Re-entering the collaboratory

A review of the book

Re-authoring teaching: Creating a collaboratory by Peggy Sax (2008)

By Bobbi Rood

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Peggy Sax has written a book for students and teachers of postmodern psychotherapeutic practices at the graduate and undergraduate levels. Initially intended as a book for teachers of narrative therapy, Peggy realised that her teaching approach could inform a wider audience in a variety of settings including university classrooms, as well as in a workshop or seminar platform. The book, as its title indicates, re-authors teaching to support a collaborative stance between teacher and student, and demonstrates how artful use of an online course platform like Web CT, Blackboard, Moodle, or Segue, can contribute to creating a collaborative-teaching community.

David Epston's foreword to the book muses on Plato's dialogic quest for truth and Peggy's pedagogical model, influenced by Paulo Freire's teachings, that education should seek to reconcile the student-teacher contradiction, highlighting democracy, dialogue, and reciprocity as educational methods (p. 16). David also speaks to the unfolding of what I would call the multiple-layered, multi-storied aspect of Peggy's text, and being drawn to student's reflections. Peggy positions herself as a learner and writes about her use of her own voice in the text:

> Writing this book has given me the opportunity to 'show and tell' my approach to teaching. Throughout the writing process, I repeatedly faced my growing edge as a teacher and as a writer. I am more comfortable demonstrating than describing what I

do and believe. In response to my reviewers' encouragement, I weave in my own voice, reflecting on how my teaching embodies the concepts and practices that I aspire to teach. In addition to bringing in multiple voices, I frequently return to my own voice, striving to ground each chapter in my experiences of teaching and witnessing this kind of learning. I reflect on my own edges of learning as I aspire to live the values and intentions that influence my chosen theoretical framework. I describe an interactive process in which I play the facilitator and guide – a process that strives to meet each student at her or his own learning edge and has the flexibility to scaffold each person's learning from that point (Vygotsky, 1986). I try to show my thinking behind intentional choices, such as letting students know why I choose to incorporate many voices in the classroom. I explore the tensions of embracing a collaborative poststructuralist position within structuralist institutions and systems of care (Madsen, 2007c). (Sax, 2008, p. 12)

I had the privilege of being in one of Peggy's collaboratories at the University of Vermont while pursuing a Master of Social Work degree there. The process of reading the book was an act of re-membering for me. Peggy was writing this book while I was in her summer 2006 class. We helped nurture the book. When she asked if any of us would be willing to help her with her book project, I volunteered, as did several others in the class. Many of my reflections are included in the book and I helped edit portions of text.

Through the reading and re-reading of the book, I was again drawn into the sense of a collaborative experience and an appreciation for the complex tapestry of assigned readings, online forums for students, and the opportunities for teacher, students and invited guests to interact with each other. Peggy's enthusiasm and exuberance for narrative therapy is evidenced in the classroom and in her book, which chronicles this experience through both student and teacher lenses. The reader is able to witness the careful structuring she provides to scaffold individual student's learning experience, wherever they are with the material. Teachers who read the text can see how Peggy's class is structured. It is an 'ask, rather than tell' approach to teaching and learning, using dialogical and reflexive media to consider material collaboratively. Students who read this text are introduced to methods of teaching that actively involve students with first-hand accounts from people Peggy has seen in her clinical practice, as well as practitioners and former students. Narrative practices like letter writing, reflecting teamwork and narrative interviews are woven throughout the text in the contexts in which the teaching occurs. Rather than creating a 'how to' manual on teaching narrative practices, Peggy seeks to re-create what the experience is like for student and teacher. Peggy describes her intentions as follows:

This book attempts to give readers a real sense of what happens in teaching situations where curiosity, wholeheartedness, and learning infuse the course. Archiving online reflections directly captures what students learn from guest speakers, recorded interviews, and story telling, excerpts of which I share throughout the book. I provide examples from the classroom and the online class forums of how letters, reflecting teams and archived websites provide public contexts for people to speak with knowledged voices about life-shaping experiences in ways that significantly inform the lives of everyone involved. (p. 4)

Teaching congruently

Peggy describes six lenses from which she has come to regard her work and which influence her stance as a teacher and contributes to her congruency in teaching practices:

A reflexive stance (family therapy)

Learning-centered teaching (adult learning)

The reflective practitioner (organization development)

Family-centered practices (human services)

Participative enquiry (research)

Co-research (narrative therapy)
(p. 48)

She then identifies and describes five concepts that, she writes, 'guide her approach to internal consistency' (p. 48). These are: isomorphism, transparency, ethics of care, partnership accountability, and ethics without virtue. I will touch on a few of them here to shine a light on how they are at play:

Isomorphism is a mathematical concept from abstract algebra that refers to mapping the relationship between two properties or operations (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isomorphism). Peggy parallels how she works as a family therapist and how she strives to learn about students' experiences with an 'ask, don't tell' approach to teaching and learning, and considers her teaching to be filled with isomorphisms (p. 52) or parallel constructions drawn from the way that she works in her clinical practice to the way that she teaches.

Peggy writes that the concept of partnership accountability is informed by the work of The Family Centre in Lower Hutt, New Zealand (p. 53), and is a concept in which people are mutually accountable to each other and those with more power take responsibility to give voice to those less likely to be heard, holding themselves accountable to the people most affected by their actions. In this vein, it makes accountability a shared responsibility between the teacher and the student. This is an important construction, because it shows how Peggy addresses the power differential between students and teacher. She writes:

I intentionally create learning opportunities that amplify students' voices. In designing activities in the classroom and online, I hold myself accountable to students, as they are most affected by my actions. I also expect students to practice accountability throughout the class – for example, to keep up with reading materials and assignments, even if they will miss any class time, to check in with me and other students to find out what they missed, and to actively work to ensure they get the learnings from others and thus don't fall behind. (p. 54)

In the chapter, '*Reckoning with power*', Peggy touches more on the issue of grading and evaluation, and how 'ask, rather than tell' plays out in the class. At the end of the course, Peggy posed this question:

In this class, we experimented with a different approach to evaluation. As co-researchers, what are some of your reflections on this experience? What did you notice about any effects of our different approach to evaluation on your participation in the class? Do you think this approach had an impact on your relationships with fellow students, with the course materials, and/or with the course website – and, if so, how? What do you imagine might have been different if we had approached grades in a more traditional way? Do you have any recommendations for my future work with students in academic environments? (p. 80)

An excerpt of Danielle's response gives a sense of how the different evaluation method worked in the class:

> Peggy, I have thought a lot about this question this week and am trying to think how things 'might have been different' for me had you chosen a traditional evaluation method. I tend to participate fully in any class I am in, so I don't think my participation would have been different. I think the difference for me would have been how I felt about the course work – especially the on-line work. I would have been more conscious of getting postings 'right' as opposed to just pondering things online. So, I would say that this evaluation method allowed me to really relax into the work and respond in a thinking way rather than a strategic way... (p. 80.)

What is a collaboratory?

'Collaboratory', Peggy explains, 'blends the two words collaboration and laboratory to convey an environment without walls where participants use computing and communication technologies to connect with a sense of discovery over a shared project' (p. 3). In class, we all shared the intention of learning more about narrative therapy and practice and were all coming to it from various viewpoints and experiences.

Classmates were some of the cohorts I shared my graduate experience with. Others were providers from a parent-child centre. The class was a platform to think about how we would incorporate ideas and skills of narrative practice into our own styles and settings. I recall sitting outside the classroom in a small group, sharing ideas and experiences, and taking risks with the exercises that stretched us beyond our comfort zones, scaffolding the unfamiliar with the familiar by also building on each other's experiences of the material, asking questions and sharing realisations. One such experience was an interview in dyads in which we shared our letters of commitment from a preferred identity exercise we did. I exchanged letters with a classmate regarding our reflections of each other's letters of commitment. This exercise provided me an opportunity to practice letter writing, as well as giving some closure on the activity. I wrote:

> '... I feel the same as you that I could do this assignment twenty times and it would be completely different each time. I did end up Doing it twice because I wasn't sure that I had followed the directions. I think that I wrote to you or someone else who did the same thing. It is really amazing how different they are, at least the landscape of action ... Gets more or less to the same end however.
>
> I wonder if your end question in your response to my letter, 'I wonder why some are so important to us?' might be answered in your own last sentence. You learned from people because you had 'real relationships, they cared about [your] children and [you] therefore believed in them'.
>
> You wrote about safety in your first paragraph and how your parents offered 'asylum' (in the sense of meaning safety) to the girls from the family down the road from you. 'Just being' or feeling respected or 'like people were happy to see me' helps a person to feel counted or 're-membered.
>
> It is interesting that each of our letters is so unique, demonstrating the differences in our personality, writing and speaking styles. I enjoyed reading both your map and letter. On your map I was curious how you came to your understanding of your friend's anger and how old you were when this occurred. It is a common cause of playground

distress and sometimes some children have difficulty understanding that their friend has hurt feelings or sad feelings and that's why they are angry.

Balancing work, family and college is rough. I really honour you including taking care of yourself as a value and think that is an important thing and something that often comes last. I wonder if it could be somehow connected with being real and being in the present. I am struck by how credible you are to teen moms, because you have experienced it yourself and because you care enough to listen.' (Personal communication, July 22, 2006.)

Peggy writes:

'Together, students and I share experiences so memorable that we create what in some cases may well be lifelong bonds. Contacting students for permission to include their voices in this book, I was again reminded of the intensity of our connections, the genuineness of our exchanges, and of our care for one another.' (p. 4)

I have saved nearly all of my assignments and feel privileged that I can go back to these documents as a means of bearing witness to all that we created and worked on together. I have kept up with Peggy and could envision having a reunion of this group at some point.

Reading Peggy's book also reminds me to think more about the ethics of narrative practice, which, as Peggy writes, 'does not privilege professional 'expert' knowledge over client knowledge' (p. 11) and includes clients as co-researchers in re-visioning and re-authoring.

Structure of the book

The book format is designed to be 'reader-friendly' (p. 10), including interactive materials from the course, and it is written in a 'collegial tone' (p. 10). It largely follows the structure of the class, which is a combination of reading, consultant presentations including letters, videotapes, readings and reflexive responses, using online, as well as in class, exercises and discussion. At the University of Vermont, the class met for one full day per week, augmented by reading and online discussions during five weeks of the summer term. Typically, the summer allows for more intensive work in an area of interest, without a full class schedule. In northern New England, summer contains the warmest months of the year and the longest days, with 8:30 p.m. sunsets. A full day in class allowed time for several small group and whole classroom practice exercises, as well as an opportunity to watch videotapes and engage in discussion in a more relaxed and focused format than the regular school term permits. Plenty of out-of-class time was available for reading and posting discussion and a few written assignments on the web. Peggy planned the classroom sessions and lined up guests or taped sessions with consultants to provide experience-near accounts of topics covered in class. Topics for online reflection were either extensions of topics covered in class, or broader topics like, for example, philosophical foundations, ethics and accountability, or deconstructive listening. A discussion board tracked threads and archives both of postings that were shared with the entire class and in smaller group conversations. At the end of the class, Peggy gave us copies of our postings. A sample discussion board is included in the book and provides the reader with an outline of topics visited (pp. 28–36).

Peggy includes sample questions in her book, as well as guidelines for reflections (p. 29). In addition to practical nuts and bolts about how the online discussion works, Peggy makes suggestions about how to listen to one another. In keeping with the 'ask don't tell' philosophy, Peggy states in the guidelines:

'I want you to listen to each other, and engage in real conversation, which is different from simply waiting for space to say what you want to say. As well, I want to do what we can to minimize the power relations of the 'teacher as authority' and learners as 'empty vessels' – otherwise known as the 'sucking up to the teacher' tradition.' (pp. 29–30)

I can still see Peggy grinning when she said that. The guidelines also invite students to ask their own questions and provide instructions on how to help keep track of new threads by creating new headings.

Peggy used hands-on experience to engage students as co-researchers in the history and culture of psychotherapy and narrative therapy, rather than as passive recipients of ideas from the 'experts'. Throughout the book, Peggy aims for what she describes as a dialogical, rather than a monological, experience of the text (p. 10). In class, we practiced skills during our exercises, discussions and spot reflections. Out of class, using the online medium, we had additional opportunity to reflect and respond to one another and engage with each other during and after in-class exercises and presentations.

Peggy's use of the online medium complemented a poststructuralist framework for teaching that engages students and teachers in a collaborative endeavour and places a high value on the journey.

The book is divided into three sections: *Re-authoring and Teaching; Multiple Voices;* and *Practice, Practice, Practice* which correspond to how the class is structured.

The first section, *Re-authoring Teaching,* includes the introduction and provides a map of how the course works, including underlying theory, some definitions of terms and some theoretical underpinnings of a postmodern pedagogy, as well as Peggy's approach to teaching narrative practice. Sitting with Peggy in the classroom, I felt invited into her passion. We had already covered some of the underlying theory in previous classes, but hearing about this from Peggy provided an insider view from a practitioner and we gained a deeper sense of the who and why of narrative practice. The theories weren't dead metaphors, but expressions of people Peggy knew and considered friends, further contributing to our understanding of the discourse that meaning is constructed through language and relationships (p. 6). The ideas became more meaningful through Peggy's passion and insider knowledge and inspired me to pursue a year of international study in my postgraduate year. During the class, we grappled with how to ask questions and how to put these ideas into action and be ourselves with the practice.

Peopling the book with multiple voices

In Section Two, *Multiple Voices*, Peggy describes how she introduces experience-near consultants and weaves her own voice among student voices as a reflection of postmodern ideas that: 1) there is no singular truth; and 2) identity is multi-voiced (p. 107). Peggy demonstrates how she structures online forums for students to consult with knowledged people outside of the actual course: authors, knowledged prior students, guest visitors and experience consultants. For example, in her online exchange with students, guest author Lynn Hoffman further illuminates an important aspect of postmodern queries into meaning and truth:

The man who defined postmodernism, Jean-Francois Lyotard, called this way of talking 'paralogical.' He meant that, rather than following the logic of reason, which says there is a right and a wrong answer, you bypass logic and open the doors to many voices, often in contradiction to one another. (p. 18)

Peggy wrote:

'The online medium is redefining community, the networks of people with whom one forges connections and ways of linking lives with each other. Email, instant messaging, live journals, blogs and wiki are transforming the landscape of connection and consciousness for people in the 21st century.' (p. 24)

Peggy's decision to infuse the voices throughout each chapter makes the students come alive as the reader experiences their thoughts and discourse.

Readers are able to experience students grappling with the concepts via the reflexive learning process through the publication of selected student postings. Peggy would offer a question online to help us reflect on an experiential practice to extend the in-class learning. Regarding a discussion in class about the narrative metaphor, Peggy posed these questions for reflection:

What is meant by the narrative metaphor and how does this impact the way you think about your work? What are the implications for theory and clinical practice? What are your thoughts about the shift in metaphor from individual to systems to stories? What are some of your lingering thoughts after hearing the stories shared in class? (p. 37)

Peggy's thoughtful responses to student reflections or to an exercise done in class reveal something of what she gives back to students and how she draws the student into yet more questions. In the chapter on apprenticing to a craft, Peggy built on responses to viewing a videotaped conversation about her work with Meghan:

'… Thank you to those of you who gave me those handwritten revisions. I really appreciate the specific ways you illustrate shifting from 'telling' to 'asking' in these letters. This is the forum for any of you to post any other newly-created letters ('Take two' or even 'Take three') and/or to share any reflections on letter writing. What has been particularly interesting to you about our focus on letter writing in this course? What do you find yourself pondering? How (if at all) do you think this practice might influence your work outside of this course?' (p. 39)

Each chapter is sprinkled with samples of student reflections and the reader is given a chance to experience these conversations and threads that occur at the end of most days, sparked by the questions that Peggy asks online. In the foreword, David Epston says that, against his better judgement, he found himself 'falling in love with the people in the book' (p.xix). I was drawn to Luke's comments and queries as he grappled with concepts like the 'not-knowing position', and I was delighted to find more than one of his posts archived:

An entirely not-knowing position still leaves us in the power position, because power relations are not being openly spoken of (we are just deciding to lower ourselves). We have already dismissed the expert position (we know, you don't) and now the 'nice position (you know, we don't). Still … any ideas of what would come after, 'We know, you don't' and, 'You know, we don't'? Maybe, 'We know something, you know more/other stuff' or something like what Freedman and Combs write, 'We know about this therapy (or social work) thing, you know your life (story.)' I am growing concerned with just being the nice therapist and ending up another benevolent patriarch. I also love that this program and class has me questioning being only nice (especially as a male) (p. 85)

In his posting, Luke also shared an interpretation he had read in Freedman & Combs (1996), an assigned text for the class, that illustrated working with clients from a not-knowing

position. The cross-pollination of ideas like these gives something for other students to react to and draws in other knowledges. I was drawn to his questioning, because it is something I am thinking about in my own practice and examination of my position as a therapist. I wanted to jump online and respond to what it moved in me. Reading the book was nearly as interactive for me as being in the class.

> Kerry 1 wrote:
>
> I loved that at any given time there were multiple threads to choose from. You could choose to join a conversation or simply start your own, depending on what you were drawn to at the time. I think this really allowed each person to be engaged in what they were responding to and writing about, rather than simply answering a standard set of questions. It also allowed us to dig in more with each other, because there was a layer of safety in writing something down and not having to say it face-to-face. We had time to think about what people said and respond in a way that more accurately reflected our thoughts, versus what first came to mind. (p. 3)

Peggy's transparency about her own intentions reveals the behind-the-scenes structure and foundations that go into making the course. A kindergarten teacher friend of mine sets the stage similarly in her classroom. Hours of deep preparation and set-up in different areas in the room go into providing an opportunity for students to safely explore and engage as scientists in learning opportunities with the teacher as a facilitator. Peggy explains the process she uses in creating a collaborative learning community when she offers 'Ten Tips for Creating a Collaborative Learning Community.' Some of these are:

> Offer multiple opportunities for students to shape the learning environment based on their own preferences.
>
> Avoid the passive dry lecture format in favour of more active learning with in-class exercises, letter writing, role-playing, and interviews. Experiment with creative options and invite conversation with outside voices including people who can speak with insider knowledge.
>
> Provide opportunities to 'de-centre' the teacher's voice and encourage students to share their ideas and work with each other.
>
> Give two-way accounts of learning: let students know specific ways this learning experience is affecting you – how what they say and do impacts on your own thoughts, teaching, etc. Avoid the culture of applause. Use yourself as an example when you make mistakes – show how you reflect, acknowledge, and rise to the occasion. (p. 28)

These offer an alternative to the ten attitudes and practices that Freire has identified as mirroring oppressive cultural forces (p. 16).

In section three, *Practice, practice, practice*, readers are drawn into the process of further honing skills like letter writing and remembering to ask the experts, those with experience.

Apprenticeship to a craft and the paralogical

One of the advantages of the interactive medium is that it opens space for questioning safely, within the student's own zone for growth and increases the ability to learn from others. In one class, Peggy likened the process of learning the skills of therapy to apprenticing to a craft. She said that Michael White and David Epston had each spoken of their apprenticeship to the

craft of narrative practice. In her book, Peggy writes about practicing the skills we are learning and learning from trial and error. She tells stories in class to illustrate a point about her ongoing learning from students and clients. She includes a story in the book about an email exchange with a student, Lauren, which serves to demonstrate how easy it is to fall into the trap of applause practices in letter writing and the possible effects of making assumptions rather than asking (p. 235). Peggy initially wrote to Lauren thanking her for being one of the first to take a shot at letter writing and was moved to point out something special that she perceived about Lauren.

> From our brief exchanges, I already knew that you had some kind of special knowledge [from a life threatening illness]… I imagine you learned early (the hard way) life wisdom that most people don't learn till much older… that life is precious, your pain is linked to my pain, and your healing to my healing, to take risks, to play your unique role in creating social justice … (p. 235.)

Lauren thanked Peggy for her response and then reflected on Peggy's assumptions that she [Lauren] seemed to have special knowledge from a childhood experience with illness. Lauren acknowledged that she may have learned some things through her illness, but said that her 'special knowledge' was something she has had all of her life and has more to do with what she holds precious and her upbringing, rather than special learnings from having had a serious illness.

Peggy is moved by Lauren's reflection and offers a 'take two' letter. The exchange of e-mails between them shows that Lauren really feels heard. Reading about this re-visioning process is helpful to students, who learn that it's okay to make mistakes and try again.

> It is helpful to read this on a number of levels. It demonstrates that we all need to practice these skills, even those with much experience. It also illustrates that a wrong assumption or missed step needn't cause irreparable damage, but can be turned around into a second take. And it served as a reminder to Peggy that 'remember-to-ask-rather-then-to-tell' vigilance is a lifelong pursuit from which she is not 'immune' nor are any of us (p. 236). Learning to craft the question is challenging for all of us, at any stage of skill development.

> Apprenticeship refers to a system for training a new generation of skilled practitioners in an art, trade, or craft. Becoming an apprentice typically involves a combination of on-the-job training and related classroom instruction where people learn the practical and theoretical aspects of a skilled occupation. Apprenticing to narrative practice is a more informal process. Together we embrace a lifelong commitment to continually sharpen our practices. (p. 231.)

> Peggy devotes a chapter to the notion of apprenticing to a craft and this is an important theme in her class. Throughout the course, Peggy makes it clear that she is learning right alongside her students, an apprentice to the craft of narrative practice, as well as teaching narrative practice, as she strives to find teaching tools and tweak exercises to work even better the next time. To a student, it is helpful to hear that your teacher struggles too and the importance of building on each other's successes, 'a process that exemplifies the kind of co-creating that is possible between students and teacher – minimizing hierarchy without obscuring my responsibility as a teacher' (p. 249). It is a reminder that we are all in this together, needing to hear and respect one another.

> The point of building on each other's successes and acknowledging the influence of people on our choices is illustrated in an exercise we did in class called the preferred identity assignment, in which we drew personal 'micro maps' or timelines based on re-authoring

conversations maps to chart out our own journeys toward our unique development as reflective practitioners. It helped sharpen my sense of the landscapes of action and consciousness and pointed out significant events and relationships that have influenced me (p. 127). Students began by participating in a four-part outsider-witness interview, during which Peggy interviewed one student about turning points in her career, realisations that had occurred over time and the effects of these understandings. The rest of the class then reflected on ideas and questions that this interview sparked. Peggy, in turn, interviewed the initial volunteer interviewee about her experience upon hearing the reflections, and then the whole class debriefed the experience. These exercises served as an introduction to the 're-authoring conversations' map and an assignment that required each student to conduct a self-interview and create a micro-map using an electronic template. This, in turn, led to a letter of commitment to an audience the student chose and a follow-up outsider-witness interview in small assigned groups.

The assignment wove together re-authoring conversations, intentional understandings of identity, double listening, re-membering practices, and outsider-witness practices and definitional ceremonies.

Readers can gain a sense of what this process meant to students by reading some reflections based on questions that Peggy posted on the class website following the completion of the assignment. It had long-reaching impact for one student, who said that he re-read his letter of commitment when he felt himself 'slipping back into the old way of being' and how that helped him (p. 142). As Ali posted:

> I really appreciate the preferred identity assignment for the way that it allows me to relate narrative ideas to my own life and to begin to see my life as many stories that can be read, written, spoken, shared many times, with new meanings emerging each time. (p. 126)

For me, reading the book was an act of re-visioning, especially when I re-read my letter to the friendly ghost from the future (p. 267). Using a type of inquiry she attributes to David Epston (Epston, Lakusta & Tomm, 2006), Peggy (p. 266) invited students 'to playfully envision a visitation from a "friendly ghost of the future", as a way to express the significance to their work and their lives of attending this course'. Re-reading the letter was a reminder of goals that I had spoken of in 2006 and prompted me to take some action to get closer to what I hold dear. The letter was an outsider witness to my commitment to my goals. The book in turn provides collaborative outsider witnessing to the process of apprenticing to the craft of narrative practice and offers much to teachers and students of reflexive, collaborative practices.

Note

An opportunity exists for readers to join in a web-based collaboratory via Peggy's website: www.reauthoringteaching.com, as well as to read a collaborative response to the book. Peggy invites readers to share their own reflections of the book or write to any of the people who have shared their stories from a link on her website following previews and reviews of her book. Peggy has extended her methodology to a wider audience by offering the password protected *Narrative Practice and Collaborative Inquiry (NCPI) Study Group*. Through a partnership with Alliant International University, she has recently introduced *E-learning modules for continuing education credit* (http://www.ce-psychology.com/product240.html).

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