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MIT4: The Work of Stories

May 8, 2005

Writing Theory Versus Narrative Theory in College Writing

Stories have always been literacy indicators and basic elements of our human inheritance (Elkins), but between 1966 and 1969 narratology as a discipline began to develop a framework for dissecting narratives into component parts for analyzing function and relationship (Jahn). From a cognitive/psychological perspective, Bruner identifies the construction of narratives as part of the process of "folk psychology" involved in the attribution of motive and meaning for the establishment of identity and negotiation of social violations. Folk narratives and narrative theory share practical underpinnings; stories are purposeful translations of ordinary and extraordinary lives, retold "to pass time, to convey information, to let someone know who we are (or at least who we want to be)." Through storytelling we locate ourselves geographically and psychologically in a place, a family, and a community. Similarly, narrative theory provides a common shorthand for working within or between disciplines. Theory is liberating, in contrast to constraining, only when viewed in relationship to the "bigger picture." This is particularly true of academic writing theory, tasked with juggling the emphases of writing to know, for social, personal, and exploratory purposes, and workplace writing as a means to an end (Ketter and Hunter).

Composition instruction draws from narrative theory, which distinguishes between the story (the what) and the discourse (the how), and composition theory, which further addresses process, as prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. The composing process and

the terms *narrator* and *audience* are key elements in both. In composing narratives, storytellers and writers are expected to interact with these terms and processes for the purpose of creating and communicating meaningful texts. Beginning writers generally identify with spoken communication and find written communication of the same material more challenging where writing theory and narrative theory exist separately or coexist only within discipline-specific academic departments. However, merging these theoretical perspectives offers an effective tool for addressing the beginning writer's constructed realities, writer/reader, self and other, through the investigation of the subjectivities and objectivities of language as vehicles of expression.

Composing meaningful texts involves accessing the writer's personal narratives, basic values and structures that are infused with complex moral, emotional, and social negotiations. The resulting texts, composed of remembered stories and unexplored principles, are only partially cognitively constructed, making instructional analysis a intricate process. Stories are intuitively constructed for a specific audience and assigned the task of portraying the world as the narrator sees it, in language designed to recreate a similar world in another mind, but the beginning writer's narratives are less intuitive in their assignment of viewpoint, with perspective frequently skewed in the process of translation to text. The storytelling model of narrative theory offers a comfortable launching point for the writer's recreation of interior experience that lowers a new writer's anxiety regarding academic writing.

Storytelling is a common perceptual map of everyday life. Stories are credited with telling truths, preserving the human spirit, extending logic, symbolizing cultural realities, and advancing the understanding of time and space to remind the storyteller and the audience what is already known and what is only beginning to be imagined. Stories are condensed forms of identity, history, and power. These forms are explored in a variety of soft and strident tones, in

students' ungrammatical squiggles, polished drafts, and imaginative visual collages. Stories convert what is only sensed or imagined into transmittable forms, enabling an audience to investigate the physical, social, and psychological world in which the writer exists. Story forms are especially effective in language and literature based courses, where teaching and learning are a complex and delicately choreographed dance of theory and application.

Wherever supporting the achievement of psychological, social, and academic maturity is considered fundamental to higher education, the preservation and development of diverse perspectives is essential. Integration of past and current experience is the foundation of continued development toward maturity, and inclusiveness is not a new educational concept. This means teaching students to trust their own voices, not "to write perfect, empty and lifeless academic essays . . . lack[ing] authentic expression" (Blake par. 4). Inclusive instruction invites marginalized voices into the conversation, making personal experience a significant point of departure. Sydney Harris reminds teachers to "seriously consider what students will actually remember the morning after the exam (Blake par. 3). Effective arguments have been made for the significance of inclusive or multicultural environment, in the broadest sense of the term, but the challenge remains, not in the essence of the concept but in the execution.

Instructional theory must continually accommodate sudden shifts generated by cultural, political, and technological change, and writing theory is perhaps most interactive with issues of language and identity, constructs that do not simply begin in the classroom but incorporate previously invented patterns of literacy to meet new academic challenges (Bruckner par. 3). These proficiencies continue to develop, provided that the interaction adequately addresses the writer's motivation toward meaning making. Each cohort of beginning college writers has a unique perspective, constructed within a temporal framework of time, space, and events, and the

present poststructuralist narratives generally resist the conventional stability of previous cohorts'

narratives, favoring complexity and multiple meaning. Composition specialists are confronted

with the need to make this complex development "a seamless, lifelong process of becoming"

members of an academic community (par. 4).

When educational practices emphasize repetition, reconstruction, replication, from an

early age, students begin to surrender the love of learning as an instrument to satisfy intellectual

curiosity in favor of receiving recognition and externally defined rewards (Dennis par. 2).

Knowing the audience is as essential as knowing the story, and writers who are taught to "read as

readers," not as writers," are less capable of imaginatively manipulating and constructing

meaning from and within the text, and creating "plausible intertexts" (par. 14). Inventiveness

becomes less compelling than locating the prescribed meaning. When this application is carried

into writing practices, texts that might have become dialogic become tightly-focused monologues,

with less dynamic consideration of audience and purpose, and the story is lost.

Hidden among the inherently mystifying rules of grammar and mechanics that confound

beginning writers are basic storytelling rules. Knowing that the story-rich "narrative achieves an

amplitude that information lacks" (Benjamin 89), the teller's task is to provide "just enough"

information. Overtelling benefits information gathering but breaks the "psychological

connection," producing a disjunction between audience and event, theory and practice. In the

creation of personal narratives beginning writers most naturally grasp the subtle art of providing

"just enough" information, and the difference between an implied and an announced thesis. One

theory suggests that "not everyone is born to become a writer, but everyone can learn to write"

(Connelly par. 3). Sharing stories is a natural way to explore these boundaries. Whether writing

an interview (collecting another person's story) or writing a narrative account of a personal experience, writers discover what their present language skills can and cannot accomplish.

Teaching writers to hear their narratives as the text's "first audience" is perhaps the primary challenge in addressing poststructuralists' concerns. Writers learn to hear the essence of a text as story before attempting to see the story as text. When student writers are given professional or polished essays as models, they have no evidence of the writer's struggle to select the most effective word or phrase, to appropriately connect complex ideas, or to construct effective transitions. This leads to an assumption that "good writers" write without struggling with language (Wells). The drafting process gains significance when perceived as the first stage of storytelling, as collecting the story. Without this perspective the student rushes toward editing, short circuiting the recursiveness of the prewriting, drafting, and revision processes. By modeling a deliberately slowed progression and demonstrating the effects of selective modification at sentence level, instructors allow new writers to grasp the importance of viewing revision as the process of taking ownership of the composing process. Writing from a storytelling model is an investigative procedure that allows perusal of surface issues and exploration of deeper issues. Meaning making becomes heightened awareness of subtle or previously unexplored elements and decompression of intense emotional response (par. 7).

In addition to traditional writing and instructional theory studies, role-playing game theory offers a new perspective for further defining storytelling and narrative texts. Game theory focuses on plot, character, genre, and interaction of players, but also suggests more than an incidental metaphorical model for classroom writing. Gamers' goals include entertainment as well as achieving literary quality in a collaboratively constructed narrative. Game theory supports research in cognitive development, social psychology, linguistics, and literary theory,

all components of composition and narrative theory. Some gaming and writing researchers suggest contrasting masculine and feminine models for collaboratively composed texts; masculine texts tend to be more monologic, goal-oriented, centripetal, and competitive. Feminine texts tend to be more dialogic, process-oriented, centrifugal, cooperative, and open to change. Other theorists view these observations as stereotypical (Henry).

Narrative structures, feminine and masculine, order and codify time and space to reflect the writer's perception of cultural artifacts and worldview (Felluga). Traditional writing forms provide clearer boundaries but less fluidity for beginners' narratives and do not encourage "'living with' uncertainty" in the construction of meaning. Open structures, on the other hand, allow writers to experiment and to accommodate discovered shifts in meaning in textual representations of themselves and remembered events (McDonald par. 12). Gian Pagnucci notes that there are hidden consequences to discounting subjective, narrative practice and overemphasizing objectivity, including the diminishing of student identity, "removing too much of the students' original selves" and making it impossible for them ever to "go back home" (25).

Patrick Hogan and Gian Pagnucci raise interesting questions about these student writers. Hogan argues that "aspirations and emotions are fundamentally the same, no matter where we are born" and the stories a culture admires and preserves are variants of a "handful of shared patterns" (16). Writing instructors must respond to the competing voices of theory, pedagogical concerns, and budgetary ramifications but may also create spaces for storytelling that provide opportunities to construct identity and interpret meaning. The student narratives that survive the rigorous academic process, with genuine voices and stories intact, become significant social texts, and, more than personal and academic artifacts; the surviving, story-rich narratives become political and cultural indicators of a literate society's continuing development.

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