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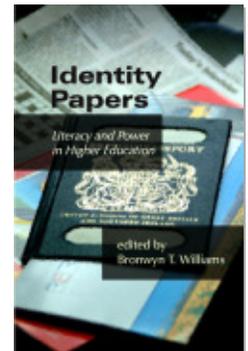
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SPEAKING FROM THE BORDERLANDS
Exploring Narratives of Teacher Identity

Janet Alsup

What does it mean to be a secondary school teacher? Those who have been high school or middle school teachers know that secondary school teaching is demanding work. They have taught 130-plus adolescents per day, spent weekends and evenings grading papers and planning lessons, and have negotiated the competing demands of various stakeholders including administrators, community leaders, colleagues, and students. They also know that the profession is often perceived, both by "insiders" and "outsiders," as *more* than a job—as a way of life or a "calling." A teacher is seen as an individual who should go above and beyond the call of duty for the benefit of the young people with whom she works.

This definition of teaching as a "calling" has both positive and negative consequences for those in the profession. On the bright side, cultural conceptions of teachers as "heroes" should mean that they are revered and respected. (I remember a recent series of television ads that featured a voice over urging young people to "Be a hero. Teach" and coffee cups proclaiming, "Teachers make a difference" written next to a red apple.) However, the down side, and also the irony, is that only rarely are teachers the recipients of such reverence in American culture. Because the standards are so high, and the price often so great, few teachers are awarded "hero" status, and the rest are labeled mediocre at best, or simply inadequate.

There is a fundamental paradox in our cultural model of teacher, a paradox that affects teacher education: for a teacher to be a hero, our society says he or she must be selfless; however, research demonstrates that only the teacher who has developed a rich, well-rounded identity, or sense of self, is truly successful in the classroom. An effective teacher must be "self actualized" (to use the phrase coined by Abraham Maslow in 1962 and later used by bell hooks in 1994) to the extent that it is possible and reflective about all aspects of his or her self, namely the intellectual/cognitive, the emotional/spiritual and the physical/material. In short, the successful teacher must be self*less* and sel*fish* at the same time.

Perhaps the first years of teaching are the most difficult. According to Dwight L. Rogers and Leslie M. Babinski (2002), much has been written about the problems of new teachers, and ample research has been conducted on the topic (Bulloughs 1987; Feiman-Nemser 1983; Grant and Zeichner 1981; Ryan 1970). Yet, they write, "despite all of the research and all of the books and articles written about the difficulties endured by beginning teachers, the first year of teaching continues to be an exceptionally difficult time for most of them" (2). All of our research and writing, while it may be published in respected journals and by academic presses, has not really helped the new teacher. According to the most current figures, only 50 percent of new teachers' careers last longer than five years (Gordon 1991; Huling-Austin et al. 1989). And, if that is not bad enough, according to Robert Bulloughs (1987), many of the teachers who remain in the profession end up structuring their classrooms in ways that are inconsistent with their pedagogical beliefs (Rogers and Babinski 2002, 3). They cannot find ways to teach as they were taught during their university education, so they revert to lifesaving measures that simply keep them afloat in the classroom.

To learn more about how to successfully mentor new teachers, I conducted a longitudinal, qualitative, interview-based research study from January 2001 to spring 2003. This study began with the following goals:

- to examine the philosophies of teaching English held by the participants and the modification of these beliefs over time;
- to describe classroom practices of the participants, their change over time, and how these changes are connected to the aforementioned beliefs;
- to explore issues of self-confidence about teaching and participants' level of comfort in the classroom and how these change over time;
- to describe changes in how the participants define their roles as English teachers over the time of the study; and
- to offer suggestions for mentoring pre-service and beginning teachers and for further research directions for understanding teacher development.

The study evolved and eventually came to focus on teacher professional identity development, a concept that encompasses all of the above questions. My goal was to recruit six to eight student participants; seven volunteered, and one dropped out of the project after the first year.

The six remaining participants were all white women, between the ages of 19 and 23. This gender and ethnicity is representative of the students in the English education program at the university where I teach (in my program, students are 74 percent female and 95 percent white). In addition to the interview data, I collected relevant artifacts such as lesson plans, philosophy statements and literacy autobiographies the pre-service teachers wrote for classes, teaching metaphors they created, and notes I took when I observed them teaching during their internship experiences. Therefore, there were ample sources of data to establish "triangulation," or the assurance that multiple sources were analyzed and compared before stating results (Denzin 1987). I used the "categorical content" approach to data analysis which is often called "content analysis." In this approach, categories of the studied topic are defined (codes), and examples from the text are placed into these categories/ groups for analysis (Lieblich et al. 1998, 13).

As a result of my research, I argue that in order to be successful in the classroom, a secondary school teacher must develop a sense of professional identity that incorporates his or her personal subjectivities with the professional/cultural expectations of what it means to be a "teacher." This incorporation, this merging, this professional identity formation, happens through a new teacher's participation in various genres of discourse that facilitate a dialogic engagement with students, mentors, teacher educators, family, peers, and even internal dialogues with other personal subjectivities or ideologies. Such discourse, as it becomes more complex and sophisticated, can result in the physical and emotional embodiment of teacher identity as well as increased pedagogical effectiveness.

This is not to say that the eventual goal of the teacher is to iron out all ideological tension so that teaching is "smooth sailing"; such consensus among subjectivities is not likely or even desirable. However, the various identity strands making up the self should be able to coexist to the extent that a professional teaching life can be enacted efficiently and effectively—at least most of the time. When such discourse occurs that allows for the intersection and integration of various subjectivities and identity positions, I call it "borderland" discourse. The "borderland" is a term that I have taken from James Gee (1999), who uses the term in a study he did of urban middle and high school students from different ethnic groups who "came together" on the schoolyard. When they came together they used borderland discourse to communicate, discourse that was "a mixture of the various neighborhood peer discourses, and

some emergent properties of its own" (22). It is at the borderlands of discourse, and by association at the borderlands of various identity positions that the pre-service teachers began to discover how to move from being student to being teacher and how to respect personal beliefs and passions while learning to embody a teacher identity. I believe that engagement in such borderland discourse is the first step toward developing a professional identity as a teacher and a productive personal pedagogy combining professional knowledge and skill with personal beliefs and orientations.

DEFINING THE BORDERLAND

I am not the first educational theorist or researcher to recognize the importance of teacher identity development. Richard P. Lipka and Thomas M. Brinkthaupt (1999) write that it is essential that teacher educators and mentors of new teachers help new teachers balance their "personal development . . . with their professional development" (2). They explore why paying attention to the personal, in addition to the professional, is important for a workable teacher identity to result. Jane Danielewicz (2001) proposes "a pedagogy for identity development" and describes "the qualities that must characterize our teaching in order for the students we encounter to become something other than students" (1). Parker Palmer (1998) identifies three paths to identity development, be it personal or professional: the intellectual, the emotional, and the spiritual. According to Palmer, an individual should address all three parts of this triadic identity. Palmer aptly calls teaching "a daily exercise in vulnerability," as the teacher attempts to find his or her "inner teacher" and teach from a place of "integrity" that incorporates these three aspects of the self (17). Deborah Britzman (1991) calls becoming a teacher a type of identity "transformation," and argues through the case studies she presents that in order to become a teacher we often ask students to give up or suppress aspects of their personal selves that do not conform to the cultural model or "script" of the secondary teacher (4). We suggest to them through a discourse of objectivity that they should not reveal their personal ideologies or make pedagogical decisions based on their racial, ethnic or gender subjectivities; on the contrary, and in order to be fair to all students, they should be intellectually neutral (and, of course, academically rigorous) as often as possible. However, this suppression of personal identity is only a sham, a facade, as personal subjectivities and ideologies do not disappear; they simply remain, and even fester, as sites of tension and discomfort.

Theorists and researchers (with the exception of Britzman) often oversimplify the identity development of pre-service teachers as a bringing together of two conflicting identity positions: the "personal" and the "professional." The idea is that once both aspects of the personality are attended to and nurtured, a holistic sense of professional self will result. My research attempts to complicate this binary understanding of professional identity. The six participants in this research study demonstrate that professional and personal identities are multiple and ever changing, rather than singular and consistently opposing. Therefore, a teacher's identity is a "weaving together" (Gee 1999) of various different subjectivities and situated identity positions as expressed through genres of discourse and influenced by multiple life experiences.

Borderland discourse explicitly facilitates (and rewards) the bringing of personal subjectivities or ideologies to the classroom and connecting them to a new teacher's developing professional self. Sometimes the new teachers were not able to experience or express borderland discourse and felt a great deal of tension and discomfort taking on the role of teacher. If the professional and personal identities and related subjectivities/ideologies seemed too distinct or even contradictory, the pre-service teachers could not close the gap, and some of them opted out of the profession. Three of the six teachers in this study decided not to be teachers after their college graduation because of extreme tension between their student and teacher subjectivities or between their perceptions of the idealized, culturally accepted professional identity and their personal beliefs or ideologies. The tension and discord were simply too powerful to negotiate.

One of our goals as teacher educators is the creation of opportunities for borderland discourse that will enable pre-service teachers to combine their personal and professional subjectivities and create a new, albeit recognized, discourse of professional identity. The discourse community of secondary educators might accept such borderland discourse because it contains some recognized characteristics; however, the discourse may also stretch understandings of professional identity within these traditional boundaries.

NARRATIVE: THE DOMINANT GENRE OF TEACHER IDENTITY DISCOURSE

Engaging in narrative discourse is one way the new teachers in this study facilitated their professional identity development. This power of narrative is reflected in the work of psychologists and psychiatrists who

have long used the "case study" and life history narrative to understand people's problems. Many social scientists assert that personal narratives do not simply reflect identities they *are* people's identities (see Bruner 1991, 1996; Gergen 1994; Gergen and Gergen 1986; Hermans et al. 1993; McAdams 1993; Polkinghorne 1991). Jerome Bruner (1986), one of the preeminent scholars of narrative, writes that people lead "storied lives," and defines narratives as essential to the making of the self. Bruner goes so far as to say that if the human being was not able to create and tell stories that both differentiate and establish connection, he or she would lack a sense of real selfhood (2002, 86).

Narratives have been used in educational research and theory since the 1980s with great consistency, for purposes such as action research projects and sharing of pedagogical expertise. Recently, several educators and researchers such as Ivor F. Goodson (1992), Leslie Rebecca Bloom (1998), and Stanton Wortham (2001) have written that analyzing or interrogating narratives new teachers tell concerning their educational histories can be a way of helping them overcome long-held and overly simplistic belief structures about what a teacher should be and what a classroom should look like. In other words, such narrative interrogation can help them overcome the temptation to simply teach as they were taught no matter what current research and theory tell them. Such interrogation of narrative histories is especially important as many studies have shown that teachers tend to teach as they remember being taught, and that they are not influenced that much by their teacher education programs (Lortie 1975; Knowles and Holt-Reynolds 1991). This large body of research supporting the influence of narrative educational memories demonstrates the importance of the examination of such narratives during the education of a teacher.

In this study, engaging in narrative discourse facilitated as well as reflected the development of professional teacher identity of the six participants. There were a total of 357 stories told by the participants over the two years of interviews. During qualitative analysis, I thematically coded these narratives, and six major types of stories emerged: (1) narratives of tension, (2) narratives of experience, (3) narratives of the embodiment of teacher identity, (4) narratives about family and friends, (5) narratives about seeking voice, and (6) borderland narratives. In the rest of this chapter, I describe a few of the most instrumental of these narratives and provide examples from the discourse of three of the pre-service teachers—Carrie, Karen, and Lois. Specifically, I will discuss a narrative of tension, a narrative of embodiment, and a borderland narrative.

THE PERSONAL CONFRONTS THE PROFESSIONAL: A CLASH OF SUBJECTIVITIES

An important finding from my narrative analysis was that unresolved tension between discordant subjectivities and associated ideologies lessened the chance of the participants developing a satisfying professional identity. In the analysis of the narratives, three major kinds of tension were revealed: (1) personal beliefs versus professional expectations, (2) university ideologies or educational methods versus the practical ones experienced in secondary field placements, and (3) "student" versus "teacher" subjectivity as pre-service teachers moved from the role of university student to that of high school teacher. Tension that was experienced by the pre-service teachers concerned issues as diverse as classroom authority, professional confidence, opinions about pedagogical methods and curricular emphases, approaching classroom discipline, and negotiating family and career.

The three students who told the highest total number of narratives of tension decided not to take traditional teaching jobs after graduation and expressed confusion about their future professional lives. These students (Sandy, Carrie, and Karen) told 34, 27, and 16 of these narratives, respectively. Others who were able to negotiate these tensions because of awareness and acceptance of nonunitary or multiple subjectivities and/or because of engagement in borderland discourse were able to find, and begin to embody, a workable professional identity. Their tensions did not go away or become insignificant; instead, these successful pre-service teachers found a way to honor and integrate the various subjectivities and ideologies central to their lives. However, this process was difficult, and Sandy, Carrie, and Karen did not complete it by the end of the study.

There were 27 narratives told about the confrontation between personal and professional subjectivities. These narratives described ways that the pre-service teacher was struggling with maintaining a sense of self while taking on the professional identity of teacher. The two students who told the most of these narratives, Carrie (told 12 narratives about personal–professional tensions) and Karen (told 15 of these narratives), chose not to become secondary teachers immediately after graduation. Unfortunately, we often imply to new teachers that the successful teaching life is relatively uncomplicated. In fact, many choose it for that reason—they think that teaching will allow them to privilege other parts of their lives, such as family, over their careers. However, this "myth of

normalcy" (Britzman 1998, 82) is not always reality. A teaching life can be fraught with ideological tension and conflict, as the educational establishment and related cultural scripts portray acceptable education within certain moral and political boundaries, boundaries that are not always comfortable for the new teacher.

For example, Carrie experienced a great deal of tension between personal and professional subjectivities, namely about curricular focus. Her interests lay in the areas of women's literature and feminist theory, and the classes she enjoyed the most as a university student tackled issues of gender, sexual orientation, and the cultural conceptions and inequities related to them. However, in Carrie's experiences in local secondary schools, she became convinced that such topics would not be accepted as a part of secondary school curricula. In the third interview with Carrie in September of 2002, she said,

> The thing is the more that I'm realizing over the past few years is that the environment that I loved so much and that I wanted to recreate is going to be very rarely recreated [in the secondary school]. . . since a big aspect [of mine] is wanting to get into my areas of interest that have developed more into the feminist and queer theory and wanting to approach those and being restricted [in high schools] with what books I can show to my classes, what topics I can talk about—even if I'm not doing an entire unit on homosexuality, you know, am I going to get yelled at or whatever for having it come up in the classroom? I'm like, why the hell am I going to even be there?

This statement is an expression of tension, a tension that Carrie could not resolve by the end of the study. Since Carrie defines herself as a lesbian, her tension is compounded by a belief that her "marked" body will not be accepted in the secondary classroom and that a life as teacher will mean a lifetime of hiding an important part of herself. This problem of embodiment is explored more fully in the next section through the stories of a second student, Karen.

DENYING THE MIND/BODY SPLIT: FACILITATING THE EMBODIMENT OF TEACHER IDENTITY

Developing teacher identity involves embodying the discourse of teacher. Brent Hocking et al. (2001) write that discourse itself is an attempt at embodiment because it attempts to close the gap between the outer, material world of sensory input and the internal, intellectual or emotional world. Freud's notion of the id and the ego addresses the falsity

of the mind/body split. He writes that the ego is "first and foremost, a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface" (1961, 27). In other words, the idea or understanding of the "self" is always wrapped up with the material body, and the embodiment of emotional or intellectual concepts of self. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan also insists upon the connection of mind and body. His "mirror stage" asserts that the child first comes to think about "self" when he or she sees his or her reflected image and begins to be aware of self as divided: the internal, individually defined self, and the corporeal self as seen and interpreted by others. While the postmodern tendency is to make gender constructions, class inequities, and other identity positions almost completely a result of discourse, feminist scholars such as Judith Butler (1993), Teresa Ebert (1996), and Bronwyn Davies (2000) are among those who insist on the inherent relationship of the discursive to the corporeal.

When I write about teacher identity and the discourse used to facilitate it, I am describing discourse not only as a way to bridge the gap between internal states—such as subjectivities, situated identities, or ideologies—but also between these internal states and the physical enactment of "teacher." In short, the new teacher has to figure out how to place herself in the "body" of the teacher, a body that is often culturally defined as white, female, middle aged, politically conservative, and heterosexual.

The narratives students told in this category concerned issues of gender, body size, age, class, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. Much like the narratives of tension, if the narratives of embodiment of teacher identity expressed an overwhelming concern about the disconnections between the pre-service teacher's perception of self and the perceived cultural script or model of the teacher body, then the student often did not choose to become a secondary teacher upon graduation. The students who told the largest number of narratives expressing confusion or frustration about embodiment issues had the most difficult time integrating into the profession. Carrie told a total of 12 narratives of embodiment tensions, and Karen told a total of eight; again, both of these students decided not to take secondary teaching jobs upon graduation.

Karen had difficulty with the notion of diversity and multiculturalism, as it was discussed in her educational classes. Karen, a white working-class student from Indiana, felt that much of the discourse about diversity was nothing more than "politically correct" identity politics. She was deeply unsettled by a "Literature of Black America" class in which

students engaged in a discussion of whether white teachers should be able to teach African American literature. She was angered and confused when her African American teacher suggested that perhaps this should not be allowed. She told me she thought her own cultural heritage was being disregarded, even though she did not seem to have a very strong idea of exactly what this heritage was. This tension between her working-class white upbringing and the "diverse" discourse of the university was consistently expressed in our conversations. Only toward the end of our time together, when Karen took a middle school coaching job at a school with primarily African American students, did she begin to work through these ideological tensions. In fact, she wrote me a long letter in which she tackled them. In December of 2002, she wrote, in part, "I have told you that I was called racist everyday. But the situation was that from the moment some of the parents came into our first practice or when they came into the parent meeting I held, they judged the fact that I was white."

Often the notions of multiculturalism as they are discussed in education courses center around the idea of a kind of "color blindness" or rhetoric of sameness. This false objectivity might make pre-service teachers such as Karen less likely to think about and interrogate their own subject positions. However, Karen's discourse reflects her struggle with her racial and ethnic identity. She was beginning to understand that she also has a race, and that her race might be an obstacle to communication in certain contexts; she was beginning to understand that race was not something that she only thought about in terms of the "other"—it was also something she had to apply to—and understand about—herself. In other words, she was starting to figure out how to live in her own skin (her white skin) and in her own body, as a teacher.

TOWARD A PERSONAL PEDAGOGY: AN ANALYSIS OF BORDERLAND NARRATIVES

Engagement in borderland discourse was important to the pre-service teachers' development of a professional identity and eventually, a personal pedagogy. The most immediately and obviously successful teacher education students in this study were those who were given the opportunity (and the necessary guidance) to begin to see complex connections among their educational memories, their university education, their practical school and teaching experiences, and their personal or core ideologies. The creation and expression of this borderland discourse can be seen as a political act, an act of enriching and broadening the

discursive and material identity of the teacher that is often perceived as narrow and restrictive.

Lois engaged in a great deal of borderland discourse, discourse that communicated connections between student and teacher subjectivities, personal and professional ideologies, and/or university coursework and practical field experiences. She told me a total of 14 borderland narratives; in contrast, of the three students who chose not to become teachers at all, one told two borderland narratives, the second told none, and the third only one. Lois' mentor teacher often facilitated this discourse, although at other times, Lois took the initiative to build bridges (so to speak) between the various aspects of her self. Consequently, she had a very satisfying student teaching experience and went on to accept a secondary teaching job the following year. Here is a quote from an interview conducted with Lois in September of 2001 about her student teaching experience that exemplifies her borderland discourse:

> One of the first things she [her student teaching mentor] said was, "I don't want you to come in and model the classroom exactly the way I do." She said, "You know, if something I do works for you and that's the way you want to do it, then go for it. But I want you to come in here, and I want you to do things the way you want to do them." She said, "I will help, you know, and I will offer you advice, but I want you to come and I want you to find your own way." Not necessarily my own way, but find what works for me. If me being more strict with discipline is the way, if I wanted to move certain students then I would. I would move those students. But then, I would see how that worked for or against me.

Lois is in the process of developing a personal pedagogy, a pedagogy that incorporates her multiple subjectivities or identity strands. I believe she *is* finding her own way. By engaging in narrative discourse about this development her understanding of her own growth only increases, and with such enhanced meta-awareness or reflexivity, Lois' professional identity can only become richer, more complex, more effective, and more satisfying over time.

BRINGING THE BORDERLAND TO THE METHODS COURSE

The discourse the pre-service teachers used to describe their identities, subjectivities, and ideologies assisted them in learning to occupy multiple borderlands between identity positions (such as student, teacher, lover, mother, or feminist) and, eventually, understand these borderlands as sites of professional and personal power instead of spaces of tension and

confusion. Eventually, spending time in this discursive borderland led to the beginnings of a personal pedagogy integrating individual beliefs and experiences with professional goals and expectations. It is at these borderlands that the pre-service teachers discovered how to move from being students to being teachers and how to honor personal beliefs and passions while also embodying a teacher identity that in our society, as Deborah Britzman (1991) writes, is so-often overshadowed by simplified and stereotypical cultural models and media scripts.

How can teacher educators create opportunities for borderland discourse for our students? Findings from this research can be applied to assignments appropriate for the English education class. I have used what I learned about narrative and teacher identity to re-think an assignment I have given many times in my methods classes. To take advantage of narrative's potential to shape and reshape teacher identity, I revised the "practice teaching" assignment to become the "pedagogical discussion."

This assignment asks the students in my class to take turns leading a discussion about teaching a literary text and the narrative histories that influenced their pedagogical decisions. The student leading the discussion describes her goals for teaching the chosen text, provides specific ideas for classroom activities and assignments, and gives suggestions for assessing student learning (as well as alignment with our state's 9–12 standards for the teaching of English language arts). Additionally, the pre-service teacher writes an essay reflecting on these goals, activities, and assessments and explaining why he or she made certain choices about teaching the selected text. In this critically reflective essay, the student is asked to include (1) discussion of research or theory that supports the pedagogical choices, (2) anecdotal or narrative evidence from past classroom experiences (either as a student or a teacher) demonstrating the appropriateness of these choices, and (3) discussion of his or her teaching philosophy and how it is consistent with the aforementioned pedagogical choices.

The reflective essay is shared with the student's peers who respond to both the pedagogical ideas and the reflective essay. To get the discussion started, the student poses questions to the class such as "What do you like about or agree with concerning my pedagogical choices?" "What suggestions or ideas might you add?" and "What narrative or anecdotal evidence do you have that is similar or different than mine?" The questions posed are determined by the student's interests and concerns; however, a key component of the assignment is that the pre-service

teacher is asked to provide narrative, theoretical, and philosophical support for her pedagogical choices, and her peers participating in the discussion are asked to respond to these narratives with educational narratives of their own. Through the discussion, the student presenting has the opportunity to critically examine the educational history that influenced his or her beliefs and discover to what extent this history, as well as the theory and research cited, is a sound basis for her pedagogical decisions and educational philosophy (Alsup 2005).

By expressing, deconstructing and critically examining the narrative, experiential knowledge underlying their current beliefs about teaching, pre-service teachers may move past simple imitation of classroom practices and expand their vision of what constitutes effective pedagogy. They might honor their educational memories while also interrogating them through new intellectual lenses, thereby taking a first step toward understanding ideological tensions as potential sites of professional and personal discovery. Through such borderland discourse, pre-service teachers can become more effective secondary English teachers, as well as self-actualized human beings.