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**Using Ethnodrama to Understand and Communicate Interview  
Data: Paper for the Arts-Based Educational Research SIG 2015  
Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research  
Association**

Charles Vanover  
vanover@usf.edu

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Using Ethnodrama to Understand and Communicate Interview Data:

Paper for the Arts-Based Educational Research SIG

2015 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association

Chicago, Illinois

Abstract:

In this paper, I discuss my efforts to use arts-based methods to understand teachers' work in schools shaped by the No Child Left Behind law and other mass reforms. I describe how the process of writing, rehearsing, and putting up multiple performances of six ethnodramas allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the data I used as the source material for these productions. Ethnodrama changed my view of what mattered in my data, and this understanding guided my choices as I created the scripts and worked with actors and community members to put up the shows.

## Using Ethnodrama to Understand and Communicate Interview Data

Starting in April of 2009, I wrote and produced a series of six ethnodramas (Belliveau, 2006; Donmoyer & Donmoyer, 1995; Saldaña, 2011) based on data from a set of narrative interviews I conducted with a group of National Board Certified (NBPTS) teachers in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and a comparison group of first year teachers who taught in similar schools in CPS. The first two ethnodramas were experimental works that were given a single, workshop performance. The four subsequent works have been performed multiple times for university and community audiences in a wide range of locales including Ann Arbor, Champaign-Urbana, Chicago, Fort Lauderdale, Philadelphia, and Saint Petersburg (see Table 6, Appendix 3).

The reflexive process of writing, rewriting, rehearsing, and performing these shows became, as Feldman (1994, 2005) emphasizes, an important way for me to break with my initial preconceptions and interpret the teacher's experience in a deeper and more thoughtful manner.

### **Research Questions, Design, and Initial Framings**

How does knowledge and experience make a difference in the lives of the students teachers serve? How do different levels of knowledge and skill shape the stories teacher tell? My research design attempted to shed light on these questions by giving a group of highly skilled veteran teachers and a comparison group of first year teachers the same interview guides and asking them to tell stories about the students they cared for and the lessons they taught (see sample interview guide in Appendix 1 and Vanover (2014a)).

I conducted 48 interview sessions in Chicago during the summer of 2004. Seven NBPTS certified teachers and five beginning teachers participated in series of four semi-structured

narrative interviews. All teachers taught in minority-majority schools in CPS. The NBPTS teachers were recruited with the help of the Chicago Teacher's Union's Quest Center (Hughes, Cavell, & Willson, 2001) and had served at least seven years Chicago's classrooms. The beginners had never taught in a classroom as full time job before that school year.

All teachers received the questions in advance. The first question in the first interview was adapted from Benner, Tanner, and Chelsea (1996). I asked teachers to "Describe a student or group of students for whom you made a difference." Five or six guiding questions structured each interview and, after the teachers had shared their initial responses, I asked them to expand on their stories by using interview techniques adapted from Terkel and Grele (1985) and Weiss (1995). I asked the teachers to "tell me more" about particular incidents and fill in the details about a particular narrative. Most interviews lasted for about 90 minutes. The text was transcribed verbatim and coded for themes across the interviews (see Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013; Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005).

Seen from one perspective (Vanover, 2009), during the interview sessions, the NBPTS teachers shared streams of stories about choreographing smoothly functioning, cognitively demanding classrooms. Students of color grew as people and citizens as young people read stories, wrote poems, presented social study reports, and solved mathematics problems. In contrast, the beginning teachers tended to describe rougher classroom spaces. Discipline problems and student disengagement were reported to be frequent and severe. It was difficult for the beginners to pull the classroom together and create a smooth and beneficial stream of instruction.

### **Gaining a New Understanding**

Underlying my original research agenda was the optimistic idea that success in the classroom is a matter of learning, and that the challenges teachers' face in their work might be transformed in given sufficient time and reflective practice (Wentzel, 1997; S. M. Wilson, 2004). By publishing stories about how teachers made a difference, I hoped my work might make a difference by inspiring others to do the hard labor of becoming an accomplished teacher.

The stories I collected, however, never fit easily into that agenda. I found differences between the teachers' narratives I was able to code and report, but both groups of teachers' described challenges and dilemmas beyond the grasp of an individual professional (see Tables 2 and 3 in Appendix II, for examples of these difficult stories shared in the beginning teachers' interviews). Chicago's history of racial and social injustice (Sampson, 2012; Travis, 1987; Wacquant, 2007; W. J. Wilson, 1996) marked the lives of the city's children so deeply that, in the teachers' account, it was impossible for one teacher to erase this record. The NBPTS teachers described doing more to care and inspire the children they served, but doing more did not mean the accomplished teachers had the ability to end children's suffering.

The two early ethnodramas organized the individual teachers' stories into a choral experience. They juxtaposed one teacher's story with another in order to help the audience see the data as I had learned to see it. I wanted people to imagine the benefits of the NBPTS teachers' years of service and understand what it meant to dedicate one's life to the education of poor and minority youth. Instead, the teachers' stories failed to come alive on stage.

I discovered I lacked the technical skills (Eisner, 1995; Goldstein, 2012; Snyder-Young, 2010) necessary to script the experience of a good day's teaching in the Chicago Public Schools. The shows were interesting in a scholarly way (Donmoyer & Donmoyer, 1995), and interesting

is good enough for a piece of research. However, interesting is not exhilarating, invigorating, and life changing. Interesting is not good enough to create good art (Barone & Eisner, 2006; Saldaña, 2011).

As I discuss in other writings, the process of building the script for the second show precipitated a major crisis (Vanover, *Ahead of Print-a*). After a long conversation with my collaborator, I went back to look for material from the interviews, and I noticed aspects of the narratives I had not seen before (Gadamer, 1975; Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Standards of best practice had changed since I had collected the data, and many of the incidents in the beginning teachers' narratives might now be easily criticized. By collecting stories of the beginners' efforts to make a difference, I had, instead, collected records of their failures. The NBPTS teachers were not vulnerable to the same criticism, but good work is not same as perfect, and this gap began to matter more to me. Teachers' vulnerability (Kelchtermans, 2005; Stuhlman & Pianta, 2001) became a major element in my deliberations about the content of the interviews and a major dilemma for my traditional and arts-based work. I had so many ideas flying through me I could not pare them down into a focused script.

### **Inquiry Theatre Series**

I solved this dilemma by abandoning my original agenda, stripping the interview material to its core, and animating the shows around inquiry (See Vanover, *Ahead of Print-a*, *Ahead of Print-b*). The four subsequent ethnodramas were not intended to help the audience understand a good day's teaching. They were intended to communicate the complex moral problems that confront teachers as they work in an unjust world (Kleinfeld, 1992). An inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) was at the core of my teaching in my university's educational leadership program, and I drew on aspects of that experience as I constructed the new plays. Two of these

plays, for instance, featured participatory structures developed by researchers in educational leadership designed to support discussion and dialogue (MacDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & MacDonald, 2007; National School Reform Faculty, n. d.). All shows made displacing deficit thinking a major theme, and they drew on research that focused on that labor (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Singleton & Linton, 2005).

Each of the four later shows evoked the experience of a single teacher. All scripts used verbatim transcripts from the interviews, and all scripts shared the incidents discussed in the original order they were voiced. I stood back, and let the teachers tell their own story. Events in a teacher's narrative might move forward or backwards in time depending on the choices she made in her storytelling, but I found it was easier for the audience to track an individual's experience and to imagine the events relayed by a particular storyteller. My role as the author was to cut extraneous material (Saldaña, 2002) and work with my collaborators to figure out how to stage the shows.

The shows were literally organized around inquiry. The audience was asked to question the teachers' stories from the moment they walked into the performance space. Before the main show started, my colleagues passed out programs that contained excerpts from the verbatim script (see examples shown in Tables 2-5 in Appendix 2). We asked the audience to read this material and gave them background information about the teacher's story. At the designated start time, during the first three shows, I walked on stage and provided a brief introduction. I had found that the audience needed more contextual information about how the CPS system worked than what they might glean from content of the interviews. Thus if CPS's decision to flunk students who did not meet a particular cut score on their high stakes exams was an important element of a teacher's stories, I would discuss research on student retention (e. g.

Anagnostopoulos, 2006; R. T. Jacob, Stone, & Roderick, 2004; Penfield, 2010; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Allensworth, 2005). If the poor working conditions in many of CPS high poverty schools shaped events evoked in the performance, I would discuss research on the U. S. failure to create positive working conditions for teachers in high poverty schools (e. g. Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Ingersoll, Hoxby, & Scrupski, 2004; B. A. Jacob, 2007).

The teacher's interview was performed after the introduction. In three of the shows, an interviewer, usually played by a local graduate student, would ask questions and a teacher, usually played by a local community member, would answer. No editorial changes were made in the content of the interviews besides the addition of a couple of words for clarity, and the extensive cuts I made to compress the source narrative.

Each of the shows ended in a general discussion led by a member of the local community. This dialogue was open ended. No attempt was made wrap up the events into a set of themes. The goal was to ask questions, not find answers.

I found that the most powerful performances focused the limits of teacher's agency. Children suffered. Teachers tried to help them the best they knew how. Sometimes their labor helped, but for some students, there was no evidence that any school professional made a difference in that child's life. My colleagues and I, as had been done for thousands of years (Favorini, 1995), worked to create social change by dramatizing pain, suffering, and regret.

### **Limits and Future Research**

For qualitative researchers, one of the primary questions my ethnodramatic work raises is how the methods we use to understand and communicate our work shape the interpretive process that guides our labor. The comparisons I made when I reported my original findings were clearly

articulated in the transcripts I coded, the memos and papers I wrote, and the PowerPoint slides I presented. However, those forms of communication did not help me to surface what I later believed was a deeper and more important story (Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Thompson, 1990): a story that focused on the limits of teachers' ability to make a difference

I believe that non-arts-based researchers might learn from the great opportunities for dialogue structured into the process of building, rehearsing, and performing ethnodrama. I hope arts-based researchers might view my view my experience with caution and become conscious of theatre's appetite for findings that evoke strong emotion. In my case, given the structural injustice that shapes life in poor communities of color (Alexander, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2012; Lareau, 2011), I believe on focusing data with high dramatic content helped me ask better questions. However, emotion is not truth. Strong feeling is not trustworthy. I would not have been able to see the data in the way I learned to see it, if I had not, first, engaged in the disciplined work of coding and reporting my interview materials (Feldman, 1994; Miles et al., 2013).

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## Appendix 1: Original Interview Guide

Table 1

## Interview 1: The Story of Your Teaching

Please come to the interview ready to tell the story of your teaching this past school year, from September 03 until June 04. I am interested in learning how the year began, how it ended, and the important incidents that happened in between. I would like to know about the successes that made you proud and the mistakes you learned from. I hope you will share some of the joy of life in the classroom while not forgetting the hard work and difficult moments that are also part of life in school. You are welcome to bring notes, samples of student work and other materials that might help you narrate. As you tell your stories, I would like you to focus on the following questions:

- Please tell a story about a student, or a group of students, for whom your teaching made a difference during the 03-04 school year.
- Describe a unit or a group of lessons where you made a difference in your students' lives.
- Describe moments during the year when you felt you had learned something new about your teaching or your students.
- For experienced teachers:
  - Tell a story about a particular moment when something you learned from the your efforts to become accredited by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards helped you become a better teacher, or instances when this knowledge made it more difficult for you to serve your students.
- For beginning teachers:
  - Tell a story about a particular moment when something you learned from your student teaching or teacher education classes helped you become a better teacher, or instances when this knowledge made it more difficult for you to serve your students.
- Tell a story about any obstacles that got in the way of your teaching.
- Tell a story about a particular event that illustrates what you believe teaching is all about.

My goal as interviewer is to ask you to describe specific events and incidents. Throughout the session, I will ask you to expand on your stories by asking you to "Tell me more about that." or to "Walk me through what happened at that moment." or to "Describe a specific incident that illustrates that idea." In order to focus the time we have on your teaching I may also ask you questions such as "Could you tell me specifically how that event or person affected your teaching?" All of these questions are designed to help you tell your story in your own way, and in your own words.

Please don't worry about telling your stories in the specific order that they happened. My goal is for you to feel relaxed enough to speak naturally about the work you've done. Feel free to move forward and backwards in time and to come back to incidents that you've brought up before. I hope you will feel comfortable enough to tell your story to me in the same way you would tell it to teacher you trust.

## Appendix 2 Excerpts from Scripts and Performance Documentation

Table 2

Excerpt published in the program for “System Failure”

**The Homeless Girl**

*In this excerpt, beginning teacher Halsted Hoyne shares incidents about the best student in her classroom during her first year in the Chicago Public Schools. Halsted’s words are taken from an interview the author conducted, and they will be used in the ethnodrama that will be performed later in this conference session. Please read this story and be prepared to share its meanings with other members of your group.*

And, one—one girl who is also repeating. She lived in a homeless shelter. She was my best student—like, not academically, but behaviorally. So appropriate—never inappropriate. Never. But she missed so much school because of their living situation. There were times where she told me she couldn’t get to school because—I don’t think the shelter was [near us]. So, they had to take a bus, and the school used to give them reduced fare bus cards, but, like, they were out of them. So, I would always slip her money, every once in a while, just so they could get to school and back.

She was already repeating 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and she was smart. I mean, she had the skills—I just wanted her to get through and to pass, and she still is going to have to go to summer school this year, which makes me so sad. I don’t know, it was just really weird. Her mother withdrew her at the end of the—withdrew her at the beginning of last week because they couldn’t even stay at their shelter anymore. They had to go somewhere in the suburbs. But, she had missed so many days—she had missed almost 50 days of school. So there was no way that I could pass her. No matter where she ends up next year, I think, maybe, they will let her take the ITBS [the Chicago high stakes assessment] again. I don’t know, but I have a feeling she’s going to have to do something, you know, something’s going to have to happen before she can go to 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

Which is pretty upsetting, because she is such a sweet girl and, by far, my most appropriate, most behaved student and with every teacher that dealt with her—just always, just really wonderful, respectful. I used to use exit tickets at the end of the day with my kids. ‘What did you learn about reading math and life?’ Inevitably, like her and a lot of other kids, too, would write, ‘I learned that this class is really mean to you.’

She was just—she’s a doll and just a sweet girl. I learned a lot from her because other kids were very resentful of the treatment she received, but, it’s like, ‘She doesn’t get this treatment for any other reason other than that she always follows directions, and she always makes good choices. She always does what she thinks is best, and that she never tries to hurt someone.’

Table 3

Excerpt from the program for “Listening to the Silences”

INTERVIEWER: Talk about your own classes. What would you do specifically with like the 13 year olds in your class.? What would you do for them?

*4 second pause;*

*Music up; Park; “Fratres,” for violins, strings, and percussion;*

How would you manage that?

INDIANA: Well, I had two at the beginning of the year that eventually got taken out ‘cause they were just really distracting other kids. And, I got them half, like I got them in October because we had to close down one of the classes. All the kids from the 3<sup>rd</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> grade class got dispersed into the two existing 5<sup>th</sup> grade classes. And, a lot of times, they didn’t—they didn’t come. They didn’t even come to school, but when they were there

*4 second pause;*

I would just, just, you know

*4 second pause;*

try anything to keep them

*5 second pause;*

occupied, basically, you know

*5 second pause;*

ummmm

*5 second pause;*

you know, a little extra help, probably, you know, I would probably stand by them more and make sure that they were following. Of course, these were the kids who need the most help with the fundamental basic things, and when you have 30 kids in your class, it’s really to give them what they need. And, I couldn’t, actually. I didn’t. I didn’t give them what they needed.

*4 second pause; She laughs;*

*Very softly;*

INTERVIEWER: That’s okay.

*8 second pause;*

INDIANA: And there is not any

*8 second pause;*

Table 4

Excerpt from the program for “They are Only Going to Steal Your Cars”

OHIO: Donna, this one student, she’s older than all the kids—taller. And she is special ed. Her story is at her old school she was retained (TAPS TABLE) two times, and was going to be retained again (TAPS TABLE). She never went to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. We placed her into 4<sup>th</sup> grade (TAPS TABLE). At first, at the beginning of the year—quiet—wouldn’t talk to anyone. She was pulled out for the majority of the day because academically she was just 1<sup>st</sup> grade level. Self esteem was really low—shot. She was in the class for writing and wouldn’t talk to anyone. She would always write about [the rapper] B2K. All her stories were

“Me, me and B2K.”

B2K is her wanting to be in the WNBA. Writing was 1<sup>st</sup> grade level. Her attitude was

“(TAPS TABLE) I don’t care. (TAPS TABLE) I’m done. Whatever. Whatever. Whatever.”

The first month and a half we talked about social stuff.

‘How you going to meet friends?’

“I don’t need to meet anybody. I don’t need anything.”

And then, when she started meeting friends, she met friends (TAPS TABLE) in a negative way.

“I rule this class. I’m strong. I’m cool.”

She expressed all of this through her writing.

“I’m going to—I’m—I’m the ruler of the class. I’ll beat all of the boys up. I’m going to make friends that way.”

When talking to her mom, [Donna] wouldn’t say anything. And, [now]

‘There’s a lot of things when she still doesn’t do (TAPS TABLE) academically. But, her writing, it was amazing. It was—two sentence—Paragraphs! Three pages! That’s how the progress was with her.’

It had grown from B2K basketball, to

“This is what I am thinking about today.”

To poetry. It was just amazing. [When I talked to mom at the end of the year,] I was

‘Look at this. Look at this growth. Maybe those grammas or conventionals aren’t in there. However, focused—on topic—on time. Look at what she has produced!’

There was some growth there. Donna, just amazing. An amazing girl. Amazing in her writing. Maybe it wasn’t 4<sup>th</sup> grade writing, but

*OHIO takes out two pieces of student writing, points to the first piece;*

‘You came here, this is where you were.

*Points to the second piece of writing;*

‘And, look at this. You should be proud of that. Wow! Look at you. That’s just totally, totally awesome.’

Table 5

Excerpt from the program for “Goodbye to All That!”

ADDISON: You know the first two days where you’re supposed to be setting up your room, it’s going to be like (VERY SARCASTICLY)

‘Test scores! You’re going to go over the test scores, and we’re going to look at what we need to do differently this year to raise those test scores.’

And I will be throwing up. I will be sitting there going,

‘Oh my god, oh my God, oh my God.’

And I’ll have to sit there and be like,

‘Don’t get up and leave. Don’t be disrespectful—Smile—Fold your hands. Don’t throw up. Don’t get up. Just sit there.’

Appendix 3: Performance History

Table 6 Ethnodramas and Performances as of July 2014	
Songs	Canterbury House, Ann Arbor, 4/2009
Learning Space	International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, University of Illinois, 5/2012
System Failure	<p>Invited performance for the Ohio State University. Columbus, Oh. 11/2014</p> <p>28<sup>th</sup> Annual University of Michigan Martin Luther King Day celebration as part of the program “Educational Disparities: Voice from the Classroom” offered by the Gerald Ford School of Public Policy and the Institute for Social Research of the University of Michigan. Ann Arbor, MI. 1/2014 (See Vanover (2014b) for a video of that performance.)</p> <p>Invited performance for the Northwestern University College of Education. Evanston IL. 6/2013</p> <p>Invited performance for The University of Chicago Committee on Education. Chicago, IL. 6/2013</p> <p>Juried ethnodramatic performance for the 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Ethnography in Education Research Forum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA. 2/2013</p> <p>Canterbury House, Ann Arbor, MI 11/2012</p>
Listening to the Silences	<p>The Studio @ 620, Saint Petersburg , FL 3/2015</p> <p>Juried ethnodramatic performance for the 36<sup>th</sup> Annual Ethnography in Education Research Forum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA. 2/2015</p>
“They are Only Going to Steal Your Cars.”	<p>Invited performance College of Education, The University of South Florida Saint Petersburg, FL 4/2014</p> <p>Studio @ 620, Saint Petersburg, FL. 1/2014</p> <p>Juried ethnodramatic performance for the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Qualitative Report Conference. Fort Lauderdale, FL. 4/2013</p> <p>Juried ethnodramatic performance for the 9<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. Champaign-Urbana, IL. 4/2013</p>
Goodbye to All That!	<p>Asian Art Initiative, Philadelphia, PA. 4/2014</p> <p>Juried ethnodramatic performance for the 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Ethnography in Education Research Forum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA. 3/2014</p>