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ABSTRACT

A study examined autobiographical narratives written by preservice English teachers who described their new experiences in student teaching. Subjects, 18 young men and women enrolled in a one-year combination teaching credential and masters degree program at Stanford University, described in writing a major classroom experience. Fourteen of the 18 students completed the assignment. Results indicated that: (1) 10 of the 14 narratives conveyed in metaphor that the classroom is a closed system in which the teacher's purpose is to win students over to the teacher's way of seeing the world and doing the world of school; and (2) 4 of the 14 narratives evoked a "convergence" metaphor in which teachers and students are common participants in a learning event. Findings suggest that such narratives can be potent instructional vehicles for working with neophyte teachers, for the very elements that identify these texts as narratives carry cultural and political assumptions that in part constitute teaching. (RS)

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I am going to talk today about autobiographical narratives and a group of pre-service English teachers whom I worked with last fall. The narratives are theirs, they were written as part of their course work with me, and they address these teachers' new experiences student teaching.

It is a fact of autobiographical narrative that the writer is at once observer of action and actor observed. Out of her own lived experience, she remakes experience, crafting a rendition in which any event may be culminating, any event extraordinary. She arranges and, so, interprets, experience, and in doing so she interprets--and presents an interpreted--self. I want to discuss the narratives written by my class of pre-service teachers because they reveal a rendering process . . . as the teachers captured and interpreted their classrooms and themselves . . . as they transacted relationships with their students and with their subject, English. I'd like to suggest that such narratives can be potent instructional vehicles for working with neophyte teachers, for the very elements that identify these texts as narrative--their structure, for example, their guiding metaphors, their rhetorical force--carry more than the personalities of their creators; they carry cultural and

political assumptions that in part constitute teaching, both for the writers of these narratives as individuals and for the writers as they make up a collective and thus define a community.

I taught a class called Curriculum and Instruction in English to a group of 18 young men and women enrolled in a one-year combination teaching credential and masters degree program at Stanford University. All these students had B.A.'s in either English or social science, they were planning to teach English at the high school or middle school level, and in the fall quarter when they were in my class they'd had a summer quarter of courses behind them and had begun their first semester in the schools of student teaching.

The assignment that spawned the narratives asked the students to describe a major classroom experience--as they had just begun student teaching, their classroom experiences were only a few weeks old. The students wrote up their major event in class, shared, went home, and revised. For most of the students the writing went through two or more drafts that were interspersed with peer feedback. All the writing was to be gathered into an informal anthology that everyone in the class would receive. That is, it was to have an audience of peers. Final drafts were around 500 to 750 words long, and fourteen students of the eighteen turned them in to be included in the anthology. It is these fourteen that I analyzed.

You can see on the handout under "narrative structure " how prototypically narrative these writings are. I did not ask,

specifically, for narrative; in fact, I wasn't specific about much except writing about an event that "stood out," but of the fourteen pieces, all are complex stories turning around a central, focal action or series of actions. Thirteen of them relate a series of actions leading to the central action, thirteen of them convey a falling away from the central action, often by reflecting on it, and eleven of them end with generalizations or lessons learned from the central event, morals to the story. Generally, they utilize rhetorical devices such as titles--"Road Maps," "Letting Go," "Hello Mr. Golding," "Defenses Down"--and engaging openings and closings, like Dc na's piece that begins with a student's exclamation, "Eeeeyeeuuw! Ms. R., Todd's got a booger on his finger!"; or Brad's setting the scene in a high school English class with "Everywhere you look in room 273 there is school"; or Jody's forboding question about her seventh-graders, "Why were they being so quiet?" Jody's writing ends on an engaging note of another sort; she writes, "I told them to put their tests away, and I started the day's lesson with a lump in my throat and only eight minutes left in the period, hoping they didn't realize that they had defeated me." Nearly all the pieces exhibit the kind of temporal manipulation that we associate with narrative, flashbacks for example, and magnification of critical moments. In one piece, the central action expands to over 90% of the writing; critical moments are detailed and extended so that they convey their own unfolding in a simulation of real time passing. After setting the classroom

scene and describing how she was going to teach a poetry lesson, June magnifies the critical seconds of asking her class a question, then waiting for a response, and this is the climactic moment of her narrative (ON HANDOUT):

> I began the class by reciting the poem and asking the students a very generic "feeling" question [SHE WRITES]. [AND THEN SHE PUTS US IN THE MOMENT] Silence. I then rephrased the question with greater emphasis on the important words. Still no response. [NOW INSIDE THE MOMENT, INSIDE THE WRITER] Stunned and feeling suddenly awkward, I had no idea what to do next. I had anticipated a cadre of positive and negative comments, but not silence. I took a deep breath and proceeded with another question. "Are there ANY questions (please!) [HER INTERNAL PLEA] about the poem?" One student spoke up.

All the pieces contain dialogue, two are close to 50% dialogue, and most of them utilize a great deal of genre-typical language--vivid and concrete images, metaphors, and so on. Brad's piece is an extreme example; it's actually one extended metaphor, as he recounts watching from the sidelines as his master teacher conducts class [ALSO ON THE HANDOUT]:

> . . . the teacher's desks and tables and podiums and bookshelves and extra chairs . . . form a bulwark between the kids and the blackboard . . . This fortress, this one man's castle, consumes nearly half

the room, and, from the safety of its twin podium/turrets, the lord of the keep can survey his small kingdom and its denizens. I am in one wing of the fortress . . . removed from the central power, observing, recording, describing the little histories that unfold in this warm and formal place. The population is at work . . .

You may detect a cynical tone in this passage, as Brad transforms his master teacher into questionable aristocracy, the young students into serfs. It looks as though the master will get his in the end though. Brad leads the narrative to its critical moment, comprised of two words, SHUT UP!, executed in capital letters and followed by an exclamation point. This is his master teacher's reaction to the class's escalating chatter and paper airplane tossing, and the reaction that marks the climax of the narrative. Brad then leads <u>away</u> from this pivotal outburst:

There is a moment of awed silence as the thunder rumbles away. The subjects look sheepish, and the old man seizes his opportunity to retreat back to his keep, knowing that if he remains among them, he will become of them somehow and lose his authority. Today, they have crossed a line and felt the consequences; they are stunned but not hurt. Tomorrow, as they realize this, they will return, rattling the very walls of his impregnable fortress.

Battle lurks here, richly couched in a di[illegible] century and viewed by a cynical observer, the student teache[illegible]as yet to enter the fray himself. But in many of the pieces written by student teachers who had already assumed responsibility for teaching in their master teachers' classes, which was in fact everyone but Brad, the battle metaphor, while less dramatic, is no less dominant . . . and it captures a similar tension, that between the teacher-protagonist, that is, the student teacher-protagonist, and the youngsters in their classes. In Jody's essay, words burst from her students' mouths, she falls into the students' trap, she is caught off guard, and is finally defeated. Don's students push paper at him, invade his space, test him to see how much he'll take and to see if he'll get scared. Maggie speaks of resorting to threats in the classroom, worries over students who challenge her authority, is surprised when a particularly "obnoxious" student whom she's told to be quiet does not leap out of his desk and come toward (her) with his fists flying. She has also told Ceedro, the student in question, to stay after class for being rude. He does. Yet when he's alone with Maggie he asks, "Can I make up the homework that I didn't do this week?" Maggie is surprised at what she sees as a new sheepish Ceedro, and when he finishes his after-class penance Maggie calls, "Have a nice weekend" to what she describes as his retreating figure. At the end of her narrative she conveys her victory over Ceedro in the manner of maybe the Godfather: "In the past minutes," she says of herself and the obnoxious Ceedro,

"we seemed to have struck a new understanding."

The central conflict is not always warlike--Donna writes, for example, "I was perturbed. Todd's booger was infinitely more attractive to the class than my discussions of similar escapades in Tom Sawyer. How could I compete with that? What event, if any, in the novel could rival Todd's booger for immediate, engrossing allure?" I emphasize the words compete and rival to illustrate the point that nine of these 14 essays depend on competition imagery to describe the central narrative event. But in the tension between teacher and student, these writers do not necessarily portray themselves as good and the students as bad. That is, the imagery of the competition, of the battle, comes through even though characters are variously portrayed, not necessarily as angry antagonists. In nine of the essays the student teacher/protagonists do render themselves positively--they are optimistic, prepared, completely jazzed, adaptable, bold. But in six of these nine narratives, students are rendered favorably: they are conscientious, alert, expectant, eloquent, good, attentive, curious. Even so, the competition metaphor emerges, and it captures as the point of central tension the relationship between teacher and students.

In these narratives, the endings are frequently happy--Maggie's story about Ceedro had a happy ending--Ceedro volunteered to make up his missing homework and appears to be "coming around." In fact, the endings are most frequently happy when the students change in ways that bring them closer to the

teacher's ideal student: Don's recalcitrant student, A.P, while a discipline problem, starts to do more of his work than he has ever done before; June's students hold a discussion about a poem while she watches, stunned; Derek's students take notes while he lectures, they "dutifully get out their journals," and they share information in a class discussion about myths, leaving Derek, at the end of class, "in a complete state of shock." He attributes what he calls the class's "attentiveness" to a "fluke," and suggests that such good things will come to an end when he "re-enters fourth period hell once again on Monday morning." Of the nine narratives that convey endings favorable to the teacher, that is, happy endings in which the neophyte teacher's will or ideas prevail, four of them carry markers of modesty like Derek's--this good experience is a fluke.

But I suggest that the assumption underlying these narratives, conveyed in metaphor if not in plot, is that the classroom is a closed system in which the teacher's purpose is to win students over to the teacher's way of (a) <u>seeing</u> the world and (b) <u>doing</u> the world of school. Battles, contests, are central, and they are of wills, ideas, or both, as teachers and students enact metaphoric struggles in which only one comes out the winner. Often, as in Derek's classroom where students dutifully take out their journals, the students appear unaware of who <u>won</u> the battle. Sometimes, as with sheepish Ceedro, they probably know who won. Indeed, our own experience as well as research tells us that successful students are those who "psych-

out" the teacher, giving her what she wants--in effect, letting her win--and so, as in old tv comedies in which wives outsmart husbands by letting them win, these savvy students are in a sense private winners in the battle of the classroom, but the game's the same.

This study has another side to it. The analysis showed there to be a countering representation of teachers and teaching in these narratives in the form of a different, second, dominating metaphor, which emerged in a small minority of the narratives--in four of the fourteen. We might call this metaphor the convergence metaphor. Let me exemplify. Linda's narrative centers on a class in which both she and her students freewrite their way into discovering a topic to write on. The climactic moments of the narrative . . . are those in which evervone reads their writing to one another: Says Linda, "I shared my piece (some of my students marveled over the length of it, but I told them we all started differently) . . . Then Frank shared, and it was quite eloquent, really, something like, 'and here I remain, faced with that blank sheet of paper' " . . . and so on. Linda concludes her narrative with the observation that she is always learning from her students--role reversal, role reciprocity, are salient themes. Ann and her class of eighth graders have all drawn maps of their life histories. The climactic moments are those which capture what the various maps look like: "My road ended in the shape of a question mark, denoting 'Where do I go from here,'" Ann writes. "Katrine's road dipped to a point where

her father had died, Sam's road only spun downhill, with two tight spirals signifying seventh, and now eighth grade." Ann observes: "I felt very glad to have exposed my important moments to the class and come to know theirs in return." Again, the salient theme is reciprocity. Tom's narrative focuses entirely on a bold teaching move in which he comes to class one day in the guise of William Golding. He and his students merge in the fictional world of Lord of the Flies as they enact a kind of fiction together, suspending disbelief so that, for 50 minutes of class time, Golding and students may hob nob.

This minority group of narratives are all marked by plots in which teacher and students are common participants in a learning event. The central narrative tension is not between teacher and student; rather, teacher and student together confront a classroom activity, a writing activity in Linda and Ann's cases, a reading activity in Tom's. The class activity envelopes the participants. Participants, teacher as well as students, merge and emerge together inside the event. The question of winning or losing does not belong in the convergences that thread through these plots and, in fact, imagery that suggests such tension does not appear.

I began this talk by suggesting that all these narratives may be potent teaching tools to use with neophyte teachers. The narratives, as narratives, carry a strong rhetorical punch. They establish each author as an individual (Maggie's students, she is careful to note, are "particularly rambunctious," not to confuse

them with anyone else's students; Jeannie's have "abundant theatrical gifts"). But at the same time, they establish each author solidly within the common group as they convey to one another the recognizable, the familiar, the everyday.

If groups are constituted in part through a common discourse, and if part of that discourse is the metaphor through which individuals present and represent both their singular and collective experiences, then these narratives can be powerful collective mirrors. If asked to look in this mirror, young teachers may catch glimpses of themselves not only as new members of the community of teachers but as particular bearers of a particular culture and as political forces in the business of educating children. These are central dimensions of groupness that can well bear critical scrutiny as we ask where the metaphors we teach by come from, how they are sustained, and how they pass from one generation of teachers to the next.