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Reflections on Using Stories

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A couple years ago Joy Ritchie—a colleague—and I drove for two-and-a-half hours on a two-lane road to a small town near the South Dakota border where one of the students in a study we were conducting—Margie—was a first-year teacher. We'd arranged to spend a few hours in her classroom, have lunch with her, and do a final series of interviews with her.

Margie had graduated from our program, idealistic, committed, and sure of the holistic, student-centered, process-oriented philosophy of teaching and language learning she had been constructing. Margie had then moved back near her hometown to teach. As the new unmarried, attractive teacher in the school, she had to contend with the sexism, jealousy, community politics and power plays of her colleagues, administrators, students and parents. She had to deal with the tests of stamina her students put every outsider through, including attempts to weave her life into their own social and sexual struggles, and she had to deal with the realities of small-town life, where her every move was under scrutiny. She was women's track coach and directed the speech and drama club, and as a result went home exhausted every night and had little time for reading, writing, reflection, or class preparation.

During her first semester of teaching, Margie called several times seeking someone to talk with about the dissonance she was experiencing in this small high school. In her first call, she talked about how one of the older teachers had discounted the importance of the journals Margie was asking her students to write and had urged Margie to "structure" her students' learning using the grammar book in order to prepare them for this other teacher's class the following year. Margie said the principal had "yelled" at her because the librarian had complained to him that Margie was sending too many students to the library to select their own books for reading rather than giving them assignments from the anthology. One of the older male teachers who taught in the same wing of the building called her "sweetie" and "cutie" when they monitored the hall between class periods. Such experiences heightened Margie's sense of isolation, exhausted her, and began to destabilize her sense of confidence, competence,

and the authority which had grown in large measure from her well articulated beliefs.

In another call from Margie, she told how the department chair had condemned her and reported her to the principal for asking students actually to perform the plays they were studying in her drama class and to give speeches in her speech class. This chair insisted that the curriculum required only the writing of speeches and the reading of plays.

Margie said, “We’re just supposed to read the plays, study the history of the theater, and not perform them??? What sense does this make? That’s like studying about writing rather than *doing* writing.”

At times during the first semester Margie considered quitting because of the pressure she felt to conform. After a long-distance conference in January in which we talked about how to cope with the pressure she felt to conform and compromise her beliefs about language learning and teaching, I didn’t hear from Margie for several weeks.

And so Joy and I decided to visit Margie near the end of the spring semester. When we arrived, making our way into her classroom, a converted outdated science lab located in the oldest part of the building, Margie seemed as energetic as the student we’d worked with off and on for the prior three years, with all the enthusiasm we’d seen in our interviews on campus. But after talking with her for an hour or two and observing three of her classes, we realized that in some ways she was not the same person who had left the university the previous summer.

Margie had been through a powerful initiation into the culture of schools, an initiation that had begun to subvert the beliefs she had developed in her preservice program. She reminded us of a young person who had finally made it through boot camp and now identified herself unquestioningly as Marine, or of a college student, who, after a semester of hazing, now writes about the wonderful benefits of being in a fraternity.

“Things are great,” Margie said to us that afternoon. “I like the principal and the teachers and the kids I teach.” But the stories she told

us of her hazing and the somber look on her face made us wonder how she was able to say this. The principal yelled at her frequently, though she had learned to ward off his anger. She said she had had to modify what she called her “overly idealistic ideas” about how much writing she could ask students to do. She had made friends with the department chair who had originally criticized and “told on” her for having students give speeches and act out plays, and they were now planning some new English units for next year. She said her teaching philosophy had not really changed, but she had become “more pragmatic.” When she talked about her students, she used many of the stock phrases one hears about not trying to be a “friend” to students and “being tough on them so they will respect you.”

All of this demonstrated for us the power of socialization. A woman who had left the university with such clear, emerging, and well articulated beliefs seemed to have had them hazed out of her. In order to become a member of the community and faculty, Margie had slowly surrendered or was in the process of surrendering many of those thoughtfully crafted beliefs. The price of membership in this community was extremely high for Margie. If they had blatantly said, “These are the rules for membership in this community; follow them or be left on the outside,” Margie would likely have told them to forget it. But such socialization happens much more subtly than that.

And Margie did have a strong need to be a member of a community. She had known what it meant to be an outsider having come to the university pregnant and single as a freshman where she was verbally and physically harassed by others in her dorm who called her “slut” and “whore” as they literally pushed her around. During the remaining three years of college she had been a single parent, pushing herself hard to finish her degree and certification in four years, and at the same time, to be a good parent. She had written often about the prejudice she’d felt as an unmarried pregnant college student and as a single parent. Then she moved to this new community with her child. She didn’t want to be an “outsider” any longer. Margie had begun to seriously date a local man

and imagined the possibility of marrying him. She now wanted to belong. Given these needs and desires, how could she not compromise and pay the price of membership?

As we drove home after our visit Joy and I each confessed to feeling moved, depressed, almost overwhelmed as we reflected on what we had heard Margie say. In her we each saw ourselves—me as a young teacher in a small town in Iowa, Joy in a suburban school in North Carolina. Both of us felt we had been Margie, had felt the powerful socializing force of the school and community on our identities, our assumptions about who we were as teachers and as people.

It seems that the narratives we collect, construct, and reconstruct about teachers and preservice teachers are as much about *us* as they are about the participants in our research. Gelya Frank talks about what may occur when researchers are involved in collecting data about the lives of other people, as we often are. She says interpreting materials from another's life may be thought of as:

“a process that blends together the consciousness of the investigator and the subjects, perhaps to the point where it is not possible to disentangle them....In some sense the reporting of data may represent a personal portrait of the investigator as well. The portrait would take the form of a shadow biography, a negative image” (quoted in Behar, 1993, p. 320).

We are unavoidably implicated in the stories we tell; as I tell you about Margie, I tell you about myself as well.

As researchers *using* stories in our work, we need to remember the very nature of stories—they are not neutral objects. They invite us—even command us—into relationship with the teller. The borders of stories are fluid and permeable; stories always become something else, the same story yet different, changed and transformed by the teller and by the hearer. In our selection and use of them, they draw us in, implicate us, revise us. Because of the relational, rather than rational nature of knowledge that comes with stories (Noddings, 1984) and because of the speculative and generative nature

of stories, they demand that as researchers we continually reexamine the stories we tell and examine our responsibilities to those who tell us their stories.

Why do I continue to tell Margie's story? Because, at least in part, I find myself in her story? Is it, still, *her* story—or has it become mine? What's my responsibility to Margie as I tell it here or in my classes, as I *use* it for one purpose or another?

It is also true that the space between the self that tells and the self that listens is fluid. Stories are seductive, persuasive, permeable. They pull us toward them and they may even take us over. From the tapes and transcripts of interviews, from the pages of journals and student writing, certain stories called out to Joy and me and drew us in. The stories we include in our work are not innocently or objectively chosen stories; they are stories that we found illuminating and emblematic of the issues that teachers confront in their learning and development. They were stories that moved us and that we found compelling because they resonated with our own understandings of learning and teaching. In some cases, we realize that these are the stories in which we feel deeply and personally implicated, stories that may have explained something to us about our own experiences as people and as teachers—as did Margie's story of small-town teaching.

There is never one true story, one true or neutral perspective on experience. Joy and I may have shaped these stories from the initial utterance when we first devised the questions for interviews, influenced them by the pose we struck as interviewers, by the relationships we developed with students during interviews and later by our work with them as colleagues.

Because stories are not innocent, we cannot afford to read them or rewrite them naïvely. Just as there is no “true” story, there is no single “true” retelling” of a narrative. The stories in our work are a version of stories we listened to. We've taken them from their context and refrained them, recontextualized them, often in a theoretical frame the original teller of the story—Margie for example—might not even have considered. Our retellings, recompositions

of the narratives students told us, may misrepresent or interpret their experiences in ways they wouldn't recognize. The "I" speaking in a transcript we re-read in writing an article, no longer exists as that same "I." Just as the "I" writing these words will no longer exist by the time this manuscript is published. Margie is no longer now as she was then. We may seem to label or "fix" these narratives in some static category, even though we recognize that they and we may not recognize or want to own the words we uttered last year or last month. Where possible, we might try to allow those who participated in the research to speak for themselves, putting in their actual words and also asking some of those participants to write their own stories or rewrite ours. (For an example, see Wilson & Ritchie, 1994, and Gulyas, 1994. In this issue of *English Education*, Joy and I tell Carol's story, and in a companion article, she claims her own story. And in Ritchie & Wilson, 2000, Carol and other teachers whose stories we've solicited tell their own stories in their won chapters.)

The stories we select and "collect" as teachers and as researchers do not simply remain as abstractions or "tools" for us to *use* to inform our work or to get us tenured or promoted. We need to acknowledge our own implication, attraction, and connection to these stories. We need to ask these and perhaps other difficult questions about our responsibilities to those whose stories we prompt and collect.

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