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Performing beginning teachers’ ‘firsts’
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Teacher identity work emphasises it is important beginning teachers understand their professional identity as something shifting, fluid and emerging – not fixed. These and other water metaphors – such as ‘washout’, ‘sink or swim’, and ‘thrown in the deep end’ – are often used to describe beginning teachers’ experiences. Such words and metaphors portray the fluid and unpredictable nature of identity transformation, while also highlighting that beginning teachers in particular find this transformation difficult, resulting in high levels of teacher attrition in the early years.

Throughout 2011 twelve beginning teachers shared their experiences of identity transformation in semi-structured interviews with the researcher. Their interview data was analysed and scripted into an ethnographic performance, examining how ‘first’ experiences shape teachers’ future practice and identity. This presentation includes excerpts from the ethnographic performance ‘The First Time’, and expands on the methodological approaches taken to generate data and knowledge that reflects the fluid and unpredictable nature of teachers’ identity. This eclectic approach combined an understanding of the self (Mead, 1934) with non-naturalistic theatrical conventions used to form the data into an ethnographic performance. The research is framed within a practice theory approach (Schatzki, 2001) with a focus on practices situated within a particular time and place. Research outcomes centre on ‘firsts’ as powerful, self-selected tools to assist beginning teachers to realise, reflect on, and revisit moments of becoming a teacher.

The research findings focus on the importance of developing creativity and flexibility as key beginning teacher attributes in order to ‘swim with the current’, and to counter the negative preconceptions beginning teachers are told to expect as rites of passage upon entering the profession. The outcomes of my research have implications for teacher educators and in-service teachers in assisting beginning teachers to negotiate the waters of an ever-changing profession.

Keywords: identity, beginning teachers, performance
Presentation transcript

Today I’m going to outline an approach I’ve taken to analyse the data in my current research – a method that draws on my background as a performing arts teacher and that has parallels with more ‘traditional’ research methods and modes of analysis. It’s called theatre-based research, and I employed this approach to investigate beginning teachers’ identity transformation in their first year of teaching. I’ve framed my research within a practice theory approach – which recognises practices as the field to investigate transformation, and I’ve used teachers ‘first’ experiences as a lens to investigate their practice.

As a teacher educator I’ve always been interested beginning teachers’ transition to ‘becoming’ a teacher. I help my pre-service teachers to understand their professional identity as something shifting, fluid and emerging – not fixed. Focusing on their teaching ‘firsts’ helps them to realise or recognise and reflect on self-selected moments of identity transformation, and revisit these moments as indicators of how they are continually ‘becoming’ a teacher.

Throughout 2011 twelve of my previous pre-service teachers shared with me their experiences of identity transformation in semi-structured interviews throughout their first year of teaching. Their interview data was analysed and scripted into a performance called The First Time, representing ‘first’ experiences and how they can shape teachers’ future practice and identity.

This theatre-based research approach employs scripting, rehearsing and performance as tools for data analysis. When scripting I searched the data noticing all the ‘firsts’, and selecting the moment that represented each participant’s identity transformation.

During this process I was conscious of the ethical responsibilities of the theatre-based researcher – so I was careful that the script only contained the participants’ exact words. I dramatised these stories through theatrical conventions, such as transformation of time and place, which would enhance the portrayal of the participants’ experiences as they told them.

I made the decision to work with teachers who could act – who could bring their own personal histories to the performance and offer legitimate suggestions. I wanted to move the audience’s experience beyond enjoyment to something that would speak to teachers from teachers.

Another important part of the process was the validation rehearsal – which is a form of member checking. I invited the participants to a reading of the play, and provided them with the opportunity to discuss their stories with the teacher-actors before rehearsals began. Some changes were made as a result of the validation rehearsal, and there were some insightful suggestions from the research participants for the actors.

While scripting the data I noticed the way the interview participants often spoke in different ‘voices’. They’d make a statement, then explain or expand on their
statement, then consolidate their meaning. So part of my analysis involved creating the trio of Narrators – the interviewee/participant. The use of the Narrators also creates the two times and selves being represented in the interviews – the time of the interview, and the time the interviewee is looking back on.

I also wanted to capture the way participants’ described their experiences often through a thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. As a result Narrator 1 represents the thesis, Narrator 2 the antithesis, and Narrator 3 the synthesis.

The advantage of using ‘firsts’ as a lens to investigate identity transformation is that a ‘first’ spans different times – sometimes you recognise or realise a ‘first’ in the moment, sometimes afterwards – then you reflect on their meaning, and often have them revisit you in light of new experiences. I aimed to embody how the participants’ practice is situated in specific times and places.

The notion of ‘looking back’ emerged as a strong theme and indicated two distinct times and identities – the past and the present. Let’s have a look at one of the scenes. While watching you might like to think about how the narrators are ‘looking back’ at their past self.

I feel the theatre-based research method reflects the fluid and unpredictable nature of teachers’ identity. The non-naturalistic theatrical conventions you saw in this scene – such as the notion of looking back, of two separate ‘selves’ highlight Mead’s understanding of the self – particularly the ‘I’ and the ‘me’, and the way we represent our ‘selves’ to other members of the social group or community to which we belong (Mead, 1934).

Surprising aspects of the data were revealed through the processes of scripting, rehearsing and performing. This next scene in particular showed me during the rehearsal process how important affiliations and interactions are for beginning teachers in coming to terms with who they are in relation to their work.

Working with a theatre-based research method also allowed people outside the research team to respond to the data. The audience’s reactions encouraged me to consider the interpretation of the data in a different light, one that acknowledged a diverse range of personal histories (and perhaps biases) other than my own. As an audience member myself I was able to notice different aspects of the data that I hadn’t previously. This next scene struck a chord with many of the audience members and highlights the way frustrating events can be viewed later as comic, and how experiencing strong emotions often prompt reflection on how such events shape teachers’ practice.

It was never my intention to dismiss more traditional forms of disseminating research by performing the data in this way. However, one intention of performing the data was to reach a broader audience. There was some interesting comments made after the performance:
A representative from Independent Schools Victoria: ‘The stories reflected a more positive experience than I feared, but there is much we still need to do to improve things for new teachers!’

I find this comment interesting – particularly the ‘more positive than I feared’. Beginning teachers’ stories often focus on the negative. My data revealed that while these beginning teachers had some negative experiences they were intertwined with positive aspects as well – often within the single experience.

Pre-service teachers: ‘A real eye opener on the path I am now traveling.’ ‘Great to see something real and relevant and something I’m sure I’ll remember next year when I’m in my own school as a grad!’

These comments emphasise the dual purpose of performing the data – as not only a methodological approach, but also as a means of bringing research to relevant audiences.

A deputy principal: ‘We laughed and I could relate to it all - especially the lunch boxes! I’m a deputy principal at a large primary school and have lots of dealings with grad teachers and the students and parents of grad teachers! Parents often need reassuring about grad teachers.’

Emerging from the data was the concern parents express in having their child taught by a graduate teacher. This was more evident with the primary teachers who often discussed how they came to understand their identity in relation to their responses to questions from parents about this being their first year of teaching.

A participant: ‘I couldn't believe it, but after the play I actually felt really excited to teach the next day.’

It’s great that Lachy was motivated by the performance experience.

As my research is framed within a practice theory approach, I recognise practices as the field to investigate transformation. Within this approach there’s a focus on what people do in a particular time and place, so the dramatic representation of different times and places has allowed me to understand the different selves that make up our professional identity, and contribute to its transformation.

Using teachers’ ‘firsts’ as a lens to investigate their identity has enabled me to focus my research on specific, self-selected and meaningful events as indicators of identity transformation over time. Many of the beginning teachers in this study recall their ‘firsts’ as moments of learning to ‘swim with the current’, and to counter the negative preconceptions beginning teachers are told to expect as rites of passage upon entering the profession.

The theatre-based research I employed allowed me to analyse the data in more depth than when I employed traditional methods of sorting, categorising, coding, contextualising, and member checking. All these processes took place, but through the forms of scripting, rehearsing and performing.

I invite you to watch the entire performance of ‘The First Time’ in its entirety, and feel free to email me your thoughts or questions.
References