Stories of the world: Using narratives to inform teacher training and professional development

Arayna Lindsay Yearwood

George Mason University

EDUC 895 - Introduction to International Education

Dr. Beverly Shaklee

December 9, 2009
Rationale

Stories have influenced my life in many ways. As a child I grew up listening to the stories that my father and grandfather told me. Each of these stories encompassed a meaningful experience. I never realized the power that stories had on my learning and how each one of these stories would shape the person I am today and by extension my teaching.

Purpose

When I began my doctoral work at George Mason University I would have never imagined the impact stories would have on my research interests and study. As an educator focused on International and Multicultural education, stories and narratives are a necessary part of learning about myself and about others. I have, in my own practice become open to and accepting of my role as both a teller and listener. At this juxtaposed position of empowerment, I look to create a plan to aid other educators uncover their stories. Narratives can be used as a tool to promote internationally aware practitioners. It is here that I begin my journey. I feel that it is imperative to use stories and narratives as agents for professional development and teacher training in the area of International education. This research may bring about new initiatives that will better suit all learners.

Research Questions

My research questions contain elements of professional development, the use of narratives, and International education. Each question examines the need for teacher training and development to assure more informed – internationally aware teaching practice.
1. How can teachers be trained to promote international mindedness in the United States and abroad?

2. Is there a need to train teachers in international and/or global education? If not, why?

3. How do different cultures feel about professional development?

4. Can stories and other forms of narrative be used to obtain knowledge and develop teaching for social justice, democracy, and citizenship?

5. What role do stories and other narrative forms play in self-reflective development?

**Terminology**

- *Content analysis* – “is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2004, p.18).

- *International education* – stated by the International Baccalaureate Program attempts to “…recognize that people share a common heritage, to adopt positive attitudes about other cultures, to respect all human beings, to understand that nations are interdependent, to know about history of the present on a world scale, to be able to commit themselves to a society where one could hold opinions freely and to engage in critical thinking, physical exercise, and community service. (Hill, 2007, p. 28)

- *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).

- *Narrative inquiry* – is defined by Connelly and Clandinin (1988) as “The study of how humans make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future”(p. 21).
Professional development – “refers to skills and knowledge attained for both personal development and career advancement” (Wikipedia.com, 2009).

Self–study – “is a professional tool teachers can employ for learning about and modifying their approach to teaching” (Samaras, Beck, Fleese, & Kosnik, 2005, p. 2).

Story – “Is a narrative, either true or fictitious, in prose or verse, designed to interest, amuse, or instruct the hearer or reader” (Dictionary.com, 2009).

Literature Review

Why use Narratives and Stories?

Bruner (1990) stated that “The method of negotiating and renegotiating meanings by the mediation of narrative interpretation is …one of the crowning achievements of human development” (p. 67). The use of stories as a means of cultural and social exchange has taken place for centuries across the boundaries of nation-states. It is for this and other reasons that the use of stories holds such powerful importance in training educators to be aware of and use international education practices in their classrooms. This construct makes teaching and learning a “culturally mediated phenomenon,” which is a trait that is recognizable around the world (Bruner, 1990, p. 69). The symbolic nature of teaching and learning lends itself to training and development models, as does the use of narratives. Is International education a “culturally mediated phenomenon” as described by Bruner (1990)? I would agree that it is, therefore models need to be created to educate teachers in the face of changing classroom demographics and world structure.

As times change so will the need for a new story that encompasses a more diverse educational platform. Stories and professional development initiatives which incorporate
narratives will be “…an instrument not so much for solving problems as for finding them…We more often tell stories to forewarn than to instruct. And because of this, stories are a culture’s coin and currency” (Bruner, 2002, p. 15). Countries and educational systems that are able to train their teachers to meet new needs will indelibly maximize on their social and human capital.

**Pedagogy**

The use of narratives and stories in self-reflection, learning, and professional development has an impact on instruction. The goal of this action plan is to construct or reconstruct the use of internationally minded pedagogy in the classroom. Some of the ways in which development can affect pedagogy, are through areas such as multicultural, multilingual, gender, race, and ethnic awareness in education. Teachers can use stories to reflect on their current practices and plan future initiatives that will meet pre-set goals about the newly learned strategies. This will not only promote new practices, but in a foreign language classroom it will draw attention the traditional disconnect between research and teaching (Mattos, 2009). This disconnect must be bridged by teacher-researcher-practitioners who are willing to use shared stories as a means of identifying and fixing problems.

Narratives have a prominent role in educational professional development because of the power this tool holds. Toni Morrison (1993) in her Nobel Prize speech stated that:

Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names. Language alone is meditation. Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man. What moves at the margin. What it is to have no home in this place. To be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of towns that cannot bear your company. (Azerbaijan International, 1998).
Her words still hold true and lend to the rationale about why this study is necessary. Value and development will unfold for educators and students as stories are told.

**International Education**

International education is worth teaching as the interconnectedness of the world becomes more apparent. The inclusion of new dimensions in teacher development training and pedagogy require new approaches. Gathercole and Ruston (2009) looked at a pilot study to internationalize learning for teachers to help them use better strategies to facilitate student learning. Their research examined the dissemination of international education practices through peer-coaching and teacher development. The model used reciprocal learning and teaching of strategies that to highlight interdependence, social justice, perceptions, and global citizenship (Gathercole & Ruston, 2009, p.8). Several of the constructs of this model can be adapted for this action plan. One area that is important in the professional development of teachers is reciprocal learning and teaching. Learning and meaning making occurs from this interaction and these stories can be used in lesson planning, curriculum design, and classroom management.

**A Need for Professional Development**

The use of stories is necessary for teacher training and professional development because humans are social beings that make sense of the world through narrative (Bruner, 1990). Although little research has been done about the use of narratives to teach international education and mindedness, they have been used in other professional development and teacher training initiatives. Teachers who seek training in the use of stories as a pedagogic tool and as a tool for professional development obtain new culturally reflective perspectives (Bank, 2001). The sharing and telling process requires deep individual reflection on experience, history, and
practices. Traditionally, professional development models have focused on the use of narratives and stories to facilitate teacher retention, where pre-service teachers use their personal experiences to provide knowledge to others. I propose that this same reflection be used to promote culturally and linguistically diverse international education training. Teacher practitioners will learn about themselves and their classrooms through narratives and stories. Banks (2001) described a need for an examination of personal narratives in professional development because of the isolated experiences and assimilationist doctrine experienced by teacher education students causing them to accept without fail the United States meta-narrative. Exposure to new ways of thought and dialogue can expose students to new forms of citizenship education. Banks (2001) stated that “Students need to understand how life in their cultural communities and nations influence other nations and the cogent influence that international events have on their daily lives” (p.8). Self reflection through professional development can facilitate this process.

A call for understanding other stories as well as our own is the premise of my research interests. As educators of global students it is imperative that we can read the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Narratives and story sharing are needed to “…develop reflective cultural and national identifications if they are to function effectively in diverse classrooms and help students from different cultures and groups” (Banks, 2001, p. 10).

Storytelling is a useful tool for reflecting on individual knowledge and helping teachers in their reflection (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p.44). In the research posed by Connelly & Clandinin (1998) teachers were asked to write three stories for self reflective purposes. If teachers were asked to write or tell stories about their international experiences or perspectives
they would help them step back and assess whether or not they are incorporating global aspects in their life and professional stories.

*Self Study*

Self reflection is a cardinal part of professional development programs. Teachers using best practices reflect on their teaching in order to make changes to increase student learning. The model that I propose does incorporate aspects of self-study because of the highly personal and reflective nature of storytelling and narratives. Samaras, Beck, Freese, and Kosnik (2005) explained that “Self study is about learning to be open to change in a changing world of teaching” (p. 2). The world that we live in today is changing everyday and as countries become more interconnected, teachers will need to adapt their practices to contain a more international focus. In order to facilitate this change, professional development training opportunities using alternative forms must be created. Self-study can serve “…as a platform to develop practical instructional techniques situated in the needed changes identified by the teachers themselves” (p. 2). These development sessions will provide a space for self-reflection, sharing, learning, and discovery about international mindedness and international educative pedagogy.

Teacher trainees in Israel have adopted personal stories in the professional development programs, too. They tell personal stories about their language learning experiences to better prepare them to Teach English as a Second Language. Although, the program established contains more than one person, the stories are shared collectively forging new bonds between members of the learning community. Leshem and Trafford (2006) stated that “…telling stories which are familiar to the teller represents an often unrecognized potential for learning” (p.15).
Students in Northern Ireland used narratives to improve schools while simultaneously encourage peace building. The narratives presented real stories about the violent bombings and segregated culture. Each of the poems provided by students was fundamental to bring about a change in school policies. Educators and planners asked themselves what the dominant stories used by children and the community were to facilitate change. Smith and Neill (2007) stated that “…narrative dialogues had great potential to stimulate improvements in organizational life relevant to peace education, open up the silences and subject the status quo to possible transformation” (p. 280). Participants were also able to dialogue about their experiences, reflect critically and examine their personal biases (Smith & Neill, 2007). These are all essential positive attributes that the use of narratives can bring to teacher training and education.

Stories and personal narratives are needed to change current educational practices at home and internationally. How do teachers because aware of international stories? What do teachers who have not been exposed to international issues do to become aware of the world around them? One way to begin is through self reflection and then move towards exposure and instruction. Narrative forms tell human stories that must be known in order to better serve diverse populations and to instruct critical thinkers who are internationally aware. The story must be told. In Darfur, during the genocide, children were given crayons. These children drew about their experience. The news and coverage of this narrative art brought new recognition to the struggle of citizens of the area. Sparrow (2008) suggests that “This is the story of how products of a personal whim were fanned into a flame by an organization, becoming… the means of educating, connecting, and inspiring people to participate in the struggle for Darfur” (p. 128). The drawings of the children of Darfur become the tellers of the untold story. “Some drawings
speak for themselves. Others require the child’s translation, which suddenly transforms a non-specific squiggle into a family fleeing from attack and rape…” (p. 132). The illustrator gains a voice and teaches new perspectives through narrative.

Narratives can also be used to express political acts. In my Spanish for Fluent Speakers classes I teach the story of Rigoberta Menchu. The students receive culturally appropriate text that is authentic. The personal narrative of Rigoberta Menchu became a testimonial that can promote “collective consciousness” (Fosl, 2008). This narrative also powerfully promotes self. Educators can use this and other similar texts in their classroom or learn from them as a way to increase their awareness about social justice and indigenous movements.

Children and women have been active tellers of their international stories. There are also religious and ethnic groups that unite to tell their histories. In the Muslim world, a group of women has come together to honor the memory of their female ancestors. The members hear a brief one minute story about female ancestors to maintain their tradition. One participant commented that “…Muslim women in general…cannot count on anyone, scholar or not, ‘involved’ or ‘neutral’ to read their history for them” (Lee Fox Shaheed, 2008, p. 177). Aware teachers can use this method to self reflect on their personal identification, use the story to better understand their students, and or enhance the curriculum.

**Action Plan**

*Model*

The use of narratives and stories can facilitate teacher development and training in international concepts. A model for future research exploration will include self-study, direct
instruction, and observations. It is through this process that teachers can obtain new information about their practice, students, classroom, and curriculum.

**Implementation**

In the future I hope to have the opportunity to implement my action plan. I would use several methodologies to construct a balance between reflective self study and direct instruction of effective teaching methods to facilitate international mindedness and the incorporation of international concepts in classroom instruction. The research plan will initially include three main phases. The first phase is for self study. Participants will assess themselves and their current state of international awareness and their uses of international education in the classroom. The assessment will be in the form of two stories. The overall process should not exceed two weeks. The second phase includes direct instruction and exposure to stories that promote awareness. The instruction will take place over the course of six weeks. Participants will be exposed to oral, written, visual, and tactile narrative representations. The final step will include the participants creating an exit story and field observations on the part of the researcher. The observations hope to provide additional feedback and data about what was learned from the self-
study and explicit instruction. The process will take approximately four weeks depending on the number of participants in the study.

**Timeline**

The estimated timeline for conducting this plan is twelve weeks. The amount to sessions given to participants would be dependent on the number of participants and their availability. After week twelve data analysis will occur and feedback will be given to the group of participants.

**Methods**

For this proposed plan, qualitative research method will be used. The data obtained from the self-study portion of the plan could provide a rich foundation to draw from when planning the direct instruction of strategies in step two. The final step in the plan, the teacher’s new story could then be compared with their original stories and analyzed using content analysis to determine the major themes of each narrative. The hope would be that there were recurrent themes that could be later analyzed to design more professional development programs that promote international education and mindedness.

**Implications**

The world is changing now, but teacher training initiatives that teach international mindedness and international education are not adapting as quickly. For this reason, I have proposed an alternative plan that will help build awareness and promote changes in the classroom. 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” (p.2). Based on this premise using stories in professional development initiatives would not only empower students, but also be a sensible place to start.

**Conclusion**

Stories and personal narratives can change education and the world. The power of voices will rise above the voiceless and demand new practices which are representative of the global community. This driving force will need to be trained in order to educate the community. Let us make alternative development programs now, instead of pretending that there is no need for change. The story that future educators tell about us begins with the story we tell today.
References


*Journal of teacher education, 52, 5, pp. 5-16.*


*Education Review, 21, 2,* pp. 6-14.


professional development. *Focus on Teacher Education Quarterly, 6* (1), 3-5 & 7.


“Definitions” Retrieved from Wikipedia.com on December 7th 2009.