

For well over a decade social work staff at La Trobe University have been providing Editorship for *Children Australia* as part of the University's support for the journal as a national contribution to the field of child, youth and family welfare. Following Lloyd's retirement from his teaching position at La Trobe, some of the other staff at La Trobe have been invited to guest edit some of the 2004 issues. For this one we are pleased to have Dr. Jennifer Lehmann from the Bendigo Campus not only to help with editorial nuts and bolts, but also to share some of her interest in narrative and storytelling as a way of reflecting on and tackling the issues life and practice present to us.

Lloyd Owen

'Sorry to interrupt you,' said a student clearly intent on interrupting.

'I need to ask you something and your office door was open a bit.'

I looked up, conscious that my mind had been a long way from students and their issues. The student looked at me more closely and then at the pad of paper lying beneath my hand.

'What are you doing?'

'I'm writing an editorial,' I answered.

'Oh ... Is that pretty much like doing an essay?'

I wondered if I could be bothered trying to address the intricacies of writing for different purposes.

'Not exactly,' I said with a hesitant tone.

'So is this your first one?' enquired the student with unwonted astuteness.

'Yes ... It is. It's for the *Children Australia* journal.'

The student was silent for a moment.

'Does anyone read editorials in journals? (Slight pause) 'Cos I don't. And no one else I know ever does. We all just check if the articles are of any use.'

'Oh ...'

It sounded such a lame response, but I had no idea who reads journal editorials. When the student left I decided to continue with this new challenge – regardless.



I have been interested in narrative approaches to teaching and learning for some years, but this brief exchange led me to think about how strongly our lives are constructed through the use of narrative. As Kirkman (2003 p.244) comments: 'Each life is understood through multiple layers of narratives.' She goes on to say that the narrative devices of plot provide us with the sense of order, sequence and meaning to our accounts. The student had a story to tell about editorials and it has been, as fate would have it, joined to my narrative about tackling the task of being guest editor. And whatever story I choose to tell about guest editorship will be underpinned with a variety of concerns that will be embedded within that version of the account.



Our working lives are equally constructed through narrative and, for many of us in the human service field, how we use language is of paramount importance. The words we choose to use are critical, whether used orally in exchanges with clients and colleagues, or in written form. Words and sentence construction convey something about literacy, about our emotional state, and about the interests and commitment of the author. For those of us who speak and write about others, narratives will often convey something about our capacity to re-author the stories of other people. Christopher Hall's research during the 1900s had, as a core concern, the re-authoring regularly undertaken by human service professionals (Hall 1997).

Hall (1997 p.12) suggests that all social work documents and conversations can be considered the text of narratives and, as such, is not only active, but is 'caught in a web in interpretations and social relations, to be read and reacted to'. He concludes that social work narratives are constructed to achieve legitimacy and to be authoritative; and that

Social workers produce accounts which do not merely lay out facts, assessments and recommendations, but are made available as persuasive, surprising and crafted narrative performances for critical audiences on specific occasions (Hall 1997 p.233).

In addition, Czarniawska (2003 p.39) reminds us of Boje's study published in 1991 that showed the line between 'story making' and 'story collecting' '... is very fine if it exists at all.' As Jacobs (2000 p.24) points out '... events become emplotted into narratives, they shape the symbolic relationships between the different characters' in the account.

So reporting on, or about, the clients of human services, and reports on research in the human services field, are somewhat akin to an ethnographic pursuit in which these reports are not only 'from there', but include propositions about the behaviours and customs of people (Czarniawska 2004 p.105). In developing accounts of others we use the

power of language to put a point of view. We also take the accounts of others and re-author them in a manner that suits our purpose of the moment. But in rendering an account as credible we have rendered ourselves as credible and given ourselves a position of power from which to tell.

Of course most of us want to represent those with whom we work, and our research, as faithfully as possible as we seek to re-create reality in our texts. But there are always competing versions and judgements associated with our telling and reporting processes. I try to remind myself that the context in which events took place and people existed, and the context in which I re-author, or re-present, that event and those people, are both set in time and space (place). In another time and place, and seen through the eyes of another person, a very different story might be told.



Jennifer's door was slightly open which usually means she is happy to answer questions, but when I pushed it I could see she was bent over the desk writing. She looked up and I saw immediately that her mind was focused on something far removed from essay questions.

'Sorry to interrupt you,' I said, wondering why she hadn't shut the door to prevent interruptions. 'What are you doing?'

'I'm writing an editorial,' she answered.

I could see in her eyes that she wished she'd shut the door. I couldn't think of what to say now because I felt embarrassed.

'Oh ... Is that pretty much like doing an essay?' I asked.

'Not exactly,' she said, but she sounded vague, even unsure. I wondered if it was her first one and she was finding it a tough task.

'So is this your first one?' My question popped out with more bluntness than I had meant.

'Yes ... It is. It's for the *Children Australia* journal.'

I didn't know what to say next. I've never bothered to read editorials. It's hard enough to find the time to read the articles.

'Does anyone read editorials in journals?' I paused here as I knew I wasn't handling the conversation too well.

'Cos I don't. And no one else I know ever does. We all just check if the articles are of any use.'

I'd really put my foot in it now and wondered if I'd caused offence. Jennifer just said 'Oh ...' so I decided to quickly ask about the likelihood of my essay topic being OK and get out. My other questions could wait until another time, another space.



The articles published in this issue of the journal can be regarded as narratives of concern about practice authored by colleagues in a field in which many of us spend our entire working lives. They address a range of complex features of contemporary human service delivery and tell stories that need to be heard as we continue to reflect on our practice and develop programs.

Judith Bessant narrates a story about a crisis of faith and trust drawing on the deep concern felt about the level of abuse experienced by children and young people in care. Judith's account of these concerns had led her to consider a way forward that had potential to improve the quality of care provided and restore confidence in human service professionals. The article, which raises familiar debates about the accreditation and registration of youth workers, is a timely challenge for all those working with children and young people to reflect on the structures and regulatory aspects of our practice. In an era in which the narratives of management often focus on quality and consumer rights, we need to consider how these stories might be usefully combined.

Liz Reimer and Dianne Nixon bring together two streams of narrative in their article: social justice and strengths-based approaches to practice. They discuss the idea that strengths-based approaches are underpinned by principles of social justice, belief in democracy and participatory practices using examples drawn from observations and practice at *UnitingCare Burnside*.

The story of the development of programs for young people leaving care told by Philip Mendes and Badal Moslehuddin provoke concern about the processes that lie behind addressing key issues in welfare and the funding decisions. The comparisons and concerns expressed in this paper are drawn from a range of oral narratives and written accounts and re-authored to provide a perspective that so often remains the informal version of events. This paper also alludes strongly to the interplay of power and influence of individuals, all of whom contribute to the progress of attaining services to our clients. While these factors are sometimes acknowledged in academic texts on organisational issues and program design and development, they are not so often candidly presented as integral to our practice.

Joe Fleming's article on the inclusion of fathers in our service responses comes at a time when politicians from both sides of the house have raised concerns about fathering and male models for children with mothers in sole parent households. Engaging fathers and hearing their stories is an important issue if our services are to be genuinely inclusive. In a sense the article re-authors the narratives of fathers who often feel excluded from family services; and it echoes the research findings of Damian Killeen (published as a social work honours project in 2003) that fathers frequently find themselves estranged from their children by both family upheaval and service responses. However, it is also interesting to reflect on our expectations of fathers, and those of fathers themselves, across a history which has accepted the absence of fathers from households for many reasons — war, employment demands and early demise being a few of those that have existed across thousands of years. Is this affecting our attitudes and practice? Is the fact

