Narrative Interviews: An Approach to Studying Teaching and Learning in English Classrooms

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Narrative interviews: An approach to studying teaching and learning in English classrooms

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The real-world consequences of high school students' success or failure to negotiate challenging works of literature is a topic that comes up regularly in a university seminar in English Education I teach. The course is designed for undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in a certification program in secondary English and runs concurrent with their student-teaching semester. As student teachers, they come to understand, often for the first time, the difficulty complex and often-lengthy canonical works present to many secondary students. They worry that these texts serve as sorting devices (Apple, 1982; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Bordieu and Passeron, 1977; Oakes, 1985), which limit the academic options of capable and promising secondary students. Newly aware of the difficulty many students have in engaging with these works, and concerned about the possible injustices of institutional sorting, student teachers in the seminar are nonetheless reluctant to abandon teaching "great works of literature," often the very works which inspired them to become teachers.

During one semester of the seminar, Josh Barlow[1] raised concerns about his high school students' comprehension of *The scarlet letter*.[2] He wanted to understand more fully how his students negotiated the text and what he could do to teach more effectively. I suggested we undertake a series of interviews with the students which would address his questions. My goal was to use this interview as "a quiet form of research" (Britton, 1983) and to introduce this process to the student teachers in my classes.

As a teacher educator, I was searching for a modest and manageable way for teachers to respond to what appear to be increasingly conflicting demands on their time and attention. Professional norms now favor personalized student-centered, inquiry-based, active learning, often labor-intensive efforts for beginning teachers. At the same time, they are expected

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[1] Josh Barlow is a pseudonym, as are the names of all persons and places in this paper.

[2] Beach and Marshall (1991) cite a 1988 survey conducted by the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature. Excluding works by Shakespeare, the third most frequently assigned literary work in American high schools is *The scarlet letter*.

to engage in "reflective practice." Building upon foundations laid by Dewey (1933), and more recently Schon (1983, 1987), educators such as Branscombe, Goswami, and Schwartz (1992), Goswami (1987), Bissex (1987), and others widely respected in the profession call on teachers to document and reflect on learning and teaching, to become teacher-researchers. They are to continue their own professional development through study groups and ongoing coursework, while developing and maintaining a reflective stance toward their own teaching and learning.

In light of these myriad demands, if it is to happen at all, teacher reflection must be efficient, focused, and purposeful. Martin (1983) addresses this challenge by suggesting that teachers simultaneously study student work and talk with students about their work. With Martin's recommendations in mind, I proposed that Josh Barlow interview selected students in his class to learn how they negotiated the task of reading and responding to challenging texts.

Josh was a student teacher at University High School, a public urban academic high school located in a medium-sized city in the northeast United States. Admission to the school, whose mission is to prepare students for high-quality post-secondary education, requires students to pass an entrance exam. Many of its eleven hundred students are immigrants, or children of recent immigrants; many are not native speakers of English. Josh worried that students enter his grade eleven English class unprepared for the rigors of authors such as Hawthorne and with few productive strategies for fulfilling challenging nightly reading assignments.

Josh chose to interview four students whom he felt represented a range of responses to the material, and whose responses he wished to understand more fully in order to improve his own teaching. Together, we designed a guide for an interview which could be completed in 30 minutes.[3] I estimated that we could transcribe, code and analyze the interviews efficiently, using 6 hours for transcribing, and 6 to 10 hours for coding and analysis. I also believed that the insights we would gain from this

18 hours of work would be of substantial practical value so that teachers would think it well worth the time.

Josh and I carried out the interviews and an informal, anecdotal analysis. However, the demands of the semester kept us from carrying out the full plan, which I still view as the essential purpose of this work. The analysis that follows — completed after Josh's graduation and departure from our university — is my own. Nonetheless, because the interviews and findings seem illuminating, I wish to present them as a possible stimulus for future work by novice or experienced secondary school teachers alone or in collaboration with university colleagues.

As this experience demonstrates, and as every teacher knows, time is a major factor in managing any research effort. However, while concerns about time are certainly ever-present, many teachers also question their own ability to "conduct research." Invoking the paradigm of "the scientific method," they describe valid research as that which produces unambiguous, replicable findings which apply across contexts. The goal of this paper is to offer an alternative paradigm. In the section which follows, I address these concerns and suggest some manageable approaches. I illustrate one of these approaches in a subsequent section with an analysis of *The scarlet letter* interviews conducted with Heidi Schroeder and Anthony Costa, two of the four students in Josh Barlow's class.

[3] After some discussion, Josh and I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews, identifying five questions which we would be certain to ask all students. At the same time, we expected that every interview would have a direction of its own, with the students leading and shaping the discussion as much as possible. The questions we selected were these:
1. How do you feel about your work on *The scarlet letter*?
2. How did you go about doing the assigned reading and writing?
3. What did you learn during your study of *The scarlet letter*?
4. What happened in class that helped you to understand and appreciate the book?
5. What other things would you like to have done to understand and appreciate the book?
To close the interview, we asked the student to read and explain a passage from the text.

Interview as narrative: A theoretical framework

Teachers often view research as complex efforts which involve large data sets, controlled variables, and sophisticated analytic methods well beyond the understanding of those not trained in these methods. This view of research precludes teachers from considering themselves researchers. As numerous theorists have pointed out (see a review in Mishier, 1986)[4], while it appears rigorous, the "scientific" approach is in itself flawed.

For the purposes of this study — understanding students' methods of dealing with challenging texts — the major flaw is the stripping away of context, the very feature that allows others to understand individual situations and particular events.

> (T)he sense of assurance mainstream researchers derive from standardized procedures is largely illusory, because it is based on assumptions that do not correspond to the essential nature of an interview as a form of discourse. Investigators following new paths of narrative analysis cannot rely on standard methods. Their confidence in the value of this direction of research comes instead from a theoretical and methodological perspective that requires close attentiveness to what interviewers and respondents say to each other and how they say it. Further, this requirement means that in developing their interpretations and theories, narrative analysts do not have the option of "distancing" themselves from the phenomenon of the talk itself in the way that survey analysts distance themselves through research strategies such as the statistical analysis of coded data (Mishler, 1986, p. 76).

Proponents of teacher research (see for example, Bissex, 1987; Britton 1983, Goswami and Stillman, 1987) argue that systematic and rigorous approaches to collecting and analyzing data, well within the limits of time and training available to teachers, offer important opportunities to learn. Among the most interesting to teachers of language and literacy is the study of interview data as narrative or "story." The fact that telling stories is one of the significant ways individuals construct and express meaning is now widely recognized. Narrative is a "primary act of mind" (Hardy, 1968), an organizing principle for human action, a means of imposing order on the flow of experience. The study of narratives offers a valuable means of investigating and understanding social life. Scholars in a broad range of disciplines (Bruner, 1986, 1994; Gee, 1985; Rayfield, 1972; Turner, 1980) have turned to the study of stories as a way of understanding human cognition and conduct. These same scholars have developed a range of approaches for analyzing stories, their methods generally reflecting their disciplinary interests and inclinations.

The fields of sociology and anthropology, for example, have a long tradition of collecting and analyzing narratives. In much of this work, the focus is less on language than on content, the researcher's interpretation of the meanings of the events encoded in the stories. Others such as philosophers of language, sociolinguists, and those trained in literary theory have focused on the narrative structures in an effort to understand what stories mean to those who tell them.

Two general approaches exist for studying narrative structures, one based on the linguistic features of the text, the other on literary forms. Most approaches to linguistic analysis are founded on the work of William Labov. In their now-classic analysis of narrative interviews Labov and Waletzky (1967) described six categories of a fully formed narrative.[5] The analysis of narrative as literary production builds on the work of Kenneth Burke, who delineates five

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[4]Much of this section is drawn from the work of psychologist Elliot Mishler and sociologist Catherine Riessman, both of whom study interviews as a form of narrative. is in itself flawed.

[5] The *abstract* is a summary of the story offered at the beginning; the *orientation* provides background information by identifying place, time and persons; *complicating action* is the story itself, made up of narrative clauses; *evaluation,* explicit or embedded significance; *result* or resolution specifies the outcome of events; and the *coda* returns the speaker to the present moment. Labov also distinguishes between narrative and non-narrative clauses in order to separate the skeleton outline of the narrative from evaluative comments which demonstrate, explicitly or implicitly the teller's altitude toward the story being told.

categories of dramatic action.[6]

For the purposes of this study, which explores the feasibility of narrative interviewing as an approach to studying teaching and learning in English classrooms, I borrow from and adapt both Labov's and Burke's work and approach narrative as literary production. An analysis of the interviews begins with Labov's first category, *abstract,* and continues with an adaptation of Burke's categories familiar to both students and teachers of English: *character, setting, plot* and *theme.*

In response to Josh's initial question, "How do you feel about your work on *The scarlet letter?",* both students offer an *abstract,* a summary of the narrative they are about to recount. At the outset of her interview, Heidi begins:

> Actually, I was happy with it because I was never a big reader and because I don't want to be illiterate. Because I'm going into the arts, I don't want to be a stupid artist so I'm trying to read more books and stuff. I figured if I could understand that, it was pretty good. So I tried to stick with the readings and not to skim like I usually do….It's a goal I set down and was able to accomplish. I read it and I have a pretty good understanding of it.

In response to the same initial question, Anthony comments:

> I have trouble remembering stuff. It's hard to get it on paper. It's all trapped in my head….Sometimes when I have a good idea, trying to express that good idea, it can be up there all mapped out ready to go. But when it comes to doing it, it freezes. It's like sometimes when I take a test, everything can be in my head, but….

In both cases, the students' evaluation of their work in the opening *abstracts* are consistent with Josh's initial assessment of how each of them interacted with the text. He felt that Heidi had struggled and ultimately done well and

Anthony had struggled and ultimately done poorly; but he was unclear about the factors that contributed to these outcomes. What can we learn by studying the stories these two students tell about their respective success and failure? If story telling is, as many narrative analysts suggest, mainly about exploring problems and their possible solutions, then Heidi and Anthony's views are important sources of information for their teachers. The following section suggests the kinds of perspective a teacher might gain from a close reading of student interviews.

Heidi's story
Virtually the only *character* in Heidi's story is Heidi herself. As the central and self-sufficient actor in this narrative, she established the goal of reading and understanding the book. Using the words *I want* numerous times, she states her intentions clearly and unambiguously. "I don't want to be illiterate.…I want to read more books…I want to understand." Later she amplifies by adding,

> "I want to have a good vocabulary too. That's something else I want."

Other characters, very much in the background and mentioned only fleetingly, are Heidi's fellow students and her family. Both are involved only in minor ways, her family by distracting her as she tries to concentrate; her classmates by explaining the plot in class discussions at times when she was behind in the reading.

In the former, she explains that difficulty she had focusing on *The scarlet letter* "when I'm out in the kitchen with people walking around and the music or tv on." She continues, "I have to make sure everything was quiet," and she does so by "going to the computer room." In the latter, during in-class discussions, her classmates helped her to understand the plot of the text. However, even in this situation, she emphasizes her own independent thinking.

> At first I got kind of backed up so a lot of times people would be saying stuff and someone would tell the actual plot, what was really going on. Sometimes, it was not clear to me what was actually going on in the plot. What usually happened then was that I would get my own questions

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[6] Burke's categories are *act,* what took place in thought or deed; *scene,* the background of the act, and the situation in which it occurred; *agent,* what person or kind of person performed the act; *agency,* the means or instrument used; and *purpose.*

and think about those.

In this way, Heidi signals her view that both her family and her classmates are peripheral to the central issues of this narrative.

In identifying the *settings* of Heidi's narrative, a similar pattern appears. The external world seems relatively insignificant. We see her briefly at home retreating to the computer room to read; and we see her in the classroom listening to her peers discuss sections of the book. By far the most important location, the site of the major conflict in the narrative, is inside Heidi's mind.

> It's hard for me to concentrate. Once I clicked into the language and stuff, it was okay.

Central to the *plot* is the problem Heidi faced in achieving her goal. In these two short sentences quoted above, spoken at the outset of the narrative immediately following the *abstract,* she identifies the problem and explains its resolution. In the course of her narrative, she mentions her problem with concentration a total of seven times.

> I am not proud of it. I can never get myself to just read. My concentration doesn't focus on that kind of stuff. I'm thinking about other things all the time.

Later, she repeats, "I have to really concentrate…just concentrate." Describing herself as a person better suited to active pursuits such as theater, painting, dance and music, Heidi explains that her difficulty with concentration has in the past led her to resort to what she calls "skimming" when assigned a book to read. But in this instance, through sheer determination, she is able to "set my mind for reading…click into the language and it's okay."

Overall, then, Heidi's narrative is a relatively straightforward success story, of triumph through effort and perseverance. I interpret its theme as an affirmation of the power of an individual will. Heidi's only enemy is her own lack of concentration; her greatest ally, her own determination.

Anthony's story

By contrast, Anthony's story is more elaborate, complex and ambiguous. It contains a number of subnarratives, is peopled by a vivid cast of characters, and operates in a range of settings. In his abstract, Anthony seems, like Heidi, to be telling a story of a singular and personal effort. However, the body of the narrative expands to include numerous events and aspects of his life and relationships with other students, teachers and family.

In the *abstract,* quoted above, Anthony expresses his difficulty in communicating his good ideas. Asked where he turns for help, Anthony replies

> I used to sit down and eat and put on my headphones, put on something R&B…If I'm listening to slow music, I feel comfortable. I can do anything.

He follows immediately with a story, presumably intended to illustrate his point.

> It's like when I first learned how to drive a stick (shift car). My brother was yelling at me. I couldn't do it. And then he got out of the car and my dad sat there with me and said either you drive home or you're not going home. He got out of the car and I drove alone. I did it.

Anthony offers this subnarrative when asked who he turns to for help in completing *The scarlet letter* assignments, He seems to be saying that he succeeds when 1) the circumstances require him to take action; 2) he sees the point of taking action; and 3) he is left to his own devices. And he seems to reiterate that point when he continues,

> Yeah. Reading has never been something I was fond of and after reading *(Scarlet letter)* I realized that reading was fun. I could read it and not get bored because sometimes I have a short attention span. If I read it and like what I'm reading, I won't just throw the book off the bed and sleep. If I like what I'm reading, I'll sit there and read it.

He continues by repeating that he liked *The scarlet letter.* But in the next breath, Anthony appears to grow cautious and says," Don't tell no one I read it." When asked to explain this request, Anthony says, "If it comes up, I don't want them to say, 'Oh, Anthony *reads."* At this

point, it is clear that Anthony's narrative is complex and contains considerable ambiguity.

So who are the *characters* in this complex story? Other teachers and students play important roles, mainly as adversaries. Anthony identifies many of the teachers in his school as "phony." One teacher in particular, he labels "the poster person for phony." Of the students, he says, "The kids go around telling every one, they're the best, they're elite." In his view, he is not well thought of in this school. "People around here think I'm a criminal. Most people think (I) go home and sell drugs. But I don't."

In talking about his work on *Scarlet letter* assignments, Anthony says

If I feel that people are watching me, I get thrown off guard. Then sometimes I have those days when I don't care what people think. But sometimes…I see those little eyes staring at me from all different directions.

Several times during the conversation, he comments on his relationship with his family.

I'm more like a loner. My brothers and sisters on the other hand are more like bookworms. My parents want me to be like them.…I'm going to prove it to them all one day. I'm going to walk across that stage with my diploma.

In contrast with these contentious relationships, Anthony praises his teacher Josh.

All it takes is that I see that someone is trying to help me. That is a green light for me…With you, you…go over it and make sure everybody understands it and that's what helped me get through the book. Because at first I was struggling. I didn't want to read the book. I would read it in class and then go home and throw it on the bed. After you started going over it, I said, hey, this is kind of interesting.

Anthony's extensive discussion of *settings* sheds light on his feelings of being unwelcome at University High School. He explains that he spent his first year of high school at the local comprehensive school and transferred during his sophomore year.

I like working with my hands. It's fun. But, I'd rather get an education because I see guys in the neighborhood come home after working on cars all day and they don't look satisfied. At first they probably loved it but now they feel that they don't have a choice. I want to get an education, get a diploma and go to college. If I don't like what I'm doing, then I could always change.

Later, Anthony mentions his after-school job, working in the cafeteria of a local university.

I like it there because the environment is not like other jobs. Over there you get to talk to interesting people.

Despite his wish to get the kind of education UHS offers, Anthony has little positive to say about the school. He describes it as "a place full of hard chairs. Plastic ones that squeak."

Some of those other teachers have this vision in their mind that UHS is the ultimate in schools. It isn't. I'm a transfer from Midtown. I found it a lot easier over there to learn something than over here. We had some teachers… Mrs. Rodriguez, she jumped down my throat because I was a transfer from Midtown. She said if you can't do the work you shouldn't be here at UHS. UHS is for the elite. What is she talking about? I did better over there than over here. Some of the teachers here are phony. She is like the poster person for phony.

By contrast with this site of struggle and rejection, he identifies his room at home as a place of refuge.

Most of the time I like sitting in my room when I am home and just puffing records on.…Just sitting in my room with some music playing. Not loud. Sit there with no interruptions, no phone, nothing.

In answer to questions about his work on *The scarlet letter,* Anthony focuses less on the work itself and more on the conditions in his school and in his life. Anthony's story is set in a hostile environment populated by teachers and students who expect him to fail. He is uncomfortable being identified as a reader ("Don't tell

no one I read it.").

As the length and richness of the interview show, Anthony speaks readily and fluently. Commenting on his contributions to class discussions, he says

> I admit I bullshit a lot. I apologize for my language.…In the beginning I was trying to lay it on thick but it didn't work because when I came to class I was dumbfounded. I didn't know what I was talking about.

In describing his final essay on *The scarlet letter:*

> The rough draft was lousy.…It went off track. I started on one thing then skip off to another…trying to bombard my paper with different topics.…I looked at all the comments and I looked at other students' work and I realized how I went off track and (in the final draft) I stuck to one thing or at least I hope I did.

In both of these instances, Anthony shows an awareness of the limitations of his behaviors and implies that he has learned from them. In both cases, the learning resulted from help provided by others. Aside from his student teacher, Josh, who is completing his semester's assignment at the school and is about to leave, he mentions no one he can turn to for help.

Anthony seems to conclude that, unlike his experience of learning to drive by his efforts alone, he has little hope of succeeding at UHS on his own. The narrative expresses his extreme discomfort with his work and his surroundings. Aside from his student teacher, Josh, his only source of comfort appears to be one he refers to repeatedly: being alone in his room with music playing.

A central issue of Anthony's narrative is the issue of "whether he is on or off track." Asked what he learned from writing several drafts of his *Scarlet letter* paper, Anthony replies

> Yeah. I learned to stay on track for once. Usually, I'll start off with one thing, then my attention span will give up and then — basically it's like that, just like in life.

Anthony trails off, indicating his confusion. His comment, though, illustrates how he has used

the conversation about his work on *The scarlet letter* as a metaphor for his concerns about direction and purpose. Throughout the interview, he consistently broadens the discussion to include his school, family, and work life, all implicitly related to issues of identity and options for the future. These ideas, taken together suggest that a central theme of the narrative is the inevitable failure of individual efforts in an unsupportive environment.

Discussion

An analysis of the interviews casts considerable light on how these two students approach the task of reading and writing about *The scarlet letter,* what they believe they have learned and ultimately how they believe the work is connected to their lives. Such close readings represent a valid and accessible form of teacher research, valuable for teachers who must constantly guard against making quick and relatively uninformed judgments about the young people who enter their classrooms every day and why they act as they do.

Desirable as it might be — and I argue that it is most desirable — for teachers to work this closely with *all* their students, it is clearly impossible, given the numbers of students most teachers are charged with educating. Nonetheless, the knowledge gained by the teacher in carrying out a few selected interviews may necessarily benefit the rest of their students. Research of this kind allows teachers to see a few students as fully realized human beings, and the work we expect them to do as embedded in — and connected to — the rest of their life. Simply put, such knowledge is an antidote against stereotyping.

However, several cautions are in order. In his exploration of the research interview as a form of narrative, Mishler argues for recognition that interviews are linguistic events, a joint production of interviewer and interviewee, shaped by their context and the nature of the interaction. And while the particularity of the context is a strength of this form of field studies — "researcher and subjects come to recognize one another as *significant others" (p.* 125) — it is also grounds for caution on several counts. First, the teacher-researcher must acknowledge the unavoidable conflict in his/her dual roles of co-

producer and interpreter of the narrative.

> The interviewer's presence and form of involvement—how she or he listens, attends, encourages, interrupts, digresses, initiates topics and terminates responses—is integral to a respondent's account (Mishler, 1986, p. 82).

Second, the teacher must recognize the students' accounts are surely influenced by the context in which they are constructed. A dual set of asymmetric and hierarchical power relations are operating here; the relationships of teacher and student, and of interviewer and interviewee. Both individually and together, they are bound to influence the nature and content of the discourse (Fairclough, 1989).

The wise course, then, is to draw only provisional conclusions, and whenever possible to consult with peers and! or the interviewees themselves to assess their accuracy. This is probably especially true when teachers are interviewing and analyzing the discourse of those whose backgrounds differ widely from their own, or those who have had vastly different life experience. A large body of research data (see for example, Michaels, 1981; Gumperz, 1982; Scollon and Scollon, 1981) demonstrates how readily unfamiliar language patterns are judged negatively.

The work of Nancy Martin, (1983) which provided a foundation for the present study, recommends combining interviews with students about their work with an examination of the work itself. Since our job as English teachers is to assist students in developing strong thinking and communication skills, the main purpose of the interviews should be to understand how the student's story and the student's work intersect. In her interview, Heidi expresses satisfaction with both the way she managed the task of reading *The scarlet letter* and her understanding of the material. At the conclusion of the interview, she reads a preselected page aloud and satisfactorily retells the gist of that segment of the plot, an indication that, at the level of literal comprehension, she is able to negotiate the text successfully. With the interview as background, a thoughtful appraisal of her written work will help us to know more about what she learned and can communicate, and how to facilitate her continued learning.

In contrast with Heidi, Anthony's responses seem filled with ambiguities, alternating among a kind of desperate bravado; colorful, bitter criticisms of teachers, students and school; and — toward the end of the conversation — some seemingly reflective moments about his own methods of responding to the assignments.

> It is not surprising that when the interview situation is opened up in this way, when the balance of power is shifted, respondents are likely to tell "stories." In sum, interviewing practices that empower respondents also produce narrative accounts. There is, however, an additional implication of empowerment. Through their narratives, people may be moved beyond the text to the possibility of action.. .to apply the understanding arrived at to action in accord with one's own interests (Mishier, 1986, 119).

Conclusion

In considering the study of talk as a means of understanding social relations in cities, linguist Michael Halliday writes

> A city is a place of talk. It is built and held together by language. Not only do its inhabitants spend much of their energies communicating with one another; in their conversation they are all the time reasserting and reshaping the basic concepts by which urban society is defined. If one listens to city talk, one hears constant reference to the institutions, the times and places, the patterns of movement and the types of social relationship that are characteristic of city life (Halliday, 1978, 154).

Applied to life in schools, Halliday's observation suggests the understanding teachers can gain by conducting and analyzing narrative interviews. Bruner (1994) adds further perspective.

> Just as…physics or painting or history are "ways of worldmaking," so autobiography, formal or informal, should be viewed as a set of procedures for "life making." And just as it is worthwhile examining in

minute detail how physics or history go about their world making, might we not be well advised to explore in equal detail what we do when we construct ourselves autobiographically? (p. 29).

Bruner's question suggests that students, who construct their lives as they engage in conversation, also have a great deal to learn by reflecting on their own narratives. Finally, the added dimension of studying student work in the context of the interview, may add yet another dimension to everyone's understanding.

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