Becoming a *Real* Teacher: Chelsea's Narrative of Teacher Identity

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Abstract

In this study, I explored a narrative of emergent teacher identity with Chelsea, a novice music teacher. At the time of the study, Chelsea had completed her second year of teaching. Together, we revisited the artifacts of her undergraduate coursework and practicum experiences (journals, online forum posts, videotapes of her own teaching, written reflections of her teaching). We engaged in a narrative exploration of her journey of becoming a "real" teacher as Chelsea provided written and verbal narratives of "then and now"—a process of ethnographic hindsight in which Chelsea was able to provide both emic and etic lenses of the experiences revisited via the data. A thread of connection and detachment is pervasive throughout the data and the interpretation of themes as Chelsea's emerging identity is positioned in the juxtaposition of these stances.

Keywords

teacher identity, reflection, narrative, connection, detachment

Becoming a *Real* Teacher: A Narrative of Emerging Teacher Identity

Chelsea is a music teacher; once a student in our undergraduate music education program, I have followed her progress as a novice teacher and now as a graduate student. Chelsea has actively engaged in reflective practice (Schön, 1983, 1987) throughout her education and teaching experiences. We engaged in narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, 2000; Reissman, 2008) to provide a space for her to metacognitively "think about her thinking." We purposefully delved into her archive of pre-service and in-service journals and teaching videos to reconsider her narrative as a fledging music teacher. The unique combination of etic and emic lenses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) generated from Chelsea as the "outsider" now looking into her own early teaching experiences allowed us to explore her emerging teacher identity. Chelsea functioned as the "more knowledgeable other" (Vygotsky, 1978) for the less experienced self she saw in the videos and whose words she read in her own journals.

Chelsea and I collaboratively explored the longitudinal data from her lived experience as a pre-service and in-service music teacher (Kincheloe, 2003; Lyons & Laboskey, 2002, Schmidt & Zenner, 2008). As we approached the data with ethnographic hindsight (Britzman, 2003), we engaged in a metacognitive process of reflection on reflective practice. "The knowledge that can be made in hindsight can take on abstract significance, making from the past new ways to conceptualize the constellation of our present" (pp. 12-13).

Data included Chelsea's teaching video and written responses from her first methods class (elementary general music), collaborative journals she wrote with a peer in the (third-year) choral methods class, videos and online journal posts from her student teaching internship, and written responses Chelsea constructed two years later as she re-read her earlier narratives. Audio-

recorded reflections—talk-alouds offered in real time as we viewed the videos together—were particularly informative. Memories lived and relived in the viewing (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) served as a catalyst for Chelsea's reflections on those experiences. She was able to articulate what she was thinking at the time and now, as a more-knowledgeable teacher, could evaluate her own teaching and classroom environment with both emic and etic perspectives.

In our collaborative inquiry into the narrative of her lived experience, Chelsea paradoxically provided a detached lens to a world with which she was intimately connected. Bresler (in press) argues for *connected detachment*—that detachment and connection need not be viewed as opposing forces, but "are most generative when regarded as complementary." As Chelsea and I mutually engaged in re-searching her narratives of experience, we negotiated this juxtaposition of connection and detachment.

Limited Peripheral Awareness

As a second-year student, Chelsea had found the elementary general music classroom a good fit. Revisiting a videotape of and reflective journal from these early experiences, Chelsea remembered the lived experiences of her younger teacher-self and inserted comments in the journal *(italicized)* as a more experienced other.

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The first lesson I chose to present was "The Mexican Hat Dance" Form lesson. I felt very comfortable and confident with my lesson plan.

> *That was me saying, "My lesson is planned to the nth degree and I had every step planned out." I was so confident writing it. It seemed so easy to put it down on paper, but*

that actually turned out to be to my detriment. I was confident with my lesson plan but not with myself as a teacher. I counted on the lesson plan more than on myself.

My first bump was maintaining focus throughout the lesson. The students wanted to hop around or dance with their friends. I wanted the students to feel free to move and express the music physically but their activities weren't related to the music. Linda has her students seated on the floor which I found to be difficult. In reviewing the video, I thought it would be much more productive if the students were seated in chairs in a half-circle. The students would still be able to move and talk, but they would have some sense of "space limitations" and wouldn't be tempted to roll around on the floor.

I don't care so much about that anymore. Now I always have my students sit on the floor. At the time I needed some controls in place. I thought the kids needed some kind of outside situation to "keep them in" but really, it wasn't so much about their chairs as about what I was doing.

I felt like, because I planned the lesson so well, that the reason it wouldn't go wrong wasn't anything I was doing, it must have been something about the classroom arrangement. It's not like I thought I was anything so great, but I had planned this so well, it should have gone so well, how could this not be working?

Overall, I think the lesson went relatively well. The students all responded well to me and they enjoyed learning the A/B dance with partners. I was impressed with their ability to analyze the music in their own words. Sometimes I would ask a question in fear that I wasn't being clear, but they were all very quick to respond.

But really, now when I watch the video, it's only one or two kids that respond, not the whole class. It was like the class was a collective—if one kid said something, she was a

representative of the collective group. I was so reassured to have someone on board, that I took it as everyone being on board. I remember that I thought it was going so well because I was getting the answers that I wanted, but only from a few children. Now, I teach more to the individual child than to a generic classroom. I see them more now as people than as a "mass." That is when it started feeling more "real" to me—I was realized I was teaching "real kids."

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Like many novice teachers, young Chelsea focused entirely on how *she* was functioning as a teacher and her *own* experience of the classroom, admitting, *"I couldn't see past the third row of kids."* Although well prepared for the lesson, she struggled in managing the classroom, not noticing children outside her limited peripheral awareness. A more mature Chelsea had the distance needed to reflect on this personal teaching scenario. She shared this 'aha moment' as she re-storied this event.

I learned that I sometimes over-think a lesson plan to the point of being emotionally tied to it for my own success. The lesson goes very well as planned, but there have been times when the tides change. I could not switch gears! There comes a point where I have thought so long about a lesson that any movement away from my "vision" is like a black hole. The students were obviously ready to move on to the next activity yet—out of fear—I clung to every step of my lesson plan. I was scared that the students would be leading me instead of me leading them.

As a more secure teacher, Chelsea offered a window into the insecurities that plagued her as a young teacher. More connected to her own experience in the classroom than to the learner's, she

was unable to detach herself from her lesson plan. Her confidence was drawn from her musical and pedagogical thinking done *prior* to the teaching event rather than her ability to engage musically *with* students *during* the teaching event.

Until she reviewed the data years later, Chelsea did not realize that in her first year as a pre-service teacher, she functioned within a self-described "teaching bubble." She watched herself engage—quite effectively—with only those students within her arm's reach. If those students were engaged and seemed to interact with appropriate musical ideas, she assumed the entire class was on board.

Developing a Teacher Presence

Throughout the internship experience, Chelsea and her peers engaged in online blogging to reflect on their own experiences and to support each other with comments about their posts. It is here that the gap between novice and mentor teacher may seem perplexingly wide as the interns step into smoothly functioning learning communities. Here, Chelsea describes her strategy for bridging this gap (*with her own comments two years later, italicized*).

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From day one, my mentor teacher introduced me to her students as a "co-teacher" rather than an intern college student. I cannot express how much this simple introduction has improved my confidence in the classroom. Many of my pre-student teaching fears involved wondering: "How will I be perceived by my students? Will they be open-minded about learning from me?" When I was introduced as a *fellow teacher*, it made it very easy for the students (and me!) to understand my role and the ways we all should interact. In their minds, I was just another teacher instead of an awkward and doubtful novice. It was also a huge "A-ha" moment for me.

I'm a teacher! -–or so very close to becoming one. I suddenly had no problem putting on my "teaching pants" and jumping into things. It is funny how being provided a little bit of status can improve confidence.

It was amazing how my mentor teacher was able to hone in on exactly what I needed psychologically at the start of my student teaching experience! I obviously had a very boxed-in definition of what a "real teacher" was in my mind back then. As a pre-service teacher, I wasn't completely sure about my role in the classroom. That was quickly remedied when my mentor teacher made it clear that she saw me as a peer. I knew right then—on my second day of student teaching—that more than anything, I wanted to work hard to fill the role that my mentor teacher had suggested. I decided not to wait for it to "feel right" and I just went for it.

I am usually my happiest whenever I am very organized, and very "in control" of my own destiny. I often sit back and think *so much* that I begin to feel anxious about teaching before I ever actually get up there and do it. Since I know this so well about myself, I decided to really try my hardest to let all that go and just "jump in" without being so analytical.

I remember that "jumping in" was not exactly easy for me to do at first in my student teaching placement. In the beginning, I was really hard on myself when a lesson I planned didn't go over well.

The way my mentor teacher modeled lessons, allowed me to teach her lessons, then gradually encouraged me to teach my own lessons was a great strategy and what I call "teacher persona scaffolding."

Having a precise model for developing my teacher persona was very important. Since young teachers often look from the outside in, they are often wrapped up in their own teacher-image more than anything else. I think they often struggle to stay true to their personal identity

when developing their teacher personas. Filling the shoes of "teacher" requires much more than simply applying your current "self" to a classroom environment. I had to figure out how to develop an entirely new version of myself. A young teacher shouldn't be figuring out how teaching can fit into them, but how they can fit into teaching. After all, the teaching profession shouldn't be about the teacher and their personal identity as much as it should be about the students and their learning experiences. When I first began mirroring my mentor teacher's teaching patterns, it was a little awkward—like wearing a pair of pants that didn't quite fit. Over time and with practice, I could ask essential questions and guide student learning in my own way. I was no longer a photocopied version of my mentor. Rather, I was able to recognize what made her teaching persona effective and I eventually understood what effective teaching looks like enough to make it work in my own way.

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Chelsea struggled with her desire to be a "real teacher." She felt confident to design lessons and admitted that she would overcompensate for her weaknesses by overthinking the future teaching scenario. Unsure of how to look like a teacher, Chelsea intentionally took on her mentor's persona, her ways of being in the classroom. Not yet knowing how to fit into teaching, she put on another's way of being that gradually "fit" as her own personality became infused with her identity as a music teacher. As Chelsea detached herself and became less self-conscious in the classroom, her doubts about how others perceived her diminished. This detachment from self, with greater connectedness with the learners in her classroom, paradoxically connected her to her teacher-self.

I remember thinking for quite some time that there was a distinct difference between being a "pre-service" teacher, and being a "real" teacher. I made a very big deal in my

mind about some hypothetical "big moment" in which I would transform into the real teacher I idealized. My previous definition of a "real teacher" has changed. It extends far beyond being able to stand up in front of a class and guide musical experiences. I think now that being a "real teacher" is having the ability to reflect upon my own daily act of teaching and how to alter what I do to best suit the learning needs of my students. It isn't only the understanding of what goes into effective teaching, but putting it into practice.

Chelsea now sees the uncertainties of classroom experience that once plagued her as the fertile ground for musical and pedagogical growth and provides stable ground for her emerging identity. Chelsea affirms that the "I have arrived as a teacher" moment she had hoped would magically occur, has occurred now that she has let that notion go. She has become a teacher.

Narrative as a Vehicle for Shaping Experience

Chelsea's process of storying her narrative of becoming a teacher—her thoughts and feelings as expressed in written journals and blogs—helped to shape her teacher identity. For Chelsea, the writing of narratives became a safe place to name the experience and in the naming, she began to call herself a "music teacher." She used the narrative space between self and future teacher-self to explore her evolving identity, reveal weaknesses, a lack of confidence, and to see a teacher that could not engage beyond her "teaching bubble." As Chelsea found ways to expand beyond her teaching bubble, to see classrooms as places where "real" children live and learn, she lost her insecure non-teacher self and found a self that could fully be present to the learners in her classroom. For Chelsea, being (outwardly) present to her learners paradoxically reconnected her (inwardly) to herself as someone who is dynamically engaged with musical learners.

Witherell and Noddings (1991) suggest that "the teller or receiver of stories can discover connections between self and other, penetrate barriers to understanding, and come to know more deeply the meanings of …her own historical and cultural narrative" (p. 94). As both teller and receiver of her narratives, Chelsea lived and relived, told and retold her narratives of learning to teach. She re-entered her own experience, with layers of detachment and connection, as she came understand the dynamic nature of her teacher identity. Chelsea is at peace with being at sea as she now thrives on the uncertainty of being a *real* teacher. Her ability to critically evaluate her own teaching and to narratively negotiate her teacher persona proved to be empowering—self-empowering. Engaging in narrative in the moment and in purposeful retrospection allowed Chelsea to bear witness to the temporal and experiential nature of becoming a teacher. Rather than looking for a point of arrival, Chelsea has embraced the journey.

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