

**Crossing Blocked Thresholds:  
Three Stories of Identity, Embodied Literacy, and  
Participatory Education**

Anne W. Anderson  
Margaret Branscombe  
Tara Nkrumah

**ABSTRACT:** Labeling ourselves or accepting others' labeling our identities as less than or as in some way incompetent can become an embodied obstacle, physically preventing us from crossing thresholds, from moving through doorways of opportunities, and from fully participating in an environment. In order to discern processes of identity formation and transformation, the authors used autoethnographic (Ellis, 2004) and narrative writing (Bochner, 2002) to probe their concepts of self as literate beings operating within a literate milieu. Each of these three autoethnographic narratives drew on Gee's (2000) work on identity as a four-part construction and considered self-identity as most audible only when heard against what Bakhtin (1981) termed social heteroglossia, which is a background of voices speaking counter to one's own developing convictions. Finally, each narrator addressed Taylor's (1989) thoughts about identity as the difference between doing and being and Bochner's (2002) claim that we, in effect, reshape our identities by changing the narratives we tell ourselves.

**Keywords:** identity, autoethnography, embodied literacy, social heteroglossia, process drama



Anne W. Anderson, a doctoral candidate in Literacy Studies at the University of South Florida, Tampa, also is Director of Blended and Online Learning for the Program for Experienced Learners at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg. She uses a variety of methods to study fiction and non-fiction texts and sometimes presents her findings using drama, poetry, and other arts-based research methods. She can be contacted at [awanderson@mail.usf.edu](mailto:awanderson@mail.usf.edu)



Margaret Branscombe earned a doctorate in Literacy Studies from the University of South Florida. Her dissertation research studied the use of drama to enhance comprehension of abstract science concepts. She now lives in Birmingham, England, where she heads her own consulting agency that trains teachers to use process drama in all areas of the elementary school curriculum. She can be contacted at [mbranscombe@mail.usf.edu](mailto:mbranscombe@mail.usf.edu)



Tara M. Nkrumah, a doctoral student in Education Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of South Florida, Tampa, is an Instructional Leadership Science coach in Hillsborough County. Her research interests include culturally relevant pedagogy, leadership, curriculum, teacher training and social justice. Tara has more than 16 years of secondary school teaching experience in the United States and West Africa. She can be contacted at [tnkrumah@mail.usf.edu](mailto:tnkrumah@mail.usf.edu)

In the 1980s, Tara was a little girl forced into remedial classes. Today, she is a middle-school science coach working toward a doctorate in education leadership. In the 1960s, Anne was convinced she would forever be an awkward, incompetent child. Today, she is the author of short stories, articles, and books and is a doctoral candidate. A year or so ago, Margaret was a doctoral candidate barred by short-sighted policies from conducting research using process drama teaching methods. Today, she has earned her Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) and—more important—she has introduced other educator to alternative teaching methods. But these transformations did not just happen. In this article, we explore pivotal scenes that illustrate the process of identity formation and transformation, scenes we didn't, at the time, realize would be either pivotal or transformational in defining ourselves as fully participatory, literate beings.

Bochner (2002) noted, "Sometimes we find ourselves in stories we would rather not be living; sometimes we construct new story lines for ourselves that help us exert control over life's possibilities and limitations" (p. 73). How does that construction of a new story line take place? Is it as easy as Dorothy's singing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" and waking up in OZ, then changing her tune to "There's no place like home" and returning, changed by the experience, to Kansas? For the three of us, the transformational process has involved resisting constructions of identity that limited our full participation as literate beings in a literate milieu, but the process has become apparent only in retrospect.

Autoethnographic explorations of these scenes helped us examine two aspects of the construction of identity: First, we considered the role of labels, which, Gee (2000) implied, are categorizing words attached verbally or by implication (as in being assigned to a particular learning group). We found it telling that the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2015) uses the terms "narrow piece" (def. 1) and "small strip" (def. 2) in its definitions of physical labels, which suggests metaphorically how limiting verbal labels can be. Second, we considered the role of what

Bakhtin (1981) termed a "social heteroglossia surrounding the object" (p. 278), that is the background of physical, metaphorical, and institutional voices against which we began to hear our own convictions voiced. We also saw more clearly how the seemingly small choices we had made in accepting and/or rejecting labels rewrote the story lines of our lives in ways we still are discovering today.

#### **Four Strands of Identity Creating a Background of Social Heteroglossia**

Taylor (1989) noted that concepts of identity have changed over time from being centered around membership in clans, families, and other communities to our "modern notion of what it is to be a human agent, a person, or a self" (p. 3) apart from our communal settings. Communal settings still play a part in our concept of self, however. Gee (2000) suggested identity is more externally imposed than inherent, seeing nature as a force acting upon us rather than an innate part of us. He identified four "ways to view identity," which he described as "what it means to be a 'certain kind of person'" (p. 100). Furthermore, Gee (2000) claimed those four ways work in concert, although "we can still ask, for a given time and place, which strands predominate" (p. 101).

Gee's (2000) four ways or strands include nature, institutions, discourse, and affinity (p. 100). Nature refers to one's genes and natural development. Institutions refers to the structures of authority found in organizations such as schools, government bodies, corporations, and even families. Discourse refers to the ways other people talk to and about us, and affinity refers to the different kinds of groups and activities in which we participate or to which we belong. Although Gee (2000) said we can be somewhat proactive in response to the workings of each of these strands, suggesting choice on our part, we cannot entirely escape their influence. Additionally, Taylor (1989) argued that identity can only be discerned as it is set against a contextual background of morality—similar to Bakhtin's social heteroglossia—the modern version of which, Taylor

said, “has tended to focus on what it is right to do rather than on what it is good to be” (p. 3).

Of Gee’s (2000) four strands of or forces shaping identity, discourse is the most obviously associated with what we recognize as labels; however, Gee noted, all four forces operate through words and descriptions, that is to say through labeling. Gee’s (2000) example of a child with ADHD shows how one identity label can be used as an example of these different strands/forces in play. ADHD can be considered as part of the child’s nature or as a disorder of nature that is institutionally diagnosed (labeled), is discussed as problematic in multiple spheres (discourse), and may, perhaps, lead to inclusion in a particular learning group (affinity) at school.

Each of these views, however, is articulated through both verbal (spoken and written) and non-verbal (classroom placement, teaching materials) labels—voices speaking at and about us in multiple modes, or as Bakhtin (1981) termed it, social heteroglossia. Referring to the emergence of an author’s voice, Bakhtin (1981) described social heteroglossia as a “Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages” (p. 278), suggesting confusion and even incoherence, and he asserted that “these voices create the background necessary for [one’s] own voice...to be perceived” (p. 278). Continuing the previous example, another articulation of the ADHD labels might be that the child is a highly energetic and creative dancer or gymnast. This construction of identity competes with the other voices that act as a form of negative relief, causing the lone voice to stand out.

We recognized that our experiences illustrated the idea of obstacles blocking particular doorways through which we each had to pass in order to fully and creatively *be* before we ultimately could fully *do* in terms of participating in various areas of education and cultural literacy. We also recognized that each crossing involved an internal rethinking of an external factor or factors and an embodied moving through to another space. How to combine our very different experiences into a coherent article, however, was more problematic. One story told of a little girl labeled slow and stupid by one teacher and labeled bright and capable by others. A second story

told of a pre-teen girl who labeled herself as physically awkward, socially immature, and verbally inept but was shown, through a novel, a different vision of who she could become. The third story told of a graduate student labeled as a time-waster by one educational system, whose own identity was shrunk and shriveled by a culture of testing and accountability, and welcomed by another, more open, system. Each story however, could be told in narrative form. Aligning Bakhtin’s (1981) discussion of the author with Bochner’s (2002) thoughts about changing our own story legitimized this approach—and so we turned to autoethnography.

### **Autoethnographic Narrative as a Method of “Think[ing] With Stories”**

Autobiography, memoir, and autoethnography each use narrative writing in different ways to explore one’s own experiences for the benefit of an audience. Autobiography generally considers the life as a whole and includes specific dates and places. Memoir, Schwartz (2005) wrote, often is the writer’s attempt “to explore the emotional truth of memory” (p. 401). The research tool autoethnography, however, is built on what Ellis (1991) termed “systematic sociological introspection” (p. 32) used to “connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). Ellis (2004) explained the goal of conducting autoethnography is “not so much to portray the facts of what happened to you . . .but instead to convey the meanings you attached to the experience” (p. 116).

Although this seems to run counter to research in the traditional sense, Ellis (2004) noted that even present-tense “[f]ield notes are one selective story about what happened written from a particular point of view at a particular point in time for a particular purpose” (p. 116). To facilitate the recollecting and recording of lived events—past-tense field notes, as it were—Ellis (2004) suggested researchers use a “process of emotional recall similar to the ‘method’ acting of Lee Strasburg at the Actors Studio [and] imagine being back in the scene emotionally and physically” (p. 117). Such immersion, Ellis (2004) found, leads to long-forgotten details emerging from the depths and allows researchers to “move around in the experience...to see it as it might appear to

others...to analyz[e] their thoughts and feelings as socially constructed processes” (p. 118) even as they are creating a narrative recounting of the event. Bochner (2002) noted that stories—narratives—“interpret and give meaning to the experiences depicted in [the] stories,” and that the narrative exploration of experience is “a mode of research that invites readers to think with stories” (p. 81).

Immersing ourselves into the emotional world of a particular moment in time meant reliving difficult scenes and attaching our names to them. At times, we used documents from our past or conducted historical research to confirm dates and other details. For instance, Anne, in “imagining being back in the scene emotionally and physically” (Ellis, 2004, p. 117), examined the scene slowly in her mind’s eye to recapture details of the sights, sounds, smells, and tactile sensations she experienced half a century earlier. She then researched slang words, movies, and clothing styles from the 1960s to confirm the sense of time and place she had recalled, and she alternated examining the scene, creating a narrative record of the memories, and confirming cultural details.

To different extents, each of us struggled with switching from a more objective and distant academic voice and writing style to a more subjective and immediate narrative voice that played with language and included such devices as dialogue. Each of us, from our present perspective as education and literacy researchers, interjected meaning-making comments as we related our experiences to the culture of school, of the educational system, and of the fringe areas of both. With the benefit of hindsight and perspective, we were thinking with what we were reliving through the method of narrative storytelling. We were studying, as opposed to just recounting, the experiences.

As we brought our stories about labeling and identity together and as we shared them with each other and with outsiders, however, we discovered we couldn’t escape the human tendency to label. Anne, in particular, hesitated sharing her story because she labeled it trivial in terms of consequences compared to Tara’s and Margaret’s stories, yet we felt it in some ways conveyed a more universal experience. Anonymous reviewers also questioned our omission

of certain implied labels, causing us to rethink our positions within our narratives and to think more broadly about labels. We revisit these questions in more detail in the conclusion. For now, we say only that we each felt strongly that the stories were more about overcoming obstacles encountered because of labels and not about the labels themselves. These, then, are our stories.

### Tara’s Story: “What Does ‘Remedial’ Mean?”

In 1981, I thought of myself as an excellent student. My report cards always contained “exceeds expectations” comments beside each A letter grade in reading, math and writing. Teachers often recognized my work as the model example for assignments completed well. I enjoyed pleasing my teachers, so I obsessed over perfectly scribing each word on the defined lines of my manuscript tablet and in memorizing all my times tables. During reading class, I fluently read passages with confidence; often I helped other students pronounce difficult words when they faltered. I thought I had mastered the doing component for being considered smart.



Figure 1. Tara Nkrumah, age 6 or 7. Tara’s Imah had the doll and matching dresses made for her.

However, my self-identity as an excellent student changed dramatically when we moved to a new state and I enrolled in Mrs. Williams’ (pseudonym) third grade class. My report cards began to list me as being in the “remedial” reading, writing, and math groups. I didn’t know what that meant. But I knew how I felt every day when it was reading time.

“All basic readers move to the back table,” Mrs. Williams’ cold voice would instruct.

Slowly, I would push back my chair to relocate to the back of the classroom where two other children, whose parents also were poor, and who were not good readers, sat during the reading lessons. Although I wasn’t clear as to what the label *remedial* meant, it was obvious to me that the three of us were not considered smart like the other children in the class. Isolated and given a different book with less text and more pictures, I wondered how my father’s words, “You are smart,” spoken often and with conviction, conflicted with what the teacher thought about my ability. I wondered how I went from receiving the same instruction as the rest of the class in my old school, where I felt equal in ability, to being labeled as a *basic reader* in this school.

Being labeled remedial wasn’t the only change that happened in third grade. When my parents moved from Chicago to a small town in Texas, I became the only Black student in the class. I went from being called “Tara” in my Chicago school to being called “Tar-face Tara” openly in class by my new peers while the teacher’s silence encouraged their rude behavior. The other two students I was grouped with in reading clearly lacked in skills as they struggled with what was basic work for me. I wanted to help them like I had done in my other school, but they seemed to resent my help. I burned with sadness each time Mrs. Williams talked with the other children about their work but never asked about mine.

Summer vacation, however, was like Christmas in June, as my sister and I spent the two-month summer break with our father’s parents, Imah (Eema) and Daddy Leslie in Tennessee. *Imah*, which means *mother* in Hebrew, was my grandmother’s choice for us to call her instead of Grandmother Ada. Unlike our parents, who were young, poor, and not able to invest much quality time with my sister and me because they were working and going to school, Imah had been a kindergarten teacher in the 1960s and later became an education professor. Dr. Willoughby became well-known for her compassionate but firm and uncompromising quest

to cultivate student excellence. I was about to encounter both.

“How was your school year?” asked Imah with a warm smile, as we drove out of Texas and headed toward Tennessee.

In the past, this question always had opened a floodgate of non-stop conversation about how much I had learned and how much I enjoyed my friends and teacher. I know she expected to hear rave reports of my great experiences in a different school environment. From the back seat of the blue El Camino, I responded with a question that froze my grandmother’s smile.

“What does it mean to be a remedial student?” I asked. I had wanted all year to know why I was in the remedial classes for every subject. I had thought maybe it was because we were poor—it was obvious to me how little I had in comparison to most of the others in my class. My parents’ failure to investigate my concerns left me wondering about the new labels. The good grades I made in remedial classes did not seem to carry the same weight as before where my excellence had been publicly rewarded.

We drove in silence for a few miles then Imah finally spoke. She asked me a series of questions as if I was on trial for a criminal case. “Did you use the same textbooks as the other students?” “What did your teacher’s comments say on your report card?” “How did your teacher treat you?” All my answers raised alarm, prompting my grandmother to stop at the next exit, call my parents, and tell them to immediately mail her my report card with the test scores.

The rest of the trip was blanketed in silence as my grandmother brooded over her plan to address this unsettling news. When we arrived in Franklin, my sister and I were ushered to bed. The next day we were awakened for the first of what I later termed “summer school boot camp.” After breakfast, my grandmother directed us to the playroom and had us sit in huge, comfortable chairs at a black table. On the table, my grandmother had placed reading, math, and writing standardized tests from the

Tennessee public school district. I knew full well what was expected.

Imah spoke in her teacher voice to me as if I was a student in her class and not her first granddaughter. She carefully read the test instructions aloud: “You are to answer all the questions in the reading test completely in the time given. If you are unsure about an answer, do your best and do not leave any blanks. Are there any questions?”

I looked up at her and shook my head. I spent the entire day testing, while my younger sister colored and read. Then Imah scored my test papers. In reading and math, my performance ranked below average for students my age, but the writing score was fairly comparable. The drop in performance could have occurred over the past school year, thought my grandmother, because of my teacher’s lack of attention to me and because my schooling was low on my parents’ list of priorities. But Imah was determined not to let either reason decide our academic futures.

Each summer, vacation became a summer school boot camp of documenting our level at the beginning of the summer, setting goals for achievement, and assessing our progress at the end. Imah made going to the library to check out books a real joy. We read storybooks, then wrote one-page summaries, and we completed practice workbooks to improve our math skills. We believed that all kids our age were spending their summers the same way. Our efforts were constantly challenged, and by the end of the summer our confidence had been restored.

But when we went back to school in Texas, we again were labeled as poor and stupid. The vicious cycle continued of having our teachers dumb down their instruction of us ten months out of the year and of Imah repairing our perception of our academic ability during June and July. In 1983, my parents divorced, and we went to live in the projects with our mother who soon had three more children. My mother worked multiple jobs to try to support us and received financial aid from the government to help subsidize some of the expenses. I often had to assume the mother-of-the-house role to my siblings, so I grew up fast learning very early that poverty is

more than about not enough money. It is also about not enough time to review homework and attend parent conferences. Dad, on the other hand, finally graduated from college in 1985 with a bachelor’s degree in science, started his own painting contracting business, and worked his way to becoming financially stable. This adjusted his focus on his daughters’ education. Imah had expressed concern that, because we were living in poverty with my mother ten months out of the year, our intellectual development was hindered beyond what she could do during the summers.

Just as he had the previous three years when school ended, Dad picked us up from our home in the projects. This time, however, it wouldn’t just be for summer vacation; Dad was moving us to Nashville for good. Imah had made up her mind that her granddaughters would attend the best schools in town: Martin Luther King Magnet, for my sister, and Hume Fogg Academic Magnet High School for me. Both schools conducted heavy screening with entrance exams, interviews, and records to support we were academically capable of meeting their standards. I still wonder with amazement how my grandmother pulled off getting us enrolled in such competitive schools with our existing sub-par school records. Officially, we had been labeled *low-performing* and deemed incapable of high scholastic levels. I was skeptical.

“I’m not a strong student,” I argued, thinking of the years of being labeled a remedial student. “Look at my report cards and teacher comments. I am not sure I can do the work.”

Imah, seated in a vanity chair and about to apply her lipstick, interrupted my words of doubt. She turned from facing the mirror and looked directly at me.

“You were born to do and to be great things,” she said firmly.

I wondered what the difference was—to do and to be.

Gee (2000) may have maintained that my “institutional perspective” (p. 102) or identity was being challenged. My first educational institution, in

Chicago, had recognized my “natural identity” (Gee, 2000, p. 102)—my intellectual capacity for academic success—and had nurtured that identity accordingly. But the educational institution in Texas did not recognize or nurture my intellect, whether from racist or from classist or from some other form of separatist bias, and I wasn’t capable yet of nurturing myself. My institutional identity withered from instructional neglect. As a result, my natural identity became stunted. Countering those voices and that neglect were my father’s affirmations and my grandmother’s concerted efforts to shape my own “discursive perspective” (Gee, 2000, p. 103) or identity, helping me think of myself as being smart and able to learn and to enjoy learning. This allowed my natural identity to recover and to bloom in high school where the discourse of my high school teachers, who represented a higher educational institution, revived my institutional identity as an academically successful student.

Initially, however, it was not easy. In class, I had to learn not to bury my head in the book as if searching for answers when the teacher asked the class questions. When I did my homework at night, Imah rehearsed possible questions the teacher might ask the next day, and I began forcing myself to raise my hand and risk giving the wrong answer. I learned that giving the wrong answer did not change my teachers’ opinion of me: In the eyes of my teachers, I was capable. Whenever I did not do well on an assignment or test, my teacher would say, “You did not do your best.” This comment, even though negative in context, became encouraging because my teacher ultimately was saying, “I know you can do better.” Regardless of what I did on a particular assignment, my teacher saw my potential for being.

The four years of high school revitalized my academic identity. My high school diploma acknowledged more than the successful completion of the coursework. It forever refuted the label remedial, and it affirmed my high school teachers’ beliefs that I was academically excellent, my grandmother’s saying that I was “born to do and to be great things,” and my father’s telling me, “You are smart.”

I also discovered that academia was part and parcel of what Gee (2000) called my “affinity perspective” (p. 103) or affinity identity. It was the community I “actively [chose] to join” (Gee, 2000, p. 106) as a profession and as a vocation. In a sense, I have become Imah for a new generation of students who often come to me as having been labeled *less than*. I tell them what Imah told me, “You were born to do and to be great things.”

### Anne’s Story: “Just an Ugly Baby”

My story begins in the mid-1960s when I was twelve and a physically awkward, socially immature, and verbally inept pre-teen at a junior high school in Southern California—the only year my mother didn’t buy my school pictures. It’s after lunch, and most of us seventh-grade girls sit on the grassy field talking and watching the seventh-grade boys play basketball on the nearby asphalt courts. We sit in scattered twos and threes and larger groups, close enough that a casual observer might see us as one gathering of mostly twelve-year-old, somewhat giggly, girls. A few girls have bodies and minds already matured into young womanhood. These girls, with their sleek hair, plucked eyebrows, and manicured nails ooze confidence and poise. Others, baby-faced innocents who still play clapping games, look like elementary school students.

Most of us fall somewhere in between. Our bodies, with their rounded breasts and monthly lets, have crossed the boundary between child and adult, but we wear these ill-fitting frames with anything but confidence and poise. We blush too easily. We stammer when we try to talk. We wear blouses and full skirts with white, ankle socks and saddle shoes instead of the more fashionable empire waist dresses and flats—no socks—the more mature girls wear. With my dated glasses, metal-banded teeth, freckled face, and dorky, curly-frizzy hair, I’m not just in between, I’m totally out of it.





Figure 2. Anne, age 11, from her 6th-grade class picture—rabbit ears and all.

Bangs are in, but mine curl every which way across my forehead. The social graces haven't graced me. I stumble and bumble my way through the day saying and doing everything wrong. It doesn't help that I usually have the right answer when I'm called on or that I ask lots of questions in class. A rhyme from childhood haunts me: "There was a little girl who had a little curl right in the middle of her forehead. And when she was good, she was very, very good. But when she was bad, she was horrid" (Longfellow, 1904). Outwardly, I look horrid; inwardly, I feel horrid.

Nor does it help that I moved here at the end of fifth grade—my fourth move in as many years, this time from a sparsely populated spot in the Mojave Desert to suburban Orange County, California. I made a few friends in sixth grade, but then we were shuffled and redealt among several junior highs. I usually sit between groups—part, but not quite, of several clusters. Some days I join the conversations of one or another of the groups; many days I enter a fictional world and stay there until the bell rings.

I let the conversation swirl around me for a bit, then, from between the covers of my notebook binder, I slip out a paperback book. I am careful not to let the others see what is scrawled all over the top page of my binder. Mentally, I make a note to tear it up.

"What are you reading?" Michelle, seated next to Sheila, asks.

I show her the cover. "*The Moon-Spinners*." I tense, but I try to speak casually.

"Never heard of it," she says.

"It's about a British girl who works at the embassy in Greece," I start to explain.

They glance at each other and smirk. If it was a magazine like *Seventeen* with an article about the Beatles or getting boyfriends, that might capture their interest. But a book about working at the British embassy in Greece? Hardly.

"They made a movie out of it," I add meekly.

"Oh." Michelle recognizes Haley Mills on the cover. "She was in *Summer Magic*."

"But that was ages ago," Sheila says.

Haley Mills is so yesterday. Maybe not to our parents who loved her as the little girl in Disney's 1960 movie, *Pollyanna*, and who still see their daughters as little girls. But to us twelve-going-on-twenty-year-olds whose hearts belong to John, Paul, George, and Ringo and who pray daily for the deaths of Cynthia, Jane, Patti, and Maureen, with their straight-as-a-pin hair and Carnaby Street wardrobes? Forget it. If Michelle or Sheila had shown interest, I would have told them it wasn't just about working at the Greek embassy. It was about a young woman on a holiday who stumbles onto a young man who has been shot and who helps him escape the people who are trying to kill him. I didn't buy the book because of Haley. Well, maybe I did. I bought it to take to the beach, and it was the only cover in the drugstore bookrack that interested me.

Once I started reading, however, I was hooked.

It was the egret, flying out of the lemon grove that started it. I won't pretend I saw it straight away as the conventional herald of adventure, the white stag of the fairytale, which, bounding from the enchanted thicket, entices the prince away from his followers, and loses him in the forest where danger threatens with the dusk. But, when the big

white bird flew suddenly up among the glossy leaves and lemon flowers, and wheeled into the mountain, I followed it. What else is there to do, when such a thing happens on a brilliant April noonday at the foot of the White Mountains of Crete; when the road is hot and dusty, but the gorge is green, and full of the sound of water, and the white wings, flying ahead, flicker in and out of deep shadow, and the air is full of the scent of lemon blossoms? (Stewart, 1964, p. 1)

Something in that first paragraph took me out of myself and spirited me away into a world where a girl—no, a young woman—wasn't at the mercy of school bells telling her when to move with the herd to a different spot, a world where junior high classrooms and lunchrooms were replaced with mountains and lemon groves, a world where anything was possible. A world where the princess could rescue the prince—before, of course, he rescued her in return.

I didn't tell Michelle and Sheila I'd been reading and re-reading the book for the better part of the school year, and I had even started copying the book by hand to share with a pen-pal. I hadn't seen the movie when it came out last year. I didn't need to. The movie I had created in my head, my identity by affinity (Gee, 2000), the one starring a twenty-two-year-old, adventuresome, confident, and capable me—a me who had skipped over the rest of what, according to my natural identity at the time, was obviously going to be a painful adolescence—could be screened anytime I chose. Institutionally, I was at school but not really part of it; discursively, the smirks and snide remarks branded my reading choices a joke.

So I found affinity in a new fictional world. I not only acquired a vision of who I might become, I also physically moved from the children's side of the library to the adult side. In a few weeks, I went from Laura Lee Hope's *The Bobbsey Twins* and Julie Campbell's *Trixie Belden* to books by Mary Stewart, Helen MacInnes, and Victoria Holt. The next summer would see an end to the braces and the bangs and would bring a new pair of glasses.



Figure 3. Anne, age 13, from a family photo.

Decades later, when I began writing and publishing in multiple genres, I would discover another legacy of *The Moon-Spinners* and of that very painful year.

The bell rings. Still reading, I grope for my notebook. But I miss and knock it open, just as Sheila reaches down for her own notebook. Sheila grabs mine and hers and stands up.

“Ooooh! Guess who Anne likes?!” She waves my notebook at the other girls who crowd around her as they make their way back across the playground to the classrooms.

I feel my face flush. I grab my things, scramble to my feet, and run after the group.

“Wait ‘til we show him!” they tease, naming one of the most popular boys in the seventh grade, the one whose name fills the top page of my notebook.

I reach Sheila and try to grab my notebook from her. She turns away, tucking the damning evidence against her.

“Give it back!” I sputter. But she just ignores me. Desperate, I reach my arm back. And then I slug her. In the arm. But still.

The other girls gasp. But Sheila just laughs in derision and tosses me the notebook.

All my childish reaction has done is to confirm to her—to all of them—what a baby, what a horrid, ugly baby, I am.

### **Margaret's Story: "What Are You Trying to Do to These Students?!?"**

I remember saying at my dissertation proposal defense, "Anyone listening in to this conversation would wonder what I was trying to do to these kids!" We were reviewing the local school district's decision to decline my research proposal, and there had been humorous talk of "sneaking in" and trying to get in "through the back door" in order to "gain access" to a local school. The talk was light-hearted, but I was worried. Where and how would I find a school that would approve my using process drama as a teaching method in a science class? I hadn't much time, either, as I needed to graduate the following May and find work. I had to conduct the research by January at the latest.

The week before my defense in September I had received a phone call from the local school district's Department of Assessment and Accountability. I had come to know the person calling quite well, and I liked him, but any phone call received at 8 a.m. on a Monday morning while driving in heavy traffic on the interstate had to be bad news. He was sorry to tell me the research approval committee had declined my application. The main concern, he said, was the amount of time my research would *take away* from instructional time in an already failing school. I was disappointed but not altogether surprised by their thinking. I had discovered that most schools in Florida hadn't experienced the possibilities of process drama as a teaching method, had no frame of reference, and didn't know what they were missing. I asked if I could appeal the decision, but the caller didn't think so. My only hope of getting it approved was as an after-school project. I did not want to do this, but by the end of the conversation I had become resigned to it.

As I reflected on the conversation, my disappointment turned to anger. I felt the decision reflected an anti-arts bias that labeled drama an extra-curricular frill rather than a pedagogy in its own right. My research wouldn't take away from

instructional time; process drama was an instructional method. I was irked by the perception of drama as a deficit learning experience and, as someone who for twenty years had witnessed the power of drama as a teaching tool, I felt my identity as a drama teacher was being diminished and my expertise as an educator was being questioned. In Gee's (2000) terms, the institutional discourse about process drama as a pedagogy conflicted with my affinity for its efficacy, leaving me, naturally, perturbed. Suddenly, I realized that I had missed my exit for the university and was heading way north. I was upset by the phone call and panicked by not knowing where I was—literally and metaphorically. I turned the car around and headed back to familiar territory.

O'Toole and O'Mara (2007) wrote, "Drama, the playful giant, is knocking at the door [of education], but despite its protean wiles, it is barely over the threshold yet" (p. 215), and these words came to represent my experience of trying, and failing, to have research using process drama as a teaching method approved by two school districts. In Greek mythology, Proteus was a god of the sea and bodies of water, and the adjective *protean* alludes to the fluidity of something, in this case the uses of drama as a pedagogy.

O'Toole and O'Mara (2007) called drama an "in the moment" experience compared with standard curriculum's being "conceptualized with status and permanence" (p. 203). The use of drama as an instructional method does not guarantee academic success, but what if the in-the-moment physical embodiment of a concept leads to greater retention and understanding of material? Process drama is not about putting on a play; it is a teaching method requiring students to devise unscripted scenarios that depict important social issues, literary themes, or concepts and ideas. Its identity does not fit well with current teaching practices as students do not produce a permanent product that can be evaluated nor do they sit and passively receive instruction. Rather, students explore ideas and concepts through physical and social interaction in order to know them in an embodied—not just cognitive—form of literacy.



Figure 4. Margaret (back to camera) works with a group of students (Kindergarten to Grade 8) to embody the idea of a pyramid.

Process drama in action can look like play, giving rise to its identity as a playful giant, a personification that sounds innocent but which also alludes to the power of drama.

My study planned to focus on helping students understand the main idea of a science text by physically representing those ideas. I wanted to study how the power of drama could alter perspectives and build knowledge. But in trying to get my research approved, I came to realize that administrators did not associate drama with building knowledge.

As the morning wore on, my anger turned to resolve. I was determined to research the effectiveness of drama in teaching main ideas during regular teaching hours, so I decided to look elsewhere for a research home. I wondered about the possibility of collecting data at the school my daughters attended—it was in a different school district, and the personal connection might help my case. Unlike the school where I had first applied, it was not a Title 1 school, but it was a public school, and that was important to me. In my experience supervising pre-service teachers in the public schools, I hadn't seen many opportunities for students to learn in innovative ways, and I hoped in some small way to create that experience for a class of students and their teacher. So, I submitted an application to my local school district and waited for the answer.

A few weeks later, I received a letter from the district's Department of Assessment, Accountability and Research. They had decided "not to participate in" my study. No reason was given, but a phone number was provided if I had any questions. When I called in search of answers, the administrative assistant said the notes on my file read "not of high importance at this time" and "time impact on all involved." I requested a meeting with the executive director. I knew I would not be able to change his or her mind, but I wanted to know more about these reasons. I was told that somebody would call me to arrange a meeting, but that didn't happen. Sensing it never would, I requested a phone conversation with the director, and eventually she called me.

When my phone rang, I took a deep breath and forced myself to remain calm. "Thank you for calling me," I said. "I have been trying to find out why my research to use drama as a teaching method in schools was not accepted."

The director's voice was not unfriendly, but it was firm. "While we appreciate all interest that is shown in our public schools," she began politely, "county policy is to not approve studies that involve visits to the classroom. We only approve studies based on the use of existing data, and do not permit studies that generate new data."

To myself, I argued how knowledge of how students learn could ever be advanced if new data were never generated. I bit back the words, however, and said, "I did review your goals for success on the district website and I noticed that the engagement of students was one of those. I believe the students would find this study very engaging—"

The director continued without pause. "There were also concerns about the time it would take the teachers to hand out consent forms. I have to protect the students and the teachers."

*Protect?* What an interesting word. What are they so scared of in drama that they feel students need protecting from it? But I didn't say this. I merely thanked the director for taking the time to call me and hung up the phone, thinking, "Your decision confirms all the existing data about the decline of

arts instruction in schools. The kids don't need protecting from drama but from this myopic view of what constitutes 'real research' and 'effective teaching methods.'"

After the rejection from the second school district, I had to abandon my ideas of conducting research in a regular public school and begin pursuing alternative sites—mainly because I needed to graduate and move on. A local charter school was recommended to me as a school that welcomed innovative approaches to teaching and learning. I sent the principal an email, and within an hour I had heard back from her. She thought the project sounded wonderful and, yes, they would be very interested to have me work with a third grade class.

That was it. No questions, no disapproval, no rejection—of me or of my methods. The playful giant—and I—were about to cross the threshold.

### **Constructing New Story Lines: Changing Narratives and Crossing Thresholds**

In writing our narratives, we were able to see more clearly that the construction of new story lines, as Bochner (2000) termed it, had taken place in our lives, but we still were not quite sure how. At first, we felt it was a matter of simply choosing to listen to one voice speaking a particular label rather than other voices speaking more negative labels. For Tara, for instance, the voices and the active determination of her grandmother, her father, and her high school teachers countered other voices and years of passive instructional neglect. For Anne, the vision/voice of what she could become, countering her pre-adolescent warped vision of herself, came through the pages of a novel. Margaret, encountering a system that identified itself as "protecting" students and teachers from new methods, held fast to her inner knowledge of a different way of teaching and of doing research. However, as we thought more about it, we wondered if it were actually so simple. Were we in danger of creating a fairy-tale version of identity reconstruction: Choose this voice/label over that, and *poof!* Look in this mirror rather than in that mirror, and *abracadabra!* Sing about lands over rainbows and end up in OZ, or talk about no place like home and wake up in Kansas. If so, then our

identities ought to have changed instantly and permanently once we found the right combination. But they hadn't. We each continually struggle to find and to speak our voice against the din.

Additionally, we were challenged during the review process to rethink the role of labels both in terms of their presence and in terms of their absence. Tara had included racial and class labels in her story, while Anne and Margaret had not, leading one anonymous, outside reviewer (personal communication, April 10, 2015) to wonder how each of us saw our "identities . . . positioned within the dominant U.S. culture, how each may feel like an outsider." We discussed the reviewer's comments, asking whether these labels mattered in the context of what were trying to achieve, which was to show how labels, thoughtlessly applied, can deceive and destroy. On the one hand, labeling helps us manage the massive amounts of information we encounter each moment (Goffman, 1974), and each human being bears many culturally-constructed labels, none of which are independent of the others (Gee, 2000). On the other hand, once we began listing labels, where would we stop? Is race and class enough information, or should we list age, gender, marital status, religion, body type, and our favorite music? Can everything or anything about a person be explained in terms of particular labels?

Additionally, the label with which Tara grappled was not a racist or classist label—even if it may have been applied because of racial and class bias. This label was a product of the education system, which discursively marginalizes students who fall outside of an artificially determined norm by labeling them *gifted* or *struggling* or *remedial*.

Another anonymous reviewer questioned whether Anne's and Margaret's not addressing race and social class was because people of a dominant race and more privileged class tend to be less likely to acknowledge the role race and class play in the formulation of identity. Perhaps. But we also felt that this information was not relevant to our stories. Neither Anne nor Margaret encountered racial or class labels, but that didn't make us immune to the effects of other labels. At the same time, we did not immediately recognize and acknowledge other



differences contributing to our stories. For example, Margaret did not include in her story that she had not grown up within the United States, as she did not initially feel that was important to her story.

On reflection, however, she acknowledged that her story involved assumptions she made based on prior experiences in another country. Process drama is widely used as a curricular tool in the United Kingdom, and she had expected it would be practiced—or at least known about—here, too. Her affinity with practicing process drama, therefore, “othered” her from the moment she came to the United States, first as a teacher and later as a graduate student. Additionally, every time Margaret spoke, her accent immediately marked her as British. Did this negatively affect how she was perceived as an educator by U.S. administrators? She likely will never know. What she came to realize, however, was that in feeling alienated by a very different education system, she was similarly othering the educational system of the United States and labeling it as *drama-deficient*. In other words, the othering was bi-directional!

The reviewers’ comments, however, made us consider these questions more deeply, and we saw three things we had not seen before: First, we realized that each of our stories began with a physical move that was both geographic and cultural. Second, we realized that the stories were as much about others being discomfited by us as we by them. While we could only tell our stories and not theirs, we realized that the labels they applied, consciously or unconsciously, were a reaction to our not fitting within their frame of immediate reference. Third, we saw that our stories presented a spectrum of ways in which labels affect us. Tara’s story considered labels in interpersonal relationships, Anne’s story revealed the intrapersonal self-labeling we sometimes fall into, and Margaret’s story explored institutionally systemic labeling.

Our thoughts boiled down to this: Surely people of all races and classes have struggled, as Anne did, with a sense of alienation and a lack of confidence and self-consciousness even within groups comprised of members of their own race and general class. Surely people of all races and classes who have

tried to introduce new ways of thinking into a system, as Margaret did, have encountered rejection. And surely people of all races and classes have been labeled wrongly, as was Tara, as incapable students for reasons other than race and class.

To us, obstacles are obstacles. Regardless of one’s cultural positioning, none of us can escape labels nor can we escape the self-questioning and obstacles—imposed from without and from within—that accompany such labels. To label ourselves as belonging or not belonging to a dominant or non-dominant culture when it wasn’t integral to the narrative seemed contrived, would negate the common human experience we sought to explore, and might deter one or more readers from identifying with the experience because he/she was, ironically, outside a particular, labeled group. We wanted readers to focus on the process of inner wrestling against some labels of doing and of the process of straining to hear, to voice, and to embody other labels of being.

We returned to Bakhtin’s (1981) social heteroglossia, his “Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages” (p. 278), and noted that, despite the connotations of confusion and disarray, social heteroglossia isn’t the villain in the story. Rather, Bakhtin (1981) claimed, “these voices create the background necessary for [the author’s] own voice, outside of which his artistic prose nuances cannot be perceived, and without which they ‘do not sound’” (p. 278). In other words, had all of these voices not existed, had they not clamored to be heard, and had we not struggled—or continue to struggle—against them, our own voices could not have emerged with any strength.

Similarly, Holland (1975) spoke of understanding “individuality by conceiving of the individual as living out variations on an identity theme much as a musician might play out an infinity of variations on a single melody. We discover that underlying theme by abstracting it from its variations” (p. 814). Play “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” for instance, in its original major key in any number of rhythms and it changes from a jaunty nursery rhyme to a somber march. Play it in a minor key and it becomes either a melancholy lullaby or a dirge. In a similar manner, we thought, the obstacles that we had encountered

had imposed various rhythms and keys upon the main theme of our identity—but the melody was still there. Were each of these variations necessary, as was the multitude of voices, for our own individual identities to develop, to be expressed, and to be heard fully?

When we looked more closely at each of our narratives to discern common threads, we began to see that there wasn't one point at which the new story line began to be constructed. Rather, it was in a continual holding ourselves open to receive what these voices and variations had to teach us, without being consumed or subsumed by them and combined with an embodied enactment of our voice, that the new story was constructed line by line and scene by scene.

For instance, Tara may have physically joined the basic reading group at the back of the room, but inwardly she held open—for the better part of the school year—the question of “why” raised by the grouping and by the word *remedial* on her report cards. Rather than closing herself off in anger from Mrs. Williams and the other children because of their behavior toward her, she held herself open to the thought that their behavior was not her fault but was their opting not to get to know her as a person. Later, she held herself open to receiving remonstrance from her high school teachers, choosing to see their admonitions that she was not doing her best as a validation of her being able to do better. Physically, she rehearsed with her grandmother how to respond to questions and made herself begin raising her hand in class.

Margaret experienced difficulty in attempting to intertwine her identity as a teacher using innovative methods with the shrunken and shriveled identity of an education system that views innovation with suspicion. Over the years, she has had to hold open her belief that if people just saw process drama at work, they would grasp its potential. In the instance related in this article, she spoke that strand of her identity by physically completing multiple applications, thereby also speaking process drama as a valid teaching method.

Before discovering *The Moon-Spinners* (1962/1964), Anne had outgrown her affinity for the children's books with which she previously had identified. Physically and psychologically, she was in an awkward adolescence, one aggravated in the institutional setting of a junior high school where her own self-consciousness magnified verbal and nonverbal labels, further shredding her sense of self. Ingesting, through repeated readings, the more adult novel helped her hold open hope for a meaningful adulthood. Additionally, the embodied act of hand-copying the text unwittingly birthed an identity not voiced until decades later, and then in short stories for children that often explored the power of hope.

Even today, we each agree that sounding our voices against the background of other sometimes harmonious, sometimes dissonant voices takes more than a little effort. We must continually be open and do something, however small. Being open and doing something changes the narrative we tell of our lives, thus changing the story lines of our lives, which as Bochner (2002) put it, “helps us exert control over possibilities and limitations” (p.73), in effect altering our identities. Finally, in reflecting on the narratives we wrote, we realized we each had positioned ourselves as the heroine or champion of our own stories.

From another perspective, however, we, too, could be seen as part of the heteroglossia of others' lives. Bakhtin (1981) wrote, “As soon as a critical interanimation of languages began to occur . . . , the necessity of actively choosing one's orientation among them began” (p. 296). But as soon as we actively choose our orientation among those voices, we affect the way those other voices sound forth, as well. We not only speak our own voice against the cacophony of other voices, we also bend and shape those other voices—individual, societal, and systemic—in ways we may not realize. Such a choice is, as Taylor (1989) noted, a moral choice. It is only in refusing to speak ourselves into being that we silence our own stories and, perhaps, those of countless others.

## References

- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (M. Holquist, Ed.; C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Bochner, A. (2002). Perspectives on inquiry III: The moral of stories. In M. Knapp & J. Daly (Eds.), *The handbook of interpersonal communication* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., pp. 73-102). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ellis, C. (1991). Sociological introspection and emotional experience. *Symbolic Interaction*, 14(1), 23-50.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Gee, J. P. (2000). Identity as an analytic lens for research in education. *Review of Research in Education*, 25, 99-125.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Holland, N. N. (1975). Unity identity text self. *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 90(5), 813-822.
- label, n.i. (September 2015). *OED Online*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. Retrieved from <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/view/Entry/104691?rskey=e2MNQA&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>
- Longfellow, H. W. (1904). There was a little girl. In B. Carman, J. V. Cheney, C. G. D. Roberts, C. F. Richardson, F. H. Stoddard, & J. R. Howard (Eds.). *The world's best poetry*, (Vol. 1). Philadelphia, PA: John D. Morris & Co.; Retrieved from <http://www.bartleby.com/360/1/120.html>
- O'Toole, J., & O'Mara, J. (2007). Proteus, the giant at the door: Drama and theater in the curriculum. In L. Bresler (Ed.). *International handbook of research in arts education*. (Vol. 16, pp. 203-219). Dordrecht, NL: Springer.
- Schwartz, M. (2005). Memoir? Fiction? Where's the line? In R. L. Root, Jr., & M. Steinberg (Eds.), *The fourth genre: Contemporary writers of/on creative nonfiction* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., pp. 399-404). New York, NY: Pearson.
- Stewart, M. (1964). *The moon-spinners*. New York, NY: Crest Books, Fawcett. (Original work published 1962)
- Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.