Some of my life as a teacher has been lived on land that from an airplane looks like a quilt—endless patches of yellow and brown tucked up against each other so one hardly notices the fences and roads between. The type of crop that’s grown changes the colour of the fabric piece and aside from minimal road allowance accommodations, each square joins comfortably to another piece...revealing one of the most altered landscapes in the world. Occasionally, there is a fold in the structure of the land that creates an opening, hidden between small hills—a place where enough moisture collects for something wild to grow—a place where deer lie in the shade of the trees. Most people don’t know that the prairies embrace these hiding places. The endless horizon carries the illusion of transparency.

The simplicity of this rural landscape—wide open sky and what seems to be a vast expanse of empty land, is contrasted by the warmth of a stranger’s hand that invariably rises in greeting as vehicles pass each other on the road. There is a nod of acknowledgement, even as the other hand attempts to keep the vehicle from blowing off the road. Often, I am unprepared for the greeting and I miss the second in which I can respond and then, we have already both moved on. This little ritual seemed odd to me at first—that anyone would make the effort to greet every driver in these days of constant travel. Yet, I have appreciated the alertness of the action, feeling that it is a bit of recognition, a lingering strand of rural. The external gesture weaves me into the landscape and into this place.
Current emphasis on ‘improvement’ and ‘accountability’ in many local educational reform agendas narrows opportunity for teacher professional growth and learning, and misses the richness and potential in conceptions of teacher learning as situated, local, and relational. In considering how my own inner landscape is continually reconstructed from the outside through relations with others, I found myself rejecting initial notions of researching ‘professional development’ of teachers and its underlying current of conformity. I considered ‘teacher learning’ and ‘curriculum change’ and then wondered if it would be helpful to just research change. Change seems to be a metonym for life itself, the process of mapping one messy and unfinished layer of experience over the other.

Maybe what’s most significant in regards to our own learning and growth as teachers is the ongoing way in which our individual experience continues to be woven by the perspectives we ascribe to meanings and by how we further intertwine newness conjointly, not necessarily as friends but as strangers engaged in actions, mediated by the tools of dialogue, silence, and gesture.

Instead of spatializing the components of our personal and professional realities in relation to each other to help us conceive of this process, we might reconceptualize time and space as texture, fabric that is used and recycled. Texture suggests touch, which kindles a social response that tries to make sense of the self in larger social terms, offering a relational awareness. Dialogue, silence, and gesture don’t exist on their own but are all part of a simultaneous interobjectivity and intersubjectivity resulting from interrelationships and interdependencies.

M. Cole (2003) discusses the definition of context and its strong similarities to the Latin term, ‘contextere,’ or ‘to weave together.’ As I engage in an a/r/tographical inquiry [1] (Irwin, 2004) that extends a renegotiation and remaking of complex, textured moments with senses of place and stories of lived experience, I stitch together a variety of used pieces of fabric—yellows, browns, ribbed, rough, coarse, flannel…and I consider other people’s stories of fabric…all part of an inextricable matrix of ongoing and unfolding relation between inner and outer, personal and professional, social and individual, fact and fiction, past and present...

This paper reflects a layered dialogical mapping of geocultural narrative and remnant river valleys of local landscape, personal experience, and professional life.

Tolman (1999) argues that, “The individual is truly human only in society,” and “that human individuality itself is achievable only in society.” (73). If we were to understand that within every person’s perspective is a new location through which we can better see ourselves, I wonder if this would be what Engstrom means (1987), in describing Vygotsky’s term, ‘zone of proximal development’: “the distance between the everyday actions of individuals and the historically new form of the societal activity that can be collectively generated as a solution to the double bind potentially embedded in… everyday actions.” (174). Berger and Luckman (in Davis, 2004) acknowledge that, “What people ‘know’ as ‘reality’ in their everyday, non- or pre-theoretical lives… constitutes the fabric of meanings without which no society could exist” (113). Making sense of our own and others’ fragments of experience and treating them as meaningful and adequate is part of negotiating our collective capacity for change. The creation of a space where respective life experience is the primary and most valuable source for growth and change is possible if teachers’ stories are not already written for them.
she fell asleep in her two-piece bathing suit that she only wore on the yard, hoping the sun’s heat would quell her cramps. later, when she came around to the door, she was shocked to see a suitcase on the porch, keys for the old car, a quarter, and a note that read, “call when you want to be a real wife.” she tried the door to the house but it was locked. no one responded to the knocking. she drove away, feeling as though this was all happening to someone else. the city was new to her and she wondered where she should go. she used the quarter to buy a tampon at a gas station. she was barefoot and felt naked in the bathing suit. she opened the suitcase. it seemed to be a cruel kind of joke. there was an odd assortment of clothes from another life: dress-up clothes for work and mismatched things she hadn’t worn in years, useless fragments of a past that wasn’t exactly over and nothing to cover her in an unknown future.

Dialogue

Dialogue, as talk between teachers, provides for us a way to mark the gap between us and also to negotiate a bridge with which to remake ideas and approaches in the midst of the important differences between us. Speroni’s (in Rockwell, 2003) century old definition of dialogue as a unity of diverse voices continues to be regarded as anarchy in institutions that focus on ‘continuous improvement’ and ‘accountability.’ Much is benefited from naturally occurring talk between teachers from which it is possible to continually refine dialogue in ongoing adaptations, as a dynamic tool for sustained, collective inquiry in which multiple perspectives are sought and valued.

There is much to talk about in the messy, complex job of teaching. Judith Little (2003) argues that although conversations in which practical solutions to teaching challenges are often desired, this collaboration is not typically built into the workday nor into most formal professional development programs. Instead many decontextualized, disembodied classroom accounts of classroom incidents are shared hurriedly in moments in hallways or staffrooms. Some of these stories linger at the edges of the tension and multiplicity of our work and our lives, suggesting spaces that are distressed or torn. However rushed and unconnected these accounts are, Little reminds us that they do form pervasive and meaningful elements of the talk among teachers and these representations become a collective interpretation of teaching practice and professional relationships, communicating and forming what it means to be a teacher in a particular place.

Since opportunities for extended talk remain short, the culture of schools or groups frequently grow out of moments of exasperation, isolation, bewilderment, and survival manoeuvres. Little (2003) argues further, that when opportunities are established for teachers to talk, it’s often the comfort of strategic answers and action that are encouraged, rather than the discomfort of ambiguity or personal experience. Provocative questions are considered hindrances, rendering some teachers’ valuable questions and contributions worthless. Ultimately some people detach from the conversation and their contributions are lost. Engaging in more controversial perspectives and dwelling in conflict is not easy nor encouraged but sitting on the outer edges of the openings into need and pain and desire only offer glimpses of some of the movement and potential that is hidden by those folds in the landscape. Perhaps the possible reverberations of discovering what’s unfamiliar may provoke more fear or exhilaration than many teachers have energy to deal with after days of teaching and nights of preparation.
In addition, well entrenched discourses often organize and constrain what can be said, thought or done (Davis, 2004). Sometimes, when opportunity is provided for dialogue among teachers, there is an expectation to see how fast questions can be asked or how quickly we can go from sight/sound/emotions, to words. We are valued for the speed with which we can throw our opinions into the mix. But it is a selective mix, even in university settings. Those who express opinions voiced from seemingly irrational emotions or personal experience, or pre-existent, unexamined beliefs are oft-times viewed as unreasonable and quickly shut down by someone with a voice of authority or a gift for articulation. Sometimes there seems to exist a double-edged intolerance in educational institutions that not only denies people the lived fabric of unusual, or alternative experience, but also devalues those who refuse to leave the certainty of what they think they already know and who have no desire to dwell in the spaces between.

Those who recognize the importance of cutting up their maps of certainty and using them to make new ones, move on to risk certainty in their uncertainty. Uncertainty itself is not an end product; its very nature is meaning that keeps slipping away. A truly generative look at what educational society considers unusual or inadequate will be self-conscious of parceling out new categories, aware of multiple possibilities and ways of being, and will appreciate not only what is beyond and in between but also what is past. Agency in society is not only in allowing the excess of others’ experiences to stand as valid but in recognizing our ongoing relationship and responsibility to everything that spills over the edges of our commonly held assumptions and categories.

A rich dialogue will encourage thinking and reflecting on planning and practice and philosophy but will also facilitate heated discussion and frustration, including both anger and joy. Hashweh (2003) and Little (2003) each contend that it is important to pay attention to the nuances of life and mood and experience in opportunities for dialogue because teachers’ experiences and anxieties are not always optimistic and should be listened to when they are shared. Even resistance is a valuable starting point for dialogue—for tearing apart the layers of meaning within an idea. Disagreeing shows that we value someone enough to engage with them (Ellsworth, 2004). Perhaps those who initiate reform agendas should be most concerned about people who appear to readily accept new innovations without any critical resistance.
grabbing her hair, he slammed her head against the steering wheel. she hoped they would crash. instead, he jerked the car to a stop. she leaped from the car and ran down the highway, wondering how far they were from where. he ran after her and grabbed her shirt. she jerked away and the fabric tore away from her body. as cars screamed past, she held the fragments of covering around her and realized that she now had to get back in the car. later, when the police pulled them over and an officer came to her door, she heard herself say, “yes, everything is fine.” she wished her shirt hadn’t torn—it was such an amazing colour of blue.

An essential topic in opportunities for dialogue in education will always be how our senses of a word’s meaning represent our local learning culture. Much diversity resides in the various interpretations of commonly used words and in the resulting strategies that occur. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1999) in their study of teacher learning in communities observe that although it has long been assumed that teachers who know more, teach better, there are many different interpretations to what ‘knowing more’ and ‘teaching better’ mean, as well as a variety of interpretations to what ‘teacher learning’ should look like. It is most important to look at the underlying assumptions about what these words mean. As Davis (2004) notes, words must be understood as sets of relations rather than as discrete word units.

When school or district goals and aims and criteria are discussed, everyone must have the opportunity to shape what words mean in that time and space. And, time and space must be provided for this individual and collective consideration so that those who move more quickly to language or those whose role carries more authority aren’t the only ones who get to decide the sense that a particular word acquires within that context. Various interpretations of words lead to wildly different ideas about how to improve instruction or how to bring about a particular school or curriculum change, which can provide a rich variety. However, without opportunity for a slower thoughtful response and invitations to engage, one’s own interpretations might remain unspoken, perhaps even unknown, and subsequently impossible to reflect on and share. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) explain that any innovation will ultimately reside in the implications—the viewpoints, assumptions, and values that each individual brings. They describe implementation of any new collective ideas as interpretive processes that will always involve further clarification and negotiation. Interrogating and clarifying even words such as ‘implementation’ will be helpful in opening extraordinary new opportunities for dialogue in which consciousness is raised and emerging context is woven.
Educational dialogue as both speaking and listening not just to agree or disagree, begins to weave and colour the texture of a time and place. Perhaps we can extend Raine’s (1996) description of touch to the tool of dialogue which is also a form of touch: “There is differentiation but that which is differentiated is neither background nor a mirror for the developing subject but an unknownness whose presence is registered at the level of unconscious desire as nonvisual, nonsymbolic traces of tactile experience” (246).

Consciousness of our collective textured experience enables the appreciation of the other in otherness. We also see our own current compositions of who we have been and who we are not. Some of these selves can identify with one another without “aspiring to assimilate in order to become one, without abolishing differences and making the other a same in order to accept him/her.” (Ettinger in Rain, 1996, 246). These kinds of encounters allow for constant renegotiation of boundaries of designations and an intimate, anonymous simultaneity of the known and the unknown in the same place.

Langer (1997) writes that reflection and advocacy and inquiry into the ideas of others, opens the individual and the group to the power of disconfirming and discomforting data, inviting new fields of experience and relation, and thereby, possibilities for incongruities, fresh perspectives, and divergent thinking. A co-existence then of professional teacher relationships will not be one of conformity nor does it have to be said that teachers are necessarily even interacting but they are neither primarily in opposition. Rather, teachers would have the opportunity to participate in a collective process of personal and local interpretation which is capable of unravelling as well as of acquiring newness, and in which all viewpoints have validity (Bohm, 1996) in emerging adaptations.

Silence

Dialogue loses meaning when there is no ability for silence; both are part of a much larger landscape. A willingness to let words linger in the atmosphere, as spheres through which we feel texture or see shape and colour, may slow the oft-quick reflexes of critically evaluating the accuracy of each other’s questions and answers. Letting the knowledge and experience of others make meaning of us, will offset a linear race for ‘accountability’ or ‘continuous improvement.’ An awareness of the potential in silence would add much to group dynamics.
Within provided opportunities for dialogue, speaking often seems to be a privileged form of discourse and silence a deficit. It is often forgotten that some thoughts are too fluid to grasp; sometimes images and feelings don’t have words yet; and sometimes it is precisely because of an enormous capability for emotion and involvement that it becomes too difficult to respond. Learning and living is about being in the midst of becoming and “being in the midst is so much more/other than language and what it can grasp. It’s what precedes language itself and out of which language comes” (Ellsworth, personal communication, May 28, 2005).

Sometimes ‘being in the midst’ tears at the edges of us so that there’s an unravelling that provides openings for relation instead of smooth surfaces that deflect one from the other. Long ago, William James (1917) wrote that our judgements concerning the worth of things big or little depend on the feelings they arouse in us. Of course, knowing this doesn’t seem to make self-expression any easier. I often feel restricted by the limits of my own capacities, where inner emotion slams against outer limits of an inability not only to communicate or represent but also to receive and perform, leaving me feeling foolish and inadequate. The helplessness of the linguistic self in coping with emotion that surpasses language leads inevitably back to our material bodies where it seems that even sensations can remain inaccessible since as Raine (1996) notes, they too resist image and exceed knowledge.

Some material bodies appear to absorb and hold more of the joy and pain of our collected being-human. Murray (in Pintrich & Schunk, 2002) writes about beta presses representing each individual’s own idiosyncratic perception and construction of a context. The associated power and intensity of emotion has the potential to be physically and/or mentally destructive to some people, particularly when alpha presses, which Murray identifies as ‘objective reality,’ or societal influence, inhibit personal experience. Those whose lives have been woven with seemingly excess awareness of humanity’s emotion and sensation experienced beyond language, are silenced unless they feel comfortable with some way to express or engage.

Our educational institutions have long over-rated functional literacy (Park, 2005) and omitted the language of making, of visual, tonal and kinaesthetic images and gesture, and of wisdom of the body. These are necessary languages in mediating learning, in dialogue and collaboration—ways to enlighten us on the nature of feeling (Broudy, 1987). Probably everyone suffers to some degree as a result of our arts-linguistic poverty that robs us of ability for expression that’s more than just transference of messages. I find that I am constantly seeking for a language to express and find what matters most to me—silent.
Gesture

Ultimately it is the body that mediates language, dialogue, and gesture. At an intersection of dialogue and emotion and inadequacy of speech, potential arises for raising a hand in acknowledgement of another, for reconnecting with the body which is where the sensory experience of one’s history of social interactions are first located (Mensing, 1995). The body is what is in the inbetweeness of roles; we are the middle space that exposes the border between self and others as constituted and fragile. Much of our external experience is remembered through texture, a presence felt against the flesh. We long for texture, touch—the material—the earth. The importance of the land is always interwoven with our memories and this relation of body-to-earth might be compared to Fynsk’s (in Nancy, 1991, p.xxxiv) measureless description of having an “experience of the world as offered, and of existence as a reception and articulation of this offering” (p.xxxiv). The materiality of a life actualized is a response to our connection to the earth.

In her Silueta series (1993-1997) Cuban artist, Ana Mendieta uses her body as the channelling surface through which the self encounters the materiality of the earth. Working at outdoor sites, she used materials of earth, plants, and her own body to trace her silhouette on the landscape. The tactile boundary between her body and the land symbolizes the passage from one place to the other through the process of becoming. An interesting part of her work is its ability to point to the “collapse of representation in the unrepresentable [and] the inadequacy of language and images” (Raine, 1996, 245). She demonstrates that it is not only the human body that can barely be known by representation but also the ‘otherness’ of materiality and mortality that are always more than can be represented.
In a description that seems to extend ideas in Mendieta’s artwork, Annie Dillard (1999) writes of her experience at an archaeological dig in China at the tomb of the first Chinese emperor, Emperor Qin, who had thousands of life-sized clay replicas of his army buried with him over 2000 years ago:

The earth was yielding these bodies, these clay people: it erupted them forth, it pressed them out. The same tan soil that embedded these people also made them; it grew and bore them. The clay people were earth itself, only shaped. (15).

Seeing the open pits in the open air, among farms, is the wonder, and seeing the bodies twist free from the soil. The sight of a cleaned clay soldier upright in a museum case is unremarkable, and this is all that future generations will see. No one will display those men crushed beyond repair; no one will display their loose parts; no one will display them crawling from the walls. Future generations will miss the crucial sight of ourselves as rammed earth. (18).

The landscape is evident in not only mortality but also as the actual constitution of the material body. Mendieta’s use of her body to act as a living threshold to the nonhuman rather than simply as an act of division and Dillard’s image of ourselves as ‘rammed earth’ speak of the physical impossibility of such a union and the terrifying thought of ultimate decomposition of the self in death and also of “the unimaginable situation of human body and non human landscape literally occupying the same space” (Raine, 1996, 245). Similarly, dialogues of diverse voices can never be expected to be in full communion—one body, one subject; if realizable, this would be death (Nancy, 1991).

Raine (1996) argues that the relationship between the human and nonhuman earth remind us of the impossibility of ever really knowing the other and of the utter necessity of adapting our dialogue to attend to that impossibility. Moreover, we begin to see each other in new ways when we realize that it is only for a lifetime that our bodies are separated from each other. Sumara and Davis (1997) remind us, “We are never merely interruptions in the ongoing events of others’ lives. We are always and already participating in the unfolding of their lives” (304).

Further to Mendieta’s exploration of body as threshold, Rogoff’s (2000) description of the body as border suggests that our material selves are full of “…questions, anxieties, incredulities, and the sense of unreality that so often permeates such zones of disidentification.” (137). As border zones, there is a constant reassembling in the process of
becoming and we acknowledge our own bodies as sites of questions, wonder, and indefinity—fascinated by ordinary, moment by moment experience. As borders, we might pause a little longer, letting the texture of a particular time and space and place make meaning of us—its landscape, its horizons—before we continue our relentless pursuit of ‘understanding.’ Identifying ourselves as ‘questioning,’ may keep us from certainty and from the certainty of uncertainty that robs us of our ability to be awake to diversity and to notice significant moments and potentialities—all valid and all worth exploring. Being a ‘border’ and/or a ‘threshold’ moves us out of comfortable relationships and partnerships, exposes us as individuals who can’t be extricated from those whose joy and pain surrounds and defines our own. There we find, as Nouwen (1966), that what we experience as most unique seems to be the most concretely embedded in the public condition of being human.

Local

When I show the quilt that I am making to the A/r/tography class that I am taking in my Master’s degree program, several people are more interested in the other side of the quilt—the messier, frayed, unfinished pattern that is not supposed to count. This interest in the other side might speak, more than anything, to my lack of skill at quilt-making! Or it might remind us that the most compelling stories are the ones that we don’t know the endings to, the ones that aren’t already sewn up. As I look at the connected pieces of used fabric, I am reminded of Bryson and de Castell’s (1996) description of postmodernism’s disruption of fixed positions: “a pedagogy of salvage and recycling.” In the class, I share my thoughts on how past experience and the sense we make of particular meanings are mediated by language, dialogue, silence, and gesture through our bodies as we engage in actions together and how it was, that in the making, I suddenly realized that the quilt does not represent the context. Context cannot be a covering under/on which people behave in certain ways. Instead, people consciously and deliberately generate context (Nardi, 1996).

Context is both internal to people—involving objects and goals and also external to people—involving other people, artifacts, and settings and mediated by dialogue, silence, and gesture. We continually use our narrative construction of memory to creatively make something new (Ellsworth & Kruse, 2005) of our ongoing process of negotiating who we are and how we fit in relation to others (Park, 2005). The external and the internal are interconnected and the folds and openings only serve to highlight the way everything is united. An individual actively modifies and is modified by situations and places as a direct result of responding to them (Vygotsky, 1978). Bal (2002) similarly describes the context of a work of art “…where the viewer’s unconscious meets the work’s power, in a pastness of each viewer’s memories that comes after, not before, the encounter” (178).

odds and ends

she was intrigued by his rebellious attitude and his poncho with central american symbols—an unusual outfit for a prairie lake in the 80s. he came in on his harley and seemed to have crashed the retreat, uninvited, determined to make a statement. as they lay in the dark on the patterned garment, she asked him why he’d been in jail. “the big m,” he said tiredly, “what’s that?” she wondered.
“murder.”

it all seemed odd but then the extent of her lived experience was still small and she wanted to know what it was like to be everyone else.

Location is such a context. It’s a process of vulnerability—it resists fixation and is insatiably curious about the webs of differential positioning (Rogoff, 2000). We can inhabit the same physical space, regardless of its name and still be in different layers or weaves which are defined by what they are and what they are not and what we do and make of them. Locations must perpetually resist closure, finality, or simplification. I am beginning to understand my own reluctance to identify with categories and labels and language that forecloses on peoples’ ability to make choices. The resistance has provided moments of belonging and unbelonging and has occasioned an emerging realization that all locations in which I have lived have both something and nothing to do with me. Remappings of contexts and identities are fluid, alternative, fragmented—collections of shifting social constructs and definitions of gender (Rogoff, 2000). These changing textures demand perpetual questioning, compelling an ongoing grappling with a social response—our relation to others. Rogoff (2000) describes unbelonging as “the express purpose of journey and its unexpected consequence” (18), of which difference and subjectivity are constitutive parts.

The quilt itself is/becomes, the collected meaning that is temporal and local in a certain time and space and yet is a part of a constant iterative sequence of motion. It is the complex rapport of unbounded dialogue, silence, and gesture that invites teacher learning to spiral towards new senses of meaning, bringing the other and the self, the interior and the exterior, into folded and overlapping positions. Textures of time and space and experience emerge through actions taken in response to the ever-changing agendas of issues that we identify and also those agendas that are imposed upon us. New stories emerge in how we daily fabricate location and meaning with our bodies—through a word, a look, or a gesture.

The square quilt pieces of yellow and brown fit comfortably against one another but the irregular shapes caused bulges in the fabric which rippled across the other pieces until I was finally able to sew them down as folds. These folds produced a bit of interiorization of the exterior—joining the outside with the inside. If it were not for the nonconforming pieces, the two sides would have remained separate. Like the new
understandings we pause at tentatively, the quilt is an interweaving of elements where the unusual, the everyday, and the marvellous are always imbricated (Sumara & Davis, 1997)—one with the other. Once we are awakened to the wonder of our eternal entanglement with each other, we discover that our centre actually borders someone else’s geography. We raise our hands in greeting and nod in recognition.

The quilt should probably remain unfinished.

Endnotes

[1.] A/r/tography is a research methodology that explores the imbricated practices of artist, researcher, and teacher through acts of ongoing living inquiry.

References


Grasslands National Park, Val Marie, SK.


About the Author

Valerie Triggs is a first year PhD student in the Center for Cross-Faculty Inquiry at UBC. She is on a temporary leave from her position as curriculum consultant in Saskatchewan's Chinook School Division. Her research is focused on inservice teacher learning that places human and ecological relationality at the centre of curriculum, through art-making, and personal experience with local landscape and geography.