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Narratives about Teaching : Remembrance, Reflection and Controversy

Narratives about Teaching:

Remembrance, Reflection and Controversy

Donna Hurst Tatsuki

1. Introduction

There is not enough time spent sharing and listening to the narratives of teachers, learners and other stakeholders in the teaching-learning endeavor. This is great pity since it is through the sharing of stories that communities are built and nourished; events are interpreted and assigned meaning (Matteos, 2009). Through *narrative inquiry* narratives about teaching (and learning) as told by teachers, learners and others (observers, interested stakeholders) events can be interpreted and thereby gain meaning. Stories come in many forms (e.g., autobiographies, journals, field notes, letters, photos/artifacts, etc.) and through the use of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999) these texts become the units of analysis to research and understand how people create meaning in their lives through narratives.

As mentioned in the *Introduction* to this volume, the second half is dedicated to examining the ways, meanings and outcomes of the acts of sharing narratives on teaching (and by proxy, learning). In order to be systematic, this chapter will consider narratives about teaching from three perspectives: 1) Student narratives, 2) Teacher based narratives, and 3) Popular/Media-based narratives.

2. Student Narratives

There are competing motivations for encouraging the production of and investing analysis effort in student narratives. For one thing, getting students to write or tell stories can give much needed language practice. However, they can be therapeutic too; the learner is able to bring to the surface thoughts, feelings and premonitions and by doing can deal with their messages and meanings. The other motivation is not solely about the good of the student; it offers teachers, researchers and interested

others a window though which to observe learner thoughts and feelings and to monitor social, psychological and cognitive development. Student narratives can be clustered in the following groups: 1) about teachers, 2) about the learning environment, 3) about their peers, and 4) about themselves.

2.1 About teachers

A staple in teacher lesson plans is the writing prompt, "Write about a teacher who has inspired you…" Note that such a prompt is almost guaranteed to elicit a glowing story of inspiration where the student feels encouraged, becomes more self-aware, and in some cases is moved to the point of wanting to become a teacher (HotChalk, 2016).

It is not surprising that teachers (or former teachers) collect and curate stories that elevate their profession especially in times when the teaching profession finds itself under attack. Holbert and Holbert (2016) cite that as one *raison d'etre* for their collection of stories. They solicited stories about teachers who mattered or made a difference to them from highly successful people (e.g., scientists, astronauts, Nobel Laureates, etc.) resulting in a 300-plus page book with more than 80 personal stories.

To be fair and balanced, there are also many stories about teachers that are not so complimentary (e.g. "You are Literally Wrong" on the *Notalwayslearning* website, n.d.) and it is safe to say, teachers rarely solicit them (yet likely they should if they are truly interested in professional development).

2.2 About the learning environment

It is important to find ways to get learners to write or tell stories about their learning environment. One way to do this is by introducing the habit of reflection (Costa & Kallick, 2009). Telling or writing stories is not only key to establishing this habit; it is key to the ability to make meaning. As Costa and Kallick state,

> Most of us go through life viewing our experiences as isolated, unrelated events. We also view these happenings simply as the experiences they are, not as opportunities for learning. Psychologists refer to this type of life view as an "episodic grasp of reality" (Feuerstein, Rand, Hoffman, & Miller, 1980), and it is not a habit we want to pass along to children. Instead, we want students to

get into the habit of linking and constructing meaning from their experiences. Such work requires reflection. (p. 221)

By providing opportunities for learners to share their stories of the classroom or learning experience—the successes, the failures, the frustrations, the triumphs—they develop stronger listening skills, ask more thoughtful questions and assigning new meanings/interpretations to learning.

2.3 About peers

Polansky et al (2010) looked at how narrative functions as part of the process of learning when language tutors work with near-peers. It was shown that narratives were useful for them to organize their personal reflections of how the teaching/learning process was going with the near-peers. It also allowed them to see the bigger picture in terms of institution, policy and social matters.

In order to expose the tutors to narrative and get them to accept the idea of using narrative as a tool, they read two books and several articles—each of which provided either a model or explanations of why narrative is so important as "the significance of narrative activity enhanced the tutors' appreciation for the medium of storytelling and the collaborative process" (p. 308). The tutors shared their stories with each other. "In their narrative reflections, the tutors offered multiple perspectives on interactions of tutors with high school students, tutors with cooperating teachers, and cooperating teachers with high school students" (p. 310).

2.4 About selves

Murphey, Chen, and Chen (2005) wrote about how learners' own imaginations and mental constructions of an "imagined community" (Norton, 2000; Kanno & Norton, 2003) are integral to the construction of personal identity throughout language learning. Although this is a huge simplification, the ideas is that the more positive the identity, the more positive the outcome. The P.Æ.C.E. Corpus (Landolfi 2012a) described in an earlier chapter in this volume provides ample evidence of this phenomenon.

Narratives about teaching as told by students can tell us a number of things:

- How does our teaching affect them/the students?
- What are they thinking, feeling experiencing in our classrooms?
- What is the gap between what we/teachers think is going on in their classrooms and what students think is going on?

Through narratives, students give us insights that come from an uncensored subconscious level; evaluations and semester end surveys can never get at this level of truth.

3. Teacher Narratives

Well-trained teachers know the value of stories, not only pedagogically, but also for the purposes of reflection and enjoyment. Unsurprisingly they write about learners, the teaching/learning environment, themselves and their peers.

3.1 About Learners

Biographical accounts of learners written by teacher researchers have been quite numerous (in the area of second language acquisition, for example, Norton, 2000; 2001; Teutsch-Dwyer, 2001). Teutsch-Dwyer's (2001) work is especially interesting since it told the story of a Polish immigrant's move the America and embedded within that story details of his grammatical development despite virtually no formal instruction. Such stories are valuable since they present data in a very accessible way that also captures much of the context and other factors usually lost in research reports.

3.2 About the teaching environment

Although many teachers incorporate aspects of their teaching environment in their stories about their own transformations (see next section), stories that focus on the teaching environment as a whole are more often told by institutional authors who are interested in persuading teachers to try a new method or system. One example of this genre is *The Responsive Classroom Approach in Action: Three Success Stories* (authored by Responsive Classroom), which uses a storytelling format to present compelling arguments replete with photos, graphs and other data for the adoption of this corporate groups system. A website developed by the iTEC project group has taken this a step further with video and digital media based teacher stories of the classroom (http://itec.eun.org/web/guest/teacher-stories).

3.3 About Selves
3.3.1 Selves as teachers

There exist some collections of stories written by teachers about themselves. They have been collected, curated and published with the idea that readers of these stories might benefit from the insights just as much as the writers themselves did through this reflective process. Such publications cover every stage and age of teacher lives/careers: early/beginning (e.g., Roehrig, Pressley & Talotta, 2002), established (e.g. Shadiow, 2012). Taken to extremes however, this genre of story writing can spin into teacher "brag books" which will be described in a later section.

Shadiow (2012) wrote one of the best summaries of research and grounded rationales for the use of stories by teachers as a means of personal development. Stories offer a means of distancing ourselves from our hard-core beliefs and view things more objectively. Her method begins with the assembly and sharing of our stories—then the deconstruction begins. Little by little each story is looked at from a differ perspective and its meaning evolves—as the sorties change, so do teaching practices.

Much earnest "teacher transformation" storytelling is being presented as a video story. Among the many websites that offer these stories is Edutopia (http://www.edutopia.org/videos).

3.3.2 Themselves as learners

A decade has passed since Murphey and Ragan (2006) published "Teachers who have moved us: Transformational narratives" yet it is good to revisit some of their important insights. One claim that strongly resonates is that when people who are currently teachers engage in the simple act of remembrance of "teachers who have moved us" in the form of a story, it "…can greatly enhance our teaching. Telling such stories provides us with insight into why we choose to teach as we teach, consolidates our philosophies of teaching, and communicates and models good teaching more clearly to others than abstract analytic statements" (p. 983).

Teachers writing about their own teachers can also be meant to celebrate the work of teachers as well as educate and motivate future or current teachers. One example of this genre edited by Underwood (2009), presents 28 stories from award-winning

teachers about the teachers that made a difference in their lives and whose memory helps them, as teachers, to carry on.

3.4 About Peers

Researcher collected stories (for example, Nagatomo, 2016) go through the following process from concept to product: 1) Collect (record verbal, take notes or written versions), 2) Collate and categorize, 3) Analyze in order to see patterns trends, 4) Interpret the meanings or significance of patterns/trends, 5) Retell the stories (unless original stories are considered more powerful or of permission for direct quotation is not given). The benefit of this kind of collected volume is that there is a strong central focus and much of the organizational and interpretive work has been done for the reader.

4. Popular/Media-based Narratives

Popular culture abounds with stories about hot (usually illicit) romances between students and teachers. Despite their prevalence, other interesting and meaningful stories involving teachers, students and learning also exist in popular media and will be the focus of this section.

4.1 Print and Digital Media
4.1.1 Best Practices and Self-promotion Teacher "brag" books

There is a cottage industry of teacher self-help tomes that collect and disseminate the "Best Practices" and other insights of superior teachers. These works do certainly provide a public service as they may inspire readers. Some are based on very well documented research (e.g. Bain, 2006) and as such are worthy of respectful consideration.

4.1.2 News, blogs, magazine articles

News organizations have long recognized the power of storytelling to attract, engage and influence readers. According to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007), journalism is "storytelling with a purpose" (p. 189) where the purpose is to inform while the storytelling makes it "meaningful, relevant and engaging" (p. 189). They emphasize that, "storytelling and information are not contradictory" but rather should be viewed as points on a communication continuum with comforting bedtime stories at one end and raw data at the other. The task of the journalist is to find the communicative

balance between these extremes.

Journalists, therefore, need to be trained in the art of storytelling. Here is a summary (with some quotes) of some of the current shortcomings in journalistic storytelling according to Kovach and Rosensteil (2007):

- The people in the news stories (sources or actual subjects) are not presented as real people—they are not real multi faceted characters but rather cardboard templates.
- There is no movement in time—it is frozen "everything happened yesterday or this evening"
- The story does not appeal to a range of audiences
  - The audience is treated like an outsider by the overuse of insider jargon and premises set on the assumption of knowledge that might not be accessible to the general public
- "Stories don't illuminate a greater meaning"
- The writer misses the chance to "globalize the local or localize the global"
- The way the story is told is "predictable and formulaic"

(Kovach & Rosenteil, 2007, p. 196)

Based on a new understanding of the journalistic W5+H1 questions, Kovach and Rosensteil (2007) suggest that, "if we think of *who* as character, *what* as plot, *where* as setting, *how* as narrative, we can bend information and storytelling" (p.198).

With all these points in mind, one might forgive the seemingly misleading use of the word "Stories" on a blog site run by Harvard University called, "Teaching & Learning Innovation Stories" (http://alumni.harvard.edu/stories/teaching-%26-learning-innovation) This blog site provides a space for *news story* type reports, written by Harvard staff writers about current Harvard professors and researchers. The purpose of the "stories" is to reach out to alumni (and the general public). It is relevant to note therefore, that their insistence on using the word "story" for *news story* type reports is parallel to the use of the world story in news organizations.

The website called "Why I teach: Educators share their stories" (http://whyiteach.learningmatters.tv), which is operated by Education Week, an

education focused media contributor to PBS News Hour, offers a forum for teachers of all ages, experience and subject areas. On their submission guideline page they post twelve questions with the following advisory: "Obviously, you don't have to answer all of these questions – but thinking about them may lead you in a certain direction" (Why I Teach, 2016, n.p.) They serve a similar purpose as the writing prompts discussed in the first chapter (Tatsuki, this volume).

4.2 Films

Teachers, teaching, students and learning/personal transformation are favorite subjects and themes in films. Among my own favorites the following come to my mind: *Dangerous Minds, Stand and Deliver, Educating Rita, Dead Poets Society, The Emperors Club* (an ever growing list, currently at 69 is available on the Internet Movie Database site at http://www.imdb.com/list/ls050642420/).

4.3 Controversies and Complicated Outcomes

In the midst of this plethora of teaching narratives, a voice cries out in the wilderness that we should be wary and think more critically. We are all familiar with inspirational stories focusing on the teacher-learner relationship that tend to draw lessons from the reciprocity of teaching and learning. One story, *A Lesson to Teach* (Unknown, n.d.), shows how a teacher slowly becomes aware that her own limited vision about a student was limiting him—by the end of the story the teacher (and the reader) learns that that a change of outlook changes everything—the teacher learns that the "failing child" was failing because she was failing as a teacher. The key statement at the turning point was as follows: "On that very day, she quit teaching reading, and writing, and arithmetic. Instead, she began to teach children."

However, one storytelling trend could actually be more harmful than good: the "well-tread path of a new teacher that enters a public-school classroom, burns out quickly or ignites dramatic change, and exits" (Anderson, 2015). Examples of such stories include: *The Battle for Room 314: My Year of Hope and Despair in a New York City High School* (Boland, 2016), *Confessions of a Bad Teacher* (Owens, 2013), and *Teach with Your Heart: Lessons I Learned from the Freedom Writers* (Gruwell, 2007). More often than not, they are white-centric tales of youthful idealism, which collide with the challenges of poor inner city schools, their students and their communities. Some consider these stories to be rallying cries for educational reform,

whereas others do not:

> … increasingly, educators and others are labeling this literary genre a mix of naiveté and bravado that leads to damaging and persistent myths about urban schools, students, and communities…Additionally, detractors say these accounts reinforce harmful stereotypes of urban teaching, and bring to the surface underlying racial aspects that add to the discord. (Anderson, 2015, n.p)

The problem is not just confined to the stereotyped depiction of under-privileged inner city students—it is deeply misleading for teachers or teachers-in-training:

> There is a questionable subtext to the many teacher stories—be it in books or on film—that perpetuate the image of the lone teacher who doesn't need experience, sleep, or support from other adults in his or her school. …it creates a dynamic where beginning teachers are afraid to admit they're struggling and soon are exhausted from trying to keep up with a false ideal. (Anderson, 2015, n.p)

This is further exacerbated by the trope of the villainous veteran teacher—the one who cannot or will not change. While it may be true that such slackers may exist, this image does a great disservice to the many veteran teachers in urban schools "who share racial identities and cultural experiences with their students and those who don't—who work hard to meet students' academic, social, and emotional needs" (Anderson, 2015, n.p).

Enter into this situation, *Teach for America* (TFA), the non-profit organization that was founded in 1990 with the mission of placing young, idealistic fresh graduates with a mere five weeks of teacher training at schools in poor areas to teach for two years. One problem is that critics say that TFA "equates enthusiasm with experience" (Specht, 2013, cited in *The Economist*). Furthermore, "placing inexperienced young people in front of 'marginalized students' only serves 'to perpetuate the status quo of inequity' (Vernoush, 2013, cited in *The Economist*). It might well be that popular images of the crusading novice teacher, as depicted in movies is perpetrating an unrealistic willingness to accept less than qualified teachers into some of the most challenging teaching situations.

5. Conclusion

It is clear that teachers and learners (and all others involved with who have a stake in the teaching-learning process) need to be heard and that narratives/storytelling are an idea way to make that happen. This should not be done however, without scrutiny and careful judgment since stories and storytelling are such potent, powerful, persuasive forces.

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Abstract

This chapter examines the ways, meanings and outcomes of the acts of sharing narratives on teaching (and by proxy, learning). It considers these topics by considering narratives about teaching from three perspectives: 1) Student narratives, 2) Teacher based narratives, and 3) Popular/Media-based narratives. It closes with some caveats and cautions about the danger of uncritical acceptance of teacher-learner narratives.

Keywords: narrative inquiry, reflective practice, storytelling, teacher education, learner development