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Topic Proposal

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Narratives of Becoming:
The Formation of Teacher Identity Through Personal Narrative Performance

By

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INTRODUCTION

“To speak one's life in the presence of another is to claim a measure of consequence.”
-Madison, 186

The term “storytelling” evokes images of firesides, folk tales, tall tales and bards. But while storytelling is an ancient craft, it is only relatively recently that personal narrative performance—the telling of one’s own experiences onstage in a crafted narrative—has gained popularity as a form of storytelling and a performance art. As a research tool and an art form, personal narrative is now seemingly everywhere. The rise of memoir, solo performance, confessional television and personal narrative radio programming has established the true story as a fixture in the cultural landscape.

But how do the stories we tell create the selves we are and become? And how do the stories teachers tell influence or constitute their identities as teachers? This study will examine the ways that context, content and performance in the stories that teachers tell can both shape and reflect teacher identities.

Beauchamp (2009) has argued for “teacher education programs to create opportunities for the exploration of new and developing teacher identities” (Beauchamp 176), while Carter (1993) indicated that it is specifically teachers’ “storied knowledge” that can help open new and productive avenues of work in teacher education (Carter 5). The term “teacher performance” is frequently used in an anti-aesthetic sense—performing efficiently or inefficiently, the way a car...
might perform (Prendergast 2008). Exploring teacher’s personal narrative performances can reframe “performance” into the aesthetic, artistic, creative endeavor which is essential to redefining teaching as an artistic, and not only a technical, pursuit, resulting in more innovative, creative and engaged teachers (Prendergast 15).

In addition, teacher attrition has grown by 50 percent in the last 15 years (Kain 2011). While many factors clearly have contributed to this crisis, some portion of it can be attributed to teacher education programs and a lack of support or mentorship (Day 2006). It is my hope that investigating the experiences of teachers engaged in storytelling about and in the classroom can illuminate critical tools for teacher education, providing both a strategy for reflective practice and a methodology for teacher education research.

I therefore propose a narrative case study of teachers studying storytelling and performing stories in a professional development workshop. The workshop will facilitate teachers in exploring storytelling techniques, focused on stories both for use in the classroom and for public performance. I am interested in how they describe the experience of storytelling, how their stories change in different contexts, and to what extent teachers can use storytelling tools and theories of performance to make sense of their identities in and out of the classroom.

I will facilitate the workshop based on work with teachers that I am currently developing with The Moth. The Moth is a national nonprofit performing arts organization, founded in 1997 and dedicated to “true stories told live” (“The Moth”). The organization produces monthly open-
mic storytelling competitions in 23 cities nationwide, 20 Mainstage curated storytelling shows a year, and runs several other programs, from a radio hour on national public radio to corporate education to community education programming. With hundreds of performances a year, it has hosted and recorded more than 10,000 stories told onstage, with an estimated 200 of these stories told by teachers (J. Hixson, personal communication).

This data, and my own work with teachers in professional development contexts, invites an intersection of several lines of research, from performance studies to identity theory to teacher education research, in order to investigate teachers’ narrative identity in storytelling performance. The intersection of teaching and performance has been studied, but not in the context of true, personal narratives. While there are solo shows about teaching, from Nilaja Sun’s successful “No Child…” to Judith Sloan’s more recent “Yo Miss,” performed by teachers who are also professional performers (Alexander 2007), it is more rare for non-performance-professionals who are teachers to have and use the tools to shape their experiences into narrative performance.

BACKGROUND

The term “storytelling” is rich and complex, with implications as a folk art, a corporate branding strategy, a therapeutic act, or a literary event. As I embark upon my project, I will ground my research in a thorough examination of the history of the term and the practice, and the
current meanings embedded in “storytelling,” as well as interrogating its use in the context of personal narrative performance, especially with The Moth.

Several Moth staff members who are veterans of the organization, among them senior producers Jenifer Hixson and Catherine McCarthy, have, in personal communication, provided me with a large measure of insight into the workings of The Moth. I will formally interview them as part of background research for my project.

Throughout my study, I will be discussing “Moth stories.” A Moth story is defined as a 5-10 minute, true, personal story told onstage without notes or props, usually in a night of several such stories on a shared theme (J. Hixson, personal communication). Moth stories are valued for several specific attributes, among them thematic unity, narrative structure and the “conversational” style of the performer, in contrast to more stylized modes of performance such as slam poetry or theatrical character pieces (C. McCarthy, personal communication). This definition will be further examined in my research.

It will also be worth examining in some detail the term “transformative teacher stories.” In contemporary Moth storytelling culture, a distinction is made between an anecdote and a story by identifying the “change” that the narrator’s character undergoes over the course of a story—an anecdote has no such change, while a story identifies a shift in the storyteller’s circumstance or character. Similarly, as I look at stories of teachers and teaching practice, I will focus on those “transformative” stories—stories that somehow narrate a moment of change for the storyteller,
whether cataclysmic or gentle, internal or external.

I became involved with The Moth in 2011, and I am currently a storyteller, an instructor and program manager with several of The Moth’s programs. In 2012 I designed and piloted The Moth’s Teacher Stories Program, a professional development program for teachers to learn the art and craft of true, personal storytelling. Through this work, I have found that teachers are eager to share their own stories with one another, in their classrooms and onstage at public open-mic nights.

While I was an elementary school teacher and theater artist from 2000 to 2010, I told stories in the classroom, performed solo shows for young audiences, and shared stories with friends, as many do, in the context of casual conversation. However, it was not until I first attended a storytelling evening produced by The Moth that I began crafting and performing personal stories about teaching, while at the same time thinking more intentionally about the ways that I craft stories for the classroom. A large part of telling stories with The Moth is reflecting hard on who we are, how we became who we are, and what moments transformed us. It was this exploration that brought me to research about teacher identity in narrative performance.

I anticipate that this research will be useful for teachers seeking to learn new strategies for classroom practice, scholars of performance studies and identity research, and teacher educators who acknowledge that teacher training must include reflective practice in order to be effective.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

I have developed several guiding questions as I embark on my project. However, I feel strongly that these questions may change in scope or focus as I investigate further in my research, and I will continue to reflect upon them at each stage of my work, allowing them to shift if necessary, rather than limiting my findings to data that answers these particular questions.

1. What is the experience of teachers telling true, personal stories in performance?

2. How do teachers shape transformative personal stories of their teaching practice?

3. In what ways do the stories of teachers inform and constitute teacher identity?

4. How does the context of a story performed by a teacher change that story, or the teacher telling it?

5. How might the study of teachers crafting personal narrative performances inform teacher education practices?

RELATED LITERATURE

Storytelling as a performing art has received increasing academic attention in the last 30 years; however, the role of personal narrative in storytelling performance, and the unique form of Moth stories, has received relatively little attention. The journal *Story Self Society* has featured a single article that was only partly about The Moth (Harvey 2008). Because Moth educational
programs have only begun in the last few years, nothing has yet been studied about them, although many researchers have written about personal voice in the classroom, and its connection to performativity (Langellier 1999; Bernhardt 2009). This study would open up a new avenue of research about personal short-form narrative performance and teacher education.

Sociolinguists William Labov and Joshua Waletzsky are credited with launching the surge in research about personal narrative in 1967 (Madison 2006). Since their work, personal narrative studies have spanned disciplines, including teacher education research. There is an overwhelming multitude of lenses through which to view personal narrative performance, and it is useful to draw out a few strands that have particular bearing on my research. For each of the following sections, I will first outline some research in the area and then reflect upon how that work will influence or inform my own research.

**Narrative Identity**

Research on narrative, and its relationship with identity, has been extensive and expansive. Disciplines as wide-ranging as performance studies, psychology and anthropology have all explored stories as informing, and frequently constituting, personal identity (Bruner 1991, Conquergood 1993, McLean 2007, Trahar 2009, McAdams 2013).

Meanwhile, the narrative nature of teacher identity has been well established as a line of inquiry in teacher education research (Conquergood 1993, Watson 2006, Hunt 2006, Day 2006, Beauchamp 2009, Huber 2013). Many of these researchers will provide theoretical support for
the design of my initial seminar. Several of these texts will also inform the design of my research methodology, as with Watson’s view of stories as a research tool as well as a reflective act; others will provide a valuable framework for positioning my own findings in the larger body of work about teacher education.

Multiple Selves, Multiple Stories

In approaching stories as a research tool, Huber (2013), citing Pinnegar and Daynes (2007), noted that shifts in narrative theory have included understanding stories in a postmodern sense as unfinished and multiple ways of knowing. This acknowledgement that stories are not static, and that there are many ways of seeing, reflects thinking in identity research (Day 2006). Identity is not something people have, or are, but something they do, and continually remake. Moving further than this, too, my research on teacher identity will not be simple and fixed, but emergent and evolving. This reflects my own epistemological framework, which sees multiple perspectives and truths in a single event.

The unfixed nature of the self is discussed in performance theory as well as teacher education research and narrative theory. In reflecting on the multiple selves that we construct through performance, Pineau (1994) noted: “this feature of performance aligns itself with current educational research that examines the multiplicity of roles, both within and without instructional contexts, that teachers assume in the course of their professional lives” (Pineau 15). After all, teachers do not have a single teaching story to tell, nor even a “final” identity at which they have
arrived, after trial and error. Many events and factors contribute to the formation of teachers’ beliefs, philosophies and approaches. I will use Pineau’s theories of multiple selves in my analysis of teacher stories, looking at each individual story or piece of data not as the complete picture but as a single facet of a larger, shifting image.

Identity and The Audience

Sfard and Prusak (2005), among many others, have seen identifying oneself as “a discursive activity,” or inherently social in nature: we form our identities through co-construction with others as well as through reflection. The discursive process of constructing identity recalls the relationship between a performer and his or her audience, as noted by Peterson (2000): a personal narrative performance constructs a situation where the joint participation of performer and audience can “surprise me myself and teach me my thought” (Peterson 249). The act of constructing knowledge in collaboration comprises an essential part of the performance process. Performance for an audience becomes not only evidence of identity making, but also the identity making itself. As a performer and as a teacher, I have experienced this phenomenon many times, and I look forward to integrating this important work into my discussion of teacher performance.

Contexts for storytelling are not, of course, completely open or emancipatory. The guidelines of performance limit certain topics as “untellable” through being either too ordinary or too shocking (Norrick 2005). Madison (2006) has noted that in personal narrative performance, a storyteller is not always free to tell what they like; there are social norms well in
place, controlling the conversation. If the storying of identity depends upon the moments of transformation or transgression, this tendency toward socially acceptable topics and perspectives can potentially be stigmatizing or constraining in the telling of experience. This notion of tellability, and constraint, becomes more rich and complex when considering what is tellable for a teacher in her classroom, with her colleagues, or in a theatrical performance. Norrick and Madison will guide me in my research framework, relating tellability to context and professional constraint. The unique challenge of a teacher—to be herself, but with boundaries, in her place of work—invites a rich examination of the problem of tellability, and it will be a central focus of my research discussion as well as my workshop design. I will examine closely the differences between teachers telling stories to one another, to students, and to the public, and what effect the audience can have on the development or performance of identity in the telling of a specific story.

*Performance as Knowing*

Closely related to context, the act of performing stories—sharing them with listeners, who take them and make meanings of their own—plays an essential role in the making of identity. Narrative identity in performance contexts has been explored by Langellier (1998), Peterson (2000) and McAdams (2013), among others.

As Pineau (1994) observed, scholars in many disciplines have studied performance as a way of knowing. Peterson (2000) noted that “in the solo performance of autobiographical
narrative, the performer’s body is the primary site for the construction of narrative identity” (Peterson 229). The construction of such identity happens through discourse with the audience. Philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1964) related this to the immediacy of the physical: “I inevitably grasp my body as a spontaneity which teaches me what I could not know in any other way except through it” (Merleau-Ponty 96, italics mine). The telling of a story can teach us about ourselves, since we are physically experiencing the telling, and since we develop our identities in a conversation with others and with our environment. This has wide-ranging implications for the use of performance in education of all kinds, but specifically in this case, teacher education.

As I design curriculum for my workshop, I will be drawing upon the philosophies of Merleau-Ponty as well as the practical performance techniques of physical theater and clown in the tradition of French theatre-maker Jacques Lecoq. These genres of performance, rooted as they are in spontaneity, honesty, and physicality, will inform the work I do with teachers to help them find safe ways to be vulnerable as they are watched and listened to (Lecoq, 2011). This lens will allow storytelling to be placed in a canon of performance modes that are improvisational, physical, personal and transformative.

The shaping of a coherent narrative for performance recalls Huber (2013), who discussed the development of a coherent identity through coherence in a narrative. Huber noted Carr’s (1986) and Kerby’s (1991) observations that “narrative identity [is] dependent on the degree of coherence and continuity that can be construed as lives are composed” (Huber 217). In analyzing
my date, I will examine the coherence of identity in relation to teachers’ many stories, as well as the internal coherence of a single story.

*Analysis of narratives and data*

Personal narrative performance can be analyzed from the point of view of sociolinguistics, performance studies, identity theory in psychology, cognitive theory and narratology, among others. I have begun to delineate the theories with which I will be examining story performances and interview data about story performance, including reception theory (Radbourne 2013), tellability theory (Norrick 2005), Polkinghorne’s narrative analysis and analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne 1995), and structural analysis (Propp, 1958). I will work carefully with these theories to find a unified framework with which to analyze data. At the same time, the very fact that this mode of performance lives in an intersection of several disciplines can deepen my understanding of phenomenon.

In order to create a unified framework, I will seek places where these theories share common structural elements. For example, in his work on performance of narrative in the context of sociolinguistics, Labov (1966) writes about elements of a narrative as either functional (telling what happened) or evaluative (reflecting on what happened). This echoes Langellier (1998)’s conceptual structure of performance and performativity, and Vladimir Propp (1958)’s formalist distinction between fabula and sujet (the story and the plot). I will, then, likely be examining the relationship between *what* is being told and *how* it is being told.
Conclusions about the literature

Narrative identity in performance is undoubtedly a rich field. However, the work that I propose has not yet been included in the body of published research that exists. My own work will be to join the scholarly conversation about these issues by applying diverse theories to a specific instance of storytelling performance, that of teachers, and to illustrate or challenge the theories and frameworks that are in place. The literature will most of all inform and justify the design of my workshop, data collection and subsequent analysis.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this narrative case study is to describe the experience of telling true, personal stories in performance for in-service teachers in a professional development program on storytelling. This study will combine the methodologies of action research, case study and narrative inquiry. I will be studying a single group of teachers participating in a professional development seminar, with follow-up interviews and group interviews, consistent with the research design of a contextual case study (Yin 2009). Since I will be designing and facilitating the seminar, I will also be examining the role of the researcher/curriculum designer and creating meaning with, not from, the participants, as in most action research (Herr 2005). This relates closely to my research question regarding teacher education practices. I will therefore spend some time reflecting on the process of designing the seminar.
I will be using narrative inquiry as a primary research methodology. This choice is a reflection of my conviction about the interdependence of art and research. Narrative inquiry is an authentic qualitative tool that offers methods for analysis that reflect the narrative nature of experience (Polkinghorne, 1995). It allows for narrative to serve as both data and methodology, allowing me to look closely at narrative structures in my own thinking. It also means that I can take advantage of my experience as a story-maker to create research that is clear and coherent. I will stay vigilant about my own use of narrative and how it might influence my research findings; the role of narrative in making experience coherent can be a danger, as it tempts a researcher/storyteller to “edit out” details or research points that are less consistent with the story being told (Polkinghorne, 1995). However, I can anticipate that examining this challenge will itself result in fruitful theoretical exploration.

The first phase of my research will consist of a professional development seminar before the start of the academic year, with 5-10 in-service teachers who identify as interested in developing storytelling techniques for the classroom or in their own performance experience. I will recruit these teachers through professional development networks in New York City schools and social media. The seminar will consist of 2-3 short, 2-hour sessions in a 2-week span and may culminate in a public performance of stories by the participants. Following this workshop, I will interview each teacher individually and conduct a follow-up Saturday group reflection session during the school year, during which participants will discuss their use of storytelling in
their classrooms and possibly develop additional stories. At the conclusion of my research process, I will ask participants to meet once more to validate my findings and discuss them further. In collecting data, I will use six kinds of data, as outlined by Yin (2009) in his discussion of case study research: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observations, and physical artifacts.

I am choosing not to observe teachers in their classrooms for a few reasons. First, observation in classrooms traditionally has implications of evaluation, and I would like participants not to feel that they are being tested on the techniques we practice. This might change the way they narrate their experiences and reflect on the process of the training. Second, I am more interested in how they experience or narrate their experiences than how well they actually implement new concepts, since my research focus is not on the effectiveness of the training but on the experience of the training by participants.

I also believe in the personal transformative properties of narrative performance, and I am aware that this belief, and my practice as a storyteller, influences the way that I will interview and facilitate. As a critical researcher, I will “engage in intense and transparent reflection and questioning” of my position and beliefs (Trahar 2009). I will be open to new ideas and challenges, and I will work to question my own practices as well as remaining critical and reflective about my own process. I will videotape my workshops, in order to re-observe them without being the facilitator. This will give me valuable information that I might have missed.
while I was both observing and “working” in the space. While doing so, I will remain vigilant to
the risk of making myself central to the discussion to the exclusion of the voices of my
participants. Narrative inquiry, as it acknowledges the subjectivity and stance of the researcher,
also requires that we work to identify whose story is whose (Trahar 2009).

Case study is a “linear but iterative process” (Yin 2009), demanding that the researcher
observe, reflect, change course if necessary, and observe again in cycles. Crafting a story, too, is
iterative; through multiple tellings, and critical discussion with listeners, a storyteller identifies
themes in her story and edits to reflect her findings. I intend to structure an emergent model of
research: I will design a framework, but remain flexible within that structure to respond to
participants’ reactions, new avenues or promising data, reframing my study as I proceed. My
research questions may evolve and new ideas may emerge that shift my focus or direction, while
I will remain focused on the central issue at hand—that of teacher story performance. While my
final product will be a written work of research, I will still consider this work to be a living
document. I wish my dissertation to be another voice in the conversation about teacher identity,
rather than the definitive answer to a question.

As a teacher, performer and researcher, I am a constructivist. I plan to focus on the
meaning that participants and I make together. I will also make use of the metaphor of the Moth
story coach, who listens to an early draft of a story and helps identify themes and meanings,
asking the storyteller for clarification and more information while allowing the storyteller to own
her own story. This is a powerful metaphor for the interviewer, who must hear meanings in a participant’s observations and shares the story as a listener without taking it from the participant. The process of interviewing is fraught with power dynamics (Saldana 2011), much like the director/performer relationship. I plan to use models of interviewing that make transparent these dynamics and I will reflect on them in relationship to notions of performance.

The use of case study, the focus of which can often be contextual conditions (Yin 2009), reflects the highly contextual nature of storytelling, given that stories change in performance depending upon their context and audience. I will spend considerable time examining the contexts for the stories that arise in my research. I will therefore include archival stories in my study, in addition to classroom stories and professional development stories. In my position as a manager at The Moth, I have access to the Moth audio and video archives, which are recordings of every public Moth performance since 2002. I will analyze stories from these archives, specifically stories that have been shared onstage by teachers, in order to deepen my study of the contextual issues of teacher narrative performance. I will also ground my study in historical research about storytelling to situate my work in the larger field of story performance, again acknowledging the deeply contextual nature of stories.

I acknowledge that as my research proceeds I may narrow my focus based on my provisional findings. I wish to remain open as I begin my research, to prevent my “finding” what I expect to find based on my favored framework.
CONCLUSION

Studying these stories, and story performance, will allow further development of teacher education strategies and philosophies. My purpose is to open a conversation about how teachers can use performance as a metaphor and a strategy—no longer in the sense of “test performance” but performance as a way of learning and knowing. Storytelling of this kind has much to offer—to the teacher-storyteller, a method for reflection on and processing of experience; to the student, a vital empathetic link with his or her teacher in the classroom; to an audience, an important perspective on the experience of teachers; to researchers, valuable data for the examination of teacher narratives; and to teacher educators, a new methodology for the development of teachers in teacher education programs.

Stories, in the classical structure, hinge on challenge and transformation (Price 1908). Our identities are challenged, destabilized, and changed in the course of a personal narrative. If personal stories are the narratives of our becoming, then teacher stories are the narratives of our becoming teachers. We each have many stories, and our stories have multiple meanings. They, like our identities, change and grow.
Works Cited


