannot simply be conflated with experience, but use the material of experience in order to achieve and communicate insights into the world that is given to us (cf. Verhesschen 2003, 452; Doecke 2015; cf. Parr et al. 2012, 158).

So it is with the stories that teachers tell to one another in an effort to gain a perspective on their work. Through telling stories to one another, teachers are enacting the sociability that comes through sharing their experiences as they occur within their workplace settings and the challenges arising therefrom. Stories do not exist outside the context of their telling. Even a so-called literary text, as Ulf Abraham has observed, is not already there, before we begin to talk about it, but is only produced as an object of our attention through our conversations with one another (Abraham 2015, 101/2016 forthcoming). Thus recognition of the value of storytelling can only emerge when people regain a sense of the importance of sharing experience 'from mouth to mouth' (Benjamin [1970] 1973, 84), when they recapture the importance of 'companionship' as a condition for sharing stories with one another (100). Benjamin's essay prompts us to refocus on the contexts in which we make use of stories, and to affirm the importance of creating opportunities for people to share their stories, to engage in the solid, practical work of communicating their experiences to one another and learning from them.

As a form of sociability, the very act of storytelling is a significant type of resistance to the anomie created by government policies that would seek to reduce education to a matter of monitoring the individual performance of children, as with the nation-wide standardised testing that provides the topic of conversation for the Australian teachers, which is also a feature of the Portuguese policy landscape. In Australia and other Anglophone settings, this focus on measurement involves the misuse of standardised testing to make judgements about the effectiveness of individual teachers and their schools, including the generation of a reified set of results at a remove from the complexities of life as it is lived in specific school communities (cf. Koretz 2008). In contradistinction to the mindset embedded in such reforms, Maria, Almar and May register the presence of individual children in their lives (the children who struggled to see the rhyming pattern, the boy who loved writing dragon stories, the little girl who needed a 'translator'), thus doing the work that storytellers do when they represent the rich particularities of experience as things that escape being understood and classified in any straightforward way. Yet it is also important for these teachers to give meaning to the heterogeneity of the people and events they encounter everyday – something that they accomplish both through emplotment (making choices about the moment to begin the story, selecting the characters and evoking the scene), as well as through distilling the story into a reflection about what they have learnt. In this way teachers are always seizing an opportunity for beginning again, treating each experience as an occasion for storytelling and for the learning that storytelling makes possible.

Walter Benjamin's work has long been appropriated by literary critics, not to mention people working in other cultural fields. It is therefore salutary to remind ourselves that the first essays he wrote were actually on educational topics, arising out of his participation in the German Youth Movement, where the phrase 'beginning again' was used to signal a faith in the capacity of young people to make the world anew (the journal in which Benjamin first published was entitled *Der Anfang* or 'the beginning')¹ The teachers whose conversations and written reflections we have been considering likewise show a commitment to the promise of young people, which they endeavour to understand on its own terms, rather than attempting to simply channel into conventional pathways. Those teachers position themselves alongside of their pupils, attempting to learn from them through their exchanges with them, even as they seek to scaffold them into new insights.

Their storytelling contrasts with the rhetoric in which governments habitually engage, which is typically about the 'big picture', including jobs and economic growth. These teachers' stories might therefore be dismissed as a modest pursuit (as mere 'anecdote' [cf. DE&T 2005]) in comparison with the large claims made in policy pronouncements and the 'data' on which those pronouncements are based. Yet to tell a story remains a supremely important act on the part of people for that very reason, amounting to a fundamental way in which the world can be grasped on human terms. A story never simply presents information about the world – its aim is not 'to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report' (Benjamin [1970] 1973, 91–92) – but always embodies a relationship between the narrator and the world represented. It is thus that it locates itself within a practical, social space where people, in the pursuit of their interests, always need to negotiate with others in order to get things done.

Benjamin's emphasis on the 'moral' or 'practical advice' that might be taken from a story conflicts with the way literary theory typically treats stories as transcending such practical purposes (cf. Eagleton 1985–86, 98). His focus on the practical advice offered by the storyteller, however, itself transcends the customary ways in which we think about stories and the divisions that we impose, such as that between a privileged body of writing that we call 'literature' and other writing, or between the 'aesthetic' and everyday life. Those divisions prevent us from understanding the significance of cultural work like storytelling as a vital dimension of the way we renew our lives from day to day and learn to live properly together. Benjamin frees us from a sense of embarrassment or self-consciousness when we express a desire 'to hear a story expressed' (Benjamin [1970] 1973, 83), affirming the value of storytelling in sustaining the practical life of a community.

The teachers' stories that have provided the focus of much of the foregoing discussion might all be read as containing sound, practical advice to their community and to the larger professional community beyond their institutional settings. It seems therefore appropriate to conclude this essay by highlighting

the practical advice they embody. May's counsel is: *Resist the current silencing of experience; revalue the particularities and contingencies of teaching experience as a vital dimension of a responsive pedagogy.* Maria and Alma's counsel is: *Be open to new insights and to the possibility of transformation by embracing new ideas, gauging their value through reflexively engaging with your own professional practice.*

Note

1. See Leslie (2007, 31) and Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser ([1977] 1991, 828ff); see also Benjamin's use of this phrase in 'The Author as Producer' (Benjamin [1934] 1973, 97; Benjamin [1977] 1991b, 695).

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