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# Narrative Studies to Enhance Teacher Development

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*Narratives offer teachers new and unique possibilities for exploring aspects of a learner's life not usually considered in our daily class routine. The data used in the narrative that the author composed of a learner was collected for more than two years through interviews, informal chats, e-mail exchanges, field notes, and journal entries with the same student. While some teachers would naturally wonder about the merits of looking at a single learner when in reality we teach many, the author will argue that we can learn much of value from understanding one student in some depth. The implications and applications from such a study could be rich. This*

*paper begins with background into the concept of narratives. Then a condensed version of a narrative of a learner is presented. In conclusion, reflective thoughts about the narrative experience and how narratives can enhance our professional development will be mentioned.*

教師の自己開発を高める叙述(ナレイティブ)研究  
叙述研究(ナレイティブ)を通して、教師は普段の授業では通常得られない学習者の生活に潜む探求面でのユニークで新たな可能性を知ることが出来る。筆者が学習者から構築した叙述(ナレイティブ)に使われているデータは、インタビュー、談話、eメール交換、現場ノート、同生徒に関する記述ジャーナルなど二年間以上に渡って収集したものである。大勢を教える実際の教育現場を離れて単一学習者を観察する価値があるだろうか、と思う教師がいるのは当然である。筆者は一生徒を深く理解する事でこそ多くを知る事が出来ると反論する。この研究が持つ意味の深さ、応用範囲の大きさは計り知れない。この論文は叙述概念の背景に始まり、学習者の叙述要約文が紹介され、結論として、叙述研究体験を振り返り如何に叙述研究が教師の教育開発を高め得るかを述べるものである。

*What is at stake is the creation of situations of trust in which the storytelling urge, so much a part of the best parts of our social life, finds expression. (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 12)*

## The impetus for this paper

My interest in narratives stems from the possibilities they offer to explore aspects of a learner's life not normally considered in our daily class routines. My interest also comes from an instinct that building stories may be viewed not only products of trust, but also as forms of personal expression which can be studied. From the start, I would like to point out a distinction that I am making between studies of teachers' stories about themselves, colleagues, or teacher-trainees and this study of my efforts to describe and analyze glimpses of a learner's life. By putting understanding aspects of a student's life in some detail first, I hope to generate ideas for how to eventually improve the attention I give to all of my students. So while I believe new directions in teacher development will increasingly focus on understanding students as individual learners (see Benson, 2000, on learner autonomy; Breen, 2001, on learner contributions), cultivating deeper understanding of a single learner is just the beginning of any teacher's development.

The data used in the narrative that I composed of a learner was collected for more than two years through interviews, informal chats, e-mail exchanges, field notes, and journal entries with the same student. While some teachers would naturally wonder about the merits of looking at a single learner when in reality we teach many, I would argue that we benefit from understanding one student in some depth. After all, teachers are expected to treat students as individuals, not as a faceless

mass regardless of the size of the class. This paper will suggest that enhancing teacher development in this case begins with the process of actually composing a narrative of a learner. Once we have a narrative, we will be able to comment on what we have noticed.

## Some characteristics of narratives

Narratives are part of our daily lives. We listen to them and make them without any thought of analyzing them. People in everyday life tell their own stories whereas researchers listen and study the stories and then write from this experience and knowledge about the lives of these people. When it comes to research, 'narratives' is one of those terms that is often used, but is not always understood in the same way. A quick search will reveal that the term 'narratives' is used in character development, life histories, autobiographies, and case studies in the fields of literature, psychology, anthropology, and biology to mention a few.

As for language teaching, a distinction is sometimes made between 'narrative study' (Pavlenko, 2002), which is looking at narratives for some purpose beyond typical daily expression and usage, and 'narrative inquiry' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Bell, 2002), which is a conscious and ongoing construction of a narrative of oneself or someone else. My treatment of narrative is an "inquiry" since I want to emphasize the possible value for teachers of constructing a narrative of a student. I consider this paper to be a "study" in terms of offering one possibility of how a narrative might be studied.

I envision narratives as potentially serving as "a web of understanding." In one sense, they are constructed in order to engage teachers in their students' learning in a more holistic

way. This is an attempt to understand students' lives inside and outside the classroom. In another sense, 'narrative studies' as I am referring to them imply that the readers seek relevance and meaning beyond the narrator's perception. In other words, narratives are crafted not only for the benefit of the writer (the teacher-researcher), but to engage others as well. Narratives can thus be viewed as a way to reveal 'truths' by connecting one story to all of our stories. Before going any further, I would like to acknowledge the importance of looking at a student's life through her own eyes as well. Having the student compose her own narrative and doing a comparison with the teacher-researcher's one would seem to be a most worthwhile future study.

## Constructing a narrative

Three teacher educators, Connelly, Clandinin, and He (1997) in an influential paper on teachers constructing narratives report on their ongoing efforts to "conceptualize teachers' personal practical knowledge." (According to Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, what they call "personal practical knowledge" is "individual teachers' knowledge." They are interested in narratives as links between the "experiential" aspect of knowledge and individual lives of teachers.) Their question is: How can teachers learn to transform their various forms of "field text data" into a narrative? They believe that developing a list of terms not only helps teachers make sense of the narrative building process, but also represents "a new way of thinking about teacher knowledge." They report on what they have noticed.

Our most important terms are image, rules, practical principles, personal philosophy, metaphor, cycles, rhythms and narrative unities. In recent years we tied these ideas together in terms of a theory of narratives and story telling. (p. 668)

In their article, there is a narrative composed by one of the authors and teacher educators, Ming Fang He. (It eventually became her thesis proposal: a study of identity formation and cultural transformation of Chinese women teachers in Chinese and Canadian cultures.) Her story serves as an illustration of the narrative process and how the terms mentioned above can be used as a framework for thinking, writing, and analyzing a teacher's narrative. She constructs her "composite" story of "Shiao" from conversations and interviews between herself and teacher participants. I have adapted her model in the construction of my own narrative with a couple of differences. Unlike He, who makes a "composite biography" from bits and pieces of data from a number of participants (partially due to political sensitivities), I have chosen to construct a narrative based on interviews, conversations, and e-mail exchanges between myself and a single person, "Masako." Furthermore, instead of crafting the entire story first and then analyzing parts of it as done by Connelly, Clandinin, and He, I begin by using their terms for analysis as a frame to guide the preliminary building of my story of Masako piece by piece.

I should mention two points here: (1) My reason for "adapting" a framework first rather than constructing was to focus my thoughts and writing. Until now, I have written first, but have found my ideas too incoherent at times. This was a chance to go the opposite way. I admit I am probably sacrificing some exploratory insight potential for the sake of some kind of focus. (2) I selected this particular framework and questions because I

felt Masako as a young Asian woman with interest in speaking English and eventually going abroad would have similar thoughts about identity as the Chinese women in He's story who go back and forth between China and Canada as teachers.

Here are selected excerpts from my narrative accompanied by brief comments.

## 1. Image: Who is she?

*Masako is a high school student in Japan. She travels over an hour by bicycle and train to attend a high school with academically high standards. She is modest, intelligent, and usually studies hard. There are three unresolved tensions in her life as a student. First, she wants to be a scientist (Her father is a science teacher.), but she finds math difficult. Second, she needs to memorize grammar rules and lots of vocabulary and also learn how to translate the type of passages which will appear on tests, but she wants to learn how to speak the target language. Third, she wants to enjoy her high school days by playing the piano and guitar, reading many kinds of books including Harry Potter and talking to many people- classmates, club mates, and teachers. However, the pressure to study remains unabated.*

### Comment:

The tension between what she wants to do and what she should do allows the reader to identify with the struggles in her life.

This tension is “essential for understanding” the character of the narrative. We all have similar issues to deal with in our own lives.

## 2. Rules, Practical Principles, and Personal Philosophy: What does Masako believe and how does she show it?

*One of her rules is to be a ‘good’ student. This means never be late for school, pay attention in class, do homework, and never give the teacher a hard time. Though she may sometimes disagree with what teachers say or do, she keeps up the good appearance in public. Her personal philosophy is to divide the world into the public and private. She tries to do enough to please classmates, teachers, and parents, so that she can enjoy her own world without unnecessary disturbances.*

### Comment:

Behind her rule of being a good student is a general principle of how to get along in public. Rules such as this one test and shape her life knowledge. Over time the rules and knowledge may “be embedded” in a larger overview of life or her personal philosophy.

### 3. Metaphor: What imaginative expression helps explain her personal practical knowledge?

*She wants to climb to the top of the mountain not only to experience the exhilaration of literally being on 'top of the world', but also to satisfy a curiosity of what life looks like from a new perspective. Finding her identity means going beyond the limits and restrictions of her present life. She dreams of setting off on this climb, but the air is thin and the footing treacherous at such heights. Complications increase the higher one climbs into the unknown.*

#### Comment:

“Metaphors give imaginative expression to personal practical knowledge” (Connelly et al., 1997, p. 671). In He’s narrative of the female teacher in China, she uses a “push-pull” metaphor. A similar tension exists in Japan as Masako feels the push of society to be a good student with all that implies as well as the pull of individualism and her search for identity and meaning in her life.

### 4. Cycles and Rhythms: What is her daily cycle of activity?

*Her daily cycle of activity and thus her life rhythm revolve around school. She gets up early in order to get to school on time. As mentioned previously,*

*it takes over an hour to get there. Once there, she has classes until noon. Lunchtime is always spent with the same small set of classmates. In the afternoon, there are more lessons mainly consisting of handing in or getting back homework and listening to teachers lecture from the textbooks or from what they write on the board. This routine rarely varies. The students stay in the same group for all classes throughout the school year. They even stay in the same classroom for all subjects except for chemistry, music, art, and P.E. After school, there are club activities, though Masako does not regularly attend her club. As she puts it, “It depends on how I feel.” She is constantly reminded that she must keep up with the pace and life rhythm set by the school if she wants to enter a good university.*

#### Comment:

The cycle and rhythm of Masako’s daily life as a student shape who she thinks she is and how she responds to situations which she encounters. Her life until now has been largely defined by “the powers above” such as her parents and teachers. She tries in a modest, but symbolic way to resist the flow of her mainstream life by not going to club regularly. She is able to exert some control at least over this part of her life.

## 5. Narrative Unity: What are the threads in her life that explain her story?

*The central thread of Masako's life since kindergarten has been the emphasis placed on her educational development. There are several supporting threads which have been interwoven since her days in primary school when she took after school lessons in piano, English conversation, and preparation to take the entrance exam to a prestigious junior high school. Other threads include her family life with grandparents, parents and brother, limited social life with a few close classmates and club mates, and private time in her room. The glue of Japanese culture holds all the threads together. Traditions and beliefs about how children should be educated in order to have 'a bright future' hold Masako in her place in society.*

### Comment:

The threads of people's lives, past and present, help to explain how "they construct the stories that they live." I believe the glue that holds everything together is culture. It provides meaning and continuity and thus keeps the various threads of our lives together. Some threads may be universal, but the glue constitutes the difference.

## Reflections on the narrative experience

Narrative inquiry through the framework allowed me to craft a story of Masako's experience through my eyes. I gained a richer sense of her experience than I would normally have. Below I summarize the key concepts that I found particularly helpful in articulating my understanding of Masako including: her identity, beliefs, concerns, actions, and how they find expression in her life.

- (1) Three unresolved tensions in her life as a student
- (2) Her rules, principles, and personal philosophy
- (3) A metaphor for her personal practical knowledge
- (4) Her daily cycle of activity and life rhythm
- (5) The threads in her life that explain her story

Using these five ideas above as lenses, I began to see Masako not simply as a foreign language learner, but as a person who has many activities going on in her life. One of those activities that is probably not the most important to her is studying English. Such key words as 'unresolved tensions,' 'personal philosophy,' 'metaphor for knowledge,' 'life rhythm,' and 'threads in her life' are rarely mentioned when teachers talk about their understanding of students. Thus, it would appear that our profession needs new ways of seeing and talking.

## Enhancing professional development

This paper suggests that the ultimate value of narrative studies for teachers comes from actually composing a narrative of a learner. One of the immediate benefits is deeper thinking about what students think and do. What really matters to them? Answers to this question will help teachers' ability to guide

students to talk about topics of real interest and concern to them. In other words, the heightened awareness of students' lives gained through narrative construction should allow teachers to make more informed decisions in matching activities, topics, and tasks to students' interests. Furthermore, this new sense of understanding may help teacher gain greater confidence and comfort in dealing with their students both collectively and individually.

The working relationship between students and teachers could change dramatically once we account in our teaching for the fact that there is more on students' minds than simply language learning. Interest in narratives could result in further studies of such important issues as learner identity, autonomy, and co-construction of meaning. Perhaps a large part of the appeal of narratives (and other highly subjective forms of expression) lies in the belief that certain aspects of life can only be understood through subjective expression of one's perception of specific events, experiences, and people.

## Concluding points

While I see exciting possibilities for teachers who use narratives, I must admit various questions and issues have been raised. Where will the validity of narratives come from? What warrants do we have to give *our* perceptions of students and claim it is their story? Part of the answer and the problem is that the analysis of narratives is still being developed. This is a relatively new area of research that is by its very nature diverse in background and forms of expression. Above all, it is highly subjective. This point may discourage some teachers. However, Freeman (1996) argues that social science definitions of research do not adequately allow for "unique ways of knowing" in

understanding the experience and knowledge of teachers. Rather than "trivialize" various non-standard ways of knowing such as narratives, we should acknowledge their contribution to teacher development.

Another issue is the apparently trivial or seemingly ordinary story of Masako. After all, she is a student whose daily routine and concerns are similar to many students. Despite this obviousness, I would suggest that there are aspects of a student's life which have for this very reason have been overlooked. A further study of a "thicker" description could help us find out. While some teachers would admit that there could be benefits derived from an extensive study of an individual learner, they would still wonder how this helps in our dealings with students collectively. Since getting involved in constructing narratives, I have progressively introduced more opportunities for students to *interact* with each other and myself both in class activities and outside optional projects. Possibly by trying to understand the "typical" nature of Masako's story has helped me gain more confidence to give other students more personal attention.

Narratives allow us to connect our professional development to the real world. Copley (2001) in his book on the historical development of narrative comes to the following conclusion: "Narrative undoubtedly *re*-presents features of the world, leaving some out in favor of others. It *re*-presents time, space, and sequence; it facilitates the remembrance and exploration of identity" (p. 228). Narratives are all around us. Narrative studies allow us to appreciate narratives in new ways. Narrative inquiry is about building public expression of personal understanding of the events, experiences, and people in our professional lives, namely our students. Perhaps narratives are simply about building situations of trust in order to allow stories to be expressed and that it is through these stories that new understandings emerge.

I close with an update of the learner. While the “unresolved tensions” in Masako’s life between expectations and desires still remain, she has found a productive balance. She is studying as hard as ever, yet also enjoying her life more than ever. It was not always this way, but it is now.

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