

## **The trouble with text: Teacher education research after the linguistic turn**

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### **Abstract**

Historical study has long used texts as a way to render the past thinkable. In the past half century, questions surrounding textual interpretation have focused on the role of historical analysis and its relationship with sociology, psychology, and semiotics -- particularly within the study of history and the philosophy of science. This is particularly true for studies involving curriculum history and analyses of the "work" of teachers where oral histories, narrative examinations, cultural linguistics and storytelling have all impacted the ways in which teachers are studied and analyzed. This paper argues that the decision of what types of text to "read," and accordingly what type of research to do when studying teacher education, is a type of intellectual self-discipline that obliterates the technologies of power which generate meaning in the discourse. Drawing from the work of Michel Foucault, the paper suggests that changing what "counts" as text does not actually change what can be written as history and it is through the interpretation of narrative text that a teacher-subject is created.

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is not to assess the state of "modern" teacher education research, nor is it trying to give a roadmap to the teacher education research terrain. Rather this paper focuses on one fairly recent genre of teacher education research narrative and textual analysis and tries to relate this methodological shift to the broader social and historical constructs contained within it. This paper begins with brief summary of how text has been utilized to understand past events. This foreshadows the second section which explains the

ways in which teacher education research has been influenced by recent shifts in textual interpretation. The third section examines narrative research within the context of the philosophy of history and suggests that research utilizing a narrative approach actually creates a teacher-subject through textual interpretation.

## Historical Text

Historical study has long used "text" to help render the past thinkable. It is as if by studying text the researcher aims to illuminate the present with the light of past events. In so doing, the reading of historical text often forms a basis for understanding present situations. But within textual interpretation lies confusion as to what types or forms of text are most readable or understandable. Debate over what kinds of text are most useful, most historic, most valid, or most truthful has raged since the ancient historians first detailed events in written form. Consider Herodotus' chronicle of the Persian Wars. He opens by stating:

"These are the researches of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes, in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due meed of glory; and withal to put on record what were their grounds of feud."<sup>1</sup>

Herodotus' attempt to preserve from decay the "remembrance" of male deeds helped form his appointment as the "father of history." Herodotus was perhaps the first western historical writer to move away from the entertaining historical chronicles, such as myth and fable, towards writing with an expressed purpose to tell the "whole" story of an historical event. Believing that "gods bestow penalties on human arrogance," Herodotus tried to "correct" earlier accounts of the war (most notably that of Hecataeus) by including geographical and ethnological information in his writing. Herodotus wrote with a new and different purpose, systematically distinguishing between "myth" and "fact" in historical record. Earlier accounts of history were meant to entertain and mystify the reader primarily through the use of fables. Seen this way, Herodotus is both the son of mythology and the father of "modern" historicism.

But Herodotus' standing as the initial historian persists alongside the assumption that he was not entirely truthful in his writing (Momigliano, 1966). For instance, Herodotus presents evidence base on the belief that the Athenian navy withdrew during the war because the Persians had turned the pass at Thermopylae. Subsequent historians studying the invasion suggest that there was no point trying to hold the pass if the way to central Greece was open by sea because the Athenian navy had withdrawn. In other words, Herodotus' account of the war, full of social and political anecdotes, is understood today as "colored" by his own limitations to "see" the truth because of his personal convictions.

Herodotus' successor, Thucydides, wrote a history of the Peloponnesian War seemingly devoid of social and political references. Since he actually participated in the war he wrote about, Thucydides' writing is viewed as being "closer" to the action and less reliant on secondary sources and therefore more valid. Thucydides wrote with effort to find causes in the war that existed *inside* the human sphere instead of the external "godly" wrath suggested by Herodotus. He rejected the use of Herodotus' singular principle and general hypothesis to explain particular events. He believed it was his duty as an historian to point out the relationship between specific factors in society, such as economic and political

power, to problems of population and poverty. With his reliance on objectivity, Thucydides is often called the "father of *scientific* history." However, it is only in contrast with Herodotus that Thucydides' objectivism is visible (Hamilton, 1996). This calls into question the very nature of "objective" interpretation. What is objectivity if we have nothing to measure it with?

Herodotus' account of history is oral, anecdotal and antiquarian when compared to Thucydides' more realistic and factual writing. Although Thucydides' stated rejection of fable and myth set the tone of "ideal" historical text for centuries to come, historians also point out he was not quite the objectivist that he appears to be. Since Thucydides viewed man as a rational being with the power to choose between alternatives, he interjected his own form of political rationalism into his account of the war, particularly in his discussion of Greek politics (Godolphin, 1942). This suggests true interpretive objectivity, while enticing, is a reverie.

The comparison of Herodotus to Thucydides affords us a chance to see how historians necessarily take an active role in interpreting the past and how we each create a reality in the historical texts we read. As text is reread in different contexts it is given new meanings which are often contradictory and always socially imbedded (Hodder, 1994). There is no "original" or "true" meaning of any text. No interpretation of any text is any closer to the "real" meaning of the writer than any other interpretation. This has led to a broadened understanding that text that can be conceptualized as a form of discourse.

As discourse, text is viewed as a negotiated endeavor concerned with the nature of interpretation and the subject matter being interpreted. The key to this is negotiation. All discourse takes into account differences of opinion as to its own authority. When applied to textual analysis in teacher education research, these differences of opinion are found between the reader's analysis and the (unknown) meaning set forth by the writer. Not only does the language used indicate various forms of meaning by the way it shifts, recedes, fractures and disperses and defers dialogue, it also represents a singular interpretation of a social event recorded in a particular way. There has been a growing recognition that any statement of experience, oral or written, can be "read" as a discursive practice. This widened view links power and authority with text, placing it in a social space that can be examined and interpreted.

### **Text and Teacher Education Research**

With this broadened view, sometimes referred to as the "linguistic turn," has come a shift in studies of teacher learning. This transformation has been particularly influential on research about how teacher construct knowledge. In the past decade there has been increasing attention given to research where oral histories, narrative examinations, personal life histories and storytelling are used to analyze the ways in which teachers learn. For instance, at the 1998 American Education Research Association over 24 papers presented had the word "narrative" or "oral history" in their title. A similar search of Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) documents revealed over one thousand titles with the words "oral history" and more than one hundred fifty titles with the words "narrative and teaching" in them.

I see this methodological transformation as being related to two historical shifts in the U.S. the reform-minded press (both popular and professional) beginning in the early 1980's and

the perceived breakdown of the technical/rational view of research in teacher learning. Each has helped produce a culture of research in teacher education which privileges discourse and narrative analyses without examining the historical constructions and power relationships of such methodology.

### *Research Shifts in Teacher Education*

Starting in the early 1980's reports critical of teacher education programs called into question the content and pedagogy of professional programs, the quality of teacher education students, the orientations and preparation of teacher educators, and asked for alternative institutional arrangements for entry into the profession (Doyle, 1990).<sup>2</sup> This was a time in the U.S. not unlike the curriculum "ferment" of a century prior (Kliebard, 1987). These reports in both the popular and professional press called for increased accountability in teacher education, pushing teacher educators to justify their methods and beliefs with "valid" research methodology. In so doing, teacher education research was propelled into new arenas.

Prior to the reports, research in teacher education was generally concerned with increasing the "science" of teaching techniques. Typical of this type of research were experiments that tested teacher learning in an attempt to guide and assess observable teaching behaviors. However, during the same time-period of the reports an erosion of consensus surrounding the technical process-product model of teacher education research also occurred. An increased interest in the nature of pedagogical knowledge and the contexts in which this knowledge was learned began to surface as research foci. This paralleled current research in the psychological and behavioral sciences on the nature of cognition (Brown, Collins & Durgid, 1989).

One particular research theme that emerged was the emphasis on the reflective professional or practitioner (Schön, 1983). This research theme emphasized knowledge from research in the classroom as well as from the social and behavioral sciences. Key in this type of research was a belief that the teacher should think critically and examine personal knowledge to gain new insight into practice. Learning how to teach was now assumed to be a highly personal process and teaching practice was derived from forms of craft knowledge. The difference in this type of research was that there was a new focus on what teachers "actually knew" and how that knowledge was acquired. Previous research methods had been concentrated on more didactic teacher training techniques. What teachers were perceived to actually know was termed *practical knowledge* (Carter, 1990). Practical knowledge includes knowledge that teachers have about classroom situations and practical dilemmas they face in carrying out professional action in these settings. It is knowledge about teaching and thinking in action. It is based in a belief that practical rationality is fundamentally different from the technical rationality that dominates academic conceptions of professional knowledge (Schön, 1983). Knowledge is generated by reflection-in-action and shaped by personal history including the cumulative effect of life experiences. It is further believed that practical knowledge must be expressed in all of its "rich particulars and in a language close to that of the practitioners themselves" (Carter, 1990, p. 300). Studies of personal practical knowledge have often involved intensive case analysis and self analysis of classroom episodes which focus on the images, metaphors and tacit theories teacher use to make sense of classroom events. The purpose of such an examination is to make sense or create *narrative unity* by relating life experiences to the practice of teaching (Carter, 1990; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). One method for getting at practical knowledge was through narrative analysis and interpretation.

### *Teacher Education Research and Narrative*

Teacher education research using a narrative approach can take many forms, but it almost always involves some form of written account or field notes. One approach is to have the researcher write in the form of letters addressed to the teacher as a way of initiating discussion of developing notions of the teacher's practical thinking. It is believed that this method helps the researcher uncover a teacher's personal philosophy of their teaching as well as their personal and professional experience and allows the teacher to construct narrative unities. Another method has teachers employ a psychoanalytic technique of free association to construct a multidimensional biography to synthesize educational experiences called *currere* (Carter, 1990; Grumet, 1988). In *currere* the writing process is emphasized to create a distancing that encourages fresh insight and understanding. The written text can be analyzed for patterns and meanings key to understanding experience. Other forms of narrative research involve journal writing and document examination (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

The use of such methods today reflects a belief that this type of research can more adequately capture the interdeterminancy of teaching within complex understandings about the profession. For instance, narrative studies have been called "the most basic kind of research on teacher education" involving "personalized accounts written by participants and/or primary actors in the teacher education activity" (Yarger & Smith, 1990, p. 30). It has evolved into an explicit attempt to use the literatures on narrative to define both the method and the object of inquiry in teaching and teacher education and has been termed a "personal knowledge revolution" in teacher education research (Carter, 1993; Carter & Doyle, 1996)

But little attention has been given to how such research methodologies were rendered thinkable through forms of intellectual self-disciplining. To more fully understand this "blind spot," a broader understanding of the science and philosophy of history must be addressed.

#### **Narrative and the Philosophy of History**

The idea that all historical text is infused with present-day values was suggested by Althusser as he investigated the specific nature of science and the philosophy founded by Marx. Althusser continued to question the very idea of history and maintained that time was a concept, not an empirical entity. In order to claim scientific status for Marxism, Althusser invoked Bachelard's historical epistemology which allowed him to separate Marxist science from earlier forms of Marxism with an 'epistemological break.' In so doing, he proposed that Marxism consisted of a new science (Historical Materialism) and a new philosophy (Dialectical Materialism) (Baltas, 1989). In order to understand historical events, Althusser argued that the reader must know the concept of history in which the event occurred. History, as a totality, is in permanent contradiction because "each history's history is defined not through its identity with, or difference from, a general history but by being differentiated from every other history" (Young, 1990, p. 62). Although a chronology can be formed to show changes over time, that same chronology has its own rhythm which can only be found by establishing the conceptual relationship of the item being studied to the various histories of the parts it is related to. In other words, Althusser argued that history (in totality) is made up of many small parts which move at different speeds and the construction of a chronology only shows part of the history. One must be as aware of the history of the chronology as chronology's history.

While Althusser used the term *historicism* to describe attempts to determine an overall

process of transformation upon historical events, Derrida attempted to shift the concept away from history as an 'idea' and toward history as a problem of meaning. When one focuses on text, history becomes a problem of interpretation. Derrida argues that every interpretation of history relies on the signs and signifiers of language, which are themselves historical. Any meaning that is produced by studying history is actually a product of the language which is constructed out of, and subject to, the endless play of difference between signifiers (Gottdiener, 1995). Because meaning is derived from the shifting relations of difference that characterize language, history cannot be understood by merely looking back upon itself. The very aspect of writing invokes Althusser's historicism.

Foucault suggested the possibility of doing historical work and avoiding historicism by beginning analysis from a question posed in the present (Foucault, 1988). While forms of "narrative" inquiry open up possibilities for understanding teacher thinking in new ways, to assume that they are more "real" or more "contextualized" than traditional forms of research is a willful forgetting of the power of language and understanding discussed by Derrida. The decision of what types of text to "read," and accordingly what type of research to do when studying how teachers learn, is a type of intellectual self-discipline that obliterates the technologies of power which generate meaning in the discourse. It eliminates the potential understanding of the "law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events" (Foucault, 1972, p. 129).

To use a narrative form of inquiry in teacher education does not allow for the ways in which the narrative was rendered "thinkable" through forms of self-disciplining. To privilege the spoken word or narrative over other forms of discourse does not recognize the systems of formation and transformation of statements. In addition, this rendering of thinkable narrative still necessitates an appeal to external forces for validity. Although the traditional criteria of validity and reliability are not seen as satisfactory as measures in narrative inquiry, attempts have been made to explore such notions as the "authenticity" of the narrative text (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). But this appeal for textual validation and external validity topples its own methodological cornerstone. Although narrative research paradigms do ask questions posed in the present, subsequent quests for external validity engage the politics of hegemony.

### *Researching the Present*

With the linguistic turn has come a return of Herodotus-like interpretations of history, particularly in the studies of teacher learning. Oral histories, narrative examinations, personal life histories and storytelling are increasingly understood as "more authentic" and "valid" ways to conduct research. But, does changing what counts as research really change what can be understood? The legitimacy of narrative text lies, historically, in audience participation. How can one really "know" the author's meaning? The shift from the divine notion of text (i.e. true meaning of author) to linguistic notions of text (i.e. anything can be read as discourse) mirrors the shift from a consciousness of consciousness to "poststructural" moves to undermine a metaphysics of presence. However, it is not monolithic especially in teacher education. The privileging of narrative, oral history, and storytelling in research on how teachers learn and think about their work is actually a privileging of the divine notion of text. It is an attempt to "see" and "know" the teacher as subject in the true sense. As such, text becomes an object for knowing the subject as "self" or "present" even while claiming not to.

The science of hermeneutics formalized the reading of text as object in order to "get at" the author's true meaning of the text. Viewing the text-as-object was a step away from textual

divination, but "knowing" the author in the religious sense is still residue in all forms of interpretation. Even with the broader understanding of what "counts" as research in teacher education, the interpretation of the text still seeks truth about the past through the interpretation of language. The subject/author becomes knowable through the text and they know that they are knowable through the concept of "text." The study of any text, therefore, becomes a matter of the construction of the present how "we" become who "we" are.

Like Herodotus, the "newer" trends in textual analysis in teacher research seek a broader understanding of events by including sociological and anthropological anecdotes in the telling of stories. Where Herodotus was interested in the culture and civilization of the Greeks and the Barbarians, the use of narrative and storytelling in teacher research suggests a renewed interest in the subject/author as creator of true (divine) discourse. What is important is that the use of ANY text necessarily creates some sort of knowable subject/self. Whether discursive or divine, interpreting the "text" means interpreting a subject that is created by, for, and about the text they are a part of.

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1 Herodotus. (1942). *The Persian Wars: The First Book, Entitled Clio* (George Rawlinson, Trans.). New York: Random House.

2 For a discussion of the reform efforts of this period, see e.g. (Berman, 1992; Cibulka, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 1992)