

## Becoming Skilful: A Conversation ‘Within’ an Apprenticeship in Narrative Enquiry

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### Introduction

In 2003 we embarked on an apprenticeship in narrative enquiry that became a 10-year journey and a life-long friendship. Frances became the apprentice and David the ‘apprenticer’, a term invented by our North American colleague Peggy Sax (personal communication, July 2003). Elsewhere, we have documented aspects of our apprenticeship to show how it worked and what we each learned along the way (Hancock & Epston, 2008, 2024). Here we re-present a conversation we had in July 2003 that weaves our lived experiences of apprenticeship with our evolving understandings of this practice-based pedagogy.

We say ‘our’ apprenticeship because we learned from one another. The apprentice immersed herself in the practice of the apprenticer, who at the same time immersed himself in the practice of the apprentice. Learning by doing assignments together, with diverse organisations/communities in different locations, the “process of enskilment” (Ingold, 2000, p. 416.) became our teacher. These assignments were drawn from Frances’ consultancy practice with individuals, groups, organisations, and communities.

The following conversation draws on and develops insights from our prior apprenticeships and reading as well as our own evolving pedagogical relationship. We explore themes that touch upon various possibilities and problematics of apprenticeship learning: apprenticeship as a venerable pedagogy, making a skilful forecast, taking the bait, finding out for yourself, the discipline of learning a craft, knowing from the inside-out, one’s disposition, interrogating asymmetries of

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power, the authority of skilfulness, puzzling over things, the conundrum of finding apprentices, caring for words, and learning as much as you can. Our explorations help to show the relevance, utility and joy of apprenticeship for teaching and learning narrative enquiry. Apprenticeship learning in narrative practice continues to find novel expressions (Epston, Ingamells, & Carlson, n.d.), opening new pathways for this venerable, practice-based pedagogy.

## Background

Our apprenticeship relied on email technology, although from time-to-time we met face-to-face to discuss work in progress. David had used email technology for several years to undertake supervision and consultation with colleagues overseas. Frances had harnessed email technology when co-authoring texts and doing consultancy assignments. Through our evolving narrative apprenticeship, we discovered that our email exchanges opened up a new world of learning, enabling us both to critically reflect “on” and “in practice” (Schon, 1983).

David was granted access to transcripts of interviews that I (Frances) had undertaken and, in some collaborative assignments, he acted as a co-researcher/conversationalist. He studied these texts and interpolated his own enquiries into my existing questions, explaining his thinking as he went. David also suggested other amendments and offered advice aligned with narrative practices and ethics.

In July 2003, not long after we began working together, we had a conversation ‘within’ our evolving apprenticeship via a series of email exchanges over several days. I later produced a highly abbreviated transcript of this conversation that David used for teaching purposes.

In 2024, we decided to prepare a more detailed record of our 2003 email conversation for publication. I reviewed all the extant data from this period—more than 80 pages of email transcripts—and quickly realised that the endeavor we had embarked upon was no easy feat. Upon closer inspection, I noticed we had returned to lines of enquiry again and again, across multiple email exchanges, each of us interpolating questions and comments, while along the way gaining and losing threads. Guided by a method of “composed/constructed conversations” (Hancock, 2018), I highlighted themes within the extant data, then stitched together conversational threads to create a coherent account. We both

took the liberty to do some light editing, but very little because we wanted our 2003 thoughts to remain as they were, in respect of who were then.

### **The conversation**

Here we adopt the term ‘apprenticer’ to describe David’s role. In traditional craft apprenticeship, ‘apprentice’—from the Latin *apprendere*, to lay hold of, or grasp— is the term for a learner. The term ‘master’ describes the role of an artisan/seasoned/senior practitioner. We rejected the term master because of its historical associations with slavery. We considered other terms such as ‘an expert’, ‘an adept’ or ‘a virtuoso’, but they, too, promoted the ‘almighty’ knowledge and power of the senior practitioner. The term *apprenticer*, in our minds, embodies a more approachable pedagogy for narrative practice. Below, David also offers the notion of ‘skilfulness’ as an alternative to master/mastery. We begin by exploring the notion of apprenticeship, or apprenticing oneself to another, as a venerable pedagogy.

### **Apprenticeship as a venerable pedagogy**

“Apprenticeship/apprenticing I suspect is one of the oldest and most venerable pedagogies and perhaps, for that reason alone, is out of fashion,” David observed.

“What an interesting challenge, then, for us to explore, through our conversations, the possibilities for revitalizing and applying this ‘old’ and ‘out of fashion’ pedagogy to support a developing narrative practice,” I replied.

“Yes! Very interesting indeed, as in some ways apprenticeship goes against a certain kind of grain, one that I know I don’t follow. For example, if everyone has ‘knowledge’ then shouldn’t advanced training just facilitate the expression of that knowledge? My short answer is this: Anyone has knowledge about the living of their life, but narrative therapy is a distinct practice, recently invented and codified (for example, in texts) and as such has to be learned the hard way like any other discipline. For example, I have a kind of expertise about the living of my life but if my computer breaks down, I immediately call an IT service for advice.”

“David, it occurs to me that in our current times it may seem almost novel to give oneself over to the rigors of an apprenticeship like the one we have embarked upon and for a work greater than oneself in the sense of being called to a vocation.”

“What a wonderful point, Frances. I strongly suspect in the last 20 years or so of professional history, it is harder and harder for trainers like me to seek or find learners willing to ‘show’ their practice to a more senior and skilful person/trainer. In fact, it has become almost impossible except in situations of extreme power, for example teacher/student–marker/candidate. That is one of the reasons I like teaching undergraduate programmes because people must do certain things, whether they like it or not, and perhaps don’t feel quite the same need to ‘hide’ their practice from overview/sight. But a vocation! Whatever happened to the sense of vocation? I like your definition of vocation—giving yourself over to a work greater than yourself.”

### **Making a skilful forecast**

We would return later to the conundrum of how to find learners willing to show their practice, but for now we turned our minds to the challenge facing an apprenticer when a candidate arrives on their doorstep. Here I (Frances) dug into my own experiences.

“The role of the apprenticer requires a deep knowing about their craft and art, as well as an appreciation of pedagogy. They must be able to assess where the apprentice is in their learning. They must also be able to work with the apprentice to determine what they need/want to learn, while being mindful of the possibilities and turmoils that come with being human—in other words, what an individual/apprentice can/will tolerate. There is some trick in this divination but when you strike it right, it’s as if the apprenticer/apprentice relationship is sealed.”

“I like that—divination—a skilful forecast,” David replied. Seeking further clarification, he asked, “Frances, what exactly do you mean by the term ‘sealed’? I can guess but I suspect my guess would be very poor.”

“The word ‘sealed’ just came to me. My thinking here is that the apprenticing relationship is ‘made secure’, ‘guaranteed’ or ‘confirmed’ in the apprenticer’s divination or forecast of what the apprentice requires and is prepared for. In that prediction, the apprentice realises they have been ‘seen’ by the apprenticer. The apprentice thinks: I can get what I need from this person, even though I am not exactly sure what that is. The apprenticer’s skilful forecast encourages the apprentice to put their trust in the relationship. If the match feels right and is imbued with exciting possibilities, the apprentice is likely to persist until the

mystery of learning what they need to know is revealed. At some point both parties consent to the relationship in this way. I wonder if the point of divination is that point because not only does the apprentice know or intuit that the apprenticer can help but also the apprenticer finds they can/are able to do so. Importantly, both parties must be willing to engage. David, your willingness to assist me also sealed the apprenticeship.”

### **Taking the bait**

David then recounted a story that reminded me of the first time we met. I attended a four-day introductory workshop on narrative therapy practice that he facilitated in 2002.

“Frances, a friend of mine talked about one of his apprenticers, whom he described as ‘being like a fisherman’. ‘It’s like you are the fish and his knowing is the bait,’ my friend said. He talked about it ‘being like adrenaline’—how a word from an apprenticer is enough to analyse or puzzle over for days and weeks, building up layer upon layer, until you go beyond your own boundaries and perhaps even those of your apprenticer.”

“Yes!’ I replied. “Your knowing was like bait. Suddenly, I was hooked! I knew within the first hour of the workshop that you had so much to teach me, although what it was, I couldn’t say exactly. But, perhaps, the greater appeal was your own passion for the work, as if you were still learning and wanting to learn – that is critical, because it levels the playing field in a way that deals with power. It also makes you more accessible or appealing as a teacher, to me at least, because it creates space for inventiveness, and how exciting to be part of that, if only by sitting on and watching from the sidelines.”

### **Finding out for yourself**

David’s story of taking the bait stayed with me, as a helpful provocation. When I next returned to our email conversation, I tried to illuminate its relevance in the context of my experiences of apprenticeship learning.

“David, I can relate to the sense of excitement and adrenaline your friend spoke of. I might call it focused attention and drive, or ‘passion’ by another name. I find myself thinking about your ideas and use of language, and the learning process itself, as well as your generosity and your accessibility, including these notes and other resources and opportunities you send my way. I feel a sense of freedom and

determination—a seriousness of purpose fueled by a thirst for learning. I’m lapping it all up.”

“At the same time, I find myself navigating my way through a haze. I catch glimpses but lose sight again. I taste rather than savour. It’s like being on the edge of something great that you haven’t quite grasped yet and don’t quite know, but it is within your reach and holds the promise of the very thing you are searching for, even if that isn’t entirely or consciously known. Whole new possibilities for a hopeful and respectful way of working are inching their way above the horizon ahead. I find this intriguing because I had thought that I was already respectful and hopeful in my work!”

I reached for the idea of tacit knowledges (Polanyi, 1958, 1998) which, in an earlier conversation, David had described as “‘unarticulated knowledges’, or a kind of ‘know-how’, born of experience, but often hard to put into words” (Hancock & Epston, 2024).

“Perhaps, I am finding a language for the tacit knowledges I had stored up but didn’t know existed, and all the while worked on that basis to some degree or other. And, along with finding a language, comes fresh authority and freedom to explore newfound possibilities. I think I am beginning to express myself differently by using new words or concepts. I wouldn’t say I am hearing my own voice yet. Perhaps I am hearing your voice through me, but I am convinced that in due course I will find my own voice.”

Here David introduced the notion of “self-discovery” (Ingold, 2000) as a critical method of learning a skill or practice.

“Frances, I suspect you are distinguishing ‘instruction’ from ‘self-discovery’ or ‘finding out for yourself’,” he replied. “And I am pretty sure that is the methodology of certain pedagogies seeking to ‘pass on’ the practice of particular arts and crafts. The apprenticer obscures your view with ‘fog’, with both parties knowing that the apprentice will, in their own good time, clear it away. A skilled apprenticer is very purposeful here.”

“Only an experienced guide can know this,” I suggested, “which is why the apprenticer is the apprenticer, and the apprentice goes searching for that person—the one who has something to teach them.”

Later I wondered if apprenticeship is the work of finding your way through the fog or the haze.

“David, it’s like the words are waiting to be found, but for that to happen I must dive deep and bring them to the surface, as if at some point my language and knowledges became submerged.”

“Ineffable—beyond words or cannot be rendered into words,” he replied. “It has always astounded me in anti-anorexia work, for example, how those who cannot speak, once provided with the means to do so, have so much to say. Which makes me think that tacit knowing may just mean that the words to describe your knowing are not available to you yet.”

“That is a helpful definition. At any rate, it is all too easy to be complacent with language.”

“Agreed.”

### **The discipline of learning a craft**

Our conversation turned momentarily to the idea of discipline as a critical factor in learning a practice. Earlier David noted, in passing, that since Foucault (1980) ‘discipline’ had become a problematic notion because it carries taken for granted meanings.

“I think the idea of discipline is important however, although some may resist it,” I suggested. “Here I’m thinking of assiduously applying oneself to one’s craft at whatever stage of engagement one is, be it as an apprentice or an apprenticer. To do a craft well, you must keep practicing it, honing it, mining and molding it. As you become more accomplished, you learn to honour and cherish the craft in your care. You develop and bring to voice or expression its mysteries, so they can become accessible to the apprentice. You might say that someone who becomes an apprenticer is a keeper of the lore and the practices of their craft.”

“And what do you make of other forms of apprenticeship that require people to endure some form of hardship or suffering?” David asked.

“There are, of course, punishing forms of apprenticeship,” I replied. “But I am persuaded by the advice of a Catholic nun, 40 years my senior, with whom I lived in my early twenties. She observed that there is enough difficulty in such a journey without resorting to harsh discipline. Her way of apprenticing was that of humour and laughter, of telling stories, and of gentle chiding.”

### Knowing from the inside-out

David expressed a concern that perhaps he was not explicit enough in his pedagogical practice. In his workshop and within our apprenticeship, I had witnessed David teaching by example, in other words, showing his craft. We both appreciated that some learners might struggle to grasp the subtleties of such a pedagogy.

“David, perhaps showing and explicit rendering are important at different times in different contexts. For teaching courses or workshops, where time is curtailed, both are useful, I think. For apprenticing, showing is important. If the apprentice can work out the explicit rendering for themselves, by grappling with that which is being shown, then they will know the thing or the practice from the inside out.”

“For me, that knowing comes first,” David replied. “A knowing from the outside-in is pretty much useless in the context of an art and a craft. Perhaps even mischievous. For example, I can imagine someone asking the same questions about anorexia that I do, with contempt rather than compassion, and the line between the two, I would imagine, is pretty fine.”

“David, would you agree that knowing from the inside-out is easier to hold onto and recreate?”

“That is the critical thing—can the learner recreate their learning? That, for me, is the real test of apprenticeship.”

### One’s disposition

David’s somewhat troubling insight, that the same questions could be asked with contempt or compassion, led to a new line of enquiry.

“Would you also agree that one’s disposition makes all the difference, in other words, the way a person is and the manner in which they convey an enquiry?” I asked.

“Frances, I like that word ‘disposition’!” David replied. “I received an email yesterday from someone with whom I have been consulting. She and her partner had been attending mental health services for 10 years, right up until the present, over concerns they have for their adult daughter. She said her partner (who she described as a very private man and very distrustful) trusted me after only knowing me for 15 minutes. I wonder what I did. How did I distinguish myself



from all the others whom they have met along their way? And that is not to say he said much in the days and weeks to follow, but I always knew he was along for the ride—his sparse comments indicated that to me. This is why I am interested more generally in the practices of hospitality. After all, I have always considered my clients to be my special guests and I am their host, and accordingly, it is incumbent on me, like any concerned host, to ensure they have a ‘good’, perhaps even ‘interesting time’. That is what I try to guarantee, an interesting time.”

“I think that is what you also offer your apprentices and workshop participants—an interesting time, and I suspect your hospitality practices are vital in conveying that sense.”

### **Interrogating asymmetries of power**

Inevitably, the conversation found its way to the asymmetries of power operating in a pedagogical relationship. I had been considering a conundrum that David had put to me about how one navigates the asymmetrical power relations between the apprenticer and apprentice. Here I offered a tentative observation.

“Although the apprentice consents to an obviously asymmetrical relationship, I think the asymmetry is affected to some degree by a shared commitment to learning. After all, learning is a humble/humbling enterprise, so perhaps humility serves to countervail the asymmetry in the relationship.”

“This is a very striking point,” David replied. “The apprenticer’s power is humbled by the search in which both apprenticer and apprentice are engaged. The apprenticer curtails the exercise of their power by showing themselves to be their own student and their apprentice’s colleague.”

“David, that’s beautifully put. Another word might be ‘tempered’. Perhaps the apprenticer’s power is tempered by the search in which both the apprentice and apprenticer are engaged. The word tempered adds the idea that the apprenticer is exercising some control over the power in their hands. As if restraining its use to enable a relationship to develop amidst the asymmetry.”

“Yes, yes, that’s the word I was looking for, but couldn’t find. Tempered. Very apt indeed.”

This discussion reminded me of another email exchange in which David said he was initially puzzled by his own discomfort in becoming an apprentice. When I asked him to help me understand why he felt this way, he offered a tentative explanation.

“I suppose it has something to do with the relationship between the apprentice and their apprentice, and the implications of that,” David said. “Perhaps my discomfort comes from the obvious asymmetry of the apprentice and their apprentice. For example, I would be very reluctant to describe to anyone else that you were my apprentice or that you are apprenticing with me.

“Why would you feel reluctant, when I am so delighted to tell people (I mean, those who have ‘ears to hear’) and only ever receive delight in response? It seems important in my mind to state the case, as the case is; not to pretend otherwise or camouflage its substance. Am I missing something?”

“No, I don’t think so,” David replied. “But you are not in the apprentice’s position and cannot be accused of hubris. Perhaps the tension here is for the skilled person to make their skills available, so the less skilled person can assume them and in doing so diminish the asymmetry of the relationship. That is what ‘drives’ the relationship to where it has to go.”

“David, how might one address asymmetries of power in the apprentice-apprentice relationship in favour of respect?”

“Mutual respect provides a kind of envelope for the relationship in which the more skilled person can challenge the less skilled person, and vice versa,” he replied.

“Do you think certain relational qualities or political commitments can help to counterpoint possible impacts of the obvious asymmetry?” I persisted. “Humility came to mind above.”

“I don’t know about humility,” David replied. “I don’t consider myself to be humble, or perhaps I don’t know what you mean by humility in this case.”

“Whatever it is, I think a characteristic of humility is not to claim it.”

Here David introduced his preferred approach to countervailing asymmetries of power that may have unproductive or harmful consequences.

“I think I would prefer, perhaps, some notion of service to some cause, that the developing skills/craft are in aid of,” he suggested. “When I think about it now, those people who, in the past, appealed to me as apprentices were all serving some cause. I wanted to ‘see’ this commitment from the outset. Those who I intuited were serving their own self-interest or were self-aggrandizing were of no interest to me. But I can be blinded by anyone’s enthusiasm as well as the next person.”

“It would only be a momentary blindness, I suspect, like when you’re driving at night and are momentarily blinded by the headlights of an approaching car. People’s motivations readily display themselves within a short period of time, don’t you think? Self-interested motivations are quite hard to contain as are those dedicated to a just cause.”

“Quite right!”

We also considered the idea of ‘apprenticeship as an exchange’, as another way to countervail unintended effects of asymmetries of power. Specifically, a pedagogical exchange in which both participants—the apprentice and the apprentice—have something to give and to gain from the relationship.

“Notwithstanding the aged goodness and benevolence of the apprentice, perhaps a good apprenticeship depends on a mutually forged, two-way dynamic that tempers power relations,” I suggested, “so there is some kind of creative or productive tension.”

“I think I said something to that effect in the above,” David replied, “but not as succinctly.”

“I just find it more interesting when both parties are learning,” I continued. “Otherwise, the apprentice will merely be going through their paces, rather than marveling at, and garnering for their own trade, whatever slips of silk are to be found there.”

“Frances, where did you get that expression from, ‘slips of silk’?”

“It came to me as I was writing, I guess. I don’t remember reading it anywhere. I think what I am trying to convey, David, is that you sit beside me, metaphorically speaking, when you acknowledge your own learning, and always you do so with

delight. I see your practice of ‘sitting beside another’ as an expression of humility. And, perhaps, ‘the joy of learning’ also serves as a counterpoint to the asymmetry in the apprenticer-apprentice relationship, along with mutuality, humility, service to some cause and a pedagogical exchange.”

I had only been working with David for a few months, but already I had witnessed these and other relational qualities as hallmarks of his practice. In my mind, these qualities were also an embodiment of his authority as an apprenticer.

### **The authority of skilfulness**

David now introduced the idea of skilfulness as a way to explore how authority can work productively to nourish the relationship.

“Does the apprenticer also act against their own authority by showing how their mastery or skilfulness comes about and, in doing so, demystifies it?” he asked. “Otherwise, their skilfulness can appear to be magic. But then again, magicians have to learn their tricks, although that is not to say that some aren’t more adept at the very same ‘trick’ than others.”

“David, even though the apprenticer acts against their own authority by showing how their skilfulness comes about, in the end their sacrifice can only increase their own adeptness as a practitioner and their authority as a seasoned guide. When the apprenticer assumes the position as co-learner, they open-up possibilities to forge new practices and to articulate the understandings that substantiate those innovations.”

“I am sure you are right,” David replied, his agreement encouraging me to carry on.

“They consent to pass on the very thing upon which their authority and status as an apprenticer depends: their skilfulness, as you put it. Doesn’t this require some measure of humility or generosity? How many skilled people are so sure of themselves that they are willing to make such a sacrifice? Doing so must spring from some sense of vocation or commitment to the work, otherwise it makes no sense in today’s commercialised world to pass on the mysteries of your trade.”

“Frances, you might see it as humility or generosity, but I would still prefer to think of it as acting in the service of, or duty to, the calling itself. In any case, the

approach you're describing doesn't quite jibe with notions of intellectual property."

"It surely doesn't!" I replied.

"I also wanted to ask," David continued, "can you have any sort of authority without some means of expressing or enacting that to which you are laying a claim? And how often does a practitioner find that they know more than they are able to express in words; although, on the other hand, they might be adept at showing what they know."

I was curious but uncertain about the direction of David's question, so I asked him to clarify its meaning so that we could get to the nub of his interest in authority.

"Frances, I suppose I am again thinking of skilfulness and the authority within a vocation that comes from that. I suspect skilful practitioners suffer prejudice in that the most common means to express that authority (such as texts/journal articles) do not necessarily indicate skilfulness in a practice. You can write about a vocation without ever having had much practice of doing it or never having done it. That is not to deny that writing up or describing skilful practice isn't worthy in and of itself. But if this is the main means of expressing authority in a vocation, then the very skilfulness that is gained via apprenticeship gets transferred to text, which can often strip the craft and art of its nuance and ingenuity. Perhaps it even de-skills it, in say attempts to manualize and franchise a practice."

In responding to David's concern, I returned to my own lived experiences, hoping they might instruct me.

"I have worked alongside many adept community colleagues who know their craft from the inside-out but very few write, present or publish on their practice—who has time for that? Academics may be able to research and write about a practice without being active in the field, but I also think their authority derives from the relevance and usefulness of their research and writing."

Later, David introduced the idea of prudence or practical wisdom as a vital characteristic of an apprenticer and measure of their authority.

"Can we consider for a moment what entitles an apprenticer to act in such a capacity?" he asked.

“I think your idea of skilfulness entitles an apprenticer to act in such a capacity. It seems like a useful umbrella term and conveys a sense of being reliably seasoned or wise.”

“Frances, this takes me back to a discussion I had with a colleague who reminded me of the Aristotelian concept of phronesis, which is often translated as prudence or practical wisdom. Phronesis not only demonstrates various forms of knowledges such as scientific, analytical, tacit/know-how, technical and so on, but also exercises the seasoned judgement or decision making of a wise person.”

“Prudence/practical wisdom sounds like an essential requirement for an apprenticer and, by-the-by, we all need to practice more of it!”

### **Puzzling over things**

As our third day of email exchanges came to an end, David assessed our progress.

“I think we are really getting somewhere here, don’t you,” he wrote, his ever-reliable enthusiasm arriving with his message.

“Yes, I’m finding this subject fascinating; there’s quite a bit to it, and as much as we have examined, there’s still more to explore.”

“Perhaps the longer you puzzle over something, the better it is,” David suggested.

“So long as the apprentice doesn’t become disheartened through a sustained period of puzzling—be it over their developing skilfulness or their current limitations,” I cautioned.

My comment struck a chord with David and, again, terminology spurred his thinking.

“Frances, you used the term ‘disheartened’ to indicate that which could endanger an apprenticeship. I have been so rarely disheartened in this work that I don’t think I have given it as much thought in relation to apprentices, as I might have. By that I mean as something an apprentice must ‘look out for’ and, if they become despondent, how they then refresh their interest. Here I am thinking about ‘the excitements’ of this practice and how might an apprenticer excite an apprentice. This conversation has really made me think about refreshing one’s imagination and perhaps the need to provide apprentices with the very means to do that as it may well not come naturally. I find so few practitioners who seem to carry around

with them an active or current interest that they are deliberating on. Perhaps I need to provide ‘tricks of the trade’. I will have to give that more thought.”

In another email exchange, we touched upon another source of ongoing puzzlement: how to apply narrative ideas and practices invented in the therapeutic realms of mental health, psychiatry, psychology, and social work to the fields in which I worked—organisational and community development.

“How do we creatively apply ingenuity to a realm that is different from the one in which it was developed?” I asked David.

“I suppose it depends on what the skill or practice is, as some may very well be bound up with their immediate context,” he replied. “But Arthur Koestler (1964) pointed out that creativity often comes about by bringing something from one context across the borders of another and, doing so, is considered to be an invention. But then again those who, say, attend daylong workshops expecting to take away skills for their ‘toolboxes’ are often disappointed.”

David’s last comment left me puzzling over how he approaches the workshops he facilitates to diverse audiences at home and overseas. Could a segue in that direction help us to puzzle over how to tackle broader concerns?

“However unnerving it is, I try not to be too specific,” he said. “I prepare by playing with ideas and allowing ideas to come to me. If I am very brave, I allow them to come to me right there and then, in the workshop, however that can lead to sleepless nights or fretful sleeps!”

“How do ideas come to you?” I asked, hoping for a magical answer.

“I often call it moping,” he said.

“Is it really moping, like brooding or languishing?” I replied, somewhat disappointed (she laughs!).

“I mean, expecting on a good day that ideas will come to me and on a bad day hoping they will come to me. When I feel vexed over how to introduce a training workshop, I return to these conversations. I also read the thesis of a former apprentice. I ‘find’ a way to proceed. If you play with ideas long enough and keep throwing them up in the air and, if luckily holding as many as you can spinning, sooner or later they ‘fall into place’ or ‘some place’.”

“David, I find if I prepare too much for a workshop, the spontaneity required for a good conversation gets sacrificed in the delivery of the presentation.”

“I agree,” he replied. “It makes it hard to do workshops with other people, as most others don’t have such comfort with spontaneity.”

“Perhaps, comfort with spontaneity is also vital for a lively apprenticeship and for applying ingenuity across different realms – being playful-in-relation-in-the-moment.”

### **The conundrum of finding apprentices**

“How can I find apprentices who are not only comfortable with spontaneity in the pedagogy but also seek to engage their own practices in such a manner?” David replied, posing a conundrum that would lead us into an intriguing segue.

“I suppose you must find people of a similar bent, who are willing to tolerate some discomfort and believe that trusting themselves to spontaneity and to your guidance will reap its own rewards. David, to tackle this conundrum another way, may I ask, why did you agree to apprentice me?”

“Who knows!”

“Think hard, my friend!”

“Well, here is an attempt. ‘During the workshop, Frances showed me that she not only relished these ideas but had the capacity to play with them and see where they would take her in her work. She showed me she had patience with herself, rather than so many who approach learning a practice as if they were acquiring a commodity. Also, she badgered me but in a way that caught my interest. In saying that, she must have also known there is such a thing as too much badgering. I must have been willing to risk that this apprentice would lead me to be a better apprenticer. And perhaps, too, she was unafraid of such a relationship, which she spelled out to me. Perhaps in her previous apprenticeships, she had grown comfortable with such arrangements.’”

David’s rich reply suggested criterion for finding apprentices, to which we now turned our attention.



### ***Relishing the ideas/practices***

“So, David, would you agree that ‘relishing the ideas’ is a requirement for an apprentice?”

“That is a good criterion,” David agreed. “Relishing ideas/practices, for example, I really want to learn how to do that ... in some ways like that.”

“Yes, and with enough passion and delight to sustain one’s interest through the discipline of learning. Enjoyment is vital, otherwise why bother.”

“Indeed.”

### ***Lending yourself to the ideas***

“David, you also observed a capacity to play with ideas—and for some purpose—to ‘see where they would take her in her work’. Perhaps she was willing to lend herself to the ideas to see how they might refashion her and her practice.”

“I like the notion of lending yourself to the ideas,” David replied. “This provides me with an enquiry for my apprentice. Frances, how will you lend yourself to see how the ideas might refashion you and your practice?”

“David, during your workshop, I recall you telling us a story about a group of scientists. When someone comes up with an idea they come together in a room and practice what the scholar Peter Elbow (1986) calls “a methodology of belief”. They take the idea as far as their good minds will allow them to, believing wholeheartedly in its merits, to give it its best shot. By contrast, Elbow’s (1986) “methodology of doubt” would emphasize all the reasons why that same idea would likely fail. So, to answer your question, I suppose in lending myself to narrative ideas, I endeavour to take up a methodology of belief, to see where that playful journey takes me. Perhaps, it is courageous or intellectual risk-taking by another name.”

“Great discussion!”

### ***Being patient with yourself***

Now I posed a question to my apprenticer that was nestled in the idea of patience.

“David, another criterion you highlighted was patience. ‘She had patience with herself’. Why is patience important? How is an apprenticeship served by patience?”

“Because learning of this kind never has an end. The more you come to know, the more you know there is to know. Looking back at when I was beginning this work, I marvel I had the nerve to even talk to people. So, I think perhaps there was some merit in my ignorance, otherwise I wouldn’t have been able to proceed.”

### ***An emphasis on learning***

David’s comments had also highlighted a focus on learning, rather than certification.

“So, David, would you agree that an apprentice is someone who cares more for the practice itself, than for a certificate of achievement? In the sense, as you proposed earlier, that the practice itself has a life and is a subject to be engaged with, played with, and reinvented, rather than treated like an object or bought like a commodity?”

“Absolutely. This is a critical distinction, from my point of view, and one that irritates me when I meet students whose sole motive seems to be their grade. I sometimes think, in this age of endless qualifications that have usurped the authority of one’s vocation or calling, that no one will train with me unless I can give them a qualification.”

“Oh, do you mean I won’t be getting a certificate!”

“You won’t! And, Frances, that is the risk you are taking.”

### ***The right amount of badgering***

“David, you also identified ‘badgering’ as a criterion, which I like very much. It’s like, ‘This one won’t leave me alone, so I have to attend.’”

“But in a way that caught my interest and that is an important distinction. Why? Because your badgering was an expression of interest.”

“I had to exercise restraint however, because my enthusiasm could have gotten away on me. I imagine too much badgering would quickly become a drag, especially if an apprenticer had other apprentices. Also, there’s the temptation

with email communication to fire off a quick reply. Impetuosity surely embraced the invention of email technology.”

“Indeed. But impetuosity allows for a different kind of ‘thinking with others’; it interanimates your thinking. When another colleague and I were writing together, I encouraged him to send me a text the moment he got stuck, because if you’re stuck too long, you lose your momentum. I was very interested to see what momentum could do to writing. He later told me he wouldn’t want to write any other way now.”

### ***Having something to offer***

David had signalled another criterion that we had canvased earlier: the apprentice has something to offer the apprenticer.

“The apprenticeship holds promise for both parties,” I suggested. “A desirable apprentice is one who helps to facilitate the very thing they come in search of; how else could the apprenticer learn their trade as an apprenticer.”

“Frances, that’s well put—the apprentice helps to facilitate the very thing they come in search of—but, in addition, I was thinking of the very art and craft of narrative practice, the vocation.”

### ***Prior apprenticing experiences***

Prior apprenticing experiences might also be a useful criterion because, as David had put it, they enable an apprentice to become comfortable with their arrangements.

“Some prior experience, one hopes, must help you to find your way into the groove of apprenticeship or, at least, teach you what to avoid,” I observed. “I hadn’t thought about apprenticeship as a social arrangement, which obviously it is. I suppose, too, following your workshop, my long letter to you was a statement of purpose and a rendering of my own histories of apprenticeship, which I hoped would invite your interest. That said, each apprenticeship is a unique arrangement, I think.”

“Frances, I hope all this indicates, as much as anything else, that the apprentice finds you [the apprenticer], rather than the other way around.”

“I believe, David, you just answered your original question. How do you find an apprentice? They find you.”

## Caring for words

There were so many lines of enquiry still to explore and so much yet to contemplate. But a characteristic of our discussions required our attention. So often David would alert me to terms that caught his attention, such as ‘divination’, ‘sealed’, ‘vocation’, ‘disposition’, ‘tempered’, ‘slips of silk’, and ‘disheartened’. Words matter to David.

“David, so few people I know (other than poets and writers) care about words the way you do,” I observed, drawing attention to his intrigue over my use of certain terms. “My dictionary is in a hundred pieces, and I can’t bring myself to abandon it and buy another.”

“Frances, the next time you visit, let me show you my Oxford English Dictionary, which most people would have thrown out. It is spineless. Falling apart. But it and I have had so many happy times together, we really can’t part. It will always be on my bookshelf.”

“David, perhaps uncovering tacit knowledges relies on a special caring for words.”

“Frances, I like that, ‘a special caring for words’. A felicitous expression for this work and something that few people have, apart from poets, writers, etc.. It is something I try to teach people. But I don’t know how well I do that, and perhaps I am not explicit enough. I have at times referred to this work as ‘the poetics of narrative practice’. Perhaps I should pick that up again.”

“Yes, do that! Whatever it might mean, it sounds intriguing.”

“If nothing else, it invites a learner to look somewhere other than where, very likely, they had been looking,” he replied.

“David, I am curious, can you say more?”

“Frances, can I encourage you not to ask questions like this: “Can you say more?”, even if they are very easy ones. Why? They seem to place too much of a burden on the Other for your curiosity. To assist me to understand and be articulate with your curiosity, your curiosity needs to have what I might refer to as more ‘say’. Let me provide you with an example. ‘David, when you said, *it invites a learner to look somewhere other than where they very likely have been looking*, do you mean ... (x) or am I right in thinking you mean by that, something like ... (x)? And (x) = some expression of where your curiosity is taking you.

“This is important for email conversations,” he stressed. “I just thought I would throw in a little tuition! Hope you don’t mind!”

“David, there’s no time like the present to learn. I am always grateful for your guidance.”

David’s use of the adjective ‘felicitous’ had also caught my attention.

“Now that’s a word I don’t hear very often, so it awakens my interest. David, you have also taught me the importance of verbs. I noticed again the other day how significant verbs are when seeking to invoke novelty. I mean in the sense of making the reader read, rather than gloss over the text. Your verbs are very expressive; they jump out, require attention. You use them in contexts I wouldn’t ordinarily expect to find them and, often, they’re playful—all of this is truly creative.”

“Funny you should observe this, as recently I, too, noticed when looking at the ‘texts’ of my enquiries that much of their meaning came from the use of a more poetic and dramatic verbal form. As a result, quite recently in a workshop, I put up a question from an attendee and then asked everyone to ‘make your verb speak from your heart. The results were phenomenal; everyone ‘saw’ and ‘felt’ the effects of doing that. Did I do that when you came to my introductory workshop? In most professional ways of speaking, verbs are banal and could easily ‘put you to sleep’.”

“David, that is what I’m learning from our email conversations and by reading transcripts. I also notice you don’t thrash a good word to death and maybe you don’t need to because you have such a rich vocabulary. You aren’t complacent with language, rather you constantly play with words—you look out for them, look them up like old friends, enjoy them, find a way to weave them into conversation.”

“Yes, I am a word-o-phile. You are quite right. In my editing, I cannot tolerate a word being reiterated too often. Why? Reiteration evacuates meaning.”

“I hope the way in which you are able to revive and reinvent language rubs off on me.”

“It already has,” he said.

## Learning as much as you can

Our conversation, which by now had traversed five days and created countless email exchanges, was nearing its end. David had an overseas conference to attend and had begun to turn his attention to preparing for it. Perhaps, his impending departure turned our attention to the matter of ‘moving on’ from an apprenticeship.

“Frances, although you welcome such an apprenticeship and tell me you have been very comfortable in such relationships in the past, when does the time come when you have learned as much as you are going to learn here?”

“I am not at all sure that you ever learn as much as you can learn in an apprenticeship. Sometimes you are called away by other commitments that require your attention, or you realise that you need to rest for a while to let all that learning sink in. In any event, I suppose, inevitably an apprentice must branch out to practice the craft they have so assiduously sought to develop and to test the limits of their own disciplined study.

“Moving on from an apprenticeship inevitably generates mixed emotions,” I continued, “but I have, for the most part, developed a deep affection for those who apprenticed me. They reside in my heart, in my memories, and in my imagination. I carry them in my spirit. When I find myself out on a limb or in deep water, I am warmed by their presence, strengthened by their skilfulness, and instructed by the wisdom of their teaching. I may call them for advice. I never completely let go or leave the relationship; rather, I find myself rekindling it again and again, albeit at a distance. Wisdom and seasoned practice, by its nature, invites continual engagement. Some people are with you for life.”

## Concluding thoughts

Although in 2003, when these email exchanges took place, neither of us had yet read the philosopher Tim Ingold’s work on enskillment, certain ideas presented here resonate with his thinking. Our conversation differentiates instruction from self-discovery (Ingold, 2000) or, as David put it, ‘finding out for yourself’. It explores the creative possibilities of ‘learning by doing’ narrative enquiry through an apprenticeship. It revitalises the notion of ‘a vocation’ or ‘a calling’ in the professions, encouraging narrative practitioners to centre the purpose of their work in being in service of others.

How does an apprenticer find a learner willing to show their practice? They find you! The opportunity of apprenticeship is sealed when the parties recognise help is at hand and both consent to its requirements. Both must be willing to show their practice in specific contexts, for that is where skilfulness develops. Power asymmetries and dynamics are acknowledged and mediated through a pedagogical exchange in which both the apprentice and the apprenticer have something to give to and to gain from the relationship. Like other relationships navigating asymmetries of power, this one also thrives on productive tension.

Developing skilfulness in certain crafts, including narrative enquiry, requires ongoing practice however, and one can never learn all there is to know, even an apprenticer. That said, inevitably, an apprentice will branch out to test their learning and limits beyond the apprenticeship. How else will the apprentice and the apprenticer know what has been learned? But our histories of learning together remain available to teach lessons only they can provide. For skilfulness—perhaps authority by another name—becomes embodied in those who become seasoned and wise.

The practice-based pedagogy we evolved in our apprenticeship laid the groundwork for ‘training through transcripts’, which David later developed and now offers with colleagues Kay Ingamells and Tom Stone Carlson (Epston et al., n.d). The ongoing appeal of apprenticeship learning is demonstrated in those who participate in this programme—the apprenticers and their apprentices. Their testimonies speak to its relevance, utility and joy.

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