A Poet's Journey as A/r/tographer: Poetic Inquiry With Junior High School Students

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ABSTRACT

In this paper[1] I explore the connection between a/r/tography and poetic inquiry, and how together they cultivate multiple ways of understanding. I further claim that classroom situations are most provocative of thoughtfulness and critical consciousness when each student participates in the classroom conversation from his or her lived situations. While difficult, teachers who can facilitate rich interchanges of dialogue within a plurality of voices are genuinely creating communities of difference and thus imagining real possibilities for social change.

An Emerging Theory of A/R/Tography and Poetic Inquiry

In a noteworthy collection of essays, editors Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, and Gouzouasis (2008) have extended the notion of a/r/tography, linking this rhizomatic way of art/teaching/and research to identities, and the many ways one as artist, researcher and teacher might *be* in her or his identities. The appeal of a/r/tography to artists is immediately apparent in the *art* prefix, particularly artist-researchers, who, being themselves teachers, are also researching the arts in art education. The complication of identity offered in a/r/tography also appeals to me as an English teacher who loves teaching and writing poetry.

For example, as a poet, who introduces himself as an assistant professor of education, with research interests in the intersection of poetry and curriculum theory, the issue of identity is ever-present, not just coming before as a prelude to who I am, but also setting out those methods by which I might practice poetry, do research, and

inquire with students. Bearing in mind this presence of identity, an attention to how it might be done a/r/tfully as "*graphy*" raises a number of questions: In the secondary English classroom, what education practices are implied by a/r/tography? How might a new generation of English teachers teaching in such diverse classrooms benefit from doing a/r/tography with their students? What does it mean to research a/r/tographically, and then represent findings *artfully* with attention to the process of *graphy*? As I seek to answer these questions, not only in this paper, but also in a life-long journey of inquiry, I know I do so incompletely, and rarely in order.

What follows are not theoretical and methodological points one, two, three, four of teaching a/r/tographically in the secondary English classroom, but rather an artful and hermeneutical investigation into what it was like for me (the autobiography of the graphy of a/r/tography) to "be" an a/r/tographer with grade 9 students who were "being" a/r/tographers with me. Thus, the theory and implied method of a/r/tography is woven throughout this paper as I explore the complication of identity in a/r/tography on my *journey* of teaching poetry to grade 9 students during the 2007-2008 academic year. A pedagogical journey, says Aoki (2005a), looking to the Greek roots of the word, represents theory as something which emerges on the way to understanding (p. 191). For Jardine (2008), what is worthwhile is worth lingering over: understanding happens in the midst of our discipline (para. 2, 4).

Questioning the Traditional Writing Economy

In the midst of the discipline of Secondary English Education is the question of what counts as rigorous, academic writing. Students often wonder whether reading and writing poetry will increase their academic success. When I tell them with certainty that it will, many have stared back with skepticism. For them, higher marks on their essays and, at the end of the year, a higher score on their provincial English exam are not readily associated with poetry. Who can blame them? It was a position I once held, thinking that the best preparation for both university and employment success was a rigorous writing program, and by that I meant assigning essays once a week and marking them with as much red ink as possible.

I came by this belief honestly, if not altruistically, thinking that hard work in writing resembled the hard work of athletic training. I thought to myself that when a basketball team loses a game because its players miss too many free throws, of course they must practice free throws, over and over, until they don't miss. And if

needed, I surmised, the skill is broken down into smaller parts such as balance, arm motion, and arc on the ball. The logical leap from athletics to academics proved to be quite simple: to improve essay writing, write essays. To improve more, write more. And if needed, break it into steps: like drafting, revising, editing; or introduction, body, conclusion; or thesis statement, evidence, emphasis. Year after year, class after class, I thought that in my academic and rigorous writing classes students were doing good work because it was hard work. With an emphasis on outcomes and exam scores, few in my school context questioned that belief.

A/R/Tography and Poetic Inquiry as Classroom Pedagogy

Knowing the hegemonic hold academic success has on schools, I find myself writing about poetry and critical thinking, poetry and engagement, poetry and inquiry, poetry and research, poetry and…anything, as long as it sounds as academic, hard, rigorous, and critical as the essay. Poetic engagement, in all its possible contexts, is a kind of translation of experience, particularly the inner, often unseen experience. A creative engagement where poetry is "a site for uncovering the self and in some ways recovering the self" opens spaces of inquiry "to excavate the complexities of the human heart, soul, and body" (Snowber & Wiebe, 2009, p. 16). I often link poetic inquiry with a/r/tography because when engaging poetically in the classroom students find links, make connections, and develop ideas through "multiple artful means" (Wiebe et al., 2007, p. 6). William Ayers (2004) says "art challenges and transports us; it offers an invitation to transformation and an opportunity to see things anew" (p. xiii). I believe that poetic engagement, as Greene (1998) argues about the poetic encounter, has the capacity to offer the reader "a new perspective on what it is to come to know, to draw forth the kind of knowledge that is always in process" (pp. 18–19).

Complementing the academic rigour of poetic engagement in the classroom, is the poetry of lifelong learning, that is the multiple poetic identities of being a poet, of living the poet, of thinking, playing, and living poetically. Leggo (2004) says of poetry that it invites him to embrace imagination and attend to language, "especially how language shapes and animates knowing and understanding" (para. 2). Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind (2005) say of a/r/tography that it is "full of curiosity punctuated by questions searching for deeper understandings while interrogating assumptions" (p. 901). Translating my life poetically requires the utilization of an

artful and poetic means to inquire and theorize, to form and reform, to question and trouble, to suggest and imply, and to enjoy both the meaning and process as the inward and inner awareness of pedagogy emerges. For the poetically aware teacher, pedagogy is replete with interstices which represent the spaces of possibility between the teacher and students. Recalling Ted Aoki, Daley says that teachers "need to live in the third space…between the structured and the playful" (Daley & Wiebe, 2002, para. 25).

As an educational researcher, attending carefully to poetry as a language of reflexive knowing and lived experience, I believe a heartful poetic mode of writing and living are particularly needed for disrupting the overly reductive forces of the rationalist discourses, such as privileging linear thought over intuition; or teaching as if thinking is aggressive and confrontational rather than collegial and collaborative; or neglecting and downplaying emotions. It is necessary for poets who are researchers and teachers, those who live in/ with/ by/ and through language, to write poetry so a poet's understanding of the world can celebrate its difference rather than sameness, can offer ongoing hope for change, which is ongoing difference, and can thus engage in "richer interchanges" of diverse cultural inheritances within a plurality of voices in a democratic world (Chinnery, 2006). While not speaking specifically about poetry, Greene (1995) underscores the importance of imagination; she says that where educators enliven "plurality and multiplicity" what emerges is a democratic community where silences are shattered, where "long repressed voices are making themselves heard" (p. 155).

So these days I am no longer surprised that students' voices are stifled in this present academic and prescriptive style of teaching English. Many of my creative writing students came to find academic success by writing creatively rather than composing essays within the limited organizational structures and styles offered by the outdated five paragraph essay. Too many teachers, writes Harp (1991), believe that prescriptions will make composing easier. They do not consider the socially constructed nature of language, assuming students are devoid of language ability. If they did acknowledge "the amazingly rich and varied linguistic ability that all students bring to the learning context" (Harp, 1991, p. 31), perhaps writing a poem would count just as much as writing an essay.

My views on teaching writing changed largely because I witnessed time and again the academic successes of creative writing students, who, after being encouraged to engage the world poetically, found a way of being with the world that reconciled the artificial separation of their creative self from the writing process. What

helped me make that shift was moving from teaching poetry units to inquiring into the world with poetry. This was the blending of poetic inquiry with a/r/tography. In my last three years of secondary English teaching, I returned often to poetry as a practice of inquiry to create for my students a kind of classroom that supports critical engagement with the texts we read and the texts of our lives (Fowler, 2006). What follows is an autobiographical account of doing poetic inquiry with grade 9 students.

Poetic Inquiry in a Grade 9 Classroom

Wanting to break away from my own fears and misconceptions about the arts being too soft to properly prepare my students, and knowing in studying poetry there was opportunity to heighten student imagination in my classroom, I was looking for a new kind of approach to teaching poetry. Going into my fifteenth year of teaching, I wondered if previous years of fun poetry activities such as having poetry/song presentations, performing the poetic devices, or presenting a few enthusiastic lectures that included "Poetry is O" or "Write in the cracks and crevices of life" could be repositioned with an inquiry learning approach. I wanted fun to count academically. I hoped that my students might see that poetry was not a distraction to the more serious business of academic preparation or acquiring job skills. To do that, I knew I had to not only release the imagination, but also release my mark book. I knew that shifting my perspective involved a rigorous commitment to unlearning, to letting go of 15 years of expertise, to keeping in the file cabinet all those tried-and-true activities, to giving back the possibility for my students to discover the discipline for themselves (Jardine, 2003).

Using the artist/teacher/researcher model for classroom inquiry (Springgay et al., 2008), I proposed to my students that we write some poems together and send them off to another class of grade 9 students who would read our poems, give feedback, and rate them. In turn, we would do the same for the other class, and in doing that I hoped notions of quality, taste, and style would develop within our community of poetic inquirers (Wiebe & Daikow, 2008). Not surprising to those who have reflected deeply on their teaching practice, it was not the students' commitment which almost derailed this inquiry, but my own. Irwin (2008) urges artists to "trouble and address difference": in my poet/artist role—no problem, in my researcher role—no problem, in my teacher role—the implicit power structure and inclination to perform my expertise almost got in the way (p. 98).

There was one moment in this inquiry that was pivotal. Receiving the first poems from the other class, I asked my students to select those they liked and come up with reasons for why they liked them. Later we would then vote on the best poems. Their answers were thoughtful, showing that previous years of language arts teaching had given them the skills and attitudes to speak about poetry intelligently. They liked imagery, rhyming poems, poems with emotion, and poems which addressed issues pertinent to adolescence.

But I disagreed with their selections, particularly their preference for rhyming couplets. I wanted my students (forgetting they were fellow inquirers) to see why my selections were better, and almost made the fatal error of teaching a lesson comparing their selections to mine, revealing to them the sometimes hard-to-see characteristics of good poems. Looking at the provincial curriculum guide, I would have had a well-justified rationale in helping students see what I could see; I would have passed on important knowledge readying them to participate as informed literary critics later in their academic careers. However, authentic inquiry depended on avoiding such an approach.

More than other classroom activities, evaluation positions students as beginners and makes more acute their awareness of lacking knowledge (Wiebe & Guiney Yallop, 2010). The poetic moment I mention above helped me learn that in order to genuinely inquire with students and together develop into a community of practice, I as the teacher needed to let go. Before this poetic inquiry, I thought I had moved on from the pedagogies that are coupled with outcome-oriented mandates which emphasize standards, norms, grade-level equivalents and the like. I thought my classes emphasized creativity and student response, and was appalled to learn how quickly I was tempted to teacher-directed outcomes.

I wish I could say that it was my love of poetry, its discipline and playfulness in exploration that rescued me. But it was the students. They were more readied for this inquiry than I was. For Greene (1995), the democratic community is always in the making. It depends on the emerging and radiating awareness of future possibilities. Teachers looking through multiple perspectives can help young people build bridges among themselves. This means letting go of those tried-and-true activities and listening to students to find their understanding, content of thinking, or issues of confusion to move beyond the narrow limits of lesson plans. Letting go of a lesson plan to experience the lived curriculum means provoking dialogue within the classroom space (Aoki, 2005b). If teaching can be thought of as an address to another's consciousness, it may be a provocation or summoning from one to another to reach out to new

possibilities. To pose questions, to seek out explanations, to look for reasons and to construct meanings is challenging classroom work, but to be so engaged with learners as distinctive, questioning persons, persons in the process of defining themselves, while difficult, is a necessary difficulty.

Contrary to my fear of being stuck in a spiral of endless end rhyme and cliché, students quickly found their own sophistication. The second set of poems shared were evaluated differently. After selecting their favorites, students talked about what was shifting for them. They now wanted poems with thoughtful, natural rhyme. The appeal of rhyming couplets soon wore off. They had now read 60 poems, and they wanted poems with humour, ones that utilized metaphor to describe things in an interesting or new way.

At this point, I was pinching myself. They owned these preferences. They weren't repeating back to me words I'd written on the board. I still wonder about how important my first silences were. The clincher, for me, was when one student volunteered this advice: We want poems that convey emotion, but not too much emotion. We don't like poems that are corny. Say what you mean to say. After completing this inquiry with my students, I claim now that our ethical responsibility as teachers is first and foremost to value students' opinions and tastes—rather than *teach* them what is supposed to taste good. To not do so, says Greene (1995), makes students simply comply and serve (p. 10).

Student Agency in Poetic Inquiry

Repositioning poetic inquiry so that students had agency over what counts gave them a chance to participate in the production of knowledge in ways that preordained activities usually deny them (McAuley, 2008). By re-imaging how the subjective experience of students could be nurtured in equitable and just ways, I also needed a strong commitment to shifting teacher-student power structures. Huebner (1972) advises teachers to question policies, standards, assessments, and outcomes for they too often inhibit student achievement: he says, "established ways of thinking, of doing, of being with others are always, and must always remain questionable [or we] destroy [our] capability to act" (p. 126). What does destroy our capability to act, he says twenty-four years later, is lack of courage "to look beyond one's self and one's tradition and to recognize that others and their traditions can enrich and transform both self and community" (Huebner, 1996, p. 582). I wonder to what extent shifting

power structures in the classroom might make its small difference in changing the impact of power and privilege on students' experiences *outside* the classroom. Greene (1995) believes that educational policies dominated by standards lead to family deterioration, neighborhood decline, racism, joblessness and addictions (p. 9). Perhaps rejecting the curriculum frameworks where all problems and all uncertainties can be resolved and instead cultivating with students multiple ways of seeing and multiple dialogues might spark the imagination to see differently and make a difference outside the classroom as well (Luke & Feedbody, 1997).

Like Liora Bresler (2003), I believe the arts, specifically poetry, enable us to realize that our experiences hold more than we can predict; there is always more in our experiences than a classroom can hold. Poetry, like the arts, connects us to past, present and future in efforts to better understand ourselves. The classroom is a ready community for negotiating personal engagement with others (Irwin, 2008). Moving to community-centered learning, according to Cole (1996) and Engestrom (1987), increases motivation and the likelihood that classroom activities will matter outside classroom walls. In textual kinds of inquiry, such as poetic inquiry, students are constructing social worlds (Beach & Myers, 2001); they are defining the traditions, practices, and purposes which constitute meaning not only for themselves but also for each other, not only with the texts but also with the texts of their lives. The arts resist fixing and fixation, and through them students can predict, classify, and theorize beyond skills-oriented activities and assignments. When teachers share power and learning students rarely have to ask, "Why are we doing this?"

Too often the answer to the question above is "because it's on the exam." Perhaps today's educationalists (to borrow a term from Huebner) fear poor school performance as a threat to national economic security (Pinar, 2004). Recent national discussions have overlooked the value of something artsy, like poetry, and are instead overly focused on learning outcomes, rigorous assessment practices, and higher achievement (Block, 2007). To some, it might seem odd to be promoting a/r/tography and poetic inquiry when today's schools are mandated to stay competitive or risk losing their funding, but the oddity is only superficial and results from an artificial bifurcation of the arts and academics. In schools that bifurcation plays out in the preference for students to write essays, reports, summaries, and the like, as these are perceived to be more rigorous than composing a poem (Stanley, 2004). Perhaps this is because it is difficult to assess a poem, or put a value on one's imagination?

Concluding Thoughts

Poetic inquiry is a gateway which helps young people break with ordinary classroom expectations. Whether experimenting with poetry from a critical literacy stance (Lensmire, 2002) or writing poetry with a view to participating in the activities of the discipline (Wiebe, 2008), or sharing poetry as a means of building classroom community (Edelsky, Smith, & Wolfe, 2002), poetry as a genre and a form of inquiry is particularly well suited to classrooms. Yet the skepticism remains. In this last section of the paper, I turn to some key educational theorists as a means of explaining, and maybe even shifting some of that skepticism.

Walker (2003) says that our task as scholars is to make theories explicit, to clarify them, work out their consequences for curriculum practice, compare them to other ideals, and justify or criticize them (p. 60). To read Walker's claim poetically is to add into the mix of educational theorizing a possibility for new blends and bends for each teacher's individual classrooms. In this way, poetry can have a restoring influence on structures which tend to reduce possibilities with justifications. Greene (1995) believes that education needs imagination. She recognizes the power of the imagination "to open new perspectives, to identify alternatives…our encounters with the world become newly informed" (p. 18). During an interview with Maxine Greene, Braman (2004) asks her to explain how the "imagination awakens" (para. 2). Greene explains that a pedagogical approach which produces an endless supply of information does not constitute learning, as such an approach is based on concepts. By contrast, Greene says the "imagination goes even further than concept…to disclose the unseen and unexpected" (para. 2). The poetic imagination encourages the discursive journey, and opens additional spaces for personal histories and identities, for those places of pedagogy intimately connected to time and place (Chambers, 2003). The imagination is a gateway to a more heightened, perhaps more critical participation. Greene (1995) writes, "participatory involvement with many forms of art can enable us to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become [more] conscious of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have oppressed" (p. 123). Greene's connection of the imagination with participatory involvement has not always been lost in English language arts classrooms (Engestrom, 1987; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Hagood, 2008). Perhaps today's renewed skepticism is linked to the trend of valuing only the knowledge that can be assessed objectively, an unacceptable assumption held by policy makers. Pinar (2007) states, "education may be neither measurable nor predictable" (para. 9). Pedagogical approaches which lack imagination treat knowledge "like a perfectly transparent

commodity, one that can be treated and dispensed independent of particular actors in context" (Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 2). Eisner (2002) stresses the need for a complete change in the direction of our educational practices, "to sail against the tide," away from the "industrial culture" of standardized measuring towards a creative culture (para. 46, 29). What Eisner proposes instead is "a greater focus on becoming" (para. 42). He urges teachers to place "more value on the imaginative than on the factual" and assign "greater priority to valuing than to measuring" (para. 42).

Educational theorists who stress genuine engagement often foreground multiple perspectives in multiple conversations. In my own classrooms where multiplicity has had sway, where student agency has been nurtured, students come to believe that something new might arise, and believe in their own imaginations for making that newness possible. Greene (1995) claims that "this is how learning happens"…[it is our] educative task" (p. 6). Blau (2004) notes that learning happens when teachers become fellow inquirers and leave their expertise at the door. It is welcome change when teachers create situations where students are genuinely engaged and begin to ask in their multiple, various, and curious tones, "why," "why not," and "so what." Be advised: These questions slow down learning (Honore, 2004), disrupt the planned lesson, and require different pedagogies. How much easier to reply, "because I said so," and get through the day's material. Eisner reminds teachers to regard "the quality of the journey as more educationally significant than the speed at which the destination is reached" (para. 42).

Eisner's valuing of the journey reminds me of a student of mine, an English 12 student, who was also in my Creative Writing 12 class, who was preparing for his provincial examination. He said to me, "Mr. Wiebe, I've forgotten the techniques you've shown me to improve my poetry, but with the poetry you definitely got me thinking, and that has helped me in every class, even studying for finals." What mattered to this grade 12 creative writing student, for a few important days, was scoring well on his English exam. But just as important to him was how we had inquired into poetry. I've come to believe that there is value in searching out how a poetic imagination, and more generally an arts-enriched curriculum, cultivates multiple ways of knowing and being while still being as rigorous and critical as any exam preparation activities. No doubt, definitive answers are elusive, and while we search for what is plausible, I rest assured that the poetry goes on doing its good work, goes on affecting this student's approach to studying (and now living) as he continues on as an English major, writing about literature and living poetically as what matters slips into and out of his life in always changing ways.

All of us have taught precocious, poetic writers who seem to relish the thought of crafting new responses to the world around them. We have been invigorated by their energy, their use of language, their intrinsic desire to write essays that transcend the perfunctory. How often, we must ask ourselves, have we allowed scholastic pettiness to alienate these students and blunt their sense of wonder. Cixous and Calle-Gruber (1997) say that injustice has spread to our imagination, that as human beings we are "not just with the earth...[because we] order everything according to a scale" (p. II). In an educational world where provincial mission statements emphasize the economic value and global influence of graduates, there is a need to question how emphasis on scales and measurements may enculturate a school climate of injustice based on fear (Wiebe & Daley, 2006). The student I mentioned above was studying for his exam to make something of himself in the world. He was also writing poetry as a way to lean into his motivations and follow his nagging thoughts. One such thought was fear. That is, fear of insignificance or of failure, sometimes articulated as lack of employment prospects, the impossibility of property ownership in Vancouver, Canada, and an overall diminishment in hope. Somehow, school had unfolded unjustly for him. In a genuinely just curriculum, there would be meaningful contribution for everyone; there would be a myriad of reasons for being alive; there would be calling, and purpose and value.

I turn again to Greene because it is her insistence on cultivating the imagination which provides fertile ground for creating change. Greene (1995) says, "boredom and a sense of futility are among the worst enemies of education. At a time of diminishing opportunity in so many lives, at a time when upward mobility cannot be guaranteed, feelings of futility are widespread" (p. 141). My hope, like Greene's, is that imagination will lead students to the confidence to live outside of school and societal structures. Rather than see this as a form of individualism, or narcissism, students can feel empowered to "reach beyond…[and find] dimensions of experience disclosing themselves in wholly unpredictable ways (Greene, 1997, p. 391). Through inquiry into the arts, meanings derived from past experiences find their way into the present; it is, says Greene (1988), the "conscious adjustment of the new and the old" (p. 124). Student and teacher experiences are a rich soil we can come back to again and again, continually restructuring, looking for different connections and overlaps. Whether writing poetry or reading children's stories or playing music or dancing to it, there is always the possibility of looking at things as if they could be otherwise. Aoki (2005c) says that "through ambiguous, ambivalent space" (which I understand as present in all the art forms), which he calls the space "between this and that" (p. 421), there are generative possibilities. Often located at the margins and boundaries, the arts offer this edgy, between space.

For me, as a teacher bringing an artfulness to my classroom through a combination of a/r/tography and poetic inquiry, my pedagogy is enlivened through acknowledging the multiple tensions in identity, and it is also intensified through the imaginative lens which can "disclose alternative ways of beginning in and thinking about the world" (Greene, 1995, p. 164).

Notes

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