

NARRATIVES IN TEACHER EDUCATION: USING AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES

This article examines the use of personal, autobiographical narrative in Teaching-English-as-Second-Language courses. Employing narrative as both a method and subject of inquiry, the article reflects current postmodern trends in applied linguistics. Specifically, it links narrative discourse with the development of early teacher identity. The paper outlines three major types of discourses that map out the identities of teachers-in-training in one TESOL program, and offers specific suggestions for teacher educators and administrators

We create ourselves out of the stories we tell about our lives, stories that impose purpose and meaning on experiences that often seem random and discontinuous. As we scrutinize our part in the effort to explain ourselves to ourselves, we discover—or invent—consistent motivations, characteristic patterns, fundamental values, a sense of self. Fashioned out of memories, our stories become our identities.

Drew Gilpin Faust

Introduction

Faust's quotation encapsulates the essence of narrative in general. Notably for this paper, it captures a critical aspect of the way human subjectivities develop. Narratives are not just stories about the past; rather, they function as a cognitive organizer that allows us to make sense of ourselves and to provide

identity to individuals.

In this article, I will argue that it is through narrative discourse that emergent teacher identity takes shape, and that teacher educators should exploit this powerful purpose of narrative in the training of both pre- and in-service TESOL practitioners. The notion that narrative constructs and re-constructs the self has found support in the most recent

conceptualizations of identity, particularly the ones that reject an essentialist view of this construct. To elaborate, a humanistic, more traditional approach supports that any individual has an identity, and that this identity is unified, singular, and largely immutable. In other words, we all have an essential core that describes our selves. On the other hand, postmodernism argues that this view is rather simplistic. Postmodernists reject the unified and essentialist type of identity that Humanism embraces, and they prefer to use the term subjectivity. In this postmodern view, subjectivity is constituted through the multiple discourses that are available to a person. As Davies (1999) explains in a useful summary of this approach, we as individuals are constituted through the discourses in which we are being positioned at some point in time; it could be through our own speaking and writing, or through the ways others speak or write about us. We can only be what the available discourses allow us to be. What is particularly important here is that instead of seeing the subject as a singular, autonomous, free-wheeling entity, the postmodern understanding of the self views selfhood as socially constructed, fragmented, and fluid.

Narrative has assumed an important place in the recent discourse on identity. Some scholars, for example, argue that personal identity is not even contained within us but exists only as narrative (Currie, 1998, p. 17). The only way to explain who we are is to “tell a story, to select key events which characterize us and organize them according to the formal principles of narrative... This gives narration at large the potential to teach us how to conceive of ourselves, what to make of our inner lives and how to organize it,” writes Currie (p. 17). In fact, in a fashion that resonates with the Russian scholar Bakhtin’s (1981) views of language and the self, current theorists believe that personal identity is not holistic and unified; it is not contained in one single nucleus. Instead, it is located in the relation between the self and others.

Thus, in this paper, I suggest that personal, autobiographical narratives provide a fertile ground for externalizing the relationships between selves and

different others. My goal here is twofold. First, I will briefly outline the role of narrative inquiry as a method and subject of study in the social sciences and its increasing presence in the fields of applied linguistics and second language acquisition. Then, I will present a specific example of how narrative discourse could be used to encourage the development of early teacher identity in one M.A. TESOL course.

Personal Narratives

Personal narratives have strongly established their presence across disciplines. For instance, scholars in cultural psychology (Bruner, 1986; Mishler, 1986) and education (Wortham, 2001) have all pointed out the relationship between narrativity and human consciousness. Narrative, to Bruner, is not just a story; it is a way of human knowing. In a more recent work on autobiography, the psychologist (Bruner, 2003) equates “self-making” (p. 210) with a narrative act. In these makings of the self, humans draw on individual memories, feelings, ideas, and beliefs. At the same time, much of this process is based in implicit cultural expectations about what we should do or be. In this sense, personal narratives are autobiographic and based on our unique experiences, but they are also a product of a particular culture and evaluated through the prism of this culture’s values and expectations. “A self-making narrative is something of a balancing act,” writes Bruner (2003, p. 218). It is personal, but on the other hand, it must relate to others—“to friends and family, to institutions” (p. 218). In a similar vein, French scholar Barthes (cited in Polkinghorne, 1988) claims that narratives perform significant functions at least two levels. At an individual level, when people narrate their own lives, it helps them to construe what they are, where they currently are, and where their futures are headed. At a cultural level, narrative functions as a transmitter of beliefs and shared values. In my use of students’ narratives as a teacher educator, I have relied on exactly this dual function of narrative, on this interplay between the uniquely autobiographical and the social.

The role of the narrative in understanding of the self has been so influential, that scholars have introduced the notion of narrative psychology. Sarbin

(1986), for example, proposes the narratory principle “that human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures” (p. 8). To Sarbin and others, the narrative is an organizing principle for human action. In this sense, we each write our own life story; in evaluating our past, we are also constructing our present selves. Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992) have summarized this value of autobiographical narratives:

How individuals recount their histories—what they emphasize and omit, their stance as protagonists or victims, the relationship the story establishes between teller and audience—all shape what individuals can claim of their own lives. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one’s life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned (p. 1)

Personal narratives have another important function—they could be transformational. As educational researcher Wortham (2001) explains, in autobiographical narratives, narrators may adopt a specific, more powerful interactional position, and in telling the story from this empowered position, they may transform themselves.

All these values of personal narrative have been recognized by the field of teacher education in general. Narrative, in particular, has been explored in research on teacher education by scholars like Clandinin and Connelly (2000). Stories and story telling, according to their research, demonstrate what teachers know about teaching, their beliefs, moral and socio-cultural values. They help articulate core principles about teachers’ instructional practices. Similar to the ways narratives enable selves to make sense of who they are, and what their positions are in the world, stories allow teachers to make sense of their professional worlds and outline their professional positions. In this vein, teachers’ narratives have become a tool for teacher development as narrative inquiry allows teachers to connect their professional learning and instructional practices with their life histories as people. This understanding of teaching as an activity of interpretation and reflection has established itself also through the work of Shulman (1987), Carter (1992),

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) and others.

Recently, narrative research has gained increasing significance in the field of second language acquisition (see Pavlenko, A., 2001; Pavlenko, A. & Lantolf, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995; Vitanova, 2005). Acknowledging the role of narrative approaches to research in psychology and anthropology, Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) investigated the formation of identity through the memoirs of bilingual writers. Pavlenko and Lantolf reject a more traditional, structural approach to second language acquisition and claim that personal narratives are “a legitimate source of data on the learning process by teasing out in a theoretically informed way insights provided by the life stories of people who have struggled cultural border crossings” (p. 158). Norton Peirce (1995), who is also interested in social identity, analyzes the personal narratives of second language learners mainly through interviews and diaries. What is especially significant in her work is that she adopts a poststructuralist approach to identity in her narrative analysis. Building on postmodern theories, Peirce asserts a view, in which the self has a multiple nature, is fragmented, and is constantly changing over time.

In her work on second language learners’ agencies, Vitanova (2005) argues that narratives are an essential form of authorship. She takes a somewhat different theoretical approach from other studies that use narratives in that she adopts a dialogical, Bakhtinian perspective to language. In her view, narratives become the interactional space for contesting others’ voices, re-accentuating one’s utterances with new meanings, and re-inventing the self through another. These recent studies in second language acquisition, though employing different theoretical perspectives in their analysis, have firmly established the role of personal narratives as both a source of data and a method of inquiry.

In TESOL education, in particular, the role of reflective practice has been recognized for some time now. For instance, Richards (1996) points out that we should approach the research in teaching “from the inside” (p. 281), and that by acknowledging real teachers’ voices, we should shift our focus to the everyday realities of teaching. According to Richards,

we can accomplish this shift only if we explore teachers' experiences and perceptions. Johnson and Golombek (2002) have taken a specific turn to the narrative in second-language teachers' development. In an edited volume, they present a collection of teachers' stories from the classroom, and then, in a more recent article (2004), they analyzed how these stories reflect the emotional and cognitive development of teachers. As Golombek and Johnson (2004) eloquently explain, "The stories resulting from inquiry enable teachers to organize and articulate what they know and believe about their teaching" (p. 309). Similar to research in teacher education in general, the narratives Johnson and Golombek present come from the classroom; in other words, the reflection is on instructional practices. In contrast, in my paper, I have chosen to analyze a different type of narrative, in which the focus is on the personal and autobiographical.

The Narrative Inquiry

While narrative research in teacher education has been primarily interested in teachers' storied knowledge of teaching, in how the stories reveal what they already know about teaching, I was interested in what narrative can tell us about how professional knowledge emerges from the personal realm and what discourses are implicated in this process. Several questions guided me in exploring the role of personal narrative in TESOL education:

1. How do autobiographical experiences of learning and schooling shape students' emergent teacher identities?
2. What central discourses do students employ in narrative?
3. What is the function of personal narrative in the development of early teacher identities?

The Narrative Discourse Examples

The examples for this presentation come from the narratives written by 25 MA TESOL students in a semester-long course at a metropolitan Florida university. The primary purpose of the course was to introduce students to basic concepts of second language education and to the variety of materials available to teachers of English. Students' backgrounds

were varied, but were primarily pre-service. Their ages varied from 25 to 50.

The narrative assignment allowed for significant flexibility in letting students choose what experiences they wanted to focus on and what past aspects of growing up, learning, or schooling they found most worth exploring. The students determined how these particular aspects contributed to their current beliefs, values, and positions about teaching English as a second language. In addition to the narrative, students wrote reflections on the first day of class and another on the last day of class. Throughout the semester, the instructor and students communicated regularly through email discussions about the value of their reflections and narrative writing. Follow-ups through face-to-face communication or email were conducted with some of the students when clarifications were needed (the clarifications concerned statements made by the students in their written narratives). For the purposes of this paper, only written narratives will be examined, however.

Theoretical Orientations

Because of the wide scope of issues that can emerge in personal narratives, it may feel overwhelming to sort through the data initially. Thus, I have found it helpful to utilize the notion of discourse in relation to identity as a unit of analysis. In analyzing discourse, I was guided by a prevalent assumption in current approaches to identity. These approaches, as mentioned above, have recognized that our daily lives are underscored by the utilization of multiple discourses. One of the major questions I had was what discourses the TESOL students, who participated in this project, invoked when reflecting on personal experiences and how these experiences stirred them on the path of second language teaching.

Accordingly, in the following sections, I will present examples illustrating the types of discourses students engaged in and the way these discourses constituted emergent teacher identities. A word of caution would be helpful here. While I mention the major types of discourses, I should emphasize in the beginning that these discourses are not isolated entities. Instead, they were fluid, constantly intersecting each other, never independent, stand-

alone units. As James Paul Gee (1999) explains in his well-known work, discourses are not units with clear boundaries; they can split into more discourses; they can merge and meld together (Gee, 1999, p. 21). Explaining the role of discourses, Gee offers a useful metaphor. Each discourse, he suggests, may be envisioned as represented on a map of a country where the boundaries are not strictly fixed. Such a map, claims Gee, is "a Discourse grid against which you understand your own and other's thought, language, action, and interaction... It is, as it exists across people and social groups, both the origin and the product of the reality of actual Discourses in the world, aligning and disaligning themselves with each other through history" (p. 23). I have found Gee's metaphor useful in conceptualizing the role and purpose of personal narrative and its analysis. In this vein, the narrative can function as the mediational ground in which we employ different discourses to make sense of relations with others, to connect our individual histories with the present, our deeply personal experiences with the professional and in this way, to map out identities.

So what were the discourses on which the students mapped out their early professional identities?

Personal/Autobiographical Discourse

The realm of what I call *personal/autobiographical* discourse encompassed a multitude of discourses. These discourses included family, community, and schooling. It was in this realm that values and beliefs first originated. At the same time, it was also the realm in which awareness of language and the ways language is used was first realized. One student, for example, located the origin of her interest in literacy and education within her family:

My parents always stressed the importance of literacy and education. Not a day went by without hearing these words from their lips: "An education is the best investment that you can make in yourself and in others." (Ellie)

Another student, for whom English was a second language, chose this learning experience as the basis of her beliefs for language teaching in general:

Considering my background in music education, I don't have a lot of experience in teaching language; however, since I learned English as a

second language when I was an adult, I believe that there are different components that play important roles in language teaching. I believe that listening to native speakers is very important... (Martha)

Some students described circuitous paths on the way to a Master's program in TESOL. Sally, for example, describing her lived experiences, traced her immigrant East European background and her military career and how both ultimately contributed to her decision to enroll in a Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) program. Others positioned themselves as part of a more traditional and even privileged discourse of schooling and learning. A case of point is Tom's story. Tom's interest in language studies originated while he was enrolled in a private college in Florida. In what he describes as a "comfortable atmosphere," he took German and then, French and Russian from engaging, motivated instructors, who were frequently native speakers of the language. Tom's upper-middle class background allowed him not only feel at ease in the classroom, but also made it possible for him to make trips to Europe where he could improve his conversational skills in the foreign languages he was studying. His instructors and their own practices helped formed his early beliefs about how a foreign language should be taught. He remembers, for instance, "the well-enunciated pronunciation pattern" of his native-speaking Russian teacher and the many charts with grammar forms he had to learn in her class. Tom found learning the grammar charts "helpful" and even enjoyable. His language courses and, later, his study programs in Germany, molded his understanding of the importance of linguistic patterns and precision in the acquisition of other languages. On one hand, because of his being able to live in a foreign language and culture, Tom has learned to value the communicative aspects of learning and teaching a language over the years. On the other hand, as the most rewarding teaching experience, in his narrative, he has singled out an occasion in which he helps a student identify and modify a persistent grammar error in her writing:

It was amazing to watch her [the student's]

face change as I explained why she was making the mistake. She is a good student and is very interested in moving forward with her skills. She thanked me more than once, telling me that she had learned so much in the past month of my class, because I was able to rephrase or illustrate the grammar in such a way that she could always understand (Tom).

In the beginning of his teaching career, Tom, the epitome of the good language learner himself, has found that he best identifies and connects with other motivated students in a private language program.

While reading about students' life experiences is certainly fascinating, what is more interesting for the purposes of this paper is the way this discourse of the personal/autobiographical merges with two other central discourses: critical/transformational and professional. Moreover, the connection from the personal to the critical or the professional discourse was seamless, occurring within the same paragraph or even sentence.

Transformational/Critical Discourse

In their narratives, students did not merely recount past events or characters, but reflected critically on them as they positioned their stories in specific social and cultural contexts. Within the realm of critical discourses, students employed discourses of ethnicity and race. One example comes from Janet, who wrote about her years of schooling:

Still, years through school were often less than positive. Racial violence pervaded my middle school in South Florida (neo-nazi hate groups once spray-painted swastikas on the walls). In my adolescence, I became exceedingly self-conscious of my own difference and quickly lost my interest in learning Spanish or Hebrew—languages I associated with my ethnic background.

Janet, the young woman who wrote the paragraph above, didn't merely narrate a negative experience. In the very same paragraph, we can hear not only her analytical voice, but also an agentive presence. These experiences were also the source of transformational power for Janet and, ultimately, prompted her to choose a career in education.

Still, the racial divisions that I encountered made

me keenly aware of the dangers of cultural ignorance and intolerance. From these events, I developed a deep-seated interest in the resolution of such conflicts and a conviction in the value of education as a tool in this process, which would later attract me to language studies and global education.

Janet's narrative discourse is a perfect illustration of the permeability of discourses, in this case—autobiographical discourse intersecting the critical/transformational.

Narratives could be a valuable transformative tool. In narratives, we not only talk about how others position us in different context, but we also get to position ourselves. One female student's narrative provides a good illustration of this phenomenon. Amy was adopted by an American couple from a Chinese orphanage when she was a little girl. She couldn't speak any English when she arrived in the United States, and, thus, she set out on her experience of learning English as a second language. During her childhood, Amy found herself "lost between two worlds, the east and the west." Her adoptive parents attempted to erase her Chinese identity completely. She was not allowed to speak Chinese, to eat Chinese food, or have any contact with anyone remotely looking Chinese. In an attempt for her to learn English quickly, her parents enrolled her in what Amy describes "a very strict Catholic school," in which a preferred technique of teaching English was corporal punishment and humiliation in front of the whole class:

One teacher made me stand up in class to repeat any word that I did not pronounce correctly. I was not allowed to sit down until I pronounced each word correctly. I often failed and cried... The class would laugh at my Chinese accent and continue to ridicule me before, during, and after school. (Amy)

In these excerpts, Amy invokes two powerful discourses: discourses of exclusion and inequality. Ironically, later in life, when she enrolled in a course in Chinese art and theater in New York City, she felt excluded again; this time by her Chinese teachers and classmates and was labeled as "ABC" (American

Born Chinese). Some literacy scholars have used the term “hybrid identities” (Gutierrez, Baquedano, & Tejada, 2000) to refer to people belonging to two cultures. Amy, however, was not allowed to develop an identity in either culture.

Amy’s personal history as a child and adolescent is more than just an account of her experiences; rather, it shaped her present and her professional choices. These experiences of humiliation and exclusion created the ground for a powerful transformation—a transformation that she chose to take with her to her own second-language students. As an adult, after visiting the Chinese orphanage where she grew up, Amy made an important decision that was not individual:

I returned to the United States and I decided that I wanted to make a positive change to the traditional educational system. I decided to become an affective, holistic, communicative teacher; help children and adults enjoy learning English as a second language and other life skills... I taught my students to be proud of their international ethnicity and how to survive within the American mainstream society. They learned how to use the power of the English language to improve their life.

In her previous narrative excerpts, Amy is being positioned by others—her parents, her teachers, her native-speaking classmates in a powerless, silent position of someone who looks different and speaks with an accent. In the last example, however, Amy positions herself as an agent. She has assumed this agentive/transformational position not just for herself, but also for her international students. In this way, the personal autobiographical discourse has become critical, and both have shaped Amy’s early professional identity.

Appropriation of Professional Discourse

The multiple discourses Amy employs in her narrative articulate and help externalize multiple identities as well. We saw her positioned by others, we saw her reflecting on her powerless position analytically, and finally, we saw her as an agent,

someone who has adopted a critical discourse in her own classroom. At the same time, as the last excerpt illustrates, Amy’s narrative reveals that she has appropriated yet another discourse: the discourse of her new profession. This is illustrated by the use of specific terms she uses, in this case “communicative,” “holistic,” and “affective.”

Again, the transitions between these discourses are seamless and fluid. The appropriation of professional discourse is intimately interwoven with the fiber of the personal, and there are many examples that illustrate this. While reflecting on her home-schooling experience, another student, Katie, credited her mother with instilling the most important values and beliefs about learning and teaching—beliefs that this student still held, but now, being enrolled in a TESOL program, she also had the metalanguage to explain or name these beliefs:

A third important lesson I learned from my mother was the idea of when to correct and when to encourage...Now as a teacher in training, I realize that it is this balance of instruction and encouragement that allows a student to be motivated without early fossilization, whether they be learning a native language or a second/foreign language.

Balance of instruction, fossilization, and motivation are terms that were discussed in this particular course, and it is obvious that Katie has begun to appropriate the discourse of the discipline in this excerpt.

The transition from the personal to the professional was evident, regardless of the experiences students selected to write about in their narratives. Students’ personal experiences as learners and their histories as human beings have produced the core of their emergent professional subjectivities. A male student, for example, summarized the value of writing the narrative:

I feel that my own personal experiences learning second languages have given me an empathy, or at least an understanding of my students and what some of them are seeking.

Conclusion

I have used these examples of narrative discourse to demonstrate that autobiographical narratives can be used as a valuable mediational and even transformational tool in teacher education courses. By enabling teachers in training to explore personal values and connect them to the field of teaching, narratives can function as the bridge between the realm of the personal and the realm of the professional discourse. It allows them to name their beliefs by using the expert pedagogical knowledge they acquire in their current programs of study. To borrow again and expand on James Gee's metaphor, we can envision narrative as the map, on which we use discourses as grids, to fashion out identities and to understand relationships with others. Some students, who came from more privileged backgrounds and described predominantly positive learning and schooling experiences, positioned themselves as linguistic authority figures in relation with their students. Because of her home-schooling experience and her mother's influence, Katie saw herself as a nurturer in the classroom. The grids on the map, however, are not immovable. For example, because of the experiences she lived as a child and adolescent, Amy, the student mentioned earlier in the paper, has chosen to transform the discourses of exclusion, into which she was positioned, into a discourse of power, not just for herself, but also for other immigrant students. Thus, she has affirmed an identity of a social agent in the classroom.

To summarize, scholars across different disciplines—psychology, anthropology, education, and applied linguistics—have claimed that narrative analysis allows for the systematic study of personal meaning. Trainers of second language teachers can tap into the nature of narrative as the mediational ground in which humans use different discourses to make sense of their past experiences and present realities, to enact and re-enact relationships with others (influential characters from their past, like teachers, parents or institutions). In their narrative utterances, they can invoke others' voices: Tom, for instance, embraced the voices of his foreign language teachers in creating his own teacher voice. In contrast,

Amy challenged the oppressive voices of her own teachers and classmates, and through this challenge, she re-positioned the grids of her discursive landscape to negotiate a more powerful, agentic presence. In this process of re-living and re-inventing events, positioning and re-positioning selves, teachers-in-training not only discover who they are as human beings but also who they are as professionals.

The goal of this paper has been to show how personal narrative inquiry can benefit teachers-in-training in articulating their evolving professional identities. However, the application of personal narratives can be versatile and used as a tool of teacher development in a variety of contexts. Teacher educators can invite both pre- and in-service teachers to reflect on their life histories, the formation of personal beliefs and values, and interpret how these ideas become incorporated in their pedagogical knowledge and classroom practices. Administrators can encourage their experienced ESOL teachers or teacher trainers, depending on the nature of the department, to write stories about their teaching and initiate a dialogue about their experiences.

In this particular paper, my focus was on personal, autobiographical narratives because I was interested in teachers-in-training. Seasoned teachers, on the other hand, may benefit from exchanging stories about their curriculum and teaching practices. These narratives could be produced as a writing task or could be oral. Some prompts that teacher educators, administrators, and language teachers may use for a narrative task could be:

- Who are the people (teachers, students, writers) that have influenced your attitudes and your assumptions about the process of language learning? About teaching? What does it mean to be a successful teacher, and how have (or can) you become one?
- Memories of the significant literacy events in your life that defined your literacy behavior and attitudes toward language learning and literacy today. What was the role of family, community, and school in this process? Include the people and practices that supported your development. How have these memories influenced your beliefs

about language teaching today and about the teacher you are (or will be)?

- How has your journey as a foreign/second language learner contributed to your current beliefs, attitudes, and expectations about the process of language learning and teaching? What specific experiences led to your decision to become a language teacher and to the idea of what it means to be a successful language teacher?
- If you already teach, please clearly illustrate the connection between these experiences and your classroom practices.

The participants in the assignment could be encouraged to include any supporting materials (e.g., photos) to illustrate their narrative. The length of the writing assignment could be specified, or it could be left up to the narrators. One reason student teachers like this assignment is precisely because of its flexibility. The prompts above could be modified depending on the specific context and the level of experience. In the case of more experienced teachers, as they draw on pedagogical knowledge and instructional wisdom, the power of narratives may be used to revisit existing curricula, revise positions in relation to their students, and if needed, bring a transformation to the classroom.

Most important, by asking teachers (novice or experienced) to engage in narrative reflection, we ask them to re-examine some already established routines and practices. We also ask them to address the most challenging, often mystifying aspects of teaching and learning, which they may not even realize exist, and to bring these issues to conscious knowledge.

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