Using narrative research as a method in teacher education; a sociocultural approach

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Abstract
Researching the relationship between narrative and teacher development has become increasingly popular. A recent literature search by the author found over forty papers published since 2005 that explored the relationship between teacher development and narrative. Many of these papers offered no explicit theorisation of narrative and its relationship to individual agency or sociocultural structure. Where a theoretical paradigm was cited, it privileged agency over structure and viewed sociocultural context only as a constraining container. As a response to this deficiency, this paper reports on research that develops Wertsch's sociocultural approach to narrative to research the ways that initial teacher education students' narratives of classroom experience (and hence their experiential learning) are influenced by dominant narratives in their placement school. This is intended to provide a worked example of a narrative research approach that other teacher education researchers can use to understand the learning of their students.

Keywords: narrative research; sociocultural theory; initial teacher education.

Why Narrative Research?
In recent decades the popularity and practice of narrative research methods has grown significantly. This popularity has been evidenced by the increasing inclusion of chapters on narrative research in research methods text books and by the increasing publication of books devoted exclusively to narrative research as a method. This growing popularity has led many commentators to write about a 'narrative turn' in research methods across the social sciences similar to the widespread 'linguistic turn' that is claimed to have happened in earlier decades (e.g. Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Berger and Quinney, 2005). This growth in the use of narrative research methods across the social sciences in general has also been evident in the particular area of research into teacher development, teacher knowledge and teacher identity. A recent review of literature on narrative and teacher education since 2005 found upwards of forty papers published in refereed journals that emphasised the importance of narrative in understanding teachers and their work (Philpott, 2014b). It is almost certain that was not the total number in print during that period. These papers explored a variety of topics, including the use of narratives as a teaching tool in the development of teachers in initial teacher education, the role of narratives in shaping teachers' identities and the role of narrative in structuring teachers' knowledge.

Why should narrative research be increasingly attractive as a way of researching teacher education and development? In part the answer to this can be traced back to Bruner's (1986) distinction between two forms of knowledge that are irreducible to one another: the narrative and the paradigmatic. Bruner argues that paradigmatic knowledge is the form of knowledge that captures logical relationships between different phenomena and can, therefore, be considered as an appropriate form for knowledge about, for example, the physical world and mathematics. Narrative knowledge is, according to Bruner, the form of knowledge most appropriate for our knowledge of the world of human interaction. Narrative knowledge captures phenomena such as the nature of people's identities, their intentions, the meaning they attach to the world, the cause and effect of

human interactions and the ways that these things can develop over time. Polkinghorne (1988) develops a more sustained argument along similar lines to Bruner's about the role of 'narrative knowing and the human sciences'. Like Bruner, Polkinghorne argues that, whereas what we might conventionally think of as 'scientific knowledge' is appropriate for knowledge of the physical world, the world of human behaviour is best understood through exploring or researching narrative forms of knowing.

Arguably, teachers' professional knowledge is narrative in form rather than paradigmatic. This is because teacher knowledge consists of knowledge of the identities of teachers and learners, of the intentions of participants in the classroom, the meaning these participants attach to their own and others' actions and the likely causes and effects of different actions and forms of behaviour. It also concerns how these things might change over time. If we accept this argument, then it follows that, when we are trying to find out what it is that teachers know, or when we are thinking about how we best capture teacher knowledge or develop professional knowledge in beginning teachers, then narrative research is one of the best ways to do this.

Recent Uses of Narrative in Teacher Education Research
In the papers that were reviewed by Philpott (2014b), not only were the foci being explored diverse but so were the research methods used and the theoretical frames that underpinned these methods. In fact, in many of the papers there was no explicit statement of the wider theoretical assumptions about narrative and its relationship to individual teacher's thinking. Nor was there to the relationship between narratives and the social and cultural contexts in which teachers live and work. It is important to explicitly theorise research methods as untheorised methods that can contain unspoken or unacknowledged assumptions that might turn out to be questionable once they are exposed to scrutiny.

Where a wider theoretical framework is explicitly explored or cited in this literature it is most frequently based in the work of Clandinin and Connelly (1995, 1996). In recent decades Clandinin and Connelly have developed the idea of the Professional Knowledge Landscape as a way of understanding how the narratively shaped knowledge, beliefs and identities of teachers are related to the social contexts in which they live and work. However, Philpott has argued (2013) that the Professional Knowledge Landscape has serious limitations as an underpinning model for researching how narratives shape teachers' knowledge, identities and actions. This is because it overemphasises the autonomy of teacher agency in choosing how narratives shape these things and underemphasises the ways in which the social and cultural context of their work provides resources for the creation of narratives and not just obstacles.

A Sociocultural Approach to Narrative Research
In place of the landscape metaphor that shapes the theoretical model of Clandinin and Connelly, I propose a model based on the idea of narratives as socioculturally situated tools that are used by teachers to make sense of their experiences and, therefore, to give them meaning. This idea of narratives as tools is derived from neo-Vygotskian approaches to understanding human activity, such as sociocultural theory (Wertsch, 1993, 2002) and cultural historical activity theory (see Roth and Lee, 2007 for an overview). These approaches elaborate Vygotsky's insight that human activity, including thinking and learning, is mediated by tools that are specific to the social, cultural and historical context in which that activity takes place. The sociocultural tool most often focused upon by both Vygotsky and sociocultural theorists such as Wertsch is language. If we consider any particular language as a whole, for example English, we can see how its use can shape how we talk about the world and how we think about it. If we focus on subsets of the whole language, such as specific discourses (Bowe, Gewirtz and Ball, 1994; Trowler, 2001) or metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), we can see how the effect of language on shaping our understanding can be more localised.

The important insight of neo-Vygotskyan theories is that these uses of language, such as particular discourses or metaphors, specific to particular social, cultural and historical contexts and shared by actors in those contexts. So, as we think, reason and learn in these contexts, we use these social, cultural and historically situated forms of language as tools that enable our thinking and learning. However, as we use them, these forms of language shape the nature of our thinking and learning in ways that we might not be completely conscious of. In the language of thinking about agency and structure, they are both enablements and constraints (Sewell, 1992; Wertsch, 2011). As these tools are historically and socioculturally specific and also shared, this means that part of what becoming a member of a particular community involves is learning to use these situated tools to make sense of and understand experience (Cain, 1991; Ochs and Capps, 2001).

This insight about the role of socioculturally situated tools in shaping what we learn, can be combined with the current interest in narrative research. We can view narratives as historically, culturally and socially situated tools that we use to help us make sense of, and therefore learn from, our experiences in particular sociocultural contexts. As they enable our understanding, they also constrain how we understand by making alternative understandings less likely to develop. Part of what it means to learn to be a teacher, then, is to learn to use the socioculturally situated narratives that are the shared resources of the context in which you are working.

Wertsch's Model of Narratives as Sociocultural Tools
As a theoretical framework for understanding these narrative tools and their relationship to particular sociocultural contexts and individual teachers we can make use of and adapt the work of Wertsch. During the last two decades Wertsch has developed and applied a theory of the way in which narratives provide socioculturally situated tools that are used as 'co-authors' (Wertsch 2008a) in the creation and maintenance of collective memory (Wertsch, 2002) in what he calls (after Bartlett, 1995) the 'effort after meaning' (Wertsch, 2008a: 144, Wertsch, 2009: 124).

In this theory, Wertsch distinguishes between two different levels of narrative as a socioculturally situated tool. The first of these levels is what Wertsch calls narrative templates. Narrative templates are abstracted, generalised narrative patterns that do not concern specific actors, events, times or places. These can perhaps be most clearly exemplified by considering traditional folk and fairy tales. A narrative template used in traditional tales is one in which a youngest and most marginalised sibling eventually triumphs over all others. In the case of male siblings this is usually through guile and resourcefulness. In the case of female siblings it is usually through steadfast virtue. This generalised pattern then 'co-authors' a number of specific tales such as Beauty and the Beast and Puss in Boots. A key point about the abstracted narrative patterns of narrative templates is that they are not universal archetypes. They are rather forms of abstracted narrative that are specific to particular cultures and historical periods (Wertsch, 2008c). Although I have used traditional fictional tales to exemplify the nature of narrative templates, the same process applies to narratives we create about real world events. Within particular historical, cultural and social contexts we make use of socioculturally situated narrative templates to 'co-author' specific narratives about our experience. In doing so, we give it a meaning and, therefore, learn from it. As I previously argued, learning to 'master' (Wertsch, 1997; Wertsch, 2000) the relevant narrative template is part of what it means to learn to be a member of a community (Cain, 1991; Ochs and Capps, 2001), including professional communities such as teachers. Another important feature of narrative templates is that they are largely invisible to the people who use them (Wertsch, 2007; Wertsch, 2008b; Wertsch, 2009). They co-author our narrative understandings of our experiences without us being aware of their power to shape how we understand our own experience. In addition, as they are largely invisible they tend to be resistant to challenge or change (Wertsch, 2007; Wertsch, 2008b; Wertsch, 2009).

The second level of narrative that Wertsch identifies is specific narratives. As the earlier example I gave from folk tales suggests, specific narratives are narratives about particular actors carrying out particular actions at particular times and in particular places. They are specific instantiations of narrative templates.

To add to these two manifestations of narrative as a cultural tool, there is a third way of understanding narrative that Wertsch derives from the Russian linguist Bakhtin (1981). This is the idea of the narrative utterance. For Bakhtin an utterance is a particular piece of language used by a particular user, for a particular purpose, at a particular moment in time, for particular interlocutors (real or imagined, present or absent). Using the earlier example of traditional tales to exemplify this, a narrative utterance could be a particular telling of Beauty and the Beast. The Disney film of Beauty and the Beast is a narrative utterance and my extempore bed time telling of it to my children would be another narrative utterance. The narrative utterance has a degree of specificity beyond what Wertsch terms a specific narrative. Table 1 represents these three types of narrative as a sociocultural tool.

Table 1. Wertsch's three types of narrative.

Narrative Type	Characteristics	Relationship	Traditional Tale Example
Narrative Utterance	Unique narration by a particular narrator, at a particular time, in a particular place, for a particular audience and purpose	Uses and is shaped by specific narrative	My particular improvised telling of Beauty and the Beast to my daughter at bed time
Specific Narrative	Particular dates, settings, actions, participants	Uses and is shaped by narrative template	Beauty and the Beast
Narrative Template	Abstracted general patterns	Sets the structure for specific narratives	Youngest marginalised sibling triumphs over all through steadfast virtue

Wertsch has mostly applied this model of narrative as a sociocultural tool, mediating understanding, to the subject of collective memory in large ethnic or national communities. Most of those influenced by his work have focused on the same area. However, this model has much potential for use in more localised sociocultural contexts such as particular professions and particular institutions. In order to be used in these types of sociocultural context, some refinement of Wertsch's initial three types of narrative is necessary and some reconsideration of how we interpret parts of his theory is also necessary (Philpott, 2014a, 2014b).

One of the elements that need to be refined is the narrative template. The narrative templates that Wertsch envisages are shared by entire ethnic or national communities. To use Wertsch's model in a more localised sociocultural context we need to consider narrative templates that might be unique to specific professions or institutions. They would share the same features of Wertsch's narrative

templates in that they would be abstracted and that they would be co-authors of a number of specific narratives within that particular sociocultural context.

Applying Wertsch's Model in a Single Institution; an Example
Philpott has recently applied Wertsch's theory to understanding how student teachers' narratives of teaching and learning experiences during school placement are co-authored by the narrative templates of initial teacher education and of the department in which they are placed (Philpott, 2014a). This application required a development of Wertsch's theory that made it applicable to this sociocultural context. This development was derived from empirical data generated in the context. The data consisted of transcribed recordings of three way conversations between student teachers, school based mentors and university based tutors as they discussed a lesson taught by the student teacher and observed by the mentor and tutor. All participants gave written consent for the gathering of this data and for its use in this research. The research was also approved by the appropriate University ethical approval process. In the extracts below the transcripts, students, mentors and tutors are designated A to E. The transcripts are intended to capture what was said with the minimum of interpretation or intervention from the transcriber. For this reason, no punctuation has been added and false starts, hesitations and so on have been retained.

Reading the transcripts suggests that three types of narrative about teaching and learning can be seen in the data. These three types of narrative can be distinguished by levels of specificity. The first type of narrative is the narrative that deals with specific teaching and learning incidents in the lesson being discussed. Examples of this are:

> 'I mean I think I allocated twenty minutes for the first part of the task where I wanted them to we actually go over the worksheet with them read for a bit and have a class discussion but as you saw it ran over by about ten, fifteen minutes?'
>
> (Transcript B, Student B).

> 'Because they started to pack away and it became all disorganised I went through one or two of them and then afterwards I and I just thought well *((puts arm in air and shrugs)) ((laughs))* they've gone I can't get them to sit back down again'
>
> (Transcript C, Student C).

Both of these examples describe particular single incidents that happened at particular moments with particular pupils or classes in particular lessons.

The second type of teaching and learning narrative evident in the transcripts is one that deals with the broader or longer term picture of how things generally are in terms of teaching and learning in this school or department, or how things generally are in terms of teaching and learning with this class or pupils in the class. Examples of this kind of narrative are given below:

> 'They do really like working in groups and they do come up with a lot of good ideas'
>
> (Transcript A, Student A).

> 'And usually with usually with that group I'm quite comfortable in knowing that when I've told them something straight away they usually know what I'm doing'
>
> (Transcript C, Student C).

This type of narrative deals with typical or general behaviour and events rather than particular incidents. However, it needs to be recognised that these general behaviours and events still relate

to particular schools, pupils and/or groups of pupils, so they are not general in the sense that a narrative template would be.

These first two types of narrative, narratives of particular incidents and narratives of typical or general events, are clearly evident as narratives in the transcripts. The third type of teaching and learning narrative may be less immediately evident. This is the narrative of teaching and learning implied by the Standards for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) in England (TDA 2008) and by officially provided guidance on teaching and learning such as that produced for the National Secondary Strategy in England (Department for Education, 2013) that were still current when these recordings were made. These may be less immediately evident as narratives because the Standards for QTS, for example, are not obviously narrative in form. Nevertheless, the Standards taken collectively do imply a narrative of teaching and learning. They do this in at least two ways. Firstly, as Bruner (1991) argues, narratives constitute the events they narrate they do not just organise pre-existing discrete events. What we consider to be the salient or significant features of a situation are created by the narrative we tell about it. In other words, narratives have an ontological function in that they establish what discrete phenomena or events there are in the situation being narrated and how they are related. The Standards for QTS constitute linguistically the salient features of the teaching and learning context. They also imply a causal connection between these different elements or features. What is true of the Standards for QTS is also true of the guidance that has emanated from official sources in England in recent years such as guidance on teaching, learning and assessment strategies from the Secondary National Strategy. These implied narratives set up a model of what the narrative of teaching and learning events should be. They are the officially sanctioned narrative or the canonical narrative (Bruner 1991) of teaching and learning. In terms of Wertsch's framework they can be seen as a form of narrative template.

This implied canonical narrative or narrative template of the teaching and learning process surfaces frequently in the transcripts. Examples include:

> 'Em but I suggested em that I you didn't really do in that lesson was modelling'
>
> (Transcript C, Mentor C).
>
> 'Were you were you attempting a three part lesson there?'
>
> (Transcript C, Tutor C).

Modelling is a recommended teaching strategy in which teachers demonstrate the tasks or activities they want pupils to complete. The three part lesson was the officially recommended lesson structure for teaching in England at this time. These examples show that there is a canonical narrative of the teaching and learning process that is derived from official guidelines on teaching and learning and that this is incorporated into the narrative making activities in this situation.

Using these three types of narrative we can revise the framework from Wertsch to be useful in this particular research context. This is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Wertsch's types of narrative revised for ITE.

Narrative Type	Example
Narrative utterance	Narrative of *particular* teaching and learning incidents in a particular lesson with a particular class
Specific Narrative	The *general* narrative of how things are in terms of teaching and learning in this department or school
Narrative template	*canonical* teaching and learning narrative of the Standards for QTS and official guidance on teaching

In this refined or revised model based on Wertsch, the narrative of particular teaching and learning incidents uses the socioculturally specific narrative tools of the other two levels as 'co-authors'. Similarly, the narrative of typical or general events in this school or department uses the culturally specific narrative tool of the canonical narrative or narrative template as a 'co-author'. In each case the other levels are drawn on as a resource for the creation of the narrative.

Conclusion

Once Wertsch's model for this particular sociocultural context has been revised, it can be used to explore how the narrative template of this sociocultural context shapes the particular narratives that student teachers make of their experiences and, therefore, what they learn from the experience (Philpott, 2014a). These narrative templates 'co-author' what students learn from experience. Like the national or ethnic narrative templates that Wertsch researches, their power to influence the sense we make of our own experience might not always be fully acknowledged. We might see them primarily as enabling resources that allow us to give shape and meaning to complex experience but in doing so they constrain us to construct one kind of understanding rather than another. We can also use the revised model to research the processes by which student teachers learn to 'master' or 'appropriate' (Wertsch, 1997, Wertsch 2000) the narrative templates of their particular sociocultural context.

My purpose in this paper is not to insist that the particular adaptation of Wertsch's model that I have used is the only way that Wertsch can be adapted to understand the narrative construction of student teachers' understanding. Rather, my purpose is to encourage other researchers to see the importance of narrative research methods for researching teacher education and to encourage them to use and adapt Wertsch's model for their own contexts in a way that helps their understanding of how the sociocultural context of learning shapes what is learned.

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