Reflecting on Sailing;
And Reimagining, Reinventing, and Renewing Life as a Teacher Educator

By Jennifer Sumsion

Strong gusts, 25 knots or more, streak across the bay. The wind moans eerily through the rigging as we lower the boat into the water. The sails flail wildly. My stomach contracts with fear. We throw ourselves on board before the wind can rip the boat from our grasp. Another gust hits. We accelerate wildly away from the launching ramp, careening through the moored boats and into open water, barely in control. In unison, we heave as much of our body weight as we can over the side, straining to counter the force of the wind in the sails and to prevent the boat from capsizing. A momentary lull; a few precious seconds to adjust the sail settings; to make everything ship shape. When the next gust hits we are prepared. The boat leaps from the water, airborne on the crest of wave. Blinded by spray, we rely on "feel," adjusting our weight slightly, and easing the sails a fraction to keep the boat finely balanced. It hums with appreciation, and accelerates even more. Fear has long gone—replaced by exhilaration, harmony, a glimpse of perfection.

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It's 8:30 p.m. on the second Monday evening of the semester. I have been in my office since first light, determined to make inroads into the piles of work on my desk. But instead of diminishing, they have multiplied exponentially and now threaten to engulf

all available surface areas. I decide to leave the chaos as it is and hope that tomorrow, miraculously, it might seem more manageable.

Just as I am about to leave, the telephone rings. If I answer it now, it is one less task for later. The caller is a new member of our team of external practicum advisers (employed by the University on a casual basis to support preservice teachers during their teaching practice). She is concerned about an escalating interpersonal conflict between a preservice teacher and a cooperating teacher and is highly anxious about the visit to the school she has scheduled for the following day. We revisit some of the issues and strategies we discussed in the orientation program that I had recently held for new advisers and identify some possible courses of action. Thirty minutes later she seems a little more confident. We agree to talk again the following evening. I make a desultory but ultimately futile attempt to finish the paper work that I had tried to deal with during the telephone conversation. By now, it's almost 10:00 p.m.

Today has been a day like many days—a frenzied rush against the clock to deal with countless tasks. Frustration at seeing a "to do" list which grows longer faster than I can tame it. A dispiriting sense of compromise, as cutting corners becomes an ingrained, albeit unwelcome, survival strategy. And, finally, mind-numbing exhaustion.

My plans to stay home tomorrow to write have long since evaporated. If I put in at least another 12 hours in my office instead, I *might* be able to salvage a writing day later in the week. I had such high hopes of the writing that I would do during the recent semester break—but these were eroded by an onslaught of assignment marking and faculty meetings; on-campus sessions for distance education and post-graduate students; obligations arising from a recently awarded teaching development grant; and the vast number of telephone phone calls associated with coordinating a practicum, and supporting preservice teachers, cooperating teachers and university advisers though the personal and professional crises that a practicum so often precipitates. The debris of those various responsibilities surround me now.

I love the joys, the challenges, the opportunities, and the still significant freedoms of my work as a teacher educator but I know that this constant and all-consuming struggle to juggle so many fragments, commitments, and competing demands is not sustainable. I have seen the toll it takes on others' health and happiness, and felt its destructive breath on my own life, family, and friendships. Days like today reinforce the need to take stock. If I am to continue to do what I do, how can I find ways to do so more effortlessly? If I am to relinquish aspects of my role, what aspects should I, or more accurately, can I surrender? And how can I accomplish this without compromising my contribution as a teacher educator?

Sailing and Reimagining, Reinventing, Renewing

Life as a Teacher Educator

In these times of dwindling resources and escalating pressures to "publish or

perish," I find myself reflecting on how I might reimagine, reinvent, and renew my life as a teacher educator so that it resonates with the exhilaration, vigor, and confidence (that I have come to associate with sailing), rather than anxiety, exhaustion, and despondency. I am encouraged by Francis P. Hunkins' (1992) account of his passion for sailing and the "invitations for enlightenment" it offers (p. 450). I, too, am a passionate sailor and, like Hunkins, appreciate how the insights that I have gained through sailing can sensitize me to the challenges of my work world. Using personal images from my sailing experience to navigate my professional life as a teacher educator seems particularly apt for I have found both endeavors intellectually, emotionally, and physically all-encompassing. And both tread a precipitously fine line between the illusion of being in control and the struggle for survival.

When I was in my mid-twenties, an unexpected opportunity to learn to sail rapidly escalated into an unfathomable and desperate desire to sail well; not just well enough to enjoy pottering around, but well enough to feel a sense of real accomplishment, well enough to win races, and to compete in national and international regattas. But above all, well enough to experience the satisfaction that comes from doing something so well that it feels effortless and fluid, and in tune with a higher state of being. It is that sense of effortless fluidity that I have been able to find in sailing—sometimes, at least—that I long for in my life as a teacher educator.

Although I focus on the personal, an implicit belief underlying my writing is that collective personal change can become a powerful political force. By jointly engaging in efforts to reclaim and reconceptualize our roles, I believe that we might have some chance of subverting the managerialist ethos currently pervading universities. Institutional preoccupation with corporate goals of productivity, efficiency, and competition constrains our ability to construct a professional life that reflects a commitment to learning and scholarship. But if we can find ways to transcend these constraints and demonstrate our continuing commitment to the values underpinning learning and scholarship through our day-to-day professional lives, hopefully we will triumph over these managerialist forces. I find it difficult to envisage a more effective way of providing positive professional, and personal, role models for our students.

Encouragingly, calls for the reaffirmation of commitment to learning and scholarship suggest an emerging groundswell of resistance to managerialism. Circumventing its constraints and creating an economically viable but educationally sound alternative will not be easy. John P. Bean (1998) argues that, to succeed, we will need to overcome ingrained perceptions, responses, and practices. For this reason, he advocates a new language for considering faculty roles. To use his words, "If faculty members can talk of their work in new ways, they can work in new ways" (p. 496).

My experience of sailing has confirmed that *personal images*—"our inner representations of our experience" (Hunt, 1992, p. 37)—can be an equally effective medium for reconceptualizing our professional lives. This is because images, like

the one with which I begin my writing, are often multi-sensory and extend beyond verbal understanding into bodily and tacit knowing. This makes them a potentially "powerful source of energy and wisdom" (Hunt, 1992, p. 45). I hope to use this energy, or internal power, to revisit and reshape ("reimagine") the images underpinning my work as a teacher educator. Reimagining might help me to gain the wisdom—a dynamic "form of harmony and balance" (Skolimowski, 1992, p.134)—to negotiate, in a personally fulfilling and a morally responsible way, the multitude of the many competing demands I encounter. I seek, also, to "reinvent" my work practices (by reconsidering, adapting or transforming them) so that they are consistent with my insights. In this way, I hope to conserve and replenish my professional energy, for I concur with Seymour B. Sarason (1992, p. viii) that a "truly energetic embracing of an altered view of self and future" is integral to professional renewal (Hunt, 1992).

The many challenges of learning to sail have left me with an enduring legacy of personal images. Amongst the most vivid is the initial sense of insurmountability that confronted me whenever I contemplated the chasm between my novice standing as a sailor and my dreams. Twenty years later, the challenges that I face now as a teacher educator often seem similarly insurmountable. Responding effortlessly to the myriad of demands and responsibilities in my work life seems as remote a possibility as responding fluidly to continuous changes in the water and wind conditions once did. But I managed to overcome those challenges then. Can I do so now?

As I reflect on my personal images of sailing, and search for words to share them with others, I begin to realize that they can be encapsulated by four themes: commitment, attunement, playfulness, and community. These themes, and the images that underpin them, seem to illuminate possibilities for reimagining, reinventing and renewing my life as a teacher educator.

Commitment

I was certain that I wanted to sail well, and committed to doing whatever was needed to fulfill my dream. But absence of doubt did not mean absence of difficulties. Learning to sail did not come easily, or naturally. On the contrary, it involved a great deal of preparation, planning and persistence, underpinned by a growing appreciation of the interconnectedness of body and mind.

As a Sailor

My extensive preparation for sailing still evokes many images. I recall the fitness and visualization routines that helped me develop physical, mental, and emotional stamina, and confidence that I could draw on, and replenish reserves of strength when needed. I was careful to avoid self-limiting actions, thoughts, and emotions that might undermine these efforts. Endless reading about racing rules,

weather conditions, boat handling techniques, tactical strategies, training programs, and accounts of sailing triumphs and disasters alerted me to the challenges I was likely to encounter and ways I might respond to these. I remember, too, the attention that I lavished on my boat to ensure that all fittings functioned well, and to minimize the risk of unexpected equipment failure.

As well, as part of our preparation, my crew (sailing partner) and I spent a great deal of time identifying and practising the skills required to master all kinds of boat handling maneuvers in all types of conditions. We developed and perfected routines that freed our attention from the mechanical demands of sailing a boat competently around a regatta course. Routines allowed us to concentrate, instead, on attempting to predict and interpret and the patterns and vagaries of the wind and the water. Focusing on the "bigger picture" enabled us to recognize and seize opportunities as they arose.

In sailing, routines are implemented within the context of a larger race plan. Before each race we took time to try to identify possible paths of least resistance through the unpredictable elements of wind and water, for each part of the course to be sailed. But these plans were always made with humility, and the unspoken acceptance that the elements were likely to thwart human efforts to make sense of, or to impose order on, what is essentially beyond human understanding.

I have vivid images, too, of the mental and physical toughness needed when those careful plans and predictions went awry, good intentions proved insufficient, unexpected and limiting personal foibles emerged, conditions exceeded our capabilities, fear threatened to paralyze, arduous works to windward seemed never-ending, and goals were increasingly unattainable. The perseverance needed in the face of this unpredictability, uncertainty, and vulnerability was often physically and emotionally painful, but an integral part of sailing.

As a Teacher Educator

Juxtaposing images of self as sailor with self as teacher educator brings mixed feelings. Wry amusement, for a start, as I contrast images of my meticulous maintenance of my boat with the current state of my office, and its cluttered desk drawers, straining filing cabinets, bulging files, overflowing bookcases and in-trays, and randomly scattered piles of paper. To sail amongst such chaos would court disaster! Conversely, committing myself to maintaining an orderly workspace might help to avert the chaos that perpetually threatens to engulf me.

Optimism, too, that the preparation that served me so well as a sailor might also assist me as a teacher educator. As in sailing, increasingly, I have come to value and rely on routines in my work. I now begin each day by writing, even if only for half an hour before interruptions intrude. If I "accomplish" nothing else during the day, I find satisfaction in knowing that each day, I am managing to get a few more words on paper. That half hour, those few words, create a familiarity with my thoughts and writing that parallels the feelings of "at oneness" with my boat. The very act of

writing, like the flow of wind across sails, seems to create energy and momentum that counteracts procrastination, and the guilt generated by escalating and yet-to-be fulfilled commitments.

Similarly, I feel excitement at the potential to extend the [race] planning that I did as a sailor to the daily challenge of negotiating my way through my responsibilities as a teacher educator. Perhaps I can learn to read the patterns and rhythm of these responsibilities, to predict eventualities that might unfold, and to consider, in advance, how I might respond. Yet, as in sailing, complexity precludes certainty. Accepting with equanimity that even the most carefully laid plans may come to naught is essential as a sailor—and, I have learned, equally so as a teacher educator. Sailing has brought, too, the satisfaction of knowing that I have developed the resilience to persevere, despite the gut-wrenching frustration of inevitable setbacks and disappointments: the good intentions that are misinterpreted; the students in whom one has misplaced one's trust; the grant proposals rejected. And, as a counterbalance, the ability to savor successes: the notes of appreciation from students; the letters advising acceptance of manuscripts by journal editors; the invitations to collaborate with others—that make my work ultimately so worthwhile.

But there is also a sense of loss. My understanding that body and mind and emotions are inextricably linked is now past knowledge, and no longer embodied in my everyday experience. My work life seems so encompassing, so skewed towards the cerebral, that I sense a deadening, almost a shriveling, of my body, heart, and soul. Reflecting on sailing has reinforced that it is time to halt this fragmentation and diminishment; time to rediscover and nurture my physical, emotional, and spiritual selves; and time to celebrate interconnectedness and wholeness.

Attunement

Articulating these ideals is one matter; honoring them is another, especially when work demands are so often overwhelming. Those who write about time management in the academy (e.g., Boice, 1995; Wildavsky, 1989) tend to see time as a commodity. They refer to scarcity, efficiency, and productivity, and propose "basic exercises of...economies at working" (Boice, 1995, p. 415). But what is the point of attempting to "save" time, if the time "saved" is absorbed by intensified obligations and further entrapment in the "ever-expanding web of production" (Anijar & Mascali 1998, p. 6)? Again, I turn to sailing in an attempt to make sense of this conundrum.

As a Sailor

The object of a sailing race is to complete the regatta course in the minimum time possible. Yet, paradoxically, focusing on the outcome rather than the moment-to-moment experience is invariably detrimental. In sailing, time is "invested" in preparation, not to "save" time, but to gain entry to another dimension. A dimension

in which time is no longer a commodity, measured in minutes or hours, tasks done or not yet completed—but a state of being, characterized by intensity of focus and experience, clarity of insight, appreciation of interconnections, freedom from constraints and preoccupations, promises of escape, and awareness of new possibilities. A dimension in which we can savor each moment and its "uniqueness and creative possibility" (Anijar & Mascasli, p. 8). A dimension in which we become so involved, and our attention so complete, that we become as if "at one" with whatever we are doing.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) writes that the seemingly effortless energy generated by this at "one-ness" creates a "flow of optimal experience." Flow transports us to a "new reality" where, instead of directing energy to futile attempts to dominate our environment, we focus on "finding a way to function harmoniously within it" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 203). The flow I experience while sailing creates feelings of "at one-ness" with the boat and the environment that help me to be receptive to the smallest changes in the elements. Each change demands a response, a "changing of gears" or, as Hunkins (1992) more poetically writes, a new rhythm in the dance.

As a Teacher Educator

Flow seems so much easier to attain as a sailor, than as a teacher educator. Sometimes, though, I find flow in my teaching when, attuned to the class context and dynamics, I am able to read "cues" from students and, to borrow again from sailing, to know that I have "found the wind." I can find it, too, in my research, when I become so absorbed in my data that, almost miraculously, meaning begins to emerge from a previously amorphous mass. And I can find it in my writing, if I can put aside my "conscious controlling self" (Elbow, 1981, p. 16) and allow myself to become swept away. But when I am forced to juggle teaching and researching and writing with my many other roles, flow so often eludes me. And yet, as a sailor, "changing gears" and finding a new rhythm to suit changing conditions and circumstances is something that comes (relatively) easily.

Perhaps, as a teacher educator, I need to immerse myself more in the experiences and challenges of the moment, just as I do when I am sailing. Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p. 33) likens focusing attention on the moment to "a beam of energy"; in contrast to diffusing energy by scattering attention randomly. I think of the energy I squander by focusing on tasks still to be done (a tutorial to be taken, another fifty assignments to be graded, a paper to be written, one to be reviewed, a grant proposal to be submitted, practicum visits to be made, a committee meeting to attend), and resolve to live more fully in the present.

Living each moment, and becoming more receptive and responsive to the events of each moment, might enable me to respond with greater fluidity to the demands of my work. When my early morning writing is brought abruptly to a halt by a telephone call, a student consultation, a meeting, or a class, I long to be able

to effortlessly "change gears"; to sustain a "dance with nature" (as Hunkins, 1992, p. 449, refers to sailing) throughout the day. To move with ease from counseling distressed preservice teachers and anxious cooperating teachers, to dealing with urgent emails requiring immediate action, to revising manuscripts returned from editors, to making telephone calls, to putting the finishing touches to a grant proposal, to working with data that remain stubbornly impenetrable. And when the demands of the day begin to recede, in that precious hour or two, when solitude is sometimes possible, to again find a way to retreat into my writing.

Playfulness

For me, sailing has confirmed that living in the moment is one way of promoting the "flow" of "optimal experience." Another is to relinquish fear of losing control (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Playfulness is the best antidote I know to fear. Play requires me to suspend preoccupations, preconceptions, and judgments and to embrace instead opportunities for creativity, risk-taking, and exploration of new ideas and roles (Bean, 1998). Play invigorates, sustains, and emboldens me, and enables me to entertain new and divergent possibilities. Play offers challenges, but its focus is fun. Enjoyment of the experience is what counts, not outcomes. As an old saying goes, play is what we enjoy while we are doing it; work is what we enjoy after we have accomplished it. But need it be this way? Can play transform the seriousness of work; can work become play? Again, I turn to sailing to explore this possibility.

As a Sailor

Sailing invites many opportunities for play. Invitations to put aside real life and its obligations, and, instead, to chase the breeze, to catch the wave, to experiment with sail settings, and to engage others in tactical games. So many of my memories of sailing are memories of play. Even "serious" State- and National-level training sessions were full of play: sailing blindfolded, sailing backwards, sailing with exaggerated movements to understand their effect, sailing with the rudder (an essential steering device) removed. Play, in sailing, develops "feel," whets curiosity, builds confidence, and takes understanding and skills to a new plane.

As a Teacher Educator

These images of sailing suggest that there is scope to approach the challenges I encounter as a teacher educator similarly lightheartedly and playfully. But how to shrug aside preoccupation with seemingly ever-expanding obligations? How to ignore fears of losing control over an ever-lengthening list of tasks to do? How to avoid wilting under the weight of responsibilities?

Perhaps first, by savoring opportunities for playfulness and by engaging in the enjoyment of the experience; in the humor that surfaces in warm and trusting

relationships with students; in the fun of playing with data, and its many permutations and possibilities; in the exhilaration of writing that illuminates what it is that I know, or am trying to understand; in the thrill of developing new projects with colleagues, and seeing them gradually come to fruition. And second, by celebrating the synergy that emerges from the interconnecting threads that I am trying to weave through all aspects of my work. Each thread sustains the other, somehow lightening the load, and, by encouraging playfulness and spontaneity, alleviates the seriousness of my work world.

Community

Feeling part of a community in which others are grappling with similar challenges also lightens the load. As Laurel Richardson (1997) writes, "community entails commitment to others, involvement with others' projects and products, a willingness to suspend one's individual needs, for a while, for the betterment of the whole" (p. 85). Essentially, community involves "each of us giving, gracefully, to each other" (p. 85). Both as a sailor, and a teacher educator, my contributions to my community have been richly rewarded.

As a Sailor

In my sailing community, we each share a passion for sailing, and a common drive to become the best sailors possible. Striving for a goal always slightly beyond reach has brought a commitment to working together, for sailing in a fleet of other capable, occasionally inspired, sailors is the best way to improve one's own sailing. But being part of a sailing community means more than providing each other with the competition needed to hone our skills, more than having people on hand to ask for practical tips or assistance. It means there are others with whom to share trepidations and triumphs, exhaustion and exhilaration. And, to sail well, within the micro community amongst the crew on each boat, there must be even closer bonds of friendship, respect, and trust.

As a Teacher Educator

The sense of community that has sustained me as sailor is equally important as a teacher educator. Being part of a sailing community has given me insights into communities within the academy. For the most part, for example, I have learned not to be phased by the "competitive and self-promoting nature" (Cole, in press) of some aspects of life in the academy. Through sailing I have learned that competition is not necessarily detrimental, that it can provide the impetus to reach for what is currently just beyond grasp, and that the learning that arises brings its own intrinsic satisfaction. I have learned, also, to ignore the bravado of those whose game plan relies mostly on unsettling others with staged, but not always successful, attempts to impress. And through sailing, I have developed sufficient strategic awareness to

avoid unnecessary skirmishes, and the strategic skills to hold my own should, unintentionally, I happen to become embroiled. Above all, through sailing, I have learned that focusing on community and collaboration, rather than competition, is far more intrinsically rewarding.

And, as with sailing, a commitment to community and collaboration also brings ample extrinsic rewards. Publication in highly regarded refereed journals and the obtaining of externally funded grants, like the winning of regattas, so often reflects the support received from colleagues: as sounding boards for initial ideas, reviewers of drafts of manuscripts and proposals, and motivators when editors and funding bodies seem to respond only with rejections. The opportunity to sail with a strong club fleet provides the foundation for success in more prestigious regattas. Similarly, the opportunity to be part of and to contribute to a vibrant and scholarly community of teacher educators and critical friends seems to increase the likelihood of "success," as gauged by publications and grants.

As I progressed from sailing at club level, to state and national level, and eventually international level, the sailing community to which I belonged expanded. As a teacher educator, my community has also expanded to extend far beyond my institution and my relationships with my immediate colleagues and students. My first conference presentations aroused similar feelings of trepidation to my first "away" regattas. But the excitement and the learning potential of venturing beyond familiar confines became addictive as a sailor, and has become equally so as a teacher educator. For me, the rewards far outweigh the additional hours of work that membership of this wider community entails, and constantly rekindle the energy and commitment that life as a teacher educator requires.

Conclusion

In some ways, my motives for writing about my ongoing attempts to make my work as a teacher educator more seamless and sustainable might seem selfish, for I have written what I have *needed* to read. But I write, also, to invite other teacher educators who feel similarly fragmented and fractured by pressures to publish (or perish) to relate their efforts to find greater balance and satisfaction in their work lives. In particular, I urge others to explore how their passions and the personal images underpinning them might infuse and sustain their work. By identifying and sharing such images, we might well create a synergy that will assist us in collectively reclaiming and renewing our professional lives.

Note

I write, also, to thank two inspirational visionaries, Frank Bethwaite and the late Henry Arthur, without whom I would never have experienced the joys of sailing well, or the fulfillment of my sailing dreams.

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