Issues and Practices in Inquiry-Oriented Teacher Education

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14 War Stories: Invitations to Reflect on Practice

Jane J. White

All too often teachers' oral accounts of what is happening in their classrooms have been dismissed by educational researchers as trivial, unsophisticated chatter. Characterized as unobjective and, indeed, dangerously emotional, this idle talk is deemed fit only for the teachers' room: it is certainly not to be taken seriously by those trying to gain scientific insights into the workings of American classrooms. Even those researchers and phenomenologists who feel that the voice of the teacher should be heard in the recently renewed dialogue about what teachers know and do can only make very weak claims about teachers' representations of their experiences. For example, Connelly and Elbaz (1980) describe teachers as engaging in 'practical reasoning', and Bolster (1983) characterizes teachers as 'situational decision-makers' (p. 296) whose knowledge is 'idiographic in origin and therefore particularistic in character' (p. 298). Bolster contrasts the knowledge teachers construct with the more 'nomothetic' and 'universalistic' knowledge generated by conventional research (p. 301).

Just because the knowledge that teachers construct as they reflect on their lived experiences is generated within the context of a specific time and place, it does not mean that their reasoning is atheoretical, without a logic of its own. Are teachers to be categorically excluded from engaging in thoughtful dialogue because their stories about life in the classroom are perceived only as evidence of concrete thinking?

Labov shows us a way out of this conundrum. In his article, 'The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax' (1972), he argues that while narratives by definition are 'one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred' (pp. 359–60), they also have a point to make, a raison d'être for being told (p. 366).

Teachers' narratives, or 'war stories' as they are often called, encode both their specific experiences and go beyond them. Teachers tell stories for reasons other than being expressive, being entertaining or 'letting off steam'. When they tell stories, teachers are beginning a process of reflection on their practice. When teachers tell stories, they make claims about the premises of teaching, theoretically argue about priorities, inculcate those moving into the profession and cause others to reflect on their own practice.

Labov's careful analysis of the verbal skills used in narratives shows that there are regularized patterns and conventions by which a speaker transforms the events that occurred into words designed to rally maximum support for a central claim that the speaker is trying to make. Labov's argument that there is an evaluative agenda will be used as the basis for a discussion of

1. Stories told by a beginning teacher, Mr Nathan, as he returned to his alma mater to tell a field experience seminar what it was really like during his first year of teaching;
2. War stories written by student teachers in their journals and discussed in seminar; and
3. Stories told by experienced teachers to each other within a graduate seminar.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze stories told by teachers in terms of the central premises about teaching they are trying to transmit as they reflect upon their experiences. I will also describe how these war stories elicit reflection by others.

Mr Nathan's War Stories

Mr Nathan is a beginning teacher who, at a time when teaching positions were difficult to obtain, was hired as a long-term substitute in fourth grade at an inner city school. Given high ratings as a substitute, he was then hired as a full-time teacher in an inner city third grade. Mr Nathan is white and the children he teaches and a majority of the faculty are black. In the spring of his third year, Mr Nathan was invited to talk at the final meeting of a field experience seminar (with twenty-five education students) to tell them what his first years of teaching were 'really like'. Mr Nathan talked without notes for over an hour, dramatically presenting more than thirty war stories.

As will be seen from the opening story, although narratives are spontaneous oral productions, they are not random or ill-formed accounts of experience. The first war story contains characteristic and identifiable structural features including an orientation, a series of interwoven complicating actions and evaluative statements skillfully presented to heighten the tension, a climax, a resolution and a coda (Labov, 1972, pp. 362–70).

At the beginning of his talk, Mr Nathan tells how he obtained his first long-term substitute position in a fourth grade:

Mr Nathan: Early in the year their teacher fell and injured her shoulder and she's been out of school ... on disability.

Well, since then they had many substitutes in and out. The year before they had been one of those classes that had been taught by substitutes. And so they again figured out that they can destroy any substitute that walks in the door
because they're not real teachers
and they don't usually
put in the effort...to...discipline.

So I walked in
and...there they were...
Everywhere.
I mean just everywhere in the classroom.
Forty-two children...
NONE...able to hear you...
say anything about the rules
because they're all SCREAMING
at the top of their lungs.

It's just the ideal situation.

Mrs White: Don't you all fear
that on your first day
you'll walk in
and the kids will just be running all over?
I mean, that always used to be my night-before-school-
started nightmare.

Mr Nathan sets up his first problem as being hired to teach a group of
children who up to now have been unteachable. The short uncomplicated
clauses, the specification of the large class size, the description of the uncontrolled
movement and noise, the stopping of the action to repeat, 'everywhere', 'I mean
just everywhere in the classroom' and the slightly exaggerated-for-emphasis
words augur well for a dramatic performance. The use of the strong verb
'destroy' ascribing negative motives to the class, and his sarcasm as he compares
the situation with which he was confronted with the field experience students'
more idealistic images of what their first class will be like, lead the audience
toward framing the situation as an us-against-them power struggle, well qual-
ifying this narrative for its vernacular characterization as a war story. The second
speaker, Mrs White, spontaneously adds to this perspective by agreeing that an
out-of-control classroom is one of the worst case fears of a teacher with a new
group.

Mr Nathan then adds complicating action to the story by describing his
initial attempts to solve his problem:

So...so I tried speaking very loud.
Now I'm very strong on discipline.
That's my reputation in the city
and that's why they put me there.
They had this other substitute
that the parents wanted OUT

because she couldn't discipline the children
well enough to teach them anything.

So I walked in
knowing that everybody in the school
was expecting me to straighten them out.
And...I raised my voice as loud as I could
and nothing happened at all.

I slammed the classroom door
and nothing happened at all.

Now generally those things DO something to my students
but it didn't happen.

So I walked around the room desperately trying to find
something I could use as a demonstration device,
and I found a piece of wood
about that long and about that thick
and I found an empty desk
and I beat it on the desk
and nothing happened.

Well usually when you hit a ruler or something on a desk
they stop, but nothing happened.

So I just hit it again
and again.

As he continues, the tension of the narrative is increased by Mr Nathan's use of
specific detail and quantification: 'I tried speaking very loud', and 'I raised my
voice as loud as I could'. The rhythmic, poetic quality of the story is built up by
the repetition of the lines at the end of each action: 'and nothing happened at all'.
Finally the story reaches its climax and resolution:

I had to do it about ten times
and they finally...quieted down.
At which point I said to them
we would not be doing that...in here.

They disagreed. (Laughs)
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So I beat it down again. (Audience laughs)
And this went on all day long
until there was nothing left of the piece of wood
except splinters all around the classroom.

Throughout his narrative Mr Nathan has made the point that by comparison
to other groups, this is one of the most difficult groups to teach that he has ever
met. Mr Nathan also makes the point that by comparison to other teachers,
he has built up the reputation that he is 'very strong on discipline'. Thus, by
the climax and resolution, the 'so-what' of the story becomes evident to the
neophytes: no matter how difficult the students and the situation, the initial
underlying premise of teaching is that one must first gain control of the students
before one can begin any of the other activities conventionally construed as
teaching.

Mr Nathan evaluates his actions by stating what other people might think,
warns of possible negative consequences resulting from his actions but then,
almost in defiance of public opinion, directly states his own thesis about teaching:

And, now that, that... sounds terrible.
And I know a lot of people go berserk
when they hear of me doing that.
That evening I had two parents in
and I left several in the office when I went home.
And the thing is
like I'm supposed to teach these children
but I can't teach them anything until they listen.

So, ... I had to get them quiet and I did that.

This attention grabbing war story of Mr Nathan's was followed by stories
that gave detailed technical advice about how to get students' attention. Mr
Nathan told how he established a set of rules and demanded total adherence:

And I began giving them lots of work to keep them busy.

... And I had very strict rules
the first things I tell them after I tell
'When you follow my rules you'll be happy. When you do not follow my rules, ...
you will be very unhappy'.
And ... they always test me.
And for about a month I'm the most hated teacher
in any school I'm working in.

Mr Nathan explained that when he first started with these students' class,
even the adults sympathetic to them in the school referred to them as 'the
gorillas'. His class lost out on many pleasurable educational activities because of
their bad behavior. For example, they had not been on a field trip for three years. Mr
Nathan argued that:

And one of the problems was
with so many substitutes in the past couple of years
they had not really learned how to behave.
They did not know the simple procedures
like passing things out.
Which many people don't realize [is that]
you have to teach that.

Thus, prior to giving a series of technical instructions about how to manage
a classroom, Mr Nathan adds a second major premise to his philosophy of
teaching: rather than believing that students are inherently bad and that it is
hopeless to try to change them, Mr Nathan believes that students are bad because
they have not yet been properly taught how to be good. Although initially harsh,
Mr Nathan's message contains a measure of hope; if it is done properly, bad
students can be taught how to be good.

Mr Nathan's stories repeatedly framed teaching as difficult as he described
how students continually challenged his best efforts. For example, he told how
he used vandalism to a bulletin board as an opportunity for learning. When a
child angry at Mr Nathan for a reprimand poked a hole into a tree, Mr Nathan
repaired it by adding a bird's nest. Building on the renewed interest in his
bulletin board, each day he added something new to this representation of spring:
two eggs; then baby birds, then the mother bird feeding worms to the babies,
etc.

Mr Nathan also told stories about how he got the children interested in
learning. In third grade he realized that the children were resentful of what they
thought would be a boring science unit on the water cycle. He caught their
attention by matter-of-factly stating that, 'Water is two hydrogen atoms bonded
to an oxygen atom'. When the children argued that this was not the type of water
they drank, he talked about the types of bonds between hydrogen and oxygen
molecules, constantly repeating the chemical formula of water. When the chil-
dren reviewed what they had learned prior to the test, the children not only
remembered but were proud of what they had learned. One girl bragged how
she had gone home and explained the molecular formula to her older sister who,
although she was in junior high, had not learned that yet.

Mr Nathan recalled how he had used knowledge from science to break what
he described as 'a terrible habit':

They all picked their noses
just all the time.

So I thought, 'Well, I've got to teach science
and I've got to stop this problem.
I'll just teach them about clean hands'.
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Although the fourth grade children claimed, that, of course, their hands were clean, Mr Nathan said:

Well,
you don't have clean hands
because you've got these millions of little things...
And they're all,
'Where are they? Where are they?'
and they're staring at their hands.

So I went through this lesson
about bacteria, viruses.
I taught them about DNA.
I had a whole group of little fourth graders who,
'What's DNA?'
'DNA is deoxyribonucleic acid'.

Half the faculty
did not know what DNA was.
My fourth graders are running around:
they're saying, 'Deoxyribonucleic acid'.

Mr Nathan went on to describe how the class decided to grow bread mold
as their science project. He gleefully reported how parents rushed into his room
on P.T.A. night asking, 'Where's the bread mold? All I hear about is the mold!... Look, my daughter's mold is really fuzzy!'

Mr Nathan concluded his talk by telling a story about taking his third grade
class to the Smithsonian. As he reminded the field experience students, 'This was
the first time in three years that this class had been out on a field trip:

Well, I figured
that this was the end of me.
I had maintained everything
until May
and now
we're going on a field trip...

So I'm pondering,
'What can I give them
that will give them direction?'

Mr Nathan spent a week connecting what the students would see at the Museum
of Natural History with what they had been learning in their science units on
geology and animals. He told them the legend of the Hope diamond and taught
them what carats were. Mr Nathan gave them assignments. The children had to
get the names of certain kinds of stones, 'they had to find three animals that lived

in an Arctic area; five animals that lived in a desert area. They were to find out
what the texture of the big elephant skin was like. And how big the blue whale
was'.

Mr Nathan also carefully described how he spent three days teaching his
students manners: how they were not to run, or to interrupt adults. He made out
worksheets and stapled them to pieces of cardboard like clipboards. Mr Nathan
found that other teachers at the school felt that he was being 'cruel' to give an
assignment to his students for the field trip.

So that morning they came in
and I handed them out
their little cardboard pieces with the worksheets
and they thought they were
the greatest thing on the face of the earth
at that moment.

They had these little clipboards
and they had a pencil
and they were going to the museum.
And they got in line.

They walked to the bus.
They sat down.
They didn't talk on the bus.
Which, I didn't (laughs)
tell them they couldn't talk on the bus.
They didn't talk on the bus to Washington, D.C.
They sat. (Laughter)
The bus stopped.
Everyone jumped up.
Not my class.
They sat there.
They did not move on the bus.
So I told them, 'Stand'.
They stood.
No one got into the aisle.
So they just stood there.

We walked out
And then they were divided up.
I had enough parents
So that each parent only had four.
And I didn't have anyone.
Cause I figured that I was going to get Johnny and
Marvin,
Billy and Amos and James....
two hydrogen and one oxygen atom. And, to stop the 'disgusting' habit of nose picking, Mr Nathan teaches the students about germs, viruses, mold and DNA. Paradoxically, by the end of his talk, Mr Nathan's need for control of a field trip results in enabling his students to act as if they are scientists gathering data on topics from the texture of elephant skin to the size of the Hope diamond.

There was not time left for questions at the end of Mr Nathan's presentation to the field experience students. While visibly enjoying his talk and applauding vigorously at the end, the field experience students did not automatically accept everything that he said. Several students stopped to talk with me immediately after class: although they were quick to assure me that they had nothing against Mr Nathan personally, the education students were bothered by the tone of his talk. They were shocked by what they described as Mr Nathan's 'harshness' and 'meanness'. They felt he showed callousness towards his students. They were particularly bothered by him conveying that the students were called 'gorillas', by the nose picking story, and by what was described as 'his delight and glee in the almost paramilitary manner in which his students behaved on the bus trip to Washington'. As one student remarked, 'There's control and there's control but this guy is excessively rigid'.

However, Mr Nathan's war stories were not dismissed out-of-hand. They disturbed the students who continued to mull over them to try to come to terms with them. A week after the final seminar, each field experience student met with the field experience instructor and supervisors for a twenty minute individual 'exit interview'. The student talked about both the strengths and problems of teaching and reflected on whether teaching would or would not be a good career choice. A week later, it was obvious that the field experience students were still trying to make meaning out of what Mr Nathan had said. For example, during the exit interviews, far more of the field experience students mentioned Mr Nathan than the numerous research articles on classroom management that they had read during the semester. Many found that there was much useful technical information embedded in his stories. Field experience students frequently mentioned what Mr Nathan said about getting a job and the notion that teachers are first judged by whether they do or do not have control. Questions asked included: 'Is it always like that when you go to get a job as a substitute?' and students worried if they would have to resort to banging a stick to get order. Students praised Mr Nathan's descriptions of teaching the students how to pass out papers and books and how to set up clipboards with questions to organize a field trip to a museum.

Although many field experience students had initially dismissed Mr Nathan as being too punitive towards students, they began to find reasons to reconsider some of the messages embedded in his war stories: 'Well at least he is honest and above board about the need for discipline' and 'You know, Mr Nathan is very clear with his students about the need for discipline'. Various field experience students began to argue that perhaps Mr Nathan was not totally negative towards his students because he was trying to help them learn. In fact, some students saw him as too powerful but very supportive. One student explained that Mr Nathan was not really in a struggle for power so that he won and the students lost. 'Really, when he wins everybody wins because the students learn'.

It should be noted that Mr Nathan's war stories violated many of the field...
experience students’ deeply held but taken-for-granted values that they had about how children should be treated with friendship, with fairness, with dignity, with justice. However, Mr Nathan’s war stories of life out in the ‘real world’ served notice that perhaps these values might not be easily or routinely implemented in their professional practice. Mr Nathan’s war stories indirectly suggested that their values might be too one-sided, pristine and/or not contextuatized. After all how does one go about immediately establishing fairness, dignity and justice in a situations in which children are labeled gorillas? Although one’s commitment to children and/or to transmitting scholarship may be pure and true, how is a person to handle the more distasteful aspects of the occupation such as snotty hands, deliberate bulletin board vandalism, and disapproving parents and teachers?

Mr Nathan’s war stories did not cause the field experience students to abandon their core values and beliefs. However, the establishment of a divergent view caused reflection by challenging some taken-for-granted beliefs. When students go out to student teach, war stories flourish in student journals and seminars as students once again find their beliefs and knowledge of teaching challenged (White, 1989).

War Stories Told by Student Teachers

Mr Nathan recounted his war stories within a more formal lecture mode. Unfortunately, there was no time for collegial feedback from the audience. In this next section, I describe a more dynamic group reflective process.

Student teachers arrive in the field with an unsorted set of beliefs about how teachers should act, beliefs about how children should act, memories of their own schooling, and a set of techniques from their university courses such as how to write lesson plans. However, war stories furiously written in journals and shared during the seminars during the first few weeks of student teaching reveal frustrations, doubts, bewilderment and sometimes a sense of ‘injustice’: life in the classroom does not operate in the way that it is supposed to. One student teacher, Sherry, placed in a first grade describes how her lessons were well-planned and well-executed but the pupils did not learn:

One thing that didn’t go well this week was my lesson on ‘telling sentences’. On Monday I introduced the declarative sentence. On Tuesday and Wednesday I thought I made it very clear that there are two very special things about these sentences: (1) They always begin with capital letters. (2) They always end with a period. We went over countless examples orally, in the book and on the board. We did a worksheet together as a class and the class did really well. However, when I gave them a graded assignment on four sentences, more than half the class failed it!

Sherry then recounted how she had to figure out how to reteach the same content in a variety of different ways until the children finally ‘got it’ and could independently punctuate sentences properly.

Another student teacher, Pam, put in many hours meticulously planning a lesson that ‘utterly bombed’. In the middle of the lesson she realized that the students did not have ‘the slightest notion’ of what she was talking about. As Pam wrote in her log:

Panic set in. What do you do in two seconds? So I totally abandoned the charts I had worked on for three nights, all the activities and I had planned and the ditto sheets that I had run off. I pulled an activity out of the air. I let the kids ask me and each other questions until they could do it. Mrs C. said that it was the first good lesson that I’ve done so far. Is it really worth preparing lessons when the spur of the moment ones seem to work better?

As dramatically recounted in the student teaching seminar, this woman was outraged, not by her initial failure but by the success of her spontaneous lesson. Pam felt that her beliefs about the need for good preparation had been made meaningless. She claimed that all her notions of how teaching worked had ‘blown up in her face’ and that ‘she didn’t know what would work and what wouldn’t’. The student teachers argued with Pam that her planning was still valuable: even if her first set of ideas didn’t work, she had thought about the lesson enough to have a second set available.

Towards the end of a different semester, a student teacher, Tom, wrote scathingly about what he now sees as his misguided attempts to reach a troubled sixth grader:

... I was determined to help a child dumped into this wretched world by parents incapable of helping themselves and instilling Brian with any shred of self-worth. Brian would appreciate me for taking the time to offer personal encouragement, positive reinforcement and heavy doses of attention... I was mistaken!! Brian not only resisted every one of my overtures and attempts to help him, but he retaliated with venomous disdain for my supposed noble efforts. Brian was deliberately disruptive, defiant, threatening and disaffected by my haughty pretensions. On several occasions he threatened: ‘You better get out of my face!!’ with the feisty spirit of an embittered and angry youth clawing at a stranger interested in him for no particular purpose or condition than that I liked him for being Brian. Brian deferred respectfully with no rumblings to Mrs B. but to me he was continually troublesome, insolent, apathetic and contemptuous of my total being.

Along with other kids Brian was praised for his basketball prowess and physical education skills. He often made derisive and highly offensive comments and slurs to girls and the less popular children.

I have come to realize that Brian’s world was a constant battle to survive in an environment unsuitable for healthy and productive maturation. Brian was embattled and pulled down by forces plaguing many decaying urban environments. His learning, then, was how to take care of himself and survive the hellish shit-hole he had no control over or decision to enter. Brian is a product of any child’s worst nightmare, only
Brian could not wake up and recover from the scary and frightening sensations temporary to poor bedtime slumber. Brian's world was permanent and he knew no other way to act or behave. Laying his emotional baggage at the school doorstep is tantamount to requiring a Vietnam Vet to forget the rages of the most vicious war we have fought.

I came to see or understand that Brian just wanted to be left alone — unattended — unscrutinized. Someone taking an interest in him was foreign to his understanding. I was, then, seen as a threat. When I loosened up and paid less attention to him, he settled down more and spoke out less and acted out less frequently.

I remember well the Indian proverb: 'Walk a mile in another man's moccasins'. I often tried to put myself in Brian's shoes in an attempt to understand his behavior. I became weighted down emotionally in his home life and struggle to survive.

My struggle with Brian shows that I cannot touch or help every child. For some children, education is not math or social studies but survival in a perilous world unfit for human habitation.

Student teachers begin reflecting when events in the classroom force them to confront that certain teaching strategies or beliefs about children have become suspect. As they leave the security of their previous knowledge base, student teachers often feel angry or overwhelmed by the ambiguity, complexity and interconnectedness of problems ranging from the mundane to the insolvable. The war stories of the first two student teachers initially involved frustration and rage: frustration at themselves for not being able to teach better and rage at the university for not preparing them better. Students in this seminar kept coming back to the issue of what do you do when you teach but no one learns. They shared stories of how to reteach exactly the same lesson using different techniques, they began to watch for different signs of whether the students were 'getting it' or not, and they shared stories of times that they or their cooperating teachers 'thought on their feet' to 'save the day'. These student teachers became interested in pacing, in trying to figure out how much they should try to teach to a class at any one time. They begin to watch how their cooperating teachers coped readily with problems that seemed overwhelming to them.

In a different seminar, Tom's anguish about not 'getting through' to a child in a different subculture split the seminar group. Middle-class students who had middle-class placements would not change their belief that one should always keep trying to 'get through' to children who had special needs. However, middle-class student teachers who were having experiences in racially different, inner city or lower socioeconomic classrooms agreed with Tom that they should be careful about forcing their structure of caring onto students from a different way of life. They argued about the morality of acting as if they could 'make a difference' to children, the ethics of raising expectations they probably could not meet because as student teachers, they were truly transient in these children's lives.

A further premise of Tom — that social studies and math were essentially irrelevant to Brian — led to wonderfully intense arguments and a converging of group consensus against Tom's position. Although there was eventually an agreement to disagree about how 'close' a teacher should get to a pupil, everyone (including me, the supervisor) agreed that Tom should not conclude that academic subjects were meaningless to Brian. Arguing that the one difference a teacher could make was to expect and assist children 'in bad situations' to do well academically, student teacher after student teacher poured out war stories of how they had helped children of whom not much was expected to achieve breakthroughs: to give 'book talks' to the entire school, to conduct science experiments, to hold high level discussions about pollution. Tom only began to 'come around' to the group's way of thinking when several student teachers told back to him stories that he had told earlier in seminars of how Brian had provided the best questions and insights in lessons. Tom had taught on Ancient Greeks and democracy. Faced with his own data, Tom was laughingly forced to agree that his actions indicated that he did hold high academic expectations for Brian who responded positively to them.

The premises in these war stories told by student teachers are different from the premises of Mr. Nathan's war stories. All were elicited by discrepant events, by the need to make sense out of events that did not conform to their notions and beliefs about the way things should be. While Mr. Nathan's battles seemed to locate the battle as one of control between 'us vs. them', these student teachers seem to be battling ignorance and confusion, their own as well as the students: the student teaching seminar decided that Tom's tale of deciding not to exhibit behaviors that seemed caring to him was really a way of caring.

War stories told by a first year teacher continue to contain reflections on these themes of power, ignorance and caring but in even more complicated situations with even a stronger sense of urgency. No longer protected by being an education student, this teacher perceived her actions as having even more serious consequences for herself and her pupils.

War Stories Told By A First Year Teacher

War stories emerged in yet another interactional format in a graduate course entitled 'Teaching Strategies for Problem Solving and Critical Thinking'. I taught six teachers from four different counties who had from zero to ten years of experience. Each week I modeled a different problem-solving lesson taken from a writing, reading, social studies, science or math curricula. Each week the teachers adapted the strategy I presented for the grade level and content of their curricula and tried them out in their classrooms. Then each teacher presented a description and critique of what happened.

Lynn is an older white female who had been an executive in the banking industry but decided to go into teaching. It is her first year of teaching, she is teaching second grade and she is the only white staff member in an inner city all black elementary school. Emily is a younger white first grade teacher who has taught for four years in a large suburban county system, Karen is an older white science teacher from the more rural Eastern Shore and Daniel is a black male teacher who has taught English in a middle school in the city for ten years. Here is Lynn's story:

Lynn: I had the most horrible thing happen to me today and I have to tell the class.
It was really upsetting to me
and the kids are all upset.

We were writing stories this week
and the kids were really going.
We spent a couple of hours verbalizing
all their ideas onto a chart.

The next day they did
a rough draft.
The next day they edited it.
and they did an excellent job.
They're only in second grade.
And I had one child who for the first time
wrote a complete sentence.

White: Oh, wow.
Lynn: And he had NEVER
put one single thing upon paper.
And he wrote a sentence and he said, 'I will be Hulk Hogan'.

Emily: Ohh.
White: Ohh.
Lynn: It floored me.
Lynn: And I thought it was wonderful.
And he rewrote it twice.
The first time rewriting the only mistake he made
was an upper case w instead of a lower case w.

White: Oh, well that's not serious at all.
Lynn: I put it on the bulletin board along with the kids' papers.
Well this morning my principal was in my room when I got there.
She told me to take them off the bulletin board
because there were a few errors.
Some children had used upper case instead of lower case and
she didn't want any work that wasn't perfect on any bulletin board!

White: Oh!
Karen: She's going to have empty bulletin boards
if everything has to be perfect.

Lynn: No, she wants the kind that you buy in the store.

Lynn: I was totally . . .
Not only was I totally destroyed but
I didn't know how to deal with these kids when they walked in
the room this morning,
because they noticed that I had taken their papers off.

And they were so-o PROUD.
I mean there was just so much pri.

especially that one little kid
when he saw his paper hit the bulletin board
he was like a new person.
He couldn't wait to write again.

Emily: (In soft, shaky voice) It makes me want to cry.

Everyone talking at once: Utterly outrageous . . . I can't
believe it, etc.

Lynn: I couldn't just roll over and play dead!
Group: Laughter

Lynn: You have to understand that I wasn't going for grammar or
capitalization here
or their handwriting skills.
Cause that's a whole different ball game.
These children are finally able
to get something from their mind onto the paper.

I said, 'They worked very hard.
This three days worth of work for them
and in second grade to have that much motivation to go for three
days...'

I said, 'I think they've accomplished something here.
And I wanted to reinforce something good.
They haven't had much success in school'.
And SHE said, 'I don't want to hear it!
In our school only perfect papers go on the bulletin board'.
(Different members in group responded, angrily, supportively.
Emily suggested using the technique of having the students
'publish' in their writing folders.)

Lynn: I just had the feeling today
that the rest of my day was not successful.
I just had the feeling
that I will play it by their rules
and the hell with it.

White: But you can't stand to be in constant conflict with her.
You must stand up for your rights but you can't stand to be
like this every day.

Lynn: But it was like:
What am I supposed to do?
There's this terrible feeling of impotence.
Where do I go?
If I think I'm right about something
what do I DO with it?
Do I GO along because this is the structure?

I mean I've been in private industry for years
and if you had a good idea
you documented it
you copyrighted it
you talked it out.

But if you had a theoretical idea
you were able to look at things objectively
and the reasons why.

And I thought to myself
I have no recourse here
other than a woman's subjective judgment.
Cause teaching is very subjective.
She's got
a subjective judgment call.
And I think mine is just as valid as hers.
I don't think

White: Well yours is more because you know the kids and you know
your purpose.
I mean it's the whole thing
if you're going to teach by objective
and you met your purpose.
Then can she superimpose
another purpose and other values?

Lynn: But I feel totally inadequate
to deal with this situation.

White: Well you felt totally powerless.

Lynn: Ya.

Daniel: Part of it is knowing
where you stand
in the . . . in the make-up of the school as well.
Uh and you know
I don't think..
For instance
If I'm at odds with my principal
she's going to win!
(Murmurs from group.)
And I understand that.
In a sense
she is the superior
(Uh the superior executive, whatever title you want to give
her.)
And,
if I'm going to make my life satisfying at that school
then I don't want to be in opposition to her.

... You know...you have to
You have to answer these type questions for yourself.

Group: (All talk at once.)

Lynn: But you lose your professionalism.

Karen: Principals forget what it's like in the classroom.

Daniel: I think that has something to do with it.

Karen: I don't know how your principal could say that
unless she doesn't remember teaching at all.

Lynn: It's been about ten years since she's taught.

Karen: And it just floors me.
I always went to really small schools.
In elementary school the principal was a teaching principal.
And I think it makes a difference
And there was a real big morale boost
a year ago when our new principal started.
We got two new assistant principals within a year.
The entire building administration changed.
And of course
he had a lot of support to begin with
because he had come up from within the ranks.
Some little things he did that made a difference like
if you had a doctor's appointment and had to leave
an hour early,
he said, 'Sure, go ahead, I'll cover your class'.

Group voices: Wow! My goodness.

Karen: He substitutes.
And he sees to it that the two assistant principals substitute in a
classroom
and keep in touch with what
what it's like to be in front of a group of kids.

Daniel: Yes. Oh yes.

... Lynn: I just keep putting my foot in my mouth.
This has been a really rough week.
I've had one kid.
He has no eye-hand coordination
And he's very destructive.
I don't know what's going bad at home.
When he came to school he wrote all over his desk with a pencil.
Just totally covered the desk.
And I tried not to lose my cool very much.
I ripped into him in the classroom
And asked him just to stand in the hall for a few minutes
Until I got it together.

White: And he needed to get it together too.

Lynn: Right.

White: That's a really smart strategy.

Lynn: But one of the kids in the class when I walked back in
said, 'why did he do that?'
And I said, 'I don't know.'
You'll have to ask him. I don't know.
So when he came back in a few minutes later I said, 'Donald, why don't you stand by your desk for a few seconds because some of your classmates have questions they want to ask you.'
White: Oh how neat.'
Lynn: So Richard, one of the other little boys, looked at him and he said, 'Why did you write on your desk?' And Donald says, (in flat intonation) 'I don't know'. And another one raised his hand and DONALD CALLED ON HIM!
(And I'm going, 'I do not believe this!')
White: All right, OK!
Lynn: And this other one said, 'You know, we don't like you anymore, because it's our furniture and we won't get anymore if you destroy it'.
White: (drawn out) WOW!
Lynn: On man, this is going good!
So I said, 'Does anyone have any suggestions?
What can we do?'
because I was afraid it was going to go too far.
And Adam said,
'I could help Donald clean off his desk'.
White: Wow.
Lynn: And that's what they did.
They cleaned off Donald's desk.
I was really impressed.
Things were going well.
I thought, 'We've got some understanding going'.
What happened an hour later —
Richard, who is always a problem with his mouth,
Very motivated child, very bright.
But always over-exuberant
Kept interrupting, interrupting, interrupting.
Well obviously he liked what happened with Donald.
And he proceeded to throw a pencil at me.
And he says, 'Now I go in front of the class'.
Emily: Uh-oooooh.
Lynn: And I thought, 'Richard, I'm not biting for this one.
I'm not going to give positive rewards for negative behavior'.
So,
This is the first time —
Richard had been constantly warned all day.
I sent him to the principal.
I said, 'Out, that is enough'.

Well, that is a terrible thing to do from my end.
Because
Not only did she —
She sent Richard home.
And has him on three day suspension for that.
Not only that —
He came to school this morning and she made him go home.
But in front of me she called him a liar.
Cause I said, 'Richard left his note at home.
His mother was working last night.
Cause his mother's supposed to sign the note.
So he couldn't bring it back this morning'.

And she said, 'Well, you'll have to learn that he is a liar'.

Emily: You're kidding.
Lynn: This kid is bright.
All this
All this
I was just
I mean right on top of the bulletin board
I said, 'this is too much'.

Emily: Yes.
Lynn: Because these children have had no success.
It's homogeneous grouping.
And they're all the kids that have failed.
And they think that they're failures.
They think they're lazy.
They think they're dumb.
They think they're liars.
And here's the principal reinforcing everything.

Emily: I was going to say
I haven't been teaching that long
but through the years
you find out what works for you.
And one of the things you'll find out is
that you'll just deal with these things within your classroom.

Lynn: RIGHT!
Emily: And it may take things like that to happen
before you find out.

White: But we've got to figure out what you can do to keep your kids writing. We can't just leave it like this.

Emily: At our school
they do say that you're not supposed to put anything up unless it's correct.
It has to look nice
and not be misspelled and so forth.
But how do we get around it
I was telling Lynn:
When we do a writing activity
if I know I am going to pick certain ones for a bulletin board,
then I’ll go through and sit down with several children
and correct it right on their paper in light pencil
or have them correct it right there with me
before we put it up.
So, the kids know they did a good job
but they also know that for the bulletin board
we have another standard.

Lynn: Well, I guess I didn’t shut down totally. I mean
I was really in the pits this afternoon.
I mean the constant attention to discipline.
I just stopped everything.
And I put the charts again
[signal to class that they are going to brainstorm ideas
for problem solving.]

And I said, ‘Can somebody answer me?
I want to know what makes you feel good in school
and what makes you feel bad in school’.
And I brought the charts home and I just left them there
cause they
really feel good in school.

And they started listing
all the things that make them feel good in school
and made them feel happy
even homework they listed that made them feel good.
Reading.
When the teacher doesn’t yell.
(Laughter. Group members talking)

I mean, they really got into it.
What they didn’t like about school only came down to about
four things.
It was all the punishment things,
having to stay after school.
So I was looking at the two charts up there
and I said, ‘Wow,
can anybody come up with a generalization?’

Lynn: I mean, it just came out.

And
my thinker
raised his hand and said,
‘Yeah, look at how much more we LIKE about school than we
don’t like’.
Wow.
And all the other kids said, ‘Yeah’.
And I said, ‘You know what,
you just turned a rough day into something great!’
(Lynn giggles.)
(Group murmurs and comments softly.)

And wouldn’t you know just as we’re writing the good
things on the board,
SHE had to walk in!
Wouldn’t you know the law of averages.
And I saw the eyes go over my shoulder to the chart on the board
which said:
‘We like when we behave good.
We like gym.
We like lunch’.

(Lynn giggles.)
It had all these words
which they’re reading at the same time.
And I saw the eyes.
And she didn’t say a word.
She didn’t say a thing.
And I quick cut out of school
and I thought,
‘Well, maybe I’ll hear about it tomorrow and maybe I won’t’.
(Laughs.)

These ‘war stories’ perform functions similar to those performed by the folk fairy tales as discussed by Bettelheim (1977, pp. 1–19). They help people achieve understanding by offering examples of both temporary and permanent solutions to pressing difficulties (p. 6). Teacher education courses, even student teaching seminars, often constrain talk because only discussions of what is right or what one should do are admissible. These war stories provide a structure in which the problematic nature of teaching can be expressed. Taboos, such as difficult children, difficult principals, one’s own incompetence, ignorance or exhaustion, can be more acceptably discussed within the plot structure of a war story. The war stories allow the teachers to elaborate and give specific details of the problem without giving in to it or being defeated by it. Bettelheim argues that ‘only by struggling courageously against overwhelming odds’ can people succeed in wringing meaning out of existence (p. 8).

When teachers tell war stories they are in effect implicitly claiming that ‘a
struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence' (Bettelheim, p. 8). Thus, one is not a 'bad' teacher just because one has difficulties: everyone has difficulties; problems and often severe problems are indigenous to the profession of teaching. However, the second part of the claim is that, 'if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious' (Bettelheim, p. 8).

Like fairy tales, in the war stories by Mr Nathan, by Sherry, Pam and Tom and Lynn, the neophyte teachers:

— Face almost overwhelming dilemmas that threaten their very existence as teachers.
— Evil as well as virtue is present.
— They contain 'images of heroes who, although, originally ignorant of the ultimate things, find secure places in the world by following their right way with deep inner confidence' (Bettelheim, p. 11).

What is so fascinating about the spontaneous talk of Mr Nathan is that he is the unabashed, perhaps over-confident hero in all of his stories. When he meets ignorance and resistance in various forms from the children, he is always saved by teaching them how to behave. Much of what he teaches them is based on a very specific set of behavioral procedures — how to pass out books, how to go on a field trip as well as learning specific scientific knowledge: what DNA is, what elephant hide feels like.

The student teachers Sherry and Pam spontaneously tell about being overwhelmed because the techniques of lesson planning that they learned at the university did not work. They make several points in their stories: they tell us that the teacher must pay attention to how the students learn and don’t learn rather than believing that there is one 'correct' way to plan or teach a lesson.

Their second message is also that one must not be deterred by initial failure but that one must persevere, teaching and reteaching, until the students show that they have acquired the information. Tom’s war story is an interesting counterpoint. He too learns that what he had learned at the university and also believed about teaching — that it is important to care and to try to ‘connect with’ each individual — does not work. Tom’s message, however, is that there are limits. Teachers must learn when to back off and not persevere if their actions make life too difficult for a child.

The stories spontaneously told by Lynn create the image of a heroine who, although originally naive, angry and powerless, is able to find a solution by following her principles with deep inner confidence. The story form allows her to acknowledge some harsh realities and power disputes. The principal desires form over substance: only perfect papers can go on the board. Although the second graders sometimes ‘come through’ as when they solve the problem of vandalizing the desk, one must be ever vigilant because certain students will constantly seek attention, often inappropriately. The principal adds to what Lynn sees as a problem of low self esteem by calling a student a liar in front of the class.

In this third example, we can see most clearly that teachers are not just aimlessly complaining about how bad life is. Rather they respond to the problems presented in Lynn’s stories with counter narratives as a way of theorizing about what they do. As Lynn talks, various members of the group, myself included, function as an ‘amen’ section, giving support and legitimacy to her statement of the problem and goals by murmuring agreement or disbelief as the narrative requires. We confirm that it is most significant when a child writes for the first time and that perfect form is not an immediate requirement. (It should be noted here that this belief about the writing process is an innovative one from the university that is clashing with a more traditional view of writing held by the principal.)

Lynn rejects Emily’s technical suggestion to have the students ‘publish’ privately in their writing folders. Instead, Lynn continues to explore the definition of the problem: her rights vis-à-vis the rights of the principal. Daniel argues that the principal is always right, even when she’s wrong. Lynn also rejects this philosophy. Karen tells a story about a different principal that offers another explanation for the problem: the principal has ‘forgotten’ what it is like to teach. Lynn elaborates: she offers two more subcases and restates what she sees as the real problem (which the principal is only aggravating): ‘Because these children have had no success … they think that they’re failures’.

The other teachers tell Lynn that this experience will teach her to handle problem students by herself and not to send them to the principal. They give suggestions as to how she can conform to the ‘perfect’ decree without compromising her principles. Lynn then describes the alternative she constructed in action, having the students brainstorm about why they like about school describes the feelings that occurred and one immediate consequence.

Conclusion

Bruner (1978) argues that: 'The psychology of thought has focused on the logical-scientific mode of thinking at the expense of the culturally legitimate narrative mode.' By using war stories teachers are able to articulate principles on which their actions are based, examine premises and assumptions underlying their arguments, suggest possible alternatives and evaluate these alternatives in terms of their potential for success. The representations these neophytes make of their reality is much richer and more inclusive than conventional scientific representations. The stories convey feelings and intentionality, often through the use of morally loaded language. The exchanging of these stories helps teachers make their fears overt. They seek legitimacy that their problems are not just unique to them and that their solutions are acceptable, if not ideal. Eliciting reactions and counter-narratives helps beginning teachers gain access to alternative understandings of their situations.

Recently the conventional educational research literature has been filled with accounts that life in the classroom is complex and (rather patronizingly) celebrating the new finding that teachers must be highly intelligent to be able to manage such complex problems. For example Berliner (1986, p. 12) argues that, 'The 8-day orchestration and conduct of those lessons [on subtraction with grouping] with 25 low-income children is to us a much more monumental feat than the orchestration and conduct of a four movement symphony'. However, there are important differences between the problems that educational researchers think teachers are solving and the problems that teachers think they are solving.
Berliner and others study how expert and novice teachers solve logistical technical problems. Even in more open-ended ethnographies, researchers constrain and edit a teacher’s perspective or the larger ‘teachers’ culture’ by asking individual teachers for explanations of specific events that have been video-taped or observed in their classroom. Researchers are not yet studying how teachers themselves perceive and structure their problems which are often related to curricular goals, goals for specific individuals, and/or feelings that researchers may not value.

Eliciting War Stories

Social contexts can be set up to elicit war stories and reflections on practice from groups of beginning teachers. For example, Labov (1969) initially had difficulty getting a black inner city child to talk. Labov found that when Leon, a 8-year-old black inner city child, was interviewed by a large friendly white male who invited him to talk about some toys in front of them, Leon responded with long hesitations followed by one word answers. Labov changed the social context so that Clarence, a black male from Harlem highly skilled at interviewing, asked Leon questions about everyday experiences such as fighting and television: this interview still resulted in Leon responding with long pauses, ‘mmm’s’, ‘nopes’ and one word answers. It was only after changing the social context from an asymmetrical formal interview situation into an informal gathering in which Clarence:

— brought along a supply of potato chips, changing the ‘interview’ into something more in the nature of a party;
— brought along Leon’s best friend, 8 year old Gregory;
— reduced the height imbalance (when Clarence got down on the floor of Leon’s room, he dropped from 6 foot 2 to 3 foot 6);
— introduced taboo words and taboo topics, and proved to Leon’s surprise that one can say anything into our microphone without any fear of retaliation. (1983, p. 198)

that there was a great increase in the verbosity, volume and style of Leon’s speech. Leon then actively competed for the floor and talked to his friend Gregory as much as he did to the interviewer.

Teacher talk must be elicited without the constraints of an asymmetrical situation. In the student teaching seminars and in the graduate course there are discussions in which I deliberately give up control as the leader and encourage a more informal conversation. For example, in the graduate seminar 1 and the students began to:

— bring a lavish supply of food to class — cold cuts, bread, materials to make sandwiches, coffee and soft drinks. This changed the class into something more informal and social.
— Different faculty friends of mine and friends of the teachers were invited to drop in to see what we were doing. Several sat in for a session or two and participated actively.

—I introduced taboo topics by starting one class period with an impassioned monologue about why what you are taught in university education courses won’t work in your classrooms. I explained why what I was teaching them would lead immediately to failure and challenged them to transform my ideas into ideas that worked for them.

If the situation can be set up that is informal, if there is no correct answer, if nothing is taboo, than education students and teachers will tell stories that help the group to articulate and reflect on the problems of teaching as they perceive them.

Structuring Reflection

However, the problem is not the elicitation of the war stories. The problem is challenging both the storytellers and the listeners to use the stories to create new insights. Merely telling and retelling the same old stories can self-servingly be used for self-justification and/or to display membership in a group mindset. However, if after a story has been supportively elicited, it can be questioned, countered, compared or affirmed with other stories, then educational neophytes can use war stories to examine and perhaps criticize their goals, their practices and/or their work environment.

What is it about these stories that makes them so powerful a form of data? The structure or grammar of a story allows the narrator to tell of a conflict or a violation of expectations at a specific time and place. The spontaneous rhythmic, poetic cadences are compelling as strong verbs are used to complicate and further complicate the action until the climax is reached. Precisely because they are not objective, detached, abstract, logical claims, war stories are often dismissed when they could serve a major source of information. Precisely because each story that ‘works’ conveys a sense of verisimilitude, a sense of ‘Gee, that could happen to me sometime’, war stories carry powerful explanatory meaning for teachers’ experiences, meanings that transcend the uniqueness of the time and place as well as legitimate their teaching as a struggle for achievement.

If teacher educators are aware that war stories always contain a raison d’être, they and neophyte teachers can begin to look for and examine the underlying assumptions. After a war story has been told, participants can look for alternative perspectives. Teachable moments were created when the field experience students wondered if being Mr. Nathan’s arguments for rigid control were the only way to succeed when working with lower socioeconomic black students. If teacher educators have a collection of war stories from comparable situations, greater reflection can be generated. Reflection occurred when the student teachers were moved by, and then argued with Tom about his caring and expectations for Brian. No claims are made that reflections result in the ability to rewrite stories with a happy ending. Yet, as when the class reacted to Lynn’s account of her horrible day, reflections on stories of lived events allow neophyte teachers to obtain support as they learn to function in a world with surprisingly harsh realities.
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References


15 Practicing What We Preach: Action Research and the Supervision of Student Teachers

Jennifer M. Gore

Teacher education programs which aim to facilitate the development of 'reflective teachers', like other teacher education programs, make a number of demands on their students. These demands, or requirements, include such pedagogical practices as writing journals, engaging in peer supervision, using readings in particular ways and conducting action research (practices which are reported more fully in other chapters of this volume).

If we conceive of pedagogy as the process of knowledge production (Lusted, 1986), we can distinguish between the pedagogy we talk about and the pedagogy of our talk. Both are important in the production of knowledge about teaching. I contend that in some of our talk about alternative approaches to teaching and teacher education (the pedagogy we talk about) we have not paid sufficient attention to the way we have talked (the pedagogy of our talk). The changes needed to improve schooling are not only those most commonly articulated in inquiry-oriented and 'critical' approaches to education — changes in teachers' definitions of their work or changes in teachers' practices, or broader changes in the political, social, economic conditions of schooling and society — but also changes in teacher education. Hence, we must consider changes in the way we conceive of and conduct our practice.

This chapter is based on my belief that, as teacher educators, we should attempt to facilitate our own reflectivity and should be wary of inconsistencies between our message and our example. Considerable research on the 'hidden curriculum' of teacher education and on teacher socialization (e.g., Bartholomew, 1976; Ginsburg, 1988; Giroux, 1980; Popkewitz, 1985) has illustrated that the impact of preservice preparation lies in . . . images of teacher, learner, knowledge, and curriculum which are subtly communicated to prospective teachers through the covert processes of the hidden curriculum of teacher education programs' (Zeichner and Gore, 1990). Without attention to the pedagogy of our arguments, inquiry-oriented teacher education surely risks the same fate as much traditional university teacher education, namely, that it is seen as 'university stuff' with little relevance to the everyday task of teaching.

One way of strengthening the message students glean from our inquiry-oriented teacher education programs is to demonstrate the usefulness, for our