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An autoethnographic inquiry into the role of serendipity in becoming a teacher educator/researcher

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In this inquiry, the author inquires into her shifting ‘self’ as a researcher/teacher educator in teacher professional development. The ‘self’ in question is acknowledged as being historically, culturally and locally specific. It is also acknowledged as unfixed or unstable; constructed from and in response to various, and often competing, discourses. As an autoethnographic inquiry, this article presents vignettes of the self/researcher/teacher educator embedded in the messiness and complexity of lived experiences and it represents her attempts to make sense (albeit partial and provisional) of these experiences. Central to the inquiry is an examination of the roles played by serendipity and by writing itself in the processes of sense- and self-making.

Keywords: serendipity; autoethnography; creativity; teacher educator

A chance discovery

One Sunday afternoon as I (like Archimedes!¹) lay in the bath rereading an article on serendipity given to me by a colleague (also one of the authors), I was ‘surprised by joy’.² I discovered an ‘unexpected similarity’ (Fine & Deegan, 1996, p. 8) between the authors’ (Fine & Deegan, 1996) description of serendipity and Csikszentmihalyi’s (1997) description of creativity. Central to both descriptions is the occurrence of a chance event – involving anomalies or opposing forces – which is recognised as significant and which is capitalised upon. However, to be in a position to take advantage of the chance event, a high level of readiness or preparedness is required. It seems though that I was not the first to discover this similarity; Morley and de Rond (2010, p. 3) also suggest that serendipity and creativity are close relatives. And, coincidentally two years earlier, before I had ever begun to think about the role of serendipity in my teaching, I had framed the first draft of this article as a self-study in creativity and teaching.

Serendipity

The term serendipity was coined by Horace Walpole in a letter addressed to British diplomat Horace Mann on 28 January 1754 (Remer, 1965, p. 6). It is derived from

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a fairy tale, *The Three Princes of Serendip*, in which the three protagonists ‘were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of’ (Walpole, 1754, quoted in Remer, 1965, p. 6). The term, while slow to take root, has become one of the ‘most popular’ words in the English language; though sagacity as an element of serendipity has often been ignored in popular usage (Alcock, 2010, pp. 6–13; Morley & de Rond, 2010, p. 1).³ But, Alcock (2010, p. 13) and Fine and Deegan (1996, p. 1), like Walpole, maintain that serendipity – ‘which revolves around finding out what you didn’t know you were looking for’ (Alcock, 2010, p. 13) – involves a combination of sagacity and accident/s. The role of serendipity in scientific discoveries has been well documented (de Rond & Morley, 2010). And, Fine and Deegan (1996) explore, with reference to a range of fieldwork discoveries, how serendipity operates in qualitative research. However, Morley and de Rond – like Fine and Deegan – demonstrate that it is ‘the attitude and expertise, *sagacity* of the observer, that births *serendipity* from chance’ (Morley & de Rond, 2010, p. 8; italics in original); or, as Louis Pasteur (1854) has put it, that ‘chance favours only the prepared mind’ (quoted in Weiss, 2010, p. 45).

Another chance discovery

I abandoned writing my self-study in creativity and teaching after the first draft. However, my interest in the study was reawakened by my chance conversation with the aforementioned colleague and the article he gave me evoked the chance occurrence that had sparked my initial study.

It was a Friday evening in early November. A group of nine experienced primary school teachers was attending the college (a Catholic college of education and the liberal arts) where I work as a teacher educator. These teachers (all women) were participating in a one-year graduate certificate course in mentoring and teacher development. Previously, as a primary school teacher, I had worked in the same school as one of them. Subsequently, as a trainer on a national curriculum support programme, I had facilitated seminars in the schools of two or three others. Then, seconded part-time from the college to a national pilot project on teacher induction, I had facilitated mentor training and development seminars in which all – but one – of the teachers had participated. All of the teachers taught full-time and they mentored (or were interested in mentoring) newly qualified teachers in their own and/or other schools. On Friday evenings and Saturday mornings, they attended classes in the college. This, for some, meant travelling long distances. That weekend, I taught my first two (of three) classes on the course. My brief was to provide guidance on developing and writing mentoring portfolios. At the time, I was writing my own teaching portfolio and was finding myself writing my way into spaces I would not otherwise have occupied (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005). I found myself writing ‘before knowing what to say and how to say it, and in order to find out if possible’ (Lyotard, 1992, p. 119). And my writing was transforming how I was thinking about (and doing) my teaching. I wanted students to experience the transformative power of writing too, so I began to include time for writing in all my classes. But, on that Friday evening as the teachers engaged in a variety of writing tasks, I became wracked by all kinds of doubts and insecurities. I was taking what I perceived to be a risk. I was deviating from what these teachers might, based on their previous experiences, reasonably expect from me. I was also deviating from what was, for me, safe teaching: the facilitation of small and whole group dialogue.

I began to doubt the value of what I was doing; after all, the teachers did not need to travel to the college at the end of a busy week to write! I was outside my own comfort zone and I feared censure from the teachers for taking them outside of theirs. I feared failing them. I feared failing as a teacher. But, most of all, I feared being perceived as a failure by those teachers. My personal and professional reputation was at stake! Nonetheless, and despite my concerns, I persisted with what had seemed to me (in the solitude of my office) to be a worthy endeavour. So, for most of that Friday evening class, the teachers wrote. And, as they wrote, they uncovered some of their personal/professional motivations for mentoring, they generated mentoring metaphors, and they documented and interrogated some of the events, teachers, mentors, obstacles, milestones and transitions that had marked their lives. And, after each writing task, I facilitated small and whole group dialogue around what they had written.

The following morning I returned to what was, for me, safe teaching. I set up a game, in groups of three, in which each player had three turns to toss a coin; if the coin landed on 'heads', the player named one of her personal/professional strengths and if it landed on 'tails', one of her personal/professional weaknesses (Malderez & Bodoczky, 1999, pp. 49–50). Then, for each strength or weakness named, the player described the 'other side of the coin', e.g. if being chaotic was identified as a weakness, then openness to creativity might be its flip side. The teachers became really animated and excited and I negotiated the tension between going with the flow and maintaining the focus of the class. As they shared their findings, I had a 'Eureka! moment'; I perceived the connection between the teachers' observations on how strengths could be reconstituted as weaknesses and weaknesses as strengths and Palmer's contention that successful teaching is about paradox or 'holding the tension of opposites' (Palmer, 1998, p. 83). This insight enabled me to use Palmer's work to explicitly frame the knowledge being constructed by the teachers as well as to highlight my dawning awareness of the role I was playing in negotiating the tension between flow and focus in the class. I thus positioned myself as a learner alongside these teacher-students. Afterwards, I identified various other opposing forces that I had been, unconsciously, negotiating that weekend: safety and risk; reflection and action; solitude and community; silence and speech; and the personal and the professional (p. 74). I also identified how the energy thus generated had invigorated me, the teachers and my teaching. My identification, however, of what was happening in Palmer's terms occurred by chance and my decision to communicate my discovery (as I was making it) was an intuitive (chance) one. I was prompted to reread Palmer's (pp. 61–87) chapter on paradox and this led to my discovery of an 'unexpected similarity' (Fine & Deegan, 1996, p. 8) between Palmer's description of paradox and Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) description of creativity. In Csikszentmihalyi's terms, the experience described in the above vignette was one of 'flow'; an experience, involving risk, novelty, challenge and enjoyment, which generates an 'automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness' (p. 110). For Csikszentmihalyi, the experience of flow is the experience of creativity and it involves paradox or the negotiation of the tension of opposites. So, accordingly – and quite by chance – my teaching became fertile ground for my research on teaching and the traditional polarities of teaching–research, teacher–researcher, and theory–practice blurred as I held them, like the opposing forces in my classroom, in dialectical tension with each other.

Sagacity in discovery

Fine and Deegan (1996) and Morley and de Rond (2010) assert (after Walpole, 1754) that serendipity is differentiated from chance by the observer's sagacity; by the extent to which the observer is prepared to notice what there is to be noticed. And, about two years prior to that November weekend, I had read Palmer's (1998) book, which had been given to me by another colleague. By that time, I had been a teacher (of adults and children) for about 25 years and a teacher educator for about five of those. Palmer's book inspired me to interrogate the complex relationships between 'who' I am as a teacher, what I believe about teaching, what I actually do in the classroom and how I relate to students (Palmer, 1998). So when a teaching portfolio development project was initiated in the college, I signed up for it. The first stage of the project involved writing a personal philosophy of teaching. As I wrote, I discovered the extent to which two diverse experiences as a student (one in primary school and one in secondary school) have influenced me and my teaching. I attended primary school in Ireland in the late 1960s and early 1970s when a new child-centred curriculum was being introduced. My teachers, in a two-teacher rural school with more than 40 children per room, embraced the ideals of this curriculum with gusto. Though such gusto was not the experience of the majority of my contemporaries (Quinlan, 1990), learning, for me, in primary school was exciting, fun, collaborative and intrinsically motivating. In contrast, learning in the convent secondary boarding school I attended was 'private, individualistic, and competitive' (hooks, 2010, p. 43). What mattered there was the memorisation of 'facts' and others' opinions; my examination results were my reward. As I was writing my teaching portfolio, I discovered the extent to which these contradictory experiences are reflected in the contradictions I live as a teacher. They are reflected in the (uneasy) co-existence of my belief in the value of intrinsic motivation for learning with my belief that it is extrinsic motivation that often enables students to reach levels of understanding and excellence they may not otherwise attain. They are reflected in my resistance to specialisation, which I find alternatively (and even simultaneously) discomfiting and energising. They are even reflected in my teaching responsibilities: my job title is 'lecturer in drama education', but at least half (and often more) of my teaching involves teaching about teaching on the college's graduate diploma in adult and further education. I have, moreover, taught courses in dance, dance education, English literature, aesthetic education, creativity, performance studies, classroom management, teacher induction, mentoring and curriculum leadership. Ever restless, I do not (usually!) have a rigid sense of what teaching 'should be'. I am, however, preoccupied with 'what might be' and (if at all possible) my latest interests and obsessions (as was the case with the writing) find their way into my classroom.

Writing my teaching portfolio enabled me to make some sense of the contradictions I was living. And, the insights I gained, together with Palmer's (1998) book, prepared me to notice how negotiating contradictory forces had generated the energy in my classroom that November weekend. I had experienced such energy before, but I had not, until that weekend, noticed how it was generated. This discovery led to another one: the discovery of the similarity between Palmer's description of paradox and Csikszentmihalyi's description of creative activity as flow. And, my subsequent bath-time discovery of the similarities between creativity and serendipity occurred as I was rereading Fine and Deegan's article on serendipity

and as I was rewriting this article. Each of these discoveries thus occurred at a time when I could – because I had been engaging with particular ideas or theories or had had particular experiences – discern its particular relevance. In other words, each involved sagacity. Fine and Deegan have argued that in ethnographic research, it is the ethnographer's ability to find 'in the rush of ongoing events, meanings and opportunities that might escape others' (p. 3) that turns a chance discovery into a significant one. And, while I would not argue that the discoveries I have made are significant in Fine's and Deegan's terms (that they have achieved, or are even likely to achieve, 'classic' [p. 3] status), they are, nonetheless, significant for me. And they have led me to consciously court creativity (or serendipity) in my teaching/research.

Putting myself into my teaching

For me, as for Fine and Deegan (1996, p. 10), serendipitous events present opportunities for transformation or opportunities for 'staging interaction and the creation of self'. And I believe, like Palmer, (1998, p. 10), that unless I have a sense of 'the self who teaches ... I have no sense of the "Thou" who learns'. My sense of the I/thou/self is however influenced by feminist post-structural readings of self/subjectivity/gender identity (Butler, 2005, 2007/1990; Davies et al., 2001; Lather, 2007). These readings draw on Foucault's (1980, 1988) readings of technologies of the self and the constituted nature of identity. Butler (2007/1990, p. 33) contends that (gendered) identity categories (and concomitant social/power relations) are embedded through, 'a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being'. For her, 'There is no self ... who maintains "integrity" prior to its entrance into this conflicted cultural field' (p. 199). Butler thus maintains that any attempt by the self to explain itself is limited by the cultural field (and identity categories) in which it is constituted (Butler, 2005, p. 66). The self cannot, therefore, explain 'its own emergence as an I' and any attempt to do so involves its reconstitution, 'at every moment it is invoked' in the very categories that constitute it (p. 66). So, in Butler's terms, the self cannot, as Palmer (1998, p. 14) puts it, ever 'be fully named or known'. What the self does, says, thinks and feels is embedded in complex cultural fields, identity categories and power relations which are taken for granted and so most often invisible. My self is inextricably bound to the identity category of teacher. And as a teacher, I have been 'trained' to separate the personal and the professional, body and mind, and student and teacher. My students are similarly 'trained' to expect that I do. But, in my classroom, as Palmer (1998, p. 13) contends, my identity or selfhood (and not just the teacher bit) is the only resource I have at my command. Palmer distinguishes between identity and integrity and for him '*identity* lies [as it does for Butler] in the intersection of the diverse forces' that constitute a life while '*integrity* lies in relating to those forces' in ways that bring 'whatever wholeness I am able to find' (p. 13).

As I have already noted, writing my teaching portfolio was transforming how I was thinking about and doing my teaching. Writing enabled me to make sense of my discoveries and achieve insights that I would not otherwise have achieved. My writing thus became an important tool in my courting of serendipity. Soon after I began writing my teaching portfolio, I started (vaguely conscious of what I was doing) to comment on my teaching as I was teaching (one such instance is

described in the vignette above). Sometimes, as with the commenting, it was as if my doing preceded my thinking and at other times it appeared that my thinking came first. Serendipitously (and another example of sagacity in discovery), I learnt from a colleague, who was reviewing my teaching as part of the portfolio development process, that other teacher educators were also commenting on their teaching as they were teaching (Loughran, 1995, 1996; Lougran & Berry, 2005). They, however, called it 'thinking aloud' or modelling. And they were doing it in order to make explicit the values, beliefs and pedagogical reasoning underpinning their practice, with a view to enabling their students to be explicit about the beliefs, values and pedagogical reasoning underpinning theirs. As I began to read and write about commenting (or 'thinking aloud' or modelling) I noticed how, like many of the discoveries I was making, it too involved a dialectical process; 'of doing and reflecting, experiencing and interpreting' (Pineau, 2005, p. 31). I also noticed how – as I commented on the beliefs, values, feelings, thoughts, confusions, biases and pedagogical reasoning embedded in various 'moments of struggle' (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 774) as I was experiencing them in the classroom – I was holding the personal and the professional, teacher and student, and teaching and its personal and cultural contexts in dialectical tension. I began putting more of myself into my teaching; sharing personal and professional stories, observations and insights. And I noticed that, in revealing the situated and subjective nature of my identity as a teacher (Jones, 2005; Pennington, 2007), I was simultaneously troubling the normative identity category of teacher as objective professional.

Most of my teaching involves teaching a group of between 12 and 15 (usually mature) students on a graduate diploma in adult and further education. Most of the students who participate in this programme already teach in the adult education sector and all of them aspire to. As part of a module in reflective practice, I teach 'core reflection'; an approach to reflective practice in teacher education developed by Korthagen and Vasalos (2005). Core reflection is designed to enable (student) teachers to align what they do with what they (ideally) want. Korthagen and Vasalos (2005, p. 64) maintain that teachers can achieve such alignment by harnessing their 'core values' or 'core qualities'; qualities or values such as courage, clarity, empathy, spontaneity, compassion, love and flexibility. I employ core reflection to investigate my own teaching. And in the vignettes below, I describe how I have used it. I also describe how I have used my experience of using it to teach about it. Like serendipitous events (which are, I believe, spawned by core reflection), core reflection presents opportunities for 'staging interaction and the creation of self' (Fine & Deegan, 1996, p. 10).

I had spent almost an entire week preparing a range of group activities for a class on group work with a cohort of adult education students. The class, however, did not work. The students engaged in the activities I had prepared, and in some discussion, but their body language clearly indicated that they considered the class to have been a waste of their time. I was not pleased either. After the class, I employed core reflection to find out what had 'really' been going on. Ideally, I had wanted the students to learn about group processes by engaging in group activities and dialogue. What I did, however, was set up one group activity after another (I had even brought in a colleague to set up some physical group activities). Moreover, I had created little opportunity for dialogue. There was, therefore, a gap between what I did and what I wanted. Korthagen and Vasalos (2005, p. 55) identify four limiting factors that prevent teachers from achieving what they want:

limiting behaviour (e.g. avoiding confrontation); limiting feelings (e.g. I feel powerless); limiting images (e.g. I am not that kind of teacher); and limiting beliefs (e.g. I am not good enough). And, written all over that class was my limiting image of the teacher educator as a repository of ideas for student teachers. Having identified my limiting image, the next task was to uncover the core qualities needed to overcome it. I uncovered clarity as the core quality needed. Then, harnessing clarity, I reimagined how I might do things differently: establish clear objectives (I had had but a vague notion of what I was about) and plan each stage of the class with those objectives in mind. So, in my next class with that group, I consciously harnessed clarity. The class took less than 10 minutes to plan. Prior to the class, the students had requested that I focus on strategies for dealing with/overcoming the challenges they were facing in their classrooms. My objective, however, was to enable them to appreciate that dealing with challenges involves more than just knowing the strategies to employ; it involves overcoming the limiting factors that prevent one from doing what one knows to do. After all, I had surely known the importance of clear objectives after over 20 years' teaching! In small groups, the students made lists of the challenges they were experiencing and they came up with strategies for dealing with them. They already *knew* (as I knew they would) the strategies to employ. So, I put it to them that knowing what to do was not enough. Then, putting myself into my teaching, I told them about my discoveries after the previous class. Troubling students' perceptions of what was needed to overcome the challenges they were encountering and troubling my own identity as a teacher, I thus troubled students to consider their identities as teachers. The students left the class that day in a pensive mood. I had, furthermore, achieved my objective.

The following year, with the next cohort of adult education students, I decided to use the teaching encounters described above to teach core reflection. I began by sharing what I considered to be some of my core values: clarity, empathy, openness, creativity, possibility and flexibility. And I acknowledged that my teaching was not always congruent with them. The students considered their own core values. They wrote about an incident in which what they did and what they wanted were in alignment. And, they identified how their actions in these incidents were aligned with one or more of their core values. They also wrote about an incident in which what they did and what they wanted were not aligned. And, they identified how their actions in these incidents were not aligned with their core values. I explained core reflection by telling the story of my experiences with the previous cohort of students. And about 10 minutes before the end of the class, I invited someone to volunteer to share her/his second incident with the class. I explained that I would act as coach, facilitating the student to identify the limiting factors at play. I was nervous ... hands sweaty ... palpitations ... I ran out of time ... what was I afraid of? And, even though I was convinced of the value of core reflection, I did not use it to probe what had happened. I decided, nevertheless, to revisit core reflection in the following class. I began by recapping my own story. And, in small groups, the students shared their accounts of incidents in which what they did and what they wanted were not aligned. Each group was then charged with the task of enabling each other to uncover the limiting factors that had prevented them from achieving what they wanted in the incidents they had described. All of the groups floundered and I panicked. My palms were sweaty and my heart was pounding. I could not think of anything to do other than to come clean. So I told the students about my bodily sensations. I told them that I did not know why I was afraid. And I told

them about my inability – at that moment – to identify the core qualities needed to generate transformation. Surprisingly, as I revealed my limits, the students began to identify (and share) the limits they had, hitherto unsuccessfully, been seeking to identify. Some even began to identify the core qualities needed to transform the situations they had been considering. My openness had generated reciprocity and a space for dialogue (Pennington, 2007). And, at the end of the class, as the students and I wrote our reflections, I got an insight into my fear: I had been afraid to be vulnerable. Consequently, I had not created a space in which students could be open or vulnerable either. But, as soon as I harnessed these qualities (albeit unconsciously) and became open and vulnerable, the students reciprocated. Insights such as this one are, according to Fine and Deegan (1996, p. 10), part of serendipity. They argue that:

Part of serendipity derives from those unplanned happenings that stem from one's own hands. This involves the powerful role of mistakes leading to insight: a messiness that stems from the investigator [or teacher].

And for them, 'Mistakes may be treated not only as unavoidable errors, but as events [like the one described here] that uncover the preconceptions of the researcher [teacher]'.

From putting myself into my teaching to writing autoethnography

When I began putting myself into my teaching, I had not yet discovered autoethnography as a research genre. I did not, therefore, realise that by putting myself into my teaching, I was using autoethnography as pedagogy (Pennington, 2007). Autoethnography, according to Ellis and Bochner (2000), involves researchers viewing 'themselves as the phenomenon', and writing:

... evocative personal narratives specifically focused on their academic as well as their personal lives. Their primary purpose is to understand a self or some aspect of a life lived in a cultural context ... Readers, too, take a more active role as they are invited into the author's world, evoked to a feeling level about the events being described, and stimulated to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives ... (p. 742)

Substituting teacher for author and reader for student, the above passage reflects my classroom practice. Moreover, putting myself into my teaching resists the mere reproduction (and inscription) of established teaching practices. It makes the personal political. And making the personal political is, according to Jones (2005), one of the principal concerns of autoethnography. For Jones, autoethnography is:

... about the personal text as critical intervention in social, political, and cultural life. ... [a] call to disrupt, produce and imagine a breakthrough in – and not a respite from – the way things are and perhaps should be ... about how looking at the world from a specific, perspectival, and limited vantage point can tell, teach, and put people in motion. ... about how a personal text can move writers and readers, subjects and objects, tellers and listeners into this space of dialogue, debate and change ... Autoethnography writes a world in a state of flux and movement – between story and context, writer and reader, crisis and denouement. It creates charged moments of clarity, connection and change. (pp. 763–764)

Again, substituting teacher for writer and reader for student, Jones's description of autoethnography reflects my classroom practice.

I had originally framed (and abandoned) this study as a self-study in teacher education. Self-study's concern with improving teaching and with developing practices for teaching about teaching (Craig, 2008; LaBoskey, 2004) means that, as a research genre, it seeks some degree of certainty or closure. However, my integrity, as described by Palmer (1998, p. 13):

... requires that I discern what is integral to my selfhood, what fits and what does not – and that I choose life-giving ways of relating to the forces that converge within me.

And, preferring to live with ambiguity, self-study's concern with certainty or closure does not fit for me. Autoethnography's aspirations as a research genre, however, converge with my aspirations as a teacher; both seek to evoke, to 'nurture the imagination' (Bochner, 2000, p. 268) and to 'put people in motion' (Jones, 2005, p. 764). In addition, autoethnography as a research genre offers me the possibility of putting other teachers/teacher educators 'in motion', of generating a 'space of dialogue, debate and change' beyond the confines of my classroom. It also supports my ongoing engagement with writing that is, in St Pierre's (1997, p. 408) words, 'not only inscription but also discovery'.

An error of insight

Learning *how* to learn from mistakes is, according to Fine and Deegan (1996, p. 10), 'critical for using serendipity in qualitative research' and, I would argue, for using it in teaching. Mistakes can also uncover for the researcher, or teacher educator, fears, preconceptions or beliefs (as described in the above vignettes) of which he/she had hitherto been unaware (p. 10). Furthermore, as Fine and Deegan contend, 'errors of insight could contribute to future insight' (p. 10).

In my third and final class with the group of teachers on the graduate certificate in mentoring and teaching development, I deliberately courted serendipity. I deliberately harnessed the tension between opposing forces as I planned to explore aspects of tradition and innovation in the Irish education system. Underpinning this class were Csikszentmihalyi's (1997, p. 71) description of creativity as 'being both *traditional and conservative* and at the same time *rebellious and iconoclastic*' (italics in original) and Palmer's (1998, pp. 61–87) description of paradox in teaching and learning. Palmer (1998, p. 62) asserts that embedded in western culture – and, consequently, its education systems – is a series of broken paradoxes or either-ors ('this or that, plus or minus, on or off, black or white') which have led to the fragmentation of reality and the destruction of 'the wholeness and wonder of life'. He argues that we are kept beholden to these either-or structures out of fear (p. 37); a view with which Senge (2006, p. 73) – whose work also informed my planning – concurs. Like Palmer, Senge (2006, p. 69) argues for 'a shift of mind from seeing parts to wholes' and he contends that this shift can be enabled – paradoxically – by anchoring it within existing structures or traditions (p. 335). This, he argues, necessitates clarifying the aspects of tradition which we seek to conserve and he maintains that:

Change naturally induces fear in us all: fear of the unknown, of failure, of not being needed in a new order of things. When we obsessively focus only on what needs to

be changed, and not on what we intend to conserve, we reinforce these fears. But when we clarify what we intend to conserve, some of this fear can be released. (p. 335)

So, mindful of the power of paradox and Senge's warning, I began the class by generating small and whole group dialogue around what constitutes 'tradition' in Irish primary education. Among the aspects of tradition identified by the teachers was either-or thinking, in which one pole is inevitably privileged over the other. They also identified the privileging of 'right' answers over divergent thinking, competition over collaboration and compliance over creativity in Irish primary schools. Next, I invited them to consider the aspects of tradition they wished to conserve as primary teachers. In this way, I was – I believed – creating a space for them to release their fears. I did not, however, get beyond this; to creating a space for them to articulate what they wanted to dismantle. And since this was my last class with this group, I was left with a gnawing sense of dissatisfaction. This prompted me to reread Palmer's book (again). And, this time, I was struck by his contention – hitherto unnoticed – that inherent in our fearful allegiance to western society's either-or structures is our fear of the possible disturbing consequences of 'a live encounter' with others, and with ourselves, that engagement in the dismantling of existing structures might precipitate (1998, p. 37). I thus discovered that by not challenging the teachers (and myself) to identify what they (I) wished to trouble, I had shirked the emotional charge of the 'live encounter'. Instead of harnessing the power of the paradox, I had avoided it altogether; I had embraced only its conservative pole and had steered well clear of its rebelliousness. Palmer (p. 65) contends that:

We split paradoxes so reflexively that we do not understand the price we pay for our habit. The poles of a paradox are like the poles of a battery: hold them together, and they generate the energy of life; pull them apart, and the current stops flowing.

And, while there was some current flowing in that class, it could have been stronger. But I nonetheless discovered what Fine and Deegan (1996, p. 10) call an 'error of insight': I believed that I was teaching in the power of paradox – negotiating the tension between tradition and innovation – while diligently avoiding doing so. So all I could do was, as Csikszentmihalyi (1997, p. 98) exhorts, let the 'problem' 'simmer below the threshold of consciousness for a time'. Here:

Free from rational direction, ideas can combine and pursue each other every which way. Because of this freedom, original connections that would be first rejected by the rational mind have a chance to become established. (p. 102)

Then, if 'a subconscious connection between ideas fits' to the extent that it is 'forced to pop out into awareness' (p. 104) at an opportune time, it can be taken advantage of. And this is, perhaps, what happened in the teaching encounter in which I shared my fears with the students. Temporally, that teaching encounter succeeded the one described here. For, as Ovid (quoted in Cameron, 1994, p. 65) has put it: 'Chance is always powerful. Let your hook be always cast; in the pool where you least expect it, there will be a fish'.

Conclusion

Writing this autoethnographic inquiry has been – like writing my teaching portfolio – a process of discovery. It has been part of a continuing dialogue between my writing and my teaching; a dialogue in which each informs and shifts the other. And, at various points, these shifts (and, concomitantly, my shifting self) are expanded through serendipity. For me, the insight thus gained is not just ‘a treasure at the end of the road’ but ‘one that unfolds with every twist and turn of the road’ (Fine & Deegan, 1996, p. 4). I court serendipity by being ready or prepared ‘to seize the clues on the road to discovery’ (Fine & Deegan, 1996, p. 11). And in this article I have shown how serendipity enables me to energise my teaching, my research and, indeed, my ‘self’. Like Butler, Lather and Davies, I believe that the self and other identity categories (though limited by the terms of their constitution) can be transformed; that they contain within them ‘the possibility of a variation within a repetition’ (Lather, 2007, p. 39) or the possibility of ‘subversive repetition’ (Butler, 2007, p. 199). So, in feminist post-structural terms, the only way that I can trouble the identity categories in which I am constituted as a (gendered) self/teacher/researcher is by enacting a variation within a repetition; by unsettling those categories from within (Lather, 2007). Or, as Butler (2007, p. 199) puts it, ‘There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very “taking up” is enabled by the tool lying there’. And in this article I have shown how I do this in my teaching/research.

It may be that my account of my teaching/research shines a light on, or even rubs up against, yours (the reader’s). I hope, at the very least, that it creates spaces for you; spaces to think about the, perhaps unexpected, traces evoked of your own serendipitous experiences; spaces to notice something that you might not otherwise have noticed; and spaces to ponder something that might be particularly relevant to you at this time. And so, at this point, I surrender my account to you ... for further thinking and doing.

Notes

1. Alcock (2010, p. 15) describes the (contestable) story of Archimedes’ discovery of hydrostatics while having a bath as ‘the best ancient example’ of serendipity.
2. ‘Surprised by Joy’ is the title of a poem by William Wordsworth.
3. Merton and Barber (2004) tell the story of serendipity’s evolution in a book written in the 1950s. This book was first published in 2004.

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