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*Finding a home: Harnessing biographical narrative in teaching and
learning in cultural geography*¹

Bill Boyd, Denise Rall, Peter Ashley, Wendy Laird & David Lloyd

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Abstract: This paper describes the use of reflective biographical narrative, in postgraduate research supervision, in helping students develop their sense of place – an intellectual place – within the scholarly landscape. The example provided centres on the work of students who have found an intellectual home in cultural geography. Using planned and semi-formal conversation, a device emerging from the authors' supervisory practices, this activity draws on the emerging tradition of reflective biographical narrative, in which biographical reflection is not merely reflection on knowledge, but a practical methodological approach to working with knowledge. We conclude that our approach provided positive learning outcomes for the students, all of who were better able to frame their research, using reflective biographical narrative, within a conscious sense of scholarly place, and to adopt such reflection as a key analytical tool in their respective research projects.

Keywords: biography, reflective practice, postgraduate learning, cultural geography, autobiography, narrative, scholarly landscape, intellectual place

Preface

In April 2004, some of us presented a verbal version of the following reflective piece – a conversation between an academic supervisor (Boyd) and three postgraduate research students (Ashley, Laird & Lloyd) – to the Annual Conference of the Institute of Australian Geographers in Adelaide, Australia, at a session of geographical education. Originally intended as an example of the role of self-reflection and focused supervisory conversation amongst geography teachers and practitioners, it became apparent at the conference session, especially through discussion after the presentation, that there was an interest in this approach, especially from the perspective of postgraduate research

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student supervision. It was felt, then, that a wider dissemination of this example would be of value to the geography community, and thus we present it here.

Subsequent to recording these experiences, a fourth postgraduate research student (Rall) was working on the role of biography in the social sciences as part of her PhD research. The observations she drew from the literature, while unrelated directly to the reflective activities of the other authors, provide a sound conceptual foundation to the empirical experiences recorded here. The paper, therefore, is something of a hybrid, drawing together several strands: ideas and literature concerning the idea of the use of biographical narrative – a constructed biographical story with elements of autobiography – as a mode of expressing reflection and its role in the social sciences (broadly defined); the intersection of biographical narrative and reflection in higher education teaching; and a description and illustration of our practice-based experiences of applying biographical narrative and reflection through the medium of recorded conversation used to enhance the research students' (in particular) sense of their personal engagement with their research.

Opportunity to report this work is now afforded through the notion of place, placemaking and cultural production: what we were undertaking, we now recognise, is an exercise in which we, individually and collectively, sought to find an intellectual place of comfort within the scholarly landscapes we inhabit. This is the story of this search.

Biographical narrative and its role in social science

In examining biographical narrative as a methodology in social science, it becomes immediately clear that the sources used for academic biographical narrative include the rich contributions of ancient scholars, religious thinkers, and philosophers. For example, the French philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533-92) self-reflects on his studies in a manner that seems prescient to modern practices in scholarship (de Santilla, 1956). While critics of Montaigne's *Essays* note his contradictory views, the following extract shows how Montaigne foreshadows current practices in scholarly self-review.

Every one, as Pliny says, is a good doctrine to himself, provided he be capable of discovering himself near at hand. Here, this is not my doctrine, 'tis my study; and is not the lesson of another, but my own; and if I communicate it, it ought not to be ill taken, for that which is of use to one, may also, peradventure, be useful to another. . . 'Tis now many years since that my thoughts have had no other aim and level than myself: or, *if I study any other thing, 'tis to apply it to or rather, in myself* . . . (excerpt from *Montaigne's Essays*, Chapter XII, Book II, "The apology of Raymond de Sebonde", cited by de Santilla (1956, p.171); emphasis added).

From Montaigne, the history of philosophy has highlighted the importance of the personal narrative – oft-cited examples include the meditations of St. Thomas Aquinas as well as the *Meditations* of Rene Descartes (1596-1650). The tradition of pursuing knowledge through self-study peaked in the early Enlightenment, but lost favor over the

decades to other philosophical perspectives: logical, pragmatic, analytical, ethical, and so on (Collins, 1998). While philosophical traditions move on, self-disclosure as a key practice in sociology, whether it is called the life story, auto/biography or lived experience has become increasingly popular, as the title of Chamberlayne *et al.*'s, relatively recent (2000) book suggests, *The turn to biographical methods in social science*.

Soliciting what are often called life stories from others for research purposes is usually sourced from ethnography, a research method tied to anthropology and where methodological assumptions are driven by culture (Geertz, 1973). Scholars soon, however, problematised this process. The focus on biographical methods in the social sciences is strongly associated with practitioners at the University of Chicago. From the late 1920s, this coalition of scholars (the Chicago School) employed the study of a participant's biography (often couched in terms of a life history) as a method to explore the life of an individual in order to detail the rich set of relationships between individuals and society (Bulmer, 1984). These methods culminated in two groundbreaking texts: the story of a Polish immigrant (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1958) and a story of juvenile delinquency in a large city (Shaw, 1966). Since their publication, both texts have come under severe scrutiny both for their methods and assumptions made about the participants by scholars in social science.

This trend continued in the 1960s and 1970s, when the life story became suspect for its stance outside the current social scientific methods that tested narratives for validity, reliability and generalisability. The rise of social constructivism allowed the life story to be read as a constructed text, a text that resulted from a collaboration between the participant and researcher (Silverman, 1997). Also in the 1970s, Karl Weintraub opened a critical discussion of traditional auto/biography by charactering auto/biography as simply offering models of the "exemplary ways of being human" (Weintraub, 1978: xv). The *exemplary life* has, thankfully, been dismissed in the last three decades. The contested ground, on the other hand, of life history, biography and autobiography was enriched by feminist, queer theory and refined practices such as ethnomethodology and auto/ethnography (Roberts, 2002). Likewise, recent advances in postmodern and postcolonial theory have developed complex theoretical configurations for the self, the other, and community that are complemented by critical methods and narrative analytical techniques, such as discourse analysis and deconstruction. All these questions in the so-called production of narratives can be employed to mark out the terrain of auto/biography from other forms of writing (Marcus, 1998). Today, the range of methods match the various theoretical perspectives suitable to the life story: personality theories, life cycle, script theory, metaphorical analysis, life course, narrative analysis, thematic field analysis and hermeneutical approaches can be considered in turn (Atkinson, 1998: 67-68). Currently, Tom Wengraf and other scholars seek to marry the relevance of *biographical work* within everyday life and the epistemology of social science research practices (Chamberlayne *et al.*, 1999).

The rise of the academic biographical narrative

Sociologists who collected very personal stories were later viewed as forming inappropriate collusions with their research participants. Some researchers associated

with the Chicago School decided to publish details of their scholarship as means to publicly defend their work (Horowitz, 1970). This form of specialised, academically focused storytelling offered scholars the chance to comment on influences, such as their professors or teachers, research projects, and their career paths. One tradition in academic biographies takes a narrow set of influences for scholarly work, circumscribed by the departmental demands such as teaching practices, research activities, publication and academic service (Weiland, 1995). Another example includes Miller & Morgan's (1993) focus on the academic curriculum vitae as the evidential document for developing an academic's biographical narrative. Clandinin & Connelly's (2000) chapter, *Why Narrative?* also reviews a number of social scientists and their retrospectives that reflect the differing perspectives of scholars of education, anthropology, organisational theory, teaching and psychiatry.

Once the search begins for auto/biographical detail in academic life, many examples can be found. And there are significant differences amongst the accounts. For example, the subtitle of Laurel Richardson's (1997) text (*Constructing an Academic Life*) serves the purpose of an extended narrative on her career in sociology. In this personal account, she includes academic essays, journal writing, and even an extended prose play. Some of the text details the machinations of American departmental life in a most unpleasant way. The point is that Richardson takes a very long, but very focused retrospective of her life as an academic well outside of her life story.

Other academics have recounted their biographies to explain their commitment to a given set of theoretical perspectives. An excellent example here is Paul Cloke's (1994) chapter entitled (*En)culturing political economy: A day in the life of a 'Rural Geographer'*. Here, Cloke develops the view that it is his biographical life decisions that have shaped his theoretical perspectives. He details family life, professors, teachers and students as well as research projects that influenced his thinking about cultural geography, particularly the special problems of rural geography. Details of his academic life are used as a springboard to examine how notions of ruralness are constrained within a cultural landscape that is increasingly dominated by images of urbanity presented in the British media. Cloke's example serves an important reminder that, for scholars, biographical details can inform their theoretical perspectives. Equally, theoretical directions taken by academics can then inform particularities (research directions, job selection, choice of co-authors and research partners) of their lives. A parallel account of the appearance of Berry & Garrison's seminal 1958 paper, "The functional basis of the central place theory", claimed to be the starting point for geography's quantitative revolution, reinforces the importance of life events and circumstances and the telling of these in understanding key scholarly and academic events and processes (Barnes, 2001).

Some scholarly recollections focus more specifically on the type of academic tasks at hand. Yvonna Lincoln presents the solution of a methodological puzzle that is worked out in a biographical way in her 1990 chapter, called *The making of a constructivist: A remembrance of transformations past*. Her biographical narrative contains life details that are strictly circumscribed by a nine-month period when she and her team worked through a problem in their methodological approach. Lincoln describes in detail the various conferences, meetings, and debates she attends, which center on her interactions with students, colleagues and critics.

There is one further example that must be considered. Like Richardson, many academics take the opportunity to tell their academic life story to preface other scholarly concerns. For example, the noted ethnographer Clifford Geertz details his academic career at the beginning of his book, *Available light: Anthropological reflections on philosophical topics*; it is worth recounting his reflections on how what and where he would study next (Geertz, 2000: 7):

The question was: where, elsewhere? With nothing substantial in the way of a job ... I thought it expedient to take shelter in graduate school, and my wife, Hildred, another displaced English major unprepared 'for the real world,' thought she might do so as well. But, once again, ... I was – we were – without resources. So I ... asked another unstandard academic, a charismatic philosophy professor named George Geiger, who had been Lou Gehrig's backup on the Columbia baseball team and John Dewey's last student, what I should do. He said [approximately]: 'Don't go into philosophy; it has fallen into the hands of Thomists and technicians. You should try anthropology'.

Geertz states later: "As improbably and casually as we had become anthropologists, and just about as innocently, we became Indonesianists. And so it goes: the rest is postscript, the working out of happenstance fate" (2000: 9). However, this makes clear that careers also lie in the details of students' lives (including their spouses, their families) – the economic factors that determine the nature and shape of their academic career tracks. This life-necessity leading to academic career plays out again in internet scholarship. The examples of self-reflective writings in the scholarly tradition of philosophers like Michel de Montaigne, Richardson's literary exercise in autobiography presenting her coming to knowledge in sociological theory, Cloke's biographical narrative developing and problematising his understanding of rural geography, Lincoln's (1990) personal recounting of how she and others solved a methodological puzzle in qualitative research theory, and the effects both economic necessities and opportunity that focused Geertz's field of study, provide ample evidence of the strength of biographical details of academic lives in understanding the dimensions of scholarly endeavor (Weiland, 1994).

Harnessing biographical narrative in higher degree teaching and learning

Regardless of this rich vein of writing and thinking regarding biographical narrative, the reflective work illustrated towards the end of the paper arose specifically from the example of self-reflection by geographers so well illustrated by Cloke *et al.* (1994). The role of self-reflection is becoming an increasingly accepted approach to supporting research in the humanities and social sciences (e.g. Lincoln, 1994; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Dunn, 1997; Wengraf, 2001). Jackson (2003: 223) usefully defines reflective practice (reflexivity) as:

... the critical thinking required to examine the interaction occurring between the researcher and the data during analysis. The researcher explores personal feelings that may influence the study and integrates her understanding of the feelings into the results of the study. The research needs to be reflective so that she can uncover and provide a full account of her deep-seated views, thinking, and conduct. This openness is necessary so that the readers of the research report are aware of how the researcher's values, assumptions, and motivations may have influenced the framework, literature review, design, sampling, data collection, and interpretation of findings. Being explicit about the participation of the researcher in the generation of knowledge adds to the relevance and accuracy of the results ...

Cloke *et al.*'s (1994) exposition of this approach, with reflections and analyses of the authors' careers, work and interactions with their material they work on, and especially Cloke's own reflections, in that volume, of the interactions between relationships with peers and teachers, personal views and philosophies, and the directions his academic and intellectual work over several decades, provides a useful and applied model and expands on Jackson's synthesis of reflexivity. One of us (Boyd) had regularly asked students to read Cloke and his co-authors as part of their professional and academic development, especially in relation to conducting academic project work. This predominantly took the approach of setting Cloke's chapter as a reading, to be followed by the student writing an equivalent, but considerably shorter, account of their own relationships to the academic project they were involved in. The focus was predominantly on self-awareness rather than any detailed critique of the influences a student's biography might have on the specific analysis being undertaken within the project.

It became apparent in subsequent supervisory discussions, however, that an extension of this activity would be of value. Hence the conversation was born. As the conversation evolved, rather than exactly following Cloke's approach in this paper, the authors are merely following his lead and highlighted, through a our conversation, significant relationships and influences that have brought us to both the particular form of geographic enquiry and the specific relationships we have as research supervisor and research students. As will be apparent, this conversation formed the basis of a significant growth of self-awareness, especially amongst the students, of the place of their academic and scholarly endeavors in the wider geographical world.

Jackson (2003) and, to a lesser extent, Cloke (1994) focus on the role of reflexivity on research. Indeed many of the authors cited above are discussing biographical narrative in terms of their relationships between researcher and the research *per se*. It is noted here that reflexivity takes the reflective mode further, whether or not expressed through biographic narrative, in that it allows for both enhanced self-awareness (reflection may do this) and for changes in identity and process. For the authors, Cloke's (1994) reflections on his academic journey were an important influence: they clearly shaped his approach to theory in his discipline. He represents the trend, during the 1990s, of sociologists beginning to see the usefulness of biographical reflection not only as a theoretical frame, but also method (Wengraf, 2001). This biographical turn became an important approach to method (e.g. Denzin & Lincoln, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c) and has

encouraged us to try to understand our biographies as not just reflection on knowledge, but as an approach to working with knowledge, that is, as a form of reflexive action (e.g. Roberts, 2002; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Sankaran *et al.*, 2001; Keen *et al.*, 2005).

However, our interests are wider, extending to the teaching and learning of research; while this paper focuses on the use of biographical narrative as a research method, it is considered to have further potential as a supervisory mode, both for research students and beyond into the larger arena of undergraduate teaching. It is interesting to note, therefore, academic staff at the University of Leeds introducing the idea of self reflection to undergraduate students who are completing project work: "Reflection skills essentially give you the mental time and space to consider what you have been doing, value it, place it into context and make mature decisions about what to do next. It does not necessarily involve change, although it may lead to development or change." (Bradford, 2000: 44). What is being articulated here is a broader educational principle, that is, that reflection plays a central role in student learning. Such an approach has been extended to formalised reflection for students undertaking field trips and work experience activities (Charlesworth, 2004; Tomkins, 2004). This approach has been extended to the supervision of PhD students, with Hellowell (2006), for example, describing ways in which supervisors may assist their students to develop their abilities to become more reflexive of their own qualitative research; Hellowell notes, importantly, that it cannot be assumed that students necessarily have the self reflexive skills or abilities, and therefore that they may need assistance.

Bradford's book is one of a series on key skills in geography in higher education published in 2000 and which is largely based on the adoption of the Kolb Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984), a model of learning that stresses the cyclical interrelationships between experience, reflection, conceptualisation and the testing of new ideas (Boyd, 2002). While Bradford's advice was designed for undergraduate students, it is becoming increasingly apparent that reflection should become an important part of the post-graduate experience.

The model of cyclical action and reflection has become more widely adopted, especially with a research focus, where it finds strong expression in action research/learning (Boyd, 2001). Action research/learning represents a practical, successful and disciplined version of the repeated cycles of testing the relationships between thought and action, and thus values reflection as well as action (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). This is a significant move from a situation where research has been governed by notions of objective realities, in which the researcher is merely a passive operator rather than, as is increasingly becoming apparent, an integral part of the research being conducted. More recently, such ideas have been integrated into ideas of social learning (Keen *et al.*, 2005), where social learning is defined as "a process of iterative reflection that occurs when we share our experiences, ideas and environments with others" (p. 9). Keen *et al.* provide models of cyclical development of planning, action and reflection very similar to those advocated by action researchers. While they focus more closely on achieving the aims of a project, they do note that critical awareness and reflective practices are everyday activities, and that the "reflective practitioner" (Schön, 1987) articulates reflective practice at personal, interpersonal, community and social levels. While Keen *et al.*'s focus is on environmental management, their discussion of reflection – "taking

account of principles, place, potential and practice” (p. 266) applies more widely, as is evidenced by their own use of the reflective process in evaluating the effectiveness of workshops and writing project that resulted in the publication of their book.

Finding a home: Using biographical narrative via structured conversation to enhance research student supervision

With so many strands of thought leading to the point where biographical narrative and reflexivity in higher education and research merge, we now describe a practical example of the application of such approaches. We do this in the context of applied cultural geography. Cultural geography is an inherently human discipline; here we describe an inherently human activity: a conversation. The conversation arose, through long periods of individual student-supervisor supervisory sessions, as a natural way to express the biographical information that helps us understand how we have developed particular scholarly activities and approaches to the work we undertake. The conversation was a natural successor to verbal debate and discussion already occurring between four academics who have gradually become cultural geographers (Boyd, Ashley, Laird & Lloyd). These four had reached a point where they were asking: Why have we become cultural geographers? How does cultural geography affect our scholarship? In trying to answer such questions, we became aware that the core question – How does cultural geography affect our scholarship? – was the wrong question, and that what we needed to understand was what is was about ourselves that brought us to the point where we were becoming increasingly receptive the intellectual traditions and methodologies of cultural geography in providing appropriate frames to our research and scholarship.

This edited conversation was held in late 2003. The conversation was held over a single session running for around an hour and a half, having been planned during several previous meetings. Outline notes, taken by Boyd, and a transcribed tape recording formed the basis of the text. We agreed that the conversation should not be reported simply as directly spoken; while this would record the content, it lacked the structure that might assist in identifying themes and issues. Consequently, Boyd drafted a first version of the conversation, restructuring the content to bring together common ideas; this represents an adaptation of the constant comparative method (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The draft was then circulated to the rest of the group, and was thus gradually refined to reflect a smoother flow of commentary. Of course, the refining and redrafting was as much a reflective process for all of the group as was the original planning and conversation. What follows is the product of this iterative reflective process.

Who are we? Bill Boyd is an established academic, qualified as a geographer in the 1970s. His academic duties include supervising postgraduate students across the physical and human geographies. His cultural focus is the social construction of heritage and the past within contemporary landscapes. His students tend to be of his own age and life stage, hyper-enthusiastic and highly motivated, and mainly returning to academia after half a lifetime elsewhere. Amongst these, Peter Ashley had just completed Honours, and Wendy Laird, David Lloyd and Denise Rall were then completing their PhD research. The conversation was held in Bill’s “outside office”, where we spend many supervisory hours (Figure 1)

Figure 1. Doing cultural geography ... some of the authors hard at work: left to right ... David Lloyd, Bill Boyd, Wendy Laird and Peter Ashley (photograph by Max Egan).



The conversation

Bill As way of introduction, I will put on record that all of you have, through our various supervision sessions discussed aspects of the scholarly and academic context of your work. It is interesting that we have reached a point individually and communally, where we feel a need to draw together these various conversation, in part recognising that stage each of you has reached in your research and reflecting the convergence of your various study paths. We have all agreed that this is now the time and a good opportunity to draw together our previous discussions. You've all moved considerable intellectual distance over the last few years ... and our supervision sessions invariably return to the importance of cultural perspectives on our research ...

My scholarship has largely been in physical geography and environmental science. ... Peter's undergraduate study was in our environmental science and management course [more emphasis on science than management]. Wendy's background is in science and architecture, while David's environmental science led him to a public service career ... We've all had an inherently human interest in our work. My geography overlaps with archaeology and cultural heritage management, while Peter increasingly explores human-environment relationships. As an architect and cultural heritage advisor, Wendy

tended towards human rather than technical solutions, while David has spent half a career translating science into English, as a civil servant, lobbyist and radio announcer.

I think of cultural geography ... as providing ways of understanding the environment as socially constructed idea and behaviour. Studying the humanity of peoples' behaviour is critical in understanding people's interactions with place. I have long worried that environment and heritage studies tend towards superficial understandings. Cultural geography, by studying place, landscape and behaviour, is a valuable window into underlying beliefs and their behavioural effects. The geographical focus lets me address real questions about how real people behave in the real world ... Why do we have this need to research environment this way?

Peter I first noticed a desire to change in my second year ... where I recognised my objection that taught science was oriented towards objective knowledge ... the "count-measure-name-define" mantra was disturbingly context-free ... I puzzled over this during my undergraduate studies, and Honours gave me the opportunity to confront my questions ... it was a very steep learning curve ... The revelation came two weeks before submitting the thesis: my intellectual home was in cultural geography! What a relief! This was really important: I was feeling more and more out of place in science ... it just didn't provide the fulfillment I was looking for. I was especially frustrated not being able to discuss my research with many of the other students; they simply didn't understand. [**Wendy** But you could discuss your work with some of the other mature age students, couldn't you?] Yes ... it's interesting all three of us are mature-age students. [**Wendy** Is our growing interest in humanity something to do with age or stage?] It might be. What I missed in the science course ... were feelings about environment. ...

Bill ... Are you are suggesting that science doesn't answer all the questions, and doesn't help the search for deeper meanings about people's place in the environment? Wendy, how did you get here?

Wendy How am I here? ... Ten years running an architecture practice ... all my design work was based on listening to people. I was designing for them and their needs ... I needed a good understanding of what people want for their environment. However, I was still frustrated, and chose cultural heritage management work, especially with communities ... This brought me in touch with you, Bill, opening up all the work we're now doing. [Wendy is working on an Aboriginal housing project, on homelessness, crowding, emergency housing, and community capacity building.] ... I'm now using the skills picked up over the years to help people manage their environment and improve health and wellbeing. This is enormously satisfying ... is it an age thing? Fixing buildings is dead easy, but getting the social and environmental mix right is harder. For example, at the recent National Housing Conference it was claimed that all we need to get Aboriginal housing up to the standard of the rest of Australia is seven billion dollars. That's OK, but doesn't address cultural impacts. It risks loss of cultural identity in communities by addressing the wrong questions. It is not about technical solutions ... cultural and social processes are far more important.

Peter Yes, science is objective: it can fix houses, but to really address issues ... we need to be far more subjective . That's a bit harder, isn't it? I see cultural geography as letting us to do this. ... it puts science into context.

Wendy I couldn't agree more; context is so important. Without context, we've no perspective, and always miss the richness of any social situation. Something I've brought from architecture is the knowledge that unless we understand the context of any situation, we can't design in any meaningful way. Cultural geography lets me contextualise problems and situations beyond just describing the physical or social context.

Bill Yes ... depth of meaning is important ... This differentiates the quantitative methods many of our colleagues use, and the qualitative approaches I've been introducing to you and other students ... It's so hard for the quantitative people to accept in-depth interviews and case studies as valid. They can't see that the greater depth of understanding overcomes the apparent lack of rigour and reproducibility ... Cultural geography's humanities approach was a revelation for me many years ago, validating my indulgence in thinking about meanings and culture. Another boost was the realisation that it is intellectually possible to do both science and non-science ... The new humanities allow diversity of scholarly approaches, and cultural geography provides the context for that diversity in my work.

Wendy Yes, it lets us take on different knowledges, and we can talk about both the specific and the general ...

Bill So, now that we want a deeper understanding of the world ... and a more human approach to research, and are less inclined to be reductionist, how has each of you changed intellectually and methodologically?

Wendy Doing cultural geography is a huge learning curve. I really appreciate the opportunity to read widely and to think across disciplines ... I loved the opportunity for discussions, especially our long rambling discussions, when we'd start with one thing and end up who knows where ... the excitement of working ideas out as pictures and scribbled diagrams. This mind-mapping appealed to me ... to be able use graphics is very important ... [it] lets me visualise ideas in a creative, aesthetic way.

Bill So cultural geography is about communication? Our early discussions ranged widely ... it was exciting to be able to draw ideas, metaphor, analogues or methods from across other disciplines ... The scribble diagrams are very geographical ... they really helped us find direction ... and you still use them to frame your work. I know Peter keeps all the diagrams ... they make increasing sense as the work progresses.

Wendy ... they're certainly a valuable tool in my work with Aboriginal communities. It seems easier to draw ideas rather than speak them. I also find it valuable for translating other peoples' ideas ... to create a shape of ideas that can be worked with. It is essential for my research.

Bill We're talking about working outside the square, aren't we? ... being able to adopt other ideas ... allowing us to play with ideas rather than just analyse things in a

formulaic manner. I still do this for other parts of my research, but for the cultural work, isn't it great to be able to play with ideas? An important discovery for me was the distinction between science and humanities writing. Science writing has to be good, but is essentially functional ... reporting completed analyses. In the humanities, writing is part of the analysis ... not constrained to reportage ... playing with language to discover meaning in cultural observations. Umberto Eco is my mentor, although my early experiments are weak imitations of his style ... not sure if I like the results, but it was fun!

David And it's not just the writing that's liberated. I'm reminded of Terry Pratchett's *Multiversity* ... I make use of his books for teaching science and management ... great for telling stories about management. And you use *Winnie the Pooh*, Bill, to help science students think about cultural perceptions of environment. I find *Wind in the Willows* great for creating/recreating the value of environment for students ... Cultural geography lets us to put literature in landscape ... just look at Simon Sharma's *Memory and Landscape* ...

Peter Working outside the square is important. Even this conversation lets us to look more broadly than we would normally. Who else in our School would even consider a reflective piece like this? You [Bill] have helped us work on problems by taking information from many directions rather than working on one point at a time ... lets me apply life experiences to solving research problems ... I'm more inclined to take a holistic approach to encompass science and people ... suits my character. Being allowed to do this intellectually is really important. When I was doing [in-depth] interviews on old growth forest issues, I asked people why they did do what they did? [Peter was interviewing people closely involved in issues of old growth forest management and conservation.] It's really obvious that they had difficulty answering. Could our colleagues answer the question? ... I am greatly influenced by Douglas Porteous, who keeps asking, "why do we do what we do?" ... and, importantly, "do people reflect on this?". I obviously need this reflection ... cultural geography provides the option, opportunity and validation to reflect on my scholarship. This is my research's most important outcome so far ... I now have more focus and direction in my work.

Bill ... All your views and attitudes towards research have changed ... You've all found a home in cultural geography, giving you space to expand and draw widely on ideas without disciplinary constraint. You're all doing real-world research, and had to learn a lot of new methods ... How hard it was to change methodologically?

Wendy You know, I can't really recall ... it's has been a long slow evolution. I know I reflect very differently now than when I was 25. I thought a lot then, but the PhD taught me the value and importance of active reflection ... it allows me to pull a whole complex of things into my reflections ... I can now reflect on 200 things rather than 20 ...! Really important ... otherwise the research becomes shallow.

Bill ... It seems we might be a special group ... a subset of cultural geographers? Are we talking about intellectual changes that reflect our age, maturity or experience? We each talk about cultural geography validating what we do ... our breadth of sources, our reflection on the world. People considerably older than us tend to reflect on their lives, and some of our best research participants are older people. Perhaps adopting cultural

geography is some bizarre way of scholastically acknowledging the value of aging and maturing! ... perhaps we needed to reach a point where work and personality match ...

David Yes, it's part of maturing. I'm increasingly comfortable with not having absolutes. In my early career, I had a passion for wildlife, but could only see individual animals. I gradually learnt that animals are part of the landscape ... so learnt about plants. By my mid-twenties, I realised that people are just as important. My passion about environment grew, and I could be passionate about people and plants and animals ... but still wanted absolute answers. The older I am, the more comfortable I am with my own insecurities. I can't know everything ... the more I know, the more complicated the world is. I'm also more comfortable looking for patterns than absolutes. This has a huge effect on my methods, and why context is important. I want to take a helicopter view of the world rather than a myopic view. Geography lets me do this. Science is interested in replicates, but with time, I am more interested in exemplars ... less worried about repeatability, and more fascinated by uniqueness. Rather than controlling things as the same, I can work with the differences that make things special ... [David was studying the integration of indigenous knowledges into protected area management.] I couldn't have worked like this early in my career. The cultural geography label is useful because it lets me slip across boundaries. It forms a bridge, and lets others see value in the humanities. ... Is this possible because we're working outside standard [university] departments? ... outside disciplinary norms? We don't have these in our multidisciplinary School. ... The university is innovative in many ways [e.g. naturopathy] ... accepting (almost expecting) different ways of doing things. Or is it also to do with Bill allowing this to happen? His status helps.

Bill Yes, but remember, I have been allowed to go my own path, but not as a deliberate strategic choice by the School. ... I don't think they understand us, so they let us go our own way, because we get results and don't make waves.

Wendy Yes, real-world outcomes are important ... and the multi-disciplinary context. We all need to be multi-disciplinary in our types of projects ... looking for real solutions to real world problems ... focusing on problem solving. I was taught architecture as problem solving; perhaps that's the underlying discipline for our work. Being outcome-focused is really important ... the importance of the applied influence. One of the really important things you [Bill] introduced to us is action research [also called action learning]. Finding action research was critical ... I now know that's what I've been doing throughout my life. Cultural geography gives it a context. ... Coming from the cultural end of environmental science and management gives us the standing to do what we're doing.

David For me action research reflects the real way people make decisions. People don't make rational decisions. They use the first behaviour they come across until the consequences don't coincide with reality ... they then pick the next one. I've been reading about how bush firefighters seem to get out of difficulty so often: do they have ESP? ... If a bushfire isn't behaving as expected, the manager's gut reaction – to pull firefighters out – is based on experience-based subliminal behaviour. Action research allows us to pick up the subliminal patterns. For me this emphasises the humanity of behaviour: we're not machines or computers, we don't process information like a computer, so we need an intellectual ability to investigate that humanity ... And it's

important to understand context and scale, which is where I see geography being so useful.

Bill ... we're all moving from a model view of the world, social science as systems ... to individualistic cultural perspectives ... difference, individuality and humanity seem more important to you all.

David Yes, they are. Exemplars let us examine the elements that make situations individual, and use abnormalities to look for rules. They give us a perspective of interconnectedness (Endnote 1). Culturally, people talk about interconnectedness through stories. Cultural geography is so good at living the stories: I love doing the interviews and getting the stories. It is about interaction with people, something you just don't get from questionnaires ... And when you're doing this, you're effecting change, not by forcing people, but by getting them talk out their own change.

Wendy ... I really enjoy the interactions with people, especially helping them effect change ... not as authority, but as facilitator. ... It's great to encourage people to have a go. We're trying to support change people are calling for. You too, Bill, spend your time actively introducing change to students' minds, for example, by encouraging undergrad science students to think about culture ...

Bill Interesting how the conversation strays, isn't it ... very human, very cultural ... story telling ... talking about change one moment and literature as a teaching tool the next ... Is this only possible because we have space to do it? Could we do this in straight science?

Let's round up. What does cultural geography mean for our scholarship and academic identity? ... We're probably an unusual group, coming to cultural geography late in our academic lives. We all want to solve real-world environmental problems ... Entering our version of cultural geography seems to be an aging or maturing process ... finding a scholarly home that resonates with our personal inclinations. The cultural focus helps us contextualise the depths of understanding and uniqueness of the situations we study. Real-world problems, facilitating change and multi-disciplinarity are important. Cultural geography provides the opportunities to range widely across the disciplines, borrow ideas, constructs and methods, and broaden communication. It's important to keep the thread ... cultural models have helped us all to do this: Peter's use of Porteous' models of being-in-place, David's people-living-stories, Wendy's helping people to have a go, my own use of social construction theory ... In the end, the people-focus is all-important: it places our cultural geography at the core of environmental management ... if only they knew!

Conclusions

And there ends the conversation. Naturally, this conversation has not, strictly ended there, but continues as an informal on-going reflection by us individually as in groups. While the authors have not reconvened as a group, all of us still consider the implications of our findings. No formal evaluation of the exercise has been run, although this could, no doubt, be done. In personal development terms (perhaps the

most appropriate evaluation), it should be noted that Peter, in particular, has found it especially useful in defining the direction he wishes to continue in academia. The conversation gave him the confidence to apply for a postgraduate scholarship at an institution he had previously considered he could not apply to; this was a direct outcome of the exercise. Both David and Wendy are more comfortable with the area of research they continued to work in, and both subsequently commented periodically that by opening up the ideas and expressing their practices, they find themselves in greater control of their research. Both used the concepts they have discovered in the cultural geography literature in the writing of their PhD research. These student-authors find, therefore, considerable agreement with Hellawell's (2006: 483) PhD students, who comment that their "consideration of their own, sometimes shifting, positions on the insider-outsider continuum [has been] of considerable value in developing their reflexivity in relation to their own research".

In summary, we are all more aware of our place in the academic world. Importantly, although Rall was not involved in the recorded conversation, she went on to frame her PhD thesis around biographical narrative; it became a central theme for her academic work (Rall, 2006). In Jackson's (2003: 223) terms – that the research needs to be reflective so that the researcher "can uncover and provide a full account of [the researcher's] deep-seated views, thinking, and conduct" and the reader can be aware of how the researchers values, assumptions, and motivations may have influenced the [research]" – we can point to the revelation Ashley experienced in understanding his relationship to the research he wished to conduct, and to the central role of reflection that Lloyd, in particular, has used in his thesis; Lloyd's (2005) thesis has frequent departures from the main text to reflect upon social processes both amongst the subjects of his research and within his own experience as the researcher. All the participants would agree with Jackson's (2003: 223) claim that "being explicit about the participation of the researcher in the generation of knowledge adds to the relevance and accuracy of the results".

Endnote

The conversation now took a short detour into the key formative events bringing us into cultural geography ... another conversation. However it is worth noting some of our comments on predisposition towards cultural geography, and its relevance to interconnectedness:

... all your work ... reflects your tendencies towards a people-focus ... the important predisposition? If doing cultural geography is part of our temperament, and thinking about us as a group, here's an idea. Is there something fundamentally Buddhist about cultural geography? Peter is attracted to Zen, and both you, David and I [Bill] are inclined towards Buddhism. I have reflected elsewhere on parallels between the Buddhist worldview and contemporary [Western] perspectives on [e.g.] management, leadership, post-modernity ...

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