

LITERACY & IDENTITY

Heroes, rebels, and victims: Student identities in literacy narratives

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The stories they tell about reading and writing stick with me long after students have left my class. One young woman could trace her love of reading back to childhood memories of sitting with her father every night after dinner reading the comics in the newspaper. Another once drew pictures on a story she had written, only to see her second-grade teacher toss it into the trash can with the admonishment "Big kids don't draw pictures on their writing." Then there was the young man who never cared for writing until his middle school social studies teacher encouraged his innovative approach to an essay about the U.S. Civil War. And how about the student who finally worked up the courage to show a science-fiction story she had written to her beloved high school English teacher, only to have him dismiss writing in that genre as a waste of time? She gave up attempting to write fiction of any kind.

Literacy narratives

These and other stories come from the literacy narratives—assignments where students are asked to tell about and reflect upon their experiences with reading and writing—that I have my students write. I am a fervent advocate of literacy narratives and assign them in almost all the courses I teach at every level. The form and the focus are sometimes different, depending on the course, but I never regret making the assignment

and never fail to find it as fascinating a learning experience for me as it is for my students.

Literacy narratives have been around for a number of years and are written about from a variety of perspectives. Some teachers have realized that these narratives can help uncover cultural constructions of literacy (Kamler, 1999), illustrate student passages between language worlds (Soliday, 1994), and raise questions about the politics of language acquisition (Eldred & Mortensen, 1992). Other teachers have used them to foster multicultural understanding (Clark & Medina, 2000), to complicate students' definitions of literacy (Fleischer, 1997), and to connect to students' parents (King, 1997). For me, literacy narratives provide a sense of students' prior literacy experiences and of their general feelings toward writing and reading. These narratives also offer me insights about potential student resistance to my pedagogical goals and approaches for the class. Students are usually too savvy to come right out and tell me that they don't want to do this kind of reading or that kind of writing. But they will often, in their discussions of past writing experiences, tell me how and, more to the point, *why* they dislike a particular kind of literacy practice. Understanding the source of such resistance allows me to consider how to construct my assignments in creative ways that might engage such students.

Issues and identity

What do literacy narratives have to do with issues of identity? Although literacy narratives have been discussed in terms of the events students relate and how to use them in the classroom, only recently has attention been paid to the identities students construct, for themselves and for their teachers, when they write literacy narratives. Of course, every writer in every piece of writing constructs an identity for an audience. Yet some teachers and scholars are examining more carefully the kinds of identities students tend to construct when they are writing about literacy for a teacher of reading and writing. These scholars are finding that many students, when writing such assignments, tend to adopt one of several recurring narrative structures. To adopt a particular structure, then, requires that students adopt a particular identity within that narrative. Often they construct a particular identity for teachers in the narrative as well. By looking more carefully at the identities students gravitate toward in their literacy narratives, and by responding overtly to this part of their text in our work with literacy narratives, we can uncover another layer for students about how literacy has influenced their lives and how they might alter such patterns in the future.

Carpenter and Falbo (2003), for example, noted how their first-year writing students, when writing literacy narratives, often portray themselves as the heroes of their stories, overcoming all obstacles to succeed in writing and reading at school. These researchers have also shown how powerful this heroic identity is for students who consider themselves to be successful writers. In these narratives it is the traditional individualistic heroic attributes—perseverance, self-reliance, self-confidence—that allow them to triumph. “They often write of the demanding language arts teacher who had to be appeased, of the difficult assignment that had to be unlocked, and of the physical and emotional terrains of the educational system that had to be navigated” (Carpenter & Falbo). (Another example is my student who found a love for writing through an assignment

about the Civil War.) Yet the hero identity constructed in the narrative portrays the student as confronting and eventually surmounting progressively difficult challenges.

Shifting identities

After a year of working as undergraduate peer tutors, the students in Carpenter and Falbo’s study were again asked to write literacy narratives. The researchers found that a student’s identity often shifts from being the lone hero, overcoming adversity to succeed, to someone who is more critical of his or her literacy practices and who sees them more connected to relationships with others—either teachers or writing peers. This awareness of the more complex and social nature of literacy “gained as a result of working with their peers causes not just a shift in identity, but, at least initially, an identity crisis. They discover, for better and worse, that they are not the writers they think they are” (Carpenter & Falbo, 2003). This shift in identity opens the door for more complex and nuanced considerations of literacy practices.

Paterson’s (2003) research has gone further in exploring the identities students construct when they write literacy narratives. Paterson looked first at the kinds of available narratives students chose when completing such an assignment. By looking at those narratives, it is possible to see the kind of identity the author presents. For example, Paterson noted that many students who are confident in their abilities write what she calls “rise-to-success” narratives where, much as Carpenter and Falbo pointed out, the writer is the hero of the narrative. Yet Paterson also saw different kinds of identities different students displayed in such narratives. Some students portrayed themselves as “child prodigies,” able and willing to excel at reading and writing from an early age. (This is like the student of mine who read with her father every night.) Others described the rewards and prizes they have accumulated through reading and writing, portraying themselves as

successful consumers of literacy and identifying themselves as literacy “winners,” because they have the most awards and prizes to show for their work. Still other students adopted the identity that through application and diligence they will better themselves.

On the other hand, not all the identities students adopt in literacy narratives are empowering or positive. Paterson (2003) also found students who wrote about being stigmatized through their literacy experiences, particularly in school where the student is the victim of bad or insensitive teaching. (Examples of this identity are in two stories from my students, the ones who had their work destroyed—either physically or psychologically—by their teachers.) Such students, Paterson noted, often wrote about themselves as being invisible or used metaphors about being unclean or outcast from the world of literacy.

There are some students who rebel against the established hierarchy or values of literacy. They portray themselves as bucking conventions or resisting the consumer-oriented approach to literacy that other students embrace. Yet they refuse to portray themselves as helpless victims. Instead, they choose to dismiss the values and assignments of the mainstream education, while often displaying what they consider their true literacy talents (Paterson, 2003).

It is also intriguing to consider the identities students construct for teachers in such narratives. These cover a great range and include heroes, martinets, nurturers, and buffoons—to name only a few. Such constructions are interesting enough in themselves, but when placed beside narratives teachers write about their experiences with students (Goodson, 1992, 2000; Haswell & Lu) they present fascinating connections and conflicts.

Considering the identities students adopt when writing literacy narratives allows for some intriguing possibilities in the reading and writing classroom. If we begin to make students aware of the kinds of identities they adopt when writing

these narratives and of how they might be able to change them in print as well as in their lives, we offer several important opportunities for student writers.

Useful exercises

For example, simply asking students to characterize the people in their narratives can be an eye-opener for them. Who is the hero, the villain, the most powerful person, and the least powerful person? Do these roles shift, and, if they do, when and how? When writing literacy narratives, most students are primarily conscious of relating events and emotions, and they do not focus on portraying the people involved—they certainly do not characterize themselves. In even this simple exercise, students can begin to see how they construct identities when they write. To push it a bit further, we can ask students to list the characteristics of the people involved who do not show up in this narrative. Afterward, some students find they want to revise their writing—they begin to see that writing about people always involves choices that create incomplete versions of identities. More important is that we can begin to show students how they (in the way of all writers) construct and portray particular identities in their writing and that such portrayals are under their control.

Another exercise is to ask students (after they describe the characteristics of the people) to describe the effect of each person on the events in their narratives. What role did this person play and why? How did other people respond to that person's actions? What other effects and actions have been left out of the narrative and why? Asking students to do these things helps them see how the identities they are constructing and portraying exist in relationships with other people and that those relationships influence and shape our sense of identity and how others perceive us. This exercise can be extended or adapted to the other kinds of literacy narratives students might read in memoirs by authors such as Maya

Angelou, Annie Dillard, or Russell Baker to help them consider how other writers construct their identities and why they include what they do, how they comment on it, and what they might be leaving out.

The final step in exploring identities in literacy narratives—and potentially the most powerful for students who see themselves as victims or rebels—is to ask students to rewrite the key moment (or moments) of the narrative from the position of a different identity. (For example, I would encourage my student whose science fiction story was dismissed by her teacher to rewrite the encounter and its aftermath, but I'd ask her to imagine that she had regarded his words as a challenge rather than a judgment.) This exercise encourages students to take on new identities that are successful and powerful in terms of literacy and to imagine as well what that would entail in terms of actions, attitudes, and emotions. Paterson (2003), in fact, noted that some students' "rise-to-success" narratives took the form of imagining success, even when they had not had it in conventional terms. This exercise can be completed by asking students to imagine a future literacy encounter and to write about how and why they might approach it from a more empowered identity.

It is obvious that imagining a scenario doesn't make it happen. Yet many students who do not feel successful as readers and writers think that these identities are the result of external judgments handed down by the literacy "authorities" in their lives. When told at a young age that they can't sing, for example, these students often accept the judgment as unalterable. Giving them

the opportunity to reconstruct the narrative and their identities as readers and writers can at least suggest the possibility that those identities could be different. The possibility of identifying themselves as successful writers and readers is often the first thing students have to imagine to enable teachers to open the doors to more enriching lives in literacy.

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