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Whose Narrative is it?: Ethical Issues when Using Drama with Teacher Narratives

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Abstract

The authors describe ethical issues they have encountered when teachers develop narratives about their own practice and then again when these narratives are later explored using drama techniques. Specifically, they look at the developmental process itself, both in the creation of the original narrative and the subsequent creation of a dramatic text. They also examine the climate of trust and respect that needs to be in place when teachers share narratives especially when the author of the narrative is not known. Issues of power relationships also arise especially when soliciting narratives from pre-service teachers and sharing them with wider audiences. (Note 1)

Other people's stories—those are the ones I crave. ... Not the stories I already know, but the ones I haven't heard yet: the ones that will show me a way out of here. ... The point is to find sense. (Barbara Kingsolver, 1995, p 156.)

There is a good reason why there is a narrative or story at the heart of most drama/theatre practice. Narratives are an integral part of our lives and, in fact, of our basic human condition. Earlier cultures taught their children, passed on their cultural heritage, and recorded their history through stories. Research tells us that knowing narrative structure is a pre-condition for literacy in children (Wagner, 1998). Teaching is more effective when done through stories as the narrative structure is more easily understood and recorded in our minds (Bruner, 1986, as cited in Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995). Sharing stories helps to create common bonds and a sense of community (Atkinson, 1995). Narratives help us know who we are and unite us in times of trouble.

We know narratives or formal stories are also powerful tools in learning, teaching, and research because for nearly ten years now, we have used them in one form or another as a part of teaching and learning educational drama. Educational drama differs from theatre in that it is designed more for the benefit of the participants rather than for an outside audience. As Wagner (1998) notes, "The goal of educational drama is to create an experiences through which students may come to understand human interactions, empathize with other people and alternative points of view" (p. 5). In classrooms, stories are used as texts when students recreate them using *story dramatization* or pre-texts when a story becomes a jumping off place to create a new text or drama world using *process drama* (O'Neill, 1995). Students share personal narratives as part of their work in drama, and, most importantly, classes

develop their own shared texts through participation in drama activities.

In our teacher education classes we have used teacher narrative and case based teaching as a learning tool for both pre-service and in-service teachers. We have learned much about this process over the years, especially how to work ethically, as have others who also work with practitioners (e.g., Zeni, 2001), use narrative in playbuilding (e.g., Weigler, 2001), or use narrative in other drama forms such as playback theatre (e.g., Wright, 2002). This paper will address how we have used narratives with both pre- and in-service teachers and the ethical issues we have encountered along the way. We hope that our experiences will serve as a guide for others.

How We Came to Work with Narratives

We are both teacher educators: Heather at the University of Tasmania in Launceston, and Laura at the University of Arizona in Tucson; and we work with pre-service drama/theatre education students, primary education majors, and classroom teachers. Initially we came at teacher narratives and case based teaching from opposite directions. Heather used already developed teacher narratives as texts which her students explored through drama, largely improvisation. Laura's students developed their own narratives during their student teaching semester. A published collection of these narratives written by student teachers in Canada and the US (Norris, McCammon, & Miller, 2000) eventually became a text for secondary drama/theatre methods courses. As a result of our association with each other, we began to shift our foci—Heather to eliciting narratives from teachers and Laura to exploring narratives through drama.

A few years ago we worked together on an international project (Note 2) which sought to investigate cross-cultural understanding that could develop through the writing and sharing of narratives between teachers in the United States and teachers in Australia. The purposes of the individual projects differed somewhat: Heather was asked to help build a new community in a school where faculty had recently been merged. As they explored their teaching contexts, the teachers developed narratives focusing on their dilemmas or on issues raised during group discussions. Laura worked with a group of elementary teachers in the same school looking at their reflections on general classroom practice and on their use of drama in the classroom.

The Arizona teachers also used drama to explore the narratives the teachers wrote. For example, one narrative described a particularly disruptive parent who confronted the teacher/author in her classroom. When one of the younger teachers in the group said she was not sure if she would be able to deal with such a parent as gracefully, a role play situation was set up with the younger teacher as the teacher in the narrative and another teacher as the parent. After the scene played out for a bit, Laura stopped the action and discussed what might be going through the teacher's mind during this confrontation. The scene was replayed with two other teachers reflecting the voices in the head of the confronted teacher, one voice urging her to take appropriate action and the other representing the negative thoughts generated by the heated exchange. The whole group reflected on the coping strategies developed through the improvisation.

Over the course of both projects, the teachers wrote biographies and at least one narrative which were shared with the teachers in the other setting. The teachers also wrote commentaries for their international peers (Note 3)

Why Use Narratives in the First Place?

There are several learning goals inherent in the process of writing teacher narratives:

1. As they develop a narrative about their teaching experiences, teachers discover what Connelly and Clandinin (1988) call “personal practical knowledge” or what they have learned about teaching through their own experiences, validating this knowledge in the process. Developing narratives is an effective method of developing and articulating teacher voice (Richert, 1992). These two comments from teachers in our study are typical of the kind of remarks that follow narrative inquiry with both pre-service and in-service teachers:

I learned more about my colleagues and more about my own teaching. It was very powerful. [Tasmanian teacher]

After 18 years of teaching, it was nice to take a step back and really dive into my ways of teaching, not only through my eyes, but through the eyes of others too. Looking at other teachers and their commentaries of their teaching methods proved to me that I was certainly on the right track and maybe doing a good job too. [Arizona teacher] (Smigiel & McCammon, 2000, p. 8)

2. Writing, editing, discussing the narrative enables teachers to reflect (Schön, 1983) on their lives in classrooms. It is primarily in reflection, which teachers, especially drama/theatre teachers, seldom take time to do (McCammon, Miller, & Norris 1999a), that new discoveries about teaching and learning are made, as this teacher noted: “*I felt the reflections were an integral part of the course. [They] allowed us to take a deeper look into our own teaching styles and philosophies*” [Arizona teacher] (Smigiel & McCammon, 2000, p. 8).
3. Sharing their narratives demonstrate our “inherent connectedness with others” (Atkinson, 1995, p. 4) and can be an effective means of creating community. Finding a sense of community and decreasing teacher isolation was one of the strongest benefits we have found for those who participate in developing and sharing narratives. These two teacher comments are typical:

We’ve had heaps of interaction and some heated discussions. Addressing issues of peer pressure have been rewarding. I’ve been surprised at what I feel I’ve got out of the kids. [Tasmanian teacher]

Working closely with our peers also gave us an opportunity to gain new perspectives on a variety of topics. I feel that it also fostered a mutual sense of understanding and support among the group. [Arizona teacher] (Smigiel & McCammon, 2000, pp. 9-10)

Ethical Concerns

Creating the Narrative

The narrative writing process. We have found that it is most effective to begin eliciting narratives with a narrative to not only “prime the pump”, but to also model the writing process. The exemplars we use are previously written narratives such as those in *Teachers' Narratives: From Personal Narrative to Professional Insight* (Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995), or narratives that we have developed in prior work. (See “Yard Duty” at the end of this paper.) The choice of narrative is important because it sets the tone for the kinds of narratives developed in the group.

Sometimes the narrative writing comes from discussions and/or drama activities we have conducted with teachers; for example, stories that have been written when in-role as a

particular character or stories that arise from a pretext and are developed by the group. Sometimes the writers are given a topic to write a narrative about (e.g., “Abandoning Teaching” from Jalongo & Isenberg, pp. 197-200), and sometimes the narrative writers are simply asked to develop a narrative about a teaching experience (e.g., the student teacher narratives). The narrative can be written all at once or in stages: a) in the first stage the author tells the narrative using as objective a tone as possible; b) in the second and third stages, she goes back and analyses what happened in the case and applies new learning to future work (Norris, McCammon, & Miller, 2000).

What happens when a narrative is developed? When we talk to teachers and collect their narratives or get them to write a personal narrative, they enter into a process of “storying” themselves and those narratives. Schank (1990) notes that when people tell narratives, they usually have one goal for themselves and another for their listeners. *Me-goals* are those intentions that storytellers have for themselves. There are five intentions for Me-goal narratives: to achieve catharsis, to get attention, to win approval, to seek advice, or to describe themselves. These narratives, especially those that are told often, become who we are and telling them allows us to feel those feelings that define us yet again. *You-goals* are those intentions storytellers have with respect to others. You-goal narratives also tend to fall into five categories: illustrate a point, make the listener feel some way or another, tell a narrative that transports the listener, transfer some piece of information in our head into the head of the listener, or summarize significant events. Schank also adds a third category: *Conversational goals*. The teller may want begin a conversation, change the topic or revive a previous conversation (pp. 41-51). The narratives we developed with teachers addressed all three goals. We also recognized the importance of the audience for the narratives—there is a difference in a narrative prepared for a known and visible audience and in preparing one for an unknown audience.

When teachers construct a narrative from a personal experience, they make choices about what to tell and even what they remember; it is also possible that they may recreate the narrative in the process as Connelly and Clandinin (1988) note, “Any piece of autobiographical writing is a particular reconstruction of an individual’s narrative, and there could be other reconstructions” (p.39). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggest that as we write, we create a sort of lived experience. There is not, however, some big truth out there that we know and tell. We create from what we hear and see. Reality, and our knowledge of it, are contextually constructed and reconstructed from our personal pathways and experiences. As Geertz (as cited in Eisner, 1991) so effectively describes, “Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance that he himself has spun” (p. 43). But this story is not told in a vacuum; the story is constructed in a context: “a life as told, a life history, is a narrative, influenced by the cultural conventions of telling, by the audience and the social context” (Bruner, 1984, p. 7).

Bearing in mind both the creative nature of storying and the complex social climate in which narratives are shared, we have found that we have ethical obligations to both the teller and the listener. First, while many narratives about a teaching experience are by nature emotional and telling them can be a cathartic experience, it is important that we, as the leaders, move the tellers beyond the “teacher-as-victim” narrative because these narratives serve largely to reinforce the culture of schools (McCammon, 1998). Reflective practice should enable a teacher to find a future solution to a teaching dilemma or de-mystify a previous experience by looking it squarely in the face. Second, it is imperative that a strong and supportive climate has been developed and maintained to enable the teller to risk sharing her work. While the vast majority of the teachers in our study reported that they benefited from both telling their own and hearing the narratives of others, the comment below, however, indicates that the same level of support was not perceived by all participants:

It takes guts to risk new material. Risking like this takes time. I do have to say

that I took a risk in this class writing a very personal, open reflection just to have it ridiculed and judged. ... I don't appreciate opening up and risking and then to be stomped on. (McCammon & Smigiel, 2000, p. 12)

We find we must be ever on our guard to allow our participants to make “risky” decisions and to feel good about them afterwards.

Respecting the Storyteller

One of our purposes in developing narratives is to share those narratives as examples of experiences or “cases” with other groups as part of a learning process. However, once a narrative is written down and then shared with another group who does not know the teller, a new dilemma emerges. As we noted earlier, teachers in our study read not only the narratives of their school peers, but also the narratives written by the teachers in the other country. As we explored these narratives, often using educational drama to unpack and develop understanding of issues, we became aware of the range of interpretations that the teachers were making about the authors of the various narratives. We were often dismayed when the teachers in the narratives were sometimes criticized or misunderstood. The learning about the teaching process was powerful and the research project was seen as successful in meeting those ends. However, we were left wondering about whether the narrative authors had been treated unjustly or unfairly (Smigiel & McCammon, 2000).

This same situation had occurred with student teacher case narratives when students at one location were frequently inclined to be overly critical of the students in the cases developed in another, unfamiliar, location. Carole Miller solved this dilemma by reminding her students that the writers of the narratives were their peers who had given them a gift, a narrative about their own experiences. These narratives were meant as a learning experience for all (Norris, McCammon, & Miller, 2000).

Once a narrative is written and published, it does cease to be the narrative of the author, in some respects as it has been transformed from private reflection to public document. We think this may be particularly true when the names and locations in the narrative are changed to protect the authors. When a pseudonym is added, an element of fiction creeps into a narrative, which was already changed from “truth” simply in the telling of it. Does this make it more or less easy to use in another context? In our study, we obtained consent from the teachers to use their narratives in other contexts. But even with this written permission, we cannot be 100% sure that the teachers knew what might happen to their narrative when explored by a different group of people.

Taking a teacher’s narrative and then exploring it through drama, also changes the original narrative in significant ways, particularly when the narrative becomes a pre-text for process drama explorations. In this case an issue in a narrative provides the context for creating a new story. For example, in one narrative an older teacher seems to treat students from one teacher’s classroom more harshly than she treats her own. The group exploring this story, decided to “hotseat” the teacher. One of the group agreed to portray the teacher and the others asked her questions about her actions and beliefs. In this way, the teacher became a more three dimensional personality and the group could find ways to understand her actions, but it was still in a fictional drama world because the teachers had used their own knowledge and experiences to create a new version of the events.

We have also used the cases several times as part of workshops at professional conferences. Each time the narratives were interpreted differently and new shared meanings emerged as a result of the exploration through drama. We believe that most of the teachers we worked with understood that their narratives would be constantly re-interpreted because they had already worked with other people’s narratives. (And they did not all give permission to use

their narratives elsewhere.) Most, we believe, felt pleased their narratives were going to be told again and, like the participants in playback theatre, found that using their narratives could be both “gift” and “affirmation” (Wright, 2002, p. 143).

Considering the Audience

It is important for the authors of narratives (and the editors of narrative collections) to consider who the possible audience might be when they write their narratives; especially when writing for those in another culture or country. That is why Laura asks her student teachers to turn in a rough draft of their case study before the final copy and tells them to remember that they are writing for someone who was not there (Norris, McCammon, & Miller, 2000). When she reads the rough drafts, Laura helps the authors identify places in their narratives which might need more explanation.

In our study we also found that

The cases were effective ways for teachers to reflect about their practice when written for themselves and for close peers, but were not as effective when written for a wider audience because the use of site-specific teacher slang and jargon tended to distance rather than bring the teachers closer together. (Smigiel & McCammon, 2000, p. 10.)

In everyday conversations, slang and jargon represent understandings forged in a specific culture and sometimes are only understood within that cultural context. In a cross-cultural study, the appearance of slang expressions can be humorous. For example, one of the Tasmanian teachers titled her narrative “Touchy-Feeling-Warm-Fuzzy Drama Stuff” or Dacked!”, the Arizona teachers, unfamiliar with the term “dacked”, had a great deal of fun speculating what the term might mean until the mystery was finally solved when Heather’s translation arrived (to be “pants” or to have ones pants pulled down in public.) But more often than not, the teachers felt that they were shut out of cases because they could not understand or visualize what was taking place. We have learned that whenever we use a narrative, we include either footnote or parenthetical explanations of terms or reference to pop culture.

Power

Ethical issues arise when college professors ask others to write about their work since the professor is in a position of power and the writers may feel a narrative is coerced. This is particularly true for undergraduate pre-service teachers who are taught and supervised by university faculty. As McKenna (2003) notes, “the classroom is a politicised space” (p. 435) and, despite our best efforts, often, “in the classroom, authority . . . and patriarchy are replicated” (p. 436). During the time of student teacher narrative project, Laura and her co-editors, Carole Miller and Joe Norris found that while many students appreciated the opportunity to share their narratives with a near peer (McCammon, Miller, & Norris, 1999b); some of the students complained, however, stating that the college professors were using their students to write a book. (This was true, of course; the book *Learning to Teach Drama: A Case Narrative Approach* was published in 2000!) In the early stages of the project, Laura admitted that sometimes, for her, getting the narrative took precedence over a student’s understanding of why the narrative could be important and how a narrative can benefit the profession (Miller, Norris, & McCammon, 1999). In time, however, the process became mutually reinforcing.

We feel it is important that whenever a teacher-researcher plans to gather narratives (or any other artefacts of students’ works) and uses them as exemplars or as items for study with future students that a signed consent form is obtained. Informed consent is perhaps the first

basic ethical principle to adhere to in gathering and using the work of others (Note 4). With the student teacher cases, as well as with the commentaries that eventually accompanied them in the book, the case/commentary author had the option of granting or not granting permission for the case/commentary to be used in research, in classes, or in a published book of cases (Norris, McCammon, & Miller, 2000). Carole, Joe, and Laura also decided to donate any earnings from the sale of the book to the International Drama/Theatre in Education Association Solidarity Fund recognizing that they were not the authors of the cases, merely the editors.

Another form of power we have found as college professors, especially when working with in-service teachers, is the power of perceived expertise. Schön noted that

...we have promoted a society of experts and nonexperts, researchers and non researchers. This promotion is evident not only in the authority endowed to certain professionals to make decisions for us, but also in the blind allegiance to people, books, approaches, and beliefs. Some people belong to the research club and others are excluded from it. Teachers for the most part have not been conditioned to see themselves as club members. (As cited in Taylor, 1998, p. 223)

When we have worked with teachers, in any context, we find we must constantly remind ourselves that we are there first and foremost to learn with the teachers and not, as Elliot Eisner (1985) termed it, as a part of an “educational commando raid” (p. 143) to swoop down, gather our data and run. Working with teachers, especially at their schools either during released time for professional development or after school hours, involves a delicate dance between the teachers’ needs and the researcher’s, and especially between the teachers’ time and energy and the researcher’s schedule for the day. As our data indicated, however, most of the teachers in our project found that writing the narratives and reading the narratives of others was an empowering and satisfying experience.

Conclusion

There are many considerations to be made when using people’s real life narratives in educational contexts. This paper has outlined a few that have arisen from our work in narrative inquiry and in the combination of narrative inquiry with educational drama. These considerations which include, power, respect, truthfulness, representation of another, and managing multiple interpretations of one narrative need to be explored in more detail and managed very carefully, and with sensitivity in drama and other teaching and learning situations.

We encourage the use of teacher narratives in your own work. Here is a narrative that we particularly liked written by teacher in Australia from our project. This story resulted from group discussions about the complexities of decisions teachers regularly make. It is a powerful and humorous story that has elements that may lead to dramatization and also to effective discussion about the working lives of teachers. It also demonstrates the vulnerability of narratives written by teachers and shared with wider audiences. These powerful, personal stories are important and valuable for a range of audiences but the ways in which they are used needs to be given careful consideration.

We give it to you! Enjoy!

YARD-DUTY

Part of my day requires me to behave like a policeman. I have to patrol the grounds ensuring all students are safe and monitor their behaviour so that it is

acceptable and legal.

My area for duty on the particular day covers secret smoking places, quick getaway exits and a toilet block. It was morning recess. I began my stroll, making a good start by spilling a cup of boiling hot coffee on my hand! I decided to slowly walk towards 'the shed'. Slowly walking allows time for those who may be out of bounds to decide what to do—escape or create some crazy excuse for being there in the first place.

I noticed the new groundsman near the shed so I plotted my course to include a conversation about the good job he had done since he began working here. About halfway there, I saw a grade 10 boy walked purposefully toward the school canteen. He could be returning from a dental appointment; he could be out of bounds or an elected decoy for others out of bounds. We chose to ignore each other despite the fact that we often talk. Instantly I knew he was a decoy and that there were others behind the shed. Not a word was spoken but much communication was taking place. My speed toward the shed maintained a slow pace indicating a mystery of intention to those still standing behind the shed. I moved closer toward the shed and called out loudly a list of suspects who would be likely to be hiding. No response. I thought “it can wait”. I actually thought of how long it would take before they would give themselves up. As I arrived at the shed, I spoke to the groundsman about the boys. He realised I knew what was happening. I chose to ignore the boys behind the shed as they would be working out a plan to return to acceptable boundaries within the school.

As I continued speaking to the groundsman I was knowingly having an intensive non verbal conversation with the boys. Next minute I looked across the road and spied number one student crouched down low creeping behind a semi mature, but open privet hedge—not only crouching but he had taken a small branch from the hedge and was holding it to his face as camouflage!

I spoke to the groundsman. I knew the other student would have to try some other method of creeping back to school without being detected. I looked across the road and monitored the 'moving' branch—shades of 'Birnam Wood'—there was some use in that play! While this was taking place student number two had plotted a course along a fortunately dry gutter! I saw his head pop up and then he crouched, army style, moving on elbows and sliding along to put some distance between us.

The 'branch' had stopped moving, as if waiting for the bobbing body to reach an agreed point, then suddenly both boys rose, pulled their sweaters over their heads (as they do in crime scenes on TV) and bolted straight to the concealment of the canteen fence. As if we did not know who they were, as if we did not know what they were doing. The groundsman and I looked at each other—“Dickheads” (“Idiots”) we said it simultaneously and laughed.

I chose not to mention the scene officially but the description received guffaws from the staffroom afterwards. I will never forget those students—they are complete masterminds of evasive action in all respects. We all knew what should have happened, but, through spontaneous, intelligent and humourous sequences of non verbal movements, we had a long and colourful conversation. Of course I attribute it all to sunglasses. We are able to talk to people while we are able to watch others at the same time. The joke was I saw it all and somehow I don't think the boys really knew, or did they?!

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 4th Researching Drama in Education Conference at the University of Exeter, April 9-13, 2002.
2. Results of this work were documented in two conference papers: McCammon & Smigiel, 2000 and Smigiel and McCammon, 2000.
3. Both programs were approved by the school governing boards, and the teachers gave written permission for their work to be used in research reports.
4. For a detailed discussion of ethical issues in practitioner research see Beck, DuPont, Geismar-Ryan, Henke, Pierce, & von Hatten, 2001; Mohr, 2001; van den Berg, 2001; and Zeni, 2001

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