

## A CASE STUDY OF NARRATIVE INQUIRY WITHIN EFL TEACHER EDUCATION IN ARGENTINA

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### Introduction

Argentinean narrative inquiry in EFLTE is a comparatively recent undertaking (Álvarez, Porta & Sarasa, 2011; Álvarez & Sarasa, 2007; Barboni, 2012; Sarasa, 2008). This work reports on a narrative inquiry developed naturalistically during the second half of the year 2011, involving a chosen sample of sophomores and juniors taking the course Overall Communication (OC) in the undergraduate EFLTE Program (EFLTEP), School of Humanities, Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, Argentina. It studies how, once the class had surveyed epic representations in the films *Michael Collins* (Jordan, 1996) and *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (Loach, 2006), undergraduates were encouraged to narrate orally 'common' lives of individuals whose experiences, nevertheless, deserved to be told. Subsequently, this paper focuses on students' written summary of the 'unheroic' existences they had related orally, their appraisal of class events, and their additional feedback. Next, themes originating from these gathered responses are analysed narratively within their specific settings of production and reception (Pavlenko, 2007). Finally, the article discusses some ways in which narrative inquiry can enhance EFLTE and professional growth.

### Literature review

It seems rather a commonplace to state that the teacher's life and work are linked inextricably. Scholars have argued that professionals should create sites of practice to examine the private realms of teaching and of learning how to become a teacher (Braid, 1996). These ideas have been sustained by the narrative turn in education (Bruner, 1991a, 1991b; Polkinghorne, 1988).

The concept of narrative inquiry in educational research was coined by Connelly and Clandinin (1990). It constitutes "a way of thinking about experience," while "to use narrative inquiry as a methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006: 477). Thus, narrative inquiry

understands experience as a "storied phenomenon." For its part, "narrative research... (is) a methodology for inquiring into storied experiences" (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009: 598). In EFLTE narrative inquiry has become the "systematic exploration that is conducted *by* teachers and *for* teachers through their own stories and language" (Johnson & Golombek, 2002: 6; Johnson & Golombek, 2011c). It constitutes research *and* also professional development.

Narrative inquiry into teacher education has thrived (Clandinin, Steeves & Chung, 2007; Dewhurst & Lamb, 2005; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2004; Frankland, 2010; Murphy, Huber & Clandinin, 2012; Phillion, He & Connelly, 2005; Savvidou, 2010; Trahar, 2009). Actual narrative inquiry practices in teacher education create a "pedagogy of life-telling" (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002: 408). The private tales generated disclose teachers' personal practical knowledge, realized "in the teacher's practice." It becomes "a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions of the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988: 25). Personal practical knowledge is shaped and articulated in professional knowledge landscapes (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995: 4-5) "positioned at the interface of theory and practice" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996: 24).

For their part, ELTE researchers have undertaken narrative inquiry into teachers' ways of knowing (Bailey & Nunan, 1996; Bell, 2002; Golombek, 1998: 449; Freeman & Richards, 1996). Here originates a research tradition in ELTE which "examines teaching... holistically, taking into account, for example, the role of affective, moral and emotional factors in shaping teachers' classroom practices" (Borg, 2003: 93; Borg, 2006). Personal practical knowledge resignified by narrative inquiry (Johnson & Golombek, 2002) allows language teachers to transcend Lortie's complaint that "schooling is long on prescription, short on description" (Lortie, 1975: vii). Likewise, teacher-generated knowledge encourages lifelong professional development (Golombek & Johnson, 2004; Mann, 2005).

ELTE has also carried out narrative inquiry at different levels in varied instruction settings (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008; Cowie, 2001, 2003; Hayes, 2009; Liu & Xu, 2011; Tsui, 2007). Narrative has thus emerged as a learning tool, a research methodology, *and* as a democratizing narrative pedagogy (Nelson, 2011). Johnson and Golombek (2011c: 488) reconceptualize narrative inquiry in S/FLTE as a professional development process and as research on teaching *and* teacher research, defining the former as a complex, located, individual route (Johnson & Golombek, 2011b). These authors (Johnson & Golombek, 2011a) argue for S/FLTEPs to engage in *actual* narrative practices fostering teacher development. Other scholars celebrate narrative inquiry because it repositions experience and emotions, emancipates students and teachers, revalues local protagonists and contexts vis-à-vis their global counterparts, and prepares teachers to become culturally and socially receptive towards their practices and their students' lives (Benson & Nunan, 2005; Canagarajah, 2005; Nelson, 2011; Nunan & Choi, 2010; Smolcic, 2011).

### Research context and participants

The undergraduate EFLTEP, School of Humanities, Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, Argentina, offers a four-year curriculum divided into four domains. The first encompasses courses centred on linguistic strategies, aiming at near-native proficiency in English in the four skills. The second domain concentrates on the grammatical and phonological features of Standard English and their interaction in discourse. Third, cultural courses survey some of the histories and literatures of different English-speaking societies to promote intercultural awareness. Lastly, pedagogical-content courses attend to themes in general education, curriculum, EFLTE, and SLA theory and research. Most courses are imparted in English, using texts destined for NSE in higher education (Álvarez, Calvete & Sarasa, 2012).

This work summarises a narrative inquiry (De Laurentis, 2012) carried out in its natural setting during the second half of 2011 with a selection of eighteen out of thirty five sophomores and juniors (five out of the thirty five had been absent during the class discussed here while twelve chose not to email their narratives to the course instructor) attending the EFLTEP course Overall Communication (OC) (Calvete, 2012; Calvete, De Laurentis & Sarasa,

2012). This linguistically oriented course is taught in English. It aims at deepening awareness of the past and present world roles of English (Canagarajah, 2006) and of the composite problematics of some cultures where it is now used (Schneider, 2006) by analysing print and media cultural products. Instructors also endeavour to render OC contents relevant to EFLTE (Álvarez, Calvete & Sarasa, 2012; Calvete & Sarasa, 2007; Sarasa, 2007).

The naturalistic study originated in a two-hour session in November 2011, after OC students had spent sixteen class-hours dealing with the films *Michael Collins* (Jordan, 1996) and *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (Loach, 2006) with the lecturer, within a syllabus unit on Irish Studies (Calvete & Sarasa, 2007; Sarasa & Calvete, 2011). Among other issues, the class problematized representations of Irish heroes displayed in these two productions (Ó Giolláin, 1998).

After exploring the films, the students were asked to carry out research on heroic figures and to narrate the lives of their chosen person in class. Finally, the author—the instructor responsible for the course—drew on work by Clandinin, Steeves and Chung (2007) and asked the lecturer to devote a two-hour class to students' narratives of 'unheroic' lives of individuals whose existences, without being messianic or known publicly, deserved to be told (Calvete, 2012; Calvete, De Laurentis & Sarasa, 2012; De Laurentis, 2012). The class was led by the lecturer and observed visually by OC unpaid undergraduate teaching assistant.

### Research design and instruments for data collection

The two purposes of this study are to describe the selected written narratives on 'unheroic lives' produced by OC students—analysing their storied perceptions on the experience—and to discuss the implications these practices have for EFLTE. Its secondary purposes are: to interpret students' perceptions of this undertaking concerning their personal/professional lives and to gauge the formative influence of student-generated narratives. In this case, the narrative process undertaken during and after the class was in itself a form of inquiry, a "way of thinking about life"—i.e. students' lives—within "the phenomenal world in which experience is mediated by story" (Xu & Connelly, 2009: 221-222).

The two-hour class during which the students told their 'unheroic' tales was led by the

lecturer. OC unpaid undergraduate teaching assistant observed its development visually, since these students are not used to being filmed or recorded: they tend to find taping inhibiting (Howard, 2010). To rebuild students' narrative experiences (Clandinin, Steeves, Li, Mickelson, Buck, Pearce, et al., 2010), the author asked the lecturer to reconstruct class events orally. Likewise, the author requested that the participants and undergraduate teaching assistant email voluntary written answers to an open-ended questionnaire. Respondents referred to the 'unheroic' life they had chosen to narrate, summed up class events, expressed their opinions on the experience, and added pertinent remarks. Eighteen out of thirty five sophomores and juniors attending the course (five had been absent during the class in question) emailed their answers voluntarily. The twelve students who did not reply of their own free will were not entreated to do so subsequently. In addition, some students had already referred to the class in the comments section of the blog the course had until 2012 and during informal exchanges with OC unpaid graduate teaching assistant (De Laurentis, 2012). The researcher read the storied accounts as instances of students' singular experiences (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009). She conducted informed conversations with the lecturer and unpaid undergraduate and graduate teaching assistants, interacting alongside all participants in the environment where the narratives had originated (Caine & Estefan, 2011). Likewise, the author, the lecturer, and the teaching assistants conceptualized the data obtained, while drawing on the theoretical literature (Polkinghorne, 2007). The focus was placed on the thematic content of students' 'unheroic' stories and class reconstructions. There follows an analysis of students' written narratives, finding themes after examining these collected texts (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) in their contexts of EFL production and reception (Pavlenko, 2007).

### **Results 1: Emerging protagonists in students' 'unheroic' narratives**

Out of the eighteen students (S) who volunteered an answer to the author's questionnaire, sixteen—plus the lecturer, who also told her grandmother's story at the end of the class—explained in their written responses (the lecturer through oral communication with the author) that they had chosen to talk about family members. These included two great-grandparents, seven grandparents, and a great

aunt. Their narratives concerned lives that were not heroic in the sense of their protagonists being known publicly but were dramatically or epically 'big': e.g. characters had participated in events such as the two World Wars. Their lives revealed public and private exertions before arriving in Argentina: "love stories" and "stories of struggles" (S6). Their narrators' purpose was to express admiration for their great-grandparents. For instance, S16's great-grandfather "deserted the (Italian) army in 1941 and came to Argentina. A few years later, he sent for his family and earned his living by building houses." These tales showed individuals overcoming large odds and constructing lives in a new land.

Grandparents' stories involved surmounting largely private grief and hardships. For example, S4's grandfather had been a physically abused child who "in spite of all his (childhood) suffering... never repeated the circle of violence; on the contrary, he became a loving and confident father and a patient and funny grandfather." The realm of the public emerged in an orphaned grandmother's life, a battered wife who had lost two of her seven children to the Argentinean dictatorship's repression (1976-1983) and two more to disease. Many among the remaining grandparents were likewise abused/orphaned and /or very poor children. S12 admitted knowing little about her grandmother's "childhood and teenage years because she never talked about it, the reason for her not sharing anything was that her mother had no money to support her and sent her to an orphanage." There was one immigrant, a hard-working Spanish grandfather who "had to settle in a country which was not his homeland and adapt to it. (He)... also... had to witness the deaths of all his brothers and sisters, and also his wife, but he was strong enough to survive and live without them" (S15). According to their grandchildren, these grandparents had broken free from their traumatic past, building productive family lives, despite the privations they had undergone. As to the great aunt, she had beaten cancer through "her mental strength and her unbreakable force of will to hold on to life and never lose hope" (S7).

Next came parents' stories, five of them, and one of a sister. The latter was a young single mother who became an elementary school teacher while raising her child. Parents' lives were less publicly impressive than the older generations' since the former's struggles involved working hard, obtaining a college

degree, or raising a family (in one case migrating abroad). As S2 indicated, there was “nothing special, just being good parents” because parents seem to have “special powers” and “perform deeds.” S9 recounted how she changed the original protagonist of her story (Polish nurse Irina Sendler, who had saved countless lives in the Warsaw Ghetto during WWII). After listening to her partners’ narratives, S9 decided to focus on her mother. S18 gave up the idea of talking about her mother—who had passed away when she was six—to focus on an elderly neighbour, a widely-travelled physician. Finally, S11 chose canonized Father Pio from Pietrecina (Italy), “a common man and a saint.”

In brief, the contents of these narratives were descriptive and appraising of the moral qualities these lives reflected rather than episodic and factual. Their spirit was anchored in epic and drama: these were grand tales in stature and scope.

## Results 2: Emerging values and knowledge in students’ narratives of the class

Students’ written class reconstructions strived to elucidate the experience. The messianic attributes, charisma, and physical prowess of heroes in Irish culture (Ó Giolláin, 1998) — which the class had used to analyse the lives of great men in *Michael Collins* (Jordan, 1996) and of small people in *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (Loach, 2006) — were replicated in the values underlying students’ tales. S1 explained that “we have chosen to tell our relatives’ stories because, in my opinion, we admire their ability to overcome hardships or to do something brave.” S15 stated that “it is due to their determination and courage that we think of (these relatives) as heroes.” S16 observed that the (great) grandparents—more distanced in time and space—performed more heroic deeds than the parents—closer and more familiar to the narrators’ lives. In this light, “some of the choices were similar to mine, many grandparents or great-grandparents had fought in either one or both world wars and had been able to overcome suffering and start their lives over. Other choices were more related to everyday efforts” (S16).

Participants enjoyed these success stories, if not from rags to riches, then with a relatively happy ending when efforts were rewarded. Thus, “all of the stories were teachings of courage, endurance and most important of love” (S7). The undergraduate teaching assistant indicated that the class:

told true stories of ordinary people—mainly our grandparents—who had suffered because they underwent many hardships, mainly because they had had to flee from their country, had fought a war, had worked very hard since they were kids, but who had been happy too because they got married and had kids, succeeded in life, accomplished their goals, etc. (Undergraduate teaching assistant).

Students’ reports exhibited the group’s moral inclinations (Fernstermacher & Richardson, 2005; Osguthorpe, 2008): the class atmosphere was “moving” (S1) for many or “aroused deep-rooted feelings” (S4, S5). Participants remembered shedding tears—including the lecturer who had told her grandmother’s tale at the end—while also laughing at times. Students listened “carefully” (e.g. S3), being “deeply engaged” (S10) in paying attention to their classmates’ words, or remaining “silent and respectful” (S6).

Regarding participants’ representations of the experiential knowledge created—articulated in EFL realistically and communicatively —S4 stated that “for the first time we were able to openly express our most private feelings in an academic environment.” The next extract connects the affective domain with the knowledge produced.

Whenever I think of the moment we shared during the class, I always think it was one of the greatest experiences since I entered university. Not only were we learning, we were listening to what each other had to say, and we were anxious to know more and more about the person we had right next to us, and about their relatives’ life. It was a class of mixed emotions, we laughed and cried, but I REPEAT... we learnt (S9).

S10 praised the value of personal experience: “we were talking about things we cared and only we knew about and wanted the rest to know it too.” S11 linked the public and the private lives discussed relating “what we had seen in class—(Ó Giolláin’s, 1998) paper about heroes—and our personal lives.” Everybody—including the lecturer and the undergraduate teaching assistant—felt that they had learned genuinely from the rest when the focus of attention had shifted from their individualities to shared experiences. The class was able to construct their communal knowledge and empathy, as explained below.

I think we connected even more, even if some of us knew each other from other courses. This gave us a kind of family feeling, our families had all gone more or less through the same things, all—or most—of us are immigrant descendants and our stories melted into one,

the one of our great-grandparents (or grandparents coming to this country looking for a better lifestyle (S6).

Finally, the use of EFL, the sense of community achieved (students explained how, as the class progressed, they became more confident and eager to share their stories) might have had a liberating effect regarding narrative content (Pavlenko, 2007). In S5's case, her grandmother had grown up in an orphanage, been an abused wife, and lost four children. S5 confessed that

It was a very special class for me because it was the first time I talked about my family's story in front of other people... As I finished talking I realized I had felt comfortable, that I had shared part of my family's story that I had planned not to mention—because I felt ashamed—and I also realized that many other students' unheroic characters, specially grandparents, had gone through tough situations just as my grandmother had (S5).

This is related to students' change of the protagonists of their story and, as has already been stated, choosing a loved one as the class proceeded. The undergraduate teaching assistant explained that “most... brought information about a member of their family, and those who didn't, decided to change the information on the spot and to talk about one of their relatives.” Being able to inquire narratively into the lives of their loved ones imbued the students with heroism: they acquired the power to tell.

### Results 3: Emerging visions of EFLTE in students' reconstruction of the class

Those respondents who assessed the class experience in the questionnaire remarked that the knowledge generated by their involvement had allowed them to find new sites for learning about themselves. S1 stated that:

We refer to that person by saying “the blonde girl... the tall girl... the one who speaks fluently... the one who always does the homework” but we never know who she really is... We base our judgement on superficial features. This experience helped me to pay attention to other people, to see a huge part of their lives that could not be contained in a classroom. Therefore, I started talking to my classmates, and to listen to them. After the class we all met in the student cafeteria and we kept on talking about our lives. I told them about my own life, my dreams, my plans, and we were all delighted to know more about each other (S1).

The limitation of lives confined within classroom limits was challenged by the students. When class time was up and they had had to

vacate the classroom for the incoming group, they invited the lecturer and the undergraduate teaching assistant to the university cafeteria to continue telling their stories there. In generating knowledge, the students found the power to create a novel location for pursuing their education beyond its academic venue (Johnson, 2006): they began to create a professional knowledge landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, 1996).

The natural critical learning environment generated (Bain, 2004) made it possible to construct knowledge socially (Bruner, 1991a, 1991b) and to build a learning community (Duff, 2002). For S9, “as usual, we sat in a semi-circle, looking at each other's face, and I felt that nobody was inhibited of talking because it was a very relaxed atmosphere.” S17 dwelt on the spontaneity of the climate generated in the following terms:

This class was one of the most spontaneous I've ever participated in, and it was really inspiring. I learnt a lot about my classmates whom I didn't know much about and perhaps would have never found out had it not been for this opportunity we had. It was marvellous to share these narrations about great people, who were close to us, and who touched our hearts and changed our lives forever (S17).

Next, there is the use of English which in the EFLTEP is the channel and object of instruction (Álvarez, Calvete & Sarasa, 2012). EFLTEP entrants are expected to have an advanced command of EFL—usually that of Cambridge FCE—and then proceed to achieve near-native proficiency. The NS norm is applied in most courses, especially concerning grammatical accuracy and Standard English pronunciation (De Laurentis, 2012). Thus, students often feel inhibited (*vis-à-vis* instructors and classmates) when interacting in class, where form tends to predominate over content (Green, 2008). Narratives' topics and their telling, according to participants' representations, served an emancipatory function. The undergraduate teaching assistant, including herself within the group, indicated that:

We were given the opportunity to speak about something that we regarded as important/meaningful and we were eager to share it with the rest of the class... I know that we are studying to be language teachers so we have to pay a lot of attention to how we say something instead of what we say (sometimes form is more important than meaning) and also most teachers pay attention to how we speak/write instead of what we want to express, but this class was different because we were paying attention to what we wanted to say instead of

how we said it... (Undergraduate teaching assistant).

When the class focused on the message to convey rather than on the ways in which to deliver it, and when content was worth learning about and sharing, students were freed from reservations. Likewise, they derived a moral: “that class... was not a conventional lesson, mainly because afterwards all of us were surely left pondering not just on grammar or on pronunciation but on what is really important in life” (S7). S12 was able to overcome the dichotomies form vs. content/ theory vs. practice/ scholarship vs. experience (Johnson, 2006; Kramersch, 1994), specifying that:

We did practice our listening and speaking skills, but I felt it was a revealing group experience. I learned a lot about my narrative and my classmates’ narratives, both in academic and personal ways. The class had a perfect combination: we were all encouraged to talk, most of us wanted to talk, we all wanted to listen and we all wondered what the rest had to say (S12).

This empowering function of narratives involved listening to students’ voices for their own worth: “It was a great idea that the focus of that class was on each of us as persons because I am sure that during that class most of us could feel that we also had good stories to tell” (S3). Similarly, the dynamics and contents of the class conveyed a message of hope for the future of students’ course of study. Finding the EFLTEP difficult, they told the stories of loved ones who had overcome hardships. Once those accounts were shared, they became invigorating: “We are now convinced that although our course of study gets harder and harder, experiences such as the ones we gained... in (this subject) make students reflect upon their future as professors. And in spite of all adversities, we can make it happen” (S4).

The experience inspired the students to envisage their own teaching practices hopefully. S18 expressed that:

I felt that we got closer to each other during that class, we were no longer just classmates; we were human beings. Competition for grades was out of the question that day, looking for mistakes in the other while speaking or thinking about one’s own (sic) was not important at all. What mattered was looking at partners from a different point of view, creating a bond, a human perspective so many times absent at University in... (EFLTEP) which I feel is so much necessary if we are to work “teaching” people. I realized how powerful we as future (teachers) can be because we can teach much more than a language in class... I hope (we) can understand... that every time we step into a

class it is not only up to the teacher to make it memorable, it is also up to us (S18).

The tales recounted were epic while the experiences told were real and human in nature in an EFLTEP that strives for authenticity in communication. In short, the students seem to have found new power, voice, and a more assertive future professional identity.

### Implications of this narrative inquiry for EFLTE

In her chapter titled “Becoming a culturally responsive teacher” Smolcic (2011: 15) urges teachers to “engage in reflective and personally transformative activity to embrace “otherness” and recognize the diversity inherent to all cultural frames, including their own.” Although this narrative inquiry demands scaling up, it stresses this “need to be concerned with helping teachers to examine their own cultural assumptions and inquire into the background of their students.”

What can this research mean for EFLTEPs? The ‘unheroic’ tales and students’ accounts of this class experience reveal the three narrative dimensions of sociality, temporality, and place (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin, Pushor & Orr, 2007). The private stories acquired significance in full externalization when sites for listening to and telling stories were created inside and outside the classroom (Johnson & Golombek, 2011c). Besides recounting past tales of small people leading big existences, they also reflected on how to live the present and the future. They had originated in earlier, difficult, contexts and travelled to a present university setting that was no less exempted from hardships for participants. In sharing the stories of their families, students narrated *who they themselves were* while finding sustenance along their course of study (Clandinin, Downey & Huber, 2009). Thus, students imagined who they could become if they followed their families’ examples. In this way, students recomposed their identities: by constructing the lives of their loved ones they remodelled their own present and future (Clandinin, Cave & Cave, 2011). Still, they moved further. By sharing their tale and shaping new locations for narrative inquiry, they reached into the professional identity they wished to acquire, i.e. the stories of themselves as future EFL teachers they wanted to enact.

Following a recent article by Huber, Caine, Huber and Steeves (2013) about the promises narrative holds for education, we can suggest that this narrative inquiry departs from

dominant—literary, cinematographic or teacher-imposed—narrative contents in EFL/TE courses. The students were free to choose the subject of their stories. Some exercised their autonomy instantly by changing the tales they had prepared when they saw that their partners' family stories mattered, that personal experience was no longer part of the null curriculum (Eisner, 1985). This shifting of stories was formative because it allowed them to find potential for continuing their studies and for their hopeful conclusion. They were able to move from thinking *about* stories as external products towards thinking *with* stories as a process owned by listeners and tellers (Morris, 2001: 55).

The experience shows the need to attend to lives in EFL/TEPs since students are knowledgeable persons with limitless stories to tell: they can construct local—relational, storied, and lived—knowledge (Canagarajah, 2005; Johnson, 2006). Thus, narrative repositioned inside and outside the classroom shares personal knowledge that can be transformed into personal practical knowledge to inhabit a professional knowledge landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, 1996). When EFL/TEP students find a voice to articulate their tales they feel empowered to create spaces for learning and becoming professionals. For these prospective EFL teachers, the experience involves their translation of themselves (Rushdie, 1992) into English, beyond the NNSE-NSE dichotomy.

Finally, narrative inquirers envisage two universes of curriculum, the “familial curriculum-making world” and “the school curriculum making world” (Murphy, Huber & Clandinin, 2012: 217). They regard curriculum building as “intergenerational and woven with identity making” expressed in “narratives of experience” (Chung, 2009: 121). Along these lines, student-generated stories can unite formal EFL/TE and students' lives in curriculum understood as *life-course*—i.e. *curriculum vitae*—made at the university, the home, and the community.

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