

REFLECTIVE STORYTELLING: AN EXAMINATION OF CULINARY SPACES AND IDENTITY FORMATION

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Many times during my academic and reflective journey I have been forced to stop and take an introspective look at myself and try to make sense of who I am. The reflective narratives presented here capture my personal story in a process that has allowed me to make sense of myself using my own culturally generated sense-making processes¹. My early experiences of reflective practice were that of reflection in practice², and were fundamental to my early professional culinary career development. These were academically unconscious reflective practices that were deeply informed by experience gained through working in practice.

In this article I take you into a world that you may not have encountered before, a world that Palmer³ calls the “underbelly” of culinary arts and its associated pedagogies. For those of you already connected with the world of culinary arts, I intend these insights to add an authentic voice and a means to segue into the critical philosophical perspectives I explore.

It also captures one of the most significant times in my life, a time when I am starting to transition from a cook who teaches to a teacher who cooks. It marks a moment which challenged my preconceptions of students and the world of culinary arts; it is in fact a moment of enlightenment through critical reflection. This was my first pedagogical transformative learning moment and it would not be my last.

The insight has been adapted from the teaching portfolio that I prepared for the New Zealand National Tertiary Teaching Awards in 2008. It was initially written for an academic readership which would determine if I was worthy of a national accolade for teaching. The original version is non-abrasive and politically correct as it speaks of hopes and dreams, aspirations and transformations.

My vignette is structured in a way that the footnotes act as a means to articulate my new pedagogical insights, gained through exploring critical theory. They act as a conscious bridge between the culinary and education world as I saw it then and the enlightenment offered by critical theory. As such, I recommend that the reader reads the vignette as a complete story before unpacking the critical thought interwoven within the supporting footnotes.

1 Bishop, R. & Glynn, T. (1999). Researching in Maori Contexts: An Interpretation of Participatory Consciousness. *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 20 (2), 167-82.

2 Schön, D.A. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books.

3 Palmer, C., Cooper, J. & Burns, P. (2010). Culture, Identity, and Belonging in the “Culinary Underbelly”. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research* 4(4), 311-26.

Some readers may find the actions and language of my personal insight challenging, but to present them any other way would devalue the authenticity of the experiences. It is through the collision of the culinary and academic worlds that I intend engage both communities in critical reflective thought about their self-constructed views of epistemology and its impact on being. As an academic leader on a culinary programme, I am constantly torn between my academic and culinary identity and the cultures that each practice embraces. To remain respected within each practice I have to constantly morph my identity and language structures, whilst trying to find a balance between “whose knowledge is best”. As Palmer states, due to the unsocial nature of the culinary occupation, chefs view the world from a position of “us’ in the kitchen and “them” on the outside world ⁴.

According to Palmer et al. ⁵

“Chefs are moreover, a community of common descent in that they share a history, a tradition, a language of speaking and a language of being that bind members together in the face of what some regard as a hostile world with little understanding of what goes on behind the kitchen door. This is not to say that everyone agrees with the values, attitudes and behaviour of all members of the community.”

It is at this time that I would like to remind the reader of the social theories proposed by French philosopher and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu⁶. Bourdieu suggests that each of us operate within habitus of our various communities and as such we each bring certain lifestyles, values and perspectives to our work. In effect we have our own socially and culturally generated perspectives of the world and its reality. In his theory of reflexive sociology, Bourdieu reminds us that we need to be aware of our own views and bias to better understand the social reality of others. As such, behaviours that may seem unnatural to the reader are in essence likely not part of the social realities or cultural identity that the reader may be accustomed to.

My First Year of Teaching

I clearly remember my first year of teaching. It was 2002 and I was only 27 but had already been in the hospitality industry for over a decade. I had worked in some prestigious restaurants and had a fairly well-informed intuition of what kind of student would make it in the world of haute cuisine⁷. Quite frankly you have to be fairly hard-arse to adapt and survive in those kitchens. It’s an environment where chefs like Marco Pierre White and his bad boy rock star attitude are worshiped. Equally Jamie Oliver is seen as a pretty Essex boy who had sold out to dinner party wannabes with his carefree “lovely jubbly” salads.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., 322

6 Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

7 As I reflect and unpack my early thoughts and practices within culinary education, it becomes evident that as an emerging educator I had a limited perspective of the role of education in society. My view of education lent towards the dominant logic of education as a means of knowledge acquisition for the sole purpose of producing obedient workers. According to Apple and Illich, education for social reproduction benefits those in power within a capitalist system at the expense of self-development of the individual. In this case, I subconsciously believed that my role within the education was the reproduction of commis chefs for the avant-garde culinary community. See Apple, M. (1982). *Education and Power*. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul. See Illich, J. (1971). *Deschooling Society*. London: Calder and Bayars.

Most of these kids in front of me wanted the glory and stardom that Jamie and television provided. Sucked in by the media and signed up to a course which they believe will provide them with a fast track into the world of celebrity chef⁸.

I distinctly remember being allowed to write menus for the training restaurant. I actually enjoyed writing the menus as it was a chance to escape the drudgery of unit standards and the state-controlled curriculum I had to teach. The irony was that I had the freedom to write and implement the menus because the students weren't being assessed during the preparation and serving of them – it was just work experience with no learning credits attached⁹.

I remember one of the dishes on the menu vividly “Duck Parfait with Granny Smith Apple Gel, Star Anise Glaze and Toasted Fig Brioche”. A technical masterpiece and a dish that I had co-created and prepared at the award-winning Thornley's Restaurant in Christchurch¹⁰.

I busted my gut in that place working 16 hours a day for shit pay; by that I mean I couldn't even financially survive. But I did it because I was learning at a phenomenal rate and I was gaining acceptance into an exclusive community of chefs. To my dismay, the kids in front of me didn't give a shit about the dish – it wasn't being assessed and emotionally they didn't own it¹¹. They hadn't sat around after a hard service with their mates conceiving potential new flavours and sensory aspects of the dish and in turn taking ownership of it. No, they had simply bought the dish via a student loan. If my chef buddies knew that I had simply given this recipe to a group of students they would have been mighty pissed off – everyone in the industry knows knowledge like that is not shared freely and is simply earned the hard way¹².

8 My comments in this vignette give an insight into the underlying belief within the culinary profession that chefs from working class backgrounds should adhere to the value of hard labour as the only meaningful contribution within the culinary community. Likewise, chefs from working class backgrounds should not rise above their social status and become media icons. Freire argues oppressed individuals often want to become like the oppressors and in doing so continue a vicious circle of oppression. In this case a culture of reproducing culinary ontologies and associated social structures. See Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (30th anniversary ed.). New York: Continuum.

9 Unbeknown to me, while I was trying to free my students from the state-controlled curriculum I was still controlling what they could see. Foucault proposed the term the gaze to describe a method of controlling human behaviours and thoughts through the manipulation of how people see their world. See Foucault, M. (1973). *The Birth of the Clinic* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). London: Tavistock. In most of my years of teaching I have struggled with the tensions of state “legitimate” and practice “illegitimate” knowledge. Since the early 1980s Michael Apple has also been critical of the control of official state knowledge and the dominance of it within society. See Apple, M. (1982). *Education and Power*. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

10 In this case, the teaching of a dish from an award-winning restaurant by an award-winning chef can be seen as the use of social and symbolic capital as a form of power control in the education of students. This dish example illustrates some key fundamentals within traditional culinary courses; French-based, technically challenging dishes have the most cultural and gastronomic value in the western culinary curriculum. See Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press. In my professional experiences, chefs with a background in fine dining (*haute cuisine*) are often employed as lecturers. This indirectly acts as a form of gastronomic cultural invasion as local dishes are not seen to have the same culinary value as of the dominating French repertoire. With time students are indoctrinated into the philosophy *haute cuisine* is superior to their own cuisine and identity. See Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (30th anniversary ed.). New York: Continuum.

11 The stigma of hard and dirty work fosters the development of a strong working culture and allows for employees (in this case chefs) to view the work in a positive light. See Ashforth, B. E. & Kreiner, G. E. (1999). “How Can You Do It?: Dirty Work and the Challenge of Constructing a Positive Identity. *Academy of Management Review* 24(3), 413-34.

Coarse and offensive language which is viewed by other societal habitués as offensive is a regular feature of the chef community. Coarse language creates kinship, belonging and a sense of community for chefs. See Palmer, C., Cooper, J. & Burns, P. (2010) *Culture, Identity, and Belonging in the “Culinary Underbelly”*. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research* 4(4), 311-26

12 When I practiced as a chef the collective designing and preparation of culinary dishes were fundamental to creating a collective ownership of knowledge. This raises critical questions as to the ownership and the power and control of knowledge from a community of practice. A phenomenological study of practicing chefs unveiled that the role of creativity is critical to creating shared values and beliefs as well as occupational commitment. See Robinson, R., Solnet, D., & Breakey, N. (2014). *A Phenomenological Approach to Hospitality Management Research: Chefs' Occupational Commitment*. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 43,65-75.

At the end of the year I took a one-week course in basic teaching at the Dunedin College of Education. This course was a revelation to me as I was introduced to the theories of different types of student motivations and to pedagogy in general. From that point forward I started to look at my students in a different light. It became apparent to me that their motivations were different to mine. Maybe my world and their worlds were different. Unlike most of them I distinctly remember the day that I knew I wanted to be a chef. I didn't choose to do it because I felt like something different in my life; it was a conscious calling and for me a way of being¹³.

Reflective Storytelling and Critical Examination

The use of reflective storytelling has long been associated with the construction of knowledge and identity for learners¹⁴. In the words of Maxine Alterio, "storytelling values emotional realities, capture the complexities of the situations, encourage self-review, make sense of experience"¹⁵.

According to Alterio¹⁶:

"Stories often need to be told in different forms before they feel complete and learning can be consolidated...as tellers and listeners we consciously and subconsciously draw on our past experiences to make sense of current situations."

In this article, through the use of emotive storytelling and the process of critical reflexivity, I expose a "set of embodied dispositions" that in fact may have impacted on the culinary "being" of the students I taught in my early teaching career. Subconsciously my thoughts and actions were based upon a series of culturally generated and socially conditioned beliefs.

Personally and professionally speaking, critical reflective storytelling is a powerful tool for educators. For me, reflective storytelling acts as the dissemination of the reflective praxis that my research journey into critical pedagogy has taken me on. As critical theorist Paulo Freire implies in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, it is through the examination of the past that we can build more wisely for our futures¹⁷. In my particular case, reflective storytelling has enabled me to be more mindful in my teaching practice and of the ways in which culinary places, spaces and beings can be influenced.

¹³ My own transition into the world of critical thought at Teachers' College started the process of emancipating me from my own perceptions of the role of education in society. Admittedly it would be many years before I felt comfortable with the concept of education and its role in enabling conscientisation. Freire advocates that the true power of education is in its ability to liberate the oppressed through critical thought processes. See Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (30th anniversary ed.). New York: Continuum.

¹⁴ Alterio, M. (2003). Using Storytelling to Enhance Student Learning. Retrieved from Durrance, B. (1997). *Stories at Work. Training and Development* 51 (2), 25-31.

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¹⁵ Alterio, M. (2008). Reflections. Retrieved from <http://maxinealterioreflexions.blogspot.co.nz/>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (30th anniversary ed.). New York: Continuum.

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