# STUDENT JOURNALS:

# *Private Lessons in Public*

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> *"In all my writing," Vaclav Havel explicitly recalled not long ago, "my starting point has always been what I know, my own experience of this world I live in, my experience of myself. In short, I have always written about what matters to me in this life; what I see, what interests me, what arouses my concerns—I shouldn't think I could find any other place to start from. However, it has always been my hope in my writing that, by bearing witness to certain specific experiences of the world, I will be able to disclose something universally human, something specific only being a way and a means of saying something about being in general, about people in today's world, about the crisis of modern-day humanity—in other words, those matters that concern us all."*
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> (Vladislov, 1986, p xiii - emphasis added; cited in McElroy, 1990)

When I was first invited to participate in a conversation about the relationship between public and private realms in teacher education, I readily agreed, relishing the opportunity to address the issues and questions surrounding what I do. At least part of what I do is I teach student teachers, and if pushed to somehow characterize my teaching then I would say I aim to teach reflectively and to teach for reflection.

As the deadline for putting my thoughts on paper loomed larger over the horizon, my enthusiasm waned. It was a much more difficult task than I had anticipated. The topic itself, a deconstruction of the notions of public and private and their implications for teacher education, is difficult enough. What makes speaking and writing about this subject difficult for me in particular is that it raises questions about the relationships between the private and the public in my own teaching, in my own life, and specifically in my own journal work in relation to that teaching and that life. It also compels me to take up these matters in a serious way, and to write of them as truthfully as I possibly can. As Vaclav Havel (1986) reminds me, my starting point is what I know, not what I know in some abstract theoretical sense, but what I know in my bones, what I know in my heart, what I have experienced of this world I live in, the world I teach in, "my experience of myself." Like Vaclav Havel, I am compelled write about what matters most to me in this life I live. My hope is that the matters of which I write are, in some sense, matters which concern for all of us engaged in teaching and teacher education.

Part of what makes this kind of truth saying most difficult is that it calls me to do what I continually ask my students to do; that is to reflect on, and to theorize about my practice and to do this in a way which does not negate the way in which I work, the way I which I teach, the way in which I write. That is, this paper asks me to go public with insights and questions about my teaching. My experiences teaching student teachers become a thing, in the Heideggerian (1971) sense of the "Thing" as the name for something that is at all, something that is near, something that calls for a response, a recall. Although these "things" of my teaching are experiences which are mine and are truthful, they are fragile, transparent, like a newborn baby and I resist delivering them to the public realm. Why am I, like students I have taught, reluctant to give public voice to that which is to

some extent private? Perhaps because like student teachers, I have many questions and much dis-ease about what I do, what I say and how I say it when I teach. In particular, the writing of this text becomes a circle where at each turn I am continually faced with the multiplicity of questions which are raised by "journaling"—by teaching reflectively and by teaching for reflection—by inviting a merger between the public and the private in my own discourse, in my own life, as well as that of the students I teach.

### Reflection-on-Demand

In what way then, are journal writing, and other forms of reflection, a part of my teaching in pre-service education classes?

I teach an introductory course called "Language in Education" which is integrated with an eight week practicum component, where students may or may not be teaching language arts. In addition to the Language in Education module, these student teachers take several other courses, including a "Seminar on Teaching." It is in this seminar on teaching that these students do much of their journal writing. Because of this, I do not request they keep a journal for my class. Instead, I engage students in a kind of reflective writing assignment which asks them to describe in a narrative form a significant or meaningful incident related to their own teaching and learning. Then I invite them to reflect on that story by articulating its significance for them as they contemplate becoming and being a teacher. As this is a language education class, rather than a course on "teaching" per se, the students submit their reflective writing as part of a writing folder, which might contain other kinds of writing. So in this context, forms of reflective writing are ushered into the course in a surreptitious way, as a kind of "language arts method." Ways and means of going public with their stories, and insights gained from them, often include sharing their ideas and drafts of their pieces with their peers as well as with me. Sometimes too, in class we do public readings of finished pieces.

Creating time and space for people to articulate who they are and why they have chosen teaching in the first place is not typically part of the curriculum of teacher education. In professional university programs such as teacher education, questions about who we are, our intentions, goals and desires are thought to be worked out in advance of entering the program, as if somehow such things could be worked out in advance. In my experience, journal writing as part of course work can create such a space for reflection on such important questions (Oberg, 1989) but what a tiny, crowded space it is. With the demands of learning classroom management, lesson planning and good interpersonal skills, somehow journal writing or any other kind of reflective way of speaking and acting becomes another swear word, in the rapidly growing curse repertoire of student teachers. Journal writing can become one more thing students have to do to get a grade; one more hoop, and a hoop they may have to jump in five classes simultaneously. I have enough trouble myself writing in one journal; I cannot fathom the difficulty of trying to keep five journals at once, for five different instructors with five different sets of expectations. Thus the possibility of journals becoming for students an invitation to see, to hear, to listen, to learn about themselves and teaching in another way becomes drowned out by habit and faddism. Reflective writing (whether in a journal or another modality) becomes a frivolity—one more fashion item in the current educational parade.

Because conventional institutional requirements for record-keeping compels instructors and supervising teacher alike to ask such questions as "Are students thinking enough about the lessons they teach? Are they doing the readings? Are they paying attention in class? etc.", journal writing itself often reduces to a form of strip tease where student teachers are to take off their clothes and display what they are learning. I have tried to steer my little ship clear of such coral reefs but more than once I have found myself stranded on just such infusions of power and control into my practice.

And yet for myself and many of the students I have worked with, journal writing about one's practice can be something other than a lexical strip-tease or "reflection-on-demand." The following cursory inquiry into my own practice speaks to both the possibilities and the difficulties of journal writing, both the kind I do and the kind I ask students to do.

### Private Readings of Public Texts

I select readings which might **inform** students' understanding of their teaching experience and I ask them to respond thoughtfully to such readings. My intent is that students will begin to explore teaching as a question of being and of living, rather than purely as a matter of technique and a mastery of a discourse. This term students read selected excerpts from Van Manen's *Tone of Teaching* (1986) and responded to those selections in a personal rather than an analytical way. By personal I mean, students are invited to draw connections between what they read and their recent student teaching experience. I ask: Why did you select this part? What does this text say to you about being a teacher? In what way, does this piece inform your understanding of your experience as teacher?

Initially, students formulate their responses in the pri-

vate realm but eventually they take the turn into the public domain. Their responses may be recorded in their journal (or not) and their journals are read by others (instructors, supervising teachers, friends). Perhaps their most public display takes place when I invite students to share their responses with the rest of the class. [Ironically, I find it hard to find the time to prepare and share my own such reflections.] A significant leap into the public for many, such a leap raises a significant question: Is this kind of interpretive task appropriate in the context of student teaching?

I invite reflection through children's literature, and its exploration of the phenomenology of the lived experience of being a child, and of being human. One of my intentions in reading a children's novel aloud to the class is to "demonstrate good language arts practices" (the importance of oral reading, exposure to literature, etc.). On the other hand, these novels themselves, and my oral interpretation of the text, "bear witness" to things that matter most in our lives; the experience of friendship, of death, of being a student. Last term I read Katherine Patterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* to the class. When I reached the story's climax, where Jesse discovers his best friend has drowned, I was overcome with emotion and I began to cry. In a final piece of writing for the course a student reflected on his experience of this moment:

> *My whole life didn't shatter when Dr. Chambers read this portion of the story although my mind went on an emotional roller coaster. The death of Leslie brought back a lot of sad memories that I have been trying to push behind me. I had wanted to scream and cry right then and there in the classroom, but because of the stereotypical attitude "men aren't supposed to cry," I refrained from doing so. The urge to let the tears flow was strong, but I held it back in order to prevent being labelled as a wimp.* (KT, 1990; p.1)

For Karl, this novel, or perhaps my emotional response to it, prompted him to write about a recent series of deaths in his life, and this writing surfaced strong emotions.

> *Reflecting on these experiences with death has been difficult with relation to writing this story. I have been writing this story in small sections because my emotions let go with the memories.* (KT, 1990; p. 6)

As a teacher educator, I invite reflection as a way of exploring the personal in the public context of the classroom. My intention, for both students and myself, is to open up to the possibilities of taking our practice and our lives as the place to begin; that is the place to begin asking "Who am I as this person becoming a teacher?" and to work on answering that question truthfully. And yet, ironically students do not always experience this as possibility. Karl concludes:

> *I would be reluctant to read stories of that nature to my students as a beginning teacher. . . I would be afraid of letting my emotions go in front of the class. I would be afraid of the students' reactions and of their parents' reactions.*

Teaching reflectively and teaching for reflection dismantles, or perhaps undermines, the practices which retain a barricade between the public and the private. This false duality names emotions as trespasser in the public domain. And yet once we open the gates between the private and the public, an entire spectrum of responses, including emotional ones, issues forth. This raises the question of which responses are legitimate in the context of teacher education? What does an emotional response signify? What is its function in this context? It seems to me that my emotional responses to what I read and write, and to what students read and write, acknowledges my response to something. Perhaps an emotional response traces the connections between our private past and our public self, or our connections between our selves and others. Perhaps an emotional response signifies my engagement with students, my openness to what truly matters to them and to me.

I do not mean to suggest that journal writing become psychotherapy, nor a place for students to get stuck. And this is part of the difficulty of teaching in that uncharted territory between the public and the private. Like the students I meet, I am confronted with an emotional response to explorations of my own subjectivity, no matter how tentative such explorations may be. For to take up my own practice, and the life which informs that practice, in a serious way is to address those things which matter to me most. Thus the emotional response no longer surprises me, but I am continually called to ask what it means, what it signifies and how am I to respond to it, in myself and in students, in a responsible and truthful way.

### Surfacing Stories or Experience as a Form of Knowledge

Beyond working with the texts of others, I invite students to surface their **own** stories, to begin to see their experiences, including their childhood, as a form of knowledge. In the privacy of their journals students rec-

ollect their formation as readers and writers, or for some, their formation as non-readers and non-writers. "Trace the history of your becoming a reader [and a writer] and any significant events which mark this process," I ask them. For some, these stories are surfacing for the first time and they take up the challenge of interpreting them seriously. Confronted by the questions raised in their stories, they trace—sometimes tentatively but often courageously—the connections between the present and the past. One mature woman student writes:

> *It seems as though reading has always been important to me. I've asked myself "What does literacy mean to me? When and where did reading become such an important activity for me?" To answer these questions I must go back to my seventh year, the year I was sent away to boarding school into a situation that would last for the next three years, although it would be in a different institution each year. It was a frightening experience for me. It seemed as though the entire day was spent doing chores, going to church, or going to school. There was never time to play and have fun. I felt a lot anger during those years. But I soon learned I could escape from feeling the loneliness and confusion which were a part of the world I was living in. I learned to escape to the fantasy world of books at every possible moment. When I was studying or reading I was safe from the strap. . . and I was safe from the heavy chores. . . Books became the safe place in my world.* (Marie; 1990, p. 3)

Ironically, Marie was particularly reluctant to do this kind of writing. And yet within the fabric of her reflection is a deepening awareness of self - as child, as woman, as reader, as teacher-to-be. This awareness began with her bringing to words those things which matter to her as a student teacher, as a human being.

Articulating our stories offers the possibility of seeing our past experiences as a form of knowledge and thus interpreting it in new ways. Yet, Marie's text hints at the potential difficulties involved in facing our own stories, particularly ones which are surfacing for the first time. Marie's story raises some of the ethical and pedagogical questions of working in this way with student teachers.

While prepared to "go public" with her story, Marie would not publicly claim it as her story: she asked her name be kept anonymous. Sharing the experience with me, as instructor, was as public as Marie was willing to go. What are the various moments in speaking publicly about what interests us, what matters to us most, and how all of that has come to be? As a teacher educator, what is my responsibility to students' in their decision about when and how to go public with their knowledge of self and its relationship to being and becoming a teacher? Part of going public is the possibility of opening one's interpretations to questioning from others. What is my responsibility to engage students in critical questioning of assumptions implicit in their stories?

### Going Public with My Own Private Lessons

What calls us to teaching and what is the ground from which we teach? What does it mean to be a teacher and to teach and to teach well? Now these kind of questions are at the heart of my examination of my own practice and my own life within, and as indistinguishable from, that practice. These questions move the beginning point of educational inquiry (both the kind of inquiry I do as an academic and the kind I want students teachers and practicing teachers to engage in) into the private world of often unarticulated experience. Now when I try to answer truthfully such questions as "What calls me to teaching and what is the ground from which I teach? What does it mean for me to **be** a teacher and to teach **well**?", I must return to *"what I know, my own experience of this world I live in, my experience of myself. In short, . . . what matters to me in this life"* (Havel, cited in Vladislov, 1986, p. xiii). This is where I ask students teachers to begin as well; with what Foucault might call an exploration of their own subjectivity: who they are and how they have come to be who they are.

But I must admit it is much easier to invite students to reflect on these questions than it is for me to take up the questions myself. In my journaling with a colleague, I write:

> *It is a new term, one month has passed and I've made no time for reflection, no time for journal writing. Why is it that I have chosen to do something which is so inherently difficult for me? My professional and personal life is very busy, every minute accounted for and full of activity which involves meeting commitments to others. [I understand that being busy is partly out of my control, i.e.. the nature of the work I have chosen, but partly I am responsible in that I keep taking on new work, work that tends to scatter my energies; I must understand why I do that.] The journal is a commitment to myself but as a research project it has evolved into a commitment to others; and this makes it a difficult commitment to keep. What are my motives for wanting to keep a professional journal and for wanting my students to do the same? I want to understand who I am, as a teacher and as a person, and I want students to do the same. Who I am—as teacher—is something I am only now [very vague-*

*ly] coming to understand. It is as though, my life [particularly my teaching life] has been a very unfocussed and faded black and white photograph, almost like a Polaroid picture developing very slowly. At this point there are various spots in the picture which are coming into focus, but much of the picture is fuzzy, shifting, like images in a dream.*
(CC personal journal, 1991-1-29)

I begin by asking students to write stories from their teaching experiences. I begin with stories because stories are the most concrete—and yet the most general way—of getting to experience. Our experiences are most often captured in stories (Novak, 1978) and those stories, and the way they are told, disclose much about our assumptions, our practices, the way we think and do things, how we participate in our own formation as a person, as a subject (Foucault, 1982; Kritzman, 1988). Our words and deeds in our stories are more likely to reveal who we are than any essay we may write. Moreover, it is in reflecting on such stories that students begin to see their experiences as a form of knowledge, and their understanding of those experiences as a kind of wisdom.

And yet stories are not an easy place for students to begin, precisely because their life, and what matters to them most dwells in the personal. If Havel is right and what matters to us most is our life; and if Foucault, Caputo (1987) and aboriginal people are right (Chambers, 1989) and the point to living is living; and if the Buddhists are right and our task is not to go anywhere but to learn to be here in the fullest way possible, then where else we should begin except with our own lives. For teaching is one practice in particular that has everything to do with us, everything to do with who we are and how we live our lives, and how we understand how we live our lives.

Taking up the personal in a serious way in teacher education means taking up self-awareness as serious work, and taking up understanding of self in relation to self and others (that is, reflexivity) as a form of knowledge, as kind of practice, as a kind of theory. I do not mean to deny the importance of the public discourse about teaching and education. But by inviting stories in journals, I am trying to return to the personal, and the subjective as the beginning point for the kind of knowing in which practice is situated.

And yet, the personal offers its own kind of trap. As I mentioned before it is a place where we can get stuck in our own stories, that is stuck in an examination of **self** as either something entirely of our own making or as something created entirely by others, without seeing the intricate connections between our stories and those of others. For who I am is not simply a personal matter, something of my own making: who I am is partly constituted by, and deeply embedded in, a particular personal and collective history, as well as sets of social and institutional practices, and a corporeal body situated in a physical natural world. I find it difficult to engage students (student teachers or practising teachers), or myself for that matter, in the cyclical move from personal experience to these "larger systems" and back again (Gendlin, 1987). While we need to begin with experience, teacher educators have a responsibility to help student teachers understand the inextricable connections between our experiences and the world in which we live.

Another way I have tried to erase the "the line that has been drawn" (Grumet, 1988) between the public and the private lives of students teachers is by sharing some of my journal writing in class. For students to take up the challenge of beginning with themselves, they must trust that such movement will be taken seriously; that it will be honored and will be understood. When I read from my journal to a class, particularly one I have prepared for that class, students see and hear my going public with teaching life, going public with what has re-

Laura Pettit, *pencil on paper*, 1991

mained private. They see my work to understand myself as teacher as I teach them, and as I stand in relation to them.

I once read a journal entry where I reflected critically on my own actions in an incident which involved this particular class of student teachers. One student teacher wrote me that while "it'd be an honest day at the law office" before he would read his journals in front of a class, he was deeply appreciative of my willingness to do so. In this class, I had encouraged students to question critically, for example, the course textbook. For this student, my reading of the journal—my voicing publicly questions related to my teaching with his class—signified that he could take my invitations to question seriously.

On the one hand, such a public reading of private reflections on teaching orients students to the difficulties of teaching reflectively, the difficulties of continually teaching/living in the questions I have raised about my practice: as Foucault would say " to question over and over again, what is postulated as self-evident . . . to dissipate what is familiar and accepted, to re-examine rules and institutions. . ." (in Kritzman, 1988, p. xvi).

On the other hand, the act of infusing the public discourse of my methods class with my private reflections demonstrates my commitment to teaching as a kind of ethical act. It is ethical in the sense that teaching is a thing which calls for recollection, the kind of "recollecting forward" of which Kierkegaard spoke; ethical in the sense that in teaching one is always "living in the flux" (Caputo, 1987) and thus never able to work out fully in advance what the appropriate response to a given situation will be.

Teaching is an ethical act too in the sense that the questions I ask of students ought to be the questions I ask of myself. Vaclav Havel (1990) reminds us that being concerned about words is "not just a linguistic task. Responsibility for and toward words is a task which is intrinsically ethical" (p. 6). So this act of making my personal deliberations about my teaching part of the public discourse of the classroom opens up the possibility of responding to this thing we call teaching in a responsible way, and demonstrates my commitment to do so.

Because what I am looking for, whether it be in journals or in some other format, is a way to address the question of teaching with students, not as a matter of technique but as a question of being. As Havel said, "something specific is only a way and a means of saying something about **being** in general, about people in today's world, about what really matters." It is my hope that reflection, through such vehicles as journal writing, can create and preserve a space for students to take up teaching and their own lives as something that really matters.

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