

COURSE TITLE: DOING COLLECTIVE BIOGRAPHY

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE METHOD:

Collective biography is a research strategy that works at the level of bodily knowledge and of affect, and moving beyond individualized versions of the subject, toward subjects-in-relation, subjects-in-process (Davies and Gannon, 2006). The practice of collective biography involves researchers and participants, over several consecutive days, meeting and talking about their chosen topic, telling their own remembered stories relevant to that topic, and writing them down. The relationship between the participants and the written texts, and memories evoked in the workshop space, is developed through a particular kind of close attention to each others' stories. Through listening and questioning each other on the remembered, embodied, affective detail, each story becomes imaginable with/in the minds/bodies of everyone. After telling stories, and listening to stories, and talking together about those stories, they are written, avoiding clichés and explanations. Each story is then read out loud to the group, registering the images now in the written form, and heard again in the modality of voice, through the vibrations in the bodies of speakers and listeners.

In the writing and reading, in the discussion about, and questioning of, the read text, and in the rewriting, each storyteller works to express the very this-ness, or haecceity, of the remembered moment. Haecceity or this-ness, as Halsey (2007) analyses it, is integral to what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call smooth space—the space that escapes the over-coded striations of territorialized space. Smooth space enables an immersion in the present moment, in time and in place, that often eludes us in the press of normative expectations, of habitual thoughts and practices, and of submission to the dominant, often clichéd codes that make up the existing order.

In our book, *Doing Collective Biography* (2006), Susanne and I coined the term mo(ve)ment in order to evoke the doubled action involved in our collective story-telling and writing, of dwelling in and on particular moments of being, and of movement toward, or openness to, new possibilities both of seeing and of being. In telling, listening, questioning, writing, reading and rewriting our stories, a shift takes place. The memories are no longer told and heard as just autobiographical (that is, an assemblage of already known stories that mark one individualized person off from the next), but as opening up for, and in, each other, knowledges of being that previously belonged only to the other, as that other's marks of identity. In working collectively with memories, we live intimately within our own bodies, and our bodies take on the intimate knowledge of each other's being. Each subject's specificity in its very particularity, in its sensory detail, becomes, through this process, the collectively imagined detail through which we know ourselves as human, even as more human -- as humans-in-relation.

Participation in collective biography extends the capacity for listening, and develops a new understanding and practice of relationality not unlike that which Rinaldi describes as the kind of listening she envisages in pedagogical spaces. Such listening begins with:

... the courage to abandon yourself to the conviction that our being is just a small part of a broader knowledge; listening is a metaphor for listening to others, sensitivity to listen and be listened to, with all your senses... Behind each act of listening there is desire, emotion, and openness to differences, to different values and points of view... Learning how to listen is a difficult undertaking; you have to open yourself to others... Competent listening creates a deep opening and predisposition toward change.

(Rinaldi, 2006: 114)

Within collective biography workshops, through developing the skills of listening and attending to the minute bodily detail of moments of being, it becomes possible for each story to become a collective story, its purpose no longer to signal the substance of any particular individual, but to open the participants to new insights into the processes of being and becoming in the world—new ways of being subjects (Davies et al., 2006):

The poststructural subject-in-process in our collective biography writing is one who plays between a close and detailed observation of what she finds when she examines her memories, (un)hampered by the moorings of liberal humanist signifying practices, *and* one who recognizes the constitutive force of that same moment of speaking/writing such a description. In this sense the poststructural subject might be said to exist at the site of an almost intolerable contradiction, a contradiction that is necessary to comprehend subjectification. Butler says of this necessary ambivalence: "... the subject is itself a site of this ambivalence in which the subject emerges both as the *effect* of a prior power and as the *condition of possibility* for a radically conditioned form of agency. A theory of the subject should take into account the full ambivalence of the conditions of its operation" (Butler, 1997: 14-15). In that ambivalence our subject-in process finds herself quite powerful, not so caught in definitions of herself as she might have been. She finds herself in mo(ve)ments, and as she *scrapes* her way through poststructural writing, *catches* herself in the act of being subjected, and, sometimes, she *drags* her individualized subjecthood behind her. She is above all, in process, vulnerable to inscriptions that may be opaque to her and yet developing the powers to make the discourses and their inscriptive powers both visible and revisable.

(Davies et al., 2006: 181)

The stories told and written in collective biography workshops do not claim to be representations of the real, or to tell a final truth of “what happened” though they do not intentionally deviate from what is remembered. Rather they are experienced as deeply inscribed on the bodies of the storytellers and listeners through their embodied senses. Collective biography story-telling takes place in a specific time and place, with particular others who, in their specificity and difference, invoke new becomings, as their memories call forth one’s own. The stories are unpredictable, surprising and always mediated by others—the others in the workshop and the others in the stories, who are also there-in-the-telling.

The practices of collective biography thus build a communal space through “the willingness to listen and be open to others...[and through] respect for differences, however they may be expressed... [It is a] sense of empathy, a closeness that creates bonds, that enables each group member to recognize the other and to recognize him/herself in the other” (Ceppi and Zini, 1998: n.p.).

When the other is different, and has made different, initially unimaginable choices, the processes of collective biography enable each participant to know--through attending to affect, to emotion, to voice, to images, to the specificity of the other--the rich and surprising multiplicity of their own and others’ being. It opens up a means of being *with*, of being “singulars singularly together” (Nancy, 2000: 33); it is a process that begins “from the ‘with’” (Nancy, 2000: 34), and while recovering the singular specificity of the one, it understands the one to be “*nothing other than with-one-another*” (Nancy, 2000: 34).

References

- Ceppi, G. and Zini, M. (eds) (1998) *Children, Spaces, Relations. Metaproject for an environment for young children*, Milan: Domus Academy Research Center.
- Davies, B. and Gannon, S. (2006) *Doing Collective Biography*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London: Athlone Press.
- Halsey, M. (2007) Molar ecology: what can the (full) body of an eco-tourist do?, in A. Hickey-Moody and P. Malins (eds.) *Deleuzian Encounters. Studies in Contemporary Social Issues*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan. 135-150.
- Butler, J. (1997) *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Davies, B. Browne, J. Gannon, S. Hopkins, L., McCann, H., and Wihlborg, M. (2006) Constituting 'the subject' in poststructuralist discourse, *Feminism and Psychology*, 16(1), 87-103. Reprinted in Davies, B. and Gannon, S. (2006) *Doing Collective Biography*. Maidenhead: Open University Press. 167-181.

Nancy, J. L. (2000) *Of being singular plural*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Rinaldi, C. (2006) *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia. Listening, Researching and Learning*, London: Routledge.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE:

It is anticipated that students will begin reading for the course during December 2009. They will each have a copy of the book *Doing Collective Biography* edited by Davies and Gannon, which they should have read prior to the course, along with readings in the required reading list, which will be available

in the library. Lectures and workshops will take place on the days of Friday 22nd January to Monday 25th January. Each day will begin with a 2 hour lecture and open discussion, from 9-11, on the method of collective biography. This will be followed by two 2 hour workshops from 11-1 and 2-4. During these workshops the students will work in 4 small groups of five participants (total of 20 students) and generate their own memory stories relevant to the topic chosen by the group for study. They will then learn how to work with those stories as data.

On Tuesday 26th and Wed 27th students and staff will have access to individual or small group consultations.

REQUIRED READINGS:

Davies, B. & Gannon, S (eds.) (2006). *Doing collective biography: Investigating the production of subjectivity*. Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press/ McGraw Hill.

Gannon, S. & Davies, B. (2007): Postmodern, Poststructural, and Critical Theories. In: Hesse-Biber, S. N. (Ed.): *Handbook of Feminist Research. Theory and Praxis*. Thousand Oaks, Sage (pp. 71-106).

Davies, B. & Gannon, S. (2009). Feminism/Post-structuralism. In: C. Lewin & B. Somekh (Eds.). *Research Methods in the Social Sciences* Second Edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage (forthcoming).

Davies, B. (2009). Listening: a radical pedagogy. Keynote address, Challenging education: Feminist and anti-oppressive strategies in teaching and learning. The first Nordic Conference on feminist pedagogies. Uppsala, 14-16 June 2009.

FURTHER READINGS BY BRONWYN DAVIES

Davies, B. (2008). Jak znovu-promyslet "chování" v pojmech umíst'ování a etiky odpovědnosti. *Biograf*, 47, 3-17.

Davies, B. (ed) (2007) *Judith Butler in conversation: Analysing the texts and talk of everyday life*. New York: Routledge.

Davies, B. (2003). *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales: Preschool Children and Gender*. Second Edition. Cresskill, Hampton Press Inc.

Davies, B. (2000). *(In)scribing Body/landscape Relations*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press

Davies, B. (2000). *A Body of Writing 1990-1999*. Walnut Creek CA: AltaMira Press.

Davies, B. (1993). *Shards of Glass. Children Reading and Writing Beyond Gendered Identities*. Sydney (pp. 1-205). Sydney: Allen and Unwin. 2nd Edition (2003) NJ Cresskill: Hampton Press.

Davies, B., Harré, R. (1990). Positioning: the discursive production of selves. *Journal of the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 20, 1, 43-65.

NAME: BRONWYN DAVIES

AFFILIATION: MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY

CONTACT INFORMATION:

daviesb@unimelb.edu.au

mobile phone: 0407 212 943

Postal address in Australia:

2011 Springfield Ave, Potts Point NSW 2011, Australia