

## *Narrative as a Basis for Teaching Educational Psychology*

Kelvin Seifert

*Real classroom events are inherently complex and open to multiple interpretations. Narrative is therefore a vital, but underused, tool in helping future teachers understand this complexity and begin to consider the many issues involved in any one instance of teaching and learning. The author discusses how to choose rich, balanced narratives and how such narratives may be used in teaching educational psychology, concluding with examples of how his own students develop and use more traditional expository knowledge through the analysis and re-visioning of stories from Tracy Kidder's **Among Schoolchildren**.*

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Classroom events are usually ambiguous and ambivalent, in that they usually serve more than one purpose and can be either praised, critiqued, or both (Good and Brophy, 2003). A teacher compliments a student's contribution to a discussion: at that moment she may be motivating that student, but also focusing classmates' thinking on key ideas. Her comment functions simultaneously as behavioral reinforcement (in Skinner's sense), information (in the cognitive science sense), and affirmation of caring (in Nel Noddings' sense). Complimenting the student may be exactly the right thing to do. Or not: perhaps her praise means she is neglecting the contributions of others, or focusing attention on factors that students cannot control, like ability instead of effort. Everything, it seems, cuts more than one way, signifies more than one thing. This complication can make it difficult to talk and write about teaching, but it also makes teaching itself interesting and challenging.

Inherent ambiguity also turns classroom life into something akin to a narrative, and makes understanding teaching and learning more like comprehending a story than analyzing expository text. Stories unfold in time, have protagonists, and are subject to interpretations; so do classrooms. As they unfold, stories can in principle end more than one way, though some endings are more plausible and likely than others; so it is with classrooms. Stories tend to be less about impersonal causes and effects than about human intentions and choices; so, it would seem, are classrooms. Stories raise questions more than make statements; if answers are implied, they are often offered as possibilities rather than certainties.

Given, then, that narrative seems in many ways better suited for understanding teaching and learning than exposition (Barone & Eisner, 2006; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006), the scattered attempts at narrative in current textbooks should give way to more full-bodied embraces of story and its rhetorical power. Instead of the occasional half-page case

studies and passing mentions of personal experiences, narratives might form the backbone of what future teachers need to "know." Yet even this statement is not quite accurate. It might be better to say, in keeping with their nature, that narratives would form the backbone of what future teachers need to *consider*.

The task of looking for rich narratives, however, is not straightforward. Among the countless books published every year are many with extended narratives, but relatively few portray teaching and learning directly. Publishers have produced supplementary books of case studies and routinely include a few brief cases in conventional texts. Both kinds of case studies, though, have been brief—usually not more than a printed page or two. Their scarcity and brevity limit their usefulness and insure that they play a distinctly secondary role in most educational psychology courses.

Deciding to use narratives as a centerpiece for teaching educational psychology necessarily begins with identifying one or more suitable narratives. Once an instructor makes this decision, he or she faces two others: designing actual ways for students to engage with the narratives effectively, and assessing whether students' engagements actually contribute to their preparation as teachers.

### **CHOOSING A NARRATIVE**

Choosing an appropriate narrative for use in teaching educational psychology requires keeping the everyday realities of teaching faced by students in mind, either by choosing stories judiciously, by critiquing them wisely once chosen, or both. Although some teacher educators might assert that the ideal narrative could deliberately exaggerate or romanticize teaching in order to motivate future teachers, it seems more plausible that the narrative should reflect the actual challenges and satisfactions likely to be experienced by the students they are teaching. The best narrative should present as balanced a picture of teaching as possible, one that most teachers in fact hope to

realize for themselves. This requirement rules out what might be called the *overly heroic genre* of educational literature: stories in which Teacher X begins teaching in extremely difficult circumstances, experiences insults, frustrations, and dangers, but gradually wins the hearts of students previously thought to be unreachable. In the end the teacher emerges as hero (or heroine), accomplishing what most mortals can never do. The villains in these accounts vary: they may be unthinking or cowardly administrators, fellow teachers, the police, or even just poverty. This sort of story may be inspiring to some, but it can also be indirectly depressing by placing the teacher's heroism beyond normal reach. For purposes of teacher education, obstacles portrayed should be challenging, not impossible, and teachers must be presented as human, not superhuman.

Keeping the above considerations in mind, I identified the eight candidate narratives listed in Appendix A, some of which showed signs of belonging to the "overly heroic genre." I eventually settled on one book, *Among Schoolchildren* by Tracy Kidder (1989). This book describes one year in the career of an experienced fifth-grade teacher, Chris Zajac, as she works in a lower-middle income neighborhood of a town in New England. The story is presented as a documentary and written in a novel-like format; in fact, many students thought it actually was a fictional novel until told otherwise. *Among Schoolchildren* seemed like a good choice for three reasons: 1) it focused not only on the teacher, but on the students as well, 2) the teacher's methods were "sensible"—neither overly traditional nor overly radical, and 3) the narrative was rich in detail, covering most major aspects of teaching and learning. Overall the book described teaching in a fairly balanced way; it did not belong to the *heroic genre* of educational literature described above.

### **USING NARRATIVE AS THE MAIN FOCUS IN AN EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY CLASS**

I first used narrative as the main focus in two sections of an educational psychology course I taught in the fall term of 2007. Each section enrolled about 35 students each, for a total of about 70 students. The course was required of all preservice teacher education candidates at a large comprehensive university in western Canada, one similar to many state universities in the United States. Although the program required a prior Bachelor's degree for admission (usually in arts or sciences), the program itself also conferred a Bachelor's degree (in this case, a Bachelor of Education). In this sense the students were more educated and mature than the typical

undergraduate education major, but they also held an intermediate, ambiguous status vis-à-vis graduate study. Of the eight sections of the course normally offered, the two that were the focus of the study were intended for "early years" students—preservice candidates intending to teach in the range of kindergarten through fourth-grade.

Once the narrative was chosen, I designed a range of assignments for students that centered on the narrative but also deliberately required access to and integration of theory and research about educational psychology, such as contained in a conventional comprehensive textbook. In particular, students completed each of the following assignments:

1. They analyzed the narrative for four themes central to educational psychology: motivation, the nature of learning, assessment, or diversity among students.
2. They reconstructed or expanded part of the narrative in a new way ("changed the plot"), and explained how the changes reflect issues about educational psychology. This task helped to compensate for topics that were not well emphasized in the original narrative.
3. Working in small groups, they presented a re-enactment of a scene from the narrative, and explained with an accompanying presentation how the scene illustrated ideas or themes from educational psychology.
4. Again working in small groups, they created and presented a new scene that changed or extended the narrative. They explained with an oral presentation how the new scene illustrated ideas or themes from educational psychology.

Collectively, these tasks amounted to 75% of the assigned work for the course—a proportion that reflected my commitment to using narrative literature as a major resource for teaching the course. The remaining 25% of the credit was allocated to two tasks unrelated to narrative analysis: 1) constructing a lesson plan and analyzing it according to principles of educational psychology, 2) constructing a chart that summarized milestones of development in three major domains of psychology (cognitive, social, and physical). Students purchased both *Among Schoolchildren* and a major textbook (Woolfolk, 2006), but with the expectation of using *Among Schoolchildren* more than the text. Given the richness of the narrative and of the assignments associated with it, there was little danger of students' not being exposed to all major themes normally associated with educational psychology.

The textbook assumed a supportive role, in making those themes explicit in students' minds.

### ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE NARRATIVE APPROACH

How successful was the use of narrative? This question can be addressed in two ways: by students' reactions to the approach, and by the extent and nature of their learning. By the first standard—students' reactions—narrative study appeared to be quite successful, though the evidence perhaps is a bit indirect. Students' overall evaluations of the course were quite high; about 75% of students rated the overall course "better than average" or "much better than average." In doing so, admittedly, they were rating an entire package of experiences, including the instructor, the class sessions, and the use of narrative. But since the course emphasized narrative much more than textbook knowledge, and since narrative was emphasized both during class sessions and in out-of-class assignments, the ratings could be taken as an indirect endorsement of the use of narrative study.

Students in these sections also learned a great deal about educational psychology. The essays and dramatizations focused on the narrative text were completed at high levels of quality—certainly a good sign, though not a definitive one. Finding enough "content" about educational psychology to relate to the narrative was never a problem for students. *Among Schoolchildren*, provided in its 352 pages more than enough examples of classroom phenomena covering the major themes of educational psychology. It offered numerous anecdotes and situations relevant to motivation, the nature of learning, assessment of instruction, and diversity among students—as well as other worthwhile topics not usually covered in the course, such as professional staff relationships and curriculum design. Students therefore had no trouble using the book to illustrate major themes of educational psychology. Coverage was enhanced, furthermore, by assignments 2 and 4 (already described), which required students to modify the existing story; doing so allowed them to highlight and analyze concepts neglected in the original narrative. It also offered them an officially sanctioned way to disagree with the author or protagonist's actions while also explaining the basis for their disagreements.

Certain outcomes suggest, however, that the issue should not be framed as a choice *between* narrative and exposition, but as a question of how one can best combine the use of both genres. In order to write intelligently about *Among Schoolchildren*, students needed to engage not only

in narrative thinking, but also in exposition: clarifying terms, analyzing and comparing concepts and ideas, and generalizing while avoiding over-generalizing. For example, in writing about a scene in the story where Judith, a child from a poor family, expresses a desire to attend college, one of the education students in the course analyzed the scene in terms of major motivational concepts:

Following Bandura's advice, Ms. Z (the teacher) builds Judith's *self-efficacy* by pointing out how successful Judith has been on academic tasks in the past. She also points out Judith's ability to direct her own learning—examples, I believe, of the ideas of *internal locus of control* and more generally of *intrinsic motivation*.

Another education student analyzed the teacher's classroom management skills this way:

"There are a lot of times when Ms. Z shows *withitness* in Kounin's sense of tracking multiple activities at once—on one occasion she responds in passing to misbehavior by Clarence (a problem student) while helping another student. On another occasion she does the reverse: she helps another student with her work even though she is busy having 'heart-to-heart' talk with Clarence about his behavior."

Clearly, the need for such conceptual understanding did not disappear just because students initially approached these concepts through discussing, reading, and writing about narrative rather than about expository information. The usual role of expository text was merely inverted in this course. Instead of being the primary focus of students' attention, as it might when a course is centered on a conventional textbook, expository information and analytical thinking based on that information became the servants or tools of narrative, adding meaning and significance to the narrative. Instead of narrative being limited to a series of unrelated anecdotes and brief stories used primarily to support textbook exposition, narrative became the continuous foundation for students' attention and thought. With narrative as the centerpiece, "conventional" expository textbook information acquired a role that was not only useful, but also helped students to articulate the multiplicity of meanings embodied in the narrative, and arguably, in classroom life. In this supporting role, textbooks about educational psychology can begin to function because of their expository, analytical style, not in spite of it.

For some teacher educators, this conclusion may not come as a surprise; after all, we have known for a long time that even the best textbook

needs good examples (a.k.a. good narratives) to come alive. What may be surprising—or at least was surprising to me—is the extent to which narrative can replace exposition without significant sacrifice of content coverage. The replacement is made possible, however, only by using narratives

that are balanced and rich in detail—not necessarily an easy task. Identifying such narratives is a service needed by future instructors of educational psychology, and studying their comparative effects is research needed by them as well.

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## APPENDIX A.

### *Some Narrative Literature Relevant to Educational Psychology.*

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