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What's the Story?

A Study of Novice Teachers' Narrative Understandings of Classroom Events Kathy Carter and Kathy Stoehr, University of Arizona Teaching, Language and Sociocultural Studies

Purpose of Paper

The objective of this paper is to report the most recent results from an ongoing, multi-year research initiative at a large Research I University in the Southwestern United States. The purpose of this line of inquiry is to learn about how novice teachers develop narrative understandings of teaching. In particular, this study explores the cognitive understandings and personal sense-making strategies used by novices to "story" the classroom events they routinely observe in the field.

The present paper is an analysis of the written well-remembered events and spontaneous stories told and recorded by a diverse group of 307 elementary and secondary preservice teacher education students during the first semester of their fieldwork and professional preparation sequence. The qualitative analysis of the content of these narratives focuses on the identification of basic story structures, themes, and meaning attached to these stories from the field. The most recent findings, to be presented in this paper, address some important, emergent, and heretofore unexplored issues in preservice teachers' narrative understandings of teaching; these issues include considerations of audience, advice, and authenticity. This close examination into preservice teachers' images of classroom events and schooling opens

questions for further study. In addition, the findings also provide promise in helping a teacher education community develop curriculum and tasks in narrative forms of pedagogy which allow both novice and practicing teachers to confront and reflect upon their personal and developing "storied" sense of classrooms within a professional community of meaning.

Perspectives/Theoretical Framework

Learning to teach is a pervasive and continuous process in the lives of teachers. As children, would-be teachers acquire cultural norms and expectations about schooling, and for long periods of time, they observe teachers at work. Basic knowledge and beliefs about teachers, teaching, curriculum, and learning are thus accumulated early. Later these conceptions and attitudes are shaped and refined through a variety of formal and informal experiences as teachers prepare for and enter the profession and as they develop through their careers (Lortie, 1975; Ovens & Tinning, 2009)

Despite general agreement that teachers' understandings are fundamentally important in teaching and that these understandings change over time, much can still be learned about what teachers come to comprehend about teaching processes, their students and the curriculum, especially as they enter the field and begin to situate their knowledge in the complex settings where they will one day work.

In recent years, researchers have begun to explore the utility of a research framework which uses narrative methods in order to focus more explicitly on

what is learned, how that knowledge is acquired, and how observed classroom events are "storied" by novice teachers (see, for example, Carter, 1993, 2007, 2009; Carter & Doyle, 2003; Gudmundsdottir, 1997; Munby & Russell, 2001). During these years, and thanks to an active research community in teacher education, much has been learned about the promise of story in our attempts to understand teaching and teacher knowledge. Even so, the years have shown us not only promise in attending to the storied nature of teaching, but we have also come to understand that much still needs to be learned about the nature of story and its value to the educational enterprise.

In teacher education, much of this work on story has centered on the use of cases (Munby & Russell, 2001), teachers' curriculum knowledge (Gudmundsdottir, 1997), and teachers' life history (see, for example, Elbaz-Luwish, 2001). It is important to note, however that the teachers' stories referred to in this tradition are still, for the most part, stories told to researchers or for research purposes rather than stories authored and shared spontaneously in an attempt to describe classroom life and the impact of one's educative experiences. The present work is a gentle point of departure from earlier modes of inquiry as it aims to look closely at self-selected and spontaneous stories told by novices early in their professional coursework sequence and experiences in the field.

Data Sources

The sample for this study included both written and spontaneously told narratives of 307 students enrolled over a 2 1/2 year period in 10 sections of an introductory general teaching methods course offered at a large Research I University in the Southwestern United States. Nearly 65% of these students were female, 35% were minority group members, 20% were bilingual, and a wide range of both elementary and secondary teaching majors were represented.

Methods and Context

Participants in this study were enrolled in the first course in the teacher preparation professional sequence. This course focuses on general methods of teaching and classroom processes and instruction. Attached to this 4-unit course is a 45-hour field component, where students are provided various assignments aimed at reflection on course content and its application to teaching events. Two major assignments were designed with a narrative focus in mind: (1) well-remembered events (WRE's) from the field (written and detailed descriptions of well remembered events of preservice teachers' own choosing from their field-placement observations and/or teaching); and (2) detailed logs of stories related to schooling that preservice teachers spontaneously told to identified others during the semester. In addition, students kept descriptive journals of actual advice given them by individuals who listened to their stories. Finally, students were asked during each of the 14 weeks in the semester to select one narrative from their written well-remembered events or from their story logs to "retell" verbally to colleagues in the class. For purposes of this study,

these well-remembered event narratives, spontaneous story logs, and oral retellings were reviewed and carefully analyzed in order to identify the basic story structures (characters, sequence, plot, pattern of action) embedded in the texts. Using iterative and thematic qualitative analysis techniques, including constant comparison methods (see Bogdan and Biklen, 2006), attention then turned to the documentation of thematic elements in these stories, to the choices of the audiences with whom these stories were shared, to the students' reflections regarding the purpose in and the veracity of their oral retellings, and to the nature of advice given by the varied audiences who listened to preservice teachers' stories.

Results

In this work, we have begun to uncover and define some significant genres (such as "humiliation" and "victory and elation" narratives, "bumpy moment" classroom stories, "in the trenches" stories, personal stories of teaching fatigue and frustration, and "sheer joy of it" teaching narratives. Importantly, we have learned that the emergence of decidedly different genres of stories is loosely connected to temporal boundaries of the semester. For example, the results of this analysis suggest strongly that during the first few weeks of their field experience, preservice teachers regularly anchor their conceptions of teaching and learning in relatively simple story structures that are imbued with either powerful personal feelings of humiliation and pain or high levels of individual elation and triumph. By mid-semester, this genre of stories became noticeably

less in number. In their place, other stories emerged, suggesting a possible shift in interpretive lens, which ran parallel to expected increases in their fieldwork/classroom involvement. The majority of stories told in the midweeks of fieldwork were stories that clearly captured many cognitive complexities of classroom life for which they felt unprepared. Story genres in these weeks primarily involved two types of narratives: (1) "bumpy moments" and (2) stories of surprise and revelation in classrooms. This "bumpy moment" genre was a prolific period of storytelling for new teachers; reviews of story logs indicate that each teacher candidate told these stories more often than any other genre. Also prominent in this time period were stories which revealed preservice teachers' shattered preconceptions, loss of idealism, and their feelings of cultural dissonance. These types of stories carried through the semester, with only a few new themes appearing in novice teacher stories late in the semester. Nevertheless, about 15% of students shifted to telling stories which were characterized by relatively more complex characterization and plot structure. Themes for these stories were: (a) "stories of repair" during difficult classroom events, "something wonderful happened to me today in class" stories, and "stories of sage advice" and "so much to learn."

Finally, this study illustrated that for the most part, preservice teachers' stories of teaching rarely find their way to the conversational floor in the teacher education professional sequence. In other words, a central body of novice teacher narratives are told to trusted audiences (significant others, spouses,

parents, and siblings), but are not often shared with teacher educators, university mentors, or supervising teachers. Following an iterative and careful analysis of preservice teachers' records of reactions and advice given to them by "outside others" a number of potentially worrisome findings emerged. Across all of these "outside other" audiences, the central pattern of reaction was often directed toward lesson-like, single answer simplification of novice teachers' stories. Indeed, one prominent finding was that the typical "outside" audiences who heard their stories often offered unsolicited directives to novices about how to get "authority" and "control" or how to achieve quick fixes to complex classroom dilemmas. Other regular patterns of outsiders' reaction appeared to be rooted in gender-based expectations and relational roles. For example, themes of advice given to young female preservice candidates by male outsiders (such as fathers, older brothers, and boyfriends) were often reduced to simplifications based on protective concerns about the female preservice teachers' age, physical appearance, and body shape and size. In short, reactions were not often about the teaching story itself, but rather were enveloped into deeply felt personal worries for the preservice teacher. Dated indicated that mothers of preservice candidates were the most commonly selected audience for preservice teachers' stories. Importantly, thematic features were also present in mothers' advice. Most prominent was a collapsing of the many narrative details of managerially difficult classroom events into an impromptu commentary on the lack of quality parenting. Preservice teachers

noted that their moms often circumvented the story to express their pride that their son or daughter was raised differently and therefore never behaved in such a “despicable” manner during school. Established patterns of personal reaction were also found to exist for other audiences (siblings, roommates) and will be described carefully in the paper.

Finally, data analysis resulted in a careful examination of the possible effect of audience on the expressions of preservice teachers' narrative understandings. Results from the present analysis clearly indicate that rich and complex classroom stories are regularly reshaped into comparatively simpler ones, largely as a result of the demands to receive and attend to advice from personal and/or available audiences. This reshaping obviously has worrisome implications for authentic and careful reflection about classroom events.

Educational Importance/Implications

The completed analysis of the various genres of stories written and told by preservice candidates appears to have captured a portion of the distilled experience of teacher education students as they enter their preparation journeys. In analyzing these stories, it became clear that one possible peril embedded in fieldwork is that the reflection, accomplished alone and without conversation in a professional community of meaning, runs the risk of singular interpretation and a reconstruction of events with a personal bias to present oneself in a certain light. When confined to outside advice and purely personal reflection, then, preservice teachers run the risk of egocentric understandings

and may not be able to position their thinking in the professional perspectives of others, in moral or pedagogical dilemmas, or in contexts of systems, politics, and other contexts of meaning.

In summary, despite recent efforts exploring the use of narrative in teacher education, the question remains to be seen whether or not we as a community of teacher educators and scholars can revisit our pedagogical practice to encourage, through the use of story, communities of professional conversation and communities of meaning. In these contexts, story may still hold promise to open new interpretations of teaching, interpretations which better represent the complex work of teaching, the moral and social dimensions inherent in this work, and the memorable impact of judgment, analysis, and action in classroom events.

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