

Michelle's Story – The being and becoming of a teacher

The centre must hold

The stage: concentric circles. Inner circle starts with self, moving to team, organisation, system, nation, world, cosmos.

A Play in two acts

Act 1: A monologue by Michelle, the protagonist.

Act 2: A dialogue by the audience sitting on the stage, in the various circles.



Act 1: Michelle

I am going to take you on my journey. It moves through these different levels.

After the Tools for Learning Design (TLD) workshops in August, we were supposed to come up with a research question. Mine was “How does the learner

become the trainer through the Advanced Certificate in Training and Assessment (ACTA) programme in Singapore?”

I am standing here between system and nation because that is where that question came from. I was very much in my Training Manager hat where I manage the development, delivery and review of the ACTA and Diploma of Adult and Continuing Education (DACE) training in Singapore. *How far can teachers or trainers be trained? Can the craft of teaching be learnt or is there something already there in the person, natural traits or attitudes that make the learning stick? To what extent can a professional identity be assumed through training? Is the IAL training process the right road to take?* My questions were very specific to my job of reviewing the impact of the training programmes, even though I wanted to feel this bigger picture of how teachers and trainers become teachers and trainers – the being and becoming of a teacher – the making of the teacher in me, the intertwining of the “teacher self” with the whole self. At what point do you declare, yourself “Yes, I am a teacher,” or “Yes, I am a trainer”.

I left the workshop and I knew I had a lot to do, but of course a lot stepped in to overwhelm me. So I am now standing in the organisation, because the organisation stepped in to disrupt anything I could possibly do. On top of my training manager position at IAL, I took on an entire new division. At one stage, when my director was on a business trip for three weeks, I was literally running two divisions so you can imagine the type of workload. So when you are in that mode trying to learn what needs to be done in a new division, trying to align team expectations, team fears and dealing with a team, that is some kind of transition mode. It was very difficult. So this part took up a lot of time and kind of got in the way of thinking about this project. I couldn’t think of adult educators – teachers, trainers – beyond this ACTA and beyond my function as a training manager.

Then, of course, I had my critical friends, Helen and Sue. Helen dropped by with some books, Sue recommended readings and sent articles. So I actually got started on building up something else, thinking more about what I really wanted to uncover. Was it really for ACTA? Or was it really for something else.

And so you know, when in doubt, you go back to yourself. And here I am standing in the self. I did a reflective journal on how I had started my own journey to where I am now. I started as a teacher and became an adult educator. And it was an up and down journey. There were various impulses and situations that led me to this point. So I was expressing that to Helen and to Sue, and I think

Sue caught onto the fact that there was more to it than the ACTA part of things. I was really questioning how many other people have journeys similar to mine?

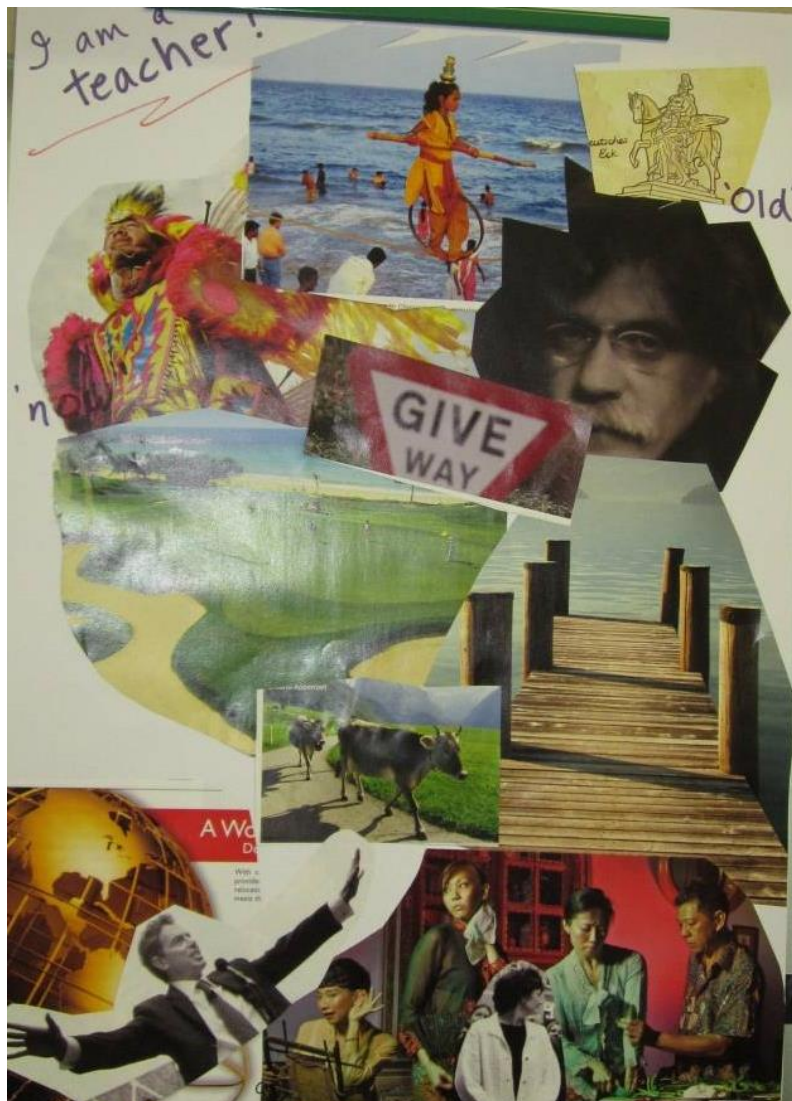
And so I started talking to people, getting them to tell little stories. But I didn't have the technique at that time. I didn't know how to ask the questions that I needed to ask. So it was just actually conversations, some of them deeper than others. I realised that all the journeys come from all over the place. And so I thought, okay, this has to progress. There is something about teaching from the self-perspective, even from a “**WE**–cultural” perspective. Teaching is not just a job. Being an educator is not just a job. There is a part in your personality that doesn't stop. All these artefacts we have created here indicate that. There is a merging between life and teaching. As Bill said, he needed to protect himself from teaching, he had to be aloof to survive. What does that mean, that your personality is so enmeshed in your function? So teaching is a lot more than a job.

I wanted to find out if everyone feels the same or feels something else or has different constructions of what it means to *be* this teacher and *become* a teacher. Becoming first and then being. Sue understood it and was able to supply words to help me along the journey. Words included essence, existential, identity, transformation. And so I started reading more in that area because I needed the theoretical clarity to some extent. And for myself, team, organisation, system, nation, all together, I also started on my PhD studies. I went to Bristol University for the first time, and the first module was “Understanding Educational Research”. It was a very boring title for a really great module. This module helped me (I am now standing in myself) sort out different philosophical stances. Before this, it had been unclear. Plus, it gave me a break from this “empire”. I went on my own, but I am familiar with UK because I lived there for a year. So it gave me time and space to think through a lot of things. Sue hasn't said very much about it, but I think after I came back, I actually had more to give to the project. It was not only clarity of stance or clarity of theoretical knowledge but also clarity of what I really want to find out and why.

And so Sue had a really great idea and she helped me. She proposed setting up an “ecology room” where I could get the team members here to come in and use the room. I could then effectively get my data, even though it would not be the empirical type, in terms of numbers and figures. So we had a really fun time planning the ecology room with many different activities to help people express the different issues with and aspirations of being a teacher. It was just done last Thursday with 12 people doing the activities – trainers, administrators, managers,

quality assurance. One of my colleagues, Anne, came into the ecology room and did this collage. I had a chance to get her to explain her journey.

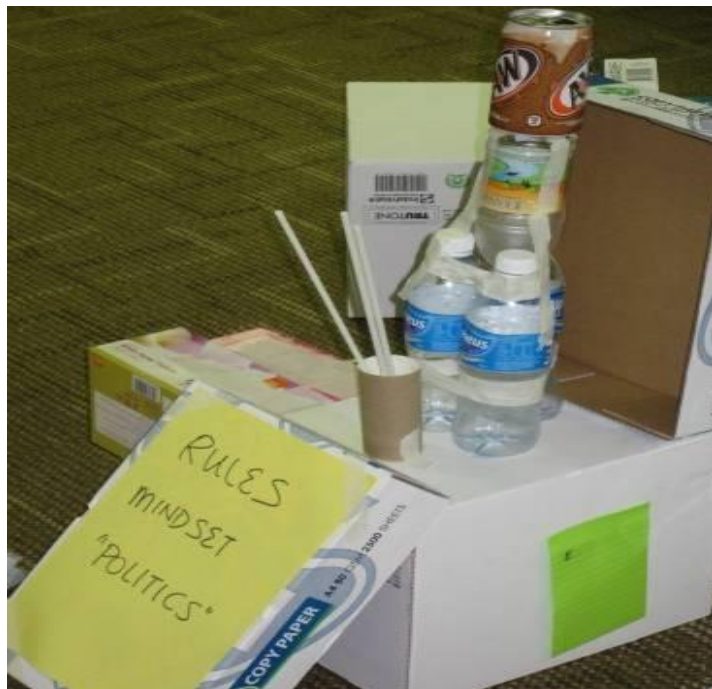
This is her 30, 40 years ago when she started, when she was a teacher. She was very reluctant to be a teacher. She didn't think it was her. But she comes from a very old-fashioned Chinese family who would not send her to school any more after a certain level and so she had to go out and work. At that time, there were not many choices; you either ended up as a teacher or a secretary. So she took a position as a teacher, and she said her idea of a teacher was old, sage-like, the knower of it all.



But now all these thoughts have had to give way to this new idea of being a teacher. There is a nice picture of a girl who is doing at least six different things. She is balancing on a tightrope, moving this hoop and balancing something on her head. Now there are so many roles we need to juggle all at once as a teacher and, in fact, you become the Indian Chief to your learners. Something has to give way. She says teaching looks like a nicely manicured lawn, as in this golf course, but you know there are holes in there, sand traps. You don't quite know where you are heading. She said, previously, she had an idea that learners were like cows in that you could say "do it that way" or train them to do it that way. But now, she says, learners are so diverse and here she even gets to meet CEOs of companies who are learners.

So she has come a long way on her journey. But I also know she refuses to step into a trainer role although she is a trained teacher. She says "no way" because she doesn't want to go back into that teaching role. It is intriguing that she has found a niche in administration supporting counsellors, but she still identifies with teaching; thinking of the impact on learners, but is not in front of learners.

It is stories like this that I need to get and then deconstruct. And it is here in part of the ecology room that we drew our journeys. All of us drew our personal journeys of coming into the profession. The journeys were really quite amazing because we had people who had come in by chance, people who had come in by force, and people who said they started off with such passion and then they dropped out for a while. They needed that recovery time before they could come back in. Some were not convinced that they were on the right path, "I don't have a road map, I am unconvinced about being a teacher". And you think to yourself, this must be one big job. So much angst about it, but at the same time, you feel the joy. It is a very redeeming thing.



I haven't had time to analyse the data but there is a huge lot. We did a lot and I discovered very many facets of my colleagues who attended that particular session. There was a little construction, an altar made out of boxes. That was one of the activities that we had where they were supposed to build a representation of what the system meant to them, and Greg came in. Greg is one task-oriented person – he sends you emails with massive spread sheets with timelines to the nth degree. He was the first one who got down to it on the floor, removed his shoes voluntarily, and started building. We were all surprised. I thought I knew these people. I have now glimpsed outside of being transactional work colleagues.

At the end of it, we asked certain questions:

- At any point of your career, did you feel like a rookie, did you feel like a learner?
- At what point did that stop and when did you realise you were a teacher?
- What moments surpassed your expectations of teaching?
- Was there some point where you wanted to throw in the towel?

They were tough questions, but people got down to them. We traded battle scars. These were the moments that defined us, shaped us as a person, made or broke us. So there were a lot of emotions and I found out a lot where world, nation, system, organisation and team are concerned. And then along the way, as I stepped back into the self, I was confronted with what I should do with all this information and all these stories that are too valuable to let go? These would give us, this entire line (self, team, organisation, system, nation, world), a much better picture of what has happened here. I am poised to be that person because I have been to every part.

I started this, thinking I would do a little experiment, a little bit, just to see whether it would work out with my PhD, but it has become a lot bigger, it is speaking to me, Sue is speaking to me, and I think the stories are speaking to me now that I have a little more of an inkling, a greater grounding of how to get those questions. And when I go back to Bristol for Module 2 which is narrative inquiry, and March when I go back for Module 3 which is auto-ethnography, I will have even more tools to get these stories out. What do I do with them in the end? I think there is a whole lot of potential which could affect this whole line down the way. The thesis will get written. Beyond that, there could be a lot there.

Act 2: The audience speaks from the stage

Sue (individual level): It is big, it is a life's work.

Michelle: It is huge, but it will get done. I handed my training manager role over properly to Jimmy this morning. I had been preparing him for the role for months – a slow give-over. I think I was meant to be in this new role, taking over professional development services. Part of the being and becoming, the emotional self, has to be supported as well beyond the ACTA modules and the DACE course which we have done, but in other ways as well, as a proper support network in the form of not just professional development services but something bigger. I think I am meant to be there.

Bill (world/cosmos level): You are knee deep in the system now. (Michelle is literally kneeling in the system next to her journal and folder. She looks down and recognises it and laughs.)

Sue (individual/facilitator): Michelle, stand back into the “self”. I am going to get you to declare this self that is birthing in you. I feel like a mid-wife. What are the words that describe this self that you want to take forward when you walk through all these layers (team, organisation, system, nation)?

Michelle: Firstly, some descriptive words, “*poised on the brink*”. I think I am a kind of catalyst, a kind of connector, a bit of a mover and a shaker. While I can understand the being and becoming of this very special group, I also have the means to propel it in a particular direction if that speaks to me. I guess I am also kind of a guide. Maybe later when I have all of the stories, I could possibly do something to help people find their way along this pathway. It is what started this journey as well because people come up to me and say I have a heart, a passion for training. I want to see what makes this passion and if it is in them, and how that can equip equally with everything, to help them become this teacher, this trainer.

Sue (facilitator): Come forward one step into the “team” for the next question I am going to ask you. In the ecology room, you opened the box for quite a few people there. That was emotional. Who is going to take responsibility for them now, minding their growth?

Michelle: I can start. Half that room was Professional Development Services, so I can start. But from a team, organisation, systemic, nation level, the Learning Development Services – Jimmy’s division – has a role. There are many streams to take care of this.

Sue (facilitator): Come forward into the “system”. As the system now, what is your responsibility to all these other people here in the room, representing so many aspects of the system?

Michelle: The stories must speak to these people and from them. Not just writing them out, but re and inscribing. The stories must show them a way. These people and these stories represent who we are working the system for.

Sue: (facilitator turns to the others in the room). Is this enough? What would you want Michelle to do, with one foot in the system and another in the nation?

Fettia (nation/world level): You can help to inject humanism, to improve the whole process. How can people like Jenny do what they like doing, and really contribute to the nation?

Michelle: A key thing is now it is no longer faceless. Now I have lots of stories and faces to them.

Marie (system/ nation level): Your system seems quite flexible. You are able to move through all these levels and take yourself with you. If you have support from your organisation and can work even harder with the system, you can get what you want.

Jimmy (organisation/system/nation): What would be nice is to uplift the status of trainers in Singapore. Champion teachers? We are almost left to fend for ourselves. There is a very disparate group of people. It would be nice to put names to faces, to what this group represents.

Fettia (nation/system): It is important to influence organisations in industry, to bring the system to the next level. We also need to improve the way trainers teach students – the ACTA modules.

Michelle: Handing over to Jimmy (the new training manager) on this one.

Anita: (team): You want to see passion and dedicated teachers. What is required to help teachers do this?

Bill: (nation/world) – I think you are in a position of great leverage and power. I can see where you are coming from, your intent is very solid, and I am warmed by that. I will share this little story. Last week, I taught this ACTA training module and talked about curriculum developers, and one of the learners shared. He was asked to develop a courseware for an Accredited Training Organisation (ATO). As courseware developers, everything has to be clear – the philosophy and intent, a lot of work has to go in, a lot of heart and thinking. He says, “If the ATO is only going to pay me \$1,000, I am only going to do \$1,000 work.” So these are the very real limitations of the system from the industry that are coming from the ground up.

(Michelle begins to creep back to the organisation and team levels.)

Sue (facilitator): Can Michelle do this, is it too big? Does Michelle need to come back into a smaller level? Michelle, why are you creeping into the organisation and team level?

Michelle: I think I can do this. I think the role I have in the organisation, the teams I am part of, I think I can begin to address the larger stories which I already know, I can address these other issues which I already know and which are real. In this new role, I meet the industry validation group for the whole ATO framework – I get to talk to government, union, employers. I actually have this whole line – self, team, organisation, system, nation. (*She walks along it.*) The growth in this course was here, in the self. The universe, the cosmos had moved things so I was able to get a bigger picture. So previously, I was the training manager in the organisation, just one part. Now I am poised to do other parts that can actually help the bigger picture. (*She walks out to the nation level.*) We are talking two, three, four or five years. But I think if the intent works out clear, the research, the theoretical aspect, it will come into the academic arena. If the intent is clear, it could be years, but I will get there.

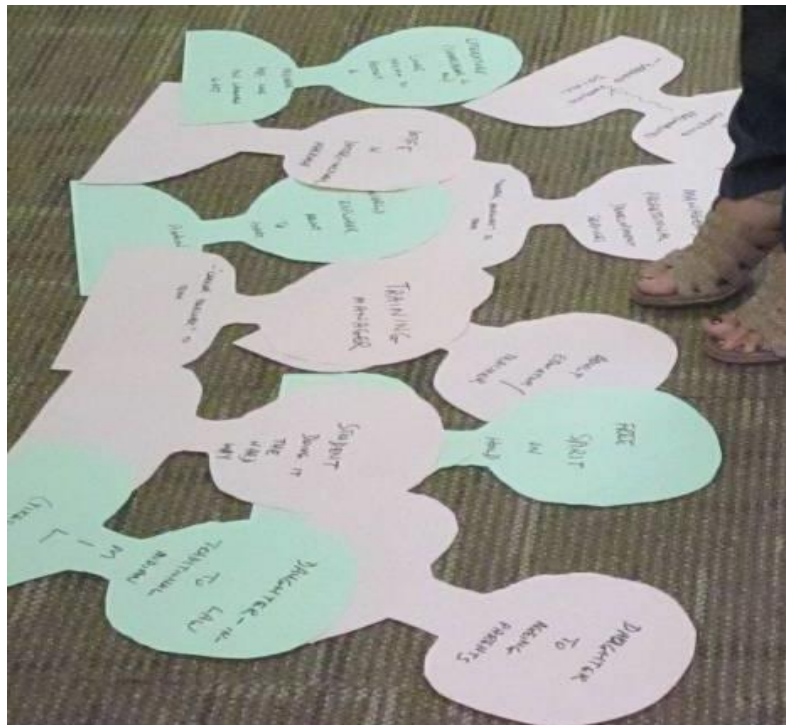
Bill (cosmos level): So turning around what you said before this session – “Can the centre hold?” – *your own centre must hold.*

Michelle: Yes, it is definitely more that *my own centre must hold.* Bristol helped. Before that, I was very conflicted about taking the scholarship because it would tie me to this organisation for a long time but I had to complete it. When I was in Bristol, I realised why I had to complete it. *That is what I am there for. That is why I need a long time to do what I need.*

Helen (organisation): And all this sustains the self. Can you align the aspirations of yourself, your different roles with your work and your intent? That is where this next step out from the self becomes important, who are these multiple teams that can support *you*?

My roles:

- Training Manager – now discarded
- Manager of Professional Development Services
- Mentor/coach
- Adult educator/teacher
- Mother to competing personalities – a weekend do-all
- Daughter to aging parents
- Wife in inter-racial marriage
- Daughter-in-law to traditional Indian mother-in-law
- Student doing it the hard way
- World explorer – about to start again
- Literature lover – trying to protect my love for art
- Free spirit on hold



I Am

I am unfettered, yet bound
I wonder how this could be
I hear words of encouragement
I see walls closing in
I want to run, but stay
I am unfettered, yet bound

I pretend everything is perfect
I feel pulled apart
I touch resistance
I worry I can't fight it
I cry out against the tension
I am unfettered, yet bound

I understand the antithesis
I say both directions need not oppose
I dream I'll find equilibrium
I try not to fight it
I hope I master the contradiction
I am unfettered, yet bound

Acknowledgements & Background



This story was constructed by Dr Sue Stack (pictured, top) from a participant's presentation and interview in the Tools for Learning Design project. This is part of the Tools for Learning Design project led by Dr Helen Bound (bottom) and Dr Stack. We would like to thank the participant for allowing her story in all its vulnerabilities to be shared.



This story and the four others that are found in the Tools for Re-imagining Learning website convey the participants' questions, issues, processes and journeys. These stories have been slightly fictionalised with changed names to provide anonymity. They aim to express the authentic voice of the participants through using a conversational writing style.

The Tools for Re-imagining Learning website is a resource for trainers, curriculum and learning designers, and training leaders in the Singapore Continuing Education and Training sector interested in deepening understanding of their practice to create innovative and enlivening possibilities for their adult learners.

The Tools for Re-imagining Learning website and the Tools for Learning Design project overview can be found at www.ial.edu.sg.

For more information on the Tools for Learning Design project or the Tools for Re-imagining Learning website (content), please email Dr Stack at susan.stack@utas.edu.au or Dr Bound at helen_bound@ial.edu.sg.

We welcome questions or feedback on this publication, the Tools for Learning Design research report or the Tools for Re-imagining Learning website (layout or technical issues). Please email research@ial.edu.sg.

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The Institute for Adult Learning (IAL) aims to contribute to the competitiveness of Singapore by developing an effective, innovative and responsive Continuing Education and Training (CET) sector that is able to meet the needs of industries and the workforce. It achieves this by raising capabilities, catalysing innovation, and leading research in workforce learning.

About the Centre for Research in Learning

The Centre for Research in Learning (CRIL) undertakes research that seeks to understand and develop the processes and practices of learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum design in the CET sector from multiple perspectives, settings and contexts. We work with those taking part in research projects, engaging practitioners in the research process and thereby developing communities of practitioner researchers.