

## Thinking as a researcher

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My paper [Reading the Subtext] addresses aspects of my thinking before, beside and after the research process but this relates to one particular study so here I chose to talk in more general terms about my own researcher development. This is timely as the object I brought to the conference was a small fossil that I favour. It is neither rare nor valuable but a found object, a native of the West Country where I (a Lancastrian by birth and an East Anglian by default) spent a great deal of my childhood. It is reminiscent of happy times when I roamed the local countryside with friends, collecting flowers, berries, and stones and if I was lucky the occasional fossil.

For someone who loves nature, a fossil is doubly relevant as it represents both living things and inert rock. This fossil is a sea-battered, highly eroded echinoid, a form of early sea urchin clearly marked with the five star-like radii that characterise this life form. This link with the sea recalls memories of long, wet family camping holidays on isolated loch-sides in Western Scotland when the weather was so bad that we swam in old woollen jerseys and tights as did the local children. Once I found a real sea urchin complete with lengthy spines and had no idea what it was – a fearful monster clinging to the rock-side.

The fossil conjures up, too, my early research experiences. As a geographer rocks, soils and minerals were a foundational element of all studies. As a talisman to place in pocket or purse, it links to my current interests in children and nature, for what child would not be fascinated by an object that evokes time past and places far away. Archaeological records confirm that children through the centuries have used small stones and pebbles as markers, as marbles, as transportable objects to shake, rattle and enclose, and a small round fossil is especially endowed with mystery.

As a researcher I enjoy the reflectivity and criticality associated with postmodern thinking, the imagination and interpretative skill needed to work with narrative material, but to keep me grounded I also need to be connected with the real world, the physical world that survives and adapts whatever humankind does to damage its surface layers. I need a stone in my pocket and this one is aesthetically satisfying too, reminding me of the literary merit of well-articulated narrative accounts and carefully constructed research papers. In my role of supervisor, I am increasingly gathering students whose use of narrative method stretches into the field of English teaching and literature and this is potentially opening up broader areas of documentary research and discourse analysis – an exciting extension to my current interests in adult education, women's lives, work and gender, childhood and nature. In my pursuit of new ideas I shall leave no stone unturned – the rolling stone shall gather no moss. See how the clichés abound – how central to our metaphors are the rocks on which we walk.

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