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Introduction to Special Issue

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Early fall semester 1998, in an undergraduate literacy education class of preservice teachers I launched into the “basketball story” as a way to explain how we develop powers of observation and analysis. We had been discussing the analysis of student writing assignment, a major requirement in the course which asks class members to collect and analyze numerous examples of writing (i.e., both school and non-school related) from students of the age they plan to teach. As is often the case when assignments are first mentioned, students have questions; and, at times, the more explanation we provide, the more they seem to need. On this occasion I sensed premature anxiety about the assignment and felt it escalating. Rather than continue discussing student writing analysis any further I moved into the narrative mode and told the following story:

When I interviewed for my first teaching position in a public high school twenty years ago, Mr. James O. Waters, the principal inquired about my willingness to coach women’s basketball in addition to English teaching. Without hesitation I assured him I could do both. I wanted to teach English; if it meant coaching too, so be it. Since I played basketball in junior and senior high with unusual ambidexterity, and my younger sister was studying health and physical education at the time with the idea of becoming a coach, I convinced myself I could do it and figured my sister could assist once the season started. I had no way of knowing all that I was taking on. Completely naïve about school politics and inequalities between men’s and women’s sports programs I didn’t think to ask about why the women’s team didn’t have a real coach. My desire to teach was strong; my optimism off the scale; my knowledge of basketball coaching, negligible at best.

The Lady Comets lost most of their games the two years I coached, and I still remember thinking how glad I would be when I could just teach the six English classes and not have to coach.

The point, I tell my students, is that through my failure as a basketball coach I learned “to read” the action on the court. Whereas at first I watched the teams move up and down the court, over time my ability to notice and ana-

lyze patterns of movement developed. The phenomenon of enhanced sight for the game of basketball was a delayed benefit of coaching, something that developed gradually. Just as it takes time to be able “to read” the patterns of movement on the basketball court if those ways of seeing are not already developed, it takes time to become observant of students’ language patterns and structures in their speaking and writing. We may begin quite capable of hearing and seeing the language students use, but we have to acquire abilities to identify and describe patterns of language which, in turn, inform our teaching.

The basketball story is about a lot of things, and I can tell it with different emphases depending on the context and what I want to illustrate. With the undergraduate literacy students, I use the story as an analogy to stress how coaching basketball trained me to be more observant and analytical and juxtapose this with learning to read student language. On this most recent occasion telling the story I have doubts about the degree students understood the similarity between basketball and student writing. It was very early in the semester for one thing. Telling the story did, however, calm students’ anxiety about the course assignment and disclose the beginnings of my teaching life.

I mention this story here in the introduction to this special issue of *The High School Journal* focused upon teacher narrative and life history because it is, as Ruth Vinz (1996) describes, part of the mosaic of my life as a teacher. The basketball story is not just an anecdote or an analogy to illustrate a point although I may use it in these ways; it is more than this, for it is part of the text I am still composing. “[T]he mosaic of our teaching life deepens and take other shapes” as we continue in our work, making choices, refining practices, learning as we go (Vinz, p. 140). This perspective, which views teaching as generative, with personal and professional circumstances continuously informing and layering our teaching histories with meaning, invites us “to read our teaching histories in much the same way we read any text—to open a field of inquiry” (Vinz, p. 243).

The turn toward narrative in education, however, still runs counter to traditional forms of

academic discourse. Joseph Trimmer (1997) offers reasons why narratives remain a departure from sanctioned procedures for reporting educational research:

Most of our professional training has debunked teaching stories. They are not reliable. They are not verifiable. They are not statistically generalizable. We can use them as anecdotes, as introductions...but this is simply a hook—a rhetorical device (like the speaker’s apology) to attract our reader’s attention. (xi)

Trimmer argues that part of the problem is that as academics we do not trust stories. Learning how to trust narrative, its forms, and the purposes those forms may serve is necessary, however, if we are to complexly understand teaching and learning as human enterprises. Exploring stories, our own and those of others, can assist in our moving toward trust. This issue of HSJ includes six authors who use narrative forms to arrive at understanding or “partial truths” (Bissex, 1996) and features autobiography, critical journal writing, interviews, and the letter form. Each author, using narrative as a vehicle for constructing knowledge, contributes to the larger project of opening academic discourse to include story power.

Lynne Alvine opens this issue with her work which uses autobiographical narrative in teacher education courses. Interweaving her own story as a student in classes that encouraged personal learning stories, Alvine demonstrates how she continues to design assignments that more fully integrate lived experience into a knowledge base for teaching. Alvine provides analyses of autobiographical writing to illustrate how this writing helps students, many of whom are already teachers, move toward new understandings of theory and personal knowledge.

Recalling her own negative experiences associated with becoming a teacher, Anne Wescott Dodd reaches understanding about her own “circuitous” and “largely accidental” professional development. Through her reflections Dodd views her journey from recipe collecting to reflective practice as instructive, and out of it emerges a practical framework for future teachers to begin critical examination of their own experiences.

Another author, Lynn Rotanz begins her practice teaching as a teacher researcher, equipped with critical, reflective habits of mind. As she records her experience as a teacher intern, she begins to realize the teaching circumstances make her feel like a puppet with her cooperating teacher pulling the strings. Rotanz's struggle for power told through her narrative demonstrates how the critical dialogue journal becomes more than just a record of practice teaching. Her use of the journal as a vehicle for reflection and sophisticated critique assists her movement through a most vulnerable stage of teaching. The narrative based upon her journal is a story that refuses to accept a bad situation; through writing about it Rotanz moves beyond bitterness, despair, and resentment, achieving her own peace, in her own way, on her own terms.

The last three articles use interviews to assist the narrative process, yet each author's work is distinct. Eileen Landay's approach with narrative interviews extends James Britton's (1984) notion of "a quiet form of research" and Nancy Martin's (1983) idea to simultaneously study student work and converse with them about their work. Landay's study of student interviews about reading and studying literature allows readers to see how students think about themselves, as well as how they think about what they are studying. The interview as a form of narrative becomes a methodological tool with its own inherent literary elements. Landay's research is linguistically intricate as she demonstrates how to utilize narrative interviews and move forward our understanding about student learning.

A very different use of interviews is apparent in Lu Ellen Huntley's article about a former teacher Virginia Walsh. Working on an oral history of this regional teaching legend, Huntley interviewed former students of Miss Walsh, all of whom are older citizens with compelling stories of their own. The most evident theme to emerge about Walsh was her immense modesty and the degree to which Walsh shunned attention. Realizing during her research that had Walsh been living, this teacher would not have approved of a project focused on her life. Huntley, therefore, selected to report her interview findings using the letter form. This letter ad-

dressed to Virginia Walsh acknowledges not only a beloved teacher's life history but the person who was the teacher.

Finally, David Wilson argues in the last article that "we need to acknowledge our own implication, attraction, and connection" to the stories we tell and ask ethical questions about our responsibilities to those whose stories we "use." Wilson also reminds readers that the "I" who speaks in transcripts and the "I" in our own manuscripts is not a static persona but an ever-changing entity of human dimension and change.

Some months ago I ran across a Dennis the Menace cartoon in the daily paper that depicts the uncertainty of the composing process. Dennis, engaged in drawing, his paintbrush poised and an array of paints close at hand, speaks to his mother without lifting his artist's gaze and says, "I won't know what I'm drawing until I'm finished." Mrs. Mitchell's facial expression lips pursed, eyes closed—quietly acknowledges Dennis's immersion in his artwork. Rather than demanding attention from others or creating his usual havoc, Dennis channels his energy to focus on his creation. Not knowing where it's going is the least of Dennis's worries as he hovers over it, pressing on, oblivious to the idea that what he is doing is work.

During the process of working on this issue of HSJ on teacher narrative and life history the cartoon's message reminded me that as we explore the narrative mode and its uses in education it helps to assume both the role of creator and observer. Alternating between these perspectives can instruct us to trust narrative projects to bring forth ways to imagine and know teaching lives.

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