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## **NARRATIVE KNOWING AND THE STUDY OF LITERACY: COMPOSING STORYLINES OF LITERACY**

### **1. Introduction**

In this essay, I explore what narrative ways of knowing contribute to the study of literacy. I draw on examples from research I have conducted over the past decade in which I have used narrative methods to study literacy within ordinary persons' lives. I have conducted literacy life history studies with two distinct populations: 1). European American (white) pre-service elementary teachers living in the Midwestern United States; and 2). African American persons living in a rural community in the southeastern United States where slavery once prospered and a long history of racial oppression continues. These studies were informed by a sociocultural perspective on literacy (e.g., Brandt 2001; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983; New London Group, 1996/2000; Street, 1984), in which literacy is comprehended as something that persons *do* (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). When I designed a life history interview protocol in order to engage persons in conversation about their uses of literacy, I asked about more than simply how they learned to read and write in the context of schools or classrooms. Rather, I inquired into how they used language to communicate with others in a variety of contexts and relationships, using a variety of modalities.

One of the constraints I have encountered in using a sociocultural lens, however, has been that temporality is often elided. I have found that sociocultural research takes time for granted, situating instances of literacy practice within the here and now, and overlooking how "an encounter with literacy will always in some sense be an encounter with its history" (Brandt, 2001, p. 11). New technologies and materials have prompted people to create new relationships to literacy and to each other (cf. Brandt, 2001, p. 11). Scholars, like Brandt, have used narrative ways of knowing (Polkinghorne, 1998) in order to understand how literacy is a social, cultural, *and* temporal practice. Doing so has enabled literacy researchers, in the words of Norman Denzin (2000) "to develop new theories, new methods, and new ways of talking about self and society" (Denzin, 2000, p.). Yet literacy researchers have not been frank about the new understandings about literacy that have emerged as a result of narrative. In this paper, I look retrospectively at my experiences using narrative for studying literacy from a sociocultural perspective. I specifically focus on the "storylines" (Goodson & Sikes, 2001) or scripts that I have been able to compose about literacy. In my discussion, I am guided by these questions:

- What storylines on literacy practice have narrative ways of knowing enabled me to identify?
- What implications do such storylines pose for theories of literacy and methods for conducting literacy research?

To address these questions, I have reviewed my corpus of published research articles (Lachuk, 2014; Johnson Lachuk & Gomez, 2011; Johnson, 2010a; Johnson, 2010b; Johnson & Cowles, 2009; Johnson, 2008a; Johnson, 2008 b; Johnson, 2007), approaching each article as a rhetorical document that has a narrative plot, and tells a story that contributes to a broader research narrative about literacy (cf. Burton, Brown, and Johnson, 2014). As such, I have worked from an understanding that all writing is narrative writing, even research writing (Clough, 1992). I identified three "storylines" that I composed in these articles in order to pose relationships between storylines and narrative methods:

1. Literacy stories as moral stories
2. Literacy as narrative experience
3. Literacy-in-persons

### **2. Defining Narrative Research**

Across this body of work, Brockmeier's (2002) work on the culturally saturated nature of an individual narrative has been useful for helping me understand social, cultural, and historical narratives of literacy experiences. Brockmeier (2002) has theorized the relationship between a person's memory and social context as existing within a continuum, stating that a person's memory "about one's life appears only at first sight really 'individual.' Upon closer

scrutiny, we find it 'distributed' in the same way one's knowledge and one's self is distributed 'beyond one's head' (Bruner, 2001)" (p. 25). From this cultural historical perspective, in relating their life history narratives about literacy persons do more than simply recall moments in learning reading and writing, but recall "the memories of a social community" (ibid p. 24). Brockmeier declared

human remembering and forgetting take place along the paths laid out by certain cognitive structures or *frames of memory*. And because these frames are defined by a culture, we always carry the memories of this culture, even if they appear to be most private and intimate (p. 24).

Brockmeier's work has helped me comprehend how when persons recount unique and individuated narratives about literacy, they are not solely recounting stories of isolated incidents, but rather they are recounting the stories of their sociocultural and historical contexts. As such, we must listen carefully to what persons are saying, the standpoints they are taking, and the voices with which they are engaging, when they recount stories about literacy.

As narrative researchers have endeavored to understand the sociocultural relevance of single instances of storytelling, they have taken different approaches in the treatment of narrative data. Some researchers have named experience as narrative (e.g., Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). While others consider narrative to be focused on the telling of a story (e.g., Gomez, 2001). And still others see narrative as a linguistic unit (e.g., Gee, 1991; Labov, 1972; Ochs & Capps, 2001). In my work, I define narrative research as that which is concerned with inquiry into the living, telling, composing, and analysis of stories. In two studies, I have used a life history approach, conducting oral interviews with persons about their literacy learning, that I have then used to a). construct a life history narrative for that person; and/or b). analyze the stories people tell about literacy for their form and function. In both instances, I have engaged in narrative ways of knowing (Polkinghorne, 1998), which involves structuring information schematically. In constructing life histories of participants, I have schematically linked or emplotted the events in their lives in order to understand their lived experiences as larger narratives (Polkinghorne, 1998). Likewise, I have closely examined how participants narrate specific life events using narrative form and features, like characters, setting, and dialogue (e.g., Labov, 1972; Gee, 1991;). And, I have considered narrative and literacy as lived experience. In these treatments of narrative data, I have engaged in narrative forms of cognition (Bruner, 1986), seeking to understand how the particular, whether the particularities of someone's life or the specific use of "revoiced speech," contributes to the whole (i.e., the whole of the narrative or the broader social, cultural, and temporal context). In the next section, I explore how these different ways of knowing in and through narrative have enabled me to compose three storylines about literacy.

### **3. Storylines of Literacy**

#### *Storyline #1: Literacy Stories as Moral Stories*

The first storyline I have composed is one in which literacy stories are comprehended as moral stories. By moral, I am not referring to universal rules of morality, rather I am referring to more localized and contextual understandings of what is right and wrong (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002; Noddings, 1984; Tom, 1984). I understand morality as "a person's beliefs and understandings which are evaluative in nature: that is, which distinguish, whether consciously or unconsciously, between what is right and wrong, good or bad" (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002, p. 3). Within the field of education, these understandings of morality have been broadly applied, but they pose particular implications for discussions of literacy. This is because the nature of the relationships in which literacy is practiced and acquired implies a morally nuanced exchange: literacy is acquired in our most intimate relationships – parent–child, sibling–sibling and teacher–student. For this reason, when one individual acts in a way that can be interpreted as not fully supporting the other's literacy (i.e. a teacher who uses a red ink pen to comment on a student's grammatical errors while ignoring the caliber of the student's ideas in a written essay), such action is often framed as a moral violation. Because of the moral aspect of literacy, teachers of literacy must be cognizant not only of the kinds of identities their pedagogies design for students but also of the moral implications of their instructional choices and interactions with students. Likewise, literacy teacher educators must be cognizant of how they prepare future literacy teachers for recognizing the moral aspects of their teaching.

I came to this understanding of literacy stories as moral stories when I interviewed 10 white preservice elementary teachers living in the midwestern United States about the literacy life histories. Across their life history narratives, preservice teachers used their stories about literacy to take a moral stand on the kinds of literacy instruction they received from both parents and teachers. In one case, a young preservice teacher named Rachel Rosenberg from the midwest narrated this story about her yearbook teacher, who she perceived to be "old" and "out of touch":

We had like a really old guy who was our yearbook person, and he was like:

*"I've been doing this since 1963. And I know they have those computer programs to do it now, but I think they're silly."*

Which really sucked because we had to take this computer class, so we all knew desktop publishing, like we'd learned it. We were like:

*"There's such a better way to do this." And he was like "No! Rubber cement, end those pages, cut it out, and -."*

All the people who did yearbook were like:

*"We'll take desktop publishing and try to convince him to move on and do it on the computer. Like we had the programs at school. Why can't we do it?"*

He's like:

*"No!" He's like "I like it better the old-fashioned cutting-and-pasting and rubber-cementing-it-down way."*

When analyzed closely for its narrative features, we can see how Rachel used characterization of her high school teacher in order to morally frame his pedagogical choices. She accomplished this characterization by rephrasing her words, and those of her teacher, using revoiced speech. In revoicing her teacher's speech, she makes certain assumptions about who he is. These instances of revoiced speech serve evaluative functions, revealing her attitudes toward her teacher, strengthening her characterization of him as "old-fashioned." For example, when Rachel says "'I've been doing this since 1963. And I know they have those computer programs to do it now, but I think they're silly'" she does so in a louder and more strident voice. Such a voice comes across as though she is parodying his authority and his instructional choices. She uses this kind of voice in order to establish her moral distance from her teacher and to morally evaluate his teaching methods, for she believed he was not making decisions that were in the long-term interests of his students. In short, Rachel uses this narrative to position herself as occupying "higher moral ground" than her teacher. For, not only did she perceive her teacher as stuck in his ways, but also he did not listen to his students and he ignored "better ways" of teaching his students – ways that might have honored the literacy practices they brought with them to class.

Rachel's story represented a subgenre of narrative that I identified across the data, in which white preservice teachers took a moral stand toward the actions of older, (usually) white, male figures whom they characterized as playing a gatekeeping role in their (and other people's) uses of literacy. In talking about their experiences with learning literacy, people often reveal their stances on "good" or "harmful" ways of supporting individuals' literacy learning. In this way, literacy stories are moral stories.

### *Storyline #2: Literacy Practice as Narrative Experience*

The second storyline I have composed is that of literacy practice as a form of narrative experience. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) define narrative experience as multidimensional, explaining that narratives are situated within context, relationships, and time. Literacy practice, similarly, takes form and evolves over time (cf. Murray, Huber, & Ross, 2012; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this way, literacy practices are not just sociocultural and interrelational, but they are also temporal. As a literacy researcher, I find such a three-dimensional approach to be a compelling mechanism for understanding literacy practice as narrative experience. Through a three-dimensional lens, we can see how persons' literacy practices are situated in time, in relationships, and in contexts. If literacy is treated as a narrative experience then, when persons practice literacy they are engaging with the pasts and "memories of their social community" (Brockmeier, 2002, p. 24). A person's unique and individuated uses of literacy are not isolated practices rather they are exemplars of literacy practice within sociocultural and historical contexts, existing within and across time and relationships. Like narrative experience, literacy is continuous.

One way that I really saw the multidimensionality of literacy was when I was conducting a life history study of literacy within a small, predominantly African American community in the rural southeastern United States (Pinesville). This community has a solid history of racism, persistent poverty, and white supremacy, linked to slavery and to Jim Crow-era segregation or de jure segregation. (Jim Crow refers to state and local laws of racial segregation enacted in the United States from 1876 to 1965). I worked in this community as a teacher educator and researcher from 2006-2009. As part of this work, I collaborated with teachers at the only school in the county, Pinesville Community School (an African American-majority, preK-12 school) on how local funds of knowledge could be identified and incorporated into the science and literacy curricula.

In this community as is consistent with an African American cultural tradition, literacy and education were seen as synonymous (Harris, 1992). People within this community learned literacy within a racially oppressive

context. In investigating how literacy was pursued in relationship to contexts and persons, it was difficult to disentangle literacy from both the historical context of the community and from education and schooling. When persons I interviewed engaged in reading, writing, and education they did so in a town that prospered under slavery, that still flies the confederate flag, and that is home to a museum commemorating the confederacy. They learned literacy within a community where it was once illegal for them to learn how to read and write, to own books or other reading materials, to attend school, and where few public dollars were committed toward them attaining their educational goals.

When I asked people about how they learned literacy or used reading and writing in their everyday lives, the conversation always tilted towards schooling. At first, as a sociocultural researcher I struggled with this conflation of literacy with schooling. It was not what I wanted the data to reveal. I wanted participants to tell me lengthy vignettes of their savvy and sophisticated ways of using literacy that often went unacknowledged in schools. Now that I look retrospectively at this study, I realize that I (naïvely) wanted to "discover" some unfound literacy practice that could then be integrated in the school's curriculum. This simply was not the case, however. Thankfully, I came to recognize my naïveté and I started to focus in on why I could not disentangle literacy from schooling within the community. What I learned was the following.

Literacy and education exist synergistically within Pinesville. This community has such a strong history of racism and oppression, literacy and education are each noteworthy and significant; but when taken together, their effects are only amplified. To represent the synergy that existed between literacy and education within the community, I began to represent the two concepts as "literacy/education." For, literacy/education is able to hit multiple "targets" per se, addressing how schooling and access to dominant cultural institutions, as well as literacy practices and skills are imperative for addressing and combating oppression and racism. In Pinesville, the two go hand-in-hand to bring about self-determination, mobility, and new opportunities. People who lived in Pinesville during Jim Crow-era segregation and the civil rights movement carry this problematic history with them in their efforts to advocate for and encourage literacy/education within the community today. In all, Pinesville represents a specific instance of how beliefs about the inextricable bond between literacy and education have persisted across time, creating a link between the community's past, present, and future, and solidifying the belief in literacy and education as "coveted possessions" (Williams, 2005).

Likewise, the story of Pinesville shows how "a community's material conditions greatly define" () how people orient themselves toward literacy, representing literacy and education as knotted. In literacy research, scholars often seek to disentangle literacy from schooling and education in an effort to understand literacy practices independently. Yet, Pinesville illustrates how critical the relationship between literacy and education can be for some individuals, particularly those who have been disenfranchised, prohibited from pursuing literacy and/or education, and have been kept at arm-reach from participating in society's institutions. Likewise, as articulated in Storyline #1, oftentimes when people tell stories about literacy they reveal their moral perspectives on how literacy should be experienced in schools. These beliefs may run contrary to scholars' long-held moral beliefs about what is "best" for "all" learners. Yet, rather than judging the moral decisions that local communities make about what is "best" for their children (as in the case of selecting a school curriculum that is seen as being "oppressive"), literacy scholars should seek to understand the complexity of a community and its particular orientation to schooling and literacy.

### *Storyline #3: Literacy-in-Persons*

The third storyline follows from the second one: literacy is an embodied practice that is "situated in historically contingent, socially enacted, culturally constructed 'worlds'" (Holland, et al., 1998, p. 7). I use the term "literacy-in-persons" (cf. Holland, et al., 1998) to theorize the continuous nature of literacy practice. If literacy practices are rooted in past contexts, are shaped by present contexts, and are directed toward future contexts (cf. Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), then (influenced by Brockmeier) when using literacy, persons carry the memories of their culture with them in their present and future practices. One way I like to think of "literacy-in-persons" is through the biography of Orlonia Phillips.

Orlonia Phillips was born in 1960 and raised in Pinesville. She has lived in the community her entire life. She attended grades 1-12 at the local elementary school in Pinesville, graduating high school in 1978. In 1982, she earned an associate's degree in early childhood education, and has worked as a teaching assistant at Pinesville Community School for 26 years: "I've been here [teaching in Pinesville] for 26 years. Most of these children, I done had [sic] their parents and grandparents. Now I am teaching their grandchildren and great grandchildren." When I analyzed Orlonia's life history interview, I identified the following repertoires of literacy practice: quotidian literacies, space literacies, place literacies, critical literacies, gender literacies, and church literacies. Studying these

repertoires within her life highlighted how her literacy practices were located within frames of history and biography and how the residue from past experiences informed Orlonia's "literacy-in-persons." Specifically, the residue left from Pinesville's white supremacist history had a profound impact on how Orlonia practiced literacy. For, Orlonia was born at the tail end of Jim Crow-era racial segregation within Pinesville.

For Orlonia, Pinesville's white supremacist history functions as a "text" in that it is an object she interprets and makes sense of to operate effectively within her community. As a text, this history has participated in creating "canons of truthfulness" (Apple, 2000, p. 46) within the community that represent a white supremacist ideology. The local newspaper is one text in which such canons of truthfulness circulate and are reproduced. For Orlonia, reading this newspaper's articles, required a repertoire of critical literacy practices in which she read for perspective, positioning, and power ( Jones, 2006) to unpack the articles' functions, ideological framings, and multiple meanings.

For example, in one stance Orlonia and I read archived issues of *The Pinesville Times* in order to understand the civil rights activities within the community in the summer of 1965. In our shared reading, Orlonia honed in one article in which the author lauded the efforts of the local sheriff in handling the civil unrest that took place that summer. Orlonia stopped at one passage that described picketing Front Street merchants for not hiring African Americans. The article described one elderly female picketer who was seen with a cold drink and a pack-age of crackers. The perspective of the reporter was that the picketer acted inconsistently—that the woman certainly purchased the soda and crackers from one of the downtown stores she was picketing. The power exercised by the reporter undermined the intentions and actions of the protestors and thereby positioned the protestors as insincere and hypocritical.

Upon reading this passage, however, Orlonia questioned the reporter's stance, asking "I wonder who *gave* it to her?" When I heard Orlonia's question, particularly the emphasis on the word "gave," I became curious about Orlonia's interpretation of the article. Orlonia's question implied that the elderly African American woman was "given" the cold drink and crackers by someone who wanted to frame her for crossing the picket line. So, in response to Orlonia's question, I asked, "Do you think a white person *gave* it to her?" To which Orlonia, smiling coyly, replied, "I don't know. Maybe." In this interaction, Orlonia directly questioned the reporter's perspective, making visible how power and positioning were operating within this article.

In another example, Orlonia and I read an article that described protests for school desegregation. Orlonia shared that African American youth who tried to board school buses headed for schools in Mill County were met by members of the KKK, who threw bottles at them. One youth who tried to board the school buses was a high school student and civil rights activist. A glass bottle thrown at the young man cut his cheek, leaving a scar. In reporting on this incident, the newspaper reported that this young man and 4 other high school students were arrested and charged with kidnapping for leading nearly 300 Pinesville High School students to a Freedom School, six miles outside of Pinesville. The perspective of the author was that these 5 students forcibly carried away 300 Pinesville High School students to the Freedom School. The power exercised by the author criminalized the actions of the students and thereby positioned them as "criminals." In reading this depiction of the young man's heroic efforts, Orlonia questioned, "Now, how could 5 kids kidnap 300 students?"

What is significant about these two examples is how the two newspaper reporters positioned African American individuals in a way that reinforced a white supremacist ideology. Rather than being positioned as local heroes who acted with integrity and courage, the reporters positioned African American individuals as hypocrites and criminals. In her reading, Orlonia detected and questioned the power and perspective of the reporters and how they used language as a tool for positioning African Americans. Although Orlonia does not link such positioning to white supremacy aloud, such thinking is implicit within her questioning. As such, these examples shed light on how Pinesville's history informs how Orlonia engages with printed texts. Orlonia has matured in a context explicitly committed to maintaining a system of white supremacy, and she bore witness to the civil rights activities within this community. These experiences have enabled her to cultivate an alternative lens for interpreting texts, like the local newspaper, that were used to question the intentions and undermine the efforts of African American individuals.

#### 4. Discussion

As I examined these storylines, I identified how narrative ways of knowing have allowed me to situate literacy multidimensionally. Literacy practice exists at the intersection of contexts, relationships, and time. When people use narrative to discuss their uses and learning of literacy, what comes to light is much more complex than simple recollections of skill building. As with all instances of narrative tellings, people position themselves in relation to the characters, settings, and plots of their literacy narratives. They take a stand on what is good and bad, right and wrong about how they used literacy at that time, or within that relationship or context. Likewise, when people's recollections of uses of literacy are emplotted in a narrative way, the insights that emerge reveal the

complexity the literacy practice. Literacy is never just used in the here and now, it is situated within time. When persons use literacy, they engage with their pasts and are directed toward their envisioned futures.

The three dimensional space of literacy practice is an always-shifting landscape: as relationships evolve and change over time, so do contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Uses of literacy that are observed in the present context are not only shaped by the past, but they are also often directed toward the future. And, while past, present, and future exist in relation to one another, their relationship is not necessarily a linear one. Within this multidimensional narrative space, I am grateful to narrative ways of knowing for enabling me to focus specifically on the temporality of literacy. A person's literacy practices are situated within time. Not only do people use literacy in the here and now, but as they develop a repertoire of literacy practices people engage with past practices and viewpoints on literacy, while keeping an eye toward the future.

People learn and use literacy now in order to respond to what Corinne Squire (2012) refers to as "the call of the future." As Squire explains it:

The call of the future [...] happens repeatedly, infinitely, and the outcome is not fixed in any way. A gift does not predetermine any response or return, but it does make an open appeal to us as some kind of recipient, even if we choose not to answer, we answer insufficiently, or we answer from the positions of a subjecthood that we can never fully assume. The responses we make in and through narratives to the gift of the future are not, though, random or relativistic; they occur in specific contexts, and they matter to us (p. 70).

From Squire's perspective, persons respond to the gift of the future through narrative. From my position, however, it is through a specific instance of literacy -- that is, the telling of a narrative -- that persons respond to "the call of the future."

## **5. Implications for Literacy & Narrative**

From where I stand, literacy and narrative cannot be disentangled. They inform one another. As a literacy researcher, for a long time, I was ashamed of thinking narratively. I thought it was not rigorous. It was too subjective, not scientific enough. But I have learned that as researchers this is what we do. We tell stories. We create characters out of participants. We put them in relationship with one another. Our research sites are settings that through language we construct -- never neutrally, never objectively -- in order to support our characterizations of others and the emplotment of our research events. Do we fabricate? No. Do we compose and construct? Yes. Regardless if we are thinking narratively or not, whatever our means of organizing knowledge, knowledge is always being organized from a standpoint and a perspective. Literacy researchers particularly need to keep in mind the narrative construction of their knowledge and experience.

Finally, a word about narrative: As a narrative researcher I have engaged with a range of methodological practices that I consider to fall under the purview of narrative research. I have used life history methods to elicit stories. And I have constructed life history narratives for participants using these methods. I have looked at lives of teachers and others as existing within a three-dimensional narrative space. I have emplotted events in order to create narrative understandings and storylines. I have also, however, parsed the words and narratives participants, analyzing them using discourse and conversation analytic techniques (e.g., Gee, 1991; Labov, 1972; Ochs and Capps, 2001) that have allowed me to get at more nuanced aspects of storytelling, such as how tellers use prosody to create characters against whom they take a stand. Or, how we (narrators and researchers) co-construct stories through narrative turns. As someone who has used the tools found within both "sides" of narrative research, I think it is critical that we do not allow ourselves to get too myopic in how we approach narratives. We need a range of tools and techniques that will enable us to generate a robust and rigorous body of knowledge about the topics for which we have passion.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have looked retrospectively at how I have composed storylines on literacy as a consequence of engaging in narrative methodologies. Through composing these storylines, I have come to appreciate the temporal and multidimensional nature of literacy practices. Using narrative methodologies like life history and narrative analysis have enabled me to expand my understandings of literacy and to think about literacy as being so much more than simply a skill. Likewise, I have come to see how telling stories about literacy is so much more than simply recounting the basic processes of learning to read and write. Rather, through their literacy stories, narrators convey moral perspectives, situate their literacy practices within a multidimensional scheme, and literally bring the histories of their families and communities into the present. It is for these reasons, that narrative knowing can be of benefit to researchers interested in better understanding issues related to literacy and literacy teaching and learning.

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