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Storied Contexts

“All there is to thinking,” he said, “is seeing something noticeable which makes you see something you weren’t noticing which makes you see something that isn’t even visible.”

(Maclean, 1976, p. 92)

On a plane to Phoenix, the woman sitting next to me turned and initiated introductions. Then she asked the usual follow-up question: “What do you do?” I responded, “I am a university professor.” Instead of the critique of contemporary education I have come to expect in such situations, she asked, “When was it that you decided to become a teacher?” There were a few perfunctory responses I could have made, but instead, I found myself telling her a familiar story (Shadiow, 2009):

Winter Saturday Classroom

I was about ten years old when I remember trying out and liking the role of “teacher.” During the bitter cold winter afternoons on the Iron Range in Northern Minnesota my parents expected me to keep my four younger siblings from getting underfoot in our small house. On many of those Saturdays, I willingly corralled my brother and sisters

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into my brother's bedroom, which doubled as our playroom, and directed them to sit behind the metal TV trays I had set up in rows of two so we could "play school." I relished leading an afternoon of lessons: there were well-worn Golden Books to guide their reading assignments, hand-printed spelling and vocabulary lists I had prepared to address their literacy deficiencies, and even math and science worksheets from my own elementary school class work to round out the curriculum. Just as I had suspected—being the teacher was more fun than being the student. I got to pick out who was recognized to speak, I could give permission (or not) for one of them to go to the bathroom, I could reward behavior with gold stars, and on occasion discipline inattention by whacking them over their head with damp mittens. I was in charge, and I liked it.

My airplane seatmate and I shared a laugh and moved to talking about her job. Then we each lowered our tray tables, an ironic echo of the TV trays in those winter Saturday classrooms, and we proceeded to focus on the very work we had just spoken about.

There are three stories here: the story of the plane conversation, the story of my first attempts at teaching, and, less visible, the story of the "teaching school" itself—why was this the reminiscence I chose to tell? I have asked my siblings if they remembered my initial attempts at teaching—they do. I have asked them if they ever told their own story about those experiences—they have not. And now that I am a professor, what is it about this "Winter Saturday Classroom" story that not only has me remembering the details, but has me regularly retelling them? To paraphrase Maclean's words introducing this chapter, When I see something I am not noticing, I am led to see something that isn't even visible. Our stories have lives beyond the moments of their retelling.

I have learned that the process of recalling, retelling, scrutinizing, and analyzing these stories sheds new light on my teaching. This process invites me into a level of reflection resembling the

nested Russian folk dolls where opening one reveals another and opening that one reveals yet another. The stories included here are among those that have enabled me to go “assumption hunting” (Brookfield, 1995), to undertake the task of reflecting on my actions in teaching (Schön, 1983), and to go “inward bound” in order to understand the “outward bound” (Palmer, 2007). My stories are intended to illustrate directions such an uncovering can take and to guide your engagement in a similar process. In doing this I refer to stories like “Winter Saturday Classroom” multiple times to show how my understanding of its impact changes. The challenge of paying attention to the autobiographical roots of educational practices is only rarely taken up in university settings (Greene, 1973), no more so now than when Greene made that observation forty years ago. We are most likely to reflect on individual events than we are on the patterns shared by such events.

Most of us find ourselves testing out and then sharing stories about the use of successful classroom strategies or assignments with another faculty member. When faculty colleagues do the same, we may reflect on the extent to which the strategies they describe are applicable to our own work. We are unlikely, however, to think about the shifting patterns in our teaching that the addition of new teaching techniques or the elimination of old ones precipitates. Doing so, moving more deeply into the nesting of stories, can precipitate an awareness of how our perspectives have come to be shaped.

Shifting Perspectives

There are clichés that characterize overarching shifts in teaching: moving from “sage on the stage” to “guide on the side” is a common example. Recently, a business professor described this transition by characterizing himself initially as an “imposter with the roster,” hiding behind an authoritarian persona but trying to move beyond being that “sage on the stage” (Starcher, 2010, p. 1). In this sense, Professor Starcher builds a new classroom story, and he tells that

story to readers of the *Teaching Professor* (and likely to colleagues, family members, or maybe even strangers on planes).

Like Professor Starcher, we experience our careers as a process. Through this process we build a collection of stories that are indelible enough for us to tell others. We are not likely to consider, however, the role that these stories can play both in framing our teaching and in providing us with insights into the *origins* of our past, current, and emerging choices of classroom techniques. Simply put, when a new technique works, we incorporate it into our teaching repertoire; if we perceive that it does not work, we discard it. Often, we do one or the other without considering why the new strategy does or does not resonate with the teaching persona that we built in the classroom.

Harvard professor Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot says that to substantively understand our teaching we “have to learn to recognize the autobiographical and ancestral roots that run through [our] school lives” (2003, p. 7). Some of the ancestral roots of our professorial practices come not just from our role as “teacher” but also from our role as “student.” We each have touchstone stories from our work in graduate school, for instance, about our intellectual and academic ancestors. When new doctoral students come into my office and hint about the lack of confidence they’re feeling in those first graduate courses, I find myself often retelling this story about my own graduate school experience.

As an undergraduate student I felt my ignorance made me conspicuous. So much was unfamiliar to me as a shy, first-generation college student. While these feelings were mitigated somewhat with each course and each degree I completed, vestiges of them continued to echo in my head as I enrolled in a doctoral program. Even though I had been recruited by the professor who became my major advisor, I struggled to match my eagerness for advanced studies with the voice in my head that doubted I was up to the intellectual challenge. Shortly after I arrived on campus and got settled in

the teaching assistants' office, I decided to confront my insecurities and see what might lie ahead.

Grad School Decision

I approached my doctoral advisor and asked if he would loan me a dissertation because I wanted to see the kind of culminating work I was expected to complete. He obliged by handing me a recently completed dissertation. I went home to read it, worried that my fears that my admittance to the doctoral program had been a sham might be confirmed. They were. It took me hours to work my way through the intimidating document. My attempt to make sense of it confirmed my ignorance. The next morning, I walked sadly to my office and began packing up. I justified my decision to leave by thinking that I would be saving Dr. Davenport and others the arduous task of trying to teach me, and I would save myself from the looming failure. I returned the borrowed dissertation.

After thanking Dr. Davenport I put the dissertation on his desk along with the program withdrawal form. He looked at me with a puzzled expression on his face and asked why I would make such a decision after only a few weeks. I gathered my resolve and explained, "I am not smart enough to be here. I read the entire dissertation, and I didn't understand it." (In my head there was a silent subtext: "Your belief in my potential to do this work was unwarranted.") I pushed the withdrawal paper toward him.

To my surprise he actually chuckled. "I didn't give you the dissertation expecting you to read it all the way through—I don't understand parts of it myself!" He went on to assure me that graduate school was about learning and not about already knowing. He was there, he said, along with my committee members to support my work and growth in my studies. He smiled and said it was likely that if a first-semester doctoral student were to read my own completed dissertation straight

through, he or she would probably struggle to understand the work as well. I mentally struggled to balance his words and my fears.

We compromised and I agreed to stay until the end of the withdrawal period. I did stay and complete my coursework and wrote a dissertation. You would think that after all these years I would consider this story a relic of past insecurities, that I might even find some humor in what seems to be an exaggerated reaction to a simple act. But through the years I have learned that no amount of evidence to the contrary assuages those feelings. I have just become better at hiding them.

Even with roughly twenty years between the stories “Winter Saturday Classroom” and “Grad School Decision,” I find they share at least a couple of basic themes: the teacher held the power (as a student in the second story, I was metaphorically raising my hand asking for permission to leave the room), the teacher held the answer, and the answer was the key to achievement. The addition of the “Winter Saturday Classroom” story and the “Grad School Decision” story to the story “Kirby’s Paper” in the Preface—only three stories from early in my educational biography—gives me a glimpse of the overarching narrative I bring to my teaching. These individual episodes contribute to a larger narrative that has an unacknowledged and unexamined role in my approach to teaching today. Clearly, my educational story has some roots in the “sage on the stage” model.

My reflection on these stories comes first from the stories themselves, then from the details in the retellings, and then from an initial step of analysis. This will not always be an easy or comfortable process, but you will find that it does lead to clarifying insights into themes in your teaching. This book provides a process for undertaking such reflection as a path toward growth. Before pursuing insights from the stories in which we are characters, looking at

stories professors “write” as a natural part of their work heightens an awareness of the inherently storied nature of professorial lives. Seeking a deepened understanding of our teaching calls for a “systematic, thoughtful, thorough and objective analysis” (Weimer, 2010, p. 24). One way to undertake this work is to begin with the story-making that is an inherent part of our daily work.

Daily Story-Making

Although I have used some of my own stories to illustrate points in speeches and professional writings over the years, I was unaware of the ways I author stories on a daily basis in my work as a college teacher. This eventual realization opened my eyes to my own authorship of stories that were so close to me that I had not seen them: I painstakingly update my academic story in a curriculum vitae; each semester I outline what is essentially the story of a course in a syllabus; and as a part of my research I try to write clearly and convincingly about my findings and how I arrived at them. Once it occurred to me that I constructed such stories on a regular basis I began to think about my work slightly differently. Without consciously intending to do so, I came to analyze each of the items to see what I could learn. Eventually this led to my realization that the types of stories I wove into my speeches and writings could themselves be sites for analysis. It turned out to be one small step toward my work in scrutinizing such stories rather than just retelling them.

By briefly giving you a glimpse of how you are similarly the author of stories in these areas, you will have an entry point into the ways your work is infused with unacknowledged stories. Whether you are in physics, music, anthropology, nursing, or engineering, for instance, each of you constructs stories in the language of your discipline. Paying attention to these stories may be a new endeavor, but daily story-making is not a wholly unfamiliar activity.

Vita as Story

We are used to taking pains to explicitly tell our academic biography in our curricula vitae. We list degrees obtained, manuscripts published, courses taught, committees served, and honors received. A closer look reveals the locales, the dates, the progression, and the scope of our work. Embedded within vita entries are stories about the professors, institutions, colleagues, students, and circumstances that have contributed to the crafting of our professorial career. Recalling such stories can be a starting point for paying deliberate attention to the autobiographical roots of our teaching practices. There is an entry in my curriculum vitae that says I graduated from Minnesota's Bemidji State College in the late 1960s. That simple entry hides a very significant part of my job history:

Library Firing

I was fired from my work-study job in the college library during undergraduate school. Fired for reading books rather than shelving them. Getting a job in the library meant I had a refuge in the unfamiliar environment of a college campus, and I was eager to prove I deserved to be there. Working in a library was simply the continuation of the hours I had spent in book stacks when I was growing up. The card catalogue and Dewey Decimal System had been guides I used as maps to unexplored worlds. When I began the college library job I worked quickly at returning books to the stacks, but my supervisor had no additional tasks to assign to me when I sought her out. Often she charitably told me to do my homework. I was so thrilled to be working in a library but so disappointed at being told to do the homework that I could do later in my dorm room. After a few weeks of slowing the pace of my work and feeling like I was missing opportunities to learn, I purposefully pushed the book cart into the stacks with a plan: I would read the first paragraph of the books before I returned them to the shelves.

It occurs to me as I write this here that as an eighth grader I had responded similarly to a related experience. After being told I was not allowed to move from the children's to the adult side of the local public library until I was a ninth grader, I vowed to read through the children's fiction section beginning with the books on the top shelf of the A section. As a college student, as I had then, I kept my plan a secret. Now, I no longer went looking for my supervisor—she came looking for me. Instead of my asking her for more work, her mission was to ask me for more work.

This cycle repeated itself three or four times. I would go back to doing the job too quickly, then I would get frustrated enough to return to my surreptitious reading. Eventually, she found me sitting on the floor in the stacks, interrupted my reading, and told me my services were no longer needed. Embarrassed and shame-faced, I went back to the financial aid officer who had placed me in that job and confessed to both my firing from the job and my secretive reading. He listened to my library story, and with one phone call he was able to place me in a position as the student assistant to the English Department chairperson.

Within the last decade I have retold this "Library Firing" story a dozen times, often after someone has introduced me to a group by referring to some entries on my vita. In my acknowledgment of the generosity of my host, I point out that my curriculum vitae (a phrase derived from Latin and roughly meaning "the course of my life") *should* more honestly include entries such as:

1957—home-school teacher, Hibbing, Minnesota

1968—fired from college library position, Bemidji State College

1979—student of Dr. Davenport, Arizona State University

Even though these three incidents are not explicitly listed in my vita, they inhabit it. Poet Demetria Martínez titles one of her books *Breathing Between the Lines* (1997). Our stories live between the

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lines of our academic accomplishments even after the experiences that gave rise to the stories are years past.

I invite you to give some thought to a few of the stories that live between the lines of your own vita. Consider people or circumstances that are invisible entries in your academic account. This might provide the impetus to share the anecdotes with one or more others, to jot down a few notes, or just to spend a few moments recalling the incidents. Use this opportunity to draw on your own curriculum vitae to illustrate to yourself how stories are integral to your formal biography.

A curriculum vitae is only one example of the way that our academic lives are, in fact, lives of everyday story-making.

Syllabus as Story

We walk into the first day of a semester's class with syllabus in hand, and we are prepared to explain to students how they will be characters in the story of a course called, for instance, American History. It is unlikely that we have ever thought about a syllabus as containing features of a story. In literature, stories are said to have seven common elements: character, plot, setting, theme, tone, style, and point of view. Even in classes far removed from literature, such as courses in political science, calculus, biology, or art, these elements of stories are a part of how we structure our courses. I do not intend to convince you that this is so, but to provide you with two examples and an opportunity to consider the presence of some of these elements in your own discipline-based course planning.

In thinking about it this way, consider the plot of a course entitled "Alexander Solzhenitsyn's Literature and Politics" I team-taught years ago with a political science professor. We constructed the course around the question, "Was the Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to Solzhenitsyn primarily for his literary contributions or his political stance?" A variation of this "plot" summary appeared in the course catalogue. The "setting" of the story involved two

professors from different disciplines and a class of undergraduates meeting in the social science building one day a week for sixteen weeks from 2:00 pm to 5:00 pm. The story's "theme": "Some seemingly settled matters are open to productive debate." These elements (character, plot, setting, theme) were explicitly present in our syllabus although not labeled as such. Three additional elements (tone, style, and point of view) were also implicitly present in the syllabus and modeled in our first class session. My colleague and I set a "tone" of respectful disagreement in the way we conducted the first class, we communicated a dialogic "style," and we each brought a "point of view" to our introduction of the content.

I invite you to consider a course you teach now or have in the past. The elements of story may be more evident to you in a course you have developed yourself. Think about how one or more of the seven narrative elements play a role in how your course is framed. Which of the elements of story are evident in your syllabus? What additional elements are evident in the way you introduce the syllabus and conduct class?

Throughout the semester, students build their own stories of the courses they take. Their class participation, exam performance, assignment responses, and office-hour visits may have us revising the story we outline in the syllabus. While we do not think about this explicitly, those revisions mean that students become coauthors.

Students Asked Me to Leave

I distributed the carefully constructed syllabus to the juniors on the first day of English 335, "Methods of Teaching Language," in which the theme of the semester was that "Language studies are integral to teaching English." I wanted to know what background students brought to the study because I was never certain they were as prepared as they should be. Once the students each introduced

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themselves, I asked them to complete a prior-knowledge quiz as a preface to our study. The results would give me an idea of the extent to which they had the background necessary to proceed or if I needed to extend the introductory material to remediate their insufficient preparation. Class concluded, they dutifully filed out, and I collected the papers they had left piled on the desk.

By using item analysis, I was able to assess the quizzes and give each student a score in five categories of grammatical knowledge. When I used that data to plot a class profile, it was clear to me that in those areas where some were the strongest, others were the weakest. I walked into the next class period a bit frustrated about needing to adjust my introductory plans once again and review key aspects covered by the pretest.

When I arrived, someone who had obviously been appointed as class spokesperson raised their hand. The student said that given my first-day-of-class explanation of how we would go over any areas of deficiency that surfaced in their prior-knowledge quiz, they had an alternate plan. I was surprised they assumed my plan would need to be altered. The spokesperson explained that they wanted me to stay in my office for the next two class periods instead of coming to class so that they could teach each other. This was only the second class meeting.

I was speechless. I had deliberately orchestrated the opening class meetings and doubted any students were in a position to make changes. Students said they wanted me to stay in my office during those class periods so they could come by if they had any questions while they were working with each other. I did not trust them, but for reasons I can't explain other than a perverse need to prove my view was warranted, I hesitatingly agreed. They were, I thought, presuming an expertise I did not imagine they had.

Once I distributed the results of the quiz, they used their scores in the five categories to pair up people with apparent mastery in some areas with those with apparent deficiencies. As they did this, I admit that I felt my position in the class had been usurped. I reluctantly

scheduled the next two class periods as office hours. My consultation hours turned out to be exactly that. Pairs of students came in for short tutoring sessions, only to return to the classroom to work with their colleagues. I was surprised by the seriousness of their questions and their demeanor. I did, however, feel like I was in some way being held hostage.

A class representative came in and asked me to give the same quiz when I returned to class as a way for them to gauge their progress. When I did return for the retest, an analysis of the results showed that most students demonstrated growth in at least one area. With their actions they had rewritten part of my syllabus: they coauthored the opening chapter of “Methods of Teaching English” in ways that I would not have imagined. They re-scripted my lines. They revised the plot. They shifted the tone. I did not realize it at the time but I have come to see since that my teaching benefited from their teaching, even though I was not yet ready for it.

The storied nature of the course syllabus and the brief, memorable moments it gives rise to illustrate how stories live in our professional work. In her Nobel Prize acceptance lecture, writer and Nobel laureate Toni Morrison said, “Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created” (1994, p. 27). This classroom narrative, “Students Asked Me to Leave,” is a convergence of daily stories—the students’, mine as their teacher, and the story of the content. At the same time that this little plot was unfolding, our understanding of our roles (how we each “played school”) was being created. In this story, faculty and students contributed to making these stories and were simultaneously being made by them.

In the same way that my students built a collective story in English 335, they bring their individual stories into class with them. It can be easier for us to be aware of their stories than it is to be fully aware of our own. In many cases we are in a position to decide on the efficacy of students’ stories and then to decide on a response.

No matter how we interact with the stories that students bring to teachers, we get glimpses into their lives:

“I missed class because I had to go to the health center.”

“My paper is late because I had to work a double shift.”

“I wasn’t prepared for lab because my computer crashed.”

The range of stories that we hear is rich and varied. Our daily lives are full of the mundane, the mindful, the comedic, and the dramatic in our classrooms. In *My Freshman Year: What a College Professor Learned by Being a Student* (2005), author Rebekah Nathan enrolled as a freshman at Any U, lived in the dorm, and took a schedule of undergraduate classes. In a section of the book where she reflects back on lessons that she learned during that year (“Lessons from My Year as a Freshman,” pp. 132–156), Dr. Nathan describes a story that has stayed with her:

I had observed students managing their identities, placating their parents, positioning their future, and finding their place in peer circles. I can vividly remember overhearing the authentic excitement in one student’s voice when she exclaimed into her cell phone, “Mom, the professor told me the essay was really good!” I keep that image of what is on the other end of a professor’s encouragement. (p. 134)

Nathan’s work illustrates how students’ stories intersect with and influence our own. When Kirby came to my office to contest an essay grade (“Kirby’s Paper,” in the Preface), we ended up revising each other’s stories. In “Students Asked Me to Leave,” the revision meant the syllabus was altered as were we. In our professional writing, we also develop a type of story that aims to inform—even alter—the thinking of others.

Professional Writing

Scholarly writing that describes research findings for peer review contains elements of stories. Considering this can provide additional insights into the kaleidoscopic nature of the way our professional narrative is framed by major documents in our professional lives. In April of 1994, an award-winning novelist visited our campus. In his address to the faculty, he sketched out the similarities between story development and the development of our scholarly essays. He said that in reporting on our research we seek to make believers out of our readers. Although the material we use in the scholarly essays is different from what he puts into his novels, there are, he explained, parallels in the processes. In scholarly manuscripts we review historical material (he said in his fiction he used such historical elements poetically); in both types of writing we have “a duty to testify to what we see and feel”; we write details that resonate with a theme; and we use details to illuminate both a “plot” (or line of thinking) and a “theme” (the point of that thinking). The vitae, syllabi, and professional writing are three types of stories that are at the marrow of our professorial lives even when we haven’t thought of them in this way before.

Shifting the Contextual Frames

The university context in which this work is accomplished itself has a story. University mission statements and strategic plans circumscribe the details of our work. The university’s approach to teaching in an even broader context can influence our local approach—our story-building. As I began to sense changes in how I was thinking about my teaching within these two contexts I came across a book describing this process: *Frame Reflection: Toward the Resolution of Intractable Policy Controversies* (Schön and Rein, 1994). Schön’s earlier books (*The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, 1983, and *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, 1987) were

interesting to me, but *Frame Reflection* helped me in the initial steps of seeing that there might be some overarching themes in my own stories about my teaching. Although Schön and Rein were writing about the public policy arena, their concept of frame reflection I felt had merit for the field of higher education as it relates to teaching.

“[F]rames,” they write, are tacit “underlying structures of belief, perception, and appreciation” (p. 23). From the beginning of my teaching in the “Winter Saturday Classroom,” my experiences led to an ongoing reinforcement of certain “underlying structures of belief” about my role as a teacher. Before reflecting on our own professional “frames” in subsequent chapters, looking at how the concept is at work in university contexts can inform that exploration.

The literature about teaching at colleges is regularly framed in two ways: “instruction-centered” and “learner-centered.” At the beginning of a book by John Tagg called *The Learning Paradigm College* (2003) in which he proposes that we shift from the first frame to the latter, Tagg opens with a personal story that illustrates what happens when major shifts occur—he recounts his experience as a young boy who finds out that he needs glasses. When he put on the new glasses, his view of the world suddenly and dramatically changed. In place of fuzzy shapes and muted colors, he saw vivid colors, sharp lines, and an “abundance of pattern, of complexity” (p. 3). Now, years later, this story is featured prominently at the beginning of his book which describes a new context through which institutions view their work; as he says in the concluding sentences of this opening story, “New lenses changed everything. And that was not a metaphor or a hyperbole. They really did change everything” (p. 3). Seeing how a new lens brings a changed view to the university context of teaching provided me with insights into my own work.

An earlier and influential essay was written by Tagg with colleague Robert Barr (1995) that called on universities to rethink the lens—the frame—that as institutions they bring to teaching

and learning. In order to contrast two frameworks for learning in higher education they lay out columns pairing the two different views. With the first view, the “instruction-centered” lens, they discuss what they observed was the relationship between teaching and learning most evident at the time. The features that they list as illustrative of this instruction-centered paradigm are reminiscent of Charles Dickens’s parody of the professor in *Hard Times* ([1854] 2007). Dickens’s Professor Thomas Gradgrind gave facts and asked students to recite what he presented. My expectations in “Winter Saturday Classroom” and “Students Asked Me to Leave” were similar. Barr and Tagg have a comprehensive list of over three dozen characteristics of what they saw as evidence of the prominence of this instruction-centered paradigm. As I read their essay I found they were describing some elements that had become calcified in my teaching through the earliest years and therefore presented me with a serious challenge when I sought to shift my thinking. Among the characteristics Barr and Tagg cite illustrating this frame are the following:

The instruction-centered paradigm is one in which

- “Transfer knowledge [moves from] faculty to students”
- There is a focus on “inputs”
- “[K]nowledge comes in chunks and bits; [and is] delivered by instructors and gotten by students”

From my vantage point now as someone who is reflecting on formative stories in my educational biography, it is hard to read this brief excerpt from their list because its resonance with my earlier views on the nature of teaching is unsettling. Today, I envision myself as someone whose teaching-frame springs from different assumptions, but through the examination of critical incidents in my teaching I have also learned that features of this instruction-centered frame continue to influence my work.

To contrast the second frame, the learner-centered paradigm, Barr and Tagg place contrasting characteristics across from each other in a two-column list. The features included below illustrate a trio of points that parallel and contrast with the points listed above.

The learner-centered paradigm is one in which

- Teachers “elicit students’ discovery and construction of knowledge”
- There is a focus on “learning and student success outcomes”
- “[K]nowledge exists in each person’s mind and is shaped by individual experience”

In describing the profound nature of these contrasting views, Barr and Tagg essentially demonstrate the point of Tagg’s story about his getting new glasses: “This new lens changes everything” (2003, p. 3). In a pared-down form, the frame that has governed colleges is this: A college is an institution that aims to *provide instruction*. Subtly but profoundly we are shifting to a new paradigm: A college is an institution that aims to *produce learning*. This institutional shift is an evolutionary one. So is the glacial change in my teaching as I seek to use stories to understand its characteristics.

In 2002, Maryellen Weimer’s *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice* brought the institutional focus of the Barr and Tagg essay into the classroom. She posited that there are five keys to consider in making the shift from instruction-centered to learner-centered pedagogy: (1) balance of power, (2) function of content, (3) role of the teacher, (4) responsibility for learning, and (5) the purposes and processes of evaluation. This is useful because it names components of the lenses and addresses what the shift looks like within the college classroom. My initial teaching experience as a ten-year-old in Northern Minnesota illustrates something

about the distant roots of my beliefs about teaching: I confidently knew what I was doing; I was charged with keeping my siblings quiet, occupied, and under control until it was time for their afternoon naps. It never occurred to me that there was any other option. I was enthralled with the power of my position. Of course, I could always threaten to report my sisters and brother to our parents if they got so far out of line that swatting them with damp mittens did not work. It did not occur to me that there was any other way to “see” the situation.

For me, the “Five Keys to Change” Weimer writes about were all stuck in a proverbial lock: there was no balance of power, my own expertise determined the content, my role was an authoritarian one, I demanded they memorize their math combinations, and when they took the afternoon tests, they got red marks on their paper signaling how poorly they had done. There was no such thing as “frame reflection.” The winters in Hibbing were so long that there were endless opportunities for me to practice and reinforce my approach. Because this approach was also reinforced by teachers I had over the years, it is no surprise that reflecting on my pedagogical frame is difficult work for me to tackle. The same may be true for you as we work through an identification and analysis of your key stories in this book.

As I have worked to understand what underlying structures frame my teaching, I have also been diligent over the years in my reading of the pedagogical literature. In trying to incorporate this sweep of literature into my growth, however, I sometimes find myself feeling like Al, a character in Wallace Stegner’s *Angle of Repose* (1971). Al’s poor vision means that he has to wear quadruple-focal glasses. Given that he owns a Laundromat, Al has to fix the machines by sticking his head into the washers: “Ever try to thee with your head inthide a Bendix?” Al asks with a lisp. His friend replies, “I get the message. Space being curved, tunnel vision and the rigid neck could leave a man focused on the back of his own head” (p. 77). I can relate to Al’s predicament.

When I told the story “Students Asked Me to Leave” earlier in this chapter I did not include a next step that I took. As a consequence of the students’ change of the course context, I gave deliberate thought to the value of the resulting students’ claim to teaching themselves. It was not entirely comfortable to look closely at my teaching and think about the challenge they issued to me. In time, I hesitatingly tried some group work with varied results—small steps of growth. The calls for more “reflective practitioners” (Schön, 1983, 1987; Brookfield, 1995) are calls for personal growth in understanding the dimensions of one’s teaching.

When we are prompted to try something new in one of our classes—like I did in agreeing to leave the classroom in the hands of students, no matter how reluctantly—we also have the potential of moving into the realm of reflective teaching. In doing so we initially engage in what Argyris and Schön discuss as “single-loop learning” (1974). That was me: with this “single-loop learning” the emphasis is on “techniques and making techniques more efficient” (Usher and Bryant in Smith, 2001).

In a call for more substantive attention to one’s professional frames, Argyris and Schön (1974) describe the power of “double-loop learning.” Double-loop learning is the process I’m engaging in as the book proceeds. It is more complicated because it involves bringing questions to the very use and consequences of the teaching techniques we choose: “Reflection here is more fundamental: the basic assumptions behind ideas or policies are confronted . . .” (Smith, 2001). In *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (1995), Brookfield calls on us to go “assumption hunting” (p. 3)—to practice double-loop learning.

On occasion, I have led teaching workshops that in turn have encouraged colleagues to try some of the practices that have worked particularly well for professors who write or speak about them. I have distributed Bain’s book *What the Best College Teachers Do* (2004), for instance, so that attendees can look at a variety of teaching practices implemented across the disciplines. Leading and

attending such sessions are not unproductive, but the question is, how do we extend this single-loop learning and take up the riskier double-loop learning? How can we become a more reflective teacher so “best practices” come to be personally grounded and resonant with our aspirations?

“Critical reflection,” “frame reflection,” “single-loop learning,” “double-loop learning,” “instruction-centered and learner-centered paradigms”—I do not include the concepts here to make you feel like you are wearing quadruple-focal glasses like Al in *Angle of Repose*; I include them because each of these concepts informs our understanding of institutional contexts and the contexts of the process of reflection. As I made my way through the literature spanning my career, doing so incrementally affected how I looked at my teaching. But it was an eventual awareness and then scrutiny of my stories that moved me from being an observer to being a participant in this shift. Some stories persist, and coming to know *how* and *why* can help us move from single-loop learning to double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1974), from knowledge-in-action to reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983), and from reflection to critical reflection (Weimer, 2010).

Next Steps

Among the questions posed in the Preface are these three: “I wonder what stories have accompanied you along the way?” “What stories reappear as you recall or possibly retell them?” “I wonder what it is about the incidents that keep certain stories within reach?” While my own stories have been folded into the exploration of frameworks in this chapter, Chapter Two invites you to begin work with recalling those stories in your own repertoire. Your former students, grad college professors, or fifth grade teachers may rise to the surface as you are prompted to take an inventory of incidents that come back to you when they are purposefully pursued. I expect you will, like I have, find some joy in bringing these stories back into your life. I

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have also found a host of other emotions but have learned through the process laid out in subsequent chapters that there is a collective richness in the stories. In his article “Pedagogy, Virtue, and Narrative Identity in Teaching,” Max van Manen says, “Personal identity can be brought to self-awareness through narrative self-reflection” (1994, p. 159). Stories live in our teaching beyond the moments in which they occur.