Why This Book

> "When you pass strangers on the street, the unfamiliar faces blur. When you let your lives touch and make the effort of asking questions and listening to the stories they tell, you discover the intricate patterns of their differences, and at the same time, the underlying themes that all members of our species have in common."
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> ***—Mary Catherine Bateson***

When I look into the faces of my students, faces that come from all over the globe, I realize that the most important task at hand as a teacher is to understand each student's reality. In other words, I need to know who the student is and what knowledge of American English culture is present. Then, how does this new knowledge interact with that of the home culture? What attitudes do the students have that might affect the acquisition of a second language? What social and familial influences are there?

All of these questions can be answered if I know the student's story, the cultural and individual journey that has been undertaken so far. In order to better understand their journey, on the first day of class, I encourage students to write their own stories. Sometimes I ask them to interview each other and write each other's stories. Often it isn't easy, but gradually their stories unfold. The stories are fascinating to read and hear, and I always learn something I didn't know. Knowing their stories, as I begin to understand their identities, I begin to connect with the students and teach

them English as a second language in a meaningful way. I am teaching a real human being, not a stereotype or abstraction, and suddenly all sorts of possibilities exist for the students' achievements in a second language.

There are many books written describing the odyssey into the foreign land and the experience of learning a second language. One author, Eva Hoffman, who emigrated from Poland as an adolescent, wrote in her memoir, *Lost in Translation* (Penguin Books, 1989):

> *Everyday I learn new words, new expressions, I pick them up from school exercises, from conversations, from the books I take out of Vancouver's well-lit, cheerful public library. There are some turns of phrase to which I develop strange allergies. "You're welcome," for example, strikes me as a gaucherie, and I can hardly bring myself to say it—I suppose because it implies that there's something to be thanked for, which in Polish would be impolite. The very places where language is at its most conventional, where it should be most taken for granted, are the places where I feel the prick of artifice.*
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> *Then there are the words to which I take an equally irrational liking, for their sound, or just because I'm pleased to have deduced their meaning. Mainly they're words I learn from books, like "enigmatic" or "insolent"—words that have only a literary value, that exist only as signs on the page.*
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> *But, mostly, the problem is that the signifier has become severed from the signified. The words I learn now don't stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue. "River" in Polish was a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers, of my being immersed in rivers. "River" in English is cold—a word without an aura. It has no accumulated associations for me, and it does not give off the radiating haze of connotation. It does not evoke. (p. 106)*

In this excerpt, much is conveyed about teaching English as a second language, about the importance of having students write personal narratives in order to be able to learn to use words in a familiar context. In other words, I would let the young Eva as a student of English write about the rivers in Poland, a landscape that is meaningful to her, before I ask her to write about rivers in a more abstract sense. I would also help her put words in context from her "literary" assignments. I might teach her word-

building skills to help her become better grounded in vocabulary. All of this would happen because I connected with her story and, in particular, about the acquisition of language and culture.

I have discovered that narratives can suggest powerful ways of learning about effective teaching because they focus on the student's perspective. I have discussed how important identity is in my earlier book, *Lives in Two Languages* (University of Michigan Press, 2001). *Understanding Cultural Narratives* continues the discussion of identity but focuses on narrative as a means of revealing it.

Furthermore, when I teach ESL bilingual teacher-training courses, I have rarely found a topic as compelling as that of the cross-cultural story**.** The narrative as a tool for learning is part of an important paradigm in the sociocultural theory. My graduate students will learn about narrative and its history in the social sciences as an introduction to studying cross-cultural stories. But it is when the graduate students in my classes read an actual account about a border-crossing, in which the individual's narrative documents the shift in perspective and the identity revision that accompanies it, that they finally understand the issues, problems, and enrichment that confront the bilingual individual as he or she changes gradually over a period of time. Furthermore, I have found that when we read texts from stories and poems that illustrate this journey, students respond with stories of identity of their own. Suddenly, an "aha" moment exists. The teacher trainees see a connection between their stories and the stories of people from other cultures. Where there previously was stereotyping, there is now an understanding of the immigrant as a person. An important feature of narratives is the recognition of the similarity that human beings have in the effort to gain agency or control over their lives. And yet, at the same time, this ability to cope, to be successful, exists in a cultural context that may not always be obvious to the observer.

If you have never moved from the very place you were born or never had to make sense out of an alien word, it is difficult to understand what the fuss is about. If someone has even moved from one part of the same country, state, or city to another part either near or far, there had to be an accompanying shift in perspective. Identities change in any new context, even going away to college, even when there is no language barrier. Therefore, for people who cross boundaries into countries, the adjustment is more intense, with learning a new language part of that experience. Language is learned in context and reflects the experience of

the learner. In fact, Chapters 2–4 explore literature and poetry as a means of uncovering stories about identity.

One effective tool for exploration of this area of inquiry is the ethnographic interview, a carefully controlled and documented question-and-answer process that has been an integral part of the qualitative research paradigm of the social sciences. It is essential that teacher trainees understand their own identities so that they can understand identity issues of others. Yet, many English-dominant people are not firmly grounded on their own cultural trappings, even if they are vestigial and handed down from many generations. Even I, whose ancestors first set foot in North America 400 years ago, have become gradually more aware of language, both words and pronunciation, and traditions that go back to the area around Lancaster, England, through teaching and learning about ethnography and the ethnographic interview. Cultural anthropologists tell us that much of cultural tradition and behavior is unconscious (Geertz, 2000). It is through the understanding of these cultural behaviors that we begin to perceive our own authentic identities.

In my graduate class, when we study the transcripts of ethnographic interviews, we become aware of the power of narrative and the power that comes with learning to discover each person's unique story. We soon see that we are all a part of the same human community on this fragile planet. In sharing a student's narrative, the teacher-trainers learn about each other, the similarities and differences. Self-discovery helps students gain the ability to be self-determining in a new milieu. When they understand who they are, they gain the same or greater control over their lives as when they were on familiar ground. This kind of knowledge has tremendous positive consequences for an individual; it brings empowerment. When students articulate answers in an interview, feelings of loss and vulnerability seem less threatening. For us as teachers, greater understanding of bilingual or multicultural individuals results from an emphasis on the narratives of real-life stories that chronicle the adjustments and choices made in a new milieu. It is important to remember this fact: *No matter how wonderful the pedagogical plan is, without connecting with the student through understanding his or her narrative, the lesson will not be as effective, and even might be totally misdirected. Through connection, meaning is made. Nothing is truly learned without a meaningful context.*

Besides the obvious benefits for their students, another important benefit that resulted from this approach to teacher training has been

the opportunity for writing that the ethnographic interview, by its very nature, requires from teacher trainees. Many graduate students come to their classes lacking recent practice in writing the sort of lengthy research projects that are required in most graduate programs. Using this reading-writing approach with ethnographic interview has helped students to gain control over their writing processes once again. In fact, interviews have led to embracing other methods of the ethnographic method of research, and even doctoral dissertations. The stories that were unearthed were so compelling that students found themselves carried along effortlessly in a tide of narrative. Most important, they were excited about learning in ways that helped them discover their identities as writers, educators, and researchers. The ethnographic interview and summaries are explored in Chapters 6 and 7.

My hope is that, as a result of using this text to understand narration as a mode of inquiry and through reading poetry, literature, and ethnography that evokes exploration of the self and identity, students will become transformed into effective teachers who are able to connect more deeply with the students they teach.