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AUTHOR Freidus, Helen
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ABSTRACT

This case study documents one graduate student's reflections on her personal and professional development as a teacher as part of a portfolio project. Her story describes how she has blended a teaching philosophy that combines the traditional pedagogy of her own early education with her subsequent experiences as a student and as a teacher using non-traditional approaches. She reflects on the traditional conserving influences that have shaped her existence and the role they play in a sense of security and connection to the dominant culture. The use of portfolio evaluation enabled her to view her less traditionally-constructed curricula in a positive way, having previously judged it only against traditional standards. Through reflection, she was able to discover the self-validity in a progressive approach. The telling of story is used in this case to document professional knowledge and the value of the portfolio as a tool for reflection. (JLS)

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The Telling of Story: Teachers Knowing What They Know

by

Helen Freidus
Bank Street College of Education
New York, New York

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The Telling of Story: Teachers Knowing What They Know

Helen Freidus
Bank Street College of Education

"Of all the things that are taught in the Lower Trainswitch School for Locomotives, the most important is, of course, Staying on the Rails No Matter What."
(Gertrude Crampton, 1945.)

In an essay in the Harvard Educational Review (August, 1986), Nicholas Burbules looks carefully at the story of Tootle. Written by Gertrude Crampton and published by Golden Books in 1945, this story remained in print for more than forty years. Tootle is the story of schooling, the schooling through which baby locomotives learn to be big locomotives. It tells how they learn the skills, behaviors, and habits of mind that will enable them to assume the responsibilities of adult engines.

Tootle is a young locomotive who is immediately identified by his teachers as having great potential. He has a natural talent and works hard at his studies - even those like Stopping for a Red Flag Waving which he does not at all like. Then, one day a "dreadful" thing happens. Enticed by a black horse, he strays from the tracks and frolics with him in a meadow. Despite his promises to himself that this will be a single adventure, the next day, as he rounds the curve of a meadow, he is overwhelmed by the desire to explore. Once again, he departs from the tracks and spends a joyful day. Upon his return to the roundhouse, Bill, the head of the school, finds grass between his wheels and discovers what Tootle has been doing. He does not confront Tootle, but, with the help of the mayor and the community, devises a way to insure that this does not happen again. He calls upon all the villagers to join him in this effort to save Tootle. The next day, each villager, holding a red flag, hides in the meadow along the track. Each time Tootle begins to get off the track, the closest villager waves his flag. So thoroughly have young locomotives been educated to the importance of stopping for a

red flag that Tootle is invariably brought to a halt. No matter which way he tries to set off for the meadow, he finds himself facing a red flag. Finally, believing the meadow is filled with nothing but red flags, he turns back toward the track and sees Bill holding a green flag. "This is the place for me," says Tootle as he recognizes that true pleasure is the reward of those who stay on the tracks. "Hurray!" shout all the townspeople as they see that Tootle will indeed fulfill his promise and grow up to be one of the best and the brightest.

As Burbules points out, there are several themes which the story teaches children through words and pictures. The story tells what schools are for. They are for learning the rules society values, so that youngsters may learn to become responsible adults in their society. The story points out that some rules are inviolate; they are not to be discussed or even questioned. Failure to follow these rules can lead to disappointment to society and bitter consequences for the individual. Moreover, the story makes clear that adults have the responsibility of insuring that children grow up to carry on the behaviors and beliefs most valued by society. Finally, for those who stray, at least those strayers who are perceived by society as holding promise, it is possible to acknowledge one's mistakes and get back on track. In short, the story is an allegory communicating that, regardless of personal style or interest, there is one unidirectional, preordained path to success (Burbules, p. 245). This path is open to all, but it must be recognized and carefully followed for the good of the individual and the good of society.

Interesting though this is, you may say, what does Tootle have to do with the narrative of teachers, the stories they tell, and their ability to communicate what they know? The answer is that stories like Tootle reflect the messages to which most teachers who have grown up in our country have been socialized in school and society. It is a part of the unspoken knowledge base they bring to their own classrooms. For those with transformative visions of education, it is only one part of that knowledge

base, a discordant part to be certain, but nonetheless a real part that needs to be recognized and addressed. It is through the sharing of personal narrative, the sharing of the stories that once were important to them and those they now hold to be important, that teachers have the opportunity to examine and rework the beliefs and behaviors that drive their work. As they share their stories, they tell what they know and how they have come to know it. For, in Bruner's words, "knowing and communicating are in their nature highly interdependent, indeed virtually inseparable" (pg. 3, 1996). Through this process of story telling, teachers come to **know** what they know and to **identify how** they know it.

This paper is a case study documenting the telling and retelling of stories by one teacher, Barbara, as she struggles to make meaning of her beliefs about and practice of "good teaching". The medium through which Barbara tells her story is portfolio. At Bank Street College, where Barbara was an in-service candidate for a Masters Degree in Education, portfolio is one option for the culminating project. Portfolio is a process through which students document their mastery of professional competencies using their own words and images. They identify six experiences that have been meaningful to them as teachers and learners and identify a theme that weaves these experiences together. They construct verbal or visual artifacts to represent each experience and write reflective captions explaining the significance of these experience for themselves and the implications for their work with children. The artifacts and captions together with a framing statement of personal philosophy and a concluding statement in which students identify connections they discover among the artifacts and between the artifacts and their statement of philosophy tell a story, a story of each person's professional journey, a story that documents his or her acquisition of professional knowledge and the personal lens through which he or she has internalized this knowledge.

Barbara's portfolio is titled: "Making a Place for Me". In it, she recalls and discusses the congruent messages that she received from her school and community as she grew up. Those messages which first shaped who she was and what she valued in many ways resemble the messages Tootle received.

As a child of a middle-class African- American family, I was raised to realize success in the way in which society defined it. I was prodded to pursue a noble, profitable existence which would be revered by the dominant culture. ...Somehow, I learned that my success in school was contingent upon catering to the wants of my teachers. In return, they would give me the grades to be successful in the world. ...It was very clear in my mind that school was a system functioning in the manner which I described and equally as clear to me was the notion that the structure of school was not to be challenged, only to be perpetuated.

Barbara was a "good student". From early childhood she learned to please and to be successful by conforming to the implicit and explicit values and mores of the world in which she lived.

The pedagogy through which Barbara learned to make her way in the world also resembles the pedagogy Tootle encountered. In the story of Tootle, there is an explicit description of the pedagogy of success. Learning is equated with rule-driven habit formation. Sensory exploration, wonder, curiosity have no place in the process. In her portfolio, Barbara talks of classrooms in which the good students were those who sat quietly in their seats, concentrated intently, and "listened carefully to the words of their teachers. Docile, obedient, and respectful, good students recorded information in their notebooks, committed it to memory at home by repetitive reading and recitation, and demonstrated their newly acquired competence on tightly constructed, timed tests. They pleased their teachers and in turn their teachers lavished them with praise and good grades.

It was in high school that Barbara first had an experience like Tootle's experience in the meadow; she was tempted by a different vision of the way things might be. Fascinated with popular culture, she envisioned a school in which learning would be

fun and engaging, where she might bring her personal interests and the knowledge she had gathered in pursuit of these interests into the classroom with her. These interests and knowledge might even, ultimately, serve as a foundation for a career. The vision was, however, too far from the reality she knew.

I had never heard of students' interests being woven into the learning process. As far as a livelihood involving my interest in popular culture was concerned, I did not know anyone whose career embraced such interests and I had no awareness of any specific jobs which would favor this interest.

She worried that if she were to risk deviating from the system that it might be for naught. "What if pursuing my interests do not afford me contentment or worse yet, what if my efforts to pursue a career in popular culture results in my becoming destitute?" And so Barbara returned to the track, and together with her parents decided that preparation for the legal profession would be a wise choice for someone like herself, a conscientious student with a talent for writing.

Unlike Tootle's, however, Barbara had a second chance. She went to a college where she was encouraged by peers and professors to examine her expectations, to find what was meaningful to her. It was not easy, and it did not happen immediately.

At first, when confronted by this amalgam of eager listeners, I think that I reiterated the words of my parents and teachers. I knew what they taught me to know and believe. But, over time as I listened to myself espouse their views as if my own, I realized that I did not always agree with what they thought and I worked to figure out what I truly believed. ...I felt as if I had truly found a place for myself, not a place dominated by the views of others but only for me.

Inspired by her own new experiences, Barbara discarded her plans for a career in law and decided to become a teacher. In Women Teaching for Change (1988), Weiler discusses the role played by images of possibility in the lives of those who succeed in their quest to become transformative teachers. Her research indicates that those who succeed in actualizing their desire to break the model of traditional schooling have seen

examples of such practice in their own lives. Barbara now had seen such a model; the visions she imagined in high school no longer seemed so bizarre. Indeed, they made sense in the context of her new learning.

Remembering the experience, Barbara describes college as “a birthplace for me, a temporal, almost Edenic haven for me as a burgeoning thinker and individual” . The realization of her goals were, however, still a distant destination. In pursuit of a Master’s Degree in Afro-American Studies, she found herself in an institution where the dialogue was one of transformation, but the practices were much closer to those she had experienced in her early schooling. Here, Barbara’s success depended on her ability to negotiate a kind of bilingualism, combining the vocabulary she had learned in college with the skills she had developed so well in her early schooling, the ability to identify and articulate thoughts that conformed to the expectations of her teachers.

Slightly wary but maintaining her idealism, Barbara accepted a teaching position in a prestigious urban private school. Her goal was to create a teaching environment in which she would adapt the philosophy and pedagogy she experienced in her undergraduate years to that of the junior high school classroom. She planned to “co-construct with her students classroom environments where learning was engaging, relevant to life experience, and purposeful.” However, it was not long before she discovered that her vision was shared neither by her colleagues nor the administrators who had hired her. Their vision, much like the vision of Tootle’s teachers, was that direct instruction provided the best foundation for success in college and beyond. Learning, they saw, as an individual matter; success would be the outcome of personal effort, natural gifts, and good teaching.

Like Tootle, Barbara felt herself being carefully “nudged” to conform to the traditional practice of the school, the kind of practice so highly regarded in her early schooling experiences. However, older and more conscious than Tootle, Barbara struggled to resist the urge to conform. She believed, as she had been told, that as long

as her students were learning, she would be free to create the classroom environment of her choice. She decided to remain in her school and work covertly to change the system. She went about this by working quietly in her own way. Believing "that by using undefined spaces or loopholes within the traditional structure of schools I could slowly carve out and craft a more progressive tradition. Over time, however, the traditional, conserving institutions sought to fill those loopholes and crevices and eventually my freedom to teach as I saw fit was slowly eroded."

Closer to the track than she once had been, nonetheless, unlike Tootle, Barbara still was not willing to say, "This is the place for me." Instead she began "to employ more subtle, less detectable modes of subversion and instead of seeking to transform the conserving institutions at which I worked, I sought to select and redress injustices on a less grand level." She also decided to study for a graduate degree at an institution with an articulated commitment to progressive thought. This decision brought her to Bank Street College and ultimately to the portfolio process.

When, having completed all of her course work, Barbara chose portfolio as a culminating project, she did so with the expressed desire of having an opportunity to reflect upon and tell the story of her own professional journey. Despite this conscious decision, the process was not an easy one for her. Functioning like the red flags Tootle encountered, traditional concepts of what constitutes academic rigor blocked her efforts to believe that the integration of reflection and self study with content knowledge could be considered a scholarly enterprise.. As Barbara selected her artifacts and wrote her captions, she found it extremely difficult to find a place for her personal experience amidst the grand conversation of formal theory. Her training in keeping her own voice silent when producing documents for academia continued to influence the ways in which she communicated what she knew. She found that she had been less successful than she thought at resisting the messages of traditional schooling.

Slowly as Barbara was supported in her efforts to tell the story of her own personal and professional development, that she began once again to loosen the hold of the traditional ways. As she looked more deeply into her artifacts, worked with her portfolio mentor, listened to peers who were also engaged in the portfolio process, and shared her stories with them, she began to revisit her undergraduate experience. This time, however, she was immersed not only in the experience but in making meaning of the experience and sharing this meaning with a community. The process was like a mini-ethnography with self as subject.

I have learned several things from the process of constructing this portfolio. First of all, I realized the extent to which I have struggled and still struggle to surmount the traditional conserving influences which shaped my existence. ...I felt a deep and abiding connection to the traditions of the dominant culture for they were familiar and as such afforded me security.

The importance of this feeling of security cannot be minimized; it is a connection to economic security, emotional security, and academic security. Breaking with these traditional influences means, in a sense, breaking with the wisdom of the ages. It is uncharted territory, enticing but unknown. It requires changing deeply engrained habits of thought, many of which one imagines to be long- abandoned (O'Laughlin, 1992). Barbara found: "I was reluctant to even reflect on several of the artifacts in this portfolio because I had become convinced that they did not reflect sufficient intellectual rigor on my part." Barbara went on to describe the ways in which the judgments of her "conserving colleagues" had led her to devalue her own work.

As I judged these curricula by traditional standards, I began to be ashamed of them and to feel that they were representative of my failure to construct curricula in a competent manner. I had to actually work up the courage to confront what I had come to perceive as my failure (but oddly enough, what I was so proud of when I initially constructed them).

Barbara had been silenced, so thoroughly so that she could not even look without pain at the exemplars of her earlier goals. As she had once been a "good student", she was

now back on track, becoming a "good teacher" by living up to the expectations that others had for her.

Using portfolio to tell her story made a difference.

The process of constructing a portfolio prodded me to review and ultimately to reevaluate these curricula. When I sat down and looked at them, I could see before me that I had placed a great deal of work and effort into the (their creation). As I analyzed them further, I rediscovered the soundness of the methods employed. I learned that I had a reason to be proud of my work again and that my feelings of guilt and shame over these artifacts were the result of forces within conserving institutions clouding my vision.

I was astounded to see how firmly grounded my methods were in the theory of progressive education. ...Theory and research ceased to be a study on a page in a child development book; they became a part of my life and the educational life of my children.

Within the context of the traditional institution in which she taught, Barbara may have continued to value the language of progressive thought, but it is unlikely that she would ever have been able to implement it. There was no forum for what Freire (1984) calls candid "reflection upon situationality", no vehicle prodding her to become conscious of how and why her teaching was deviating from the vision that had motivated her career choice, no motivation for her to take charge of her own practice. She could and did voice anger and frustration at the conserving environment in which she taught, but, like Tootle, she could not or did not understand how along with her students, she was being kept on track. Without awareness, she had no sense of agency.

When I was completing my portfolio, I felt as if I was really discovering who I was and what I was about. For so long, I felt as though I was trying to cloak this person or to reveal her only in settings where she would not be attacked for her radical pedagogical perspectives and practices. The portfolio process pushed me to do more than to truly see myself for who I was, It pushed me to show this self to others.

Barbara's story has implications for both teachers and teacher educators.

Looking at the telling of her story informed by the story of Tootle helps us to

understand just how strong are the socializing messages of traditional education, how accurate Cochran Smith (1995) is when she speaks of "teaching against the grain." Secondly, it speaks to the importance of forums in which teachers are helped to tell their stories. Barbara's story, however, shows us that opportunity is essential, but it is not enough. It cannot be expected that when the silencing structures are eliminated stories linking personal and professional funds of knowledge will immediately spring forth. Very few teachers have ever been asked to tell what they know in terms that are deeply meaningful to them. Even fewer have been asked to articulate the ways in which what they believe and what they practice are consonant. The telling of story to document professional knowledge is a new habit of mind. It needs to be a goal for both teachers and teacher educators.

Barbara's story also shows the many influences, both subtle and overt, through which teachers come to perceive their beliefs and their actual efforts to engage in transformative pedagogy as youthful idealism or, worse yet, actual disservice to students. There is a need for formal structures that push teachers to create communities of practice in which both beliefs and pedagogy can be shared, validated, and extended. Barbara's story shows us that the ability to reflect upon and tell stories that link theory and practice takes time. Barbara's story begins in her own early childhood classrooms; its telling begins with her own undergraduate experience. It took her many years and many experiences to identify and articulate what Nona Lyons (1996) calls "the long strands of connection" that undergird the making of a reflective practitioner and the telling of the stories that document the process. This paper has not tried to tease out the ways in which issues of race, class, and gender pose specific obstacles to the process of candid telling of story. One cannot help but surmise that careful analysis through those lenses would further document the risk that is involved in the telling of story and the need that exists for formal structures to promote the development of communities of practice that promote dialogue.

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Address: <i>610 W 112 St. NYC, NY 10024</i>	Telephone Number: <i>(212) 875-4700 4533</i>
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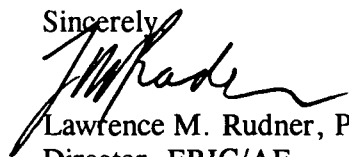
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