

Living by the Proverb

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ABSTRACT

There seems to be a strong link between developing our identities and storytelling. As humans, we strive for coherence, and this coherence is found in stories (Hermans, 2001). This is an experimental paper telling a story about developing a brave, and authentic self as an educator (teacher) in Higher Education by incorporating creative pedagogies into Higher Education. This paper reflects on the challenges faced by new educators and those suffering with imposter syndrome (Wilkinson, 2018) with an aim to celebrate the imperfect self, as opposed to enacting unrealistic expectations. The purpose of this paper is not to favour creative teaching pedagogies but rather to persuade educators to bring their world vision and lived experiences to the classroom acknowledging that they are important factors that shape teacher identity. It seeks to provoke reflection and hopefully some laughter, and supports you not feeling lost in the demands of the performative frameworks within which we act, and try to create niches of freedom and agency for our Selves and our students.

KEYWORDS

Academic Development, Teacher Identities, Academic Practice

A BEGINNING OF SORTS

Germany. Early 2000s.

Renault Twingo. Granada Red. Don't you dare call my car pink! My eldest niece was sitting in the back and the five hours car journey was painful for the teenage brain. I cannot remember how the topic came to be proverbs. Anyway, I was telling my niece that my best friends at university, who both came from different parts of Germany, had never heard of about 90% of the proverbs I used. I wondered if this was specific to our area in Saxony, but they indeed insisted that this was a family thing. We came up with four two-sided A4 pages of just proverbs. Some of them a bit nonsensical such as:

German Proverb: Kräht der Hahn auf dem Mist. Ändert sich das Wetter oder es bleibt wie es ist.

Literal Translation: If the rooster crows on top of the dung heap, the weather is going to change or stay the same.

Explanation: Which pretty much makes fun of all the farmer's wisdom my farmer granddad used to throw at us, given half a chance.

Others were a bit 18-rated:

German Proverb: Hätte der Hund nicht geschissen, hätte er den Igel gefangen.

Literal Translation: If the dog wasn't busy doing his business, he would have caught the rabbit.

Explanation: Let's just say it translates into: 'No regrets!'

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF STORIES

Germany. The Glorious 80s.

Some of the proverbs are related to actual family stories, for instance when someone did something especially silly, that person was proclaimed to be just as silly as Scheffler's pig. Now Scheffler was a local farmer, whose pig was staying with my granddad's pigs for a while to make more piglets. Anyway, apparently the dog spooked the pig and it took off. Fleeing towards the gate. One side of the gate was open, the other side of the gate was closed. In hindsight, it fits narrative causality very well: the pig of course decided to squeeze underneath the closed side of the gate and became stuck. Upon which the gate had to be taken off the hinges to free the pig. Hence, silliness is proclaimed to be comparable to that unfortunate decision made in panic.

Now at this point you might have imagined a fair-size piggy bum being stuck underneath a gate, but as our brains work wonderous ways simultaneously asked yourself, what all of this has to do with creativity in Higher Education.

Well:

German Proverb: Mach die Augen auf und lass den Geist ein bissl leuchten!

Literal Translation: Open your eyes and let you spirit [mind] shine a little!

Explanation: You will figure it out—just have a think.

Wait! That was not meant literally.

Before reflecting on creativity in Higher Education I must make a detour via identities. Learning and identity negotiation are intrinsically linked as authors have argued in the past (Kumpulainen & Rajala, 2017, Hendrix, Jackson, & Warren, 2003, Sheridan, 2011, Windschitl & Thompson, 2005) and so is teaching (Yuan, 2019, Winberg, 2008, Wilkinson, 2018). Therefore, translating creative practice into teaching in Higher Education is ultimately part of this identity negotiation, an act of becoming, or emerging with our creative selves within the teaching environment. The stories we tell about our-selves and how we tell them (Thompson *et al.*, 2009) inevitably influences who we are, not just in private life but also as teachers in Higher Education¹ (Wilkinson, 2018; Tsaousi, 2019; Badia *et al.*, 2019). There is a body of research establishing a strong link between developing our identities and storytelling. As humans, we strive for coherence, and this coherence is found in stories (Hermans, 2006). We are made of stories.

We tell ourselves stories in order to live. ~Joan Didion

Storytelling holds a significant role in learning, too (i.e.: Schrum, 2019, Moon and Fowler, 2008, Moon, 2010). During my undergraduate degree we had a professor who—if you so want—taught in a very traditional old-fashioned way. Often no slides—or very few; but he was a brilliant storyteller. I remember one time he was explaining the medieval worldview and stating that people believed demons were everywhere and he pointed around the lecture hall saying: “... and they were there, and there, and there!”

And over one hundred students kept turning around following his hand gestures. He was so passionate, and a charismatic storyteller, that we as learners were just drawn into the world he created with his stories. He managed for an hour a week to bring medieval times alive. He held the power of creating a story so alive and colourful that it captured each student’s imagination. Is this creativity?

The universe is made of stories, not of atoms. ~Muriel Rukeyser

Maybe stories are the place where we come together with our learners, where we find a common ground. Moon and Fowler (2008) suggested a model for stories used in teaching, differentiating between six different categories of stories. For me, the most notable consideration is that they suggest storytelling as a category of ‘story’ since the act of storytelling holds value beyond the content (Moon and Fowler, 2008, p.234). Jørgensen (2018) picks up on a similar argument with exploring spaces for storytelling. The author portrays storytelling as a creative act (Jørgensen, 2018):

Perhaps the one thing above all that characterizes spaces of storytelling is the “freedom” to appear, do and experiment with the world – to recognize difference and plurality and the possibilities of playfulness and creativity that difference and plurality might entail. The idea is to lay out spaces for storytelling where researchers and teachers can create, make and remake their stories and of course develop them to become full-bodied craftspersons and professionals.
(Jørgensen, 2018, p.417)

¹ I am using the term teacher, apologies if this is an unwanted label, please overwrite with a term you prefer while you read

To do this, to have the confidence to experiment, risk failure, and become a full-bodied craftsperson in teaching, needs the consideration of another aspect of our identity negotiation. And maybe our propensity as academics to seek perfection, and over-achievement. Our own fear of failure, and the relentless little voice in the back of our heads telling us that we are just not good enough.

OF IDENTITIES AND PERFECTION

Germany. Still the 80s. The fashion is not getting any better.

German Proverb: Auto fahren und singen, kann man nicht erzwingen.

Literal translation: You cannot force driving and singing.

Explanation: there are things, no matter how hard you try, you might be able to get a hang off, but will never master. Your abilities, or lack thereof, your idiosyncrasies, are all part of you, accept your limitations and embrace your gifts.

Lesson One: Accept thyself—thy whole self.

There is an ongoing debate about people in academia suffering from imposter syndrome at all levels of seniority (Revuluri, 2018, Kauati, 2020, Seritan and Mehta, 2016), it is easier for us to accept our weaknesses, and shout ‘mea culpa’ before we are even able to hear someone giving us a compliment. But part of this accepting the whole self is also accepting abilities and skills. Is exercising professional self-acceptance an act of self-care and a step towards building resilience?

My mentor after a successful teaching intervention asked me if my approaches are transferable or if they are intrinsically linked to my being me-ness.

[Imagine a very long pause. You know a ‘seeing my whole life flashback’ pause.]

Now, there was a challenging question! Was my mentor right in calling me an unconscious expert (Broadwell, 1969)? Isn’t that a strange term? Shouldn’t I be there truly, fully, wholly there when I am being expertly? This label-giving exercise led to a journey of becoming conscious about expertise yet again and engage in reflexive practice.

[...] you must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship is the center of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you may work. (Mills, 1959, p.196)

By being reflexive we acknowledge that social researchers cannot be separated from their autobiographies (Lumsden, Bradford and Goode, 2019, p.2) My contention is that this does not only relate to social researchers, teaching is an intellectual product as described above, and we cannot separate our autobiographies from what we think teaching is, learning is, how a teacher or a student ought to behave. This is at large determined by our own experiences, and norms and values. The authors (Lumsden, Bradford and Goode, 2019) also state that there is no coherent definition or agreement across the board on reflexivity whilst reflection is thinking about something after the fact, I understand reflexivity to be something more integrated into our practice. It's reflecting whilst we are doing something and then changing the elements which we want to improve. To me, reflexive practice is being a mindful educator. Being in the here and now with my learners, and being aware of my Self in this situation. Indeed my own understanding of reflexive practice is closely aligned with Schön's (1991) interpretation of 'knowledge in action'. As the craft of experiencing a situation and being able to react consciously to the situation under consideration of consequences. Hence, my wondering if being a mindful teacher is being a reflexive practitioner. Nilsson and Kazemi (2016) identified five characteristics of mindfulness inherent in all definitions of that concept: Present-Centredness, Attention and Awareness, External Events, Ethical Mindedness, and Cultivation.

Whilst the definitions are from a Western perspective; and simplified for the purpose of this paper there are some elements that I would indeed link to reflexive practice. The first, 'Attention and Awareness', refers to the ability to focus on selective aspects of reality and consciously determine which of these should be included in the momentary awareness (Nilsson and Kazemi, 2016, p.185). 'Present-Centredness' describes the habit or act of becoming *aware of what is happening in the here and now—in the present moment*. (Nilsson and Kazemi, 2016, p.188). Both these behaviours are closely linked to 'reflection in action' in my opinion. We ought to be able as educators to be aware of the situations we are in to react in the best possible way.

10 Years Ago, UK

I remember when I tried to record my first lecture as a video, and during that process I realised just how much I rely on the non-verbal and verbal feedback of my learners. The subtle art of non-verbal communication has a significant impact on how I am providing a lecture. If I tell a story to refute confusion, if I add an ad hoc activity to draw attention back into the matter. So being present, is crucial in teaching situations. So is the awareness of outside influences (external events (Lisson and Kazemi, 2016)). Are we aware of the environment we are teaching within, are we aware of outside influences on our learners, or how our own social environment has shaped our interpretation and understanding of the world?

The fourth factor—'Cultivating' (Nilsson and Kazemi, 2016)—is particularly interesting as this one focusses most strongly on the links of the internalised reflections with the outside world. In developing compassion and empathy, and even the aspiration to become an instrument of social change—as a way of becoming *intentionally situated* (Lisson and Kazemi, 2016, p.190).

Ethical Mindedness: one can say that “mindful consciousness” is about being acutely aware of the importance of integrating ethical guidance into daily life. Without this sort of conscious ethical-mindedness, the risk of causing harm to each other and the surrounding environment is clearly heightened [...] (Lisson and Kazemi, 2016, p.190)

With a stronger emphasis on inclusion and accessibility, being mindful in the moment—what pronouns are you using when teaching? And being mindful when designing learning and teaching material and environments, this aspect of mindfulness, to me appears to fit in very well with being a reflexive and reflective practitioner. So, my summary of reflexive practice at the moment would be that of professional mindfulness.

But how do we as educators get there? Mills (1959) suggests keeping a diary, to analyse our thoughts, and how we position ourselves within our profession and our Selves. I have always written reflective diaries, not always regularly but tried to catch, pivotal points, struggles, joys, and analysis of situations. One of the habits I found useful, every time when planning a new seminar, or course, I would go back to reading, and write a planning document. Taking a more critical approach to this, analysing reasons behind my decisions for one topic over another, or for how I aim to tell a story, would be my next steps to becoming more intentionally situated within my teaching practice. The exercise becomes near to impossible when you are given a course, developed and taught by someone else prior, with little notice. The first iteration of this tends to be familiarizing ourselves with what is there before we can truly take ownership of this teaching.

What is a strategy that would work for you?

THE COMPLIANCE TRAP

Lesson Two: Never let fears stop you from doing something.

Germany, 80s yet, the political tensions are rising.

German Proverb: Wer nicht wagt kommt nicht nach Waldheim.

Literal Translation: If you do not dare, you will not get into Waldheim.

Translation: No risk no reward—No risk no fun

Explanation: A politically biased proverb. Waldheim is an infamous German prison, which was used as a political prison in East Germany. The tongue in cheek proverb, had a serious undertone. Not matter how much you think you are risking now, it's still not bad

enough to get you into this prison. So how realistic is your level of fear?

Some authors argue that creativity is intrinsically linked to risk taking although the authors contest that there is not enough empirical evidence to support the theoretical connection (Shen *et al.*, 2018). However, other authors argue that the risk we take in being creative, is a social risk (Runco, 2015). Feedback from my 'Creative Pedagogies for Active Learning' course, which is part of our MEd in Academic Practice, highlights the fear of these risks. Of being reluctant to implement creative and active learning strategies, because of the fear of not being taken seriously, or laughed about.

So, is it indeed risk taking to do something new in your classroom? To run a session where you cannot predict the outcome. We cannot predict the outcome of any lesson but if we stick to specific structures, we can at least predict how the students behave within that environment. But do we know if the students' learning was deep learning; was lasting learning? Also are we doing something that is out of our comfort zone? Something we are not sure about. The discussion at this point could easily move into reflections about neoliberalism, and the intrusive nature of metrics and impact measurements.

The conclusion that it is only at the micro-level that the neoliberal production ideology can be challenged may initially appear dispiriting. But, as Merleau-Ponty (1955, 23) argues, 'there is no situation without hope'. Within HE institutions there remains space, albeit limited, to develop more progressive transformative pedagogies. (Sutton, 2015)(p45)

Covid19, lockdown and the pivot to online learning has disrupted much of the traditional practices, whilst the performative frameworks appear unshaken. For the purpose of this paper, as an individual academic, with a complex multitude of demands on our time we are not able to change this exoskeleton of our work environment. However, we can practice freedom within these structures, we can embrace emancipatory practices in our pedagogy, and foster our learners' agency as much as our own. And some of the current developments, of academics gathering virtually, and supporting these efforts emphasize this point.

UK, 2013.

During a conference, when speaking about an example in which I was authentic with my students sharing my own exam-angst I had as student and what strategies helped me, one of the colleagues said that I was a risk taker, and not everyone is like that. To me that was a strange label to be given—yet again—do you see the theme here? People will give us labels and there is not really anything we can do about that. However, this dimension of risk taking is very closely related to our professional identities, and how much we want to challenge our identities. And what would happen if things don't work out? This is where the next proverb comes in:

German Proverb: Ist der Ruf erst ruiniert, lebt's sich gänzlich ungeniert!

Literal Translation: Once your reputation is ruined, you can live entirely free of worry.

Explanation: This proverb and lesson is all about stop rules. Stop rules are a concept from social psychology and are rules of engagement we are taught growing up. Stop rules (stop filters) are reinforced through "... punishment, reward or ignorance of creative behaviour [and thus] can teach a child to grow or stop their creative endeavours." (Runco, 2014, p.254)

Example: My nephew in his art class created a wonderful, paper cut-out of a crocodile, with movable head. However, the primary-school teacher punished him with poor feedback, because he did not follow instructions about just drawing a crocodile. He went above and beyond and was punished with a strict stop rule to his creativity. To some degree we, as educators in Higher Education, are surrounded by stop-rules (Sutton, 2015). My strategy is to explore the freedom within these to create learning spaces that enable the learners to break through the learned behaviour of what they think they should do, and as educators take agency of our teaching identities.

How much have stop rules influenced developing our creativity as a child. How much does institutional culture, does 'we have always done it this way', does 'but that's not what we usually do', does the friction between students as agents of their learning and performative culture, does your academic probation, does your annual review create stop rules for you? How much risk taking is involved for you professionally, personally to be creative? Is this an actual or a perceived risk? What do you have to lose?

These are questions that keep coming up for me as well as my students. Indeed, once, a senior manager when hearing about one of my teaching techniques, complained to my line manager, asking them to tell me, to not do what I had planned, because of what people might think. Now. That is a strong stop-rule. Particularly, as they had entirely misunderstood that activity. However, I in turn, became defensive about my teaching-identity. I can and will always, and I emphasized always, defend, justify and evidence every single thing I do in my class. I will have concepts from social-psychology, developmental psychology, educational science et cetera et infinitum as my posy coming to my defence. So yes. I am confident as a teacher. I can justify what I am doing. And I have been doing this all my life—again this is a story for another day. However, if you are just starting out, if you are not confident. Find your support network. Use scholarship to gather evidence for learning and teaching methods, have a chat with colleagues from across your institution, join an online academic coffee klatsch like the Wednesday evening #LTHEchat or #AcademicChatter on Twitter to run ideas by other educators. Don't go into the situation on your own. You are not alone! If you have an idea and you always wanted to try it out but were worried about your colleagues' reaction, have a cup of coffee with your friendly academic developer and pick their brains.

FEAR OF FAILURE

Lesson Three: Fail! Fail often. With all your passion. And then fail some more.

Lesson Four

Crossing time and borders.

German Proverb: Wo gehobelt wird fallen Späne.

Google translate: Where wood is chopped, splinters must fall.

Explanation: This proverb is all about not being scared to fail, not being afraid of mistakes, and is probably the one I have heard most often from my granddad. My family never questioned that you were going to make mistakes. In fact, the attitude was that if you never made a mistake you never actually tried something properly. The question always was, what you do once you failed.

Maybe because of this unlearning of fear of failure, I would easily put myself out there, and try new things. So, I applied for a job as English teacher in a kindergarten during my undergraduate degree. At this time there was no such thing as an early years language curriculum or even any material. My internet had just moved from a dial-up modem to a flat-rate and I had to beg, borrow steal ideas wherever I found them, I created the whole curriculum and all the materials including a board game myself. One of the mums told me their child was counting better in English than in German. When speaking to my sister about this she said she does the same, she jumps in the deep end happily but then begins to panic. Maybe, just maybe, this is not because we are both risk-takers by nature, but because we had unlearned fear of failure. And every single time we would speak to family about our fears when they eventually emerged. The answer would be:

German Proverb: Du wächst mit deinen Aufgaben.

Literal Translation: You grow with your tasks.

Explanation: Learning is in what we do with the failure—a well-known adage. One could argue that there is learning to be had during the failing, learning about ourselves. What I believe is more important though is to unlearn the fear of failure and to learn risk taking. Learn that failure is an inevitability. The proverb was meant to address anxiety around failure, it came with a culture of family dinners, or long breakfasts during the holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, Birthdays. Where three or sometimes four generations would sit around the table and recall, the 'best fails' of each person. Like a real-life YouTube channel. Lovingly roasting each other's failures, telling stories of belonging.

Has one of your family members ever put a hat into the fridge in the evening, only to spend half an hour searching for it the next morning? Have you gone to school coming back home because you thought you forgot your backpack only to realise you were wearing it upon seeing your reflection in the window? Have you gone out bill-sticking during election time and accidentally swallowed a pin, ended up in A&E and then had to eat Sauerkraut, because the A&E doctor said the strong fibres of Sauerkraut will wrap around the pin and protect your gut from becoming hurt? Where you supposed to keep an eye on the chicken in the stove while everyone else was making hay, and each time you check you would eat a bit, and once everyone came in for lunch there was just some bones and the legs left? Have you forgotten to unplug the electrical lawn mower when checking why the blades got stuck? I spare you the details but the A&E doctor said it was good luck the blades were new, and the fingertips could be reattached again. Or accidentally put sugar instead of salt into the soup because you didn't label the glass jars? Get the oven-mitt stuck in the oven door handle and dinner for seven people—all already sitting around the table--ends on the kitchen floor spiced with glass shards? Trying to heat milk in a filter coffee maker? Need I go on?

One of my favourite failing stories, was the following. I grew up on a farm turned smallholding. My granddad was famous for using ropes for everything, from staking the sheep temporarily while moving the pasture fence, to using them in a pully system. My uncle had stored an old wardrobe in our attic, which still had a door and pully system in the wall, from having been a hay storage in the early days of the farm. Granddad decided instead of lugging the heavy wardrobe down the stairs it's easier to lead it down with

the pully system and the famous all-purpose ropes. All said and done. Well, the wardrobe was swinging gently halfway down the building when granddad realised the rope was too short. Not to worry. Here hold that. Giving the end of the rope to my uncle, I am just going to get another one and we extent it. After all, there were more than enough ropes around. They are very useful, you know. Whilst granddad was on his way, and my uncle held on to the gently swinging wardrobe, the veteran rope, that had held, dozens of sheep, fixed and carried loads, reached the end of its line and the end of its life. I cannot remember a noise, but the crash as the heavy wardrobe landed on a corner and folded into itself. Irreparable. Needless to say the story was retold in much detail, hilarity, and re-enactment, quite regularly.

So maybe the key to reframing the fear of failure is to understand that it is all about learning, and failing is part of learning. Some research indicates that these family stories support an individual's development and

resilience (Sen, 2010). However, not everyone has the opportunity to grow up in a multi-generational or even in a safe home. How can we in our roles as educators, create safe spaces for failure. So, our students can face fear of failure, and learn effective strategies, for how to develop failure-response.

I'm only human after all. (Rag'n'Bone Man, 2016)

CONCLUSION

And maybe this is where we need to begin—with a pedagogy of care (Bali, 2015). Meeting our imperfect, high achiever selves, and our sometimes insecure, sometimes confident learners with unconditional positive regard, and move forward from there. Make failure part of the process and enable our learners to learn how to fail forward, so they can truly take agency of their learning and their journey. Introducing creative pedagogies can help with this process (Sheridan and Dale (forthcoming)). Whilst I haven't eluded to the vast body of literature around creativity and its concepts, one of the ones I like to share and implement as a practical starting point into using creative learning and teaching is that of Jeffrey (2006). I really liked this concept of creative learning and teaching as it provides a tangible framework, we as educators can work with. The authors define creative learning and teaching as being relevant, providing ownership and control, and resulting in innovation. Innovation in its most simple form is the ability to apply knowledge in a new or different context. Relevance I always understood as the real-life context, how does what I am learning relate to the overall picture and how does it make sense to me and my life, beyond the classroom. Whilst ownership and control are about the students' agency in the learning process and the ability to make educated decisions about how and how much they engage at various points in their learner journey.

Of course, this can be done with a variety of methods and approaches to our pedagogies. I have made use of playdough, balloons (latex free—mind allergies!), Lego, games, and creative writing, to enable the learners to engage, and grasp sometimes abstract concepts. I have created comic strips, flowcharts, interactive website, posters, and even PowerPoint games. But there is nothing wrong with telling a good story, or just having a chat with your students. The important bit is that we are authentic as educators and embrace our own background and experience. Therefore, instead of defining creativity for the reader, I conclude this thought paper with a question: What does creativity mean to you?

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