



Small stories as performative resources: An emerging framework for studying literacy teacher identity



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ABSTRACT

Taking a functionalist small stories approach, we conceptualize and study teacher identity as theatrical performance of self. From that perspective, we ask: What identity work do small stories do for teachers in literacy classrooms? How do interlocutors use available resources – including curricular resources, small-scale discursive resources, and circulating master narratives/storylines about “how the world is” – to accomplish that identity work through small stories? Analyzing a focal small story event in an urban US middle school English classroom, we show how a teacher (a) mobilized human and non-human story characters to perform being “owner” of the classroom “territory,” (b) appropriated a micro-discursive routine in the classroom, the IRE sequence, to accomplish that performance of self, and (c) construed a reality, a naturalized set of assumptions about the social order of the classroom, by recruiting assumptions available in more broadly circulating cultural “master narratives” about teachers, students and classroom discipline. Combining layers of small story analysis allows us to trace teacher identity through locally enacted, interactionally negotiated performances.

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Introduction

Often what talkers undertake to do is not to provide information to a recipient but to present dramas to an audience. Indeed, it seems that we spend most of our time not engaged in giving information but in giving shows. And observe, this theatricality is not based on mere displays of feelings or faked exhibitions of spontaneity or anything else by way of the huffing and puffing we might derogate by calling theatrical. The parallel between stage and conversation is much, much deeper than that. The point is that ordinarily when an individual says something, he is not saying it as a bald statement of fact on his own behalf. He is recounting. He is running through a strip of already determined events for the engagement of his listeners (Erving Goffman, 1974, p. 508).

Identity research in education has proliferated in recent years, and scholarship on identity within the field of literacy has enjoyed especially robust engagement. In a review of identity studies in literacy, [Moje and Luke \(2009\)](#) use five metaphors to chart the scholarly terrain of this work: identity as *difference*, identity as *self*, identity as *mind/consciousness*, identity as *narrative*, and identity as *positioning*. Developing each metaphor in the review to examine “how literacy matters to identity

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and how identity matters to literacy” (p. 415), they point to the value of locating where, in the universe of identity scholarship, a particular study of literacy and identity might emerge and contribute back to the ongoing conversation.

The logic of Moje and Luke’s article seems to develop progressively, with each subsequent metaphor being a more highly preferred vantage point for conceptualizing identity studies in literacy. Thus, the last metaphor is preferred, because, as they explain,

positioning metaphors allow for the doing of identity – or identity in activity – to be as powerful a means of self-construction and representation as the narrativizing of identity because positioning metaphors require that the researcher follow people through different physical/spatial and social/metaphorical positions of their lives, documenting activity, artifacts, and discursive productions simultaneously (p. 431).

In considering implications of each metaphor for identity study in literacy, Moje and Luke write almost exclusively about *students’* identities in questions and conceptualizations of literacy *learning*.

Despite being virtually absent in the review, no doubt reflecting its scarcity in the scholarship, literacy *teaching* also involves identity work. Handsfield, Crumpler, and Dean (2010), for example, show how a fourth grade teacher tactically recontextualized and creatively adapted the discourses of standardization, bilingual education, writer’s workshop, and novice teacher status across space and time. From this analysis, they show the difficulties and complexities of locating literacy teaching identity. McKinney and Giorgis (2009) take up the question of how elementary writing teacher identities were performed in literacy autobiographies and in qualitative interviews. In studying a middle school classroom, Juzwik (2009) examined how a literacy teacher accomplished identity work through narrative events that primarily referred to the curricular content, rather than to events from her own life. These and other exceptions notwithstanding (e.g., Hunt & Handsfield, 2013; Rainville & Jones, 2008), the scarcity of work – either conceptual or empirical – on identity in/and literacy teaching deserves more attention from the field, because of its implications for literacy teacher education and professional development, as well as for literacy curriculum and instruction.

Our present goal, then, is to contribute to the project of advancing theoretical and empirical understandings of teacher identity studies in literacy through examination of how “small stories” (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Georgakopoulou, 2007) can function as identity performances for literacy teachers in classrooms. We focus not only on how such performances happen across physical/spatial and social/metaphorical domains, as Moje and Luke discuss, but also on how small stories performatively function in relation to curricular, discursive, material, and other available resources. The study therefore asks two focal questions: What identity work do small stories do for people – especially teachers – in literacy classrooms? How do interlocutors mobilize available resources – including curricular resources, small-scale discursive resources, and circulating master narratives/storylines about “how the world is” – to accomplish that identity work?

In addressing the questions, we first conceptualize teacher identity as *performative* in nature, elaborating a metaphor that is mentioned, but not foregrounded, by Moje and Luke (2009), but that seems particularly relevant for the study of teaching and teacher discourse. Secondly, building from the work of Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008), we situate small story research as a mechanism for studying teacher identity performances. In that discussion, we identify three interpretive layers for such study – a framework that organizes our presentation of findings in the subsequent section. In discussion, we summarize and explore the implications of our argument that teachers draw on curriculum, micro-discursive classroom routines, and circulating grand narratives in order to perform selves through small stories across discursive spaces.

Analytic framework and background research

Identity as performance

In this paper, we take up the ideas of narrative and positioning with respect to identity, but we foreground the metaphor of theatrical drama or performance as evoked by interactional sociologist Erving Goffman and rhetorician Kenneth Burke (1968), among others. In a series of books, Goffman developed the idea that in mundane everyday interactions, what he evocatively called “the performance of self in everyday life” (the title of his 1959 book), humans perform dramas for one another – as if they were actors upon a stage, performing elaborately structured and creatively improvised shows for various audiences. The metaphor is famously captured in Macbeth’s haunting soliloquy:

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts (Shakespeare, Act II, Scene VII, Lines 142–145).

The metaphor mobilized here, as alluded to in the epitaph above, is theatrical in nature. It likens identity – and more broadly human existence – to the situation of actors on stages and audiences looking on. Interactional situations, when guided by this metaphor, are seen as esthetic in nature, quite often involving the poetic function of language (Jakobson, 1960) to produce effects on audiences (Burke, 1968). The performance metaphor also evokes a host of coordinated, behind-the-scenes work and negotiations that go into theatrical *productions*.

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