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Dialogic Ground: The Use of “Teaching Dilemmas” with Prospective Teachers

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This article describes a method of storytelling that can assist novice teachers in moving toward “re-seeing” their stories of teaching not just as narratives of experience, but as sites for work to be done. The assignment novice teachers undertook as part of a methods class in the teaching of English language arts has the potential to be a catalyst for problem solving and decision making as teachers. We argue that telling one’s teaching stories in such a fashion helps novice teachers discover the layered and context-specific nature of schools and classrooms, as well as assists them in moving toward envisioning multiple possible solutions to the challenges they face in the classroom. Also, through this assignment, novice teachers were able to forge new understandings or build on ones already held by interacting with their peers about the dilemmas they faced as teachers.

Teaching stories have long been an aspect of how novice teachers conceptualize their teaching practice. Likewise, storytelling, more generally, has been emphasized by researchers as a primary way that humans make sense of their experience of the world (Clandinin and Connelly, 1996, 2000). Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992) note that telling stories about teaching has this potential for teachers, and telling one’s stories has perhaps the most transformational potential for the *teller* of the story themselves:

...[T]he stories people tell about themselves are interesting not only for the events and characters they describe but also for something in the construction of the stories themselves. How individuals recount their histories—what they emphasize and omit, their stance as protagonists or victims, the relationship the story establishes between teller and audience—all shape what individuals can claim of their own lives. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one’s life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned. It is this formative—and sometimes deformative power of stories that make them important” (p. 1).

As novice teachers enter the classroom as practicum students, student teachers, or first-year teachers, how might the power of the stories they tell be harnessed to help them move from “novice” toward “expert” in the trajectory of teaching?

In this article, we describe a method of storytelling that can assist novice teachers in moving toward “re-seeing” their stories of teaching not just as narratives of experience, but as sites for teaching work to be done. The storytelling assignment novice teachers undertook as part of an English language arts methods class has the potential to be a catalyst for problem solving and decision-making as teachers. We argue that telling one’s teaching stories in such a fashion helps novice teachers discover the layered and context-specific nature of schools and classrooms, as well as assists them in moving toward envisioning multiple possible solutions to the challenges they face in the classroom. Also, through this assignment, novice teachers were able to forge new understandings or build on ones already held by interacting with their peers about the dilemmas they faced as teachers.

The novice teachers featured in this article were in their final year of teacher preparation before embarking on a teaching career, and all of the prospective teachers were currently completing a practicum in middle/ high school English classrooms. The practicum consisted of working with students in a middle/ high school English classroom for at least ten hours per week, and most prospective teachers were in their practicum classroom for two hours per day throughout the course of the semester (fifteen weeks).

Throughout the course of the practicum, novice teachers found that they faced different “dilemmas” in the classroom. These dilemmas ranged from difficulties working with particular students to fears about teaching certain types of curriculum. Some dilemmas were resolved within the week in which they arose, whereas others took a more extended time to resolve. Novice teachers found that their peers, who were also completing the practicum, sometimes faced similar dilemmas. As a way to assist novice teachers with developing strategies for working through their dilemmas, we considered what value telling teaching stories hold, for we knew that novice teachers’ dilemmas could be viewed as sites for developing new understandings about teaching.

Yet, novice teachers’ teaching dilemmas originally stood as constructed solely through the perspective of an individual teacher him or herself. Broadening this perspective by sharing teaching dilemmas with fellow novice teachers prompted prospective teachers to recognize that

their perspective on their dilemma was limited; or, at best, their perspective on a dilemma was constructed through a stance that was uniquely their own. We ask, throughout this article, “What were the benefits of sharing one’s teaching dilemmas with other novice teachers?”

Teaching Stories and Dialogism

“Telling teaching stories” is the title of a seminal article written by F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin (1994) and is also the premise for the particular assignment featured in this article. This assignment had the goals of honing in on the potential that prospective teachers’ stories had for their growth as professionals. In the trajectory of “novice” to “expert,” our hope was that telling teaching stories would allow novice teachers to recognize that expert teachers typically draw from multiple possible solutions in order to resolve dilemmas they face. Instead of thinking there may be one “right” answer to a dilemma, expert teachers weigh the pros and cons of solving a dilemma in different ways. In their article, Connelly and Clandinin note that “teachers’ professional and personal stories are important to teacher education, teacher development, and the improvement of schools” (1994, p. 145). They also suggest that teachers’ stories are the sense-making tool that teachers use in the day-to-day. Consistent with the goals of narrative methodologies in research, telling teaching stories has been characterized in teacher education as a way for teachers to investigate tensions within and between teachers’ narratives and the milieu of which they are part.

To view the importance of sharing one’s teaching stories with others, we also draw on Russian philosopher Bakhtin’s (1981, 1986, 1990) theory of *dialogism*. *Dialogism*, or the premise that “utterances” (Bakhtin’s term), are always responsive in nature, is primarily concerned with the idea that *all* language is produced as response to other language. Thus, a central tenet of viewing text as *dialogic* highlights the “action” utterances within one text make in relation to other texts. “Dialogism,” the foundation of Bakhtin’s work, is described by Michael Holquist (1990):

“Dialogism, like relativity, takes it for granted that nothing can be perceived except against the perspective of something else: dialogism’s master assumption is that there is no figure without a ground” (p. 21)

We see dialogism as important to the study of teachers’ stories and seek to connect the theory to assisting teachers with finding possible solutions to their teaching dilemmas. Teachers’

stories, though offered initially as individual stories, are also always formed as “responses” to others, and fellow novice teachers play an important role in supporting their teacher peers’ sense-making about what occurs in schools and classrooms. Therefore, novice teachers’ stories exist as prime sites for investigation about one’s teaching practice. Participating in this sense-making with other novice teachers invites the potential for dialogue and exchange about one’s teaching stories. Novice teachers, then, understand the craft of teaching through interacting with others; talking with fellow teachers and teacher educators assists novice teachers in constructing a reality of teaching that they may not have come to otherwise.

Bakhtin (1990) also understood that when interacting with others, one’s initial perceptions might be reconfigured. Through this “re-seeing,” individuals are persuaded by conversants who have “authority”—whether these authorities are in the form of a peer or the larger society. He refers to these normalizing discourses as producing internally persuasive discourses, thus establishing a dialectic between oneself and intended “other.” Bakhtin notes the shared sense of discourse between individual and conversant by stating,

“The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with one’s own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention” (p. 293).

Similarly, Connelly and Clandinin (1994) emphasize the dialectic quality of teachers’ stories, emphasizing that stories have both a teller and a listener. Through sharing teaching stories, teacher education, as a whole, can be transformed to be a reconstructive experience for prospective teachers. That is, prospective teachers are able to examine their past and “reconstruct” it, giving way for new learning to occur. In this sense, novice teachers’ teaching stories are a pivotal part of such “reconstruction.”

The Context

The context of the study on which this article is based is Green State University’s (GSU) secondary English language arts teacher education program (all names of people and places are pseudonyms). This program is housed within the state’s flagship institution, a large, research-oriented university in the Midwest United States. GSU is located in a community of 90,000 people yet is only 45 miles from Marshall City, a large metropolitan area of just over 2 million. As previously mentioned, the novice teachers featured in this article were in their final year of

teacher preparation at GSU. During this semester, they completed a practicum experience in local middle/ high schools as well as completed twelve credits of professional education coursework at GSU. After this semester, they would spend their final semester of the teacher education program student teaching full-time in a middle or high school English classroom.

All students in the practicum were also enrolled in a English language arts methods class (Curriculum and Teaching 540: Advanced Practices in Teaching English language arts). Because this class and other professional education classes at GSU were taken together, prospective English language arts teachers had formed a “cohort” of sorts, demonstrating that they felt familiar with each other and comfortable sharing their teaching stories with each other. There were seventeen prospective teachers enrolled in both the methods class and the practicum at the time of the study. The first author was the instructor for the course and the second author was one of the prospective teachers enrolled in the course.

The Assignment: Write a “Teaching Dilemma”

The assignment featured next was designed to see novice teachers’ teaching stories as dialogic ground. The assignment prompted prospective teachers to work together to “re-see” the dilemmas they faced in the practicum classroom. Prospective teachers were asked to construct a teaching story that described a current “dilemma” they were facing in their practicum classroom. The dilemma could be about working with students, creating or implementing curriculum, or any other “dilemma” that they intended to think more about, and hopefully, move forward by finding a resolution to the dilemma.

The first step in the assignment was to write the dilemma in the form of a 2-page narrative. Prospective teachers were urged to share some of the dilemma’s context in order to help their peers understand the dilemma more fully. After prospective teachers had written their dilemma in the form of a 2-page narrative, they met with a small group of peers in order to “reconstruct” the narrative. The process they undertook included reading the narrative aloud to a small group (3-4 prospective teachers). After reading the narrative aloud, small groups engaged in a discussion of the dilemma. At this point, peers were urged to listen to the author’s narrative to ask questions about the dilemma as a way of clarifying or extending the narrative.

The next step in the assignment was for group members to “interrupt” the narrative. This “interruption” was done over the course of the next two days and consisted of group members’

written feedback on the narrative. For this part of the assignment, group members were urged to use alternate fonts to “interrupt” the author’s narrative. Such comments on the original narrative were intended to give the author concrete feedback in “re-seeing” the narrative. Some interruptions took the form of questions, whereas others took the form of comments and suggestions.

The final step in the assignment asked the author of the dilemma to reflect on the interruptions in a closing paragraph. The author, after synthesizing the original narrative as well as the interruptions, was urged to consider the following questions:

- How do you see your original dilemma in a new way (as a result of receiving feedback from your peers?)
- Is this dilemma resolved in your mind? If not, how has it changed?

Through “re-seeing” their teaching stories through the dialogue they had with others, the assignment aimed to assist novice teachers in viewing multiple possible solutions to their dilemma that were not previously considered. Instead of embodying their original stance in authoring their dilemma, this assignment valued a stance built as a result of the dialogue, as this dialogue had the potential to open new doors for considering future action in the classroom. Though novice teachers did not have cooperating teachers interrupt their teaching dilemmas, doing so would provide another valuable source of feedback.

Figure 1 depicts the assignment sheet that prospective teachers received. It shows an example of how one teacher started writing her narrative about her dilemma and how group members responded to her. The dilemma shown in Figure 1 is not complete, but was shown as a way for beginning teachers to conceptualize the assignment.

Figure 1: Teaching Dilemma and “Interruption” of Teaching Dilemma

“Teaching dilemmas” are narratives about issues you have faced as a teacher, and are experienced by novice and veteran teachers alike. As a pre-service teacher, you will construct a teaching dilemma as a way to grapple with an issue that you have faced while in your practicum classroom. Next, you will share this dilemma with your peers, and they will “interrupt” it with questions and comments, helping you re-frame your initial analysis of your teaching dilemma and consider alternatives to the solutions to the issue that you wrote about. Below is an excerpt from a teaching dilemma. You will notice that the author begins to frame the dilemma, and then two of her group members respond. Before you respond to your peers’ teaching dilemmas, you will get a chance to talk with the author in a small group, hearing their perspective on the issue they are facing.

Accidental Transcendentalism?

Having grown up in Cedar Creek, I was worried about trying to have field experiences that would show me a different perspective on schools unfamiliar to me. When I realized that I did not have to go far to teach in a rural high school, I signed up for a placement at Fall River High School (about 18 miles northeast of Cedar Creek). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2008, Fall River’s population was 4, 305 people (Cedar Creek’s, in 2008, was 90,520) with an average home income of about \$55,000/year (compared to Cedar Creek’s \$40,000/year). I AM WONDERING ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF THESE FACTS AND THEIR BEARING ON STUDENTS AND THEIR INVOLVEMENT WHILE AT SCHOOL. THOUGH WE NOTED IN OUR GROUP DISCUSSION THAT THESE FACTS MIGHT NOT PLAY A SPECIFIC ROLE IN STUDENTS’ LEARNING, THE WAY YOU NOTE THESE FACTS ASSUMES THAT YOU BELIEVE THESE THINGS HAVE A SIGNIFICANCE IN YOUR STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCE.

I think it is wise to discuss how these factors play a part in students’ achievement in school. I also like that you compare the “known” place of Lawrence to somewhere “unknown.”

I had the privilege of teaching 127 juniors both in American English and Honors American English. I was told from the beginning by my cooperating teacher that she never gives homework to her regular English classes and rarely gives much homework to her Honors courses because she admitted that her students do not complete it and not having completed homework has put a damper on her lesson plans in the past. MY TEACHER HAS EXPRESSED SIMILAR SITUATIONS REGARDING HOMEWORK, AND THIS HAS MADE ME FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE. HEARING YOU SAY THAT THIS WAS YOUR SITUATION, THOUGH, HAS REASSURED ME THAT PERHAPS MY PARTICULAR CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE WAS NOT THAT UNUSUAL.

I think that, as student teachers or beginning teachers, we are often trying to understand the norms of the school in which we work and how these norms collide with what we value.

Therefore, much of the readings we did for the unit my cooperating teacher picked out for me to teach to her honors students, Transcendentalism, were read and discussed in class.

Throughout this article, we use the term “narrative” interchangeably with “story” and distinguish between “seeing data as story” (narrative analysis), which can be understood as a situated interpretation of events, and “seeing stories in data” (analysis of narratives) (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994). Here, we draw on the analysis of narratives or “storytelling events” and consider narratives to contain the following textual elements: a.) temporal sequencing of remembered events; b.) narrative point of view (the “I” or “we” of the story; the teller); c.) setting; d.) characters (who may be portrayed as protagonists/antagonists in relation to the teller); e.) plot (sequencing of events, but also a complication in the action); f.) stance toward the subject (how the teller feels about the subject); and g.) theme.

Teachers’ use of the remembered events described above is key to understanding that teachers’ stories seek to have themes as well as protagonists/ antagonists. Individual tellers of stories also embody stances that cast particular lenses on the events that compose the story. Story elements are composed through the particular stance of the storyteller, and changing this stance requires a teller to be open to new interpretations of the story.

One Novice Teacher’s Dilemma

In the remainder of the article, we feature one novice teacher’s dilemma (see Figure 2) and highlight his peer’s interruptions to his dilemma. We view this teacher’s case as what Ellen (1984) refers to as a “telling case,” as this case aptly illustrates the benefits that this assignment afforded prospective teachers. Viewing teachers’ stories as dialogic ground offers prospective teachers the potential to view the dilemmas they faced in new, and often more sophisticated, ways.

Figure 2

Zach

I have mentioned this student a few times in class. My cooperating teacher has told me that he is labeled with "BD" (Behavior Disorder). It is apparent that something is wrong. Each day in class, this student will set his stuff down, sit down in his seat and then plop down and proceed to sleep or have his head down on the desk. The teacher and paras will go whisper (*Which immediately shows that they are treating him differently*) to him, "You need to sit up and pay attention," or ask him if he needs to get up and get a drink. Often his response is, "I'm fine" or "I'm just a little tired," which could definitely be the case. It seems like he has a huge lack of interest in school. Or, it could be that he possibly feels so far behind that he has just given up. I'm not certain what the problem is or where to find the root of it. **It is usually hard to really tell what is going on with these kids. Having been a kid like this, I can say that it is likely that he has been treated like a problem for a while. His head down behavior could be a defense mechanism to stay out of trouble. He could feel like if he were to try to be engaged in class that his energy would drift toward something that would get him in trouble, hence the detachment; I can't misbehave if I tune out.**

I know that the teacher has contacted his parent(s) about it and that they respond and are concerned but I don't know much else. Their talks are often about his medication or his behavior but it seems that he has been having problems for a while, at least within a school environment. He is an intelligent kid, but just doesn't show any interest while he is in English class. I came to a realization during one of my practicum days and that realization was that the other adults in the classroom don't really treat him like a student or a kid but have kind of labeled him as "that kid with a behavior issue." I sat next to him one day, and instead of whispering in his ear an order or telling him to sit up, I asked him, "Hey man, how are you doing today? Do you want to knock this out real quick?" (referring to the assignment) and he replied with, "Yeah, I'm doing fine," and there was a short pause and then he agreed to do his assignment. *You treated him like an adult, a normal student, and a person and he responded... Huh. Not surprising.* He looks to be bored but at the same time is completely aware of everything that is going on around him. His assignment was subpar but at least when I asked, he did it. He even raised his hand during a discussion session but only when I gave him a little nudge. He knows the material and it is just the matter of getting him to be interested. **Sounds like a multiple means of engagement/expression type of thing could be beneficial.** The dilemma lies in how to motivate students like Zach or whether or not there are other ways to address students that don't respond in the same way. I am sure that a lot of this issue does come down to his IEP and his medication because it is almost every day (even if we aren't doing anything) that he is nodding off to sleep. I can't quite pinpoint the exact issue with Zach but it is apparent that something needs tweaking. I don't want to completely blame the teachers for his lack of interest but it plays its role in this dilemma. **If teachers have some**

personality and energy in their presentations, it is much harder for students to tune out. I think the student has to put some effort forth, though. It can't all be on the teacher. Also, I wouldn't be surprised that his medication might be the cause of his zombie-like routine day in and day out. Alas, I have only observed and talked to Zach in this context, the English Language Arts class.

I think it is a very likely a possibility that his medication could be causing his zombie-like symptoms. Many studies have shown that lots of medications have this effect on teenagers whose bodies are still developing. I don't think its right to blame the teachers entirely, but it isn't their sole responsibility either. It also lies with Zach. It seems very hard to motivate him, but I feel that you have discovered that it's all about creating that atmosphere where he feels involved and not ostracized/marginalized. It is necessary to look at exactly how the class is structured AND how the teachers address him and engage him. Your example of leaning over and whispering is key- since the teachers don't do this with any other student, it instantly identifies him as receiving "special treatment" or being "different". Practices like this are all too easily hidden from view behind the classroom doors. Nobody overtly acts to estrange a student from education; but being in an environment in which their personality must be constrained disengages them without anyone realizing, and most of the time, caring.

I wonder what his behavior is like in the other subjects. **I'm pretty sure I had some report cards that had an A in one class and D's and F's in the others, so you might be onto something with the problems being worse in this particular class. The good-fantastic news is that you've had positive interactions with him. You were able to get him involved in class. Keep building on this.**

When I read interruptions by Amy and Kent, I felt more optimistic about interacting with Zach. Kent's comment that some report cards could say 'A' in one class and 'D's' and 'F's' in others reminded me that I just see Zach in English class. I don't really know how the rest of his day goes and if I stay at the school (for student teaching) maybe I would learn more. This dilemma is a continuing one. This week Zach has again displayed behavior that is disengaged. But, I am more aware of what kind of environment I'm contributing to through my actions. I know that if I treat Zach with care and concern and reach out to him, maybe he will respond better in English class.

“Re-seeing” the Teaching Dilemma

The dilemma featured in Figure 2, written by prospective teacher Michael Walters, describes a student named Zach that Michael had encountered in his practicum classroom. Michael notes the disengagement that Zach displays in English class, and also features his role as a practicum student. Michael describes how he has been observing the environment in the classroom and offers some suggestions about why Zach may be disengaged. Though Michael does not know all the circumstances of Zach’s life, he focuses on the actions he can take as Zach’s teacher. He remains puzzled, though, about whether his actions are beneficial, or if there is more he can do in this particular situation.

Fellow prospective teachers, Amy and Kent, work with Michael to “re-see” the dilemma. The comments that they make throughout Michael’s teaching dilemma focus on affirming Michael’s actions. Yet, they create a dialogue with the *stance* that Michael takes throughout the narrative. In particular, Kent offers a way to “re-see” Zach that prompts Michael to think further about his prior interpretations of Zach. Kent, as a now adult who can identify with thirteen-year-old Zach, urges Michael to see that Zach may not act the same throughout all of his classes. Kent also urges Michael to remember that Zach has a history—as a student and as a teenager. That history has shaped Zach and there may be multiple reasons that Zach acts the way he does in English class. Amy affirms this and contributes to the analysis of the narrative by focusing on how the environment plays a part in Zach’s behavior.

The dialogue that Michael, Amy, and Kent have about Zach in their small group also prompts Michael to feel both affirmed in the actions he has taken with Zach in the classroom, yet view Zach’s history as shaping who he is today. Perhaps equally important to the process of Michael’s understanding was how the dialogue that Amy and Kent brought forth urged him to reconsider his observations of what was occurring in the classroom.

Bakhtin (1981, 1990) noted that the contexts in which we live—spatial and temporal—are important in how we know and understand the world. From these contexts, we are in continual dialogue with others and with ourselves. Therefore, the stories that we tell are dialogic ground. They are foundations, yet are open to being uprooted and tilled to prepare for new understandings. They also assist us in forming our *teacher identity*, a critical component of pre-service teachers’ path in learning to teach.

Teacher Identity and Teaching Dilemmas

One of the most important aspects of the Teaching Dilemma assignment was its focus on a novice teacher's personal development of identity. As future educators, beginning teachers are constantly working to distinguish their own teaching philosophy while finding their place in the larger discourse community. Because of how difficult it can be for these teachers to find confidence in their abilities as they prepare to enter the field of education, it is imperative that they are provided learning opportunities with both expert veterans as well as their fellow novice colleagues. The teaching dilemma assignment supports this idea by creating an open conversation reflecting on a novice teacher's experiences in the classroom. Alsup (2006) argues that young teachers "must have experience with transformational discourse that helps them integrate their various personal and professional spaces" (p. 144). The Teaching Dilemmas assignment effectively offers a place for new teachers to learn and improve their skills as a teacher while developing their own individual identity.

The continuation of identity development is not unique to novice teachers, as expert teachers can benefit from the practice as well. The roles of novice and expert teachers in the educational discourse community may be debated, but one common theme is the idea that all teachers should be consistently working to be lifelong learners. The assignment discussed in this article highlights the value of this approach as the convergence of different perspectives and solutions to challenges in the classroom can be illuminating for both novice and expert teachers alike. It is this openness to collaboration that is vital for young teachers to learn and accept that will help them succeed in the classroom.

Dialogic Praxis and the Movement from Novice to Expert Teacher

Much as identity development is central to development as a teacher, it must be acknowledged that teacher educators wish for novice teachers to move into a more "expert" teacher role through their transition from pre-service to in-service teacher. In an article discussing the importance of mentoring novice teachers, Bieler (2013) states that, "dialogic praxis provides a space for participants to articulate, clarify, and pursue individual visions for change" (p. 412). Bieler notes that the term "dialogic praxis," rooted in Bakhtin's theory of *dialogism* and Freire's concept of *praxis*—highlights the potential for individual agency amongst the contextual constraints.

As Michael interprets how he will respond to his peers' comments on his teaching dilemma, it becomes important that he focus on the place his agency as a teacher has in this dilemma. Though he may never know whether Zach acts the same way in other classes as he does in English class, he does have assurance that the actions that he takes, as a teacher, matters. This agentic stance is perhaps the most valuable outcome of the assignment for novice teachers, for it encourages them to negotiate meaning while participate and act within the classroom. The shared goals of negotiating meaning through dialogue and participating in action help move novice teachers to more expert stances. The goals of dialogic praxis are congruent with these aims, and Bieler (2013) asserts that there are three important tenets of dialogic praxis. In dialogic praxis,

“continual acts of negotiation are regarded as central to the work of teaching and learning. Second, participating in dialogic praxis affords opportunities to strengthen individual agency. Third, dialogic praxis provides a space for participants to articulate, clarify, and pursue individual visions for change” (p. 396).

Therefore, in order to reach a more “expert” state of teaching, one must seek dialogic praxis, characterized by problem-posing, negotiation, and enacting agency in situations (419).

Through the telling teaching stories and participating in interrupting those stories, teacher educators can perhaps prompt novice teachers to value multiple possibilities for resolving the dilemmas they face as classroom teachers. Smith (2007), in her work with beginning teachers, reminds us that the traditional notion of “expertise” may be flawed; instead, we must urge teachers to consider the meaning of “novice” and “expert” roles. Highlighting novice teachers' agency is key to this reconsideration and supports the creation of a teacher preparation model that prioritizes the growth of beginning teachers as professionals.

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