

Narrative of a pre-service teacher

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ABSTRACT: This article demonstrates the value of narrative as a research tool, using a pre-service teacher's story as an example. The focus of this article is the role that narrative inquiry can play in illuminating the relationship between past experiences and the development of professional knowledge. The data comprise one pre-service teacher's stories of past and present learning experiences, recorded as narrative accounts. These narrative accounts will be explored for their potential impact on the professional knowledge that is ultimately constructed.

KEYWORDS: Narrative inquiry, narrative methodology, pre-service teachers, Knowledge Building Community, learning communities.

In what follows this article will:

- briefly review relevant literature
- briefly describe the learning context of the particular pre-service teacher education course in which the subject was enrolled
- outline the methodology used to "hear the stories" and develop a narrative identity
- provide some illustrative examples of narrative inquiry in action
- pull together some theoretical threads about the use of narrative inquiry.

A REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Recent research suggests that pre-service teachers come to their preparation programs with well-established ideas about teaching (Lortie, 1975; Barry & King, 1999). Leminer and Mayer (2002) also point out that "student teachers bring to their teacher education more than a desire to teach, they bring their life experiences and their school experiences – which in turn contribute to their knowledge of the world of schools and the curriculum" (p. 2).

Because this article's focus is the role that past experiences can play in the development of professional knowledge, Dewey's philosophy of education, especially as it relates to his notion of "reflection on experience" and Vygotsky's theory of "social constructivism" will be used as a theoretical framework, in which to ground the research.

Dewey held the view that "experience is continuity, namely, the notion that experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences" (cited in Clandinin, & Connelly, 2000. p. 2). Such a view underscores the importance of teachers' personal experiences as one of the fundamental sources of their knowledge of classrooms and teaching (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Elbaz, 1991). Marland (1995) also argues that the process of learning to teach is intermingled with the learners' past experience.

Furthermore in the past twenty years, the term "reflective practice" has increasingly appeared in the descriptions of teacher education. Historically Dewey (1916), who himself drew on ideas of educators such as Plato, is acknowledged as the inventor of the concept of "reflective thought" in his *How we think*, a work designed for teachers. Dewey's most basic assumption was that learning improves out of the process of reflection.

Schon's (1983, 1987) work saw the term "reflective practice" enter the literature of professional education. Schon described "reflective practice" as a professional activity in which the practitioner reflects, both *in-action* and *on-action* in order to improve his or her practice. This emphasis on reflective practice in teacher education has challenged the traditional view of teacher training, arguing that learning is an individual process in which personal experience is reconstructed as strategies are tried and evaluated in the process.

Vygotsky's theory that learning is a social activity and is thus enhanced through social interactions is also relevant in the field of professional learning. Vygotsky argues that through social contacts, learners acquire new ideas and processes that stimulate their knowledge development. Later, these new ideas and processes are internalised as abstract thought and "become part of the (student's) child's independent developmental achievement" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90).

In summary, this literature suggests that the transfer from interpersonal to intrapersonal is not only at the heart of how we learn, but is also the link between Dewey's theory of "reflection on experience" and Vygotsky's theories on "social constructivism" and the benefits of a learning community. Both it seems would support the notion that knowledge construction with co-learners allows other learners to formulate thoughts by making them external and explicit.

THE PRE-SERVICE LEARNING SETTING

The narrative in this article is part of a larger set of narratives, which were written in the context of the first year of a three-year primary teacher education program for pre-service teachers at the University of Wollongong, Australia. At the time of writing, the pre-service teacher featured in this paper was undertaking her training in an alternate model of teacher training, referred to as the Knowledge Building Community (KBC) program. This program blends the traditional lectures and tutorial mode of university study with collaborative sessions that provide a more contextualised link between theory and practice.

In the context of the KBC program, the pre-service teachers spend one semester each year in a learning environment that fosters interaction and sharing. The KBC model has three modes of learning, briefly described below.

The first mode of learning is that of university learning. During this time the pre-service teachers attend the university for an intensive three-week block of learning. During this time they are introduced to the knowledge building community, university formalities, educational discourse and the theoretical aspects of the Bachelor of Teaching degree. This is then modified so that, for the remainder of the semester, the

pre-service teachers attend university one day a week, meeting in a "homeroom" to work on a variety of activities both as a large collaborative group and in small collaborative groups. Most of their time is spent in professional discussions, problem-solving, reflecting-on-actions, writing tasks and making group presentations.

During the second mode of learning, these students undertake the practical aspect of their teacher training, attending host schools in what are referred to as "school-based" groups two days a week to take on the role of "teaching associates" (Cambourne, 2001; Kiggins & Ferry, 1999). This mode of learning is also referred to as "the practicum". While in schools these school-based groups work together to develop an understanding of the culture of that school. In addition they take on the individual role of "teaching associate" and work with a mentor teacher in a classroom, thus developing an understanding of the nature and role of teaching in a primary school.

The third mode is that of school-based, "self-directed learning" (Kiggins & Ferry, 1999). The cohort groups nominate a time and a place to work together for planning, reading, discussing, researching and compiling group task activities. The combination of these activities provides the pre-service teachers with the opportunity to share and reconstruct their past and present teaching and learning experiences through collaboration with the others in the "school-based" group.

AN OUTLINE OF NARRATIVE INQUIRY AS A METHODOLOGICAL TOOL

In educational literature narrative inquiry is emerging as a research tool that allows teachers and students to tell of their experiences, and their concerns. Kathleen Casey's (1996) recent descriptions of narrative highlight its wide appeal.

Reissman (1993, pp. 2-3) declares that "narratives of personal experiences... are ubiquitous in everyday life...telling stories about past events seems to be a universal human activity." Charles Taylor (1989, pp. 51-52) asserts that "we must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form". Donald Polkinghorne (1988, p. 1) calls narrative "the primary form by which human experiences is made meaningful." Jerome Bruner (1986, p. 11) claims for narrative one of two natural modes of cognitive functioning, a distinctive way "of ordering experience, of constructing reality" (Casey, 1996).

Similarly, Beattie (1995) comments that "narrative could be used to illuminate the ways in which we understand ourselves as teachers, appraise our experiences and ourselves and evoke and bring to life the meanings of those experiences" (p. 41). Lysaght also finds value in the use of narrative stating "that stories are said to fashion our lives, providing the structure for our day-to-day existence and they propel us into a future that is shaped by our lived experiences of them" (2001, p. 64). Such views acknowledge the potential for narrative inquiry to help understand some features of professional growth.

METHODOLOGY: HOW I APPROACHED NARRATIVE INQUIRY

My methodological aim was to hear the stories of past and present learning experiences and record these as narrative accounts. I went into the setting as a participant observer, which Trochim (2002) advocates as “one of the most common methods for qualitative data collection” (p. 1). Participant observation:

1. emphasises the role of the researcher as a participant
2. involves the collection of field notes
3. “often requires months or years of intensive work because the researcher needs to become accepted as a natural part of the culture in order to assure that the observations are of the natural phenomenon” (Trochim, 2002, p. 1).

For me it necessitated becoming a participant of the culture of the pre-service cohort, through prolonged engagement in their homeroom learning sessions, from Day 1 of the session ("Orientation Day") until the end of the semester (a period of fourteen weeks). It meant being accepted by these students as part of the learning community; my purposes for being there had to be made fully transparent. I sat at a table at the back of the room recording notes and was frequently invited to join in discussions about my experiences both as a student and a teacher. During recess breaks I generally stayed in the room to have a coffee and join in the less formal discussions.

THE END PRODUCT OF APPLYING THIS METHODOLOGY: SOME ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

Illustrative Example #1: The pre-service setting described in narrative form

The Knowledge Building Community area is located in Building 23 on the grounds of the University of Wollongong's main campus. The KBC Program has a homeroom located at the western end of the first floor of this building and is accessed by a flight of stairs off the main entry foyer.

Entering through the door into this teaching and learning area, the first impression is that this room appears to be something other than a typical university tutorial room. Standing at the front of this long narrow room, the back wall appears to be partially covered by a large, tree-shaped poster. This poster is more than a relic left by a past KBC group; the colourful image offers a focal point to begin further observations. Underfoot, a grey blue carpet; above, fluorescent lights and ceiling fans; three solid structural walls all painted off white, dotted with blue tack and masking tape; one wall of cobweb-encrusted windows, all framing what resembles a (elementary) primary school classroom. The furniture comprises a collection of white laminated desks large enough for two adult students to sit side by side; these have been arranged into abstract rows and cluster formations. The desks are pushed together so that six students can sit around the edges. The seats in these clusters indicate that two students will sit directly facing the front of the room while the other four will sit at obtuse angles. Scanning the room from the front, the additional furniture consists of two out-dated Macintosh computers with attachments and cables; an overhead projector; two easels supporting flip-chart pads; and colourful plastic boxes of pens, pencils, tape and scissors. Behind this is a wall covered by a large clean whiteboard. Moving to the

side, there is a free-standing, white laminated bookshelf containing children's picture books, dictionaries, textbooks and teaching aides. A small out-dated student desk is crowded with tea and coffee equipment such as an urn, mugs and cups. The wall above the tea and coffee area displays published newspaper articles and photographs promoting the past four years of KBC, school, university and local community initiatives and projects. To complete the observation of this room, in the back corners are desks. In the right corner under a window is a white laminated desk covered by two old Macintosh computers and, in the left corner, a small student's desk and chair with a place label identifying that this was for me.

Illustrative Example #2 The KBC setting in action: The sounds and behaviours in narrative form

Week 4. 8.30 a.m.:

Bags were dumped onto the floor and books were thumped onto the desks, as the room filled.

"Good morning, let's get under way," said (Dr) Noreen the KBC facilitator, moving across the room to open a window. In doing this she broke a cobweb and dislodged the built-up dust crusted on the outside sill and allowed the warm summer breeze to enter the room...

"Where have you been this week?" asked Noreen in an attempt to get the group's attention and break the early morning chatter.

"I took my children shopping."

"A group of us went to the pub for a few social drinks."

"I went parachuting." Were the replies I could hear from my observation post at the back of the room.

"Parachuting?" Noreen reaffirmed, responding with a momentary look of surprise. Continuing to address the whole group, she moved into the centre of the room.

"You have also been associating with professionals in a complex cultural environment." Pausing to give them time to direct their thought back over the past week. "You have just spent two days of the last week as teaching associates in host practicum schools." Pausing again and moving deeper into the room, closer to my observation post... "You have been immersed into a culture that has been established over time to educate." Continuing with firmness in her voice she outlined the shared learning task for the morning. "Working in your school groups, discuss some of the significant insights you have made into the school system, such as what makes up a school community, identifying some of the inside and outside influences on this community. After you have shared within your school groups, we will come together to share with the larger group."

8.50 a.m.; Without hesitation, seats were repositioned to form tight clusters around the desks to allow the students to sit close together. Books were pushed around, causing chaos with the containers of pencils on some desks. Loud constructive chatter filled the room and continued for several minutes. "Do you know what I saw?" "I felt like a teacher because I went into the staff room." "I saw so much happening." "I forgot to take a coffee mug."

Illustrative Example #3: One pre-service teacher's stories of past and present learning experiences, recorded in narrative form. Kim's narrative.

During the opening sessions in the first week of university, Kim introduced herself to the extended KBC group in simple terms stating: my name is Kim, I am married and I have two small girls and I travel to university from Sydney. As the weeks progressed Kim's personality emerged. Kim came across as a "crusader". I could add that she has a presence, is unhurried, is perceptive and has a mother's caring nature. Each morning she'd routinely walked in to the KBC homeroom through the first door, the door with the sign that indicated that it was a mobile phone free room. She'd manoeuvre her way through the paraphernalia in the room, smiling and chatting as she stepped over bags lying on the floor. Placing her things in the same spot at the same desk sitting with the same people week after week.

Sitting together at the back of the KBC room in amongst the bags and books, Kim talked about her past family life, describing the intrinsic and extrinsic boundaries established by her parents, maintained through the strong bonds of loyalty and respect.

I was brought up in a firm household with my parents and two sisters. My father would sit us down and he would say "you will behave like this, and you will act like this." That's my dad. Firm.

I had a different relationship with my mum. I told my mum everything. On Friday nights she would be waiting to hear what happened, she was interested in sharing my experiences. But she would not stick up for me in an argument with my dad. She would go along with my dad and what he wanted. I suppose that is the generation. They were first boy friend, girl friend. They met at 16, and married young. That is not what it is like in my marriage. I think what I say is it.

In the first weeks of university I noted that Kim remained distant and seldom joined in discussions that focused on past school experiences. She appeared to listen to the stories told by the other KBC students of "that special teacher", reward systems; success in the classroom; success on the playing field and of the books they read.

Sitting together, we talked about the transition she was making coming to university of leaving her two young girls in day care, and travelling for an hour against the flow of city commuters along the freeway that connects Wollongong to Sydney. We also talked about overcoming the confusion of learning university jargon, and the expectation of being in KBC. I asked Kim to tell me what she remembered primary school to be like. I noticed her body tense as she replied.

I'm thirty, I went to primary school 20 yrs ago and to be honest, I don't remember what primary school was like. This question has come up so many times here and at home, and as hard as I try I can't remember. My sister often says, "Do you remember this or that?" I just don't remember and I would simply say that I don't have any recollection of that incident.

She sat at the table, quietly thinking. I asked: "Can you describe the environment, the buildings or the grounds?" Her reply was concise. "Briefly!" Then she proceeded to talk in general terms about her primary school.

The school I went to, there were 14 girls in the whole school. Yes there were only 14 of us. It was a Catholic primary school and there was a girls' playground and a boys' playground. Girls played with the girls and boys played with the boys. No interaction

with boys whatsoever, right up until 6th grade. So everything seemed nice and we all got on well. There wasn't the "I'm your best friend" thing that happens with girls. There were no special needs children, and there was no bullying. The closest thing to bullying was, asking the two girls who liked to play by themselves, if they'd join in a game. They didn't join us. () So we let them play by themselves and just accepted that was what they did and who they were.

I could see from her body language that she was uncomfortable. She stood up and turned to walk away, she stopped at the whiteboard and tapped on it with the pen in her hand. As she turned back she said. "There weren't issues or problems at school I just can't remember particular incidents."

Kim's first practicum came on the third week into the course. She was placed with four other pre-service students into a host school north of Wollongong. As with the others, Kim was paired with a mentor teacher. For the nine weeks of the practicum, she would be associating with this teacher and her class to develop a professional knowledge of the school culture and observe teaching strategies and begin teaching for short periods.

After her first week in the year four class, Kim told the large KBC cohort, "I did what BC (the other facilitator of the group's learning) and Noreen asked. I became an anthropologist. I sat at the side of the room and watched and noted what was happening." There was comparative excitement in Kim as she began to share her observations. She stood at the front of the room with one hand on her waist and the other freely moving.

A pin could drop every lesson. The way the teacher controlled the class was amazing. She would get through this list of activities. The noise never got above a whisper. It was good to work in that environment. It was also neat as anything. I reckon the children react better if they walk into a tidy class and everything is in order.

The following week, the KBC students were asked to sit in randomly formed groups to share their observations on classroom teachers' strategies. Kim's group comprised a mixture of female KBC students. Sitting crowded around a desk taking turns to talk about their observations, I noted that they all made reference to "my school", "my teacher" and "my class", emphasizing the "my" when talking about their current positions in the host schools. Again, with comparative excitement Kim spoke about the organisation in her year four class.

A thing that amazed me was the extent of the organisation it must take to set up a class in the beginning of the year. The rules, the desks, the culture and then maintain all these things plus the learning throughout the year. I was also surprised at how full my teacher's day was.

The others sat and shared observations of how "my teachers" ended lessons with activities and games, and in "my class" the children get given lollies and stickers, and that the looking for lost pencils and sharpening pencils takes up an enormous amount of time.

In the following week Kim continued to talk about organisation.

What I think is that I have been put with the best teacher and now mentor. Teaching is about time management. To me we need to have a formal syllabus in time management. And this whole setting up your classroom has to do with time management. The way the children get through the door and get to their seats. It is how clean their desks are when the class finishes a lesson, to where the book is to start the next lesson. She is fantastic and through observing other classrooms her time management is amazing.

During one of the weekly sharing session the students were asked to discuss in small groups "How a teacher develops a life long love of reading?" Kim shared her thoughts with the group. Her first statement gained their immediate attention. She said to the group, "I have been doing the (textbook) readings." She then identified that she had learned from these that "reading is gaining meaning of a text". She then proceeded to explain what she had seen in one of the classrooms while on practicum.

I have been observing in the kindy class and they are learning to read and write. I have noticed that every time they do a picture the teacher writes their name on top, so they understand that print relates to them. This gives print and their name meaning. They then relate the squiggle, the print on the top of the page with their name. Learning to read cannot be any more life long than that.

During a whole group sharing session, Kim shared with the whole group the satisfaction of being involved in an activity that brought members of the local community into the school to celebrate Easter. She stood, with her feet slightly apart, tilted her head to the side and flicked her long dark hair back over her shoulder.

I think it is significant that the wider community has such an impact on the school community. Not just the people that come in as speakers or helper but other things like languages, cultures, and the things the children experience outside school. I see that the community outside school is as important as the community inside school.

Kim arrived at university a little late one day to find that as she entered, the "special needs" lecturer at the university was concluding a session on ADD, ADHD, autism and behavioural problems. All these terms and their definitions were written on the board. Kim was clearly disturbed about missing this presentation. Kim turned and said "I need to talk, I need to ask questions, I need to find out things about the system, I am getting too involved. When are you free?" and tears welled in her eyes. We sat together at lunchtime and I let her talk.

I am getting too personally involved with the frustrations of the system. Because there is this teacher that has given up on this one boy. He is on ADD medication, but I don't think he is ADD. I think there are other things. He misbehaves and gets sent out of the room. This really is upsetting me.

Kim, visibly upset, sat back in her seat and wiped a tear from her eyes. Her school group gathered and offered comfort as the other KBC students, aware of Kim's special needs, moved out of the room to have lunch. We crowded around the desk. She began an emotional address that elaborated on the structures in the school that related to dealing with children with difficulties. The group shared, consoled and spoke honestly to each other for the entire lunch break. It was apparent that this group had built strong personal and ethical relationships during the weeks of collaboration in this Knowledge Building Community.

The last week in KBC in all its madness to hand in final assignments, and do group presentations, the school mentor, faculty and Department of Education officials, Kim and I were able to sit and talk about "what she had learned about teaching and schools". The instantaneous reply: " A lot!" After a short pause she developed this brief insightful summary of what she had learned.

I have learnt from my mentor teacher to set high expectations at the beginning of a lesson or activity and encourage them to achieve their best. I see how that works, if you go in there expecting them to give you their best they will, and they will stick with it if you are consistent with them. I have learnt that teachers have different strategies. There are some kids who respond to a strategy and others that don't and I am aware of time, and management and preparation. I have learnt that schools are independent and dependent communities.

I was also able to ask about her professional growth and learning, asking, "Can you identify what you have learnt by being apart of a learning community?"

Um! I have worked in a lot of groups in my working career and I never worked in a group where I haven't learnt. I think I can identify that I have learnt through problem-based learning how to work better in a group. The group tasks in working situations are different, the groups may work together for a week, knowing that this is what you have got to get done, in a short period of time and this is what you have to present at the end of the task. Then you don't see these people again, because you go back to your normal roles. I have never worked in a group where we really have to share everything and discussed things in depth until now. And to me this is what University is about. I have been concerned that during large group discussion in KBC I don't find the depth of discussion. See we discuss a lot in my group. We discuss the texts with what we see in the classroom and what we are learning and experiencing. We will sit and go "yeah! I saw that". We actually do, do that. Which amazes me that we share so much. I noticed that the other day I was reading something, then I saw it, we then discussed it as a group and it went into my head. So the understanding is coming from within the smaller group. We do then go back into the larger group and share our new experiences during the discussions and insight sessions. Group learning has been huge.

Our last interview in the last week of session was again on her learning experiences in KBC.

Oh, in KBC firstly you are a person and you are taught to handle things, situations, people and problems. The practical way of doing things is definitely what sets the KBC apart. Without a doubt. Noreen could say to use class room management strategy rah, rah, rah then when you get into the class room, you try that strategy, you find out if it works in class or not. That is when you can say hang on I have to look into this some more. I found it hard to just say excuse me rah, rah, rah. I found I needed to ask my teacher, what she did to get attention, because that was the strategy that the class would have known. Like pens down, arms folded, look at me. Every child would just do it. It got them quiet and paying attention. For her to stand there and go "right pens down and look at me" is a clear concise instruction. I was then able to share this with the others. Having time to talk things through and listen to others was valuable.

PULLING SOME THREADS TOGETHER

This article is based on the premise that life is constructed by stories and that experience grows out of experience. The narrative account in this paper was constructed from interviews and a compilation of field texts developed as I took the stance of participant observer in a Knowledge Building Community (KBC). A community such as KBC has a history based on the sharing of experiences, beliefs and desires so that the members develop a sense of belonging and interdependence. The combination of shared activities provides the pre-service teachers with the opportunity to reconstruct their learning experiences through the social construction of knowledge with the others in the KBC group.

My participation in this community allowed me to sit in on and share in these group discussions, workshops, focused learning activities and social conversations. This enabled me to record the words and images of the pre-service teachers as they spoke candidly about their personal and professional experiences, beliefs and learning goals. I became more than a participant observer. I became part of the community. I observed the same rules of operation as the KBC students. I used the paraphernalia in the setting as they did and my timetable and activities were constructed around their professional learning activities.

All of this begs the question, "So what can we learn about professional growth from the use of narrative inquiry?" Kim's narrative illuminates dramatically the nature of the social discourse in the KBC setting. It provides much richer and "thicker" data than could be collected through interview, questionnaire, or survey. Embedded in Kim's story are accounts of experiences which helped her develop explicit knowledge and understandings of school culture, university and teaching terminology and discourse, teaching strategies, classroom management techniques, different styles of learning, the importance of time, preparation and planning and community practice.

Kim talked openly about the positive relationships she shared with her peers, her mentor teacher and the university facilitators. These relationships overlooked any differences in age, gender, and social backgrounds.

Kim's story also indicated that she used the other KBC members as resources for her own learning, listening and reconstructing facts, in turn building onto her personal understandings about teaching and learning. And, finally, Kim spoke positively about school, making reference to "my school", "my classroom", "my teacher" and "my class" personalising her practical teaching experience.

Most importantly, Kim's narratives clearly illustrate the claims made by advocates of narrative inquiry as a useful research tool, namely that we live our lives by the stories we tell, that "stories fashion our lives" (Lysaght, 2001) and are "the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful" (Polkinghorne, 1998).

The narrative accounts in this inquiry show the KBC homeroom to be the setting that provides the social context in which the KBC students can experience and practice the kinds of conversation valued for professional growth and development. In this setting the students' experiences are made meaningful. It suggests that the social constructivist style of learning promoted in this setting allowed pre-service teachers

like Kim to “experience others”, and prompted her and her peers to be more informative in their discussions.

Finally Kim's narrative shows that speaking aloud demands the kind of elaboration that private, internal, silent thinking can avoid. It also obviously helps students to be expressive and explicit. The rationale behind the use of narrative inquiry as a research tool is simple, if the social world is constructed from (speech) narrative, researchers can gain a better understanding of the student's growth in professional learning through narrative inquiry.

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