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Shaping the Teaching Self Through Autobiographical Narrative

Lynne Alvine

As we study the forms of our own experience, not only are we searching for evidence of the external forces that have diminished us; we are also recovering our own possibilities. We work to remember, imagine, and realize ways of knowing and being that can span the chasm presently separating our public and private worlds.

Madeline R. Grumet in *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching*

The Emergence of Autobiographical Narrative in Teacher Education

In the past, autobiographical writing was often used in teacher education courses simply as a way to identify the concerns of pre-service teachers, to bring those concerns forward so that they might better be addressed (Parker and FitzGibbon.) Increasingly, teacher educators have recognized the importance of the individual's lived experience as relevant to the development of what he or she will bring to the classroom. Thus, the life histories of teachers have come to be seen as grounded experience for knowledge of teaching.

Teacher educators across the disciplines have called for autobiographical writing as a way for prospective teachers to increase their teaching knowledge base, to make explicit for themselves knowledge about teaching and learning — as they have experienced it. Rosenthal (1991) asked preservice science teachers to write their science autobiographies, their personal histories of learning science, of connecting with science. Pereira-Mendoza (1988) reported that he assigned a “math autobiography” to his pre-service math teachers. Danielson (1989) asked her pre-service language arts teachers to write a literacy autobiography, to focus on their own learning to read and write, as a means of understanding the nature of language learning. The thinking is that if those who would teach can develop a critical distance from their own lived experiences with the content and skills of their subject, they can, perhaps, better assist their students in the mastery of their discipline.

One Teacher Educator's Beginning

As a doctoral student in Curriculum and Instruction at Virginia Tech in the 1980s, I was

asked to write about my own high school experience in an assignment that Professor Robert Small called, “Remembering High School.” What did we notice as my classmates and I shared from those papers in our graduate seminar? Nearly everyone recalled something about a favorite or dreaded teacher’s personality; memories of social interactions with friends and extracurricular activities also filled the pages; very little surfaced that was about the school curriculum except, as Dewey would have predicted, the memory of special projects.

Even so, the assignment gave us an opportunity to explore our own concepts of high school and, more important, to look at some aspects of how those understandings had been formed. The assignment also situated us in our own perceptions of the sociological and psychological characteristics of adolescence, by putting us back in touch with our own adolescent experiences.

Drawing from that experience in my post-graduate course work, I began including autobiographical writing in my courses when I first became a teacher educator in 1988. When I joined the English Education faculty at Indiana University of Pennsylvania in 1990, I found colleagues who were committed to having students explore their own literacy learning — to write their reading and writing autobiographies. For the past several years, then, autobiographical narrative has been a part of every course I teach in our teacher education programs.

Masters students in my English teaching methods seminar write a paper titled “Remembering High School.” In a course on research in teaching literature and literacy, students do a three part “Profile of the Self as Reader” project in which they 1) examine closely their own literacy learning, 2) carefully analyze their response as a reader to a full length text, and 3) apply evidence from their personal history as readers to their understandings of their current reading selves. In my graduate reading theory course, students write a literacy autobiography focused on both their early and subsequent experiences with reading. (See assignments in Appendix.)

Linking Women’s Life Experience with a Teaching Life

Building on the earlier work of Carol Gilligan in the psychology of women (1982), Mary Belenky and her colleagues (1986) identified five developmental stages of women’s perspectives on knowledge, on what it is to come to know. They found that many women begin in silence, without awareness that they possess knowledge or the confidence to articulate any perspective on that knowledge. Then, they view knowledge as ‘out there,’ as something that is to be received from others. Third, they begin to recognize their own intuited truths as something of value, and thus, begin to recognize and put forward their own subjective views. Then, comes acknowledgement of procedural structures and strictures, and the need to strive for a balance between the ‘outer’ and ‘inner’ knowing. Finally, women combine all of these perspectives into a more integrated view of knowledge, seeing it as that which is constructed through interaction between the knower and the known. Women who teach or who are preparing to teach may be at different staging points from others in their development of themselves as constructed knowers. Even so, through autobiographical writing, they can make, as Grumet (1988) suggests, the link between their experience in life and their life in teaching. By connecting their personal knowledge to theoretical perspectives gained in their teacher education courses, my students — perhaps most importantly my women students — more fully integrate their own lived experience into their knowledge base for teaching.

Excerpts from Women’s Literacy Autobiographies

What evidence can support this claim for autobiographical narrative in the preparation of teachers? In this section, excerpts from course assignments written by three women students — Cindy, Renee, and Susan — are presented with minimal interpretive commentary. In these reflective narratives each of the women explores her early reading experiences and makes explicit and/or implicit references to her teaching.

Cindy

Cindy was a 24-year-old single woman who already had earned a B.A. in English and who was enrolled in an initial certification Master of Arts in Teaching English degree program. She was in her second semester and had no teaching experience at the time of the writing. This first excerpt is from the 'Reading History,' Part I of the "Profile as a Reader" project that Cindy did for my Research on Teaching Literature and Literacy course. In Part I, Cindy wrote:

By the time high school rolled around, my time for reading was drastically reduced. ... I went through almost all of Stephen King's horror stories — I loved them. My friends and I used to trade those Danielle Steele books. But at the same time I was almost too embarrassed to take these kinds of books into my classroom for free reading days — which were few and far between. I thought my teacher would be disappointed in me for reading horror stories and romance novels instead of "real literature."

Until I got to college and took a contemporary literature class I didn't think that anything written after 1950 was really considered literature. ... I was guilty of looking down my nose at contemporary authors and certain genres in the classroom, yet I read them on the sly at home! I finally crawled out from underneath that rock and am a BIG fan of contemporary novels.

I'm also really into adolescent literature now. Before taking a class in it, I completely forgot this whole area. And before last semester, my knowledge of minority literature was pretty slim. I don't think I'll be the same after reading Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni, etc. I've had entire worlds opened up to me in the last few years — worlds that may never have been discovered if I had not been a reader. ... had it not been for the supportive environment I grew up in. If I hadn't had such a positive background early on, I might have become disinterested in reading all together when I got to high school where only certain kinds of books were

accepted and others were rejected or discouraged. I will do everything in my power as a teacher to see that my students never have to feel the way I did about what they are reading.

After completing her Reading History, Cindy read a novel of her own choosing, keeping a response journal while she was reading. She then completed an analysis of her current reading self by doing a systematic analysis of that private response journal. For the third part of the "Profile of a Reader" project, Cindy was asked to link evidence from her reading history with her analysis of her current reading self, making explicit those perceived connections between her lived experience and her current behavior. By extension, she was to look also at any implications for teaching that emerged from the analysis. In Part III, Cindy wrote:

Despite all of the whining and complaining I did about this project, I'm SO GLAD I have it. I've learned so much about myself as a reader and responder. I had such a strong and positive background when I was young that it formed a sturdy foundation ... that was not shaken when I got older and had other forces continually pulling at me.

I can see connections between my "reading History" and my "Response Profile" that show what elements are important to me as I read. I place strong emphasis on characters. Over and over again, I mention the man with the yellow hat, Curious George, Peter Rabbit, Jemima Puddle Duck, Ramona Quimby. ... In the "Response Profile" most of my entries are about characters. If I am tied emotionally and can respond affectively, I am more likely to remember and get involved with the book.

Associations work the same way with me. I've discovered associations in both parts also. At first I didn't get the connection. Then I finally came up with the link. The associations are my way of connecting my life to what I am reading. The initial affective response may draw me in, but it is the associative response that keeps me

there and ties me to what I am reading.

I'd also like to mention something about my experience in learning about different genres which I touched briefly upon in my "Reading History." What I see is that once I open a new door, I really give it a chance. For example, I talked about adolescent literature and how I had forgotten it even existed. I could have dismissed it as juvenile, but I didn't. I gave it a chance and it has become one of my favorite areas.

In a way, my "Response Profile" exhibits this attitude in a more concrete way. At first I was so confused with all of the characters in *The Pelican Brief* that I couldn't keep them all straight. But I kept going and it turned out to be a great book.

Doing this project has really given me insight into the way I respond. I will take this newly discovered knowledge into my classroom when I am a teacher. Hopefully, I will be able to use and apply what I now know.

Cindy now knows that characters and associations are important to her as a reader, that they always have been. She also has insights about her need for new adventures in reading. By making these understandings explicit for herself, she has developed her metalinguistic awareness of herself as a reader. She has learned a strategy for helping her students develop their own metalinguistic awareness. And, she has linked her lived experience with knowledge that will serve her in her future teaching life.

Renee

Renee was a non-traditional age undergraduate in our English education program. After graduating, she taught grade 11 English in a nearby high school and returned for summer graduate work after her first year of teaching. In her senior year English teaching methods course, Renee wrote her reading autobiography in which she recalled the comfort of her traditional basal reader and credited phonics with giving her a 'leg up in the world of reading.' As an undergraduate Renee wrote:

When I started first grade in 1961, I was a non-reader. I can remember nothing

about reading before that. Learning to read at that time involved the old "Dick and Jane" readers, which I remember liking. I think I liked them for their simplicity and repetition. I liked getting used to those simple words that came over and over again throughout the pages. "See Spot. See Spot run. See Spot run and run. See Dick. See Spot and Dick. Spot and Dick run and run." It seems mindless now to my thirty-six-year-old self, but thirty years ago those words were comforting. They helped me learn to read.

My teachers also taught me phonics. I don't remember any particulars about that except that we had workbooks. It seems to me now that learning phonics was very helpful. It gave me a "leg up" in the world of reading. No matter how new and unfamiliar a word might have been, I knew I could sound it out. I remember the little thrill of recognition I would get when I sounded out a word and realized it was a word I had heard or spoken before. (Aha! I know this word. So, that's what it looks like!")

In my graduate level Reading Theory course, Renee read theoretical perspectives which questioned, even condemned heavy emphasis on phonics and other part-to-whole processing strategies. When she told me she already had done this kind of assignment and had dug out her earlier reading autobiography, I encouraged her to compare her two versions. For whatever reason, the two are quite similar. As a graduate student, Renee wrote:

When I started first grade in 1961, I was a non-reader. Although my mother read to me, I have no memories of reading before entering school. Learning to read at that time involved the old "Dick and Jane" readers, which in all honesty I remember liking, at least a little. I think I liked them for their simplicity and repetition. While I do remember decoding a word at a time, I liked getting used to those simple words that came over and over again throughout the pages. I even liked the simple world of Dick and Jane. It was always the same. Dick and Jane could be counted on

to run and play all the time with their constant companion Spot. For a child like me who came from a sometimes abusive home situation, the “Dick and Jane” reader became my first “escapist” literature. Their world was always safe: unreal, perhaps, but safe. For me, that was enough.

My teachers also taught me phonics. I don’t remember any particulars about that except that we had workbooks. While I realize now that my early reading experiences could have been much richer, phonics was the only strategy I had at the time and it helped me with learning new words. No matter how new and unfamiliar a word might have been, I knew I could “sound it out.” I remember the little thrill of recognition I would get when I sounded out a word and realized it was one I had heard or spoken before. (“Aha! So that’s what it looks like!”)

Note the subtle change, however, in Renee’s language. What earlier was seen as “very helpful at the time” has become “the only strategy I had at the time.” I believe this subtle shift is evidence of Renee’s integrating the theoretical perspectives from her course readings into her lived experience and of her moving toward new understandings of both the theoretical framework and her own personal knowledge of literacy learning.

Susan

Susan was a woman in her late 40s who had taught for 2 years with a B.S. in Home Economics before going into the home decorating business for 13 years. Then, she had completed an M.A. in ESL and had taught freshman composition part time at a small college before becoming an ESL teacher at a Private Institute for one year. When she was in my class, she was enrolled in her second semester of course work for a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Linguistics. In her reading autobiography for Reading Theory, Susan wrote:

I entertained myself by going to the small library not far from home. I could walk alone and it was a treat to visit this modest, quiet and orderly place where a red-headed, freckle faced, left handed little girl

could hide from embarrassment. It had big windows in the front, remainders of some previous business or store. I can picture myself standing in front of the tall bookshelf looking for the books I hadn’t read yet. Each week I walked to the library and chose a new book, probably Nancy Drew or the Hardy Boys mysteries. The most memorable thing was the first novel I checked out by mistake. It was a real life story about a woman leaving an asylum to go “Home Before Dark”. Nancy Drew seemed made up after that. When I would get home I would often go to the back corner of the yard next to the junk pile and sit on the saw horses where my mother couldn’t see me. I’d read as long as I could before she would call me in to do a chore. There were always jobs to be done in a house where there was a new baby every year until there were eight of us. My mother didn’t discourage reading, but the Puritan work ethic required work before play. Reading was a private and personal luxury then as it is now. I still enjoy reading mystery novels and historical novels by Michner and Uris on a grey and cold Colorado winter day. During the summer it’s pure luxury to escape to the deck outside with a glass of iced tea, my sunglasses, and a good novel.

Susan clearly understands how her “work before play” ethic has impacted her own reading life. Making this influence explicit and, therefore, making it knowledge that is available to herself, is a crucial first step in thinking about the messages she might give to students about the role of reading in their own lives.

Conclusion

Each of these women, in her own way, has examined how she, herself, came to make meaning from print. In the writing of these autobiographical narratives and in looking closely at them, each has articulated new insights about her early learning experiences. When those who plan to teach write about their own early memories of learning, they bring forward their embedded understandings about teaching and learning. In making those understandings explicit, they make them available

to themselves.

When those explicit understandings are brought forward at the time the individual is reading current theoretical perspectives on teaching and learning, the result can be a more fully integrated knowledge base for teaching. By testing current theory against their own lived experience as literacy learners, prospective teachers can bring together the external and the internal, the received and the intuited, the public and the private. Rather than simply adopting others' ideas for classroom practice, or attempting to teach in ways that represent the learning theory they have encountered in teacher education courses, prospective teachers in my courses — both men and women — are better prepared to form their own beliefs about teaching and learning, beliefs that are grounded in their lived experience.

At least this is what I *think* is happening when my preservice and inservice teachers write about their literacy learning and look at it in light of the theory we are reading. In any event, at the end of the courses, students unanimously point to the autobiographical narrative as the most important task of the semester and encourage me to be sure to keep that assignment in my syllabus. Of course, I intend to do so.

Note: For readers who might consider adding autobiographical narrative writing to teacher education courses, I have appended examples of assignments I have used in various courses.

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Appendix

LITERACY AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

At IUP, where literacy autobiography is integral to the undergraduate teacher education curriculum, the reading autobiography is written in a course titled “Teaching Literature and Reading in the Secondary School.” The writing autobiography is done in a course titled “Teaching and Evaluation Writing.”

Assignments as they might appear on the course syllabus:

Reading Autobiography

In a 4–7 page paper, describe how you learned to read and your sense of your current state of reading proficiency.

What do you remember of your early perceptions of reading as well as your successes and frustrations with it? What are your strengths and weaknesses as a reader? What reading strategies do you employ for assigned readings; and how do you use reading in your everyday life? Include a consideration for your habits and attitudes related to reading, some analysis of yourself as a reader, and the individual and social processes that affected your acquisition of literacy. Include any specific incidents and/or people that have played an important role in your life as a reader.

Writing Autobiography

In a 4–7 page paper, describe how you learned to write and your sense of your current state of writing proficiency.

What do you remember of your early perceptions of writing as well as your successes and frustrations with it? What are your strengths and weaknesses as a writer? What composing strategies do you employ for university-level assigned writing; and how do you use writing in your everyday life? Include a consideration for your habits and attitudes related to writing, some analysis of yourself as a writer, and the individual and social processes that affected your acquisition of written expression. Include any specific incidents and/or people that have played an important role in your life as a writer.

REMEMBERING HIGH SCHOOL

In the final course students take before going out for their extended field experience (student teaching), students are asked to write a paper in which they focus on memories of their own high school experiences.

Assignment as it might appear in a methods course syllabus:

Think back to when you were a high school student. List as many names and events as you can. Take yourself on a mental tour of your high school building. Recall as many sensory details as you can. Then select from your dredged up memories and write a 4–5 page autobiographical narrative that focuses on some aspect or several aspects of your own high school experience.

RESPONSE SELF PORTRAIT PROJECT

I assign the following Response Self Portrait Project to students in a course titled “Research on the Teaching of Literature and Literacy.” Students in the course are enrolled in the Master of Arts in Teaching English (MA/TE), the Master of Arts in English, or the Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (MA/TESOL) degree program. Most of the MA/TE students are seeking initial secondary certification.

Assignment as it appears on the course syllabus:

This project offers you the opportunity to examine yourself as a reader and as a responder to literature.

Goals of the Project:

- 1) You will become a more insightful and sensitive reader of literature by better understanding how you yourself act in that role.
- 2) You will experience the types of metacognitive awareness that successful readers exhibit.
- 3) You will understand just how complex and uniquely personal response to literature is.
- 4) You will be better prepared to deal with the complex personal reality your students create when they respond to literature.

Procedures:

1) Part I: Write a 5–10 page reading history. Eventually, this will be labeled **“Part I: Reading History.”** Include all of the important events in your life as a reader — both in and out of school. Perhaps these questions will help, but you should not limit yourself to answering them. Include anything that you think is important to this personal history of reading.

How did you learn to read? How did you develop as a reader? Why do you think you were successful? Unsuccessful? How and when did you connect to literature? What lead you to take course work in literature? What works have changed you and/or your vision of the world? How did your increasing expertise as a reader of literature affect your reading? How does being a teacher of literature affect your reading? Where are you today as a reader?

Do not do a final draft of this part of the project until very near the due date. You will, no doubt, think of details to include as we move through the course. Jot down ideas as they come to you during your reading and/or discussions.

2) Choose a book-length work of fiction or poetry that you have really been wanting to read. (If the first choice doesn’t engage you, select an alternate book.)

3) Keep a response journal as you read. This journal is personal writing and will not be turned in. Try to capture as much of the reading experience as possible. You might find it helpful to think of the class or one class member as the audience for this writing (I often “write a letter to one person” when I write a journal entry), but you will determine what you will share from this journal.

In your journal, try to do the following:

- name any feelings which the literature aroused in you.
- describe any persons, things or situations which it reminded you of (make associations.)
- mention any aspect of the work (a phrase, a word, a sentence, an image, a character, an event, a setting — anything in the work) which

strikes you in any way whether or not you can identify the reasons why it strikes you.

— rewrite ideas, passages, events, in your own words.

Also, you should:

— write freely whatever comes. Don’t censure yourself. You are the only one to read this.

— do not be concerned with correctness or format. — do not rewrite or reorganize anything.

— reread as often as you like in order to extend yourself as much as you possible can.

The more you write here, the more raw material you will have to work with later! Don’t cut any corners on the response journal!

4) After you have completed the book and made all of your entries, you will use the response journal to construct “Part II—Response Profile for [title of the book read].”

Read the journal over several times with the intention of better understanding the written record of your response. Then describe your response profile for this work using the class readings as sources of suggestions of what might constitute landmarks, paths, turns, and intersections for your journey through the work. This summary should run from 10 to 20 pages.

5) Finally, write “Part III: Response Self Portrait” by using both “Part I: Reading History” and “Part II: Response Profile for [title of book read]” as the sources of information. Describe yourself as a reader/responder in 5–15 pages.