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Narrative and Portfolio Approaches to Teacher Professional Standards

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Abstract

This paper analyses various uses of narrative in the exploration of teacher identity. It highlights the way many contemporary education writers use terminology such as ‘storying lives’ and ‘storied landscapes’ to describe teacher processes of reflection on practice. In this paper the authors discuss some recent approaches to narrative that incorporate or suggest systematic uses of narrative theory (Conle 2003, Kamler, 2001, Richardson, 2003). Consideration is also given to the links between critical ethnography and narrative in order to critique the use of teacher portfolios, as in a recent Australian initiative for the appraisal of beginning teachers. The authors conclude with an argument for the rehabilitation and refinement of narrative theory in the ‘writing’ of teacher identity.
Narrative, in a variety of genres, is a common contemporary tool for the exploration of teacher identity. Biography and autobiography are the most obvious examples, since 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 and patterns), which readily convey personal, 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.

These genres, while familiar and conventional forms of narrative, are not necessarily lacking in innovation and variety and may take the form of writing or even 'storytelling' of the oral kind. A current variation on the autobiographical theme is 'authentic conversation' (Clark, 2001) in which teachers discuss their experiences in regular informal meetings with colleagues or in which pre-service teachers exchange letters, formulating various questions in personal narratives.

Narrative is, however, being used in a variety of senses, which 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 representing it.
More recently, Mason (2002) proposes a ‘discipline of noticing’ as an aspect of being professional which takes us beyond reflection into action. As he puts it ‘Reflection is a much used word, with meaning varying from “vaguely thinking back to or commenting on an incident” to detailed written records of as much as can be recalled of an event’. (p.15). The present writers are also exploring the idea of ‘noticing’ as a form of awareness which moves beginning teachers beyond the preoccupation with ‘classroom management’ to an appreciation of the complex cultures contained within and beyond the classroom (Moss et al, 2004). In general terms, narrative approaches to teachers’ work have not been preoccupied with the collection of data but with ‘data storying’ (Lather and Smithies, 1997).

Connelly and Clandinin (1998, p. 155) alert us to a basis for distinguishing between story and narrative (story as ‘phenomenon’, narrative as ‘inquiry’). However, as they concede in a later work, they do not deal with the ‘huge literature’ that talks about narrative, preferring instead to concentrate on what ‘narrative inquirers’ do (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 49). Our point is that avoidance of the ‘huge literature’ may lend itself to the emergence of diluted or even distorted forms of narrative enquiry such as the proposed use of a portfolio for assessment of teachers discussed later in this paper.

Craig (2003), like Clandinin and Connelly, is clearly in sympathy with the notion of story as an act of enquiry into experience. She refers to ‘the stories that teachers are expected to tell about school reform and reform stories - the stories teachers personally tell about their experiences of school reform’ (p. 15). Such stories of ‘reform’ are not mere
accounts. While she also avoids specific argument relating to the elements of narrative, it is clear that some kind of authorial ‘reconstruction’ is inherent in her view of teachers’ experience, which draws on the concept of ‘personal practical knowledge’.

Personal practical knowledge is in the teacher’s past experience, in the teacher’s present mind and body, and in the future plans and actions. Personal practical knowledge is found in the teacher’s practice. It is, for any teacher, a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions of the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation (Connelly and Clandinin, 1995, p. 25).

The links with narrative, and genres from journal and chronicle to diary, letter or even life story are evident in this view of teacher knowledge - or self-knowledge. Craig (2003) argues that the entries that teachers choose to include in their reflective narrative portfolio pieces are based on personal practical knowledge and school context (p. 4). She emphasises the importance of teaching context and draws on Clandinin and Connelly’s (1995) metaphor of teacher professional knowledge ‘landscapes’. The essence of the trope appears to be the breadth and variety of view provided by landscape painting as opposed to other forms, but it is interesting to note in passing how the principal idea of narrative is being illustrated by means of an art form other than narrative. Clandinin and Connelly are a long way removed from instrumental approaches, which merely document teachers’ work, but this metaphorical use of terminology and ideas from narrative may, in its most derivative form, such as in uses of ‘portfolio’ discussed below, obscure the possibilities for using narrative in a genuine and substantive sense rather than creating essentially documentary or ‘realist’ genres which range from relatively free self-expression to rigid assessment. Kamler (2001), in her use of critical discourse analysis, points to the lack of engagement in most poststructuralist work between theories of
language and close textual analysis (p. 113). In a certain sense, Kamler’s use of critical
discourse analysis is a form of ‘narrative inquiry’ as advocated by Connelly and
Clandinin (1998, 2000). Where Kamler differs, however, is the clear attempt to link
narrative theory and poststructuralist frameworks via the tool of textual analysis.

In two significant examples of the treatment of narrative - the use of the term ‘landscape’
and the use of the term ‘storying’ - there is evidence of a tendency to overlook decades of
rich discussion in the area of narrative theory and critical and cultural studies, in favour
of popular or metaphorical terminology which seems congruent with postmodernist,
poststructuralist approaches to identity, voice and perspective. This may have had the
effect of distancing the genres in which these elements of narrative are situated (letters,
dialogues, journals, diaries, portfolios) from the arena of narrative theory. Our intention
here is not to argue for a firm position along the continuum from structuralist to
poststructuralist thinking, but to re-locate the issue of narrative back in a more ‘literal’
framework of narrative theory, critical and cultural theory and qualitative research, rather
than to treat narrative as a kind of metaphor for expressions of identity, self-awareness or
even self-assessment. A distinction is emerging here between genres which derive from
diaries, logs, journals, chronicles, ‘episodic’ or ‘documentary’ styles of narrative and/forms of writing more closely related to Laurel Richardson’s more critical or
transformative view of writing, or ‘knowing’.
Perhaps the clearest expression of the link between narrative theory, research and writing as opposed to some kind of recording or documentation, is made by Richardson in her seminal work, ‘Writing. A Method of Inquiry’

Although we usually think about writing as a mode of ‘telling’ about the social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of ‘knowing’ - a method of discovery and analysis. (Richardson, in Denzin and Lincoln, eds. 2003, p.499)

The form of enquiry most readily associated with this view of ‘knowing’, as opposed to ‘writing-up’ of experience or observation is, broadly speaking, qualitative research and some favoured genres identified by Richardson are ‘life histories, informants’ oral accounts, in-depth interviews, case studies, historical documents, and participant observation’ (1997, p. 26).

In the following sections we will explore some key aspects of narrative and related fields of enquiry in order to suggest the possibilities that might flow from a more comprehensive use of theoretical and research-based perspectives. We begin with general links between qualitative research and narrative, extend the discussion into aspects of ‘critical’ research and pedagogy and return to the notion of the portfolio. We use an Australian example of the portfolio - in particular the ‘high stakes’ (Wolf, 1994, p. 121) form of portfolio-based registration as proposed by the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) which is clearly in the ‘realist’ tradition identified by Richardson, (1997, 2003), and based on a view of ‘evidence’, or ‘truth’ rather than reflection about possibilities, meanings and transformation.
Qualitative Research and Narrative

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) define qualitative research as

A situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representation, including *field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self*. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (our emphasis) (p. 4-5).

They go on to identify ‘case study; personal experience; introspection; life story; interview; artefacts; cultural texts and productions; observational, historical, interactional and visual texts’ (p. 3-4) as forms of representation commonly used in qualitative research. Conle (2003) surveys recent use of narrative in teacher education and within graduate education programs, (p. 3-4) 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, roughly 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 Gerard Génette to make this distinction, and places the narrator researcher and ‘subject’ within her narrative framework. The researcher is author/character/narrator and the subject/participant is something like ‘protagonist’ (Payne, 1996, p. 360).

When narrative accounts are constructed from field texts and shared with participants as means for the latter’s professional development, the researcher and the participant are both experiencing curricular changes. The story in a narrative is predominantly lived by the main character, while the account as narrative statement is chiefly constructed by the narrator researcher who is generally a minor character in it (Conle, 2003, p. 8).
In fields such as curriculum (Conle, 2003) and sociology (Richardson, 1997) there are examples of researchers engaging with narrative theory. Aveling (2001) emphasises the element 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 et al, 1995, p. 225). Such a move emphasises the agency of teachers (Aveling, 2001, p. 36).

Conle (2003, p. 4) is focused on using narrative in an analytical way.

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 (Conle, 2003, p. 5).

We suggest that it is just this ‘everyday usage’ of narrative that is causing the confusion in scholarly writing about narrative in education. For example, as discussed above, narrative and story are not synonyms and nor are plot and story the same thing. However, they are generally conflated in a notion of narrative as in the following:

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 school portfolio construction and reconstruction because they offer important perspectives concerning what 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).
Craig’s use of Connelly and Clandinin’s ‘landscape’ together with her use of the term ‘story’, becomes, in effect, a mixed metaphor. 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 analytical precision.

**Ethnography, Critical Ethnography and Narrative**

A basic premise (although not an uncontroversial or uncontested one) of the kind of narrative theory articulated above is a sense of the difference between ‘documented episodes’ (‘real life’ recounted in natural, or chronological order) and the kind of fictive, imaginative and authored re-constructions of events. This has survived in narrative approaches to teacher education, as in Schön’s (1983, 1987 and 1991) ‘reflective practitioner’ and ‘personal practical knowledge’ (Connelly and Clandinin, 1995), which differs sharply from documentation.

The difference between a record and a story is also inherent in the notion of a ‘critical’ pedagogy or ‘critical’ ethnography. While much of the postmodern/poststructuralist response to culture and identity (especially minority culture and identity) has found its way from critical and cultural studies into education, and while ethnography itself has been derived from anthropology, ‘critical’ ethnography has been contributed by the field of education, and resonates with the works of Paulo Freire (1972), Ivan Illich (1973) and
Augusto Boal (1985). It is fascinating to note that after the passage of three decades, Paulo Freire sounds as much at home – and in fact as much a leader - of this discourse as anybody.

A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship at any level, inside or outside the school, reveals its fundamentally narrative character. This relationship involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. Education is suffering from narration sickness (1972, p. 45).

Freire sounds as if he is at the forefront of a debate on narrative, which has not, in fact, yet happened. He is talking about the relationships between students and teachers but it may be that there is a kind of ‘narration sickness’ going on in education in which the form of narrative applied to teachers is ‘metaphorical’ rather than a form that lends itself to both critical pedagogy and more contemporary ethnographies.

As Carspecken (2001) notes:

Critical ethnography’ was first used in reference to qualitative educational research informed by critical theories of education, such as critical pedagogy theory, feminist theories of education, and neo-Marxist theories of education…the term ‘critical ethnography’ has been aptly applied to well known works from the late 1970s and early 1980s (p. 3).

The link between ‘critical’ approaches to pedagogy and teacher education is made evident by Giroux and McLaren (1986, cited in Aveling, 2001) who argue that a teacher education curriculum needs to contain an element of ‘critical’ study, a form of study ‘that values student experience and student voice’ (p. 2). The ‘critical’ element in critical
pedagogy and critical ethnography is in turn closely related to narrative. Britzman comments:

First, ethnography is both a process and a product; there are methods for how to go about narrating culture, and these social strategies promise a text. Second, good ethnographic texts tell stories that invariably embody qualities of a novel. Implicitly, ethnographies promise pleasure or at least new information to the reader. Third, an ethnography takes the reader into an actual world to reveal the cultural knowledge working in a particular place and time as it is lived through the subjectivities of its inhabitants (2003, p. 243).

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2002) have described critical ethnography as a branch of ethnography that is concerned with ‘the exposure of oppression and inequality in society with a view to emancipating individuals and group towards collective empowerment’ (p. 153). In general terms there is a clear link between these concerns, the methodological paradigms in which they are located and fundamental elements of narrative such as voice, perspective and identity.

Several elements, which in our view are fundamental to Laurel Richardson’s (2003) notion of ‘writing as a method of inquiry’ have been identified as ‘hallmarks of effective ethnographies’ by Spindler and Spindler (1992) and described thus in Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2002):

- Observations have contextual relevance
- The ethnographer’s presence should be declared
- Observation is prolonged and repetitive with events and series of events observed more than once
- Sociocultural knowledge is elicited from participants (p. 139-140).
In narrative terms, ‘context’, ‘voice’, ‘perspective’, ‘storytelling’, ‘storied landscapes’ and concerns with ‘subjectivities’, acknowledgement of the role of the observer in the process of observation, and ultimately a concern with the transformative power of knowledge, are all fundamental aspects of narrative forms of enquiry. From field notes, interviews and conversations to fiction (including novels and autoethnography), the ‘transformative' element of critical ethnography is in fact the power of writing. Consider, for example, the testimonio of Rigoberta Menchu (1984, in Lincoln and Denzin, 2003). Despite the stand-alone force – the horror in fact - of the events documented, it is the writing which, in Roland Barthes’ (1972) terms, the ‘discourse’ which conveys that force.

**Portfolio as narrative**

We will now turn to a proposed Australian use of portfolio, which, in our view has been derived from, but divorced from, narrative theory and practice. In 2003 the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) proposed the introduction of competency standards for beginning teachers for implementation in 2004, suggesting eight ‘standards’. Teachers are expected to develop a portfolio to demonstrate that they can provide evidence of achieving these standards after they have been teaching for a year (VIT, 2003). If these standards are satisfactorily demonstrated to a school-based panel, these teachers move from provisional to full registration (VIT, 2004). The draft standards included the statement: ‘They are not a checklist of competencies for beginning teachers to master by the end of their first year’ (VIT, 2003). This, however, has been removed in the final version, as has the word, ‘portfolio’ (VIT, 2004). While the portfolio *process* appears to be a contemporary and forward-looking approach, the *content* does in fact reflect a
checklist of basic skills and abilities and a competency perspective. In parts of North America and increasingly in Australia, the use of portfolios within the teaching profession has involved teachers in personal writing. However, we would argue that the genre employed is an impoverished form of narrative, which provides little room for complexity or identity development.

The notion of ‘portfolio’ is clearly a derivative of narrative approaches, based on some combination of ‘episodic’ accounts of teachers’ work, opportunities for reflection on teacher practice and teacher knowledge and demonstration of competencies. Wolf (1994) describes portfolios as ‘purposeful and selective collections of a person’s work and reflections’, and outlines the way they have evolved from a display of artists’ work to collections of student writing and more recently to a means of assessing teachers' work, and a ‘structure and occasion for self-reflection and collegial interactions based on documented episodes of their own teaching’ (112-113).

The portfolio may well contain cumulative, chronologically arranged evidence of a teacher’s work, including lesson plans, student work, and for that matter records of that person’s career from academic preparation to professional development, and certain milestones, but it would be little more than a scrapbook if it did not contain some significant element of reflection, or ‘noticing’ (Mason, 2002; Moss et al., 2004). In narratological terms, a portfolio may either be a ‘story’ (a sequence of events arranged in some basically chronological order, as they are supposed to have happened in real life) or some kind of ‘plot’, in which an author re-arranges events, characters and setting to form
a certain ‘discourse’, which has meaning or pattern - or several meanings and patterns. In effect, despite their use of the verb ‘storying’, what writers like Craig (2003) seems to mean is more akin to ‘plot’ than anything like a chronicle of events in a teacher's life.

The VIT (2003) emphasis, despite a statement of principle suggesting that a key purpose of the portfolio is exploration of professional identity, appears to be very much about the demonstration of competencies. This is at best only a ‘story’ in narratological terms, rather than a piece of ‘writing’ in the Richardson sense. At the outset, VIT has declared, ‘This is a statement of purpose and vision for the teaching profession…[and] serves to remind us of our commitment as teachers, and of the importance of our work’ (VIT, 2003). The idea of reflection and critical enquiry only appears once under the ‘professional engagement’ domain. Wolf (1993) points to the importance of reflection in discussing the uses of teaching portfolios in the United States:

(Another) essential ingredient in a teaching portfolio is a reflective commentary written by the teacher. Reflective commentaries go beyond a description of the portfolio contents; they examine the teaching that is documented and discuss what the portfolio reveals about the teacher’s effectiveness (p. 127).

We would argue that the proposed Victorian use of teaching portfolios is a device more congruent with measurement than reflection. Certainly the idea of a ‘personal knowledge’ or the sense of perspective inherent in the Clandinin and Connelly metaphor of ‘professional landscape’ appears to be missing from the VIT portfolio. The idea of professional knowledge landscapes seems to be derived from the location of teachers’ personal knowledge in the context of their teaching practice. Clandinin and Connelly argue that the metaphor allows them to:
... talk about space, place and time. Furthermore, it has a sense of expansiveness and the possibility of being filled with diverse people, things, and events in different relationships. Understanding professional knowledge as comprising a landscape calls for a notion of professional knowledge as composed of a wide variety of components and influenced by a wide variety of people, places, and things. Because we see the professional knowledge landscape as composed of relationships among people, places, and things, we see it as both an intellectual and moral landscape (Clandinin and Connelly, 1995, p. 4-5).

In the VIT (2003) interpretation of portfolio, the full context of a teacher’s experience is limited to a technical core of eight standards in a quest for some kind of objectivity and precision reminiscent of notions of the neutrality or objectivity of the researcher. In fact they are being asked to be ‘neutral’ about their own lives. Gill, Doecke and McClenaghan (2000) comment on the status of teachers, describing them as ‘critical professionals rather than functionaries following someone else’s agenda’ (p. 37). The VIT portfolio affects the style of narrative forms of enquiry but remains essentially an instrument of measurement. For those of us interested in making links between ethnographic research, critical pedagogy and forms of teacher narrative, this is a depressing development and a distortion of the essentially narrative aspect of a teaching portfolio.

**Conclusion:**

Complexity and thick description (Geertz, 1973) are essential aspects both of critical ethnography and narrative, and should be reflected in the notion of a teacher portfolio. However, if the portfolio is appropriated by agencies whose principal concern is ‘standards’ or ‘competencies’, the richness and complexity of beginning teacher identity may well end up being characterised as a ‘less complex’ area of enquiry. ‘Experience’
and ‘Inexperience’ are the principal motifs, or even characters, in a dualistic tale type reminiscent of folklore. In fact, if the portfolio is considered in terms of conventional narrative typology of the folktale kind, it is tempting to see the beginning teacher in the role of ‘hero’ starting out on a journey (Campbell, 1968), and the experienced teacher as hero at the end of the journey, in a classic binary (and structuralist) opposition. But the problem with this story, from the poststructuralist point of view, is its lack of complexity, voice, context and situation - its lack of all the things that a ‘critical’ pedagogy or ethnography might impart. To put it another way, when it comes to ‘writing’ (in the Richardson sense), or ‘storying the lives’ of teachers, (in the Connelly and Clandinin sense), the task of the narrator is no less complex when the subjects are beginning teachers rather than experienced teachers. Imagine the writer who took the view that a fifteen-year-old protagonist was less complicated than a fifty year old, by dint of age and experience.

The Australian model of the portfolio, which had the potential to be enriched by narrative theory, has been converted into a device for regulating and controlling the teaching profession. Practice has been divorced from theory, teacher experience has been impoverished in the process and the portfolio itself has become essentially a form of mixed metaphor. To return to Friere’s (1972) view of narrative and education, the teacher is being made to write about their reality ‘as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized and predictable’ (p. 45).
The professional knowledge valued and measured in standards and appraisal processes so
favoured by governments and bureaucracies worldwide has ‘evident associations with
behaviorist principles and with curricula defined according to pre-specified and
measurable objectives and outcomes’ (Tickle 1999, p. 121). This view of teaching is
profoundly limited and fails to acknowledge the intense social interactions of teaching
and the development of affective aspects of teaching like empathy, compassion,
flexibility, tolerance, and so on (Tickle, 1991, 1994; Marti and Huberman, 1993). The
teacher as instructional technician mimicking and implementing the policies and
programs of professional organisations represents a sad, impoverished ‘story’ of teachers’
lives. Unfortunately, this is the way things are going in the state of Victoria, Australia -
not exactly what Freire meant by ‘narration sickness’, but a rather sickly little child of
narrative, nonetheless. What we prescribe is not a mixture of metaphors but a
concentrated dose of narrative enquiry - and some rehabilitation of associated theory
along the lines of Kamler, Conle and Richardson. This will take the portfolio beyond
notions of measurement, standards and registration, and beyond even reflection and
storying to profound teacher learning about identity.

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