Narrative and the exploration of culture in teachers’ discussions of literacy, identity, self, and other

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of teacher narratives in relation to culture, literacy, self, and other within a masters literacy course in a US context. Within the course, teachers read and responded to autobiographical fiction and nonfiction in book club discussions and by sharing spoken and written personal narratives. Whereas many previous studies of teacher narrative have focused primarily on the content of teacher narrative, this study sought to consider the forms, functions, content, and contexts surrounding the sharing of personal narratives. Two cases, explored through sociolinguistic analysis, are presented to demonstrate how course participants constructed narratives and how these narratives functioned within the course and in relation to participant learning.

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1. Discussions of literacy, identity, self, and other

Over the past decade theorists, researchers, and teacher educators have argued persuasively for a valuing of preservice and inservice teachers’ experience and knowledge through autobiography or other forms of personal narratives. In examining life experiences, advocates of narrative argue that individuals can be transformed by stories and that stories can be a means for teachers to express beliefs about theory, practice, and curriculum

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Although there are exceptions (e.g., Florio-Ruane, 2001; Florio-Ruane & de Tar, 1995), few studies have focused on the relationship between teachers’ narratives and their beliefs about literacy in relation to cultural identity. While previous studies have emphasized the content of teacher narratives, scant attention has focused on narratives as social performances (Schegloff, 1992; Swidler, 1992). In doing so, much past research has privileged content over close analysis of the forms and functions of narrative, an observation that is not altogether new (see McEwan, 1997, p. 86, 88). In describing what he referred to as “multi-functionality” of narrative, McEwan proposed that it would “be useful to look at some of the ways that narratives do function in educational discourse because in understanding how these narratives work, we can gain a more detailed perspective on the value that narrative has in research on teaching”. McEwan also addressed the form narratives can take, noting that researchers can be seduced both by story content and form and that researchers and educators need to be particularly wary given that “We also seem to work with a fairly limited repertoire of story forms in educational settings”.

Through this study I sought to address concerns raised by McEwan and others. I explored forms, functions, and content of teacher narratives within the “Literacy, Culture, and Autobiography” masters course where participants used personal and published narratives and research reports to explore course topics. Because the course was structured around peer-led discussions, narratives were explored in the context of conversation and as single-authored stories. Two research questions are addressed: (1) What did narrative forms, functions, content, and contexts reveal about the role of narrative and about what the participants learned about identity, culture, literacy, and views of self and other? (2) How did written and oral narratives function to create, sustain, or constrain learning-oriented explorations within the literacy course? After describing theoretical frameworks and methodology, I explore these questions through the cases of Ellie and Regan.

2. Theoretical frameworks

2.1. Theoretical perspectives on culture and teacher learning

In the contemporary educational landscape in the US where teachers are still overwhelmingly white, female, monolingual, and middle-class and where students are increasingly diverse in cultural identity, ethnicity, socio-economic class, and mother tongue, it is critical for teachers to understand literacy as both a cultural artifact and cultural tool. To effectively reach diverse students, teachers must be aware that “literacy acquisition, particularly reading instruction, holds implications for cultural transmission, that is, for how knowledge is transferred, reproduced, and transformed” (Roth in Ferdman, 1990, p. 288). As such, literate practices are not limited to print decoding or the cognitive strategies accompanying comprehension or composition, but are imbued with culturally based knowledge. Literate practices invoke cultural norms and referents of which teachers are often unaware. For example, teachers may feel that their role is simply to make pedagogical and curricular decisions without realizing, in Cazden and Mehans (1989, p. 50) words, that “Like all culturally based behavior, classroom behavior is guided by rules or norms established by convention, which means they are implicitly taught, tacitly agreed upon, and cooperatively maintained”. As teachers begin to examine the interplay of culture and literacy in their classrooms, they can become aware that they “have culture” and that what they learn, know, and teach is shaped by and embedded with social norms and cultural practices. In the US, there are many white teachers who currently believe they do not have a culture (Frankenberg, 1993; McVee 2003), and these teachers are likely unaware that their definitions of literacy and choices of literacy instruction are colored by their own experience, by their own culture. For these teachers, culture is transparent and uncontested.

In helping teachers increase their awareness of the role that culture plays in shaping beliefs about students and their literacy learning and instruction, we face many challenges. Anthropologist Rosaldo (1993) notes, for example, that
interpretations of culture can be problematic because our attempts to make others more visible often lead us to focus on others without an increased awareness of self. Many typical explorations of culture within educational settings seek to align individuals with one group and identify the characteristics of that group. Rosaldo argues that groups who wield the least power within a particular society are often seen by others as having the most “authentic” culture, whereas powerful groups often see themselves as “culture-less”. Teacher education courses that explore a variety of ethnic or cultural groups along with various holidays, beliefs, and practices of those groups serve to reinforce this perspective. Rosaldo’s work argues against such views of culture that essentialize individuals and groups.

Rosaldo’s perspective is critical to the study undertaken here because in helping teachers consider aspects of culture, I hoped to challenge not only their perceptions of others’ cultures, but their understandings and interpretations of their own culture and their positions within it. In the literacy course I taught, and in my research study, culture was defined as a dynamic, contested process rather than a fixed entity (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Teachers had a chance to examine culture not as festivals, holidays, exotic locations, or specific actions but as human behaviors and ways of making meaning. Course readings and narratives shared in teachers’ book clubs reflected the insight that “all human conduct is culturally mediated” (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 26).

2.2. A sociocultural theory of teacher learning and narrative

Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory also highlights the role of cultural mediation in human development and was relevant in framing this study. Vygotsky (1978, 1986) argued that all learning is socially mediated and must be viewed within its social, historical, and cultural contexts. This was a point of critical importance when studying teachers’ explorations of self and other, and their underlying beliefs about literacy. For Vygotsky, learning occurred first as social processes between individuals (interpsychological) and then as psychological processes within individuals (intrapsychological). In the context of this study, teachers read published autobiographical narratives by writers from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. They responded to these autobiographies primarily within book clubs where they were encouraged to talk and write about the texts thus engaging in socially mediated learning. The social context of the course allowed for the creation of new texts in the form of written or spoken narratives. These texts were interpsychological in that they were constructed around interactions with others and intrapsychological because they reflected and shaped the internalized thought or learning of participants. Personal narrative functioned as a mediational tool that assisted participants in organizing and interpreting experience, and written and oral narrative, as tools, provided reflections of the internalized thought or learning of participants (Gavelek & Raphael, 1996). In reading, writing, and sharing narratives, teachers engaged in making meaning. The written and oral texts, teachers created, were windows into how and what they learned as well as representations of the ways that their culture mediated their understandings.

3. Method

3.1. Data collection

To address the research questions, I designed a multi-method study to track the social and linguistic aspects of participants’ thinking about culture within book club discussions and other class activities. The data summarized in this article were collected while I was an instructor for a literacy masters course, “Culture, Literacy, and Autobiography” at a midwestern university in the US. Six practicing teachers and one full-time student were enrolled in the course; all seven consented to participate in the study. All participants were Euro-American women. The purpose of the course was to read and respond to multicultural autobiographies and to read theoretical and research-related articles to help teachers explore issues of culture, self, and other as related
to literate practices. This included having the course participants respond to narratives shared orally in the class and to narratives written by their peers to foster an awareness of culture and issues of diversity (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2001). Using book club (McMahon & Raphael, 1997; Raphael & McMahon, 1994) as a model for discussion and drawing on a model of teacher development outlined by Florio-Ruane and Raphael (Florio-Ruane, 2001), teachers read autobiographies or autobiographical fiction by ethnic minorities or white teachers who had examined their own practice. Autobiographies were alternated weekly with discussions of research articles related to culture and literacy.

As an instance of practitioner research (Crhan-Smith & Lytle, 1993), I acted as both teacher educator and researcher. In addition to the data that is typically collected within a masters course by a teacher (e.g., in-class writing, mid-term essay, final project), I also wrote memos about my class planning and field notes as an “observant participant” in the course adapting ethnographic techniques (e.g., see Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983) to my role as practitioner researcher. For each class, I collected, catalogued, and transcribed audio and video tape.

Students completed several types of assignments throughout the course. At the beginning of the course students completed a written reflection on their beliefs about literacy, autobiography, and culture. At the end of the course, students completed a similar final course reflection across course themes and journals. In journals, students recorded their thinking and explored how the autobiographies, book clubs, research articles, and discussions impacted their thinking. Students crafted multiple drafts of a narrative vignette about a cultural border-crossing experience and a mid-term essay exploring their views of language, culture, literacy, and teaching. Final projects were designed by students based on their own interests and needs.

3.2. Data analysis

In completing preliminary analyses, I revisited my field notes, and listened to audio and video tapes. I also wrote analytic memos to identify categories and themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I then tested and refined my analyses against other parts of the dataset (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). At this stage of analysis, I relied upon a loosely constructed definition of narrative as the “relating of an event or series of events, either true or false” (American Heritage Dictionary [1988, p. 13). After identifying narratives generally, I refined the analysis by examining narratives according to Labov and Waletzky’s (1967) definition of narrative as an orientation (a statement that orients the listener to the main elements of a story), complicating action (the events that take place in the story), evaluation (the narrator’s attitude toward the events related), resolution (the result of the narrative), and the coda (the device used to return a narrator and listener to the present).

Labov’s definition drew my attention to differences in narrative forms and content. Although I had yet to conduct close analysis of conversational discourse, in reading field notes and transcripts, I had noted various features of conversational discourse for further exploration. At this point I identified case examples to explore more closely. Ellie was chosen because her narratives closely adhered to Labov’s narrative features and her conversational discourse appeared similar to other participants. Moreover, Ellie was unusual in that she retold the same story numerous times. Regan was chosen because her discourse and narratives were unlike those of other participants. Furthermore, her stories did not adhere to the features of narrative identified by Labov, but differed in powerful ways.

Although the case analyses highlight narratives and other forms of discourse shared by Ellie and Regan, I also scrutinized conversational settings involving narrative where all seven participants were present. To do so, I relied on sociolinguistic methods to analyze group interactions around oral narratives but also to investigate the notion of language as tool since sociolinguists consider language to be “a socially and culturally constructed symbol system” (Schiffrin, 1994, p. 102). This step in analysis included examining speech and narratives for patterns related to social
interactions and content. For example, in exploring the discussion of various narratives, I noted pauses, back channeling, turn taking procedures, length of turns, overlapping speech, stress, and repetition (Edelsky, 1993; Schiffrin, 1992; Tannen, 1989). I then examined the relationship between discourse markers and content. For example, when identifying pauses, I noted where these appeared to indicate discomfort around discussions of race or culture and where they seemed to indicate a shift in the conversational floor. This step was critical in identifying the function of narratives and conversational talk, particularly in Regan’s stories.

4. Findings

4.1. Ellie’s stories: learning to question—the same story retold

Ellie retold one narrative in its entirety six times throughout the course. The multiple narratives presented opportunities to explore how Ellie positioned herself and others through multiple retellings. Fig. 1 presents a timeline for Ellie’s retellings.

Ellie first narrated this story in a brief sketch in her journal, and retold the story as follows during class time:

The first time I walked into the building [where] I taught in Finley, there was this big picture, a 16 x 20 of the whole school. And I immediately noticed, of course, how there was absolutely no white faces in the whole thing except teachers. And my first thought was “Oh, I thought this would never bother me. What if it bothers me?” And then I turned around and there’s a picture of Jesus in African garb and all the Apostles are African and they’re all in their African hats and they’re all on the plains of Africa and that just bothered the heck out of me. ‘Cause I’m like look, “It says right there he’s in Jerusalem. He wasn’t in Africa.” That just drove me nuts and then um I was talking to my partner that I ended up teaching with and this is us, right here, with one of my classes…. [S]he said, “You know, it used to bother me too, but if it makes them feel a closer connection to Christ because they see him like they look, how can that, how can that harm anything?”

The content of Ellie’s story focused on the discomfort she felt at discovering that students in the school were black and at seeing Jesus as a black man in African dress. Although Ellie’s initial offering of this narrative did not stand out as unusual, her retellings throughout the semester indicated that it was a significant event for her because the story reflected her interpretation of who she was as a teacher and a person. To borrow a phrase from Chafe (1998), Ellie’s repetition indicated that she was “preoccupied” with the idea of being a white teacher in a predominantly black school. As she revisited the story across the semester in written and oral form, the story changed with subsequent retellings.

I examined Ellie’s stories at the level of clauses using Labov and Waletzky’s framework of abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda for analyzing single-authored stories. Their framework was adapted by Polanyi (1985) to include means of conversational analysis. In turn I adapted Polanyi’s work to develop a means of looking at main line events,
crucial contextualized information, flash back or flash ahead sequences, evaluation, and non-storyworld talk. Table 1 shows how I coded the first version of the narrative.

I constructed a similar table for each of the six narratives. This allowed me to examine story structure. Although length does not permit the inclusion of all six tables here, Table 1 provides an overview of structural changes in all six retellings.

By looking at quantitative changes in Ellie’s story, several things become apparent. First, the length of the story increased dramatically from 20 to 154 clauses. The main events of the story did not change much. The evaluation increased from 6 clauses to 53 clauses. In and of themselves, these changes are rather unremarkable. We may expect as Ellie revisited the story she added more contextual information to keep her audience entertained. Although the increase in evaluative clauses was intriguing, the number alone does not substantiate the claim that Ellie was reflecting more deeply. To examine the type of reflection Ellie engaged in, I looked at how Ellie resolved her story and at all clauses that were coded as evaluation. In coding evaluation statements, I noted changes in content and in structure.

Resolution: moving from race as a non-issue to race as a site of discomfort. [Labov and Waletzky 1967, p. 39] refer to the resolution as the ‘‘result’’ of a narrative. Resolutions are offered up as ways for narrators to resolve a set of events, or tensions, that surface in their stories. Ellie used three different resolutions across her stories. In her first three narratives, Ellie resolved the tension she felt of being a white teacher in a school where the students were black and of having seen the black Jesus, by stating that she talked to her teaching partner about the black Jesus and she saw an article in Life magazine about different versions of Jesus (e.g., Russian, Chinese, etc.). In resolving the conflict, she focused on the black Jesus and how she felt. The outcome was that she was “OK” with having a black representation of Christ because it helped her black students feel closer to Christ.

Table 1
Analysis of Ellie’s first narrative using Polanyi’s categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative context</th>
<th>Main line events</th>
<th>Crucial contextualizing information</th>
<th>Non-storyworld talk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 (written) Journal entry for Paley’s White Teacher</td>
<td>I walked in—there it was—the picture—then behind me was another picture: Black &amp; white of All students Black only. Jesus &amp; the 12 Apostles dressed in African garb, on the African plains. Jesus lived in the Middle East</td>
<td>I always thought it would never bother me. I hoped now it wouldn’t. This bothered me</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Flash sequences
1. I talked to my teaching partner about the picture until I talked to my partner. “If it makes the kids feel better to see Jesus in a way they can identify with—then so be it.”
2. Incomplete flash sequence. (fully developed in later versions) Life Magazine—Chinese, Russian, African, female—too far

Note: Evaluation is italicized. Flashbacks are underlined.
In narratives #4 and #5, Ellie shifted her focus to the students. In resolving these narratives, she confided that “it”—her being white and her students being black—was not a problem. She stated that “They were my kids. I was their teacher”. Sometimes she prefaced this resolution with a statement like, “I entered the school my first day still so excited, but now, not the least bit concerned about the kids’ race”. In all of these first five narratives, Ellie focused on the other—the black Christ, the black students. She did not focus any resolution around herself or her own race until the final narrative when she began to ask “How do others see me? What does it mean that I was and am a white teacher working with African American students?”

When compared to her earlier narratives, the self-reflective stance in the final narrative is striking. The final narrative contained no pat resolution for the racial differences that existed between Ellie and her students. Rather, Ellie maintained an openly reflective stance by raising numerous evaluative questions such as, “What if I am [prejudiced or racist] something I never thought I was?”. In this last narrative it is somewhat ironic that Ellie resolved the tension through a series of open-ended questions. There was no resolution in the final narrative. Instead Ellie ended with a series of “What if” questions that problematized her position as white teacher and how others in the school—the principal, the students—might view her.

**Evaluations: beginning to explore discomfort and race in teaching.** Analysis of Ellie’s narratives using Labov’s categories indicated a striking increase in the number of evaluative statements. Evaluation reveals how the narrator feels about the events that have happened or about the narrating of those events. For example, “I always thought it [being a white teacher in a black school] would never bother me.” Evaluative statements are important because they also emphasize “the relative importance of some narrative units as compared to others” ([Labov & Waletzky](#)) p. 37). Over the course of the retelling, the category of Evaluation increased from 6 to 53 lines.

There is evidence that the increase in evaluation statements reflected Ellie’s attempts to interpret her story and to explore her own position more deeply. Notice for example, how in the first narrative, Ellie never mentioned the word “race”. In talking about the school, she related how “I always thought it would never bother me,” and “I hoped now it wouldn’t.” In this first narrative, she did not specify what the “it” refers to. As an ambiguous reference, the pronoun could refer to her feelings about the black Jesus, her being a white teacher, or to her black students. In narratives #2 and #3, Ellie continued to use ambiguous pronouns, and it was not clear what caused her discomfort. She did not use the word “race” until narrative #4. In this narrative she stated that upon seeing the picture of all the black

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**Table 2**

Summary of Ellie’s narrative retellings by number of clauses per segment narratives #1–#6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative context</th>
<th>Main line events</th>
<th>CCI, flashes, and evaluation</th>
<th>Evaluation within CCI and flash sequences</th>
<th>Non-storyworld talk or writing</th>
<th>Total # of clauses in this narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 written</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2 oral</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3 oral</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4 written</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5 rewrite</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6 oral</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: CCI = crucial contextualizing information; Flashes = flash ahead or flash back sequences; Evaluation = evaluation within flash sequences as well as main narrative.*

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students when she entered the school. “At that moment everything I had always prided myself on was challenged. I never thought I would have a problem teaching a child of any race,” and she asked, “What if I did have a problem with race? What would that mean I was?” While still subtle, this shift is critical. For the first time, Ellie actually stated that the problem might be one of race. In addition, she focused the problem not on the black students but on herself as white teacher. Again, this step is critical because much scholarship has revealed how resistant white teachers can be to considering their own race and culture as important referents in their teaching (e.g., McIntyre, 1997; Glazier, 2003; McVee, 2003; Pearce, 2003).

Ellie continued her exploration of race in narratives #5 and #6. She again raised the issue of black Jesus, “I would probably have a very difficult time at this school if I was expected to accept a black Jesus.” But she also continued questioning herself around race:

...now, here I was faced with things I did not believe (black Jesus) and something I never thought I’d face—a class of all black children. What if I did have a problem? What if I found I was uncomfortable here? What if the children did not want to listen to me? Would the principal see something in me I never thought was there; that I did have a problem with race? If so, what would that mean I was?

Ellie quickly resolved this narrative by stating that she learned “quite a bit about the black culture” working at the school, and she never felt the difference between her and the kids mattered: “I was their teacher, and they were my kids”.

In narrative #6, Ellie again retold her story but was more specific in specifying and exploring “the problem.” Recall that in her first three narratives, her language was ambiguous and there was not a clear sense of what was troubling her, whether it was the black Jesus, the black children, her being a white teacher in a black school. In narratives #4 and #5, she introduced the term race and began to explore her own position as a white teacher. In narrative #6, she explicitly stated:

I was afraid that there actually was something in me that was, that would be prejudiced or biased against this or something…. But mostly my concern was what if I get this job and I’m in this room and all of a sudden it’s a problem, and it’s something that I never thought would be a problem and it really is. And that’s mostly what my narrative was, was kind of waking up to who I really, who I really was and what if there was a person in me I never knew was there—someone I didn’t really like…. That was mostly what the issue was, was just kind of being faced with: What if I’m something I’ve always said I wasn’t.

The excerpt above includes a number of “what if” statements that Ellie asked of herself. As illustrated in Table 3, these statements increased in frequency over the course of Ellie’s retellings. While this increase indicates that Ellie was trying to re-interpret her experience, the content of her talk as mentioned above also bears this out.

As I studied the multiple versions of Ellie’s story I concluded that the quantitative and qualitative changes across Ellie’s narratives revealed a shift in her position with regard to the story. Initially, she positioned herself as “just a teacher” and her students were “just kids”. As a color-blind teacher, she could assume that race was not an issue in her classroom. However, over time, Ellie’s stories revealed a change in her position and a growing awareness that race was potentially an issue that influenced her teaching. She began to position herself as a white teacher and not just a teacher.

Limits of narrative exploration: the power of narrative to reify racial positions. At the same time Ellie’s story demonstrated the potential reflective aspects of narrative, it also demonstrated the power of story to reify. For example, across the narratives, Ellie made statements such as:

I had actually never thought about a school that could be 100% black. It, you, always to me it was there, there were some of them in your classroom. It was just really hard to think of it being, you know, a 100% [black classroom].

In looking carefully at how Ellie positioned herself and her students as characters in the
narrative, Ellie reinforced many of the deeply sedimented attitudes around race within the US context, particularly through her use of pronouns (e.g., “them”) in ways that depersonalized her students and the black community. Close analysis of Ellie’s narrative suggests that telling stories, while perhaps always a sociolinguistic performance of self (e.g., Bauman, 1986), is not always educative or transformative. Individuals may sometimes fail to re-interpret a narrative. Like clients in therapeutic situations, they may resist new ways of thinking about culture (Spindler & Spindler, 1993). Additionally, when describing her response to the picture of the black students with their white teachers, Ellie commented, “...I was faced with this sea of people and it was almost like I’m gonna be outnumbered here”. This comment evoked a historical positioning of black populations as groups to be feared, especially when whites are in the minority. Interestingly, these reified positions on race co-exist with Ellie’s emerging awareness of her own feelings toward race.

Reflections on Ellie’s narrative retellings. Ellie’s case demonstrates that the process of narrating a story is a dialectic between events and interpretation. In each narrative, the events are similar, but as she continues to revisit the events, Ellie begins to ask herself numerous self-directed questions. The interplay between the events and her evaluative commentary, leads her to explore the position and prejudices that she has perhaps internalized. Ellie’s multiple retellings point to the need for teacher educators to allow their students to revisit stories for further exploration.

Ellie’s multiple retellings indicate that we are not just one story but many stories, often conflicting, sometimes in concert. In Ellie’s stories, Ellie is at once the naive, white teacher who chooses to be color blind and the more experienced teacher exploring what it means to be color conscious. Ellie asks herself numerous self-directed questions to begin to explore the position and prejudices that she has perhaps internalized. In what seems contradictory, at the same time she positions the black students and black community through her discourse in ways that mask her own whiteness but which draw attention to the blackness of the other,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative</th>
<th>Number of self-questioning statements in narratives 1–6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>0 Week 2 (9–8) Journal entry (written)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>1 Week 2 (9–8) Large group (oral)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>2 Week 2 (9–8) Narrative vignette (written)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4</td>
<td>4 Week 1111–10 Narrative vignette (written)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>9 Week 1111–10 Narrative vignette (written)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6</td>
<td>11(11–10) Small group (oral)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
a phenomenon described by [Rosaldo (1993)]. Ellie’s stories illustrate how challenging it can be to re-interpret a narrative related to race, identity, and teaching.

Ellie shows us that narrators may re-interpret some ideas while holding onto other interpretations. As narrators we are constrained by our own ways of talking, believing, valuing, and acting, that is to say, by our culture and discourse (Gee, 1989). Sometimes our interpretations of stories are so closely held that we cannot uncover them. It is only when we begin to interpret events from another’s perspective that we can begin to radically evaluate our life events and counter the reifying effects of narrative. Such reflection is never easy, and in undertaking this tentative and delicate engagement of the self, Ellie carried out a complicated and courageous task. Her multiple renditions of the narrative demonstrate the power of narratives to change over time if opportunity is provided to revisit and reinterpret events.

4.2. Regan’s stories: the varied forms of quasi-narratives, multi-voiced narratives, and grand narratives

My interest in Regan was piqued first not as a researcher, but as a teacher. From the beginning, it was clear that Regan differed from other course participants. Regan had worked with a family literacy program for Tlingit Indians in Alaska and not only did these experiences set her apart, but it was clear from my field notes and transcripts that Regan’s discourse was distinct in content and form, and ultimately, function. Both transcripts and field notes indicated there were often long pauses or shifts in topics after Regan spoke. With her varied experiences and penchant for interpreting texts, Regan often embodied the very things I was hoping to accomplish within the course—exploration of self and other, consideration of the social and cultural contexts of literacy, use of autobiography to explore and understand cultural and linguistic diversity. As a teacher, I wanted to sanction Regan’s comments but knew that I also needed to allow students to construct their own conversations. Consequently, there were numerous times where Regan’s ideas received no uptake or where other participants responded with humor, rather than developing the conversational topics Regan proposed, as in the example below.

The exchange below occurred during a discussion of Lost in Translation an autobiography where [Hoffman (1989)] wrote about her experiences growing up in Poland and then immigrating to Canada as an adolescent. Hoffman closely analyzed her use of language, both Polish and English, and the role that language played in constructing her identity. Regan tied Hoffman’s book to reading she had done as an undergraduate by Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf and went on to say that she thought Hoffman’s text was “amazing”.

Mary: What was, what was so amazing about it to you?
Regan: Um, well, her construction (talking together, laughter)
Regan: It was her construction of um, first of all, I was absolutely awestruck at her use of the English language.
(?) Oh, yeah
Regan: Coming from Polish.
Ellie: Like I was um-struck, going, “Um, what is that?”

In this instance, despite the humorous asides from Ellie, Regan continued to develop her ideas. There are numerous examples similar to the above, where the content and form of Regan’s talk led to her being perceived as an intellectual, and as such, different from her peers. As in the above example, Regan and her peers co-constructed these positions, and were aware of them. Despite such differences, they had a good rapport. During one discussion where I asked students to reflect on their own discourse and its form, function, and content, the group talked about how Regan’s discourse differed. Regan even joked, “Sometimes I think I’m on another planet entirely. Like I’m over here. Sometimes you guys all look at me, and I’m just like oookaaaaay.” Although Regan’s discourse distanced her from her peers, at other times Regan’s talk pushed the group to explore new territory, and to reconsider our reading of cultural narratives which contribute to the oppression of the other through racism, classism, and
sexism. Such explorations were more likely to occur in the atypical narrative forms introduced by Regan. Below, I explain these narrative structures and discuss how they at times set Regan apart and, at other times, how they pushed the group to think in new ways.

I identified and classified Regan’s talk according to several types of narrative and non-narrative talk. Much of Regan’s talk represented an interesting blend of academic discourse and narrative. Academic discourse was predicated upon paradigmatic ways of knowing; that is, such discourse relied upon intertextual connections and synthesis and analysis for Regan to present her point of view \[\text{(Bruner, 1983)}\]. Regan used this blend of academic and narrative discourse with far greater frequency than did her peers in the course.

I coded Regan’s talk into narratives that were conventional, the simplest narratives that most people think of as stories, and non-conventional which differed on the basis of form, function, or both form and function. I identified three categories of unconventional narratives (1) quasi-narratives, (2) multi-voiced narratives, and (3) grand narratives.

**Quasi-narratives:** quasi-narratives were narratives so closely intertwined with academic discourse that it was difficult to tell where one type of discourse ended and another began. Quasi-narratives blurred the borders of paradigmatic and narrative ways of knowing \[\text{(Bruner, 1983)}\] by blending connections, themes, categories, and rational thought with images and details of story. In the blurred genre of quasi-narratives, information learned from paradigmatic ways of knowing was juxtaposed with that present in narrative forms. The intertextuality created through this juxtaposition resulted in opportunities for what \[\text{Tannen (1989, p. 138)}\] has called “internal evaluation”, that is, opportunities for a speaker to interpret the events or details of a narrative. In interesting ways, Regan’s talk actually represented what scholars are coming to find in their own work—that they must weave scientific discourse with the multiplicities of literary works, thus blurring genres \[\text{(Clifford \\& Marcus, 1988)}\]. Such a blurring of genres encouraged consideration of multiple viewpoints and interpretations.

The narrative presented below was coded as a quasi-narrative because it was embedded within academic discourse. Quasi-narratives are quite long, so I describe the academic analysis Regan used to frame her narrative. I then present the narrative component of the quasi-narrative. This example is also drawn from a response to \[\text{Hoffman's (1989)}\] text, *Lost in Translation*.

Regan used academic discourse to explore Hoffman’s obsession with language and context, noting that in changing contexts and languages as an adolescent, Hoffman had to “translate herself.” Using terms such as “constructivist” and “deconstruction,” Regan talked about Hoffman’s struggle to understand the cultural and linguistic contexts she found herself in, after her family emigrated from Poland to Canada. Regan ended her exploration of Hoffman’s work by talking about Hoffman’s awakening to English where Hoffman finally grasped the “rhythm and the timbre of the language, she finally started to realize the beauty of it.” Regan’s close analysis of Hoffman’s text, her choice of words (e.g., constructivist, deconstruction, rhythm, timbre) set her apart from her classmates who did not talk this way and who were unimpressed with Hoffman's use of language. In her book, Hoffman wrote passionately about her search for connections between context and language. As noted above, Regan explored this theme through academic discourse; within that academic discourse Regan embedded the following story, one that paralleled Hoffman’s. Regan described her attempt to connect context and language in her French studies by exploring her identity and the identity of Simone de Beauvoir who she had written about.

And I was a French lit major in college and I tried to write this sort of contextual piece for my comprehensive exercise which was like it was 30 pages, and it was all about Simone [de Beauvoir] and her life and about, you know, the things that she went through as a woman and as a writer and as a feminist and like growing up in Paris in bourgeois society. Like I thought it was so cool. And my professors, I got to my comprehensive hearing, like they were just like “Well, that’s really good but um, how about,
you know, how do you feel about the first paragraph of her autobiography? Let’s look at that...”. And then they passed me finally. But I had written this 30 page like thesis that was all about like who I was and who women were and all this stuff. But they were like “No, we don’t want the context. You know, the context isn’t what is important.” So I really identified with her, being able to succeed in writing in English lit....

Although this excerpt contained many elements of narrative, it was atypical of the narratives told by course participants, and I have coded it as a quasi-narrative. Whereas Ellie’s narratives followed Labov and Waletzky’s (1967) sequence of abstract, orientation, complicating action, and evaluation, Regan’s narratives seldom followed this linear model. In the example above, Regan began her narrative with the action—trying to write a paper. There is no abstract and little orientation. Although the narrative contained evaluative statements (e.g., “Like I thought it was so cool”), the bulk of the evaluation existed in the academic discourse before and after the narrative. Regan used that discourse about identity, language, and context to frame her own narrative. Without Regan’s framing comments about Hoffman’s views of language, identity, and context, it is difficult to understand the point of Regan’s narrative.

This narrative was also unlike that of other participants because it was one example of how Regan identified with the other—in this case the immigrant struggling to learn the context of America and the language of English. In essence what Regan did in the quasi-narrative was exactly what she respected Hoffman for doing. She included in her discourse a great deal of introspection and evaluation along with talk that analyzed and synthesized. In Regan’s analysis of Hoffman’s text and life, Regan mirrored Hoffman’s own postmodern narrative with its analysis, synthesis, and unconventional narrative form and emphasis on multiple selves.

**Multi-voiced narratives:** the multiplicity and blurred genres of Regan’s quasi-narratives were key elements of her creation of multi-voiced narratives. These narratives had many qualities of postmodern texts which present multiple representations of self contingent upon one’s point of view, position, or location. She shared several stories that began with references to herself in the first person. However, within the same story she also used first person “I” to refer to the other. This structure represents a double- or multi-voicedness (Bamburg, 1991), often present in postmodern autobiography where authors create new non-linear forms to convey “multilayered identities” and experiences (Wogwitsch, 1995, p. 154). Non-linear forms allow writers to keep contradictions at the fore of their writing rather than presenting readers with overly simplistic resolutions. Regan’s multi-voiced narratives functioned in the same manner. They allowed her to explore her own position and also try on the position of others while avoiding overly simplistic interpretations of self and other.

There are several examples of narratives that Regan told or wrote where she demonstrated an amazing ability to put herself into the place of the other. In these narratives multi-voicedness is actually represented in how the pronoun “I” indexes more than Regan herself. For example, in the following excerpt, Regan put herself into the place of the Tlingit children she worked with. In sharing the story with her classmates she described how their family literacy program was run in a community center and was divided up by movable partitions that allowed children and parents to be in separate spaces. The children were classified as “at-risk” because they came from homes with high poverty rates and high rates of substance abuse. Some of the children had been removed from their homes several times. Regan described how difficult it was to work with the children because they “were out of control” constantly looking under and around the partitions to find their parents. Finally, the workers took the room dividers down and the kids stopped “acting up.” Regan shared the child’s perspective: “She’s [Mom’s] over there and she’s doing her own thing right now, and yeah, I’m doing something over here with Regan and that’s fine because I can still see mom and I can be sure that she’s not leaving me”. In this story Regan assumes the voice of the
child and explores the child’s feelings from a child’s point of view.

In other examples Regan also portrayed this multi-voicedness. During one week, she had the opportunity to hear a speech by Sister Helen Prejean author of Dead Man Walking (Prejean, 1994). In her journal Regan wrote about that experience and quoted the following from Sister Helen:

I keep thinking of the gifts of my own upbringing, which I once took for granted: I can read any book I choose and comprehend it. I can write a complete sentence and punctuate it correctly. If I need help, I can call on judges, attorneys, educators, ministers. I wonder what I would be like if I had grown up without such protections and supports. What cracks would have turned up in my character? What makes me think that I wouldn’t have been pregnant at seventeen? How law-abiding would I be?

In sharing this excerpt from her journal during class, Regan positioned herself, as did Sister Helen, in place of the other. Essentially she asked: If I had not had the privilege of being white and well-educated, where would I be? Who would I be? Again, Regan internalized the exploration of others by focusing it inwardly on the self. Whereas Regan’s discourse contained numerous examples of these multi-voiced narratives, only two other students used this form, and then in only one instance each time.

Grand narratives: The third type of narrative identified in Regan’s case were grand narratives. Grand narratives or master narratives are conventional in the sense that they follow a linear form and are a part of cultural and societal norms, and, in their broadest sense, a part of a national psyche. We encounter these narratives everywhere in daily life. In the same way that culture is often transparent to members of the white middle class (e.g., we ascribe culture as belonging to people of color, new immigrants, bilinguals), the grand narratives that shape our views and identities remain hidden and unquestioned. It is uncommon to explicitly identify these narratives unless we wish to write or speak against the grain. For example, an explicit treatment of grand narratives can be found in Women Writing Culture (Behar & Gordon, 1993) where contributors write against the master narratives that have shaped the identity and treatment of women in many societies. During the course, Regan articulated and identified master narratives holding them up for examination. She was the only student in the course to do so.

Grand narratives are “conventional” in the sense that they typically follow a linear structure and that they are an established part of any culture. However, I categorized them as unconventional because they were narrated or identified by Regan for a range of purposes exceeding the conventions of ordinary story-telling. Grand narratives are deeply sedimented within culture and serve to sustain cultural understanding as tacit and shared. As such they are powerful but limited in their form, scope, and evaluation and limiting in the ways that they construct and constrain an individual’s cultural identity. To provide a critique of these narratives requires stepping outside the “primary discourse” which has been used to construct these narratives (Gee, 1989, p. 7–8). Regan’s ability to identify and then critique these narratives was limited by her own experience and knowledge—by the extent to which she can step outside the primary discourse. Her efforts at critiquing the grand narratives were more successful where her own knowledge was detailed, nuanced, and critical, where she had internalized a “meta-language” that allowed her to explore the power that these narratives had to “constitute us as persons and situate us in society” (Gee, 1989, p. 9). Consider the following example, summarized from a group discussion of Maya Angelou (1969) I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.

Regan tried to draw attention to the passage of the book where Angelou wrote about how the black school, her school, would be getting a new basketball court, while the white school would be getting new textbooks. Regan attempted to relate this to an article in a news magazine about the emphasis on sports as a way for young, urban black men to achieve success. Regan noted that movies like Hoop Dreams and surveys where unrealistically high numbers of young black men indicate that they are hoping to be professional sports players, bear witness to how little American
society has changed since Angelou’s school days in the 1940s and 1950s. In raising these issues, Regan attempted to identify a grand narrative prevalent in the US landscape and depicted in a movie like Hoop Dreams: the young African American male sets out to achieve the goal of becoming successful of “making something” of himself in society. This drama is played out in the inner-city where the scene is dominated by images of poverty, drugs, and violence. In this grand narrative, a sport, particularly basketball, is both the instrument and the action that leads to success. Regan has identified one of the grand narratives that assist in the construction of racial stereotyping and prejudice within a US context.

This narrative with its depiction of African American success is a comfortable representation of race in US society. McIntyre (1997, p. 61) refers to this type of narrative as an “exception” story because it allows whites to emphasize the exception rather than the rule. In this case, the metanarrative indicates that black males have a way out of poverty, especially as it is characterized in urban areas. This ignores the reality that poverty and race are correlated, with black children in the US experiencing poverty at a rate almost three times that of white children (Grant & Secada, 1997). The metanarrative also contributes to the stereotyping of black men by implying that they are suited for sports but not for other professional occupations. The narrative thus frames “choice” in ways that divert attention away from practices of institutionalized racism—practices which limit the opportunities and chances for black men who wish to succeed within a white dominated society.

Regan’s analysis of Angelou’s text acted as a springboard for several other participants to share stories that demonstrated racism in contemporary society, thus developing the theme that some things have not changed. Two students, both white women, shared stories about black male friends who were stopped by police. One man’s car was subjected to an intensive search because police were certain a box of laundry detergent (a white powder) was drugs. Another group of men were stopped because they were traveling in the company of one white woman who was a friend of theirs. Although these stories also reflected cultural stereotypes of black men and followed a theme raised in Regan’s talk, neither narrator identified the grand narratives that framed these stories.

Regan was the only student who directly identified master narratives and the power these stories hold in shaping our interpretations. Rather than telling a story about a black man who made it as a sports hero, she questioned the believability of the master narrative. Although Regan used the reference to Angelou to imply criticism of the master narrative, her experience was limited to what Angelou had written as well as by her own position as a white middle class woman and by her own “primary discourse.” Her position was further limited by the course curriculum which did not include autobiographies written by African American male authors. Although partially successful in the instance above, there were other times where Regan was able to use her own knowledge and experience and her willingness to critique the grand narratives to push the group’s understanding and insights in more effective ways. Such was the case during the discussion of domestic abuse in The Kitchen God’s Wife (Tan, 1991).

In this discussion Regan identified the underlying master narrative in the group’s talk—that in the US if a woman is abused, she seeks help, receives it, and the problem is solved. Due to her own experience as a volunteer at a women’s shelter, Regan successfully managed to get the group to reconsider how their position was aligned with this grand narrative. Originally, participants had positioned domestic violence as crime situated within another place and time. At first, participants discussed domestic violence only in China, the setting of The Kitchen God’s Wife. They then compared China to the US during the 1940s and 1950s when people were less aware of domestic abuse. As a group, they contrasted China and mid-century America with the current US context, where people are “more conscious” of abuse and there are “laws,” and “safe places to go”. Throughout this discussion Regan interjected experiences of working at the women’s shelter because she wanted to call into question the master
narrative, in this case, that women are safe from domestic abuse because now there are laws and resources, and women can get away. Not only did members of the group start to question their own stance, but they also co-authored a multi-voiced narrative. In this multi-voiced narrative, several participants took on the part of a domestic violence victim, one stated, “How disheartening that would be, to say ‘I’m trying to get out of this situation,’” and another continued “Now what do I do, go back?” Ultimately, one participant, Toni, shared a story about a sister who was currently in an abusive relationship, thus allowing the group to further question their initial beliefs that domestic violence was something from another place and time. This example demonstrated how Regan effectively questioned the master narrative in a way that catalyzed talk around a particular issue and led to a deeper and more sustained exploration.

Reflecting on narrative in Regan’s learning: more than any other student, Regan demonstrated how complex and varied narrative structure could be through her blending of academic discourse and story structure. When looking at Regan’s stories, narrative loses some of the static, linear, monolithic structure implied in many narrative studies; that is, we begin to see for adult learners, just as with children, there are multiple forms of narrative—each with distinct sociolinguistic features—functioning in different ways. Regan’s identification and critique of the grand narratives that are prevalent within our culture indicate how entrenched these narratives are and how even our short anecdotes will often pay tribute to the grand narratives of a culture. Her multi-voiced narratives allowed her to put herself in the place of others and to contend with issues of power and oppression.

Fischer (1986, p. 232) has noted that “Contemporary ethnic autobiographies partake of the mood of meta-discourse, of drawing attention to their own linguistic and fictive nature, of using the narrator as an inscribed figure within the text whose manipulation calls attention to authority structures, of encouraging the reader to self-consciously participate in the production of meaning”. In her stories, Regan made it clear that she was aware of the privilege and position she held as a white, educated middle class individual and this was reflected in both her meta-discourse and strategies she used to describe her experiences (e.g., the multiple presentation of self, the intense self-evaluation and introspection). Like the autobiographies Fischer writes about, Regan’s narratives moved beyond a caricature of her ethnicity to reflect on power and position.

5. Discussion: what can we learn from Ellie and Regan?

5.1. Narrative as dynamic

If we think of Ellie and Regan and the varieties of narratives presented, we can see that narratives are more than static and linear structures. Rather, there are multiple narrative forms with distinctive sociolinguistic features. For example, Ellie’s multiple retellings demonstrated that one narrative in subsequent iterations changed its form by adding more evaluation or a different resolution, and changed its content becoming more or less descriptive or introspective. Ellie’s narratives, which essentially followed the same storyline, changed with the context (e.g., written or spoken in a large or small group). These changes provided different degrees of opportunity for Ellie to consider her position and the positions of others. Only after narrating multiple versions of her story did Ellie directly raise the possibility of her own prejudice. Such change implies that all narratives are not the same, even when they are assumed to be “the same story,” and illustrates that narratives are dynamic.

The dynamic nature of narrative also reflects understandings of culture as under construction. This was demonstrated in Ellie’s final narrative where she emphasized exploring alternatives and different ways of seeing things and doing things. For Ellie this meant beginning to engage in exploration of her own position as a white teacher and thinking about whether race or prejudice could be problems that influenced her work with children. Regan also used narrative to reflect and examine dynamic issues of culture. For example, in her course project she wrote about the “violence to
self” experienced by Rodríguez (1982) and Hoffman (1989) in their autobiographies as they described their crossing of cultural and linguistic boundaries. For Regan, these autobiographies were not simple stories of experience but stories where culture was presented as complex and contested.

5.2. Fostering multiplicity

Although their stories have been fixed upon the page, the stories of Ellie and Regan continue into the future. In this sense, autobiographical narratives do not just refer to examination of past selves or the present self, but ideally, narratives are teleographic. They can be a projecting of possible future selves, as could be seen in Ellie’s multiple narrations and by the movement and repositioning of self in her story. Her personal narrative was not just about looking back, but also about struggling into the future. To maintain a telegraphic stance requires us to be wary of linear autobiographical narratives that portray only a single and unified self. The linear story with its singular self stands in opposition to the multiple selves revealed in the increased self-reflection presented in Ellie’s narratives or through Regan’s multi-voiced stories.

To foster such multiplicity, teacher educators must provide opportunities for creating and valuing narratives based on personal experience, and we must also scaffold critical examination of narratives to assist students in reflecting on discourse within narratives, the form of narratives and how those forms function in the construction of selves and in constructing and positioning others. Examinations of narrative must include consideration of how we position ourselves and others through story and in relation to the social, historical, and cultural contexts. For both teachers and students this is a challenging undertaking as was demonstrated by the many instances where Regan attempted this type of analysis and where there was little uptake.

5.3. Uncovering issues of power in and through narrative

In order for teachers to transform their conceptualization of power and its reproduction in classroom practice, they must identify and challenge existing notions of literacy, culture, and constructions of self and other within our society. Many writers contend that autobiography is well-suited to explore how systems of power saturate our discourse and, in turn, position each of us. However, in examining how narratives were constructed and functioned, it has become clear to me that identifying and critiquing systems of power does not always accompany autobiographical explorations. Regan was the only participant in this study who consistently referred to and explored issues of power based on race, social class, and gender.

More than any other student, Regan demonstrated how complex and different narrative structure can be through her blending of academic discourse and story structure. Regan’s identification and critique of the grand narratives that are prevalent within our culture indicate how sedimented these narratives are and how even our short anecdotes will often pay tribute to the grand narratives of a culture. Regan’s case also demonstrated that critique of the grand narratives was limited by personal experience or knowledge. Across the course interactions and narratives, it was difficult for teachers to raise and sustain discussion of issues related to power and oppression.

6. Conclusion: a teacher educator reflects

Acting as a teacher researcher has allowed me to participate in a close examination of my own beliefs about language, culture, literacy, gender, race, class, and power and conducting data analysis has reminded of how very difficult it was as a teacher to assist students in their exploration of “hot-lava” topics (Glazier et al., 2007). At times in listening to audiotapes or reading through transcripts, I observed that my responses to students stalled conversations or moved us away from hot-lava topics toward safer ground. Most importantly, sharing the role of researcher and, even more so, the role of teacher made me carefully consider: Which narratives are educative or transformative? Which narratives are helping us
to approach course goals? Which narratives hold us back?

Attempting to address what participants did learn through narrative, that is, how narrative is educative, was a difficult task because it involves judging students’ stories. In making such judgments, I encountered great tension between the role of researcher and teacher as I tried to use narrative as a mediational tool for teaching and learning in the classroom. Although I have not resolved this tension, I found a helpful framework in Dewey’s notion of experience in education. Dewey (1938) felt that educative experiences were defined by movement, by a trajectory toward a worthy goal. Although course assignments, discussions, and writing provide an incomplete picture of what kind of knowledge is being internalized by students and to what extent that knowledge is internalized, such artifacts do provide evidence of how students are beginning to change and the direction in which they appear to be growing (Gavelek & Raphael, 1996). Through narrative, Ellie and Regan both demonstrated this type of trajectory and their narratives are examples of those that promote educative experiences. We see then, that narrative can be educative, but the work of such learning is difficult and requires thoughtful curriculum, teaching, and time.

Narratives of personal experience need to be represented in teacher education courses in ways that demonstrate their dynamic, multiple viewpoints. Narrative is not just one form but has the potential to be many constructions and therefore, to function in multiple ways as a mediational tool (Wertsch, 1998). Like the aspects of culture it reflects, narrative is dynamic. It embodies the possibilities of change even as it holds forth the possibility to reify beliefs and ideas. The greatest opportunities for transformation and learning through narrative occur where teacher educators consider narrative form, function, and content in relation to context. In the best of all possible worlds, narrative provides preservice and inservice teachers with educative experiences that teacher educators can point to in order to encourage and then document a potential trajectory of growth and learning for students.

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