

# Storying the Self: Autobiographical pedagogy in undergraduate Creative Writing teaching

## Abstract

The telling and sharing of stories is synonymous with what it is to be human. The narrative threads reaching back through our personal histories help us make sense of who we are. We use stories anecdotally, at school, on dates, or over coffee, to connect with people and social worlds. In academia, storytelling that engenders meaning making is becoming legitimised as a branch of qualitative research that informs us about our culture and identity. Autoethnography is a methodology that links the self (auto) with ethno (culture) to research (graphy) (Reed-Danahay, 1997) and it is this approach that has driven the ethos guiding the development of a creative writing module for undergraduates that the authors co-devised. This article uses autobiographical storytelling to demonstrate the author's pedagogical practice and research into storying the self.

## Key words

Autobiography, autoethnographic, storytelling, creative writing, pedagogy

## Introduction

"The use of fiction, which should not be regarded as synonymous with falsehood, arguably facilitates telling tales in a dramatic and enjoyable way. It is also a useful way of 'writing the self', so that the researcher and the researched become one and the same. Writing the self means using fiction and other literary tools to both construct and clarify the person being written about...the researcher and the researched." (Grant, 2010b, p.1)

Here at the University of Brighton, we have recently established two new degrees in English Literature & Creative Writing and English Language & Creative Writing, and against the trend of closures to courses and funding in the humanities, these courses recruited well for their first intake in 2016. When designing the degrees, we created a flagship module, 'Storying the Self' which embodies our core educational ethos: that autobiographical storytelling has a powerful place in reflexivity and meaning making. The module encourages students to identify those things within themselves that they want to write about and to develop skill with prose, poetry, script and graphic novel to tell the tales that have shaped their own identities in relation to others. We identify these stories from their heritage as being able to "provide a valuable foundation for adolescents as they can navigate the challenges of becoming adults." (Fivush 2017: 244). Whilst we accept that our undergraduates are of course adults, we argue that the transition to university often takes navigation that can seem daunting or demotivating and that the telling and sharing of personal narratives can be a way of mapping a way through their first year, connecting with their peer group and tutors, and valuing the stories that already exist within themselves that need listening to and respecting. Autobiographical stories can often be concerned with trauma or overcoming adversity (Fivush, 2017) and by developing and building on these narratives using creative writing techniques, we wanted the module to be constructive, transformative, empowering, and for the students to develop confidence with their unique stories and also with the skills to tell them.

"...research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political. Autoethnographic forms feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection portrayed in dialogue, scenes, characterization, and plot. Thus, autoethnography claims the conventions of literary writing." (Ellis 2004: Xix)

Through the writing of our own autobiographical stories, we explore our senses of the past and how this has informed the development of this module. We identify our own autobiographical storytelling as a strategy for supporting students to value and develop their own life stories. Through conversations together on 'Storying the Self', we each reached into familial pasts to investigate why we take this pedagogic approach in our teaching practice on these creative writing courses. We each write an autobiographical story to reflect on the way stories figure in our personal and professional lives.

### Jess's Story: Pointing Fingers

*When Nan was in her 20s, her finger got trapped in a revolving door. The pain was so bad that she passed out as the door kept circling and once she came to in Kilburn hospital, she refused to have it reset. As a result, it always pointed at a funny angle so that when she was wagging a finger at you, usually because you'd done something to annoy her, it always looked as though she was pointing at the person next to you. And this made it quite hard to take her seriously, even when she was telling you off in her animated Irish bark that might otherwise have stripped flesh from bone. In three inch heels and decked in purple mohair, Helen Rubinstein lipstick no. 12 and masses of green eye shadow, Nan was a sight to behold. In spite of being 5 foot 2, even in the heels, with her flaming red hair and clouds of Armani perfume, she was unmissable on the Jubilee line, going from Wembley to work at Dickens & Jones or Harrods or another colossal department store where she was always one of the best sellers of designer clothing to designer women. She was so good at making money for these shops that managers would turn a blind eye to her long lunches and the discreet pilfering of her and her mates that meant they were always as fashionable and formidable as any of the women they served. They worked hard, and would reward themselves with frequent nights out, piling into black cabs and heading to where the party was at – which was always where they were.*

*Growing up, I used to admire them so much, these women who looked like something out of Dynasty, had their own money and knew how to enjoy themselves. Even on the estate where Nan lived, her door was nearly always open and the neighbours would pop in for a morning mug of tea and a Silk Cut while they gossiped about what was occurring beyond the net curtains. When my granddad was alive, he was often beside himself at her escapades and regular trips abroad on women only holidays. Her bag was never unpacked and there would always be some aunt or friend who wanted a companion to Malaga or Alicante and Nana May's passport refused to gather dust in a drawer. She wanted to be off and out. "You've got to make the best of it." She would say, raising a cut glass tumbler of whiskey to the skies as she detailed another trip where the barman just happened to know this secret beach or the manager had given her a free parasail or how at the resort's best restaurant they all cheered "May!" whenever she walked in.*

*It had taken my granddad three attempts to get my Nan into church. The first two times, she told the driver to circle round and changed her mind but by the third time, her father told her enough was enough. "On our wedding night, your grandfather stayed up all night drinking with your Uncle Danny and I slept at the end of the bed." She told me, "I just lay there thinking to meself, 'what have you done May?'" They were a regular Burton and Taylor. Either madly in love or just mad. It took me three engagements before I would actually marry someone and when I did, he had to organise the wedding or else I swore I wouldn't say 'I do.' She wasn't there when I did and I don't think she would have approved of the registry office but she would have loved my black wedding dress, gold shoes and the reception with a free bar.*

*They always bought my brother and me expensive toys and took us to the cinema or the drive thru when they babysat. We would be high on Mary Poppins and sweets by the time they took us home in Jim's red Rover. I never wanted to go to bed when we slept at theirs, but they didn't mind me staying*

*up and watching late night films like Jaws and Dirty Harry. Nan would make me turn away in the scary bits but even now I'm still terrified of swimming in the sea. One night, whilst she painted her nails, Jim taught me to tie my laces on his right shoe and when I finally got it they both cheered and clapped so she smudged them. She didn't care. Much. She hated a naked finger or toe and my nails are usually a garish tangerine or green as a tribute.*

*When Jim died, she started taking half a sleeping tablet every night to get her through to morning. She moved into the middle of their huge bed with satin sheets, and kept his photo in every room so she could talk or row with him when she needed to. Several of her exes appeared on the scene and wined and dined her, took her on expensive holidays and offered to be husband number two (I still have an engagement ring one of them refused to take back in case she changed her mind). She always had more than one beau on the go, and she was always out pulling the strings of Fred or Mac or Alfredo and then letting them go when she got bored. "I'll never get married again, I swear to you now." Not that we would have minded, but she was happy to pick them up and let them down when it suited her and kept partying with her friends all the while.*

*She was a terrible hypochondriac but lived through the triple bypass and ignored all protestations to stop smoking and drinking. She thought a Chinese take away was a healthy meal and that cups of tea stopped and that the bar opened at midday (although with the bad hangovers, sometimes the bar opened at 9am). Before she went down to surgery to have a pacemaker fitted, the anaesthetist had to wrestle her blue make up bag from her as she tried to put on mascara – with no mirror. "If I go, I want to have my eyes on at least!" she told him, "Mrs Moriarty, the only place you are going is to the operating theatre and they don't care what you look like down there." But he relented and let her have a smudge of eye liner, just in case.*

*When she died, she was in her 80s. Only my Great Auntie Ann knew her real age for sure, it was the stuff of legend. She was pulling on a pair of pink knickers and that heart of hers gave in. That heart that loved as ferociously as any I've ever known. If she liked you at least. If she didn't, it was catty and cold but I was always in her sun. Maybe she saw in me something of herself that had been filtered through my parents DNA? Something more measured, less wild but reckless and burning nonetheless. I see her in my own daughter, in Arla who at only 6 is bold and has to be who she is, on her terms. Her two brothers are softer, kinder, in awe of her power and her 'nothing will stop me'. Her teachers have told us we need to be stricter with her, 'She's just so feisty.' One lamented at a parents evening, "That's how we like her." I said, "Well yes," said the teacher, "but she has to know the world doesn't belong to her?"*

*My daughter waggles her finger too and she puts lipstick on without a mirror. She can be the life and soul but she can cut you dead. She laughs at her own jokes and claps her hands when she does it. She keeps her dad and her brothers on strings she has already mastered. She wants to run for president with the best hair accessories she can find.*

*And I tell her about her Great Grandmother who wouldn't be tamed. Who spoke her mind and loved like a cyclone, lifting you up and up and destroying anything that got in the way. I tell her she was neither just good or just bad and certainly never in-between. I tell her Nana May would have thought she was the business. That you can never be too feisty if the world's going to belong to you.*

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### ['Storying the Self': Autobiography in action](#)

Baxter Magolda (2006) suggests that all students bring their individual identities to the construction of knowledge, not merely absorbing what they are being taught, but actively developing their

understanding of their academic discipline on the basis of prior knowledge and experience (Biggs 2003). Supporting students to value and draw on their existing autobiographical knowing and helping them to build on this can therefore help them with confidence in themselves and in their discipline (Reading and Moriarty 2012). The transition from a school to university is often a time of stress and anxiety for students (Brooks & DuBois 1995; Gall et al. 2000). The pressure to forge new friendships, adjust to new learning environments, adapt previous relationships with family and friends, identify new strategies for their studies and function independently as adults can be daunting and difficult. However helping students to value the experiences they have already had that might help them with their academic studies can be a powerful tool in supporting this transition and can also help to keep students engaged in their course (Parker et al. 2006).

Earlier research found that creative practice students employ a form of 'autobiographical knowing and personal feelings, experiences and opinions' (Gushka 2005) to inform and inspire their work but that they often find it difficult to locate their personal stories within wider academic and contextual debates (Reading 2009). This can still be problematic in academic work too where research that openly relates to the self is criticised for narcissism (Coffey 1999; Holt 2003) and for not having the objectivity required for traditional and conventional academic practice. Carolyn Ellis argues however that, "It's narcissistic to leave out your own experience and to act all-knowing, as though you can stand apart, and that you are not subject to the same forces as those you write about," (Quoted in Pickles 2017) and so supporting students and academics to value autobiographical experiences and to develop skill with mediating these through their creative work, is a real but important challenge.

The *Storying the Self* module asks first year undergraduates on the English Literature and Creative Writing BA and English Language and Creative Writing BA at the University of Brighton to work with and on their autobiographical material and encourages a discussion around the issues of why one might and should write their autobiography, the aesthetics of autobiographical narratives (Nalbantian 1994) and writing as therapy (Hunt 2000). It is important to make this distinction and encourage students to develop literary techniques and skills that will help them to devise creative work that might also have implications for their sense of self and wellbeing. This stems from the notion that whilst self-narration can be cathartic, "the classroom is not a clinic." (Cardell and Douglas 2016: 10). The module places an emphasis on transformational writing that employs skill and retains a sense of technique and craft. In this way, the process can empower students to develop as thinkers and artists but also as people with a clearer sense of themselves and their academic and creative identity. This method can be useful for how they envisage themselves and their discipline in the world outside the classroom once they graduate (Moriarty 2017).

Students work with writers and artists who engage in a process of storying the self for their own creative work. This year, they worked with a Graphic Novelist (Nye Wright), novelist (Karen Joy-Fowler) and playwright (Tanaka Mhishi) who led workshops and lectures where they discussed their processes and engaged students in tasks to help them with their own storying of the self. These sessions helped the students to develop knowledge of different crafts, identify specific storytelling techniques and build confidence with their ability to apply these to their own writing. They were then encouraged to critically reflect on their work and their process. Autoethnographers engage in a similar cycle of reflection and action, often triggered by wanting to find something out about themselves in relation to the wider world.

Discussion

Reflection



## Practice

Fig. 1 – Triangulation of Practice

Engaging students in a triangulation of discussion - reflection - practice can help them to 'make new sense of situations of uncertainty or uniqueness' that they might experience (Schon 1983: 61) and these are crucial research skills that have the potential to help them make sense of their academic studies and lived experiences whilst at university. Not only can this help them to feel surer about their writing and their studies but also their ability to identify themselves as part of an academic community with something to say about their discipline of creative writing (Moriarty and Reading 2012).

Autoethnography is a social process whereby individuals come to greater understanding of themselves and others (Schubert 1986: 33) as a result of their writing (Carless and Sparkes 2007; Grant 2010a; Moriarty 2015). Students are asked to reflect on their own creative outputs and consider how their own writing and research might connect with and resonate within audiences and readers, a practice adapted from an approach that is: "ethnographical in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation" (Chang 2008: 1). We identify this process as having the potential to help students' foster connections between lived experiences, academic study and their social worlds and argue that this aligns it with an autoethnographic approach. This process has provided the ethos driving the development and subsequent implementation of the module and also reflects our own approaches to research and writing as critical, reflexive practices which often adopt an autoethnographic position (Moriarty 2017, 2016).

### Ross's Story: Upping Sticks

*"Not to be opened unless anything happens to me. And only by you my dear wife."* My mother looks up at me from reading the envelope.

The letter was opened sometime after February 17<sup>th</sup> 1917 by Alice Sayer née Kerry, my great grandmother. She was always 'Guy Guy' to me for the three years I knew her and 'Trifter' to everyone else. I now only have dim memories of her and the toys she brought once a week, with her daughter, in those days before we moved to Australia. Through creased and foxed papers, images from afar, and our voices, her granddaughter and me in familial conversation, we look back. My mother takes out the letter. Just three small sheets. I hold the envelope trying to imagine its first opening.

'Encounter' is the word that I use most to write (and therefore) think about education. This is an education that relies most on the self in relation to Other and the different modes of encounter that the Other provides when looking back, asking and listening or in writing. But these are never neutral relations that appear as a given, or which can be given. Neither can they be taken. Because at its deepest level, education is characterised by understanding, which in relation to the Other, is always an ethical relation. As Wiercinski (2011b: 109) writes, "education is a call to transform our life by exercising openness toward the other and the unknown. It is an ethics of embracing the strange, the negative, without silencing the differences. In this respect education is about living diversity". This view of education as hermeneutic encounter bound up in an ethics of the other struggles in contemporary cultures of higher education. It struggles because learning has become objectified, as something separate from the learner. The learner has 'earned credits', the learner 'has a degree'. These small phrases belie a particular view of education which turns experience into problems to be

seized and solved. It is an alienation that arises when education is seen as something provided, to be pocketed. Gallagher (1992: 152) draws on Marcel's (1971) notions of 'problem' and 'mystery' to highlight what is lacking in this view. A problem has an end, a clear-cut solution, which we remain outside of. A mystery is where we cannot step outside or see the whole. But in the struggle for sight lies the ongoing attempt "that is never entirely finished" (Gadamer 2004: 301) at understanding. In the hermeneutic tradition of education (Fairfield 2011; Gallagher 1992; Wiercinski 2011a) this is a recognition of the self in dialogue with the Other. In this view the self is intimately implicated in all understanding which is limited by its 'horizon' (Gadamer 2004: 301). In encountering creative writing with our students, we recognise following Gadamer (2001) that 'education is self-education'. By this he means "we must proceed so that we never forget that we educate ourselves, that humanity educates itself, and the so-called educator participates in this process only in such modest roles, for example, as teacher and as mother". It is in this 'modest role' of being teachers that we situate our work on 'Storying the Self', these encounters with the past, our writing, and our own and others' stories.

### Looking back

My mother continues, "*Sept 22.9.16. My own darling wife. Am writing this letter to be opened by you if anything should happen to me in this war*". Three voices, my mother's, her great grandfather Bertie and mine as we strive to make sense of what went on, of what this past is. I look for Guy Guy in between us as we try to locate her in the times and places of the past. I hear our puzzles over letters, dates and documents through the chink of cups in the kitchen as my father makes us coffee. We come across an insignificant scrap of a letter dated 29.3.17 on square lined paper which starts '*I regret to inform you that I received last night information of the death of your husband.*'

What I'm looking for is something behind a story I know quite well. An elusive past moment when I sense Guy Guy has made up her mind to 'up sticks'. The moment when Guy Guy made that choice for her two daughters. She would leave her role as the cook in a priory just outside Colchester in Suffolk and move to live with her sister in West Clandon, a Surrey village, with her two young girls. A destination after a traumatic event. The same village we would go to when I was thirteen on our return from eight years in Australia. It's the one story of my great grandmother's life that I've heard from my mother many times before that has drawn me into this. The horizon of my present understanding extends outward from this question. Why do we, as teachers, ask our students to 'story the self? I sense that part of the answer lies in the choice that Guy Guy made. My mother reaches into the box of letters and documents.

Why do we look back? In education, reflection has a firm place in the pedagogic repertoire. As Jess shows, cycles of action and reflection form a core part of any informed research practice. But there is another sense of reflection which produces different understandings of what might be happening when we look back. Hindsight might be another word that captures something of this difference. For Freeman (2010), hindsight *is* looking back but it has two particular emphases. First hindsight is not just reflecting on past moments, on memories, but is a narrative reflection. There are, in other words, processes of emplotment through which "the experiences of times past now ... [are] ... seen as parts of an emerging whole, episodes in an evolving story" (p. 4). Thus "what would appear to be required for a hermeneutics of self-understanding is an encounter with the past, with one's history; for it is precisely here, in the context of what I have already been, that I find the most suitable vehicle for coming to terms with whom I might be now.", (Freeman 1997: 375). Narrative in this sense is one the two modes of understanding proposed by Jerome Bruner (1986). One, 'logical thought', is defined by its emphasis on reasoning, logic and argument. It is paradigmatic in that it aims to reveal things in categories and the logical connections between things and categories.

Bruner (2004) argues that this is not the most common mode of thought, but that narrative is ‘world making’ and is “the principal function of mind” (p. 691). He goes on to say that:

eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very "events" of a life. In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we "tell about" our lives. (p. 694)

But for Freeman (2010) the additional aspect to hindsight is that it “plays an integral role in shaping and deepening moral life”, (p. 5). From the vantage point of now, past experiences (often mistakes) are (re)viewed, lessons learnt and moral growth allowed to flourish. Ethical questions of how to live are possible with the delayed understanding that is hindsight. But this doesn’t entirely cut it. This version of hindsight makes no mention of the other, however conceived, and remains a hermetically sealed version of the self. Freeman (2014a) relates how his encounter with a story by Primo Levi, “Shame” from *The Drowned and the Saved* (1989) along with others, revealed the importance of the Other in any discussion of personal, spiritual and moral growth. Freeman (2014b) identifies two principles on the priority of the other, aesthetics and ethics. In the first the other is “a source of meaning, value and existential nourishment, and second, as a source of ethical energy and commitment”, (p. 5). These he says are connected. Are we able to engage with the other in the first sense without appropriation? In other words, in being with the other through writing and storytelling of the kind we do in ‘Storying the Self’ can we inhabit a relational ethics that might be the seeds of education as self-education?

### Talking together and listening

We pull another document from the box. Covered in green circles for post office stamps, it’s a ‘separation allowance and allotment of pay’ document dated 16.6.16. The first stamp is dated 20 Ju 16, the last 15 Oc 17. I start sentences and my mother ends them as we talk together striving to understand.

“Oh crikey,” I say, “he didn’t last ...”

“Well he didn’t have to put up with it for too long that’s all you can be thankful for.”

It was place and moving place that brought me to this conversation. This East Anglian connection that I don’t quite understand. We talk and piece together bit by bit what may have happened, and where and when. The why may be lost forever.

Talking and listening together, is a dialogue which drives understanding. Or perhaps it’s better to say that it is in dialogue that understanding emerges. The emphasis on dialogue and language is key in Gadamer’s (2004) hermeneutics. Conversation is seen to overcome us as we are swept along, not entirely sure within the twists and turns where the conversation will take us. Our conversations on Alice’s letters take us around Suffolk and Norfolk. We may know where she eventually continued life after Bertie but we don’t know where our understandings will take us. “A conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it, i.e., that it allows something to ‘emerge’ which henceforth exists”, (Gadamer 2004: 385). There is risk in these conversations, a risk in taking part in a dialogue, putting forth a view or an idea. “No one knows in advance what will ‘come out’ of a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us”, (ibid.). Encounter, etymologically speaking, is a meeting of adversaries. The ‘in and against’ whether in conversations at home or in the classroom.

In our work on 'Storying the Self' we ask our students to make digital stories. These short autobiographical films, comprising scripted voice over, sound effect, music and (usually) photographs have their heritage in community arts work in the United States from the mid 1990s. Digital storytelling is now practised around the world and is often found in education programmes, health work and social activism (Alexandra 2008; Gubrium 2009; Vivienne and Burgess 2013; LaMarre and Rice 2016). Key to the process and ethos is its workshop approach where small groups gather to 'listen deeply and share stories' (StoryCenter 2018). Early on in the process our students share their initial ideas. A bit further on they try out a draft around the 'storycircle'. This is the hard part. It's hard to have a dialogue with someone about their autobiographical work. Surely they (the speaker) have got it all right? But being inquisitive is the most powerful part. I genuinely want to know more about that person, or that situation. I hope the students around the circle do too. In the storycircle we provide students with some etiquette for conducting the sharing of stories. For example, "Try asking questions to the storyteller or be inquisitive about the story rather than only telling them what they could do. "I'd love to know about why you said ..." "Were you saying that you felt ....when you said ...". By being in a position of not knowing as a listener, we might be able to help the storyteller understand more deeply why that story is being told right now. As Warnke (1987, p. 170) says, "At the conclusion of a conversation, the initial positions of all participants can be seen to be inadequate positions on their own and are integrated within a richer, more comprehensive view". These are not conversations that necessarily end in agreement but instead an increased openness to the potential revision of one's own views in light of the other's position. A genuine interest by the listener to understand more can result in a deeper understanding by the storyteller. Stories deserve that understanding if they are to be written well.

### Writing stories of the self

A letter from 1917 mentions Norwich. It seems that Guy Guy, my grandmother Bella and her sister were there. The post office stamps with their town names help. They are from the post office in the village where they worked at the manor. But the stamps in their circles only fill half the page. An abrupt ending in October 1917. We look closer. And there, on the page, in post office stamps, are the travels of my great grandmother.

"It's like a detective story," I exclaim. I hurriedly look up Bawburgh on Google maps.

"Well they must have been so distressed they went to relatives somewhere, near Norwich and Beccles did you say?"

I'm reading out every town and village written in those stamps. "Oh look it's all here. The whole story's here. 1<sup>st</sup> January 1917 Beccles, 13<sup>th</sup> February Bawburgh Norwich, 7<sup>th</sup> May 1917 back to the Priory, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1917, West Clandon." West Clandon comes out as a whisper. This is the move I've been looking for, the narrative that connects. The moment when it all makes sense and that story that was always a mystery, becomes my story.

Storying the self with our social and familial relations in mind can embody an ethics of doing it, such that we are not exposing students to the accusation that they are being narcissistic or that their work has "a risk of leaning towards self-indulgence, superficiality, and sensationalism", (Lapadat 2017: 593). Our task is to keep these stories open and to avoid that closing down which can shut off the 'existential nourishment' and 'ethical energy' which Freeman (2014b) speaks of. We hope that our students also come to see their stories in this way, open to themselves, open to the other.

In ending, I want to keep Guy Guy open and not close her story down. I already had an ending but it's not quite right. This isn't a neat narrative that I can appropriate as my own.

We always find ourselves within a situation, and throwing light on it is a task that is never entirely finished...The illumination of this situation—reflection on effective history—can never be completely achieved; yet the fact that it cannot be completed is due not to a deficiency in reflection but to the essence of the historical being that we are. To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete. (Gadamer 2004: 301)

In fact she didn't make her permanent move to West Clandon on the 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1917, just six months after finding out about the loss of her husband. A letter from the Imperial War Graves, addressed to her at that Priory just outside Colchester, is dated 8<sup>th</sup> May 1923. So they were still there then. My grandmother turned fourteen later that year. The Fisher act of 1918 raised the school leaving age from 12 to 14 although the act didn't become law until the Education Act of 19<sup>th</sup> August 1921. I'll let my mother finish the story:

"I think my mother, Bella, was quite bright and had the opportunity to go to school in Colchester. But for some reason this form had to be filled in by this Mrs Ingham. You know she said, 'Oh what does she want to learn History for and what does she want to learn Geography for'. And she wouldn't sign it. I don't know what age my mother was but I suppose my grandmother thought 'well I suppose she wants my girls to go into service' in her house, and she didn't want that. So they upped sticks."

We don't know when they moved to West Clandon but perhaps the future for her two girls was not as she may have imagined. We'll never know. But I do get a sense of the reasons for them moving. Perhaps there was an openness to what was to come and what was to come was more open than what had been. We understand our work in 'Storying the Self' as perhaps contributing to students own sense of place, belonging and relationality, as writers-in-relation situated at the beginning of Higher Education study. Opening up the aesthetics and ethics of autobiographical storytelling is one way of keeping ourselves open to self and other in teaching and learning.

## Conclusion

We live storied lives (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992) and can use autobiographical storying to make sense of our identities as teachers and researchers. This ongoing autobiographical knowing can be formative in terms of understanding and also connecting with our DNA. Furnishing students with the skills to reshape their stories, imbue them with new meanings and reimaginings can equip them with the confidence to engage in a reciprocal process of meaning making . In this way, our autobiographies constitute "our medium of being" (Schafer, 1981: 31). Storying the self is both a *method* of knowing – a social practice – and a way of telling about our lives (Richardson 1990). This parallels Morris's (2001: 55) observation that

"The concept of thinking *with* stories is meant to oppose and modify (not replace) the institutionalized Western practice of thinking *about* stories. Thinking *about* stories conceives of narrative as an object. Thinker and object of thought are at least theoretically distinct. Thinking *with* stories is a process in which we as thinkers do not so much work on narrative as take the radical step back, almost a return to childhood experience, of allowing narrative to work on us. "

Autobiographical memory work, (e.g. Rubin 1996; Gill and Goodson 2010; Berntsen and Rubin 2012; Gill and Goodson 2014) has the potential to support students value and adopt practices of thinking with stories. Through these reflexive practices of distancing and disembedding, students may come to see the ways that autobiographical storying intersects historically and culturally. This is what Gill

and Goodson (Gill and Goodson 2014: 147) call a 'theory of context'. In the immediate context of their first year studies, such work may contribute to understandings of self in relation to the wider social configurations of creative writing as a subject to be studied at university. This is a process that can be encouraged throughout life, and establishing this practice at university can be a particularly powerful way of further engaging students with their discipline, with their peer group and with themselves. We argue that it has been crucial for us as teachers to become authors of autobiographical memory work in order to engage our students more fully on the Storying the Self module. This is not so much that we act as 'examples' for our students. It is to live with these stories as a way of making sense of ourselves in the present. The process has not only helped us feel more confident in how we have devised our teaching and learning strategies, but it has also made us feel more connected to each other as colleagues and as people. Having identified this process of storytelling linked to pedagogic practice, we any family histories, storying work is never done.

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