
Teachers' Stories: Our Ways of Knowing

By sharing stories about their classroom experience, teachers not only gain insight into their own practice, but they also contribute to the storehouse of knowledge about teaching.

MARY RENCK JALONGO

Consider for a moment how other professions use stories, not just as casual conversation, but as tools for professional growth. In medicine, stories are case histories; in law, stories set legal precedents; in business, real and hypothetical stories become scenarios. Experts from every walk of life organize their specialized knowledge and skill into episodes, events, or cases (Bruner 1988, Carter and Doyle 1989). Among the social sciences, education alone remains reluctant to share and value the stories that give form and meaning to our lives as educators. We need to use stories as other professional fields do, to treat stories as "little factories of understanding," using them to "attract and light up everything relevant" in our professional lives (Hughes 1988). Educators' stories about teaching and their reflections upon them are a deceptively simple way of addressing significant issues about what it means to teach and to learn (Frederick 1990, Schön 1983).

The Power of the Narrative

Our technological society's insistence on "hard data," facts, and empirical research would tend to suggest that the story is an inferior way of knowing — narratives are "soft," subjective, and

ungeneralizable. But there is nothing to be gained by creating artificial dichotomies between these two very different, yet complementary, ways of knowing (Abbs 1984, Bogdan 1980, Calderhead 1987). Almost to a person, the best people in our field have learned to allow their scientific and narrative modes to interact. As Sutton-Smith (1988) points out,

The narrative mode has little to do with objectivity, predictors, and verifications; rather, it has to do with consensual support, impartial readings, and verisimilitude. The science that derived from physics and mathematics is a science of verification; the science that derives from linguistics and narratives is a science of interpretation (pp. 22-23).

An Act of Mind

Stories are "a primary act of mind," a basic way of processing information (Hardy 1977). Both children and adults find it much easier to remember and use material presented in story format rather than as a categorized list (Bretherton 1984, Egan 1986). If you doubt this is true, attend an all-day workshop and consider what you recall in any great detail by the end of the day or much later. Chances are, it is a personal anecdote shared by a

workshop leader or a participant.

It used to trouble me that whenever I encountered former students, they would invariably remark on my stories about children rather than the theories or research I was trying to convey. But now I have come around to Seymour Papert's (1990) perspective on learning:

Understanding learning is my life-long passion But interestingly I find that what helps most is not the proliferation of abstract principles. I gain more by extending my collection of "learnings"—concrete learning situations that I can use as "objects to think with" (p. ix).

I now believe that the teaching stories I chose to share with students served their purpose. Those stories and our reflections upon them have been and continue to be "good things to think with."

The Story Is You

Susan Ohanian (1989) once observed, "The more I teach, the more I realize that we teachers are nothing but our anecdotes, our reflections on experience." As teachers, we become the stories we choose to tell. If our personal narratives are primarily celebrations of student learning, we have high expectations for students; if the stories we choose to tell about teaching are little more than petty complaints, we have grown dull and apathetic; or, if our personal narratives are mainly tales of despair, we are "burned out" and in desperate need of renewal. This happens because personal narratives are a way of

"structuring experience itself, laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future . . . a life as led is inseparable from a life as told . . . a life is not 'how it was' but how it is interpreted, told and retold" (Bruner 1988). Stories about teaching enable us to organize, articulate, and communicate what we believe about teaching and to reveal, in narrative style, what we have become as educators.

Contributions to Professional Growth

Professional growth is more like finding our way through a forest than driving down a freeway; each of us must find our own path to professional fulfillment. Teacher stories contribute to that process of discovery.

Teachers' Stories Invite Reflection

One thing that differentiates reflective practice from routine practice is the number, richness, and flexibility of the "scripts" teachers bring to the classroom setting (Schön 1983, 1987, 1991).

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As a teacher educator, I sometimes hear a veteran teacher complain that a novice teacher "just doesn't have common sense." Professional educators' common sense derives, not from rote memorization of many precise pieces of information, but from the stories used to make all those bits of information cohesive and relevant. Reflective practitioners have "common sense" precisely because they have a storehouse of stories that organize, apply, and interpret what they know about teaching (Shafer 1981). Figure 1 suggests specific strategies for using stories to encourage more reflective teaching.

Teachers' Stories Are a Metaphor for Change

Stories are not crystallized; they are fluid. As stories evolve, they sometimes seem to take on "a life of their own. New revelations of meaning open out of their images and patterns continually, stirred into reach by our own growth and changing circumstances" (Hughes 1988, p. 35).

As an illustration of the dynamic quality of narratives, consider this story that Krista, a preservice teacher, shared with a class of student teachers after her initial meeting with a small group of 1st graders:

I was handing out construction paper and giving the children their choice of color when this child shouted, "I want black. Black is superior. Black is always superior."

I thought, oh boy, I am really going to have problems with this one. I just never thought people had those racial attitudes so young.

One of the teachers in the group asked Krista if she would have made the same inferences about racial attitudes if the child had been white and had said, "I want white, white is

FIGURE 1

A Dozen Story Ideas*

- Reflections on Improvement**
(Chism 1990)
The change I made:
What prompted the change:
The impact of that change and how I assessed it:
- A Metaphor for Myself**
What best symbolizes you as a teacher?
What are the features that unify your self and the symbol you selected?
- At Least . . .**
Generate a series of statements about making the best of a bad situation in your professional life (Our district may be in a budget crunch, but at least I . . .)
- Joyful Moments**
Make a list of the most joyful moments in your professional life.
- Imaginary Dialogue**
Write an imaginary dialogue between your self and the school, an administrator, a colleague, a parent, or a child.
- Unrevealed Kindnesses**
Write about a situation where you went above and beyond the call of duty to help a child in distress.
- Remembrances**
Reflect upon your own experience as a child at school. Write about an incident from your childhood that has enabled you to develop greater empathy for the children you now teach.
- Low Points**
Describe an incident that nearly caused you to abandon the teaching profession. Looking back on it, why was this such a critical incident?
- Heights and Depths**
Write about your most and/or least successful learning experiences.
- Memorable Teachers**
Profile the best and/or worst teacher you ever had.
- Packing Decisions**
If you were invited to teach overseas and knew that your teaching resources would be very limited, what would you pack in your suitcase? Compare/contrast your choices with those of other teachers. What do your choices reveal about you as a teacher?
- Looking Back**
Contact a former teacher you admired and interview him or her. What insights did you gain about the teacher? About yourself?

* Items 2-6 adapted from Cooper (1991).

Classroom Chronicles: So Now Do You Know the Real Story?

MARGE SCHERER

Ask teachers what they remember about their first year of teaching, and the stories tumble forth. One teacher remembers being so controlling of his students that they were afraid to step out of line, while another remembers ignoring bad behavior to the extent that her students' animal noises drowned out her book discussions.

One teacher looking back recalls that he once threw his desk in a fit of anger over his students' lack of motivation. Forever after, he had earned himself the nickname Geyser. Another teacher calls to mind the day her desk was strewn with flowers. Her students — whom everyone else called "the retards" — were saying thanks for believing in them.

A good number of teachers reminiscing about their year as a neophyte remember, although not always by name, the fellow teacher, principal, or department chair who joked or counseled them through their rookie year. Not surprisingly, for many career teachers, the memory of their entire first year can be evoked by one student's name — the David, Leo, Adrianna, whose life touched their own in some lasting way.

In *The First Year of Teaching: Real World Stories from American Teachers*, Editor Pearl Rich Kane collects 25 of such stories. Chosen from more than 400 submitted in a

nationwide contest called "In The Beginning," the essays chronicle "the pivotal decisions, the lessons learned, the dramatic, poignant and funny incidents" that make up teachers' experiences. While each is specific and unique, collectively the stories reveal realities of classrooms that experienced teachers will recognize and beginning teachers will appreciate.

The book sheds light on some educational issues worthy of reflection: the difference between the way men and women approach teaching; the moral dilemmas teachers face in the classroom (from plagiarism to racism); and, most problematic, the effectiveness of teacher training. Interestingly, for all the teachers who lament that their preservice texts and training didn't adequately prepare them, an equal number pay tribute to the educational strategy, psychology, or philosophy that guided them through the early days.

Finally, the stories remind readers how different teaching is from other professions. As Kane writes in her introduction, "Indeed, few other jobs offer the immediate challenge, the magnitude of responsibility, or the potential for intrinsic satisfaction and learning that teaching in an elementary or secondary school affords from the first day of employment."

Available from Walker and Company, 720 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10019, for \$10.95 (paper).

Five Teachers' Lives

A Lifetime of Teaching: Portraits of Five Veteran High School Teachers is another story collection — one organized with a question in mind. Author Rosetta Marantz Cohen wants to know: What does the life of a successful teacher look like?

Her narrations probe the chronology of five teachers' lives, their early influences, outside interests, family situations, and, most of all, the kind of teaching that built their reputations among students and colleagues as successful, even outstanding, teachers.

The teachers — seen inside and outside their classroom — aren't extraordinary, and their lives aren't what is remarkable about them. Cohen's conclusions about what these teachers have in common, however, provide insight into the elusive art of teaching.

First, they feel passion for their subject. From English literature to all things French, what they teach is a life enthusiasm, one they impart to their students with fervor.

As for teaching style, "though all these teachers from time to time nod in the direction of the most current research on effective teaching," Cohen writes, "their styles remain independent of policy and prescription."

Carl Brenner, who knows mathematics well enough to have written his own textbook series, embraces the questioning approach. "Could you do it another way?" and "Convince me," said in the most challenging tone he

can summon, are his favorite ways to rock his students out of complacent thinking.

On the other hand, science teacher Lily Chin collects teaching objects — models, manipulatives, a menagerie of classroom animals, and much hands-on junk — anything to hone her students' process skills of observing, classifying, measuring, controlling, communicating.

Bill Salerno is adept at story-telling. His power to command the attention of his listeners and manipulate emotions makes him a masterful teacher of literature.

That these teachers also have in common originality, a kind of idiosyncratic genius, and even "legendary weirdness" (in the words of their students) should come as no surprise to those of us familiar with "teacher literature" and "teacher television" featuring the likes of Miss Jean Brodie, Mr. Novak, and Jaime Escalante.

Two commonalities Cohen uncovers about the veterans, however, counter current educational theory. These teachers are *not* student-centered in their classrooms, and, furthermore, their stage of ego development looks to Cohen more like "the persistent novice perspective" than the mature stage of the selfless teacher.

These expert teachers aren't afraid to admit they that they teach for themselves as much as for their students. Indeed in every case, Cohen writes, "the subject's classroom functions as a kind of stage on which a variety of needs can be asserted and worked through — the need for applause, the need for control, the need for expressing personal talents or inter-

ests." Consciously or unconsciously, in their pursuit of self-actualization, "they all seem to believe that if the teacher's needs are satisfied, the students will ultimately benefit."

So what do these portraits of sometimes fiery, often skeptical and battle-wise teachers reveal to readers about effective teaching? Cohen concludes that the educational establishment ought to widen its definition of good teaching. Is it not ironic, she asks, that "contemporary education, which is so preoccupied with learning styles and individual differences among students, perceives the needs of teachers to be so uniform?"

As for the implications for teacher training and professional development, "the input and active involvement of veteran teachers are imperative. . . . Defining and articulating the classroom philosophies that have governed their careers would encourage them to examine those philosophies in ways they have not done before. What is more, their involvement in the teaching of new recruits would enhance their careers without making them leave the classroom."

These deductions might seem obvious except for the fact, as Cohen mentions at the end of the book, "not once in the course of their careers were these teachers ever asked what they do and why." It seems high time the stories were told. □

Available from Teacher's College Press, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, for \$15.95 (paper).

Marge Scherer is Managing Editor of *Educational Leadership*.

always superior."

"Maybe not," Krista admitted, "maybe he just wants attention." Several weeks later, Krista shared with the class a different viewpoint about this child:

Yesterday, I was teaching a lesson on the concept of celebrations. At the end, I asked the children to draw a picture and tell a story about a

The world we know is the world we make in words, and all we have after years of work and struggle is the story.

celebration they had experienced.

This little boy said, "No! There ain't no celebrations at my house since my baby sister died."

I found out that his sister had just died of leukemia. Next time, I won't be so quick to judge. I'll learn to focus more on the child and less on my own problems.

When I shared this story with a group of students, some were quick to judge Krista. Rose remarked, "I'll bet she felt ashamed." But when Rose had a personal experience with misinterpreting a child's behavior, she quickly recognized the similarities:

On the first day of my summer school class, Joey came into my classroom, slumped in his chair, folded his arms across his chest, and mumbled obscenities. I took him aside and he stopped cursing.

but he remained uncooperative for several days.

Later, Joey confided that he knew he was going to have "a really mean" teacher next year in 3rd grade and that he had been afraid that summer school "would be the same." Evidently, the cursing was his way of defending himself.

Rose realized that "just as in the story you told about the boy whose sister had died, I was worrying about what I was going to do instead of wondering why is this kid behaving this way?"

To see how stories become metaphors for change, notice how the same story was interpreted and reinterpreted. For Krista, what began as a "racial incident story" ended as a "becoming a more child-centered teacher story." For Rose, it was a story about a mistake she could not imagine herself committing. Yet later, she realized the issue was the same one she faced.

The same story not only encapsulates the transitions made by those directly involved but also transcends the boundaries of time and space when it is shared with others. That is because "a story is something happening to someone you have been led to care about . . . whatever its subject matter, every story is about change" (Shulevitz 1985, pp. 7, 47).

Teachers' Stories Promote the Ethic of Care

Asked about their concerns as preservice teachers, one student, Teri, responded, "Maybe this sounds funny — but I worry about caring too much, about children's problems 'getting to me.'"

Teri's comments prompted me to share the following story about April, a kindergartner:

The first child I noticed in the class was April. She looked neglected

and seemed desperate for approval. I had seen April's teenaged mother pick her up at school once, but April's grandparents, who were openly resentful about having to care for her, appeared to be in charge.

I was in the classroom one day as the children were getting ready to lie down on carpets for "quiet time." A classmate asked sarcasti-

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cally, "Hey, April, where's your rug?" and another answered, "She probably doesn't even have one."

April responded by making a funny face and dancing around wildly. When the derisive laughter faded, April walked over to the sink and pulled a handful of paper towels from the holder. Then she unfolded the paper towels, spread them out on the tile floor, and curled up on top of them in an awkward fetal position. I couldn't stand it. I started to cry. April's teacher seemed oblivious to this dramatic Friday afternoon event.

That weekend, I discussed the incident with my family. Almost before the story ended, my young nieces were rummaging through the linen closet. They thrust a small carpet into my hands. "Here. Take this to school and give it to her," they said. "If you're worried that the teacher will get mad, don't let her see you."

Teri responded to this story. She told me it "really helped me to feel it's okay to be sensitive and it's reasonable to take action." The story of April was a better response to Teri's concern than any other reason I could formulate. It was better because it demonstrated the ethic of care that must dominate our profession (Noddings 1984, Witherle and Noddings 1991).

When I shared the story with experienced teachers, they spoke — many of them for the first time in their professional lives — about "unrevealed kindness," things they had done for children without any expectations of reward or recognition. To me, that ethic of care and stories about it are like the mast of a ship on a turbulent sea: we lash ourselves to it as a defense against incessant waves of change for change's sake and gales of criticism. Stories remind us of the reasons we went into teaching in the first place.

"All We Have Is The Story"

Personal narratives can reveal the nurturing dimension of the teaching role, characterize important changes in our professional lives, and encourage more reflective practice. All of these benefits have a direct impact upon professional growth because "our lives are made of stories. Such stories allow us to explore our lives, to try out alternative possible ways of acting and being in the world, and indeed to help shape our future actions" (Kazemek 1985, p. 201).

Personal narratives are not superfluous features of teachers' lives; they are basic to our professional growth. Ultimately, "The world we know is the world we make in words, and all we have after years of work and struggle is the story" (Rouse 1978, p. 187).

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