



# Narrative representations of practice: What and how can student teachers learn from them?



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Narrative inquiry in teacher education has overlooked embedded, “small stories”.
- Three teaching methods workshops in an Israeli teacher education program were videotaped and analysed.
- Embedded narratives were the most common means of representing practice in the workshops.
- Narratives were used as currency in disputes, with participants offering stories instead of claims and counter-claims.

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## ABSTRACT

Representing practice as an object for joint scrutiny is critical for student teacher learning and the development of professional vision. This article examines narrative representations of practice in teaching methods workshops and their affordances and constraints for prospective teacher learning. Three workshops in an Israeli teacher education program were video-recorded and analyzed. Embedded narratives were the most prevalent form of representation, often serving to advance claims and counter-claims. An examination of 112 narrative episodes revealed three forms of mediation: non-exploration, explication and discussion. We conclude that designing for intentional mediation of embedded narratives might increase their utility for teacher education.

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Many professions situate a large part of their training in practice. Novices observe expert practitioners, collaborate with them and perform new tasks under their supervision. Consider, for example, a group of medical students participating in clinical rounds in a hospital: the teaching physician uses the opportunity to guide the students' gaze, to supervise their practice, and to connect theoretical medical knowledge to the cases encountered while discussing diagnoses and treatments. The structure of pre-service teacher education does not afford conditions for such joint observation and practice. Specifically, since teacher education and the work of teaching occur in different and often detached settings (Clift & Brady, 2009), and since halting classroom activity for joint reflection is rarely feasible, it is difficult to make teaching practice present as a shared object of study in teacher education. Such shared objects are critical for developing professional vision (Goodwin,

1994) and for relating theory and practice. A major challenge, therefore, in socializing novice teachers into expert ways of seeing and understanding classroom practice is how to represent that practice in sufficient depth and detail.

Classroom practice can be represented through multiple means, including “everything from the stories told by practitioners about practice, to written narratives and cases of practice, to videos of actual practice” (Grossman, 2011, p. 2837). The most readily available means of representation – narrative – is a highly prevalent practice in preservice teacher education methods courses. What stories are told? In what ways? And what are their implications for student teachers' development?

In this article we address these questions through investigation of 112 naturally occurring narratives about practice told by teacher educators and student teachers in three teaching methods workshops in one Israeli teacher education college. We show that a high proportion of narratives focus on teachers and classroom practice but only a small proportion are publicly reflected upon. We discuss detailed examples of three forms of narrative mediation: unexplored, explicated and discussed narratives. We conclude by

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arguing that greater exploration of embedded narratives is critical for student teacher learning.

In developing this argument, we first review the relevant research literature on the use of narratives in teacher education, and show how recent developments in narrative research – specifically, looking at the ways in which narratives are situated in interaction – can advance understanding in this field. Next, we outline our research context and methods, and present findings with regard to frequencies and distributions of narrative representations in the workshops. We then examine three illustrative case studies of the different uses of narratives in the workshops, and conclude with a discussion of implications for teacher education and the study of teacher learning.

## 1. Narrative in teacher education

Since the 1980's narrative inquiry has come to be seen by many scholars as a favored mode of investigating a wide range of educational topics, including teacher knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004), teaching practice (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2001a; Le Fevre, 2011), the process of learning to teach (Carter & Doyle, 1996; Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2011), teacher identity (Cooper & Olson, 1996; Li & Niyozov, 2008), curriculum (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992), and multiculturalism and diversity (Chan, 2006; Conle, 1999). Stories of personal experience are seen as “highly accessible, very engaging means to promote reflection on the complexity and highly contextualized nature of schooling and instruction. Stories embrace the messy, improvisational, unexpected qualities of teaching and learning” (Preskill, 1998, p. 345) and “are the context of making meaning of school situations” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990 p.3). As such, they are well aligned with Schon's (1995) call for practitioner-generated knowledge of professional practice that can account for the chaotic, complex, uncertain, and situated nature of that practice.

In their review of narrative research Carter and Doyle (1996) claim that a biographical frame enables us to better understand what becoming a teacher entails, including the adoption of a teacher identity, and adapting it and one's ideas and ideals to institutional requirements and classroom realities. In summarizing this body of research, Carter and Doyle identify four key themes: “(1) teaching is deeply personal, (2) personal understandings of teaching are profoundly systematic and theoretical, (3) learning to teach is fundamentally a negotiated process, and (4) a sense of mastery in teaching takes a long time to achieve” (p. 134).

Broadly, three types of narratives are studied in teacher education: narratives constructed by researchers on the basis of holistic qualitative research (e.g. Craig, 2013; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2001b), narratives told by research subjects in response to active researcher elicitation (e.g. McVee, 2004; Schultz & Ravitch, 2013), and narratives embedded in research subjects' naturally occurring interaction (e.g. Horn, 2010; Juzwik, 2005). The research literature on teacher narratives is overwhelmingly focused on the first two categories, i.e. researcher constructed and elicited stories. Such narratives usefully highlight personal ideas and attitudes, but also conceal the social and collaborative nature of narrating and learning. In this article we focus on narratives that naturally emerge in social interaction. Investigation of such “non-elicited” narratives raises questions about the extent to which understanding teaching is either systematic or theoretical, and suggests that deliberate and consistent effort is needed to support learning from such stories.

Given the utility of narrative inquiry for researching teaching, it is only natural that teacher educators have brought narrative into pre-service teacher preparation (see Craig, 2011; for a detailed review). In particular, narrative is viewed as a promising method for making practice and practical knowledge accessible to student teachers. It is

now commonplace in teacher education courses to use narrative inquiry as a tool for reflecting on practice and as a means of promoting student teachers' reflective abilities (Conle, 2003; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2011). Main uses of narrative include both (a) discussion of biographies and autobiographies of other teachers (Conle et al., 2000; Kelchtermans, 2010), and (b) eliciting and working with student teachers' own narratives (Le Fevre, 2011; Laughter, 2011; Parker, 2010; Rushton, 2001; Rodriguez & Cho, 2011).

One might get the impression from the vast literature on the use of narratives in teacher education that engaging with stories about classroom practice and being a teacher are in and of themselves educative. Among the many benefits attributed to narrative inquiry in teacher education are advances in understanding, increased interpretive competence, richer practical repertoires, life changes and broadened vision (Conle, 2003).

McVee (2004) questions the inherent value of narratives, arguing that “individuals may sometimes fail to re-interpret a narrative” (McVee, 2004, p. 889). In order for narratives to meet the researchers and teacher educators' expectations, “[n]arratives of personal experience need to be represented in teacher education courses in ways that demonstrate their dynamic, multiple viewpoints” (McVee, 2004, p. 897). Similarly, Conle (1999) emphasizes that “[t]he told event ... is not “reality itself,” but reality from a particular vantage point, the current now-perspective” (p. 15). Hence, she argues, an important task of narrative inquiry in teacher education is to intentionally explore the narrator's perspective and context, helping students see narrated events from a new vantage point. This restorying process can even have therapeutic value, as participants reframe damaging “stuck stories”, arriving at more adaptive interpretations (Mullet, Akerson, & Turman, 2013). Similarly, Conle (1999) cautions against “hardened” stories, which lose their connection to lived experience and context as researchers push for consistency, generalizability and portability. For example, stories may harden when the narrator uses them to explain, illustrate or prove an agenda, or draw generalizations about a character. Similarly, stories may become “frozen” as we waive our agency as both characters in and authors of our stories. Such hardened and frozen stories offer limited opportunity to develop new interpretations of the narrated events and practices. Building on McVee and Conle we investigate in this article the ways in which narratives are represented, interpreted and discussed in teacher education workshops. In so doing, we take advantage of recent trends in sociolinguistic research into the ways in which narratives are situated in social interaction, the topic of the next section.

## 2. Situated narratives

Most narrative inquiry in teacher education and research focuses on elicited narratives and examines almost exclusively the content of the textual product, abstracted from the context of its production and performance. As such, this research is well-aligned with traditional narrative studies (outside of teacher education), which explored narratives of personal experience elicited in research interviews, also referred to as ‘big stories research’ or the ‘autobiographical model’ (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). Two notable exceptions to this rule are Olson and Craig (2009) and Schultz and Ravitch (2013), who investigate prospective teachers' small narratives. Note however that we use the term “small stories” differently emphasising stories that are situated and constructed in interaction.

Indeed, in the past couple of decades, researchers in sociolinguistics are increasingly turning their attention to naturally occurring, situated “small stories”, moments of story-telling embedded in conversations (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Ochs, 2004; Georgakopoulou, 2006). While narrating big

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