Reflexive Practice

Writing my migrant selves: using my story to script a multi-reflective account of context appropriate pedagogy

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Writing my migrant selves: using mystory to script a multi-reflective account of context appropriate pedagogy

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In this article I use a creative layered text approach to represent a multi-reflective pedagogic ‘mystorical diary’. After theorizing the use of ‘mystery’ as a reflective practice tool, the text moves between many different positions of re-presenting practitioner and personal narratives in relation to identity and the development of appropriate pedagogy in the context of migrating as a university lecturer from the United Kingdom to Aotearoa New Zealand. Finally, I review the worth of the experimental text as a way of taking into account complex notions of self and culture when developing reflective pedagogic practice in the context of migrating between countries.

Keywords: mystory; creative reflectivity; layered texts; context appropriate pedagogy; migrant pedagogy

There is a problem with writing from who I am where I am. For one thing I can’t nip down to the local Waitrose supermarket to check out the almond croissants, for another I can’t read The Guardian newspaper every day and (here’s the big one) my face is constantly rubbed in the fact that there are millions and millions of people in the world for whom words such as ‘Waitrose’ and ‘Guardian’ are exotic. It makes the text look smaller on the page. It makes me feel parochial.

Before I moved from the United Kingdom to Aotearoa I thought that it would be ‘a cinch’ to keep writing, lecturing and researching. But I have stalled. The problem with over here is that it is sufficiently like over there to make things muddled … but here is sufficiently unlike there to make things muddled in a different way. Perhaps it would be easier if I were somewhere more different?

For one thing there is the whole Aotearoa (Māori)¹ – New Zealand (Pakeha)² divide. One country, two names. Before I came here I thought that I was moving to Aotearoa, a sexy Pacific Rim country that was embracing biculturalism and bilingualism in every sphere. And some days I do live in Aotearoa. On others I am in New Zealand, where some Pakeha can just about run to a sullen ‘kia ora’ and know that the haka is the dance before the rugby. Overseas New Zealand plays to its Aotearoan heritage; overseas moko are high fashion on rich, white skin and the haka is a symbol of a small nation’s pride in the people of its land. Day-to-day it is something else.

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Pushing against knowledge hierarchies: working with mystery

This article arises from a multi-reflective pedagogic diary that takes the form of ‘mystery’ (Ulmer, 1989, 1994); a genre that seeks to challenge conventional forms of academic writing and knowing. The article uses a layered text (Rambo Ronai, 1995) to investigate storied experiences in relation to identity and the development of appropriate, reflective, pedagogic practice in the context of migrating from the United Kingdom to Aotearoa New Zealand. As Lewis (2005) notes, whilst international students have been subject to considerable attention, the experiences of migrant staff in the tertiary sector have received relatively little attention. This article attends to this gap in the literature in ways that seek to take into account the complexities of developing reflective practices within the current climate of postmodern theorizing about the ‘crisis of representation’ and how diasporic identities challenge simplistic notions of the process of acculturation to a new host country’s culture. Such work sees culture and self as deeply intertwined in ways that necessarily reject acculturation to a new country and culture as a linear reassignment of allegiance from one relatively homogeneous social grouping to another. Moving cultures is understood in more complex and labile ways, such that ‘here and there, past and present, homeland and hostland, self and other are constantly being negotiated with each other’ (Bhatia & Ram, 2001, p. 15). Mystery is a way to supplement the well-documented advantages of keeping a reflective journal in order to gain insight and balance with regard to multiple roles (e.g. Cooper & Stevens, 2006). The mystorical approach to reflective practice (coupled with a layered text representation) draws attention to complex identities in ways that force the reader (and writer) to reject simple stories of self, identity and reflective practice. The layered account format seeks to question taken-for-granted-meanings and the reader is invited into the text to fill the empty spaces that are deliberately left for her/him to construct her/his own interpretation.

In the genre of mystery meaning is not ‘subjected to successivity’ (Ulmer, 1985, p. 8). The author’s task is to build a structure of possibilities rather than a single argument. It attempts to push against conventional knowledge hierarchies by placing together strands of personal narrative, scholarly discourse and popular culture (in this mystery quotes from two tourist guidebooks). In mystery, the writer self-consciously creates situated versions of the world that are rhizomatic, dialogic and susceptible to constant modification. Mystery seeks to develop a reflexive praxis that constantly questions both its subject and its authority to be subjective. It is one way to engage in what Pillow (2003, p. 188) terms ‘uncomfortable reflexivity – a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous’. Mystery endeavors to make space for complex subject-in-process reflexivities: ‘The personal self is used as a vehicle for a knowledge practice and is not explored for its own sake’ (Ulmer, 1985, p. 231). The writer is left inside the writing not as a psychological subject but as the agent of the action; memories are recalled not to recover the past but rather to use them as ‘tools for opening up the present’ (Ulmer, 1989, p. 112). The layered text as an expression of mystery demonstrates how multi-voicedness characterizes both the relationship between cultures and the relationships between different cultural positions within an individual self (Hermans, 2001). The layered text is intended to provide the reader with an unstable sense of how the reflective practitioner may negotiate, and constantly renegotiate, a sense of being simultaneously in multiple cultures of ‘being “hyphenated” and “in-between” cultures’ (Bhatia, 2002, p. 62).
This approach assumes the writer’s beginnings to be in specific historically situated experiences, ‘and that one always thinks by means of and through these specifics, even if that thinking is directed against the institutions of one’s own formation’ (Ulmer, 1989, p. viii). Reflective practice is grounded in immediate situations, but ‘ground’ is recognized as unstable. Grounding is always mobile and provisional. The mystery genre provokes ways to write and think that are supplements to analytical reason (Ulmer, 1989). The task is to transform from the mode of mystery (interpretation, truth) into the feeling of eureka (invention). The associative links, inter-textual elements and intra-textual juxtapositions work through ‘intuitions’ that are concerned with creating, generating and preserving knowledge rather than with the mere ordering of the already known.

Furthermore, this inventive approach brings to light the multiple locations of readers. I agree with Hughes (2002, p. 411) that we need to develop practices that recognize our audiences as ‘multiply located and subjectively-in-process’. In order to facilitate and query multiple representations and readings, this article includes boxed texts, asterisk-divided mini-narratives, recurring questioning and juxtaposed quotations. These textual elements must contain substantive content in order for the account to be meaningful. Yet, this content is left open as an invitation to readers to participate actively in constructing meanings and assigning values. They are able to ‘reconstruct the subject, thus projecting more of themselves into it, and taking more away from it’ (Rambo Ronai, 1995, p. 396). At times, the layered text may appear rather like a conventional ‘work in progress’ before its eventual synthesis. Yet, this is not a work whose step precedes other steps in a trajectory that leads to the final work. As Trinh argues (1991) such texts are

not a work awaiting a better, more perfect stage of realization. Inevitably, a work is always a form of tangible closure. But closures need not close off; they can be doors opening onto other closures and functioning as ongoing passages to an elsewhere (-within-here). (p. 15)

Therefore, the reader is requested to work at playing the paradoxes of the text rather than seeking to resolve them.

Pom-foreigner-Pakeha-English-Welsh-migrant: layers of the mystery

This text is not ‘about’ migrancy or pedagogy or reflective practice. It explores ways of making sense, allowing migrancy, pedagogy and reflective practice to haunt the text rather than determine it.

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What happens in the classroom?

I stand in front of my first qualitative research class in Aotearoa New Zealand and ask each of them to tell the group (tell me) how s/he comes to be here. The joker ‘came by car’. The others give summaries of professional careers (as does Mr. Joker once the laughter has died down). We finish the turn around the circle and then I am asked how I come to be here. ‘Ah I am but a pawn moved by the goddess,’ uncertainty then laughter. This is not a suitable answer for the lecturer to give … and not as funny as the joker’s form of transport.

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The self is not to be conceived of as an individual placed in a ‘preceding’ or ‘external’ history, but is itself a historical process, that is, an embodiment of a personal and collective history with direct affective implications. (Hermans, 2001, p. 26)

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Migrant?

Terminology is fraught with vested interests. Take the word ‘migrant’, for instance. In most postcolonial literature the term is read as synonymous with dispossessed, colonized, colored. In New Zealand migration is a condition that better describes the colonizer. (Greenwood, 2001, p. 196)

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Teaching is a public practice which can be compared with the practice of acting since it necessarily involves a constant vigilance towards one’s audience, efforts to imagine how one is coming across, and evaluation of whether one’s attempts at communication are being understood as intended. (Warin, Maddock, Pell, & Hargreaves, 2006, p. 234)

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Foreigner?

Reserving the concept of indigenousness for pre-colonial peoples freezes time at the point of original settlement. It denies that the descendants of colonial settlers can ever be at home in the country their ancestors colonized. This is naturally resented by the many Pakeha New Zealanders who feel at home in this country and feel foreign if they visit the ‘Home’ of their colonial ancestors. (Mulgan, 1989, pp. 20–21)

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What happens in the classroom?

Sheep live in my classroom. When I ask the students to carry out a small group exercise re: western knowledges, they remake this as Pakeha knowledge performed for the visiting Pom. Sheep frolic between the lists of scientific straw men. My students recommend books that I should read; texts produced by New Zealand ‘White trash’ (their term – a linguistic borrowing from North America so that we can all speak the same language).

Lonely Planet New Zealand: New Zealand has so many superb physical features that you tend to take the country’s beauty for granted after a while. With hundreds of kilometres of rugged coastline and sandy beaches, lush native forest, rugged mountains and volcanoes, abundant wildlife and many other beautiful natural features, NZ has highlights practically everywhere you turn. (Turner, Williams, Keller, & Wheeler, 1998, p. 63)

The class has left before I attend fully to the flock of sheep. ‘It’s part of the cultural cringe’ – ‘we have to explain to you – because you are just a Pom’. If only I was ‘just
a Pom’, but explaining my complexities defeats me, and them … I collapse back to Pom-hood.

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If I cannot introduce ‘my’ personal because my migrant status occludes the personal, how can I model reflective practice?

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Reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) requires the identification of a puzzling or surprising event, however the migrant experience may render so much puzzling or surprising that it is difficult to identify single events abstracted from a complex matrix.

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Foreigner?

The fascism of the Third Reich has been defeated, and the communism of the Soviet Union has been brought to its knees, it seems, mainly so that transnational identities can be constructed by developed nations with the promise of a thousand years of uninterrupted shopping and watching re-run episodes of *Baywatch*. (McLaren interviewed by Sardoc, 2001, pp. 418–419)

The Rough Guide to New Zealand:
Only in the last couple of decades has New Zealand come of age and developed a true national confidence, something partly forced on it by Britain severing the colonial apron strings in the early 1970s, and partly by the resurgence of Maori identity. Maori demands have been nurtured by a willingness on the part of most pakeha to redress the wrongs perpetrated over the last century and a half, as long as it doesn’t impinge on their high standard of living or overall feeling of control. (Harper, Mudd, & Whitfield (2000, p. xiv)

What happens in the classroom?

I want to tell stories. I enjoy storytelling. My students are all teachers who know about the importance of placing the written text in the room. Some of them teach at primary school level. Their everyday lives include telling pupils stories to help them understand the world.

So, I try a different tack in session two (I only have eight sessions … what am I to do? What can I do?).

Sarah Delamont’s caveat at the start of *Fieldwork in Educational Settings* resonates with what I want to say:

Do you really want to do qualitative research?

You have probably picked up this book because you are thinking of doing qualitative research. If you think that qualitative research is the soft option, is easy, is commonsense,
is simple then (a) you are wrong and (b) you will not enjoy this book [with a smile I add ‘or this course’]. Qualitative research is harder, more stressful and more time-consuming than other types. If you want to get your MEd dissertation or whatever finished quickly and easily: do a straightforward questionnaire study. Qualitative research is only suitable for people who care about it, take it seriously, and are prepared for commitment. It must be done properly or not at all – so unless you are fired with zeal, don’t do it! (Delamont 1992, pp. viii)

I wrap an apologetic Pom-ness around my reading of Delamont.

I adopt a light and relaxed introductory spiel, “I know that I’m a whingeing Pom, so I thought I’d start with the downside of qualitative research.’

I prove myself to be a ‘user friendly Pom’, and use this as a springboard into an easy relationship with the class. This is an easiness in which I collude with my allo- cation to a group, ‘Pom’; this obscures my complexities. In stereotyping myself what damage am I inflicting on others in my classroom?

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**Migrant?**

Greenwood (2001, p. 196) argues that ‘to describe me in New Zealand as a European denies my identification with where I claim to belong. Pakeha is a word I like much better’. However, as a recent migrant I have a confused status, forever at a disadvan- tage due to migrant status, forever privileged as a white, well educated woman from the ‘mother country’. I know that non-European migrants are more likely to face exclusion and discrimination than are European migrants, and I recognize that as a white, English speaking migrant I am part of a ‘diasporic elite’ able to claim certain privileges due to the unequal relationship between ‘colony and empire’ (Bhatia, 2002). In seeking to attach the flimsy label of ‘Pakeha’ I wish to signal my associa- tion with my new locale. Some of my colleagues accept this fragile branding. Some do not.

Lonely Planet New Zealand:

New Zealanders are intensely proud of their country. Aware of their country’s small size and relative insignificance of the world stage, national achievements, particularly world-beating sporting achievements, are greeted with great fanfare. New Zealand also values its independence and is not afraid to take on the world, as it has done in its anti-nuclear stance, a policy so widely supported that not even conservative governments have been game to reverse it despite intense international pressure. (Turner et al., 1998, p. 32)

**New Zealander?**

To name oneself as Pakeha is not only to acknowledge Māori as Tangata Whenua (the people of the land – the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand), but also to be aware of the inequalities and injustices that exist between Māori and Pakeha. As Marotta (2000, p. 184) notes, Pakeha ‘is clearly not a monolithic or unified identity because, not only does the category have both a political and cultural dimension which different groups either support or dismiss, it is also resisted by the very same people it pretends to describe’.
The Rough Guide to New Zealand:
Geologically, New Zealand split off from the super-continent of Gondwanaland early, developing a unique ecosystem in which birds adapted to fill the role normally held by mammals, many becoming flightless through lack of predators. That all changed around 1200 years ago when the arrival of Polynesian navigators made this the last major land mass to be settled by humans. On sighting the new land from their canoes, Maori names it Aotearoa – “the land of the long white cloud” – and proceeded to radically alter the fragile ecosystem, dispatching forever the giant ostrich-sized moa, which formed a major part of their diet. A delicate ecological balance was achieved before the arrival of pakeha – white Europeans, predominantly of British origin – who swarmed off their square-rigged ships full of colonial zeal. Harper et al. (2000, p. xi)

… the ethnicised term ‘pakeha’ for settler descendents is not widely accepted. Indeed its use is the most frequent reason for complaints to the New Zealand Race Relations Office. (Openshaw & Rata, 2007, p. 409)

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Welsh?

When my grandfather went to school he was doubly persecuted. He spoke only in Welsh yet at school he was required to speak only in English. This extended to the playground huddles, the secret whispers, to every childhood friendship and enmity within the school gates. The teachers would patrol the grounds, ears and canes ready for the hiss of the children’s native tongue. This first persecution drew a circle around all the children in the village. Yet my grandfather was singled out for another intolerable everydayness. He was left-handed. He would reach for the pen, the chalk, the ruler with unremitting wrong-handedness. At first he was beaten, later his hand was tied behind his back. Soon this extended to Sunday school and then, such was the power of the village schoolteacher, to his life at home. It took seven months before he accepted the naturalness of his right hand.

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Pakeha?

The romanticisation of white heritage may ensure a local solidarity of members but it obscures the loyalty to the larger category of whiteness. (Levine-Rasky, 2000, p. 280)

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I am a whingeing whining Pom.

Which reminds me … how do you know when a planeload of Poms has arrived? The engines are switched off, but the whining continues.

Lonely Planet New Zealand:
No book about NZ would be complete without mention of the national obsession – Rugby Union football. Try to escape the euphoria when the All Blacks, the national team, steamroll their international opponents into the mud at Eden Park in Auckland. Look at the fear on the faces of the opposition as the All Blacks perform the fearsome haka at the start of a match for which they have become famous. (Turner et al. 1998, p. 90)
Welsh?

Whiteness does not vanish upon the discovery of white ethnicities. The new identities just temporarily supersede it. (Levine-Rasky, 2000, p. 278)

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Sometimes Māoridom is present in ways that I did not expect before I came to Aotearoa New Zealand. I often feel uncomfortable. At powhiri (Māori welcoming ceremony) at the start of academic conferences I do not understand the mihi (speeches) I do not know the waiata (songs). I have to not quite mime, I murmur along; I walk in shuffling steps behind people who possess more knowledge.

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Pakeha?

An important fictive ethnicity. (Spoonley, 1995, p. 110)

Productive, fun and transgressive? Responding to the mysterical text

This article is a snapshot of a mystery that continues to grow; sprouting in new, and sometimes unruly, directions; this article does not, and cannot, show every aspect of the (ongoing) mysterical essay. If self and culture are irrevocably entwined, then reflective practitioners are challenged to develop a variety of practices to enable this complexity to be taken into account. In ‘writing my migrant selves’ I seek to cultivate practices that develop a reflexivity that ‘pushes toward an unfamiliar, towards the uncomfortable … [that] calls for a positioning of reflexivity not as clarity, honesty, or humility, but as practices of confounding disruptions – at times even a failure of our language and practices’ (Pillow, 2003, p. 192).

In seeking to produce reflexivity as a ‘confounding disruption’, I have evoked mysterical practices as a denial of the possibility of definitive positions regarding migrancy, pedagogy or reflective practice. As noted earlier, these three elements haunt rather than delimit the text. Readers are invited into the text to co-construct interpretations that arise from (and move beyond) the rhizomatic mystery. This article then is about trying to rethink (and remake) scholarly reflective practice. In the interest of knowing more about what may work I have scripted this text in the spirit of an experiment. Producing a layered text mystery is an attempt to work towards a productive subject-in-process reflexivity that encourages curiosity. This subject-in-process is bound by (re)negotiations of meaning, slippery alliances, serendipities, disappointments, betrayals and manoeuvrings. This is a multifaceted move beyond privileging introspection (of a universal self existing beyond culture) that interlaces the research/writing process and the stories arising from my reflection upon pedagogic practices. Mystery facilitates reflective practice that challenges notions of a universal self upon which culture imprints itself, instead allowing a writing form that acknowledges ‘much of one’s thinking takes place “outside” the “self” and within the symbolic order’ (Ulmer, 1994, p. 180). Developing context appropriate pedagogy thus highlights how reflective practice must take into account that acculturation can never be a matter of individual strategy, rather it involves ‘a constant process of negotiation,
intervention and mediation that is shaped by issues of race, gender, sexuality and power’ (Bhatia, 2002, p. 59).

In judging the worth of the layered text mystery as an experiment I need to assess the impact of this reflective technique upon my understandings and practice. For the migrant, the mystical approach may bring to the fore aspects of self and culture that were less relevant in the country of origin than in the new host country. For me, the complexity of my mingled Welsh and English heritage has been highlighted in relation to Māori and Pakeha cultures, and allowed reflexive work in relation to critical whiteness and the privileges of first world migrants. The mystery was helpful in allowing me to attend to my withdrawal from the complex personal in my everyday pedagogic practice. It enabled me to realize that my migrant status obscures the personal and compromises my practice/understanding of reflective pedagogy. Furthermore, the multi-linear approach was helpful in allowing me to bring to the fore my willingness to remake myself as ‘user friendly Pom’, and so collude with the veiling of my complexities. In interrogating my practice via mystery I have connected with the process by which I conspire with the construction of my own stereotype as ‘Pom’ and in doing so noted how I have smoothed away not only my own complexities but also those of the heterogeneous students within the class. Mysterical work has prompted me to draw students’ attention to their (and my) own uncomfortable positions. Now I invite the group to speak directly about the joking strategies we use together to mask (and mark) mainstream and other identities within the classroom. As most of the students are teacher practitioners this is a crucial piece of reflective teaching and learning as they can take this reflexive awareness of the need to recognize complexity back into their own classrooms.

Mystery is a tool to help recognize complex reflexivities as inscriptive (to resist dualistic and representative notions of subject and text) and to develop a way to be reflective that allows the practitioner to draw attention to diasporic notions of self, culture and subculture. The flimsy labels of ‘Pom-foreigner-Pakeha-English-Welsh-migrant’ are useful because of their potential to resist the reification of both United Kingdom and Aotearoa New Zealand cultures. I still am uncertain as to exactly how to carry out context appropriate pedagogy; for me the mystery is a useful opening tool. It requires the author to build a structure of possibilities and in doing so encourages a hopeful reflexivity that uses multifaceted memories and provisionally grounded intuition to explore imbrications of culture and self. Furthermore, in denying the lure of linear argument, the genre raises the importance of developing emotional as well as cognitive ways of exploring reflective practice. In encouraging the reflective practitioner to make links based on emotional associations and through linking a broad array of types of literatures (for the purposes of simplifying for the reader a narrowed array is shown in this article) mystery can draw attention to practice issues as they emerge as emotional dis-ease, rather than waiting until a clearly defined problem has been identified; it can rapidly build the awareness necessary for critical reflection to begin (Thorpe, 2004). To this extent the experiment of using mystery has been a success. For me it has proved to be a way of raising reflective awareness of the problems and puzzles involved in developing context appropriate pedagogy.

Mystery can be useful as a way of developing a multi-linear narration that highlights how the power and influence of different aspects of self and culture vary according to time and place (Warin et al., 2006). However, reflective practice must also include sustained critical analysis and reflection linking theory and classroom practice (Schön, 1983). It is important to emphasize that mystery is one additional technology
of the self that can be used in response to the challenges and invitations of postmodernity and complex diasporic notions of self and place to reflective pedagogic practice. Mystories may be used to nudge us toward further possibilities and have a role to play in complementing existing reflective practices. As Magolda notes:

Mystories are not intended to replace traditional pedagogy and essays. Writing mysteries or subscribing to a pedagogy that incorporates multiple discourses will unlikely solve the problems of education. Mystories could further connect life in the classroom with everyday practice and remind readers that they have a responsibility to interpret and wonder and question authority. These modest benefits are important contributions to knowledge. (Magolda, 1999, pp. 240–241).

Notes
1. Māori are the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand.
2. Pakeha, is a generally recognized, but contested, term in Aotearoa New Zealand to describe non-Māori people/New Zealanders of European descent/origin.

Note on contributor
Jean Rath is a Senior Lecturer and Research Coordinator for the University of Canterbury College of Education, Aotearoa New Zealand. Her current research interests include using creative auto-ethnographic techniques to facilitate and transform reflective professional practice, and professional development for research supervision as a form of context specific pedagogy.

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