Teachers who have moved us: Transformational narratives

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Remembering "teachers who have moved us" in our past and telling others about them is an activity that can greatly enhance our teaching. Telling such stories provides us with insight into why we choose to teach as we teach, consolidates our philosophies of teaching, and communicates and models good teaching more clearly to others than abstract analytic statements. Below we look at a) the theory of identity and narrative construction, b) the stories we tell ourselves about teachers who impressed us and their impact on our teaching, and c) ways that teachers can formally and informally tell more stories to understand their teaching and enact professional development.

過去に出会った「感動させられた教師」について思い出し、それを他の人に伝えることは自分の教え方を大いに向上させる可能性がある。そのような経験談を話すことによってなぜ自分が今のような教え方をするのかについて考えたり、自分の教育観を固めたり、単に抽象的かつ分析的な説明ではなくはっきりと良い教え方とは何かについて伝え、モデルを示したりすることになる。以下において私たちはa) アイデンティティと物語構築論、b) 感動させられた教師と自分の教え方への影響についての話、c) 自分の教え方を理解し教員として成長するために、形式ばったあるいはインフォーマルな形で、もっと話を伝える方法、について考える。

Telling stories of teachers who inspired us in our professional work can do much to allow us to peacefully settle into our professional identities as teachers. We hope the reader will understand how this happened for the authors from the stories they tell. We also hope the information we give will further support the usefulness of remembering and telling the reader's own stories.

In the TESOL world of professional development there are many indications that teachers-telling-their-stories is gaining credibility. There is an increase in narrative based portfolios for professional development

in MA programs and other teacher training projects. Many books now start with the author's stories. Calls for book chapters that ask for narrative introductions are becoming common. Block's *The Social Turn in SLA* (2001) even tells us the story of how researchers are adopting stories as bona fide research tools and showing more cognitive researchers the value of a social understanding of language acquisition. One of the co-authors of this article has even published his auto ethnography of entrance exam testing in Japan in the TESOL Quarterly (Murphey, 2004a).

To link the power of story telling to the broader world, the business management field has also become enthralled with storytelling as a way of management (Brown, Denning, Groh, & Prusak, 2005; Simmons, 2001). As have scientist and science writers who popularize and explain the complexities of sciences such as Quantum Physics and Neuroscience, e.g. Pert's *Molecules of Emotion*. (1997) As the reader can see this is not just a fad in TESOL but rather an acknowledgement from many areas of academia and everyday life that stories are a great way to communicate and enhance learning.

In the foreword to a special issue of *The Language Teacher* on the "Narrative Mind," the editors wrote:

> Once upon a time there was a "narrative turn" in social science research in which many social scientists discovered the ubiquitous presence of stories in our lives. While inspired early on by the likes of George Mead (1977), Mikhael Bakhtin (Holquist 1990), and Jerome Bruner (1990), much of the human sciences have still remained tied "uncritically to the rationalist epistemology and experimental methodology of the hard sciences" (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, p. 157). The hard science model has brought obvious results, but it has also limited what counts as knowledge when over-valued and over-generalized—even Einstein rated imagination over intelligence. The contention of the narrative turn is that there are many ways of knowing and building knowledge that are equally valid. Stories and different forms of discourse can perhaps teach us in ways that are at times more ecological and efficient (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). (Croker, Deacon, Murphey, & Sato, 2002, p. 1)

We hope that everyone is fortunate enough to have had a number of teachers in their lives who provide inspirational influence. Actively remembering these teachers and telling stories about them helps us understand why we choose to teach and interact with students in the ways we do. Telling these stories also allows us to change in more useful and positive ways as we reconstruct and give meaning to them. Thusly used, stories can empower us, and sometimes our students, to change for the better. One teacher stands out from co-author Dave's elementary school days.

> After a traumatic experience in the first month of fourth grade my father got me transferred to a county school in the countryside. I was brought to my new fourth grade classroom by the principle and introduced to Mrs. Steele.
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> The room was very different from the modern brick and steel low-ceiling room of my previous school. It was in an old wooden building with high ceilings and had a wooden floor worn smooth by

years of children's feet. The classmates were all in their desks staring at the new kid from town. Town folks and country folks didn't get along too well in those days. Though to outsiders it would have been hard to tell the difference, we knew there was a big difference. I was very scared; however, that soon disappeared. Mrs. Steele, towering above me, greeted me with a warm hug and told the class who I was in a very southern way by explaining who my father was and what he did.

The classmates told me their names and then I was shown to my desk and the class continued. I think we were doing long division math. As we worked on the problems, Mrs. Steele came around to each student and helped where needed and encouraged each person. Even though she called us her children she treated us as people.

I remember her telling us stories each morning; those stories about her life or the life of her family always seemed to be related in someway to what we did that day. She would also tell stories when the inevitable fights or rule-breaking occurred. These stories always helped repair the disharmony between kids in the class which reduced the problems in her class. It was much better than the traditional paddles that most teachers used for class discipline. I know we did lots of social studies, math, reading, writing, spelling and science that year but what I really remember are the stories and the feeling of safety, love, and especially humor that created connections in Mrs. Steele's class.

45 years later I go to a nursing home to visit Mrs. Steele. She is confined to a bed and has lost control of her bowels and cannot move on her own but her mind is still as sharp as ever. She greets me as she did those many years ago except this time I stand over her and hug her. I stay for over an hour as she shares stories with me as she did 45 years ago. She asks about my life. She still praises me and tells me of the successes of classmates from long ago. She even jokes about her condition. Her humor, stories and obvious love of life and learning trigger my memories of those days 45 years ago and have led me to write this paper and to a greater appreciation of the power of stories.

This story about Dave as a young boy and his new teacher Mrs. Steele is a small piece of his life but it had a big impact on him. At first he did not realize that there was even a story there but when the memories came back so did the story and the ways it had affected his life and the lives of his many and varied students began to become clear. The jump from Mrs. Steele to Dave's students may at first appear spurious, but our minds make these jumps all the time.

We see ourselves in our students and we see our past teachers and parents in ourselves. These are the processes of near peer role modeling (Murphey & Arao, 2001) as well as self and other modeling (Murphey, 2004b, in press). When we see and admire others we often simultaneously project a future image of ourselves, what Dornyei (2005) has called an ideal self. But are we admiring others or a possible future self? The answer is "both." Even the 'hard' sciences confirm this paradoxical answer. Quantum physics is telling

us that our conceptions of the world are a bit skewed by our conventional beliefs and that we are to a great extent what we see and to a great extent changed by what we see and imagine ("What the Bleep Do We Know", 2004). However, we are also in the business of constructing understandings of what we see, our memories, and our on-going visual panorama. Nothing simply is, all is becoming. Stories remembered and shared help us become what we are and will be.

The relationship of narrative to identity

> People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are. These self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance for the teller, are what we refer to as identities. (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 3)

Each time we tell stories of *the teachers who have moved us* we tend to come just a little closer to *being* those teachers and enacting their ways of being in the world (Gee, 1996). Thus, we should be careful both of the stories we tell and the visions we wish to see in our minds, because they both inspire prolepsis, self-fulfilling prophecies. Vonnegut said as much in the preface to *Mother Night* (1961), "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be" (p.iv). Some teachers may be just pretending to *do a job*. However, we contend that when they tell stories of teachers who moved them, they become inspired to do a little moving themselves and catch some of the magic of the teachers they describe. Going one step further, in a quote often attributed to Mandela, who also knows very well the power of visions, "Pretending to be small does not serve the world" (see <www.famous-quotations.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=30&PN=1>). We feel that most teachers do enter the profession to serve and change the world -it certainly was not for the money- and yet many of us fall into the trap of feeling powerless. Once again, talking of those special teachers in our past can rejuvenate us and give us the strength to attempt change.

Learning is change over time through engagement in activity (Clarke, 2003). When we verbalize our reflections we objectify them—make them into an object—and make them available for scrutiny (Swain, 2000) and change. We suggest that the act of writing one's Teacher Learner History and recalling teachers who have moved us is a social construction that takes as its main topic our dynamically *distributed identities* that are multiple, conflicted, and still changing and yet, in the metacognitive act of composition, can become firmer and stronger (Murphey, 2004a; Murphey, Chen, & Chen, 2005; Norton 2000, 2001). We construct ourselves through hearing others' stories and telling our own stories. This is, we think, what Vygosky (1962) had in mind when he described how learning begins intermentally between minds and then is internalized, intramentally, and then available for the individual to use. Telling stories is a wonderfully rich intermental activity during which many understandings can be constructed and internalized.

The story telling brain

Throughout the ages a variety of writers and artists have observed that what the brain experiences—creates—

internally can be as powerful as any real external experience, at least in our reaction to it. We notice this ourselves, in our dreams and nightmares, when we wake with the feeling that something actually did happen. Athletes have used this insight to mentally train and repair themselves when injured. Gallwey's (1974) "inner game" series of books is based on this concept. When we hear or tell a good story about an influential teacher, such as Mrs. Steele, we see her, and to an extent we see ourselves doing what she has done.

Brain-based learning specialist Jensen (1995) looks at several conditions necessary for producing effective stories with impact. Ideally stories are life like experiences rich in visual, auditory and kinesthetic input. Listeners are never belittled. They are, also, able to understand the story at an appropriate level of complexity and at their own pace. The listeners' affective needs are addressed. There is also a tremendous amount of informal feedback both internally in the brain and externally from the story teller or writer. Internally the brain processes emotions, thoughts and ideas through the various structures of the brain. At the same time, the listener's brain receives feedback from the tone of voice, body movements and words used by the story teller.

From all this feedback learners have choices as to what they want to think is significant, that is; they make meaning out of the story. They are not lectured but left free to use what they see as useful in the story. Listeners are also simultaneously in the process of comparing the story they are hearing with those they know and making links to their experiences. The brain has millions of messages coursing through it while listening to a story and is unavoidably multitasking mostly at the non-conscious level. As a result of all this brain activity our stories about the teachers who have moved us can become *memes* -an idea in one mind that reproduces itself in other minds- that spread and mutate as we tell the stories to others and as they tell them to yet others (Brodie, 1996). So here are a few more meme's we'd like to spread from Tim's life.

> Rather than tell one story as Dave did, I would like to give you a collage of teachers who have moved me. *My 6th grade teacher, the first man to teach me, just out of college, told us many times how much he missed playing tennis every day in university. Somehow that sunk in and I became a college tennis player who did his best to play every day. *In HS, I had a black man who taught me biology and exclaimed each day with a shout that "Practice does not make perfect! Only perfect practice, full of errors, [here he would pause to let it sink in]… makes perfect!" I loved that phrase and respected him so much for pushing me out of the box. *Pat Byrd was the assistant director in my MA program who first suggested that I publish an idea about recording multiple weather reports to play to classes so they could see the similarities and differences in speakers. I was shocked to think that I could contribute to the profession as a grad student. Now I get my grad students to publish every chance I can. *Recently, I have taken a TESOL Electronic Village Online training to become a moderator and have found a host of teachers online who have extraordinary patience and kindness combined with amazing know-

how. I want to be more like them! *We never stop learning! And there are so many wonderful teachers out there.

Organizing teachers to tell their stories

Perhaps the easiest, most efficient, and most enjoyable teacher development exercise stems from the simple request, "Tell me about a teacher who moved you." Therefore we asked teachers at the end of our workshop to do the following exercise

Teachers who have moved us: Transformational narratives reflective activity:

1. List, as fast as you can, teachers who you think left a positive mark on your development starting with early education and going through to now.
2. Family Members who seemed to have influenced your teaching
3. Writers who seemed to have influenced your teaching
4. Friends and Colleagues

Now choose two or three to talk to a partner about that you could talk about briefly. Tell your partner some critical incident that occurred that would illustrate their influence. What did they do or say?

[In the original handout there were large spaces between the numbers to list numerous examples].

The participants were greatly engaged and we had a hard time getting the floor back after 15 minutes to conclude our session. While it was a great exercise, we would suggest that encouraging people to write their stories would greatly increase the impact for the original author and also make the model even more available for others when shared in publications. Therefore, we would like to invite readers to send in their stories of teachers who moved them to us for an eventual publication (email either author for details). Writing your stories down will, we are certain, stimulate your own teaching and by sharing your stories of the teachers who moved you, you will also be moving others. Help us to spread the *memes* of good teaching and learning.

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such as neuroscience, economics, physics, systems theory and business, and adapt them for teaching English. He can be reached at <ragan@aiu.ac.jp>.

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