Living in Paradox: Metaphors of Conflict and Contradiction in the Academy

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*Living in Paradox* is a three-part installation created from information gathered in a study of pre-tenured teacher educators working to change the way teachers are prepared in Canadian faculties of education[1]. Over a three-year period I engaged with six teacher educators in different institutions to explore with them their experiences of being teacher educators new to the professoriate within a contemporary climate of change. We had in-depth conversations and electronic mail exchanges about personal and career histories and their experiences in the academy. I spent time with them in their places of work and, in some cases, their homes. I gathered institutional and personal documents and artifacts including autobiographical writing, course syllabi, appointment books, and institutional policy documents.

The conversations, which mainly focused on their experiences as professors, and which revealed the deep-rootedness of their individual commitments, were poignant reminders of the powerful role that history—personal and institutional—plays in the push and pull of change. Individuals with rich personal and career histories in education, and a tireless commitment to making a difference by challenging the status quo, experienced the power of academic institutions to preserve their own traditions and institutional histories. Their stories of frustration, oppression, steadfast determination, self-sacrifice, and naïve optimism revealed the underbelly of the institutional beast: skeletons in institutional closets.

The paradoxical nature of much of the professors’ experience was an overarching theme from the research analysis, as was their experience of struggle or conflict. Often, when talking about certain issues and experiences, words seemed woefully inadequate to convey the passion and emotion felt. Frequently, the teacher educators used graphic language to create images or metaphors to describe elements of their experiences. The power in their message could not be contained by or adequately communicated through printed words on a page.

As I searched for a way to authentically convey the teacher educators’ stories and experiences, I was also mindful that the stories needed to be told with great care. Through the telling, I could not place individuals at risk. Details and idiosyncratic complexities, which could surely identify individuals and institutions, needed to be camouflaged. Particular events and incidents, which both illustrate and reveal, had to be presented carefully. Aspirations, commitments, and strategies, which perhaps had remained covert, except to me, needed to remain so. I could not blow anyone's cover. I could not risk anyone’s position and well-being.
Researching inside the academy is tricky business. It is tricky for researchers, especially those who are members of the academy themselves. It is tricky for those being researched, especially those pre-tenured faculty members not securely protected by a promise of academic freedom. I was mindful of the weight of moral and ethical responsibility that I carried to keep the trust the teacher educators’ placed in me; I had assured them that no harm would come. By virtue of my position as an insider, I was privileged to hear and hold their stories. By virtue of my position as an insider, I was (hyper)vigilant about the potential impact that telling these stories would have on the lives of the participants and others.

The stories reveal some terrible truths about the academy. They also reveal the strength of commitment and the unabashed passion of those who challenge the status quo; they are inspirational stories. Therein lays another, methodological, paradox. I needed to find a way to tell without telling (brown, 2000). I needed to find a form that was not only authentic but also safe; that depicted the rawness of emotion I heard and felt but without revealing anyone’s identity; that drew others in to the familiarity of the stories but not the storytellers.

I looked to the arts for inspiration, particularly installation artists such as Edward Keinholz and Nancy Reddin Keinholz, Martha Rosler, and Marcel Duchamps (see, Cole & McIntyre, 2008 for a discussion of installation-art-as-research). With the help of three colleagues[2], I constructed three-dimensional representations of three of the predominant overarching themes that emerged through an analysis of the stories told. The artistic renderings are also informed by my experiences as a teacher educator and teacher education scholar. The themes reflected in the installation are well documented and supported in other research and literature on the teacher education professoriate and the role of Education in the University.[3]

What follows is a virtual tour of the three-part installation that includes images of each piece and an accompanying artist/scholar statement, which incorporates a descriptive analysis. My intention is to draw readers/viewers in to connect with the truths expressed. At an intimate level, I invite readers to dwell in the ‘lifeworlds’ (Van Manen, 1990) of the individual teacher educators whose experiences are portrayed here. At a broader level, I invite readers to engage with the illustrations as renderings of the institutional norms, values, and expectations that define teacher educators’ lives in the academy. In the spirit of transformation, and with the goal of working toward the creation of a more humane and generous reality for teacher educators in the academy, I invite engagement that is embodied and empathic, evocative and provocative.

**Installation 1: Academic Altarcations**

media: common objects; clothing; wood; vinyl; metal; rubber; peau de soie; polyester batting; audio recorded text; acrylic paint on canvas; music, *Canto Gregoriano*, Coro de monjes del Monasterio Benedictino de Santo Domingo de Silos, 1973, EMI Records, S. A., Madrid, Spain.
Approaching the exhibit hall, your attention is grabbed by the haunting sounds of melodious chanting (Coro de monjes del Monasterio Benedictino de Santo Domingo de Silos). The voices lead you to an altar simulating a university setting. Carefully placed on a cloth-covered table are burning candles and a black mortarboard. The familiarity of the academic headdress piques your curiosity. Behind the altar, painted on two large canvases,
are familiar symbols—a blackboard covered with faint traces of erased words, an office door with an appointment schedule and posted notices to students, an ivy-covered wall. A chronology of academic garb—school uniforms of different sizes and an academic gown—hangs on pegs under the sign “Men’s Room.” You smile at the subtle statement.

All of this, though, is backdrop to the centerpiece of the assemblage. Lined up on an electrically driven blood-red conveyor belt are several tiny, white, satin pillows. You watch them laboriously climb their way to the altar and you feel a stabbing pang of recognition as though the symbols positioned on the pillows and passing before your eyes are of your own life: a torn family photograph, gold wedding band, empty pill bottle, ticking clock, wad of money, and on it goes. You recognize those sacrifices made religiously at the altar of the academy. You are mesmerized by the rhythmic movement and sound of the conveyor belt, the monks’ voices, and another familiar chant that, for a moment, you think is your own inner voice. In contrast to the beautiful and harmonious male voices are the recorded, spoken words of rationalization—“But I love my work. I really, really love my work.”

“Too close to home,” you think, as you walk a few feet away to another part of the exhibit.

Artist/Scholar Statement

One of the most striking and prevalent self-contradictory yet ‘truthful’ expressions made by the teacher educators I spoke with is represented in this installation. It is the paradox of sacrifice. The academy, it seems, is a sacred place held in high esteem because of the power
it holds and grants to its worthy members. For those with aspirations and commitments to make a difference in the lives of students and teachers, and by extension, to better society, the academy is a place where that kind of influence is deemed possible.

Such individuals with secure, well paying jobs in schools or other educational settings often leave those situations to take up positions as university-based teacher educators, usually for much less salary and little or no job security. Frequently, their quest for an academic life uproots them; they leave home and family. Sometimes they literally leave behind spouses and children; other disconnections might be more metaphorical. Once affiliated with the academy, the desire to stay is so strong that they become increasingly self-sacrificing. Work becomes all encompassing, all consuming. Pressures to perform as teachers, researchers, scholars, and community members, and personal ambitions to “make a difference,” leave little time or room for life outside work, especially when those two sets of goals require different but equally demanding ways of working. Self-care is reduced to luxury and family commitments become a challenge to uphold.

The promise of the academy, though, is seductive. Despite the personal and professional sacrifices made religiously at the academic altar, often with considerable associated pain and loss, the chant, echoed and re-echoed, resounds: “But I love my work. I really, really love my work.”

**Installation 2: Wrestling Differences**
media: plastic action toys; plastic; nylon; elastic; wood; acrylic paint; narrative text; slides

A miniature version of a wrestling arena is set up on a nearby table. A toy wrestling ring sits in the middle of a simulated set of bleachers filled with jeering onlookers. Standing menacingly in the middle of the ring are two World Wrestling Federation-syndicated toy action figures. Up against the ropes, appearing vulnerable but in a defiant pose, is a much smaller, female figure. Poignant narrative excerpts from pre-tenured female teacher educators working in the academy for two to five years are projected onto the spotlit,
smoke-filled, painted backdrop of the arena.

You stand for several minutes as the startlingly familiar words appear and disappear in a rhythmic presentation, thankful that someone dared to speak out.

I was the faculty rep. for three years. Part of my job was to show up half an hour before the meeting, greet people, ask them how they liked their coffee, and come back with a tray of coffee.

Being half-time and, um, I might as well say it up front—being female and not in the inner room to know all the local goings-on—I really wasn’t aware of how decisions were made

Those of us on term contracts were all women. There were no women on tenure tracks. It was time we had women on tenure tracks.

It’s a culture that works a fair amount on lobbying and confrontation so you have a lot of head butting, pissing contests, and cock fighting.

It’s only been just recently that we’ve discovered that it’s the women who have the heavy enrolment courses.

There’s a lot of distrust—even fear—of women who are strong.

It’s a culture that is resistant to self-examination and any kind of change, and good at manipulating things to make it look like change does happen.

I put up with the macho treatment for a while—tried to be humorous about it—but then I couldn’t stand it any longer. I thought I’d get chucked out for that.

So many of the connections and decisions are made in contexts where the boys get together for a beer or in the locker room. Women don’t have access to that so they’re always marginalized from the core community.
More phrases are written on the bleacher-like supports. You reel at the blatancy of some of the words:

She stepped over the line and she got smacked done.

She’s been replaced by a man.

If you complain, you’re a bitchy female.

I’m surprised by the animosity caused by my being a woman.

“Amen,” you mutter as you finish reading.

Artist/Scholar Statement

The academy, as a bastion of patriarchy built on norms and values of rugged individualism, competition and hierarchy, is an adverse arena for many women faculty members. While the number of women holding full-time academic positions in Canadian universities has increased (albeit “glacially” according to Drakich and Stewart (2007)) and improvements have been made, parity continues to elude women across disciplines.[4] Regardless of discipline, women still have difficulty progressing through the ranks. And, despite an overall increase in female faculty presence, women continue to be dramatically underrepresented in other than feminized disciplines.[5]

There is a particular irony associated with the persistent chill in the climate of Education faculties because the profession (along with other faculties such as Nursing and Social Work) has been traditionally recognized as feminized and continues to be perceived as women's work. As such, Education faculties, with low standing in the academy, continue to struggle for acceptance as legitimate members of the academic community.[6] Within Education faculties, many women, like those interviewed, struggle both for acceptance by
their male counterparts and against the norms and values upon which the dominant male culture is built (even in a feminized profession). For many women teacher educators, like those interviewed and others reflected in relevant literature, this is the paradox that defines their struggle.[7]

Many of the messages women receive, when they make known their presence and difference, are in the form of suggestions (both subtle and not so subtle) about how to become socialized and fit into the existing culture. The kind of political posturing and self-justification that go on at faculty meetings, or the isolationist ways of working that are expected and rewarded, are two examples. Some not so subtle messages serve as reminders to women of their proper place in the male-defined hierarchy. For instance, the kinds of roles to which women are assigned and the ways in which they are expected to assume their responsibilities in those roles. Consider for example, the pre-tenured faculty member, who was invited to join a committee and then given the responsibility to make and serve coffee, or the assistant professor who chaired a labour intensive committee and was left to carry out all the time-consuming clerical work, only to be succeeded the next term by a male faculty member who was provided full clerical support for the committee work.

These are two blatant examples drawn from the many stories told by women teacher educators in this study. And then there is the invisible labour associated with field- and community-based work and guidance and support of students, which counts for little in the academy, but which takes up a large percentage of women faculty members’ time and energy.

To challenge and change the status quo is a tiring and seemingly relentless struggle, sometimes with little visible gain. It is a sparring game that often involves men and women in an oppositional stance. The gendered nature of the academy presents particular problems for women in faculties of Education where the arena of change extends from within the faculty to the broader university context.

**Installation 3: A Perfect Imbalance**

media: wood and metal, foam blocks
A Perfect Imbalance is a simple balance scale set atop a chest-high, cloth-covered table. Your curiosity is immediately aroused because, while the scales seem balanced, the items on each side of the scale are clearly disproportionate. A small sign invites you to try to balance the scale. Knowing that achieving balance between the personal and professional sides of your life has always been an elusive pursuit you decide to try.

You topple the high tower of blocks from one side of the scale. Each foam block is labeled to represent a different activity or role required of professors of teacher education (teaching, service, professional development, community development, in-service education, family, recreation, exercise, etc.). From the other side you remove a single multi-faceted block labeled with activities the university deems most meritorious. You notice that this single block is much heavier than the others and you catch on.

You know that, according to the values and standards of the university, activities that have mainly local or personal implications and which demand inordinate time and energy do not carry much weight. The heavy weights from the university’s perspective are those activities that result in intellectual and financial prestige and international acclaim. You know that the scales will only balance when the entire pile of blocks defining teacher educators’ work is in place. As you replace the last block at the top of the teetering tower you reflect on how imperfect the balance really is.
Artist/Scholar Statement

Teacher educators’ work is a balancing act of activities, demands, obligations, commitments, and aspirations. The multiple, diverse nature of their work, and the time and energy commitments involved in the elusive pursuit of a balanced professional life also makes a search for balance between the personal and professional realms of life a fruitless effort. The dual mandate of teacher educators’ work that requires them to serve both the academy and the profession keeps their gaze focused on the fulcrum of their lives striving for balance. Work and personal (self and family) commitments pull against one another.

Time spent on teaching and field development activities must be kept in check so that sufficient time is available for research and writing. Decisions about the kind of research to engage in, where to publish, and for what purposes must take into account the different sets of values that define the profession and the academy. Aspirations and commitments to work collaboratively must be carefully monitored (even in spite of rhetoric that suggests otherwise) so as to live up to the university's standards of individualism, especially for purposes of tenure and promotion. A divergence in research interests must be curtailed in order to establish a specialized and unique program of research. Attitudes, values, and practices cannot be overly challenging of the status quo upon which all structures, policies, and norms are based.

The problem for most teacher educators, especially those committed to change in teacher education, is that no matter how hard they try, the scales are impossible to balance because the weights are uneven to begin with. According to the values and standards of the university, teaching, service, professional and community development, and other activities that have mainly local or personal implications, and which demand inordinate time and energy commitments, do not carry much weight. The heavy weights from the university’s perspective are those activities that result in intellectual and financial prestige and international acclaim. For most teacher educators, it seems, any balance that is possible to achieve is always imperfect.

I stand at the edge of the exhibit, observing—those who hurry by, head bent, eyes half-lowered, furtively scanning the scene; those whose curiosity draws them to the familiar form of print where they stop to read the artist statements before they make a brief visual survey of the installation and move on; and, those who stand transfixed as if caught unawares by their own reflection. I am intrigued, for different reasons, by the range of ways in which people engage with the exhibit. I am particularly struck by those who seem to deeply connect with the work: those who are overcome by tears; those who seem reluctant to leave; those who return again and again; those who say aloud to no one or anyone, “This is my life!”

While watching and thinking, I am aware of yet another paradox inherent in this work. Despite the obvious resonant quality of the installation, those who see themselves and their experiences reflected in the work might not be likely to tell their story this way. Depending on institutional context, some pre-tenured faculty—those, generally speaking, whose stories I tell—might find the risks associated with this kind of research representation too great.

Arts-informed research (Cole & Knowles, 2008) does not easily fit into any of the categories typically used to define and judge academic merit. Creating, transporting, and
mounting installation-art-as-research is enormously time-consuming and labour-intensive. Valuable time and energy required are taken away from activities that ‘count.’ Assistance with technical skills required to create some parts of the installation only adds to the time demands and cost of the work. And after months of working, learning, and creating, finding appropriate venues can be very difficult.

There is no doubt that writing in academic prose for publication in conventional scholarly journals is a more straightforward, relatively risk-free, undertaking. Indeed, I also took that route with this study. Articles I wrote were mainly academic exercises, products of intellectual engagement, just lines on my CV—easy to count, and therefore useful in that regard. But writing and reading those pieces (Did I read them again after they were published?) did not move me the way that the installation does. Living in Paradox affects me each time I work with it, install it, think or write about it. It touches me now. During the writing of this article I was moved to tears more than once, felt a range of emotions from anger to pride. But I also was reminded of why I do this work.

In 1996, during the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting in New York, I visited the Whitney Museum of Contemporary American Art where I experienced the work of installation artists Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz. Their installation art had such a profound impact on me (in stark contrast to the research presentations I heard at the conference) that I returned home with a commitment to strive to re-enchant (Gablik, 1991) research to be accessible, evocative, empathic, embodied, and provocative (for a fuller account of this experience see, Cole, 2004). In short, I wanted to imbue my work with a stronger sense of moral responsibility and, hopefully, to make a difference.

I think Living in Paradox has made a difference for those who connect with the work and the experiences represented. I expect that even those who engaged with the work primarily through the comfort of the artist/scholar statements will return in their minds to review the pieces of the exhibit they saw from a distance. The words and images might stay with them and the power of those words and images could very well prompt some form of positive action. And those who, for whatever reasons, scurried by with barely a glance at the work might not be in such a hurry the next time. Or perhaps they and the others, and maybe even you, are right now re-imagining the installation, re-writing the script, re-creating the culture and context of teacher educators’ work in the academy.

It is possible.

[1] This research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
[2] The installation, Living in Paradox, was constructed with Gary Knowles, brenda brown, and Margie Buttignol.
[5] See Saunders, Therrien, & Williams, 1998; Chamberlain, 1988; Drakich & Stewart,
2007.


References


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