



Putting the NonVerbal into Words by Guy Ewing



Recently, I was sitting at the drop-in at the Parkdale Activities and Recreation Centre (PARC), a community program operated by and for psychiatric survivors. I had arranged to meet someone there, but he was late, and I was left sitting in a corner, watching the room. Members were coming and going, sitting around tables, talking and drinking coffee. In the open kitchen at the back of the drop-in, members and staff were working together to prepare lunch. As I watched, unable to hear what people were saying exactly, only hearing the lovely

hum of conversation, I felt myself becoming emotionally drawn in to a dance of people physically interacting with each other. At one table, people leaned close to hear each other. An elderly man with a cane walked in the door, recognized a friend and hugged him. A tall young man weaved his way between tables and people standing, moving carefully so as not to interrupt.

So much of what we learn in communities is never spoken, only expressed in our bodies, in the way we move with each other. Watching the dance of bodies at the PARC drop-in, I experienced a large part of the knowledge that has been created in that community, about people, social interaction, values, life.

This kind of knowledge is created in community literacy programs as well. In fact, part of what moved me watching the drop-in at PARC were memories of the drop-in at Parkdale Project Read, where I used to work. I remembered how, for learners, this kind of knowledge sustained the difficult and potentially lonely work of learning how to read, write and use numbers. More than that, I remembered how important this kind of knowledge was for all of us, in itself.

One of the challenges of community literacy work is to articulate the importance of non-verbal knowledge, to put it into words. In doing this, we could affirm and make apparent a kind of knowledge which is at the heart of community literacy work. ☞

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PLUS - the first annual Literacy Enquirer Summer Reading List for Literacy Workers who need to think about something else



What's Story Got to Do With It by Sheila Stewart

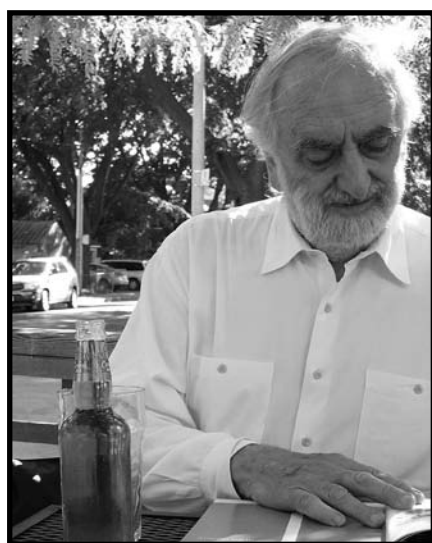


Learners tell us stories – at intake, in groups, as we pack up to go home. We hear family and schooling stories of struggle, trauma, neglect, abuse, perseverance. We listen; sometimes we sit with them and write down their words. We use language experience approach to create learner stories. We talk about our groups and learners with our colleagues when we find time - telling stories over lunch or after meetings of what is going well and what isn't working.

Do some learners feel they need to present themselves in a manner that we will deem them “worthy” of support, appropriate to help, needy enough, but perhaps not too needy for our already over-taxed programs? How do we present ourselves to funders so we will appear professional, competent, and when needed, compliant, not too challenging? What circumscribes which stories are told where? To try to get funding and make sense of our work, we tell different kinds of literacy stories. What are the frames which shape the stories we tell? How honest can we be with funders, learners, ourselves?

We publish certain learner stories and use these stories to tell further stories about literacy. What are the patterns we find in learner stories? How are these similar and different from those of other stories? Newspaper articles likewise have an arc, a predictability, sometimes a tacked-on happy ending, a quotient of despair, conflict, redemption.

Who do we tell our stories to? As literacy workers, are we caught in a web of stories for others?



Story is what we consume. It's what we want, what we live. How can we examine this narrative impulse to make more room in our programs for that which is truly life-giving? How do our story-making selves connect with our learning selves? How can we play with our own stories and help learners do the same with theirs so that we can question the stories we tell, shed new light on our story-making and create more possibilities for learning? Can we find

possibility in their stories so that we have something to say, something to give back to them, a posture and gesture that holds their bigger, more powerful self? How do we hold hope for learners? How do we hold hope for ourselves?

Many of the learners we work with don't have what they need, their birthrights are stolen from them, they are boxed in, trying to get their papers or a job. They haven't left the community they



live in for years, haven't had a day off, been on a holiday. They might not have anyone trustworthy to leave their kids with. They leave their child with the neighbour to come to school, leave the child alone to get herself off to school. They need the childcare money for food. They need something, someone. So we listen, nod, smile, and work with learners to try to help them connect with written and oral language, with each other and with their

communities. We can read educational theory, but we can't theorize away poverty, abuse, racism.

I'm a proponent of research, particularly research-in-practice. I have hope that the world of research and theory, documenting and giving ourselves time to think and talk can help us further develop the work we do and help shape literacy policy. Such change is slow. In order to find our strength, we need to research ourselves, our literacy worker selves entwined with our living, learning, breathing selves. Why do we do literacy work? What we get out of it? What infuriates us and why? What about our own learning? The first research is research into ourselves – it can be scary to look within, and to keep doing it, feeling it, knowing it, and claiming it.

Our stories are entwined with those of our learners. Literacy is partly the making and re-making of stories. The more we can uncover our own stories, the more we can hear those of learners, and the more hope we can hold for us all. ☞

