To be sensual or sensuous is to be in the presence of your own soul.
—O’Donohue, 1998, 59

Sensual wisdom

Perhaps the desire to become a teacher, the sense of vocation that most student teachers feel to one degree or another, is a longing to manifest love in the world through everyday physical and emotional and intellectual labour. This love may be manifested through the daily practice of sensual wisdom, a practice that opens and unfolds with a free-flowing ethic of care for the Other, and infuses even everyday acts with “an eros, a palpable love, that is also sacred” (Griffin 1995, 9). Such wisdom, this profound manner of acting in and with the world, is a relational practice located in the space between knowing and not knowing, believing and doubting, certainty and uncertainty, questioning and answering (Arlin 1990; Meacham 1990; Sternberg 1990).

Wisdom is called into play when one is confronted with the inherently thorny problems of life, such as the tricky situations my student teachers faced on their long practicum. What does a student teacher do if she suspects a child is being physically abused, but is not really sure? How does a student teacher nurture a child who seems neglected (even if possibly loved) by his parents? A young teacher requires more than professional, procedural knowledge in such situations, more than pure intellect or abstract rationality—even if possibly loved) by his parents? A young teacher requires more than professional, procedural knowledge in such situations, more than pure intellect or abstract rationality—although these skills and qualities can surely be of great help. Relational ways of knowing, such as sensual, emotional, and intuitive knowledge, are also required.

Yet, these relational ways of knowing usually lead a concerned teacher down paths of
uncertainty. Certainty (often a false illusion of control), in contrast, may prematurely close down a teacher’s intuitive responses, and her ability to adapt to continually changing circumstances. Nonetheless, gathering together her accumulated experience and wisdom, a teacher must go forward carefully with this awareness of uncertainty, an intuitive sense of what she can and cannot know, certain only that she may have to act, and act decisively.

In this essay, I reflect on my memories of working with student teachers at crucial junctures in their development as educators. These were times when the intellectual philosophies and traditions of the Academy that they had so thoroughly absorbed came into direct conflict with their own particular bodily-sensorial understandings of pedagogical practice, with their innate and newly blossoming practice of sensual wisdom. In such moments, many of my student teachers cried, the shed tears a betrayal of their fragile sense of neophyte professionalism.

Their tears have provided me with a means of entering into a discussion of what I call here “sensual wisdom,” a way of being in the world that is often ignored and underrated, if not maligned, by many North American educators, teacher educators, and curriculum theorists. The cultural roots of this repudiation run deep, and have caused a cultural lack, and hence also corresponding theoretical shortfalls. Thus, further explorations of the role of sensual, emotional, and somatic ways of knowing are required if we are to begin to piece together a fuller understanding of our own and our student teachers’ pedagogical experiences.

The sweat of the heart

I do not work on the insignificant: the shedding of tears is a mystery throughout all our life….When I begin to write it always starts from something unexplained, mysterious, and concrete. Something that happens here. I could be indifferent to these phenomena; but I think that these are the only important phenomena….When I write a book, the only thing that guides me at the beginning is an alarm. Not a tear [larme], but an alarm. The thing that alarmed me at once with its violence and strangeness.

—Cixous, in Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997, 11

A couple of years ago I began to wonder: What makes my student teachers cry? I had been supervising students in one and two year Bachelor of Education programs in elementary education, accompanying them on their practicum journeys, the very beginning of their careers in teaching. I found that all my students enjoyed the brief first and second practicums, but the third practicum, thirteen weeks long, was the one that caused them the most anxiety and trepidation.
When we met during the first week or so of this final practicum, we frequently discussed their fears, and found ways that they could deal with them so that they might stay focussed for themselves and their students. But just when they seemed to be coming into their own as neophyte teachers, approximately half way through this long practicum, something strange happened. Many began to share with me, not just their fears, or their joy and satisfaction at their progress, but their sadness. Several of them cried.

Why did my student teachers cry, then? Was it that they were so very tired, completely worn down by the gruelling work of their long practicum? They seemed always to be on the move, running from one class to another, from meetings with parents, staff, social workers, then on to training seminars, and off to the library for materials. Their own students required constant attention. The environment always assaulted them with school noises and school smells: The phenomenal sound of hundreds of small bodies rushing through corridors on their way out to the playground; the strong chemical stench of cleaning fluids that seem only to be used in schools and hospitals; the plastic taste of microwaved food that they were almost too fatigued too eat; the contagion of their sneezing, coughing little charges during flu season; the vomit on the carpet; the traces of glue and glitter on the chairs; the bloody nosebleed splashes trailing all along the hallway down to the door of the school office.

The joys and travails of my student teachers’ personal lives added to the extraordinary stresses of their practicum experiences. Of course, they could not leave the personal aspects of their lives behind as soon as they passed through the school gates. One of my student teachers, Adriana, a marathon runner, complained that she had never experienced such total physical exhaustion. Another student teacher, Angela, broke her leg early on in the practicum, yet insisted on continuing to teach. Katherine was being constantly terrorized by a violent ex-partner. Akiko worked through a case of pneumonia, adamantly refusing to take any rest. Emily struggled to find good childcare for her own child who was off school and sick at home. Karen’s grandmother was dying alone on a faraway continent. And Nimmi fell head over heels in love quite unexpectedly, and had to manage the exhilaration of a nascent romance along with all her nightly marking and lesson preparation.

Of course, the same communities of peers and mentors who nurtured the student teachers’ professional practice also became personal confidantes and gave supportive advice in staff room lunch hour conversations. These communities kept the student teachers going through the tough, draining times. Still, my student teachers cried. Once they had become so tired, it was the daily—sometimes small, but always significant—injustices and struggles that their own students faced, which triggered a flow of tears.

Gail, who had grown up in an idyllic rural setting, took her students on daily nature walks to the local park. She felt so saddened by the way that she always had to tell the children that they could look at the piles of autumn leaves on the ground, but they could not run through them. The beautiful heaps of leaves held arsenals of used needles, condoms, and broken glass. This socio-economically privileged student teacher began to understand the physical reality of poverty: her students would not be able to frolic in rustling gold-russet-red leaves as she had once done when she was young. She shook her head and her lips trembled as she told me her story.
Jacqueline confessed to me, with tears in her eyes, that she had been so worried for the safety of one of her kindergarten students that she had felt constantly nauseous all week long. Her kindergartner’s legs had been covered with suspicious bruises and marks. What was to be done? In the meantime, she met the parents every day at school when they picked up and dropped off their child. Earlier in the practicum, Jacqueline and I had had a long talk about how she might express affection and caring for her students. Sensing her students’ strong need for warmth and love, Jacqueline wanted to hug the children without being, in her words, “too physical,” without becoming “too parental,” while remaining “always professional.”

Grace, mascara stains still on her cheeks, shook as she told me what had happened in her class earlier that day. One young fellow had gone missing. She had looked for him everywhere, and had begun to panic. All available staff commenced a thorough search of the school and surrounding area. The police and parents were called. Meanwhile, the frantic Grace had to go back to her classroom to continue with the day’s lessons. Soon after, the missing boy, feeling able to return to class, simply popped his head up from behind the sofa at the back of the classroom!

Janet broke down in tears when she told me about her favourite student. She told me that she knew she should not have favourites amongst her students, but that this boy needed extra attention. He was a “real sweetheart” she said, so shy, so kind, so quiet. She always sent her students home with homework assignments, but this student, her favourite, never had a school bag. In fact, he never had a pencil, or an eraser, and he never had a coat if it was wet outside, or a sweater if it was cold. He never got the new shoes he so needed. He never had breakfast. Unlike so many of his classmates, no grandparents visited the school at lunchtime bearing hot lunches made especially for him. Janet decided to buy the student a Pokemon backpack with her own money. She stocked his new school bag with all kinds of novelty stationery supplies, and gave it to him when there were no other students around.

“Is that alright?” Janet asked me. “Is that professional behaviour? Is it okay to be so involved with your students’ lives? Will his Mum and Dad mind? Will the gift embarrass the parents, or make the child seem different from his peers?” She told me she loved this boy, that he was special and that she would never forget him. Then, the very next week he suddenly left her class; his parents had moved away from the area. Janet sobbed when she related the news to me during her prep period. Fat tears dripped onto the photocopier as she told me she never thought teaching would be this way. She never thought she would have her heart broken on practicum.
I had also cried when I was on my long practicum, I assured my student teachers. And when I was working as a teacher, I sometimes cried then too. “It’s all right to find a quiet place, like the supply storeroom, and have a good cry every now and then,” I would say. Handing them a tissue, I would then half-jokingly give the following advice: When you emerge puffy-eyed, if it is summertime tell your students you have hay fever, and if it is winter tell them you have a bad cold. My student teachers and I both knew that although teachers are human, it is not considered “professional” for them to be seen crying, least of all by their elementary school students. Nonetheless, the act of teaching exposes educators to many deep sadnesses, as I know all too well. One memory from my early days as a teacher still remains fresh and clear in my memory, more than a decade later.

I was working as an English language resource teacher in southern Japan. That day I was at a junior high school, which I visited several times a month. It was late in the monsoon season, and thick clouds clung to the lower slopes of the densely forested mountain against which the school was nestled. The air was cool from a heavy rain shower and the schoolyard was flooded with huge puddles, reflecting grey lakes of light back up at the sky. I was drinking strong coffee in the staff room, trying to clear the fog out of my head before my first class. I had just returned from my mother’s funeral in England, and was somewhat jet lagged. Although I was emotionally fragile, I seemed to be coping well enough with the tasks of everyday life.

An older male teacher burst through the door, bringing with him two boys into the stillness of the staff room. He was berating them for some sort of “bad behaviour,” and began to raise his voice. He told the boys to kneel down on the concrete floor. Then, quite suddenly, he began to hit one of them, picking him up by his neck, throwing him across the room onto a desk. After cuffing him around the face, he dragged him into an adjacent storeroom from which I could hear the sound of the boy’s body being thrown against shelving and filing cabinets. The second boy, who remained kneeling in the staff room, began to shake. The other teachers went on reading their newspapers and drinking green tea, quietly minding their own business, as if all was well with the world. Seized by a flood of grief, I fled to the sanctuary of the women’s washroom, locked myself into a cubicle, pressed my forehead to the cold, celadon-coloured tiles, and sobbed uncontrollably for a long time.

I did not tell any of my student teachers this story though. I was their teacher, their practicum supervisor and I felt, perhaps mistakenly, that it was my job to be present for them while they cried, not to reveal tales of my shed tears to them. In truth I was ashamed of how I reacted to witnessing the Japanese boy’s beating. I did not confront the violent teacher, or ask other teachers for assistance, or report the matter to the school principal. I keenly felt my youth, my gender, my foreignness, and my sense of powerlessness. Later on, weeks after the incident, I was still deliberating about whether to act or not. In the end, I decided to remain silent. I was an outsider in the Japanese public school system and wanted my contract to be renewed for a further year. And I was tired. I was grieving for my mother.

Many years have passed since then. Now a teacher educator, what strikes me as most remarkable is not that my student teachers would cry for themselves and their students, but that they all felt their crying was an unnatural act for a teacher. They struggled to retain their “professionalism,” an emotional neutrality and distance, whenever faced with heartbreaking, unjust situations. My student teachers, without exception, showed no such reserve when expressing pride in their students’ accomplishments, or happiness when a lesson unfolded magically, or joy when those special and rare teachable moments appeared. Their desire for emotional neutrality and distance only appeared when a situation looked hopeless, when they did not know what to do, when progress or resolution seemed impossible.

Subconsciously, they felt perhaps that this freezing of their emotions would offer some
protection from hopelessness, and not knowing and impossibility. But when they were too
tired to fight them back, the tears came anyway. My students cried privately if at all possible,
choked back sobs when meeting with me, and apologized profusely if any tears did begin to
trickle. They found the tears humiliating.

I feel that this sense of humiliation was not indicative of the power imbalance that existed
between us—student teacher and teacher educator—although obviously such a power
differential did exist. I was more than willing to admit that I did not have all the answers
(indeed, no one does), that there are always many ways in which to respond to any given
pedagogical situation, and that in some cases we simply can not know for sure which is the
best course of action.

Yet, for all that, we must continue to engage with the pedagogical struggle. My student
teachers were probably not prepared to experience this kind of uncertainty, and I did not and
probably could not have fully prepared them for it. Clearly, my reassurances were not so
reassuring to a student teacher in the midst of a pedagogical crisis. I offered tissues. I listened.
Still, the tears were humiliating to both of us.

The word “humiliation” is derived from the Greek humus, meaning “of the soil” (Whyte 2001,
125). The humiliating tears were, in a way, bringing my weeping students down to earth,
returning them to “the ground of their being” (Whyte 2001, 125), making them acknowledge
the physicality and materiality of pedagogical practice. When you are humiliated you pray that
the earth will open up and swallow you whole. In a way, to be humiliated is to wish for a
small death. To be humiliated is a transformative experience, which may then lead to a rebirth
of spirit. In my role as practicum supervisor, I acted as doula during this rebirth of spirit,
helping the tearful student teacher birth the new self into being, attending to their needs while
they were in a state of vulnerability.

My student teachers were not prepared for the intense physicality of the teaching experience.
They had not yet come to terms with the materiality of their own and their students’ bodies in
their classrooms, and the multitude of ways that their own personal lives were interwoven with
those of their students, all crisscrossing the professional territory of teaching in unpredictable
ways. Poverty, racism, and child abuse were no longer abstract concepts, but were written on
the living bodies of their students.

Some of my students had been seeking economic security, social respectability, and upward
mobility, as well as a path of professionally rewarding service to the community, by becoming
teachers. Unexpectedly, however, they found that they loved students, and that they were
experiencing fear and anger and sadness as part of their teaching practice. They were being
forced to relinquish the dream of perfect pedagogical control. Personal and professional
notions of the teacher as “one who knows” crumbled beneath their feet. Suddenly, a terrifying
chasm lay before them exposing the horrific understanding of the sheer impossibility of
teaching. They were beginning to truly experience the emotional labour of teaching. Their tears
were the physical manifestation of the “sweat of the heart”—the heart, which labours to give
birth to itself and is never completely born (O’Donohue 1998, 6).
Coming to our senses

If people are highly successful in their professions they lose their senses. Sight goes. They have no time to look at pictures. Sound goes. They have no time to listen to music. Speech goes. They have no time for conversation. They lose their sense of proportion—the relations between one thing and another. Humanity goes….What then remains of a human being who has lost sight, sound, and sense of proportion?

—Woolf, cited by Chicago 1982, 197

My student teachers did not always feel at home with the rhythm and wisdom of their senses and emotions. And why should they? As Virginia Woolf (cited by Chicago, 1982) pointed out many years ago, developing a strong mistrust of the senses and emotions is all part of the process of becoming a successful professional. The majority of North American educational institutions—including most of the schools and universities entrusted with educating professionals such as teachers—are rooted in long traditions of dualism, which repudiate the emotional dimension of “bodily-sensorial understanding” (Bai 2001).

Dualism is the belief that all aspects of the universe, and even all modalities of thought used to conceptualize the universe, can be divided into two parts: body/mind, human/animal, culture/nature, physical/mental, masculine/feminine, spirit/matter, public/private, sacred/profane, intellect/emotion, thought/feeling, analysis/intuition, metaphor/logic, rational/irrational, and so on (Griffin 1995; Grosz 1994). In western traditions, this binary splitting simultaneously objectifies, classifies, and orders all existence, with one part of existence being exalted and privileged over the other. So thoroughly ingrained is this manner of thinking that in Western culture:

the idea of logic, reason, even the capacity for insight, thought or clear-mindedness have been situated so firmly in the duality between intellect and emotion, mind and body, spirit and matter that to challenge this duality must seem like a threat to consciousness itself. (Griffin 1995, 40)

In maintaining such a rigid dualistic organization of culture, vast areas of experience are split off, artificially limited, and denigrated. Mainstream North American schooling practices and pedagogies devalue the body, the spirit, the emotional, the passionate, the subjective, the intuitive, the non-rational, the chaotic, and the sacred. Yet, these “shadow traits” of human experience do not simply disappear in dualistic educational cultures. They are always present . . . in the shadows.
The tearful student teachers with whom I worked came face to face with the problems of dualism. Each student was well schooled in disciplinary, academic thought. Yet, each unexpectedly found herself located at a juncture, feeling the power of bodily-sensorial and relational experience, while simultaneously immersed in the prevalent dualistic ideologies of the school workplace and the university.[1] This place of critical convergence was physically marked with the falling of their tears, a flowing of somatic truth. In retrospect I can see that their tearful release was also my own, as the tears freed us to move forward together to new kinds of conversations about teaching and learning.

Naturally, at the beginning of their long, final practicum, most of my new students yearned for a sense of security and certainty. As their faculty advisor, I tried to help them to experience sufficient security and certainty that they might be able to proceed without freezing into a state of fear when teaching. “Plan, plan, plan!” I enthusiastically advised them. “I know you can’t plan everything, but a good plan gives you a wonderful springboard for successful lessons.” This was something my student teachers could hold on to, I surmised. They had all been trained in planning: lesson plans, unit plans, timetabling, planning of assessment, booking resources, fieldtrip planning . . . In one of our first seminars, we discussed the purposes of planning, what could and could not be planned, and why a teacher might plan anyway. We also discussed the kinds of things that could derail even the most thoughtfully conceived plans. I thought that at least I was helping them to take some of what they had learned in their university courses into their elementary school classrooms. I was providing a sense of empowerment, a steadying focus. Yet, I felt somewhat unsteady and nervous about giving this advice.

I was advising them to maintain a tightly controlled, objectifying relationship with knowledge. I was prompting them to attempt to eliminate the mystery of human beings and of pedagogical processes and to put themselves in charge of the object-world. This orderly technical-rational approach to teaching, which most North American Faculties of Education promote, and which I was endorsing, reduces school students’ educational experiences to “a set of competencies to be performed” (Miller, 1988, 26). As such, I felt I was intentionally asking student teachers to enslave themselves and their own students to a set of technical procedures, to become compliant, passive, and conformist in the interests of productivity and efficiency, rather than making themselves available to their students in a pedagogically meaningful way. I felt as if I were misrepresenting myself, and everything in which I believed.

Somewhere deep down, however, I knew that no matter how much my student teachers followed my advice to “plan, plan, plan” they would still have to rely on intersubjective, eclectic, intuitive, liberatory, complex, creative, sometimes magical, perhaps even spiritual approaches to teaching, approaches which are necessarily not predictable or quantifiable. When I witnessed my student teachers crying, it was clear to me that I would not have to ask them to undermine the dualistic foundations of their own training: Instead, their tears had already torn apart many of their former assumptions about teaching.

Their tears were, I believe, emotional expressions of intellectual discomfort and psychic sadness and pain; a release from frustrated expectations of how teaching ought to be, how they were taught that “good” teaching should be; communicative of disorientation and indecision in the face of complex dilemmas; symbolic of a flood of transformation from an old to a new self during a period of intense change. These tears were a wake up call—as Cixous (1997) would say, not a “larme” but “an alarm” (43).

Although one or two of my student teachers were still clinging firmly to their lesson plans at the end of the practicum, I had noticed that several of the “tearful students,” those who had cried during their long practicum, had noticeably changed their practice. At first they had felt...
continually pressed for time, and were unable to slow down enough to experience the flow of vital pedagogical moments. The all-important schedule had a mechanizing effect on their days, and on their bodies, reducing the sensuality of their lives to greyness, subduing their creativity and their energy. The world of the teacher-as-curriculum planner is a world of linear progress where time is always running out, a world in which time is “emptied of presence” (O’Donohue 1998, 89).

Towards the end of the practicum experience, however, these student teachers frequently displayed a more visible ease with the rhythmic complexity of each teaching day. They still planned, but were somehow more comfortable with the unfurling recursivity of non-linear time, expecting, sometimes even welcoming, the inevitable interruptions—the fun and mock-horror of the earthquake drill and the fire drill, the drama and excitement of the Halloween party, the pride and angst of parent-teacher conferences, the student who has something pressing and important to say in the middle of a lesson. My student teachers now seemed to relax into their own and into their students’ sense of time, a time “swollen by subjectivity, passion, and dreams haunted by reality” (Vaneigem cited in Jensen & Zerzan June 2001, 52). I, too, was more able to relax into this temporal-somatic space.

John Zerzan in an Utne Reader (in Jensen & Zerzan June 2001) interview describes the difference between linear time and the swollen subjectivity and dream-like passion of non-linear time:

I’m talking about time not existing. Time, as an abstract continuing “thread” that unravels in an endless progression that links all events together while remaining independent of them. That doesn’t exist. Sequence exists. Rhythm exists. But not time. Part of this has to do with the notion of mass production and division of labour. Tick, tick, tick . . . Identical seconds. Identical people. Identical chores repeated endlessly. Well, no two occurrences are identical, and if you are living in a stream of inner and outer experience that constantly brings clusters of new events, each moment is quantitatively and qualitatively different from the moment before. The notion of time simply disappears. (52)

What remains when linear time slips away is a flow of bodily reciprocity, an openness to the sensual improvisation of one being meeting another, with the possibility that the experience contained within even the briefest of moments might imprint deeply upon one’s life, changing one forever.

My tearful student teachers had discovered for themselves the beauty of non-dualistic pedagogical practice. From a non-dualistic perspective, “being is generated from the body” (Griffin 1995, 65). The mind is embodied (Lakoff & Johnson 1999; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch 1995), and bodies never exist in isolation, but in community with other bodies, and the body of the earth. A person’s emotional/intellectual/sensorial understanding of space and time always arises out of specific locations, contexts, and circumstances, from dynamic, generative interactions with the body of the intelligent universe. One embodied mind is continuously born from another (Griffin 1995).

Non-dualistic knowledge, emerging from the chaotic mingling of body-minds, is unpredictable, refusing the convenience of objectification, and ordering into stable systems of categorization. Thus, a non-dualistic relationship to knowledge is necessarily uncertain, unstable, and contingent. According to Helene Cixous (in Cixous & Calle-Gruber 1997), this quality of uncertainty, what Derrida calls the undecided, “is indissociable from human life” (52). Uncertain knowledge is complex, contradictory, precarious, indeterminate, ambiguous, awkward, messy, and difficult. These confounding characteristics should be welcomed, however, as they necessitate a creative approach in dealing with uncertain knowledge, an approach that one might call “wisdom.”
Wisdom is obviously intangible and indefinable, but it is often strikingly apparent when a teacher has “it.” I do not believe that we can directly train our student teachers in this non-dualistic approach to their practice, but we can help them recognise it whenever it occurs, and awaken them to the possibility of nurturing it in their own everyday lives as teachers. For this to happen, however, curriculum theorists and teacher educators will first have to develop more comprehensive lexicons and languages with which to describe such pedagogical approaches, and begin to engage full-heartedly in conversations about pedagogy and the practice of sensual wisdom.

Memoir and the emotional educator

Pedagogy [is] a vocation to live and act within the difference between what we do know and what we do not know, that is to be drawn out to what calls us from both within and beyond ourselves.

—Smith, 1994, 168

In writing this paper, I hope to invite both contemplation of and conversation about sensual wisdom. Contemplation is certainly not a form of inaction. The creation of theory, an act that requires a contemplative state of mind, is frequently an act of resistance (Zavazadéh & Morton 1994). Contemplative practice can be the first vital step to understanding the limits of our knowledge, to forming the difficult questions that will guide further research and practice. It is thus an inherently creative state, one in which even the most ambiguous and disorderly aspects of pedagogy can be explored.

If we educators can acknowledge the disorderly, ambiguous, and mysterious nature of our everyday pedagogies, and let ourselves be drawn outward into the world with a heightened sense of unknowing, then we may begin to view our living practice with astonishment and wonder: The shedding of a few tears can become a subject worthy of our attention and critical investigation.

Critical inquiry into emotion not only reveals the centrality of emotions as a source of embodied knowledge, it also makes possible radical cultural interventions. The study of emotion is a vital and necessary form of political work, which uncovers and names the invisible spaces located between ideology and internalized feeling (Boler 1999). Such spaces are sites of control, struggle, and resistance, and are characterized by complexity, ambiguity, and generativity.

The embodied mind is in itself a primary pedagogical site, locus of pleasure, desire, fear,
shame, pain, struggle and control. Our emotions “reflect our complex identities situated within social hierarchies, [and how they] ‘embody’ and ‘act out’ relations of power” (Boler, 3-4). According to Boler, structures of race, class, and gender are shaped by the social control of emotion, and reflect particular historical, cultural, and social arrangements. Thus, the embodied self simultaneously constitutes and is constituted by the discursive environment, becoming inscribed with discursive practices in so doing.

As curriculum theorist and teacher educator, it is my responsibility to find a non-dualistic language that can embrace the embodied, emotional, sensual, chaotic aspects of pedagogical experience—a medium of expression that will loosely contain but not erase the contradictions and disorder of everyday practice. In this text, I have struggled to employ a language that would help me to remember events that I once overlooked or had even forgotten, a language that would allow me to express emotion, and also serve as vehicle for examination, understanding, dialogue, and possible change. I chose memoir, a reflective and autobiographical form of narrative inquiry, as my methodological approach to this subject. Through the use of memoir, I insist that the personal, the remembered and the imagined infuse everyday educational research with a certain colour and quality of meaning that are not, indeed often cannot, be expressed solely through technical-rational approaches to research.

True, I have created a text with many gaps and spaces. I see these not as textual failings but as generative openings to dialogue—textual entryways, if you will. I anticipate that a reader will have a response to my text, perhaps remembering times when they cried on practicum or when their own student teachers shed tears. It is my hope that the reader will be able to insert herself into the text thereby creating dialogical movement. I strive, through telling and then reflecting on these autobiographical stories, to construct what Suzi Gablik (1992) terms a “connective aesthetics.”

In employing memoir as research methodology, I explore the ways in which human experience is endowed with meaning, seeking to enlarge understandings of “the moral and ethical choices we face as human beings who live in an uncertain world” (Ellis & Bochner 2000, 744). By so doing I hope to broaden and deepen my, and perhaps others’, understandings of our discursive community, making possible engaging and meaningful conversations about pedagogy and culture in ways that permit a thorough questioning of our shared and individual experiences and understandings.

Fragments of memory are not simply represented as flat documentary but constructed to give a “new take” on the old, constructed to move us into a different mode of articulation.

—hooks, 1990, 147

Thus, the practice of memoir refuses the premature closure of conversation. And, continued conversations in turn lead to new areas of meditation and exploration.

At first glance, the focus of memoir may seem to be set firmly on the self. However, the educational researcher must actually focus on the space between educational practice and the self. Personal memories merely act as a springboard for the study of self and others in context, enabling the researcher to seek patterns in the complexities of everyday experience that illuminate cultural and social structures, identity formation, and lived experiences of power and possibility.

The text of the memoir can never be directly representative of experience. Rather, it is a story about experience, a fictional accounting, or even re-counting, of actual events. To remember is to engage in a powerful act of fiction. A memoir is usually peopled with many characters, not only the character of the fictional protagonist (the “I” of the text) who is closely identified with the author. A memoir may well be composed of fictions, but these fictions are, of course, the
Please know that when I write that the text of a memoir is woven from fictions, I do not speak flippantly. Fictions have tremendous power to both heal and to harm. Thus, I have taken pains to protect the identities of the student teachers depicted here, changing their names, many details of their stories, and so forth, while striving to keep the heart of their stories intact. Without seeming to be too much of a contrarian, I also hope that the reader will understand that despite the obvious sensuality and intimacy of much autobiographical writing, it is futile to search for a singular, embodied protagonist in this text. The “I” who appears to tell my stories is, of course, always frustratingly illusory.

Despite the knotty textual conundrums that are an intrinsic part of the practice of memoir, the methodological approach still has its merits. New stories generated through the creation of memoir permit new kinds of relationships with others, enabling the co-creation of new kinds of possible worlds, reinventing notions of self in community, yielding collective as well as personal benefits (Chambers 1998; Dunlop 1999; Eisner in Saks (Ed.) 1996). In willingly submerging themselves in fictions, writers and readers may resurface transformed with different appreciations of the socially constructed nature of our communal reality, bringing into a heightened awareness many forgotten and suppressed stories, as well as a keen sense of the old stories that were perhaps camouflaged behind sentimentalizations, simplifications, or obfuscations. One might say that through reading and writing fiction, we begin to make a home for ourselves not just on paper, but in the wider world (Chambers 1998).

Likewise, as teacher educators, our everyday pedagogical practice can be thought of as a way of finding and making a home for ourselves in the wider world. How much more powerful could our practice of “home-making” become if we could more fully engage with and attend to our embodied experiences of pedagogy? If, supported by a less dualistic culture, could we allow ourselves to feel and explore the deeper meanings of our emotions, including our tears? How might our pedagogical practice be transformed if we felt able to linger, at least for a short time, in the pain, anger, frustration, sadness, fear, and joy that lies behind our tears?

By allowing ourselves to deeply experience our own embodied, emotional selves in community with embodied others, we could I believe enact radical transformations of practice, infusing our lives and work with sensual wisdom. Such transformations of practice could lead to a significant enrichment of the practicum experience for both teacher educator and student teacher.

Clearly, dualistic ways of thinking and acting are deeply enculturated into the policies and practices of by far the majority of North American schools and universities. Dualism is, as I say, the prevalent but not a
monolithic paradigm. There are always individual educators who explore and discuss non-dualistic practice, as well as communities and loose collectives where non-dualistic ways of being in the world are encouraged and even flourish.

Other scholars have also investigated the topic of emotion and teaching, most notably William Ayers (2001; 2004) and Parker Palmer (1993; 1998).

References


**About the Author**

**Alison Pryer** has taught in Germany, Japan, and Egypt, and more recently at the University of British Columbia where she completed her doctoral studies. Her work has appeared in numerous North American and international academic and literary journals. She is currently working on a novel for young adults.

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