The "Ten-Year Road:" Joys and Challenges on the Road to Tenure

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the pre-tenure experiences of five assistant professors employed in the faculty of education of a research-intensive university. Acting as co-researchers, the authors researched their experiences through a critical narrative approach. The analysis, informed by critically-oriented writing that extends Wenger's *Communities of Practice,* takes as axiomatic the notion that globalized processes of economic restructuring are mediating work in the academy and examines its local manifestations. Discussions explore issues of power, equity, shifting identities, and the need for improved navigational resources. The authors found that the process of critically and collaboratively researching their pre-tenure experiences offered insight into sites of personal and professional agency and also served as the impetus to form the social semiotic spaces that encouraged a sense of community. The Dean, a tenured member, but also a newcomer, serves in the role of critical friend.

RESUMÉ: Dans ce papier, nous découvrons les expériences de pré titularisation de cinq maîtres-assistants employés à la Faculté d'éducation dans le service de recherche intensive de l'université. Par le biais d'une approche narrative critique, les auteurs, agissant en tant que cochercheurs, ont fouillé dans leur expérience. L'analyse, alimentée par des écrits plutôt critiques qui enrichissent les "Communautés de praticiens" de Wenger, considère comme axiome, la notion que les processus généralisés de restructuration économique, servent de travail médiateur dans le domaine universitaire et examine ses manifestations locales. Les débats abordent des questions de pouvoir, d'équité, de changements d'identités et aussi le besoin d'améliorer les moteurs de recherche. Les auteurs ont trouvé que la méthode pour rechercher d'une façon critique et concertée dans leurs expériences avant la titularisation, a permis d'offrir un ensemble de sites de service personnel et

Journal of Educational Thought
Vol. 44, No. 1, 2010, 69-83.

professionnel et a aussi donné l'impulsion pour créer les espaces sociaux sémiotiques qui encouragent le sens de la communauté. Le doyen, qui est titulaire et qui est aussi nouveau, joue le rôle d'ami critique.

Overview

Nearly a decade ago, Gurney and Andrews (2000) predicted that faculties of education in Canada would "be smaller, with fewer full-time faculty members ... focus[ed] in specialized areas ... [serving] larger class sizes. ... The financial issue is simply the immediate catalyst bringing about the change" (2000, n.p.). Evidence of the rationalization of programs can already be observed, but recent economic developments promise to intensify the pace, breadth, and depth of the changes to come.

The challenges facing pre-tenured faculty in this context are complex and multifaceted. Twale and De Luca (2008) observe that "our academic world is changing faster than the academic culture and organizational governance structure can accommodate" (p. xii). Growing the knowledge and information sector has been identified as key to global economic recovery; spawning further scrutiny, competition and a greater emphasis on measurable outcomes (Austin, 2003). As the demands for performance increase, institutional supports are declining (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2009).

In this paper, we employ a critical narrative approach to explore how stories from our experiences as pre-tenure faculty might "encourage social justice and democratic processes" to assist us in these challenging times (Chase, 2005, p. 667). We focus on issues of power, equity, shifting identities, and the social semiotic spaces that arouse new understandings through a critical reconstruction of our experiences. We take as axiomatic the notion that globalized processes of economic restructuring "concretely intrude into local social practice" (Holland & Lave, 2001, p. 6) and like Holland and Lave, conceptualize our stories as starting points for critical conversations about ways in which local practices "mediate between complex sociopolitical-economic struggles and the historically fashioned identities-in-practice that they produce and by which they are in turn constituted" (p. 6).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that provides the lens for analysis is drawn from the literature informing narrative research (Chase, 2005) and

critically-oriented writing that extends Wenger's (1998) influential work, *Communities of Practice.* We adopt the term *semiotic social space* (Gee, 2005) rather than "community of practice" because it affords opportunities to explore "what thoughts, values, actions and interactions go on in this space" (p. 214) we share as a condition of our pre-tenure status. As Gee points out, in spite of Wenger's efforts to define carefully the construct "community of practice," the term is often employed inaccurately to describe a team of people brought together for purposes defined by administrators and, more importantly, it focuses attention too closely on membership.

Social semiotic space is a space in which each of us individually and together negotiates meaning on our pre-tenure journey. Within that space we engage in dialogue about how we collectively understand and shape the internal grammar of space and how it is also shaped through our interactions with ruling discourses, most notably discourses associated with the New Economy (DeVault, 2008, p. 9). As we *re-search* our stories, we *re-view* them to understand better the points of view expressed: how the pre-tenure role is understood/mis-understood and the subject positions or social locations in which our stories are told. We examine too, the ways in which our stories can be enabled or constrained by the current context in faculties of education across Canada, and by our personal and professional identities (Chase, 2005).

The Study

The authors include five pre-tenure, female faculty members, all hired within the past six years to a Faculty of Education at one Canadian institution: Kathy, Katina, Roz, Immaculate, and Farahnaz. Our stories draw on diverse cultural, educational, and professional backgrounds and experiences: two were hired in 2008, two in 2007, and one in 2004. The areas we teach and research are multiliteracies, applied linguistics, mathematics education, and educational leadership and policy. All of us earned PhDs from Canadian universities: two from the faculty of education in which the stories are situated, two from another faculty of education in the province, and one from another province. As a tenured member, but also a newcomer, the Dean serves in the role of critical friend (Hooley, 2007).

We situate our investigation within a critical narrative inquiry. "Narrative inquiry can be characterized as an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and innovative methods – all revolving around an

interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them" (Chase, 2005, p. 651). Critical narrative requires that both the reader and the researchers problematize that which has been taken for granted.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre claims, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do' if I can answer the prior question of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" (1984, p. 216). Articulating our individual stories and then sharing them as *research texts* with each other was a process aimed at helping us see new meanings and lead us to further retelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In order to interpret our experiences, we chronicle our stories within the "context of a set of narrative histories, histories both of the individuals concerned and of the settings in which they act and suffer" (p. 211).

We began then, by writing our stories. Our first drafts proved to be a cathartic free writing experience; some quite lengthy streams of consciousness, and others resembling more of a list of seemingly unachievable tasks, documenting worries, fears, and a few insights. Subsequent drafts were developed from looking reflectively and critically at our own first efforts, generating "textual sketches" (DeVault, 2008, p. 2) that documented the most significant aspects of our journey to date and insights gleaned from a critical reconsideration of our writing. These texts were shared amongst the group with a view to reading them individually and collectively, keeping in mind the guiding questions we sought to explore.

Making meaning in critical narrative inquiry requires a recursive reading of the texts, critically reflecting on our experiences and positioning them next to relevant literature. In *The Model of the Text*, Ricoeur (1977) suggests that text is really a system of signs interpreted by communities of users. The interpretation of text is subject to the influences of power, culture, gender, experience, and education to name a few. Insights are considered and reconsidered as they are contextualized within our own experiences and juxtaposed with those that differ from our own. Britzman (1991) describes the search for meaning as a fluid construct; one that is "interpretive, constructivist, and critical, moving back and forth between the story, its telling, and the contingencies of perspectival borders" (p. 14). Our individual understandings grow and change as we view and review our own stories and consider them in light of relevant literature and institutional policies and practices (both expressed and internalized). In this way, we

aim to dislocate ourselves in order to "relocate the personal" (Kamler, 2001). This is a "getting lost as a way to move out of commanding, controlling, mastery discourses and into a knowledge that recognizes the inevitable blind spots of our knowing" (Lather, 2002, p. 6). Lather reminds us that critique can be helpful to "living the present historically" even if it does not quite resolve the "tensions between modernist authenticity and postructural conceptions of identity and subjectivity" (p. 3).

The Stories: Telling and (Re)telling

Our stories of starting out on the pre-tenure journey can be read as "coming of age" stories. Immaculate recalls with some exuberance her delight at finally securing a coveted tenure-track position.

> Immaculate: *There was a lot to celebrate when I got a new job. ... The faculty members were very welcoming and collegial. With broad experience in teaching, considerable research experience as an RA and from my dissertation research, as well as with good service experience on graduate committees, I enjoyed and felt confident mostly at my work assignments. I was on my way to even greater excellence. The new, higher status as an assistant professor, the increased time as a result of no longer dividing time between work and study, and the close to doubled net income were going to enhance my personal and family life which I had seemingly put on hold for about five years to pursue two graduate degrees.*

Kathy too recalls the excitement of getting *the* job. Family commitments had kept her in the city after her PhD, and like many academics who work from one short-term contract to the next, she had felt vulnerable and positioned as "contingent academic labour" (Alexander, 2005, p. 5). "*Beginning the tenure-track role*" Kathy wrote, "*offered a sense of 'legitimization' at the faculty.*"

Our stories were also infused with anxiety. Since the doctoral experience is designed in part to usher students into an academic environment, we expected the transition to be smoother:

> Roz: *I thought that living close to the office would save valuable time commuting and allow me to be part of the community, but it was an isolating experience. No one else seemed to be there and my work often took me all over the region, anyway.*

> Farahnaz: *At a personal level, taking an academic position often involves moving to a new town or city. This move often brings social isolation and thus results in emotional and sometimes psychological discomfort. Given these demands, professionally, learning the new cultural environment and learning how to function in this context is the direction I am striving for.*
>
> Katina: *It became clear that there is no Academic GPS to help successfully navigate the road to tenure. Even though academics are considered part of a profession ... [our] professional knowledge and these professional skills are applicable to only part of our work they do not guarantee successful navigation. ... Our work is part of complex social processes that defy any rational navigating system that requires inputting some information into a black box where the output directions merely need to be followed.*

We also found surprising the speed with which managing time surfaced as a major activity in its own right. Like the people in DeVault's (2008) *People at Work*, our lives "braid together paid work and relations with others, of mutual responsibility, care and dependence" (p. 3). We had all been accustomed to "multi-tasking." As students, Kathy and Roz had laughed when a faculty member had commented that graduate students' conference presentations were the best because students had more time to prepare. Now we laugh at ourselves and wonder if we dare tell that story to our graduate students. Even Kathy, who had been managing an active research program and an administrative role for a few years prior to embarking on the road to tenure, "*struggled to reconcile the increasing demands with [her] valued identity of 'teacher'.*" She was haunted by a comment casually made by one of her professors that "you are *either* a teacher *or* an academic." Upon reflection she wondered if she had "*misunderstood the faculty member's comment nearly ten years ago – perhaps the intended message was that one cannot spend the time required to teach well given the demands on limited time.*"

Reviewing the textual sketches of our pre-tenure stories afforded opportunities to reflect on changing positions, subjectivities, and identities. For a graduate student, obtaining a tenure-track position completes a journey, and the semblance between a job talk and a PhD oral exam may well reinforce the (mis)perception that a tenure track position is an award for intellectual achievement. Indeed, the promise of a salary after four years of graduate school can feel like receiving an

award that "keeps on giving." But as Farahnaz points out, "*the range and intensity of ... responsibilities are quite different from the type of work that students are required to do in a PhD program.*" Lather's excitement about "getting lost" (2002, p. 6) was largely missing from our narratives. The stories recognized and valued privileges such as academic freedom and support for research, yet spoke of a longing for structure and guidance. The protagonists embraced the opportunity to reinvent themselves, but to paraphrase Karl Marx they were aware that they may not be reinventing themselves on their own terms (1956, cited in Holstein & Gubrium, 2005, p. 484).

> Katina: *The rules for the road in this particular journey may be laid out in workload policies, contracts; even course and program descriptions but how they play out depends on the practices and social nuances. ... Even though the employment contract stipulates 40% Teaching, 40% Research and 20% Service; what did this really mean? ... Academic institutions are not necessarily like the private sector or factories where there are particular processes that are followed based on some organized protocol. Academics have more freedom and decision-making power which makes navigating the tenure track journey both exciting and stressful at the same time.*

> Farahnaz: *I am quite appalled by the fact that having a PhD is supposed to mean that we automatically know how to function as a faculty member. I find it especially ironic in faculties of education where the preparation of teachers for their job as well as mentorship is emphasized, and yet there is no such preparation for faculty members.*

At the heart of the anxieties expressed in the stories was the wraith of accountability. In the following excerpt Kathy wondered which of the many kinds of work she routinely carries out will be recognized as productivity when her Annual Performance Evaluation report is interpreted by a committee of colleagues. At the same time her comments reveal a vocational clarity acquired in professional spaces.

> Kathy: *My years as a graduate student had served to sufficientlydisrupt everything I thought I knew about education based on my experience – so I had developed a healthy respect for what research has to offer practice. However, I also had come to better understand what my teaching practice (both past and present) brought to my scholarship.*

What did our stories reveal about our understandings of the pre-tenure role? We were drawn to familiar themes; challenges associated with balancing teaching, building a research agenda, and contributing to the faculty and the university through service. Some expectations were understood prior to starting our new roles; notably an assumption that the purpose of the pre-tenure journey is to divest oneself of the "pre" within a six-year period. Other expectations we have inferred and intuited in navigating the overlapping and sometimes conflicting social semiotic spaces that constitute life-as-usual in the faculty. For example, committee work enables a faculty member to learn about the administrative work of a faculty, to have a voice in what gets done and to communicate with colleagues. However, committees are discursively organized, complex communicative spaces that may not support the development of supportive social networks. As newcomers, we were learning through legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) about the *way things work*, but (also as newcomers) we were expected to bring new ideas and approaches to bear on decision making. The "problematic nature of human knowledge" (Kelly, 2009, p. 32) is a great seminar topic, but more than one of us found that the problematic nature of human knowledge is as welcome at a program planning meeting as the bad fairy at Sleeping Beauty's christening.

Our interactions with colleagues have been collegial and collaborative, yet also contested and competitive. Developing a faculty identity early in one's career is tenuous at best. For many, scholarly activity is an isolated and sometimes isolating endeavour. With universities competing globally for students and limited research funds, promoting ourselves through publications, acquiring grants, and presenting at conferences increases our own market value and that of the institution.

What are the subject positions from which the stories are told? Our narratives spoke of being "female in a male-dominated environment," "an outsider," "a non-native English speaker," and "an ethnic minority." As women working in academia, we sometimes experienced the well documented conflicts that arise from working in a male dominated profession or juggling competing demands. Some of us are mothers, some are caring for aging parents, and some are considering parenthood.

> Immaculate: *For an ethnic young woman, only three years in a first marriage, child-bearing was on the schedule ... how was child-bearing going to be compatible with the stories I was*

> *hearing about being a tenure track professor – tenure-track professors work hardest, establish a research program, reach the peak of their career, prove themselves to students, colleagues and to the university, and excel at the major components of their work. ... Only after tenure does one expect to approach a balanced family-work life!!! Was this becoming my story as I progressed towards tenure? How was child-bearing – not to mention child-raising going to fit into my vision of work excellence?*

Immaculate added, almost as an aside,

> *Of course, there are other multiple interrelated issues such as challenges of being a visible minority who is also a recent immigrant, and the number of and rate of adjustments that come with working at a different jurisdiction than of one's previous practice and education.*

The most familiar metaphor, however, was that of "imposter in a strange land."

> Roz: *I kept thinking about Lisa Delpit's (1988) comment that children who don't have the luxury of a lifetime's immersion in the culture of power need people who will make the rules explicit for them. As a professional who's come late to academic life, I too feel the pressure of time. I can't afford to be learning everything the hard way, but that's exactly what keeps happening. I wonder if I've been too rule oriented in the past. In their famous article on multiliteracies pedagogy, The New London Group (1996) writes that the flattened hierarchies of fast capitalism can be more exclusionary than the old corporate ladder because a lack of formality foregrounds the need for self-representation and self-preservation.*

The New London group also writes: "Fast capitalism, notwithstanding its discourse of collaboration, culture, and shared values, is ... driven by the barely restrained market" (1996, p. 66). It is not surprising, then, that some challenges faced by new faculty are not unique to them. For example, Kathy noted that "*more and more things ... get downloaded in a 'do it yourself' fashion ... stealing away precious time and energy*" from important work. Kathy's concerns echo Jackson and Slade (2008) who describe ways in which factory workers avoid or resist a "labyrinth of workplace texts used ... in the name of 'quality' and productivity" (p. 26) only to be labeled by employers as illiterate. By contrast, a rhetorical frame unique to academia is the *academic star*. Solomon (2008) calls the academic star an ideological code that organizes how faculty view their

own and each other's productivity. Along with economic privilege and intellectual autonomy, a faculty position affords protection from the kinds of "overt control" (DeVault, 2008, p. 180) experienced by Jackson and Slade's participants, but with fewer tenure track openings, competition replaces overt control, and activities are accountable to the "constant surveillance in the name of the panopticon of cost containment" (Bowker & Star, 2000, p. 253).

The ideological code of the academic star is "made up of comparisons (of publication rates, of work habits, and of prestige), compensation (for grants, for the best publication rate, and for prestige) and sacrifice (long work hours, minimal personal and family life, minimal ... use of parental-leave policies)" (Bowker & Star, 2000, p. 201). Solomon writes that feelings of vulnerability stem from "the pressure to be a star" (p. 185) and "the language of stardom ... constructs ... resistance as an individual choice" (p. 186). The code makes feelings of guilt and inadequacy inevitable even for stars since "definitive stardom is ultimately unattainable" (p. 198). Solomon's work offers a way of better understanding those elusive expectations that are not articulated in any policy documents.

Learning in the Telling

Roz: *It wasn't unusual to find me at the office on Sunday afternoon. However, this time, when I arrived outside my door I found a metal plate covering the splintered area where would-be thieves had chipped away at the wood. A new lock had been installed directly above the old one. ... The security person arrived soon enough, but then he hesitated to open the door for me. How did he know I hadn't been fired and locked out? The next day I stopped by the Dean's Office. Was there a robbery while I was away? What happened? How could I get a new key? "No need,"* smiled the Dean's secretary. "*Your old key works in the new lock.*"

Narrative researchers and writing scholars work from the premise that writing can be a powerful catalyst for insight. Graff (1992), for example, tells about the surprise and pleasure writers experience when they see they have written something not yet consciously known to them. Following Graff we assert that the act of clarifying these hitherto unknown thoughts leads to new insights. What emerged from our focused textual sketches were insights into how we might cope with the challenges that so dominated our first stories. In retelling the stories, we recognized possibilities for agency in previously unarticulated struggles.

Immaculate: *I found that I had to pay closer attention to the bigger and longer projects such as travel for an international conference, tracking of own progress towards tenure, drafting a book proposal and applying for larger grants.*

Kathy: *As I write this, I cannot help but reflect upon the discussions I have been having in a graduate course I am currently teaching. ... It occurs to me that we have been talking about the similar struggles in different contexts. I have encouraged my students to recognize where they have agency, start small, look for innovative solutions; all ideas that are designed to allow them to function in ways that bring them closer to the professional values that they hold dear within a climate that grows increasingly focused on the managerial. I begin to think about how I can take my own advice. Who do I want to be in this place and how can I best make that happen?*

Farahnaz: *The expectations to know what to do and how to complete these responsibilities are taken for granted in academia ... just as induction programs are deemed necessary in teacher education programs, it seems that induction into an academic position is equally vital.*

Roz: *I'm learning that my work is answerable to different groups who might not be communicating with one another and whose goals may, in fact, be incommensurable. The people who assign me my teaching workload are not the people who read the annual report. The workload agreement is my responsibility to memorize. ... I'm learning that I can speak up. People may be angry, but they don't stay angry. People expect you to speak up. ... And I'm learning that one's grad students and former grad students become a wonderful source of community and new learning. I hadn't counted on that happening so quickly – if at all*

Katina: *In the past I've beat myself up with not being satisfied with my teaching. I've received good evaluations, yet privately I've never felt it was good enough. I've learned that perhaps my expectations may be a little too high, and that I need to reconsider them. I have realized that I will have to get comfortable with my own evaluation of 'pretty good' or 'good enough.' ... I've learned quickly that if I do not meet a grant deadline for the current year it won't be the end of the world. ... I will have another*

opportunity to apply. And lastly, while I recognize that committee work is important, I will need to say 'no' more often and not feel that I need to provide reasons for my decisions.

Conclusion

Acclaimed storyteller, Nancy Willard writes, "I haven't a clue as to how my story will end. But that's all right. When you set out on a journey and night covers the road, you don't conclude that the road has vanished" (1993, pp. 191-192). So it is with the tenure road, what Farahnaz jokingly refers to as a ten-year road that begins with the decision to pursue a PhD. The challenge for us, however, is not to keep the tenure road in view, but to keep it in perspective. As Katina points out, without a GPS – or map –any detour can seem too risky. And so we stay on the road, but lose sight of why we set out in the first place.

As Julia reviewed our stories as critical friend, she noted our need for guidance and support, but also pointed out that we are not without navigational resources. This collaboration provided the social semiotic spaces we all craved but had not made time for. "*Struck by the commonalities in our search for identities as scholars,*" Julia concluded:

> *Pre-tenure faculty are the lifeblood of our disciplines and of the academy. It behooves us to ask them: What is it that brought you here? ... What do you hope to have accomplished and how can we help you get there? ... Listening is not enough. We must be influenced by what we hear and find ways within our own contexts to respond effectively.*

Recognizing an ideological code for what it is, keeping in touch with who we want to be, weighing the relative efficacy of forces that impinge on our goals (Apple, 2000) afford agency. Researching our stories provided a forum to increase our individual and collective resiliency, as we continue along the "road to tenure."

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