

Narrative Works



Places of Practice Learning to Think Narratively

Jean Clandinin, Vera Caine, Andrew Estefan, Janice Huber, M. Shaun Murphy
and Pam Steeves

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Article abstract

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Places of Practice: Learning to Think Narratively

Jean Clandinin Vera Caine Andrew Estefan
University of Alberta University of Alberta University of Calgary

Janice Huber M. Shaun Murphy Pam Steeves
University of Regina University of Saskatchewan University of Alberta

In the lived practices of narrative inquiry, we honour our relational ontological commitments and responsibilities as narrative inquirers. In this paper, we link these ontological commitments with our practice, which is often tension-filled because the knowledge landscape on which we live as researchers is shaped by paradigmatic rather than narrative knowledge. It is easy to get swept into thinking paradigmatically and to sustain ourselves as narrative inquirers amidst knowledge landscapes that cast narrative inquirers as not knowing when seen from within dominant plotlines. We see that not to fall into these dominant plotlines requires wakefulness to shaping places where we can practice thinking narratively.

Our small research team gathered to work on a multi-year proposal for a national funding body. We were engaging in a narrative inquiry to explore the experiences of Aboriginal youth and their families. We had undertaken the literature review, designed the study, and outlined objectives. We knew that funding applications for major research projects followed certain formats. Reviewers and review panels were used to reading with a particular set of criteria. However, we also knew that we were working from an ontology that worked with narrative understandings of experience. We wanted to stay congruent with our ontological commitments and wanted to signal this in our proposal. To do otherwise felt like we were playing the research funding game, living what might be called a “cover story.” We wanted our proposal to show, rather than merely tell, what we meant by a narrative ontological view of experience. In crafting the research proposal, we wanted to show how we proposed to

live out our research puzzles alongside participants, show our ontological commitments as they are lived. Hesitantly, we chose selections from the narrative account of one of the participants in an earlier study, Skye, and began to weave the proposal around these selections.

We begin with this descriptive fragment of an experience of writing a research proposal. Writing proposals is part of our practice as narrative inquirers. As we write proposals, we see that our ontological commitments in narrative inquiry also shape how we live in the world, as we write proposals, frame research puzzles, and come alongside participants in inquiries. These ontological commitments with their related responsibilities become a way of living in the world. As we attend to our ontological responsibilities, we are attending to the lives, the experiences, of those with whom we live in relation. Our commitments are not first and foremost to the inquiry puzzle but to the lives of the people involved. It is in the lived practices of narrative inquiry that we honour relational ontological commitments (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009; Clandinin, et al., 2013).

In this paper, we link these ontological commitments to our understandings of practice. As Goldberg (2013) notes, practice is something we continue to do regularly, despite resistances. Practice is "...something you choose to do on a regular basis with no vision of an outcome; the aim is not improvement, not getting somewhere. You do it because you do it" (p. 56). Goldberg understands practice as "something that will settle into your life, make it real, build a good foundation. Not well-being, but the *ground of being*" (p. 60). The ontological commitment to experience settles into the life of a narrative inquirer. This commitment might be understood as the practice of the researcher. How might individuals practice their ontological commitments in their research lives? What might the practices of a practice situated in a commitment to experience look like? We use Goldberg's work to consider these wonders. There is not one way to practice an ontological commitment to thinking narratively; there is no recipe or series of steps to follow. As Goldberg wrote, "Practice is not for something else. Practice is the practice of being here with your life" (p. 37), and in this commitment to practice resides the practice of commitment to experience.

What is the Practice of Narrative Inquiry?

To begin to explore *narrative inquiry* as a practice, a way of living our lives, we need to make clear what we mean by the term. Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomena. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomena under study. (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477)

This definition of narrative inquiry links narrative inquiry as a research methodology with an underlying ontology of narrative conceptions of experience. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) describe narrative inquiry as beginning with “respect for ordinary lived experience” in the exploration of both individuals’ experience as well as “the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences were constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted” (p. 42).

The three-dimensional narrative inquiry space is a way of conceptualizing experience narratively (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Within this space, the experiences of participants and researchers animate temporality, sociality, and place. In attending to the forward, backward, inward, outward directions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of being *in* the experience, researchers enter into relationships with participants, as well as attend to their own experience of the research. It is this process of being in the midst—that is, attending to experience and showing this attending to experience—that supports the understanding of narrative inquiry as “an experience of the experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 189). We see this ongoing attentiveness to experience as practice; it is practice because it is what we do. Just as in a walking meditation we attend to the way the foot moves, the feeling of the ground, the position of the body (Goldberg, 2013), so too in a narrative inquiry, we attend to the inward, outward, forward, and backward movements that make up our experiences.

Our intention as narrative inquirers is to stay attentive to experience with no clear outcome beyond a deeper understanding of experience. This ontological grounding in experience is one in which we hold open a space of wonder related to experience—the relational space of

others and ourselves. It is in this relational, deep attending to experience that we see hope for personal, social, cultural, and institutional change.

The Research Landscape

The knowledge landscape on which we live as researchers in Canada attends most closely to paradigmatic knowledge (Bruner, 1987) rather than narrative knowledge. The focus on goals, outcomes, and resources inform institutional policies and practices that shape our knowledge landscapes. While we appreciate that a dichotomous view of two kinds of knowledge might seem a rather simplistic approach to understanding research contexts, we recognize that the knowledge landscapes, although textured and layered, do seem shaped by two views of knowledge. As researchers living on these knowledge landscapes, it is easy to get swept into thinking paradigmatically, to frame our research through attending to categories and generalizability. In this midst it is difficult to learn and practice thinking narratively, that is, to think about lives within the temporal, personal, social, and place dimensions that shape narrative thinking and narrative knowing (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It is difficult to sustain ourselves as narrative inquirers amidst knowledge landscapes that cast the work of narrative inquirers as less than, when seen from within the dominant paradigmatic plotlines that shape the knowledge landscapes.

Our opening account gave a sense of tensions we, as narrative inquirers, experience in composing lives in which we stay at living out our ontological commitments to experience. We showed our knowing of the risks of weaving narrative accounts of Skye's life into our research proposal. In order to live out our ontological commitments to experience, including in writing research proposals, it made sense to draw upon Skye's narrative account as a way to show these commitments.

Increasingly, we see that not to fall into the dominant paradigmatic plotlines, thereby abandoning our lives, our ways of being as narrative inquirers, requires careful attention to our "ground of being" (Goldberg, 2013, p. 60), to shaping places where we can practice thinking narratively. At the same time we realize we need to restory the multiple aspects of our work as researchers so that we can do our work in ways that allow us to practice as narrative inquirers. In order to inquire into our practice, we first tell stories of multiple places which we see as sites of practice, as places where we practice the living of narrative inquiry and where we work to both sustain ourselves as researchers and change the

dominant knowledge landscape. We identified seven practices we continue to do on a regular basis as narrative inquirers.

1. Learning through Practice

We began with acknowledging the importance of practicing thinking narratively on a regular basis daily, or at least weekly. We shared stories of intentionally making such places where we could think narratively with graduate students and works-in-progress groups with colleagues and students. As we live in these intentionally created places, we work to ensure we are responsible to what it means to think narratively, to self-face when we awaken to being caught into the paradigmatic knowledge plotlines.

Our stories were often placed in our experiences at the Research Issues Table. Andrew, for example, told the following story of his first experience at the weekly Research Issues Table in the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development at the University of Alberta, a place of practice which Pam, Vera, Jean, Shaun, and Janice know well:

There is a strangeness to the Research Issues Table. My first time there was, well, intimidating. As usual, I was intimidated by my imaginings of what such a place could be like. I had been asked to come and talk about my doctoral research, and I gladly accepted, at a time when I was riding a wave of triumph at having completed something I had set out five years previously. Much more happened in that 90 minutes than the telling of my research. I put faces to names whose work I had read, and I experienced the drying out of my mouth, the closer the time came for me to talk. Despite my nerves I noticed qualities of this place that resonate with me still, another five years later: the passing of the tea pot around the table, turn-taking to speak, and how collegiality, although present, was superseded by genuine friendliness. This was a place characterized by civility, warmth, and sustained by invited tellings of academic and social life, intertwined and enjoyed. You don't sit there because of who you are, you sit there because of who you are becoming.

The Research Issues Table has a 24-year history as a place where graduate students, faculty members, and visiting students and faculty

gather each week to share stories of their experiences as narrative inquirers. A key aspect of attending Research Issues is the importance of responding to the stories told in ways that open up possibilities for retelling and reliving stories of experience. This responsibility to respond in these ways requires continuous wakefulness to thinking narratively. Andrew draws attention to how unusual, how unexpected, the Research Issues Table is. He stories his anxiety as he imagined his turn to tell stories of his research. The self-facing he experienced in the telling and responding is part of the practice of thinking narratively. In telling his stories of experiences, he realized they were not ones of having completed his research, but ones where his research, as was he, was in the midst. Andrew's story draws attention to Goldberg's (2013) sense of practice as "being here with your life" (p. 37) and to staying awake to the stories of experience. Andrew's practice was a practice of being attentive to his experience and who he was becoming.

2. Continuing to Stay at It with Others

The stories of our experiences of practicing thinking narratively always included working alongside others, of not being alone. We saw how important it was to continue alongside others in order to resist being caught in the larger narratives that dominate our research knowledge landscape, narratives in which working alone are often common. Vera shared the following story of thinking narratively as she and others coauthored a paper:

It was Wednesday evening, and Pam, Janice, Marilyn, and I were connecting over the telephone; we have done so several times and each time we do so, a familiar rhythm sets in. Each conversation starts with a recounting of life events since we last talked. In one conversation, Janice reminds me that she wants to hear what happened last week in Ken's (my husband) and my meeting with Felix's (my son) grade one teachers and school principal. It has become such a complicated experience for us as a family. Although we have bumped up against the stories of school for some time now and long before Felix was born, it seems more present now than ever before. In a recent event, we requested that Felix not write a standard assessment test administered to grade one students. The test assesses reading and writing abilities and is used to compare results across schools; it is also a test, Janice

reminds me, that some schools use for assessment of individual students. I can feel the reluctance, resistance, and despair rising in me again as I think about how students and families might experience this test. Within two days of refusing the test, we were requested to attend a meeting to discuss Felix's academic development with his teachers and principal. I recall thinking how closely in time our refusal of the test and the request for this meeting has fallen. As parents, we are invited to volunteer when help is needed. I wondered why we were invited now, and in what ways would we be asked to help? The minute we entered the principal's office, it was clear this meeting wasn't intended to request our help—this meeting was about ensuring that we understood that Felix was loved and protected by his teachers in school, that they spend so much time with him to help him learn, that he is in serious need of extra attention ... as I listened I was no longer reluctant or resistant. I was furious.

As Vera storied her experience, she and her co-authors were writing a paper about narrative inquiry as pedagogical practice. However, there was another thread unfolding in their work together. It was a story of Vera's experiences as a parent of a child in school. Over the months of writing the paper, Vera engaged both herself and the co-authors in telling and retelling her stories of parenting as a practice of thinking narratively. Staying at thinking narratively, as they and she responded, opened up possibilities for reliving. Vera's and the co-authors' insistence that they stay at attending to Vera's experiences as a parent also helped them stay at attending to lives in the making as a central understanding in their paper. Staying in the midst of experience as they puzzled through narrative inquiry as pedagogical practice helped them to keep the manuscript moving forward. As narrative inquirers engaged in the practice of thinking narratively they needed to stay attentive to lives. And they needed to do so in relation.

What Vera's story of experience shows is that thinking narratively needs to be continuously practiced with others in places or sites. This communal aspect of narrative inquiry positions us in relation with diverse people. These communities sustain us in our writing, but more deeply sustain us in maintaining an ontological commitment to staying with experience and to exploring the narrative threads of a life lived in research and teaching.

3. Staying with Thinking with Stories

Other stories we told helped us make explicit that part of the practice of thinking narratively is thinking with stories, as Morris (2002) suggests. He differentiates between thinking *about* stories as objects and thinking *with* stories, which allows us more easily to think narratively about experiences. While thinking about stories as objects allows us to more easily fit within the more dominant paradigmatic knowledge structures, doing so can also shape us into judging and blaming people who are seen as characters in stories. In this way people are seen as fixed and frozen objects rather than as people living out experiences. We return to Vera's story of her experiences as a parent:

I was furious about the underlying notions that Felix needed protection—furious that the protection from whom or what was never attended to and left up to us to guess and that no questions were asked on who we were as a family. He didn't need protection and love from his teachers; he needed a place where he, and us as a family, could begin to make sense of our experiences of school and education, stories that bumped up against the dominant story of school, of good student and compliant parent. I heard in Marilyn's voice and Pam's breath that they too were troubled by our school experience and they, like Janice, began to imagine a different school landscape, one that was deeply shaped by who they and I are as narrative inquirers.

In staying attentive to lives, Vera often shared stories of her experience with Felix as he attended school. While stories were both hard to tell and hard to hear, it was as Vera and the co-authors engaged in thinking narratively with her stories of experience that they began to imagine otherwise, to wonder about the intersections of school and family stories. Together they resisted thinking about stories as they struggled to think with the stories, to imagine spaces where Vera and her family could think narratively about the place of school in their lives.

Thinking narratively with stories of experience calls us as narrative inquirers to enter complex, uncertain, often tension-filled midsts. For example, while Vera and her coauthors could situate Felix's teachers and principal as deficit, few educative possibilities would result. However, staying with the practice of thinking narratively, wonders about who each person is and is becoming in the midst of these experiences,

emerged. Wonders about the possibilities for Felix, Vera, Ken, and the teachers and principal to sit together to tell, to listen, and to respond to one another's stories of experience were explored. In thinking with stories, it became more possible to imagine ways of moving forward.

4. Not Just Telling, but Retelling

Some of our stories lead us to sharing stories of experiences alongside co-researchers. The story below was shared by Janice of an experience lived alongside co-researchers. In particular, Janice shared a story of an experience lived alongside the Mi'kmaq Elder Sister Dorothy Moore. In this story we saw a shift from telling a story to imagining possible retellings:

"Can you say more about why you analyzed your stories using Clandinin and Connelly's three-dimensional narrative inquiry space? I'm wondering why you didn't just tell your stories," an audience member asked. It was quiet for a few moments before Sister Dorothy spoke. As she did so, she reflected on her experiences across time and place, experiences including feeling misunderstood and dismissed as a person of Mi'kmaq ancestry. She then storied a thread indelibly shaping her life, a thread of supporting non-Mi'kmaq and non-Aboriginal people to more deeply understand the lives of Mi'kmaq and Aboriginal people. Circling back to the question asked, Sister Dorothy wondered if only telling stories held potential for shaping the kind of change she was working toward. She wondered if thinking with the teachers' stories made the multidimensionality, the wholeness of their lives, more visible. Further, she wondered if only telling stories was maybe why the narrative of colonization, so deeply shaping her life and the lives of many people of Mi'kmaq and Aboriginal ancestry in Canada, was continuing.

Janice's story of being alongside Sister Dorothy and other co-researchers at an academic conference as Sister Dorothy responded to a question about the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space reminded us of many other times and places where questions of analyzing stories have been raised. Such questions help us stay grounded in what it means to practice thinking narratively. In the narrative cycles of living, telling, retelling, and reliving (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), the work of the

narrative inquirers and participants lies in the retelling of storied experiences. While living and telling often shapes field texts, as we engage in thinking narratively with these lived and told stories in the co-composition of interim and final research texts, the possibilities for retelling and reliving open up. Clandinin and Connelly (1998) wrote that “the promise of storytelling emerges when we move beyond regarding a story as a fixed entity and engage in conversations with our stories. The mere telling of a story leaves it as a fixed entity. It is in the inquiry, in our conversations with each other, with texts, with situations, and with other stories that we can come to retelling our stories and to reliving them” (p. 251).

Janice’s story is of an experience five years into a seven-year narrative inquiry. A resonant thread across the narrative inquiry was the ways in which each of the six teacher co-researchers felt, in differing times and places, positioned as not “real” teachers (Young et al., 2012). Sometimes this positioning happened in the midst of graduate and undergraduate courses, sometimes in relation with hiring practices, sometimes as they found themselves teaching in First Nation schools alongside non-Aboriginal teachers whose ways of being and knowing seemed more valued. Over time and place, the co-researchers worked to think narratively with stories of experience as a way to shape new possible intergenerational narrative reverberations, counterstories holding possibilities to re-make dominant narratives in post-secondary education.

5. Bumping against Dominant Institutional Plotlines

As narrative inquirers, we inhabit multiple places on storied research landscapes. Often, the ways we position ourselves within experience and in relation to lives causes bumps with dominant narratives shaping our research landscapes in relation with how research is done or positioned. Andrew stories his experiences alongside Kim (pseudonym), a doctoral student who interrupts the institutional story of candidacy processes. Kim’s narrative inquiry puzzle is into the experiences of women and their children in addictions programs. In her autobiographical narrative beginning, Kim wove in stories of her childhood experiences. In doing so, Kim made obvious ways in which narrative inquirers need to make themselves vulnerable in their narrative inquiries, and Andrew makes clear his relational commitments to Kim:

As we were preparing for candidacy, we returned to Kim's narrative beginnings, and we realized that, although Kim had spoken with me at length about her interests in her proposed narrative inquiry as a clinician and practitioner, she had never attempted to write an autobiographical narrative beginning. As a supervisor, I was struggling with asking Kim to write a philosophical paper in advance of her engagement in the fieldwork of her narrative inquiry. Kim had a sense that the stories of women who might become participants in her narrative inquiry might call forth feminist ideas, but she also wondered whether other, more postmodern, positions on difference, identity, and language would support the stories of the women. I made a decision to ask Kim to call forth her narrative beginnings as part of her doctoral work and examinations. Kim's narrative beginnings paper was a powerfully written and evocative account of coming to know what it means to live as a woman in the presence of addiction. Kim's paper was an invitation to the examining committee to come alongside her, to think with her story and, importantly, to be vulnerable with her. Many of us cried when we read her paper; others were left wondering about their experiences as people within families and as practitioners/clinicians who seek meaningful ways to engage with difficult experiences in people's lives. As the committee thought alongside Kim's stories, we encountered the discomfort of doing things differently. Two examiners prefaced their questions and discussion with, "I didn't know at first what to do with this paper. I've never seen anything like this in a candidacy before," and yet that paper was the foundation that made possible Kim's doctoral work. As I sat next to Kim in the room, I felt the reverberations of her story within each of the examiners, including myself. That Kim had told a chronological story, from childhood to present, made sense to everyone present. That she had continued to weave in the voice of herself as a child in her continued wonders about addiction, did not. In a short time, Kim reminded us all that there are elements of experience we carry with us and experience in the present, both as our adult selves and as the children we once were, and that in the pursuit of understanding experience, neither voice should be silenced. Other than Kim and me, Vera was the only other narrative inquirer present. Between us, we were able,

through our questions, to facilitate understanding of what happens when we think with stories.

This story is one of many stories of bumping with the dominant narratives shaping the research knowledge landscapes where we practice. Staying at the practice of thinking narratively often feels like a practice of resistance. By choosing a way of knowing that may be other, we intentionally choose what this will mean to us, how we will move forward. Often, as Andrew's story shows, moving forward as a narrative inquirer engaged in thinking narratively is strengthened alongside others who share our ontological commitments to experience, such as Kim's and Vera's presence alongside Andrew. As they worked together in Kim's candidacy, they co-shaped possibilities, spaces in which the other members of the committee could understand the need for Kim to think narratively as she began her narrative inquiry.

We live in the midst of multiple plotlines, which shape research landscapes (i.e. tenure and promotion, research grants, publications, competition for individual success or in our teaching, falling into privileging technical knowledge over lives in the making). Each can rub against the practice of thinking narratively and ways in which this practice necessarily shapes the ways we live and interact in our work places with colleagues, students, and others.

We are reminded of Goldberg's (2013) sense of *resistances*. As narrative inquirers, people/we experience these resistances as they/we bump against other storylines that shape knowledge landscapes. The commitment to experience is the *ground of being* for a narrative inquirer. Recognizing that ground, the landscape upon which experience is lived, requires a commitment to practice, often in practice interactions with self or others, in resistance to plotlines that would have us be other.

We see resistance as akin to a moment Arendt (1978) might call a moment to stop and think; a moment where it might be possible to interrupt, to allow us to imagine otherwise, a moment to create something new. Resistance is not, then, an acknowledgement of vulnerability, but an acknowledgement that there is the possibility of interrupting what is ongoing. It is from these moments of resistance that we can, perhaps, more clearly see the complex contours of knowledge landscapes, not as shaped by either/or dichotomous plotlines, but as knowledge landscapes where, if we remain thoughtful, we can see ways to shift the knowledge landscapes to allow the possibility of something new. As Arendt (1978) noted, "but if the wind of thinking ... has shaken you from sleep and made

you fully awake and alive, then you will see that you have nothing in your grasp but perplexities, and the best we can do with them is share them with each other” (p. 175).

6. Bumping Within Ourselves

While the turns to qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) and the “narrative revolution” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998) are well documented in the literature, dominant narratives which continue to shape the research knowledge landscapes where we practice continue to privilege certainty and individualistic plotlines. As we engaged in the inquiry into our experiences, we shared stories of bumping with dominant narratives, moments when, for example, colleagues on tenure and promotion committees warned us to submit a research grant proposal where we were the principal investigator and to submit individually authored publications. These suggestions came when our research records were seen as too collaborative. Janice told a story of living in the midst of these moments when who we are and who we *imagine* becoming comes into direct conflict with dominant institutional narratives about what counts as research, and what counts as the way of composing a successful research life:

Some time ago, in a conversation with an Associate Dean as part of an interview process, he looked up from quickly scanning my CV and wondered if I was ready, yet, to “cut the apron strings” with my doctoral supervisor. This had not been a question I anticipated prior to the interview; it took me by surprise. While I no longer remember how I responded, I know that I did not, in that moment, say anything that might have shaped an opening for another conversation between us, a conversation in which, together, we might have been able to imagine something otherwise in relation with the dominant narratives shaping the university research landscape.

Janice’s story opened a space for each of us to attend to ways in which our practice of thinking narratively shapes many moments of bumping within ourselves. Staying at the practice of thinking narratively is not easy because we each carry multiple plotlines in our knowledge, in our bodies. Janice noted her silence when the Associate Dean asked her about her plans for cutting the apron strings. As Janice’s doctoral

supervisor was Jean, Janice's story drew forward Jean's experiences, including a similar experience in which Jean, when she first applied for tenure and promotion to Associate Professor, was warned that unless she severed her relationship with Michael Connelly, she would not be promoted to full Professor.

As we thought with the many stories called forward in relation with this practice of bumping within ourselves as an aspect of the practice of thinking narratively, we wondered if, for example, our non-acceptance of merit made any difference in re-making dominant institutional narratives. Or, might more recent grants we received to undertake narrative inquiries in fields dominated by quantitative or other kinds of qualitative research be a sign that research knowledge landscapes are, slowly, changing? As we thought with these storied experiences we noted ways in which the experiences shaped feelings of dis-ease. These feelings of dis-ease were often multi-perspectival. In part, we realized that our feelings of dis-ease were, at times, shaped by, as in Janice's story, falling into silence about ways in which her commitments as a narrative inquirer necessarily entailed relational commitments, relational commitments with co-participants and co-researchers, as well as response communities.

These feelings of dis-ease drew us to Goldberg's (2013) words that "In order to write, you have to be willing to be disturbed" (p. 63). As we thought about Goldberg's sense of disturbance as an aspect of the process of writing, we were reminded of the self-facing of which Anzaldúa (1990) and Lindemann Nelson (1995) write, a process in which we need to carefully consider who we are and are becoming as we interact with others whose experiences differ from our own. In this way, we see self-facing as a significant, although uncomfortable, aspect of the practice of thinking narratively. As we engage in self-facing, as we think narratively with our or others' stories of experience, a space of mutual vulnerability is opened up, a space in which our complicity in maintaining dominant narratives often becomes more clearly visible.

7. Everyone Needs to Practice

The Research Issues Table at the University of Alberta is a central place where we have practiced thinking narratively over time. As people have left the table to take up academic positions in new geographic places, they have created other table spaces. While we consider the Research Issues Table at the University of Alberta our academic homeplace, we work at creating other places. The Prairie Research Issues

Table, which was held two years ago, was a time to remember and practice “what you know first” (MacLachlan, 1995):

In 2012 we held the first Prairie Research Issues Table comprised of graduate students and faculty members involved in Narrative Inquiry across the three prairie provinces of Canada. There were approximately 22 people gathered around a large table space over two days. Pulling forward the protocol of story-telling and response from the Research Issues Table at the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development, we listened, laughed, cried, grew angry, were saddened, ate together, and came away exhausted but full of the possibilities shaped by thinking narratively. As always it was a place where our professional and personal lives intertwined.

As we turned towards one another to listen in attentive silence, to think with and respond to the stories that came to us, we practiced our ontological commitment to experience. As we practiced, we felt a profound grounding of our lives in relation. The sense of relational knowing felt within our bodies flooded our senses in a felt relation that reminded us of Buber’s (1937) words that “all real living is meeting” (p. 25). He believed this kind of dialogic relationship, held together in mutual trust, could be expressed with or without words. At the Prairie Research Issues Table in Regina, Andrew was reminded of his first time sitting at the table in Edmonton. As Janice welcomed everyone, she looked around the table and wondered about the possibilities inherent in collaborative and relational work, work that did not emphasize the cutting of metaphorical apron strings. As narrative inquirers, our ethical commitment to lives requires us to practice continually. Such a practice must be sustained and can never be over and done with. It is a responsibility each of us carries.

While our practices are guided by attentiveness, world traveling, and playfulness (Lugones, 1987), becoming a narrative inquirer is an open-ended process, a work in progress (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) which reflects that lives are always in the making as we continually awaken to seeing “what was ordinarily obscured by the familiar, so much part of the accustomed and the everyday that it escaped notice entirely” (Greene, 1988, p.122). As Vera looks at Jean across the table, she is reminded of her work alongside Jean and research participants, work that has not always been easy. In the moments of listening to others talk about

their research puzzles and work, there is a recognition that commitment to experience necessarily dis-positions (Vinz, 1997) us, allowing us to continually come to see from other perspectives, continually retell and, possibly, relive our lives. As narrative inquirers, our commitment to experience requires us, as Greene (1995) says, “to look through others’ eyes more than I would have and to imagine being something more than I have come to be” (p. 86). As such, narrative inquiry is pedagogical (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013).

A Reflective Turn

As we look backwards and call forth the multiple ways we practice being narrative inquirers, we think again about what it means to practice; to continue to stay at it with others; to think with stories; to not just tell, but retell; to bump up against the landscape and within ourselves. Most of all, we think about how everyone needs to practice. To take a course or do a narrative inquiry study only marks the beginning of learning. Practicing commitment to experience is part of our stories to live by (Connelly & Clandinin 1999) in the process of becoming narrative inquirers (Clandinin, Huber, Steeves, & Li, 2011). Without practice, our commitment to experience is difficult to sustain. Becoming a narrative inquirer is ongoing; it requires practice and, as we stay at it, we imagine our “ground of being” (Goldberg, 2013) becoming more solid and also more alive.

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Jean Clandinin, PhD, is Professor and Director of the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development at the University of Alberta. In addition to other books and articles, she edited the *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a methodology* (Sage, 2007). Her most recent book is *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry* (2013).

Vera Caine, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Alberta. Vera engages in narrative inquiries alongside women living with HIV, aboriginal youth, and families in precarious housing situations.

Andrew Estefan, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of psychiatric nursing at the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Dr. Estefan runs a program of research that inquires into experiences of mental health and illness, particularly as they are mediated by gender and sexuality.

Janice Huber, PhD, is an Associate Professor in pre-service and graduate teacher education at the University of Regina, Canada. She has engaged in long-term relational narrative inquiries with children, families, teachers, and Elders in and outside of school and university places.

Shaun Murphy, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Foundations at the University of Saskatchewan. His research interests are based in relational narrative inquiry and focus on familial and school curriculum making; the interwoven lives of children, families, and teachers; and teacher education.

Pam Steeves, PhD, is an Adjunct Professor with the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development at the University of Alberta, Canada. She has engaged in narrative inquiries with children, youth, and teachers with attention to identities in transition.