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## A narrative approach to exploring context in language teaching

### Abstract

In recent years there have been persistent calls for teachers to explore their teaching contexts in order to become more aware of them and to understand them. Doing so would enable teachers to make more informed decisions about their practice and their students' learning. This article outlines a narrative approach for exploring context. A narrative inquiry case is presented to provide a framework for the discussion. Emerging from this narrative case are three levels of story applicable to the participant English teachers' lives. A brief description of these levels is provided, and is followed by an illustration of each using extracts from the written story of one of the participating teachers.

### Introduction

I discovered the power of narrative inquiry while interviewing Afrikaans-speaking teachers from South Africa who had immigrated to New Zealand. My aim was to discover their language-related experiences as immigrants living and working in a new country, and so I prepared a series of appropriate questions to ask during the semi-structured interviews. I soon discovered that the interviews took on a rather different shape from what I had planned and expected. Instead of a basic question-answer format, the interviews looked more like conversations; the sort of casual discussions one has with friends and family about familiar topics. Furthermore, a lot of what the teachers said took the form of stories. Below is an extract from one of these. In this extract, the primary school teacher tells of a time back in South Africa when she was required to use both English and Afrikaans as the

languages of instruction in her classroom. She ends by saying that this early experience prepared her for teaching in New Zealand, even though, at first, she struggled in this new English-only context.

So I had all of a sudden to be able to talk Afrikaans and English at the same time. It was rather hard to change, the worst was to be able to tell a kid off in English. You would do the whole thing in Afrikaans and the kid would look at you and, 'could you please translate that?' It is a hard thing to be able to tell a kid off or to get mad in English instead of in Afrikaans. But it went very well and some of my senior classes I had to speak Afrikaans and English in the class at the same time, which gave me a good ground to come here, a good starting point even though I smashed it all up when I came.

It is easy to see how this extract from the interview is a story. Firstly, there are people or *characters* in the story; the teacher herself, the South African students in junior and senior classes, and the students in New Zealand. The story also refers to different *times*; when she was teaching in South Africa, when she first started teaching in New Zealand, and currently at the time of telling the story. Finally, the story is located in different *places*; broadly South Africa and New Zealand, but also more specifically in schools and classrooms.

These three elements (characters in interaction, time and place) interrelate to produce what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to as a three-dimensional narrative space which provides context for any particular story. The three dimensions are as follows:

1. the participants in the story - their own experiences and their interactions with others;

2. the time during which the story takes place, including its temporal connections to history and the future;
3. the physical settings or places in which the story is located.

Any story is positioned within the matrix or space that these three interrelated dimensions create, and it is within this context that the story is understood, by both the teller of the story and the narrative researcher. As Phillion and Connelly (2004: 460) say, 'context is crucial to meaning making.'

I very quickly became aware of this during my interviews with the immigrant teachers, and decided to explore further how other teachers and teacher educators had engaged with narrative in their work. My findings revealed that there is a relatively long history of narrative inquiry in *general* teacher education (see, for example, Gudmundsdottir 1997, a special issue of the journal *Teaching and Teacher Education* which focuses on narrative perspectives on research in teaching and teacher education), and that in the field of *language* teacher education there is fast growing interest in narrative inquiry (Bell 2002, Johnson and Golombek 2002).

In this article, I argue that a narrative approach to exploring one's teaching context leads to a good understanding of that context. This, of course, has important implications for teachers, in terms of their own practice and consequently in terms of the learning outcomes of their students. I present a narrative inquiry exemplar (Lyons and LaBoskey 2002) to provide a framework for my discussion. Emerging from this narrative case are three levels

of story applicable to the participant English teachers' lives. I illustrate these story levels with narrative data from one of the teachers.

### Claims of narrative inquiry in teacher education

There are substantial claims made about the value of narrative inquiry for teachers in both the theoretical and empirical literature on language teacher education. These can be summarized as follows:

1. Narrative inquiry is reflective inquiry. Through constructing, sharing, analyzing and interpreting their teaching stories, teachers get the opportunity to reflect on their own practice and to articulate their interpretations of this practice. Constructing and thinking about stories in this way, therefore, involves both introspection and interrogation.
2. And the consequence of this is meaning making; in other words, making sense or gaining an understanding of one's teaching knowledge and practice.
3. The result of this deeper understanding is change; change within self and one's practice. Johnson and Golombek (2002: 4) make this point, saying, 'inquiry into experience ... can be educative if it enables us to reflect on our actions and then act with foresight.' When teachers articulate and interpret the stories of their practice, their *own* practice, they develop their personal practical knowledge to the extent that they act in the future with insight and foresight.
4. As we know, this is not always easy to do. Any teaching situation is a complex, dynamic arrangement of many factors. In constructing stories teachers bring together many of these, and in reflecting on the stories there exists the potential for them, therefore, to see the whole picture. So, as opposed to focusing on only one or two

isolated variables in a particular context, stories include many of these linked together, and the process of making sense of the stories means unravelling this complexity.

5. Narrative inquiry is contextualized inquiry. Calls for a context approach to language teaching highlight the necessity of ‘placing context at the heart of the profession’ (Bax 2003: 278), which involves teachers exploring the numerous aspects of their particular, local contexts such as the needs and wants of their students, the teaching resources and facilities available, the school and community culture, existing syllabuses and language-in-education policies, as well as the wider sociopolitical context (even at the level of the state) in which the teaching and learning take place. The aim here is to emphasise the ‘particularity’ of teaching, one aspect of what Kumaradavidelu (2006: 69) calls a postmethod pedagogy: ‘*Particularity* seeks to facilitate the advancement of a context-sensitive, location-specific pedagogy that is based on a true understanding of local linguistic, social, cultural, and political particularities’.

The purpose of such a particularistic, context-sensitive approach is for teachers to make sense of their own working situations and thus to practise in a contextually-appropriate way. The reasoning behind such an aim is that teachers teach best and learners learn best in situations that are compatible with their backgrounds, beliefs and expectations. I am suggesting in this article, as others have done elsewhere, that one way to achieve this understanding is to undertake narrative inquiry in the form of constructing, interpreting and reflecting on one’s personal teaching stories.

### A narrative inquiry exemplar

To explore narrative inquiry in language teacher education further, beyond the literature, I collaborated in an inquiry with English teachers in the context of a South African university postgraduate ELT course. The course was about recent issues to do with language teaching, generally and in the South African context. There were only two students in this class, one with 20 years English teaching experience (I'll call her Roxanne), and the other, a recent graduate with no classroom experience (I'll call her Betty). The intensive course ran over the period of a month, with two-hour meetings 2-3 times a week.

These conditions appeared to me to be ideal for engaging with narrative systematically for the first time. The potential for interaction was high and the content of the course lent itself to debate and open-ended discussion, especially since the two students came from very different cultural and educational backgrounds. Roxanne completed her teacher education in a west African country, taught English there, and then worked in a southern African country before moving to South Africa. Betty too was educated outside of South Africa, in a different southern African country, and went to South Africa to complete her first degree and to study for an English teaching qualification.

Our narrative work involved the following:

1. The students were required to write a series of three personal narratives or stories (about 1000 words each) which together would form one long, connected story. The stories were to be submitted to me as part of an assignment (see below). The following topics were suggested to provide some focus to the stories:

- a. Introduce yourself and tell the story of your interest in English teaching.
  - b. What are your ideas regarding the process of *becoming* a language teacher – generally, as well as personally?
  - c. What are some of the desires, fears, concerns, moments of joy that language teachers experience?
2. Opportunities were created in class for the students to share their stories with each other and with me. This was done in an informal way, and these conversations, together with those stories which stemmed from them, as well as entirely new stories, contributed to the data of the inquiry.
3. Of course, I too was part of these conversations, and so shared my own experiences of English teaching and being a teacher educator.
4. All these stories were integrated with our more formal discussions and interpretations of the theoretical literature we were reading during the course, including that on narrative inquiry in the field of language teaching.
5. My independent involvement included keeping narrative notes of my experiences during the course. In these notes, I recorded what I was learning about narrative inquiry, how our story telling and sharing was progressing, and what we were learning, both individually and collectively, about language teaching and language teacher education in the contexts in which we lived and worked.
6. Lastly, as part of their assignment (see point 1 above), the students were required to conduct a content analysis of the three stories they constructed; that is, analysing the stories for themes, and then organising the themes into categories meaningful to themselves as (prospective) English teachers (Ellis and Barkhuizen 2005, Polkinghorne



1995). To do so, they were encouraged to use Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three dimensional contextual space to guide their analysis and interpretation.

### Three interconnected levels of story

When I analysed all these narrative data I noticed that our stories seemed to reflect context at different levels. In other words, our exploration of the contexts in which we had taught, had been taught, and had observed teaching, revealed that our personal stories of these experiences interconnected with other stories, those at varying levels of removal from our own. The important word here is *interconnected*: the stories mutually construct each other.

I represent these levels as follows (see Figure 1):

1. The inner circle consists of a particular teacher's story. This story is personal, and embodies the inner thoughts, emotions, ideas and theories of teachers, as well as the many social interactions in which they take part during their teaching practice. This story is constructed in teachers' immediate contexts, for example, during classroom lessons, during one-on-one conversations with students and colleagues, and in teaching journals or portfolios.
2. A second level of Story (with a capital S) spreads wider than the immediate psychological and inter-personal context of the teacher. Included in this Story are consequences of decisions typically made by others in the work environment, as well as their attitudes, expectations and prescriptions; for example, a school's language-in-education policy, the wants and needs of the community from which the students come, and the methods and materials which teachers are required to use by their supervisors

and budget-conscious administrators. At this level of Story teachers usually have less control; less power to manipulate the complex arrangement of variables that construct their practice, and consequently their stories.

3. A third level of STORY (in capital letters) refers to the broader sociopolitical context in which teaching and learning takes place. Here teachers have even less power to make decisions about conditions which influence their practice. Examples of STORIES include national language-in-education policy, imposed curriculum from Ministries of Education, and socioeconomic circumstances in a region. The use of capital letters to refer to this level of STORY merely signifies a wider, macro context and the power often associated with it. In no ways does it diminish the worth of any individual teacher's story.

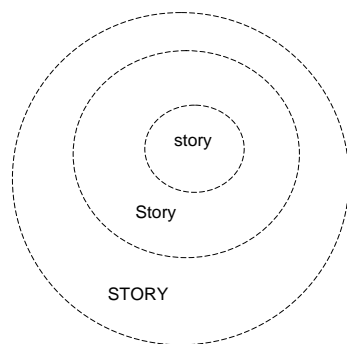


Figure 1: Three interconnected stories

These levels of story are obviously interrelated, and at times it may be difficult to distinguish them. This is to be expected, since the three levels of story are very much interconnected. For any particular teacher, it would be impossible to make sense of any one

level without considering the others. Exploring context in language teaching, therefore, necessarily means exploring all three levels of story.

### Roxanne's story, Story and STORY

In this section, I illustrate the three story levels by presenting extracts from Roxanne's story constructed during our narrative inquiry exemplar in South Africa.

story

Roxanne taught English at primary and high schools in a west African country (where she was born) before moving to another country in southern Africa where she taught English at university level. She then moved to South Africa and continued her teacher education by embarking on a further qualification. The following extract from her written narrative clearly suggests context at a personal level; specifically her inner thoughts about her philosophy of teaching and her goals for her students.

I desire to impart knowledge effectively to learners in a manner that they will clearly understand each topic of discussion and develop a love for English as a second language. This desire motivates me to prepare very well before going to the classroom to teach. There is also the desire in me for my students to develop proficiency in the language and display this by participating actively in class activities, perform well in tests and exams, but more importantly, for them to acquire lifelong skills in effective communication (both in written and spoken) in English in different settings.

Roxanne remarked in her analysis of her narrative (the second part of the assignment) that writing her story was the first time she had articulated this personal dimension of her teaching life: ‘it has given me the opportunity to reflect critically on some important aspects of my life that I have not given serious consideration to previously, especially my learning/teaching experiences in the [west African] ESL context.’

### Story

At this level, Roxanne’s story connects with Stories going on at a level outside of her immediate domain; that is, the context is such that her control of her practice within it is not as intimate and secure as at the level of story (with a small s). The following extract illustrates this contextual level:

School inspectors (experienced teachers) from the Department of Education also come regularly to inspect the teaching/learning activities going on in the schools. All of these are done to ensure that the required standard is maintained. I learnt a lot from all these experienced teachers.

Here, Roxanne reports on an external monitoring process, and her comment suggesting that she learned much from such surveillance is evidence of the story-Story connection. The next extract is part of a longer story which relates her experiences of teaching a literature-based English course for the first time, in an unfamiliar cultural context. In the final sentence she once again connects this wider context to her own personal practice.

I had a more mature group of students from an entirely different cultural background, more numerous in number than each of the classes I had taught

previously and a new course, Literature and Society, which I had to relate to their society and culture. It was quite challenging at first.

## STORY

Throughout Roxanne's narrative she makes connections to STORIES which relate closely to her own. For example, the bad economic situation in her country meant that she had to put off her teacher education for a few years.

I had to work after high school in order to save some money for my university education because of the economic situation of my family and most families in [the country] under military dictatorship. During this period, the economy of [the country] was in a very bad shape and many workers were retrenched from work without any benefits.

Once she qualified as an English teacher the government Education Department deployed her (as it did all graduates) to teach in a location different from where she lived:

A program was designed to promote unity to some extent. Graduates who qualify ... are sent to states different from their states of origin in order for them to be introduced to different cultures and languages in the other part of the country. Since I hail from [name of] state and speak [name of] language, I was posted to [name of] state with a language and culture different from mine.

In order to qualify and work as a teacher in the context of this STORY, Roxanne had to go along with these conditions. She had no power to resist them.

## Conclusion

Roxanne ends the analysis of her three personal stories by commenting on her experience of writing them during the course.

I have come to learn how to continuously identify problems in my teaching beliefs and practice and ... to reflect always on my past learning/teaching experiences and think of how I can make the needed changes in order to become a better language teacher in the future.

Our collaborative narrative inquiry, therefore, was productive for her. She became aware of the importance of critical reflection and meaning making when writing her story; reflection which brought together the three contextual dimensions of *place* (her west African country of origin, South Africa, different schools and classrooms), *time* (past, present and future) and the many *social interactions* in which she engaged (with inspectors, colleagues, students), as well as reflection which spanned the three levels of story, Story and STORY.

I suggest that similar contextual explorations through narrative would be equally productive for other English teachers working in different contexts. Roxanne constructed, shared and analysed her story as part of a course assignment requirement, but she could just as easily have done so as a practising teacher in her own school away from the constraints of any assessment.

The same applies to other English teachers. There are many ways that they could do this: they could write their teaching life histories; they could record in story form significant or problematic teaching and learning events in their classrooms; they could relate to each other in scheduled conversations the desires, fears, expectations and personal meanings they experience in their daily teaching lives. By doing so they would necessarily engage with the context of their teaching, and through the telling, re-telling and interpretation of their stories they might begin to 'impose order and coherence on the stream of experience and work out the meaning of incidents and events in the real world' (Carter 1993: 7). This 'real world' is the context that so many in the field of language teaching are urging us all to explore.

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