The Teacher Writer: Narrative Theory, Storytelling and Research

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Abstract
As previously noted by the authors (White, 2004; White and Hay, 2004; Hay, 2004; Hay, White, Moss, Ferguson and Dixon, 2004; White and Hay, 2005; Hay and White, 2005) uses of narrative in teacher education tend to focus on reflection, autobiographical recording and biography. This narrow range of genres is, we argue, the product of a lack of theoretical underpinning in narrative and a limited use of narrative, as writing. Implicit in the work of two particular researchers Conle (2003) and Richardson (1990, 1993, 1997, 2000a, 2000b) is the possibility of an approach that is both more rigorous as research and more creative as a genre of writing. In this paper the authors develop this approach and offer a means of linking elements of narrative theory (and elements of narrative itself) with storytelling and research. An approach to storytelling is adapted for pre-service teachers and early career teachers with a focus on narrative theory and contemporary qualitative research. Insights from contemporary critical and cultural theory are applied to specific elements of narrative, including voice, perspective and stance, in order to link research and practice through writing.
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Narrative, in a variety of genres, is a contemporary tool at the disposal of teachers for the exploration of professional identity. Biography and autobiography are accessible genres for this kind of exploration and can be liberating, or even cathartic as a means of linking personal and professional identity. First person accounts of teachers’ lives or the lives of teachers as recounted by others are clearly forms of discourse (in the narratological sense of narrative structures, patterns and genres), which readily convey both personal and professional experience and knowledge. To put this in the less technical sense adopted by a good deal of the contemporary literature on teachers’ work and teacher preparation, teachers’ lives are ‘storied’ and their experiences are shared for the purposes of self-expression, or as a means of breaking through an apparent wall of isolation and self-doubt into a space of shared professional identity.

In our work in teacher education at The University of Melbourne, we have employed a narrative approach to beginning teacher identity and used first person stories as an entry point to the exploration of professional identity. For example, in ‘First Person: A Narrative Approach to Teacher/Learner Identity’ (Hay, 2004), we have included our stories and those of other colleagues. These have been used as a means of entry into a discourse about professional identity. For some years now we have used this idea to stimulate the use of narrative in with large numbers of pre-service teachers. This publication (2004) also highlighted the possibilities of ‘noticing’ as a tool as a means of shaping personal and professional identity and making the link between identity, beliefs
and pedagogy (Dixon, Ferguson, Hay, Moss and White, 2004, p.20). In a further chapter (Moss and Hay, 2004), a tentative link is made between narrative and the emerging role of the beginning teacher as a researcher and activist.

In this paper we will clarify the link between articulating identity and preparing for a professional role as teacher-researcher. In particular, we address the following questions:

1. Can we derive a method for linking ‘literary’ writing, and ‘research’ writing from narrative theory?

2. Can this method assist in the transformation of early career teacher identity from beginner to professional practitioner-researcher?

Narrative is, moreover, being used in a variety of senses that move beyond biographical/autobiographical reportage, into ‘critical reflection’ and the more imagined, or fictive, aspects of storytelling. Connelly and Clandinin (1995, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2000) have written extensively about ‘storying lives’, ‘stories to live by’, and ‘storied landscapes’ while Schön (1983, 1987, 1991) talks about the ‘reflective practitioner’, as a person who is aware of personal practice, rather than just a practised or experienced professional. Implicit in these approaches is a view that narrative is a tool for shaping experience, not just for recording it. Indeed, narrative may be the basis of highly reflexive practitioner-researcher that includes the inexperienced teacher every bit as much as the experienced teacher.
In order to clarify this, we draw on our own experience in using narrative in the context of both a literary discipline (storytelling) and exploration of identity (research). Trevor Hay has worked with early childhood pre-service teachers in developing techniques of storytelling for young children. It became apparent during many years of classes, in which the students selected and told stories to their, that certain key elements of narrative had to be ‘noticed’ in order to develop the skills of storytelling. These elements were in essence: ‘voice’, ‘perspective’, ‘story’, ‘plot’ and ‘characterisation’. During this time he distilled quite a lot of complex theory about narrative into three questions intended to assist students to focus on those narrative elements needed to convey the story. These questions have become:

1. What happened?
2. How do we know?
3. What does it mean? (Hay, 2003)

In his classes on storytelling, Trevor Hay devised a method using these questions to form a ‘cue card’ prompt. An excerpt is provided below explaining how this method worked.

1. What happened?
The source of this information is the evidence of text, and we will see how plot, and story are inter-related. This is not quite as obvious as it seems, since, for a storyteller or reader-aloud, it is necessary to distinguish carefully between elements that are frequently confused on the basis of sequence of events.

2. How do we know?
Following the rather legal-sounding analogy of evidence and witness, I suggest there are two parts to this testimony; the evidence of a witness or witnesses inside the text, who may be a character, a fictional narrator, or some kind of detached observer/recorder, and the evidence of a witness or witnesses outside the text, who

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1 Note: Italics represent the elements of narrative that students were asked to note in constructing their ‘cue cards’.
may be an author, or fictional narrator, or some combination of the two. From these witnesses we get things like *voice, perspective, characterisation.*

3. **What does it mean?**

In this category elements such as *theme* and *motif* (or moral or message) are highlighted, but in this particular approach the relationship between the ‘speaker’ and the ‘speech’ or *discourse*, is explored to show the possibility of various levels of meaning which are conveyed by *genres* such as myth, fairytale, ballad, etc. (Hay, 2003, pp. 15-16).

The second use of narrative (exploration of identity in research) occurs in Julie White’s doctoral dissertation (White, 2004), which attempted to discern patterns in the stories of beginning teachers. This study began with personal narratives told by teachers in their first year of professional employment. At this career point, teachers commonly told ‘disaster stories’ or ‘war stories’ in which they were positioned as either the hero or the victim. The common ‘tale types’ in the international literature *about* beginning teachers identifies a familiar ‘novice and mentor’ binary obscuring issues of identity, knowledge and power. In this discourse, teachers are dichotomised as ‘experienced’ or ‘inexperienced’, ‘good’ versus ‘bad’, ‘problem’ versus ‘solution’, ‘capable’ versus ‘incapable’. The complexity involved in learning to teach is strangely absent. The use of voice and perspective is limited and the characterisation of the beginning teacher is circumscribed by the context of their problems. Using the ‘cue card’ approach described above, these stories proved to be records of ‘What happened?’, but did not proceed beyond this into the other questions ‘How do we know?’ and ‘What does it mean?’

If teacher stories are ‘moved forward’ from reportage into interpretive or even fictive modes, the three-question method outline above might yield richer discourses for
narrating and ‘imagining’ professional identity (Dixon, Ferguson, Hay, Moss and White, 2004, p. 16). As Roland Barthes (1957) observed, ‘To write is a glorious but bold activity; the writer is an “artist”’ (p. 50). However, it seems to us that the kind of professional writing required of teachers remains largely functional and utilitarian. They write critiques of their students’ work. They write reports on their students’ progress - in increasingly controlled ways. They also ‘write up’ incident reports and, where compelled, write accounts of their performance as seen in the first year teacher registration requirements in Victoria (White, 2004; White & Hay, 2005). To receive or maintain external funding, teachers also develop action plans, reports and ‘write up’ action research projects.

We distinguish here between ‘writing’ and ‘writing up’ (White and Hay, 2004) in working with early career teachers on research projects and at workshops and presentations at conferences. The distinction draws on Laurel Richardson’s (2000) comment about writing being a process of inquiry rather than a ‘mopping up’ exercise. Students often refer to writing about their research as ‘writing up’, which seems to denote something different from more literary approaches. But where do teachers write to reflect on their pedagogical practice? What kinds of writing might allow teachers to construct rich narratives of their own professional lives?

It is important to note that, in the narratological sense, ‘narrative’ is not simply synonymous with ‘story’, (the term used consistently by Connelly and Clandinin among others) since it incorporates the various elements of a told story, including, for example,
narration, as the act or process of telling and discourse, as the conscious authorial/artistic assembly, sequencing and representation of events, artefacts, thoughts, traces, souvenirs and symbols in such a way as to convey a story (Eagleton, 1996, p. 91-92). Put another way, ‘story’ is only a sequence of events arranged in chronological order, but ‘narrative’ contains, among other things, the disposition or augmentation of these in some kind of ‘plot’ (Cuddon, 1992, p. 570-571). As E. M. Forster famously put it, “‘The king died and then the queen died’ is a story. ‘The king died, and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot’ (Forster, 1963, p. 87). And plot, in this sense, is not just a matter of intrigue, or the conscious tying of a knot to be untied. In Forster’s example, a writer might convey these same basic events by means not only of a plot, but of a discourse that puts grief at the heart of the narrative, rather than death. This alone will make it a different kind of narrative - a love story, say, rather than a murder mystery.

Conle (2003) surveys recent use of narrative in teacher education and within graduate education programs, drawing a clear distinction between ‘story’ and ‘account’, which in narratological terms, appears to be something like the distinction between ‘story’ and ‘plot’, in which ‘story’ is, broadly speaking, a sequence of events arranged in chronological or ‘natural’ order, and ‘plot’ is the re-arrangement of those events in some kind of authorial composition. Conle draws on the work of Gérard Genette to make this distinction. Genette clearly distinguishes between ‘narrative’ and narration’. Further:

He theorizes narrative in terms of the relations between récit, the order of events as they are represented in a given narrative; histoire, the chronological order in which the events occurred; and narration, the narrative act itself…For Genette, narrative is the result of the relations between these various elements. He utilizes five basic areas in which these elements interact: the narrative’s ordering of time; the varying lengths of time accorded to plot events by the narrative; the frequency
with which an event is narrated as well as the frequency with which it actually occurred; the narrative techniques used and the viewpoint of the narrative persona; and the act of narration per se (Innes, 1997, pp. 360-361).

Conle (2003), Richardson (2000) and Aveling (2001) have made a case for narrative analysis in terms applicable to teacher professional identity. Our purpose here however, is not to impose narratological terminology on this discussion, but to explore the gaps left by Conle (2003) and Britzman (2003) between understanding of narrative and the creation of narrative forms. Perhaps a more sophisticated understanding of narrative, coupled with some recent thinking on self and subjectivity, and an eye for audience, might lead us beyond current uses of ‘authenticity’, and ‘evidence’ in student and teacher assessment, and beyond limited forms of self-expression, to possibilities for the transformation of professional identity.

Writers themselves sometimes provide us with clearer insights into the subtle possibilities of voice and narration, as in Henry James’s use, in The Ambassadors, of a ‘central consciousness’ which is not exercised through a first person narrator, and therefore does not have the ‘omniscient’ quality of the unseen storyteller, but is in fact limited to the experience and perception of a single character confined within the tale (Kuznets, 1989). This may well be a useful example of how a teacher-researcher might put into practice Richardson’s (2000) idea of writing as an act of inquiry. The teacher would be involved in actually writing, using conscious aspects of voice, plot, story etc. in order to probe the perspectives of their students who are, in a sense, ‘confined’, like James’s narrator-character, within their own limited context, or knowledge (Hay and White, 2005).
In fields such as curriculum (Conle, 2003) and sociology (Richardson, 1995, 1997) there are examples of researchers engaging with narrative theory. Aveling (2001) emphasises the elements of change addressed by Pinar (1995) and links narratology directly with both critical pedagogy and storytelling:

Critical pedagogy arose out of theories of resistance, themselves a reaction against the pessimism of theories of cultural reproduction current in the 1970s and 1980s. While critical pedagogy is not readily summed up in a phrase or indeed a couple of paragraphs, its focus is to move ‘beyond interpretation to change’ (Pinar, 1995, p. 225). Such a move emphasises the agency of teachers (Aveling, 2001, p. 36).

Conle (2003) is among this handful of writers searching for a more analytical use of narrative:

Definitions of narrative become analytical tools. I use them heuristically in order to get a clearer idea about where one might look if one wanted to point to curricular results. Alongside a tremendous amount of work by narratologists and others…the word narrative seems straightforward and is understood in everyday usage (p. 5).

It is precisely this ‘everyday usage’ of narrative that obscures the potential for more heuristic use of narrative in the pursuit of identity. For example, Craig (see below) conflates the notions of ‘landscape’ and ‘stories’, and proceeds via the metaphor of ‘constellation’ into ‘portfolio’in a way that leaves the reader quite uncertain what genre of writing is intended in order to tell their stories. In other words, the fundamental narrative nature of Genette’s ‘narrative act’ (1980, p. 160) has been obscured by a mixture of metaphors.

A number of sets of stories characterize school landscapes. Stories of school – the stories that educators are expected to live and tell about schools – and school stories – the stories educators personally tell about schools - are vital. Also important are stories of reform – the stories that teachers are expected to live and tell about school reform and reform stories – the stories teachers personally tell about their experiences of school reform…the dynamic interplay between and among these multiple narratives forming a story constellation…on teachers’
professional knowledge landscapes is fundamental to school portfolio development. In short, these stories sit at the heart of the school portfolio construction and reconstruction because they offer important perspectives concerning which works, why, and the meanings held by those who live in the tensions between and among the multiple story constellations shaping school landscapes (Craig, 2003) (p. 5).

As Doecke, Brown and Loughnan (2000) comment, ‘Recently educational researchers have appropriated a range of insights from narrative theory (or narratology) to argue the value of narrative in educational research, especially the research by teachers into their own practice’ (p. 336). It may well be time for these insights, whether structuralist or poststructuralist, to be used with more heuristic effect.

Connelly and Clandinin (2000) open up possibilities for teachers to inquire into their own professional lives by means of an act of narration which goes beyond mere recording of experience to the telling of stories. However, without a more systematic approach to narrative, these stories remain limited to a form of recount or self-exploration. The familiar elements of narrative, such as story, plot, characterisation, theme, mood and motif, are present not only in those events which are, strictly speaking, *told*, but in those which are enacted, illustrated, danced, sung or represented in a variety of forms and genres. If we apply notions like narration and discourse to the storying of teachers’ lives, as in Connelly and Clandinin (1999), or to Richardson’s (2000) plea for writing as an act of inquiry, by asking:

1. What happens?
2. How do we know?
3. What does it mean?
we have taken a step from ‘realism’ based on practice towards writing based on understanding. This may involve ‘fictive’ elements yet ironically, moves us closer towards ‘authenticity.’ Consider the power of fiction – and the power of myth and folklore - to convey truths that go far beyond realism.

As reported elsewhere (Hay & White, 2005) some of our students experience the greatest revelation of their entire course in teacher education when they simply surrender to the act of writing themselves into a tale of teaching. An excerpt from Stephanie’s pre-service portfolio illustrates this:

“Little Miss, Little Miss, have you heard?!” I’d never seen my year twelves so excited.
“Heard what?”
“We got into the [Rock Eisteddford] grand final!”
Looking at their beaming faces, I knew that their achievement far exceeded a grand final berth.

A discernible change washed over the school like a spell cast by Julie Andrews in that family, feel-good, Disney flick. The kids made fewer excuses and offered more answers in class, the staff found some reserves of energy and the corridors echoed with the excited giggles of both contingents. Pride was infectious. The College was alive with enthusiasm (Stephanie Wellsford, 2004, cited in Hay and White, 2005).

The fictive, imaginative and lyrical elements in this writing are not just a matter of literary style, but contribute directly to the second and third questions:

1. What happens?
2. How do we know?
3. What does it mean?

To illustrate briefly, in exploring Stephanie’s perceptions of attitudinal change in her students, the reader/audience engages with the author/narrator in addressing Question 2.
And in exploring her succinct conclusion, the reader/audience finds a basis for determining the possible meanings of these events (Question 3).

At the beginning of this paper we posed two questions: ‘Can we derive a method for linking ‘literary’ writing, and ‘research’ writing from narrative theory?’ and ‘Can this method assist in the transformation of early career teacher identity from beginner to professional practitioner-researcher? On the basis of our experience so far, we do not claim a method but we have made a beginning in linking an approach to storytelling, derived from the discipline of literature with uses of narrative derived from qualitative methodology and narrative theory. The task remaining in our work with pre-service and early career teachers and other researchers interested in narrative approaches, is to gather a body of stories, such as Stephanie’s, and work towards a systematic process for writing that is based on our three questions.

References


