The Power of Students' Stories: Narrative Inquiry in English Education

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This theoretical article outlines the rationale behind one teacher educator's decision to use student-written narratives as part of a narrative inquiry in a year-long English methods course. The article is an explication of why narrative inquiry, as both an individual and a collective endeavor, can be a powerful tool for student learning. Finally, the author explores the epistemological underpinnings of such an inquiry, as well as the stance a teacher educator might take when engaging in narrative inquiry.

Maxine Greene (1995) suggests that "intensified realization" requires that we understand our realities as "interpreted experience," which depends on our varied "situation[s] and location[s] in the world" (p. 19). I argue that English language arts methods courses are one place where preservice teachers can explore their realities from their varied situations and locations. Through these explorations, they can gain a greater sense of agency that they carry into their own classrooms as they work to provide their students with more relevant and powerful literacy learning opportunities and experiences.

Narrative inquiry is one means of engaging in such work with secondary English language arts preservice teachers. My understanding of narrative inquiry is rooted in the work of Connelly and Clandinin (1988) who define it as "the study of how humans make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future" (p. 21). Thus, narrative inquiry encompasses the stories that people tell, as well as the collection, description, and interpretation of those stories, producing "narratives of experience" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Therefore, grounded in my experiences and my belief that narrative inquiry can be a powerful pedagogical tool, this article is an argument for using narrative inquiry in secondary ELA methods courses.

Toward that end, I have framed this article as a synthesis and interpretation of the existing literature on narrative inquiry, specifically, the literature that has informed my own work with narrative inquiry in my practice as a teacher educator. I begin by first discussing the nature of narrative, including the collective nature of narrative inquiry. This discussion then leads to why narrative inquiry may be an effective pedagogical approach. Afterward, I move to explain

my current understanding of the epistemology behind narrative inquiry, as well as the stance a teacher educator might take in order to effectively engage in narrative inquiry alongside preservice teachers.

The Nature of Narrative and Narrative Inquiry

A discussion about why narrative inquiry seems a powerful pedagogical choice first necessitates a definitional understanding of narrative, for which I draw on the work of narrative theorists. At its most basic level a "narrative is *the representation of an event or a series of events*" (Abbott, 2002, p. 12) that are "connected by subject matter and related by time" (Scholes, 1981, p. 205). In addition, narratives have characters who are a part of the events, as well as narrators who construct the story.

As part of narrative inquiry, students chronicle events in their lives. When students are in the process of choosing which event or series of events (which story) they wish to tell, they have already placed a certain amount of significance on that story. However, increased significance is revealed when they also engage in reflective writing. It is through this reflective process that students" "stories" become narratives, as they re-examine and interrogate their stories to discover how personal experience shapes their beliefs and assumptions about students, teaching, and learning and thus impacts their classroom practices. New insights into *why* they may act as they do in the classroom have the potential to give students a greater sense of agency, a belief that they have the capacity to provide powerful learning experiences for their own students and thus affect student learning. While students take on the role of characters in their stories, narrative inquiry becomes more agentive in nature during the shift from a character in the story to the narrator looking back on the story (Conle, 1999).

However, this term "shift" may be too linear and may not fully capture what occurs during the act of narration. Chatman"s (2000) differentiation between character and narrator does not suggest a shift from character to narrator but instead examines the roles that each plays in narration. Chatman asserts, like Conle (1999), that both characters and narrators are present in narrative, but they serve different functions or have different points of view. A *slant* is the narrator"s point of view and serves a reporting function, whereas a *filter* reflects the character"s mental activity; in other words, slant reflects attitudes, while filter reflects experience.

In narrative inquiry, students are characters in their narratives; they are a part of the events and experiences about which they write. However, as narrators they offer their thoughts, perspectives on, and attitudes toward those experiences and those who are involved in the experiences. Therefore, students need opportunities—and encouragement—to become "narrators," where they can examine their perspectives and attitudes in order to make sense of those aspects of their narratives, particularly those attitudes that are relevant to the classroom and their teaching practices. The move from storytelling to narration seems to be an important pedagogical issue, as it provides direction for narrative inquiry, moving it away from either therapy or "navel gazing" into academic content.

Time works to accomplish this shift from character to narrator, and it is perhaps the reason that character and narrator can abide together. Conle (1999) writes:

> Each telling happens from at least two time perspectives, the ‚then-perspective" of the contents of the story and the ‚now-perspective" available at the time of the telling. The now-perspective changes with each telling, as new information, new circumstances influence the teller. The told event therefore is not "reality itself,"

> but reality from a particular vantage point, the current now-perspective. As the
> vantage point changes, so does the story and with it the reality we are able to
> perceive (p. 15).

Conle is talking specifically about the role of time in the construction of stories and how this role shapes reality. The events in students" written narratives represent what Conle calls a "then-perspective." However, the "now-perspective," which occurs when narratives are constructed, implies that written stories take on new significance or value through that process as the vantage point has changed.

Greene (2000) describes this reality in slightly different terms, as individuals" interpretations of their varied experiences: "To tap into imagination is to become able to break with what is supposedly…objectively and independently real….Doing so, a person may become freed to glimpse what might be, to form notions of what should be and is not yet. And the same person may, at the same time, remain in touch with what presumably *is*" (p. 19). While Greene may not disagree with Conle (1999), she seems to extend Conle"s ideas into the future. In other words, while we may construct the past and interpret the past through the process of narration, it is that very process that allows us to look into the future and to imagine something different or something better. Greene asserts that writing narratives then creates space(s) for us to "become freed to glimpse what might be" (p. 19). Narrative inquiry thus seems to hold great promise, given its ability to span past, present, and future and its potential to create those spaces where we might conceive of a different reality, one that holds greater possibility.

Narrative Inquiry as Pedagogy

Bruner (1996) suggests why narrative inquiry may be a powerful pedagogical tool when he argues that narrative is the means by which we make sense of our experiences. Engaging in narrative inquiry, then, reflects a conscious decision to draw on students" personal experiences and to use their written constructions of these experiences as primary "texts" for teaching. Nespor and Barylske (1991) claim: "Teachers" narratives are not expressions or reflections of some underlying, hidden knowledge or experience; they are tools for constructing knowledge" (p. 819). From a pedagogical perspective, student-constructed narratives may serve as foundational course texts through which preservice teachers explore their experiences, as well as interrogate those experiences in order to gain deeper understandings of themselves and others.

Moreover, narrative is a way of knowing that may be particularly suited to teacher education. Wilson and Ritchie (1994) write:

> Becoming teachers involves an ongoing process of negotiation and struggle
> among various narratives—narratives composed as scripts from their histories in
> gender, social class, racial, ethnic and family groups; multiple and often
> conflicting narratives of teaching and education in our popular culture; and the
> narratives surrounding teaching and learning students have composed from
> seventeen or more years of experience in educational institutions. All of these
> stories continue to shape teachers" understandings of teaching and them as people
> in educational institutions. (p. 178)

I assume that if prospective teachers" conflicting narratives continually shape their understandings of teaching, then engaging in narrative inquiry with them works to create a heightened awareness of who they are, how they have come to be who they are, and how their

beliefs impact their teaching practices. If we think and know in story form, then it is those stories that allow us to make sense of ourselves and the world around us.

Clandinin (1985) identifies this territory of knowledge as a teacher‟s "personal practical knowledge" (p. 362) that takes into account all experiences, both personal and professional. Johnson (1989) complicates this idea further as he explores how a teacher‟s personal practical knowledge shapes the instructional decisions teachers make, as well as the nature of their interactions with students. According to both Clandinin and Johnson, students (and educators) enter classrooms already holding this experiential knowledge. However, Willinsky (1989) identifies this knowledge as tacit rather than explicit. If we believe this to be the case, then narrative inquiry may support students as they work to focus their attention on the ways they understand their world, to bring that knowledge to the surface, and to illuminate how it impacts them in the classroom. Such inquiry is most powerful when it is not an isolated effort but a collective endeavor.

The Collective Nature of Narrative Inquiry

Some theorists and researchers claim that the most distinctive quality of a narrative process is its collective nature, which occurs through the act of "telling" our stories (Conle, 1999). I interpret "telling" as the oral sharing of narratives, which implies a collective effort, and according to some, an essential element of narrative inquiry. Casey (1995-1996) asserts that "the self is understood as a social construction, and as such, can be remade. But this transformation is a collective project" (p. 222). I interpret "collective project" as a group effort or process, a process individuals undertake together with others.

Bruner (1996) identifies this collective effort as collaboration and goes so far as to claim that without collaboration, agency is impossible; you cannot have one without the other. Bruner also suggests what this process might look like in his description of Ann Brown, an elementary classroom teacher who worked to connect agency and collaboration in her classroom. She accomplished this connection through allowing her students to "generate their own hypotheses…negotiate them with others…and take the role of teacher" (p. 93). Bruner identifies this process as providing structure. Accordingly, a pedagogical concern in narrative inquiry is to provide a structure that is conducive to collective inquiry. Moreover, this structure—or collaboration—plays a central role in that during the sharing of narratives, students might hear and learn from each others‟ stories, work to connect each others‟ stories to their own, and explore the connections between all of the stories and their lives in classrooms, potentially leading to a greater sense of agency.

This potential for greater agency may be possible through what Rappaport (1995) defines as a community narrative: "a story that is common among a group of people" (p. 803). I believe that, to some extent, the students in a methods course share at least one common story: that of learning how to teach and struggling with the challenges of classroom life, thus forming a "community narrative" (Rappaport, p. 804). In addition, their individual narratives as prospective teachers need this community narrative if their subsequent stories as teachers are to be "newly created."

Rappaport (1995) also explicates how a greater sense of agency might result when a community narrative supports the creation of new individual narratives: "Empowerment [is] enhanced when people discover, or create and give voice to, a collective narrative that sustains their own personal life story in positive ways…listening to stories and helping people to create

places that value and support both their personal stories and their collective narratives is an empowering activity" (pp. 796 & 805). Rappaport"s work, then, suggests that narrative inquiry is a sound pedagogical choice.

Bond, Belenky, and Weinstock (2000), further this implication with their illustration of how a narrative inquiry played out for a group of young women in an intervention called "The Listening Partners." They describe this intervention as "[a] social action, peer group interaction [that] supported a community of poor, rural, isolated, young, White mothers to gain a greater voice, claim the powers of their minds, and collaborate in developmental leadership " (p. 1). As part of this intervention, the researchers "designed sessions where women took turns telling their life story…as narrative is the primary tool we have for making sense out of our own experiences in the world…The goal was to name one"s own experience and naming is power" (pp. 6 & 18). However, that empowerment came from more than the stories and the naming; it also derived from the process of sharing of those stories, where "reflective dialogue was the centerpiece of the peer group activities because it empowers people as individuals and groups" (p. 5). I theorize that collective effort, as well as collected stories, may lead to new understandings; these researchers" work again suggests the power of collective narrative inquiry.

In their prologue to the book *Stories Lives Tell: Narrative and Dialogue in Education* (1991), Witherell and Noddings write:

> Through telling, writing, reading, and listening to life stories—one"s own and others"—those engaged in this work can penetrate cultural barriers, discover the power of the self and the integrity of the other, and deepen their understanding of their respective histories and possibilities. (p. 4)

These scholars assert that growth is not only an individual process; instead, deeper understandings of both the self and others also come through dialogue with others. Because narrative inquiry is often collaborative, teacher educators may need to develop pedagogical practices and stances that would support, guide, and encourage the processes of the collective effort. Below I explicate what this collective effort might look like in a secondary English language arts methods course, focusing on understandings of knowledge, as well as the implications for teaching that such epistemological assumptions reveal.

Constructed Knowing

Given the tensions and dissonance that prospective teachers may sense, it does not seem efficacious to provide only one way of exploring and addressing their concerns. Asking students to simply draw on their personal experiences to inform the decisions they might make also seems insufficient, as it may result in overly-simplistic analyses or interpretations. Students may minimize contextual factors and may not critically examine or question their personal experiences (Appleman, 2000).

A more effective approach to narrative inquiry might be to weave together students" subjective knowledge, which I understand as their experiential knowledge, with objective knowledge, which I define as knowledge-for-practice, the "formal knowledge and theory (including codifications of the so-called wisdom of practice) *for* teachers to use in order to improve practice" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 250). This approach would entail supporting students as they work to develop a stance of constructed knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997). Constructed knowing is the understanding that it is people who construct knowledge. Therefore, that all knowledge, even "received" knowledge (codified

knowledge located in academic texts) is contextualized, experiential in nature, and never "neutral." When students take a stance of constructed knowing, they come to realize that they too can generate new knowledge and create new understandings. Developing a stance of constructed knowing is a process through which students might shape new perceptions of people, ideas, or situations, leading to more complicated understandings of students, teaching, and learning. As a result, students may begin to develop a greater tolerance for ambiguity and a recognition that conflict is unavoidable, which seems significant given the uncertainties of teaching.

When engaged in narrative inquiry, guiding students toward a stance of constructed knowing seems logical, if not necessary, and requires a pedagogy that blends their past experiences as students with received knowledge. As prospective teachers engage in narrative inquiry, they may be allowed to "return," in a sense, to a position of subjective knowing. At the least, they need to understand that their subjective knowledge is a powerful tool for learning. However, this is not the "end." They also need to learn how to integrate that knowledge with objective knowledge, or knowledge-for-practice.

The notion of "integrate," however, is more complicated than simply applying knowledge-for-practice to experiential knowledge or drawing on one to inform another. Instead, integrate means interrogating both subjective and objective knowledge, problematizing and complicating both. As students read across and against texts, both their own and others'', they can assess and reassess the significance and value of those texts from their current perspectives, as well as consider the future implications of what they have newly come to know and understand.

Therefore, students may need to reflect on their past experiences, being alert to the details of those experiences, perhaps questioning and challenging the beliefs and values that have resulted from those experiences. At the same time, they need those experiences to make sense of and challenge the objective knowledge that they encounter in academic texts. Through this process, they may move toward a stance of constructed knowing. It is from this perspective, then, that they can explore their beliefs and assumptions about students, teaching, and learning. From this perspective, they may relearn how to engage in reflective and critical thought about teaching practice.

Villegas and Lucas (2002) describe how teacher educators can support their students in developing a stance of constructed knowing when they discuss the role of autobiographical writing in teacher education courses:

> [It] helps them not only to better understand their own worldviews but also to recognize the active roles they can play in promoting or obstructing the success of individual students and groups of students and to consider ways they might act toward these students in the future. (p. 123)

It seems that these authors are arguing that narrative inquiry helps students to better understand their worldviews. Through this deeper understanding of their worldviews, students may begin to recognize where they may be advantaging some students while disadvantaging others. A social action agenda implies that teachers should work to advantage *all* students and to respond equitably to all students. Believing that preservice teachers need to understand their experiences—and thus their worldviews—suggests the value and significance of experiential knowledge and the role it plays in how they act toward students. Valuing that knowledge thus means allowing students to name their experiences, and naming can serve to empower them.

Working toward constructed knowing may require a teacher educator to become a co-learner and a co-authority alongside students. These roles encourage students to assume similar roles with both their instructor and with their peers. To fully appreciate the value of narrative

inquiry and benefit from such an inquiry, then, requires that both teachers and students assume a sense of responsibility to all members of the collective and to the subject matter. Working from the epistemological position of constructed knowing, where students are co-learners and co-authorities, illuminates the stance a teacher educator might take while engaging in narrative inquiry, what such a stance may entail, and what challenges it may present.

Teacher Stance

At its most basic level, constructivist learning theory argues that knowledge is grounded in—and generated from—experience, which is similar to the notion of constructed knowing. Constructivist learning theory is a way of understanding how we make sense of new knowledge in terms of what we already know. However, it should not be confused with constructed knowing, which is a stance, a belief about what constitutes knowledge. Constructivist learning theory espouses that students act as co-learners, socially sharing in intellectual endeavors or socially co-constructing knowledge (Resnick, 1997; Windschitl, 2002).

Educational theorists (e.g., Duckworth, 1987; Windschitl, 2002) have written about a teacher's role in a constructivist setting, as well as the dilemmas this type of teaching might create. I will first provide a brief description of constructivists' understanding of a teacher's role and will then attend to the notion of teachers' embodying a stance, which I define as teachers acting on a set of values and beliefs regarding the nature of their role as a teacher, the nature of the instructional decisions they make, and their interactions with students in the classroom. Further, I will explain why such a stance may support narrative inquiry.

Windschitl (2002) characterizes teacher and student activities in a constructivist classroom: Teachers draw on students' backgrounds and experiences, provide multiple opportunities for collaborative efforts among students, and work with students to make their thinking processes explicit. His characterizations seem to echo Duckworth (1987) who asserts that teachers who espouse constructivist teaching and learning should acknowledge complexity, raise questions, and focus on depth versus breadth. When teachers take on such a role, learners come to recognize knowledge as human constructions and realize that teachers are not the final arbiters of what students come to know.

Acting as a co-learner and co-authority along with students may seem (at least to some) like a new kind of instruction and could prove disruptive to students' images of "being students and teacher." Theories of a teacher's *stance* explain how teachers can provide a representation of a "teaching self" in a classroom where students and teacher value constructed knowing and are engaged in narrative inquiry.

Fried (1995) calls a *stance* "a philosophy, an attitude, a bearing, a way of encountering students based on a set of core values about kids and their learning potential….based on our commitment to respect the depth of their potential and the dignity of their person" (pp. 139 & 150). My understanding of Fried's definition and evaluation of a stance, then, is that it is based on a set of beliefs and values that informs every move, every decision, every response a teacher makes. Teachers' actions reflect their beliefs about students, including whether or not they respect students' potential and dignity. Teachers who have developed *stances* have a solid foundation of what teaching and learning are all about; despite the shifting winds of instructional policies and theories, and they can return to that cornerstone to rediscover that "essence." Taking a stance does not eliminate the reality that the teacher is an "historical being" entrenched in the "culture of the classroom," and it does *not* mean that a teacher will not experience dilemmas or

feel tensions. However, unlike *assuming* a role, a teacher *embodies* a stance. It encompasses who a teacher is as an individual—a human being—as well as a teacher.

Belenky, Clinchy, Golberger, and Tarule (1997) suggest how this stance might work in narrative inquiry. Teachers do not "assign" ideas or issues or posit questions for the students to think about and then pull back and observe. Nor do teachers do all of the thinking and then make their thinking available for students to absorb. Instead, teachers think about ideas or issues *with* students and join in the discussion or dialogue *alongside* them. This is a different "image" of what being a teacher might be all about.

Extending this idea of a teacher's "image" even further, Belencky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997) provide the image of a teacher as midwife who assists students as they "give birth" to their own ideas. In other words, a midwife teacher is interested in more than positing ideas, opinions, experiences, or knowledge; instead, this teacher works and talks with students and guides them as they make their own knowledge and thinking public. Through this process, both teachers and students learn with and from each other. As a result, the images of student and teacher begin to merge, as they both become co-learners and co-authorities. Furthermore, a teacher who embodies this stance does not allow students to simply share their beliefs or interpretations with each other but instead encourages students to think and talk about themselves in more theoretical terms.

hooks (1994) suggests that when a teacher portrays an image that seems unfamiliar—and asks students to also portray an unfamiliar image—it can be uncomfortable and disruptive for students. Even if students do believe in their legitimacy as knowers and believe that they share mutual responsibility for learning with the teacher, they may not necessarily trust a teacher who claims to share this belief. Therefore, teachers need to "prove" their convictions to gain students' trust and to support students as they begin to unlock their powers as learners and individuals.

This idea does not assume that just because a teacher is vulnerable with students—and shares in taking risks—that students will "automatically" believe that the teacher is trustworthy. Nor does it assume that after sharing in the experience of mutual risk-taking with a teacher that students will "suddenly" perceive themselves—and their knowledge—as legitimate in the classroom. However, if teachers are not willing to take risks with students and expose their vulnerabilities, then it is more likely that students may *never* fully trust or *never* fully believe in their legitimacy.

The stance that hooks (1994) describes seems consistent with what Jackson (1986) calls "transformative teaching," which he contrasts with the "showing" and "telling" practices of "mimetic teaching." Transformative teaching seeks

> a transformation of one kind or another in the person being taught—a qualitative
> change often of dramatic proportion, a metamorphosis, so to speak…conceived of
> as being more deeply integrated and ingrained within the psychological makeup
> of the student—and therefore as perhaps more enduring—than those sought
> within…[traditions] whose dominant metaphor is one of 'adding on' to what
> already exists. (pp. 120-121).

Jackson argues that teachers working within a transformative tradition "*do* have some characteristic ways of working" (p. 124), including personal modeling, where teachers "personify the very qualities they seek to engender in their students" (p. 124). What is interesting about Jackson's assertions about transformative teaching is that the authority of teachers and students do not "merge." Instead, the authority of the teacher becomes "diminished;" teacher and student roles reverse themselves; and the teacher's knowledge and status are not clearly superior.

The very nature of narrative inquiry, which is grounded in personal experience and relies on the collective efforts of both students and teachers, necessitates that a teacher educator embodies this stance. It is this stance that will encourages students" experiences to become the basis of study and places their narrative texts at the center of the methods classroom.

Endings

It is crucial for English educators to constantly consider what future English teachers need to know. What constitutes "best practice" is continually under discussion and changes as students, contexts, technologies, and society in general change. Furthermore, English itself is a "contested and diffuse field" (Meyer & Sawyer, 2006, p. 46). Given the inherent challenges in the field and how the knowledge base for teaching seems to be in a state of continual flux, it is imperative that teacher educators examine their curriculum and pedagogy.

I would assert that narrative inquiry represents such an examination in English education. Narrative inquiry reflects a vision of teaching (Kennedy, 2006) and leads to the construction of knowledge, particularly knowledge of the self, knowledge of others, and conceptual knowledge of teaching. Therefore, one implication of this examination is that it suggests how students" visions of education—regardless of their flaws—may be incorporated into a curricular segment that is but one constituent of a larger course or program.

If projects such as this were a regular part of the curriculum for teacher education, we might find that we would create more opportunities for prospective teachers to develop new understandings of themselves, their peers, and their students. Students" own narrative texts hold the power to represent more than content, as students come to realize that producing and sharing those texts represent a process through which they can examine their teaching practices and hopefully experience a greater sense of agency as they work to meet the challenges they will inevitably face.

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