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Introduction To Another Voice: Educational Life-Writing As Responsible Text

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Abstract

Good educational biography serves to humanize both historical actors and the past itself. It gives readers a sense of real people involved with real issues in a complex world. If done with sensitivity and skill, educational biography provides us with knowledge, insight and understanding, elements that are always in short supply (Beauchamp, 1980, p. 4).

Life-writing, a broad category of writings which includes both biography and autobiography, is an immensely popular genre in contemporary North America. A survey by the Library of Congress revealed that during the first six months of 1990, more people read biographies than any other kind of book. Some view these biographies as an escape mechanism from the tremendous pressures of contemporary life (Beauchamp, 1980, p. 1). Others feel that biographical writings can fill a void in their readers' lives—lives void of intrigue, adventure, and excitement.

Historically, the reading of novels has been that outlet for many of its readers. According to James Veninga, "Biography has taken the place the novel used to fill. Nineteenth century novels...provided readers with large slices of life in which questions of character, motivation, morality, social pressure, and internal conflict could be explored in great depth." He continues by saying, "Most modern novels—all bare bones and spare parts—do not provide that kind of satisfaction. Modern biographies often do" (1983, p. 37).

Educational life-writing focuses on "theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as lived" (Connell & Cladimir, 1990, p. 3). It unites the experiences of life and education. An educational biographer gathers materials such as letters, journal entries, diaries, photographs, tape-recordings, and interviews to construct the life-story of a living or deceased individual. Educational biography has taken on various forms. The two most notable are individual biography and group biography, the latter referred to as multibiography. Individual biography has taken on various forms. The two most notable are individual biography and group biography, the latter referred to as multibiography. Individual biography is a written story of one life; multibiography surveys the "lives of two or more persons published together for some definite purpose" (Winslow, 1978, p. 69). The individuals featured in biographies may be well-known educationalists such as John Dewey or relatively unknown individuals connected to an elite institution such as Harvard University. Or the subjects, meaning the persons about whom a biography is constructed, may be non-elite individuals such as students, teachers, principals, schoolmasters and school mistresses, or even homeschoolers.

Educational life-writing, whatever its particular characteristics, is not popular, at least in the form of biographical essays published in scholarly journals. Only one American journal is devoted exclusively to life-writing, Vitae Scholasticae (VS), the organ for the International Society for Educational Biography. VS has a circulation of less than 100, an indication of the small measure of interest in its subject matter. History of Education Quarterly (HEQ), the organ for the History of Education Society (United States), is considered the undisputed leader in the field of educational history. HEQ published only five biographical articles and a small number of biographical reviews between 1977 and 1987 (Beauchamp, 1980). A content analysis of the first twelve volumes of the interdisciplinary journal Biography, revealed only eight educational biographical studies, a figure representing less than four percent of the total (Beauchamp, 1980). Many of these articles feature techniques and strategies for constructing biographies. Actual educational life-writings were the exception rather than the rule.

Given the apparent lack of interest in educational biography in the United States, American educational historians might be interested to learn that of the first thirty-three articles published in Historical Studies in Education/Revue D'Histoire De L'Education (HSE), the organ of Canadian History of Education Association, thirty-nine percent, or thirteen articles, fall under the rubric of life-writing.

Furthermore, narrative inquiry is increasingly selected as the methodology of choice by researchers across many disciplines. The word "narrative" means a narration, or actual description of chronological events and experiences. Narrative researchers use personal narratives to construct biographies and other texts. For the most part, narrative implies a story of a person's life as told to someone else. If the term narrative appears in a book title, such as A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Margaret Douglas, it implies a written account of the subject's life as constructed by the biographer. Narrative can also be the oral or written source material, or text, the researcher collects and uses to answer a research question. For example, in order to study the drop-out problem, a researcher collects personal narratives of girls...
who have left high school prior to graduation. In other words, narrative can reflect (1) the historical life text as constructed by the biographer, and (2) the collected data, or text, the researcher uses to study some aspect of people's lives.

The study of narrative, called narratology, is a "study of the ways humans experience the world." According to Connelly and Clandinin, narratologists view education as "the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories" (1990, p. 3). Narratologists are found in many disciplines—psychology, philosophy, history, anthropology, and education; they write biographies, case studies, and life histories. Narrative inquiry, which also falls under the rubric of life-writing, stresses to restore "human agency and human relationships." It further focuses on the "motives, qualities of intellect, or creative sensibilities which the architects of education [have] brought to their task" (Finkelstein, 1990, p. 6).

Many researchers have viewed life-writing in one of two ways. Some regard it as "just" interesting stories with the possibility of some literary value. Yet, due to observer and narrator bias, these interesting data can yield no real generalizations or principles and thus have little value. A second viewpoint is that these data "might" have some scientific merit if analyzed in an "objective" manner. According to Gordon Allport, an early pioneer in biographical research, data can be objectified by following two procedures: by minimizing "observable bias" or by using the data to illuminate general concepts or principles. Allport felt that minimizing observer bias would promote validity and reliability and that data could then yield patterns resulting in generalizations and principles (Freeman & Krantz, 1980, p. 3).

Allport distinguished between using life-writings to analyze the person who had constructed them and using such documents to "discover generalizations about human personality" (Gaarity, 1981, p. 284). In the 1930s he set out to standardize biographical techniques and eventually produced rules to evaluate life-writings. However, he soon realized that these rules were inappropriate and ineffective. He concluded that "biographies could not be reduced to formulas of any kind" (p. 284). This conclusion is the same as that reached by narratologists Connelly and Clandinin who believe that the criteria of validity, reliability, and generalizability are not appropriate for life-writing. Currently narrative researchers are developing their own research standards for each research project, which they justify as part of their methodology (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

This study seeks to dispel the myth that biography and history are two separate genres. It endeavors to release the "straight-jacket" definition of history, that is, an uncritical definition of history as a genre whose principles are unchanging and bound by tradition. With regard to this purpose, we raise the following questions: What is responsible text? Is educational life-writing a demonstration of responsible text? Or, is it theoretically deficient because it doesn't adhere to traditional social science criteria and principles? And, with regard to educational life-writing, do American and Canadian historians of education differ in their perceptions of "responsible text?"

In order to answer these questions, we will examine the leading American and Canadian history of education journals to determine: (1) the total number of articles published, (2) the percentage of educational life-writings, and (3) the apparent criteria for selecting publishable articles. One article from each journal that perhaps best represents what the journal has currently published in the life-writing category will be examined. The analysis will be augmented by comments of the editors and editorial board members. Our analysis might help us ascertain standards by which educational life-writing is judged as "responsible text."

History of Education Quarterly

The History of Education Society is an international scholarly society. Its purpose is to encourage and facilitate research in the history of education, to encourage cooperation among specialists in history of education, and to promote an appreciation of the value of historical perspective in the making of educational policy (History of Education Quarterly, Winter, 1994).

History of Education Quarterly (HEQ), established in 1949 by the History of Education Society (HES) has a circulation of approximately 1,600. Between 1985 and Winter 1994, HEQ, published 130 articles. Twenty articles, or 15%, are classified as educational life-writing.

Barbara Finkelstein says that the death of biographical articles in HEQ points to the fact that American historians have ignored relationships among people. Furthermore, "...historians have implicitly defined human motivation, action, achievement, and sensibility as utterly derivative—the product of economic desire, greed, political cunning, status anxiety, and/or philosophical and ideological commitments" (Finkelstein, 1990, p.6).

Finkelstein's assertions were supported by a recent past editor of HEQ, Professor William J. Reese, who stated that most of the leading educational historians in the United States are not writing biographies. Reese explained that he and many of his colleagues were trained to be social historians who are more interested in groups of people and large movements in education than in individual lives (Reese, 1990). All of HEQ life-writings can be grouped into two categories, principle-case studies and collective biographies. A principle-case study, the more popular construction, is an essay that features a general historical principle which is used to explain an important aspect of an educational movement or institution. The principle, repeated several times throughout the article and given special emphasis in the conclusion, is supported and illustrated by an historical case study, one element of which is a description of an educational leader. All details about the leader's personality and life story are

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excluded except those related to the principle. Most leaders in the case studies are well known (e.g., Adam Smith, Horace Mann, Joseph Lancaster) and the institutions are usually elite (e.g., Barnard and Amherst colleges, the Carnegie Corporation, University of Chicago).

"A Gamble of Youth: Robert M. Hutchins, the University of Chicago and the Politics of Presidential Selection," by Benjamin McArthur, is an excellent principle-case study (McArthur, 1990, pp. 161-168). McArthur begins by stating a principle that might be applied to a host of institutions of higher learning: "As bastions of tradition and instigators of change, universities periodically confront the tension embedded in those two antagonistic roles." He goes on to explain that the selection of a president is often the occasion when the conflict between these two roles is apparent. McArthur next defends his selection of the particular case study which he plans to explore in the article. While Robert Hutchins was president of the university, he became "a voice of educational reform and made his college the focus of national interest." In a few deft strokes augmented by photographs, Robert Hutchins is portrayed as a young, gifted university administrator with considerable potential to lead the University of Chicago to even greater prominence; but neither Hutchins' personality nor his educational philosophy is fully revealed. Instead, McArthur focuses on the power struggle among the members of the search committee. Their actions and personalities spring to life through the use of insightful analysis and provocative quotations.

A striking feature of the article is its strong argument that the study is worthy of the reader's attention. In addition to the reason cited above, McArthur states that the story of the selection of Hutchins is fascinating, it reveals the university "as an important juncture in its history," and it reveals how administrators at the University of Chicago would continue to make selections for presidents for the next sixty years. Without stating so explicitly, he also challenges historians of American higher education who have generally overlooked the political process of selecting a university president. He also cites from an impressive collection of personal and institutional documents in his reconstruction of the process of selecting Hutchins; and in so doing, he illuminates the tension between tradition and innovation which, he asserts, is central to the functioning of a major American university.

In an interview, Professor Jeffrey Mirel, editorial board member of HSE/RHE, explained why McArthur's explicit and implicit arguments for the importance of his study are essential. Some authors seem to assume that if they are interested in a topic, then surely it is important. These authors need to convince me that the topic is important, but also that their topic connects to something larger, such as progressivism in New York or progressivism in general. The article should enlarge our understanding of a movement in education" (Mirel, 1991).

The life, personality, and educational philosophy of Robert Hutchins are not particularly significant to Mirel nor, perhaps, to the larger community of scholars he represents. What is more important is Hutchins' connection to major institutions of higher learning in the early twentieth century. According to Mirel, that connection must be stated explicitly and supported with solid evidence. Even if he is unconvinced by the historian's argument, Mirel says, he still accepts articles that present an interesting strong argument and are well researched (Mire, 1991).

Historical Studies in Education/Revue D'Historie De L’Education

HSE/RHE, the organ of Canadian History of Education Association, was founded at a conference hosted by the University of Calgary in 1988. It now has a circulation of 220 (around 10% are U.S. subscribers). It is bilingual so as to appeal to both English-speaking and Francophone scholars.

Between 1989 and 1994, HSE/RHE published 70 articles, 28 (or 40%) of which were life-writings. These articles can be grouped into three categories: methodological essays, individual life stories, and collective biographies. Collective biographies, the most prevalent type, usually explore a particular topic. WMS missionary work was a "unique career opportunity for educated, single middle-class women, they explains, especially since most female wage-earners in that era were from the working class. She argues further that in view of the limited options available to women (domesticity or a secular professional career), missionary work was "an attractive, respectable, and exciting alternative." Most interestingly, she explains that missionary work had a hierarchical structure.

The best qualified women went to the more visible foreign fields, particularly Japan, whereas the least accomplished worked with native Americans and immigrants at home. These disparities help to explain why some missionaries had lengthy careers whereas others dropped out quickly.
Gagan is particularly adept at placing the women in their social and historical context. For example, she briefly but clearly describes a wide variety of schools attended by the missionaries: elementary schools, high schools, ladies’ colleges, normal schools, universities, Bible institutes, medical schools, nurses’ training schools, and business colleges. She devotes a good deal of attention to the institution established especially to train female religious workers, the National Methodist Training School in Toronto. In this way, she provides an excellent overview of the schools open to Canadian women of that era.

Gagan concludes by tracing the field failures and successes of the missionaries, such as their inability to learn Japanese or to cope with adversity. However, she reports that university graduates in Japan had longer careers than those with less schooling. “The pattern is repeated for West China and for home missions, suggesting that WMS university graduates were, in fact, more committed to the goal of a professional career as a single women than their less educated colleagues.” Here is a fascinating portrait of a little studied female profession.

While an excellent essay, Gagan’s collective biography should not serve as a template for articles likely to be accepted by HSE/RHE editors. Unlike HEQ, the Canadian journal has no one article that could serve as a representative sample. This is because the articles vary widely both in style and content. They do, however, share some common attributes.

First, many explore the experiences of non-elite individuals such as students and teachers. These non-elite voices, many being relatively powerless and unremembered, have been selectively omitted from much historical discourse. E.H. Carr remarks that selecting the facts of history is “like fishing swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean, and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use—these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch” (1964, p. 23). Articles on elite and famous educators are the exception in HSE/RHE.

Second, a large number of published articles focus on issues of gender and power. Women are the subjects of most collective biographies, but men are not ignored; on the contrary, the life experiences of both genders are usually compared and contrasted. Winifred Millar, co-editor, was asked why women’s history was a prominent feature of the journal. She explained that a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada had resulted in the publication of papers presented at the 1988 meeting of the Canadian History of Education Association and that the theme for the conference was “Aspects of Class and Gender in Education.” She further explained that gender is an area of scholarship that has been previously neglected but is now of much interest among Canadian historians (Millar, 1991).

According to Johanna Selles-Roney, the call to include “ethnicity, class, and gender” has often left religion behind” (1991, p. 101). Not so with Canadian historians of education—they are exploring the frequently ignored topic of religious education. Four of the ten articles in the 1994 “Special Issue,” referred to earlier in this paper, focused on religious influences. “Educating for Temperance: The Women’s Christian Temperance Union [WCTU] and Ontario Children, 1880-1916” (Cook, 1993) is a typical example. This article gives a brief historiography of the WCTU and the program of temperance education in Protestant Sunday schools. It further elaborates the pedagogy rooted in evangelical convictions. Such articles place HSE/RHE on the cutting edge.

The Canadians’ commitment to the development of young scholars contributes to its diversity. The editors of HSE/RHE encourage graduate students to submit articles for publication. The publication of such articles is one of the policies of this journal. Rebecca Coulter, a co-editor, explained that the policy was formulated in order to foster the development of the next generation of Canadian scholars. Editors sometimes request one or more revisions before the students’ manuscripts are sent out for blind review. Coulter stated that graduate students often need such mentoring in order to become productive scholars (Coulter, 1991).

It is evident when examining the diversity in style and content of published articles that Canadians are committed to nurturing new perspectives and are encouraging diversified formats. There is no “one size fits all.”

**The Evidence of Responsible Text in Educational Life-Writing**

Oral history has enjoyed a small but legitimate niche in Academe, but still it is often ignored by many academic historians or discounted along with “local” or “amateur” histories as being not sufficiently objective or analytic. The academic tradition, in history at least, has always set great store by objectivity. The subject may add color but corroborating evidence has always been demanded before any “serious” analysis can be made. Besides this, traditional academic authors have deliberately placed themselves between their subjects and the data in the interest of further ensuring the objectivity of the final product (Weiss, 1994, p. 193).

Educational life-writing is preferred and legitimated by a few, ignored and bastardized by many—bastardized in that life-writing is believed to debase or lower the character, quality, and value of historical scholarship. "Traditional academic prowess, as Gillian Weiss states, lies in the researchers’ ability to distance themselves from the subject. The desired outcome is bias-free data that yield a set of generalizations and principles that further explain a broad movement of education. Many academic historians view this process and the resulting product as "responsible text." They believe that before any life-writing essay or article for submission can be taken seriously, it must meet a predetermined standard, that
is, a set of rigid criteria designed to reject any amateur attempt at reconstructing history. In this case, the term "amateur" usually means an attempt at reporting personal experiences, whether factual or perceived, with little concern for norms or standardization.

History of Education Quarterly has the mindset described above. In keeping with the scholarly tradition, the History of Education Society as represented by its publication, _HEQ_, has defined and constructed history that incorporates human relationships as byproducts—derivatives from the larger society at work. Although the editors have not totally neglected the inclusion of non-elites, a multitude of voices (both elite and non-elite) are silenced. Advocates of this approach view life-writing only as a springboard toward understanding the larger society or movements in education. They selectively abandoned the principle of intentionality, that is, "that there is inseparable connectedness of the human being to the world" (Van Manen, 1993, p. 181). This abandonment of the nature and importance of lived experience supports objectivity. It also defines history as "governed by a rigidity of style and format. It places a wedge between history and biography defining both as separate and somewhat adversarial genres.

As stated earlier in this study, the life-writing articles in _HEQ_, which amount to only 15%, fall into two distinct categories: principle-case studies and collective biographies. There appears to be little, if any, room for creative examinations of human subjectivities and connections. Why is this the case? Admittedly, the editors have confessed that they are trained social historians who center their interests on groups and large movements rather than on the personalities and relationships of individuals. Their professed standards for selection of articles is in keeping with their social training and within the boundaries of what they believe is acceptable to the historical community.

The resulting journal is bland and repetitive. Lacking vitality, intimacy, and sensitivity. To place distance between oneself and one's subjects results in texts that are often stale and lifeless. Yet, in the editor's eyes, these tests reflect validity and reliability. Their perceived evidence of "responsible text" is rooted in the ideology of objectification.

_Historical Studies in Education/Revue D'Histoire De L'Education_ allows for fresh voices and new approaches. The questions that we would propose are: What can we, as American historians, learn from our Canadian neighbours? What is their conception of life-writing as responsible text?

It appears, from our content analysis, that _HSE/RHE_ places much faith in non-elite voices. These voices are both authors of articles and the individuals they write about. The fact that the editors have designed a policy to mentor graduate students towards becoming the new Canadian scholars is evidence of their commitment to new voices. The fact that 40% of the total articles are life-writings about relatively unknown individuals, such as students and teachers of insipidious institutions, shows that editors are affording power to those once historically silenced voices. Both non-elite and elite voices are not bound by traditional ideologies that prevents us from learning and experiencing the soft, sensitive surfaces of lived experience. Rather, lived experience is transformed in the breadth and depth of authentic meaning. Lived experiences can be likened to "motifs in the andante of a symphony," (Van Manen, 1994, p. 37). Therefore, biography and history are united in one genre, or one experiential life symphony.

Second, _HSE/RHE_ is not bound by traditional western academic traditions. This holds true with respect to methodology and perception of scholarly rigor. Both methodological positions, the objective and subjective, are celebrated and encouraged. One is not seen as more valid than the other. Both are needed—both are vital to the concept of "responsible text." The acceptance of data that do not seek to generate principles and generalization but seek to celebrate each individual life is refreshing as well as pluralistic (Weiss, 1994).

In closing, "responsible text," and the evidence that supports it, are found in the Canadian journal. "The histories of women, working and middle classes, literacy, children and youth, families, among others contradict" the claim that the history of education thus far has failed to achieve the promise of the "new" or revisionist histories. "New approaches to gender, generation, family, ethnicity, race, class, culture, the state, politics, hierarchy, order, authority; ideology, discourse, rhetoric, institutions, teachers, learners... offer unfulfilled and unexplored possibilities" (Graff, 1991, p. 205-206).

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