Narrative Ways of Knowing

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Purpose

Stories are used everyday to express ideas and knowledge socially. In classrooms in the United States and around the world, teachers are using stories as a pedagogic tool because “…narrative is not just child’s play, but an instrument for making meaning that dominates much of life in culture” (Bruner, 1990, p. 97).

Rationale

When I was a child, my father told me a story every night before I went to bed. It was a tradition in our family passed down from father to child, similar to the African oral traditions that I have recently come to know. The stories that my father and his father before him told were both fictional and non-fictional. Each story communicated new ideas, meanings, and history to me as I fell asleep. Storytelling was and still is a part of my life because it has had a lasting effect on my social, cultural, and professional development. It is for this reason that I have chosen narrative as a way of knowing.

This paper will look at narrative ways of knowing and its use as a pedagogic tool. An examination of questions, terminology, literature reviews, and teacher interviews will formulate my understanding of narratives as a way of knowing. I anticipate that this exploration will yield new ways to look at learning and the way learning takes place in hopes to inform my future research initiatives.

Questions

1. What are the origins of storytelling?

2. What cultures, societies, and countries value the use of stories or narratives?

3. Are narratives and stories pedagogic tools?
4. Who is the teller?

5. What role does the teller have in making meaning or knowledge?

6. What effect do narratives and stories have on language development?

7. Are teachers in the United States using stories and narratives as pedagogic tools? If not, what are the implications?

Terminology

In writing this paper, I realized the importance in defining several terms. I use the words story and narrative interchangeably, but realize that research subtly distinguishes between these two words at times. The inconsistency of researchers to define both narratives and stories has lead me to combine the terms for the purposes of this paper, attempting to view the more general scope of narrative ways of knowing.

- **Story** is “a narrative, either true or fictitious, in prose or verse, designed to interest, amuse, or instruct the hearer or reader; tale” (www.dictionary.com).
- **Narrative** is “a story or account of events and/ or experiences which can be either true or fictitious. It can also be defined as a book, literary work containing a story” (www.dictionary.com).
- **Teller** is “a person or thing that tells, relates, or communicates; narrator” (www.dictionary.com).
- **Narrative Inquiry** is the study of how humans make meaning of experience telling and retelling stories about themselves. This refigures and creates meaning for the future (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988).
Literature Review

Making Meaning

Human beings look to make meaning of their existence. The meaning making process takes place in our interactions with one another. These interactions are formal or informal symbolic activities where human beings are constructing and making sense of the world, and also themselves (Bruner, 1990, p. 2). It is unclear where or when stories and narratives began, but it is evident that “The symbolic systems that individuals used in constructing meaning were systems that were already in place, already ‘there,’ deeply entrenched in culture and language” (Bruner, 1990, p. 11). These systems have been used to both construct and reconstruct meaning and self. It is with an understanding of self that new knowledge emerges. Bruner (2002) stated that “…it is through narrative that we create and re-create selfhood, that self is a product of our telling” (p. 85).

Story as a Way of Knowing

Stories have been told across cultures and countries since origins of oral communication began. This medium has been used to relate messages and meanings in a social context. It is here that stories become an epistemological force and can be warranted as a valid way of knowing. Bradt (1997) stated that “How we know the world, that is, by what means, medium, or modality, determines not only what we know but also what we can know” (p. 3). Story is also an agent that structures thoughts and perception, which makes it meaningful to study and look at as a way of knowing.

Stories and narrative take several distinct forms. For the purposes of this investigation I will look at both oral and written forms. It is important to note that the form in which a story is transmitted shapes the encounter between the teller and audience. Normally, a warm bond is
formed through the interaction amongst communicators using an oral-aural story. Written texts on the contrary, are autonomous stories, disconnected from the author (Bradt, 1997). It is the goal of the teller or author to be understood and meaning to unfold. In order “For a text to be intelligible, to deliver its message, it must be reconverted into sound, directly or indirectly, either in the external world or in the auditory imagination” (Bradt, 1997, p. 6). The power of story and narrative as a way of knowing comes from the relationship the medium establishes between the teller and self, the teller and listener, and the listener and self. Within each of these relationships new meaning and experiences unfold. Bradt (1997) stated that:

The truth that emerges from storying is not in the written words, for they never exist in and of themselves as the written story does on the page…it resists confinement in any durable material reality…the truth of storying transcends its own articulation and exists in space between the teller and listener, knower and known. (pp.9-10)

It is here in this space, that meaning and knowledge take place therefore I believe that stories and narratives can be used in pedagogy.

Multiculturalism

The diverse experience of stories and narratives transcend all known boundaries of race, ethnicity or gender, but it continues to be ironic whose stories are told and whose are excluded. In my upbringing my both my father and grandfather prided themselves on providing me stories with brown faces that my books in school did not provide. Many educators are moving towards the use of stories and narratives to connect themselves with others. The incorporation of all stories and perspectives can aid “The challenges of multiculturalism or the demands of long-overlooked words and voices” and make a place for them in our traditions and our curricula (Greene, 1994, p. 14). If all perspectives and voices are not heard meaning and knowing is
limited. Education and mis-educating forces can have conspired to limit narrative voice. This limitation can damage the self image of under-represented groups. It is the job of educators to use stories and narratives as tools of engagement of all community perspectives. It is no longer acceptable to contain ways of knowing to a Euro-centric canon, selected and constructed by powerful white men convinced that they were voicing a universal perspective (Greene, 1994).

Language Development

Stories can be used across curriculum and content areas. In a language classroom stories can be used to provide students with authentic material in the target language. The use of narrative in a language classroom is similar to Krashen’s Natural Approach to Language Learning, in which language is acquired through context and not through learned rules. Creating a natural environment is not simple. Resources may be difficult to find, but teachers can solicit the help of native speaking parents or other community members. Interviewing language holders can provide teachers with authentic stories to share with their classes. Parents and other community members “…are usually pleased and honored to help in school activities, and when we ask them for stories of their childhood, their cultures are at once invited into the school community and validated as sources of information worthy of academic study” (Langer de Ramírez, 1996).

Language is formed by a community of speakers. Each speaker can create his or her own meaning and own stories. Oral traditions can provide a vast amount of teaching resources for language classrooms, but the teacher should be mindful that several versions of a story may exist. Each perspective should be valued in the classroom. Langer de Ramírez (1996) stated that “…stories gleaned from the oral tradition of any culture can be adapted to reflect the specific grammar and vocabulary that students have learned.” It is here that teachers can apply best
practices to enhance student learning of language and content material. Students who were unaware of the diversity of language communities gain new perspectives from the use of stories. The use of real people or tellers shifts the focus away from the all too prevalent literary canon. Students of all levels receive real vocabulary used in a meaningful context, which delivers “Powerful cultural images that are not contrived or stereotypical” (Langer de Ramírez, 1996).

Learning and teaching does not stop in the classroom. Educators and researchers alike can use stories and narratives to make meaning of the bigger picture. The premise of narrative inquiry rests on the fact that humans make sense of their experiences by using stories. Language learners can examine and become aware of new ways of knowing with stories. Teachers and researchers will “…find new ways to understand the experience of L2 classrooms. Narrative offers teachers the possibility of understanding their students in new ways” (Sinclair Bell, 2002, pp.210 - 211).

Pedagogy and Professional Knowledge

Teachers and researchers use stories to make meaning in their daily lives. It is through life that humans experience and share stories. These experiences can also be used to shape curricula. Narrative inquiry was born by capturing these stories and using them as research initiatives. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) stated that “The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who … lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2). The study of stories has and will continue to lead to educational advances in pedagogy because of the empowered link between researchers and teacher practitioners exchanging stories.

Professional knowledge is obtained through professional development, mentoring, and practice. Teachers like all other human beings live lives filled with storied moments. These
stories permeate the boundary between the classroom and the outside world. Knowledge, meaning, and shared experiences flow across this boundary and impact what is known and how it is taught. Researchers can collect valuable information about narratives through interviews, telling, and observations (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 5). Narratives and stories shape experiences and “By listening to participant stories of their experience of teaching and learning, we hope to write narratives of what it means to educate and be educated” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.5). The positive implications of this research are endless for educators and their students.

In the classroom teachers are using stories and narratives to instruct, engage, and build relationships with their students. Stories and narratives become transforming agents that create a new shared and valued experience within the classroom. Cardwell (2002) stated that “The unscripted, spontaneous stories teachers tell invite children to make connections, creating shared meaning and culture within the classroom. Ultimately, the lessons learned are shaped by the questions and interests the learner brings” (p.85). Students are empowered as they make their own meaning. Several case studies showed how teachers used stories to reach and impact minority and girl children. Girl children can enhance their cognitive and emotional development in the relationships established between the teller and listener, which make their use invaluable in the educational process (Cardwell, 2002).

**A Need for Stories**

There is a need for stories and narratives in the classroom and in research. The use of stories and narratives can increase the number and quality of the connections made between the community of the teller and the listener. The use of stories and narratives also exposes the listener to other voices as sharing occurs. When students become tellers of their own stories
their experiences are validated in the eyes of the teacher and their peers. This is an important factor in boosting positive images and self esteem in youth. Genishi & Dyson (1994) stated that “Stories help us transform the present and shape the future for our students and ourselves so that it will be richer or better than the past” (p. 243).

Teacher Interviews

Part of making meaning and gaining knowledge can be achieved through interaction with others. For this project I interviewed five teachers about their use of narratives in the classroom and as a pedagogic tool. I have changed the names of each person interviewed to protect their privacy. The feedback and dialogues that the interviews stimulated were each powerful and unique. All of the teachers interviewed discussed ways in which they currently used stories in their classrooms and ways they would like to use them in the future. Each underscored the benefit that narrative use brought not only for themselves, but also their students.

Chris and Amy were the first teachers that I interviewed. They are both language teachers. Chris is a veteran teacher and Amy is a novice. They are both colleagues of mine and it was interesting to sit with them and learn more about their teaching styles and strategies. The first question asked was a general one, what stories do you use in classroom instruction? Both Chris and Amy pondered the question before responding. Amy began by telling a story that she uses in her classroom to explain reflexive verbs in Spanish. She stated that:

In Ohio, where I am from, there is a place called Cedar Point. One day when I was there I saw this couple sitting together. They were boyfriend and girlfriend. I couldn’t help but stare at them because they had nose rings that were connected with a chain. I watched them and they walked off together moving in a synchronized fashion. They have to walk together because can you imagine what
would happen if one of them decided to go in a different direction. Ouch, that would hurt. This is exactly like reflexive verbs and pronouns you can separate them but they have to say close, they are on an imaginary chain just like the couple at Cedar Point.

This story illustrates the use of narratives as a pedagogic tool in a language classroom. Amy incorporated a personal story that she had experienced in her instruction as a visual tool for students to better understand grammatical concepts.

Both Chris and Amy mentioned that they told their students personal stories and narratives to make connections with their students. They also felt that both written and oral narrative forms could be used as a tool to get to know their students better. Chris continued by sharing a story that he uses in his classroom, *Buddha and the Secret of Life* and the affect it had on a former student:

I had a student who came back and his name was Tim, he was you know, the border line D, F student. He came back and he had served a tour in Iraq. He had obviously joined the military and it gave him what he needed, it gave him the confidence that he needed. He came back to thank me for a story that I told and it was an old Buddhist story about this man who wanted to know the secret of life so he went ahead and he went to see this old man who was supposed to be this wise man. And he said ‘tell me the secret of life.’ So they walked through the woods for a bit and he was, you know, giving him answers to questions, you know, what is the secret of life? and he is elaborating. And they wander past a stream and they stop at the stream and all of the sudden the old man grabs the younger man and he shoves his head under the water and the man is freaking out. First of all
'cause this old man is freakishly strong, 'cause he is holding him under the water and he can’t get out. And he is really worried about that and he’s starting to think that he’s going to die at this point in time when the old man yanks him out of the water. And once he gathers himself he asks ‘what was that all about?’ And he goes, ‘you’ll know the secret of life when you want it as much as you just wanted to breathe.’ And it was one of those moments for this student. This story really resonated with him, it clicked with him and that’s when he started to do things because he knew that if he really wanted to do something he could do that. So, I use that story in my classroom.

Giselle is another teacher that I interviewed. She is also a veteran language teacher. Our conversation was centered around uses of stories and narratives in her classroom as pedagogic tools. “I do tell stories because it helps the students connect with teachers,” she said. Her main use of stories as a pedagogic tool is to emphasize cultural differences between French and non-French cultures. In her upper level classes Giselle teaches a section on Africa and students learn about the griot, a special generation to generation story teller who teaches people about the past. She also teaches the students small proverbs and superstitions used in African oral traditions. Giselle remarked that “the kids like this because they have to do a lot of thinking critically.”

Sara has been a language teacher for six years, she has taught in both secondary and post secondary schools. Her passion and expertise is in Spanish Literature. It is from this perspective that our interview took place. Sara mentioned that it was challenging to incorporate narratives in her instruction because of the current focus of the Fairfax County Public Schools curriculum and the language level of her students. She stated that she would like to “incorporate more poetry and short stories” in her classes. Sara feels that students will learn language and culture by
discovering the grammatical forms encoded in the text along with the historical and cultural information about language communities that cannot be taught solely through explicit grammar instruction.

Donna was the last teacher that I interviewed. She teaches university students. The courses that she teaches have both an in class and hospital practicum. I asked her about the use of narratives and stories in her classes and also in student practicum. She mentioned that she did use personal stories about her experiences and that of her family to help students visualize and connect with the concepts presented in class. She stressed that one of the challenges she has found in implementing narratives and stories is the content rich curriculum that leaves little time for implementing alternative forms of instruction. I found it fascinating that Donna stressed the fact that effective practitioners are knowledgeable about nursing theories, but also must understand patient stories to make informed and accurate diagnosis.

The interviews were very informative. They helped me answer several of my initial questions. Before beginning this research I told stories in my own classroom and was surprised at what my students recalled. For me what had been an insignificant story took on a greater meaning for my students. This method interconnected the teacher and student in a social construct. The medium of storytelling and narratives was safe and easily understood by all participants. That is why I think that narrative ways of knowing are effective pedagogical tools. The interviews conducted only reemphasized the strength of this way of knowing as one that should be used by all educators to transmit information to students and also build personal relationships with them.

Implications
The research demonstrates a need for narrative and stories. Humans learn about self and others through experience. Shared experiences that are vocalized provide a forum for exchange and the transmission of knowledge. This paper and the literature review suggest that the use of narratives and stories can provide positive benefits for curriculum, pedagogy, teacher training and development, and future narrative inquiry. Since narratives and stories create meaning for the teller and listener, using this way of knowing will create avenues for new dynamic, inclusive curriculum planning and pedagogy. It will also make teachers reflect on the voices that are present in their classrooms and in their personal life stories. This reflection can bring about a much needed change in professional development. More informed training and development will bring the way of knowing full circle and therefore affect and empower and the entire educational chain from community to teacher to student, student to teacher to community.

Conclusion

Bruner (2002) stated that “Through narrative, we construct, reconstruct, in some ways reinvent yesterday and tomorrow (p.93). I think that this statement is true and provides a launching point for future examination of narrative ways of knowing and their use as pedagogic tools to promote learning for all.
References


Criteria for Self and Professor Samaras’ Evaluation of your WoK Paper

Does the paper meet the following criteria with a response of:

☐ Yes  ☐ No  ☐ Developing

- Purpose: A clearly defined focus
- Rationale: why you chose to explore this way of knowing
- Questions: an expansive list of your questions and what you actually decided to explore and a major question

9.5/10 pts

Clear purpose setting. I wonder if you might have elaborated more here on the role of story in your life. Perhaps even shared one your dad told you.

- Literature Review which includes:
  1. your understanding of the basic assumptions of this approach
  2. an accurate presentation of the nature/characteristics of this approach
  3. evidence that you have read extensively and gathered examples of researchers using this approach
  4. depth and analysis of research approach leading to a preliminary conceptual framework

15/15 pts.

This section is exemplary. Your questions about pedagogical tools #3 and “the teller” #4 are fascinating ones. I see storytelling as the oral part of telling the written or narrative story. Little has been examined on the teller-listener role in teaching and especially in learning language. Most of it is on the written word. That re-telling or speaking out and aloud to peers is a very important part of the empathetic and personal meaning making of a story. I’m excited for you and the “encounter between the teller and the audience” on p. 4.- oral-aural (Bradt, 1997).- space between...the role voice has been limited for some-minority and females- also fascinating. a community of speakers, story that enforces the stereotypical- you have lots of good ideas. I love the idea of “The Griot” that could be you Arayna. The interviews were amazingly powerful and convincing all teachers should be considering this pedagogical tool.

- Reflection: articulate how you originally understand the approach and how you reframed your understanding. Revisit your original research questions.

4.5/5 pts.

This is your next step. Bring in your story more, what you learned from the interviews more. What do you think needs re-inventing in your field and through story that Bruner suggests?
References

Language Mechanics:

1. cogency; organization and writing
2. have a distinctive focus or voice
3. have an accessible style and presentation
4. use grammatically correct and professional language
5. complete reference list using APA style

5/5 pts.

No problems here.

Final Grade on WoK paper = 34/35 = 97 = A

Presentation
You magically brought us into the fold of your storytelling. Powerpoint was a good talking and visual tool. See notes on BB too.

Best Wishes,
It has been my privilege to teach you and get to know you.
Anastasia