Trouble — In, around, and between narratives

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This essay defines narrating in terms of *trouble* — narrators' interaction in the structure of narratives, with the (often troubling) contexts around narratives, and management of expectations and possibilities in the process between narratives. I frame this discussion about the narrating process as an urgent concern for designers of developmental research and practice in the rapidly changing, diverse human environments of this global era. Since narrating in a tool for individual and societal sense-making, developmental activities engage relational complexity and tension.

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In his book *Making stories: Law, literature, life*, Jerome Bruner states "… everybody agrees that a story begins with some breach in the expected state of things — *peripeteia*. Something goes awry, otherwise there's nothing to tell about" (p. 17). Bruner brings us inside the structure of stories then zooms out to the courtroom to ponder the relationship of narrating to culture. In this essay, I extend Bruner's analysis of the power story, with urgency for those of us who work with young people in developmental research and practice. I discuss the initiating action of story as *trouble*, consistent with peripeteia — the launching of plot — in particular to foreground that people *do* things with stories, beyond entertaining or sharing personal experiences. Implicated in the "murky" narrative transfigurations of the commonplace (Bruner, 2002, p. 4), we become members of a society, or several, we figure out how to survive in times of trouble, and, ideally, we participate in collective stories imagining how to transform our plights. If narrating is a sense-making process, *trouble* is certainly at the center. Trouble is the seed of plot development;

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trouble in the narrating situation can guide a narrator to craft different stories for diverse audiences, and trouble in social institutions constraining narrators may give way to stories transgressing societal canons.

Drawing on recent empirical research with young people growing up in extremely troubled places, I discuss trouble in narrative plots and then focus on narrators' plotting about what to share and what not to dare in relation to circumstances where they live. I build on theory that stories are tools for making sense of what is going on in the world and how we fit (Bamberg, 2006; Bruner, 2002; Nelson, 1996; Peterson & McCabe, 1983; Tomasello, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). As the discussion moves from within stories out to their contexts, I highlight a largely ignored, observation that "… storytelling is somehow not innocent … that it even has a wicked or immoral penumbra?" (Bruner, 2002, p. 5). And, I explain that the consequence of such wickedness is that much of narrating goes on b*etween* narratives, in the troubles of the world that provoke our attention to *what* we make sense about, *whom* we think is listening, *where/when* we live, and *which* dangers and opportunities motivate us. I conclude with the point that research and practice in the contemporary world must address the troubles around narrating to understand its role in human development.

Trouble in narrative

As with the more strictly literary peripeteia, trouble in everyday narratives by regular people occurs when something interrupts expected circumstances, in a story's setting or implied in the broader context. Such a reversal might be a fight at a picnic on a peaceful summer day, an ethnic war in a formerly harmonious society, or a love affair among children of rival merchants. Trouble need not be a negative reversal — love can bloom amidst hatred — nor do resolutions always put things right — they may suspend in painful recognition. Narrating could involve explicit reflection but typically, it's left alone as though it springs authentically from an individual soul rather than from intense interaction in society.

I make this argument with examples from a six-year practice-based research project, *Dynamic Story-telling By Youth*, involving 137 12 to 27 year olds growing up during and after the violent disintegration of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s (Daiute, 2010). We draw on analyses of some 400 narratives by participants in Bosnia & Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia, Serbia, and a refugee community in the United States interacting with a range of conflicts from diverse perspectives for diverse audiences. Narratives do not have to be about conflict to revolve around trouble, because the issue of conflict in daily life has long been identified as relevant

not only to narrating but also to development in complex urban environments (Labov & Waletzky, 1997).

When asked to write about a time when he or someone his age was involved in a conflict or disagreement with a peer, sixteen year old Vahmata[1] in Serbia shared the following:

> *It happened one afternoon when my band gathered to practice the repertoire for the show. One of the members of the band was trying to persuade me to include in it "Tamara", a song by Bajaga. He was quite determined to include it. The two of us starting quarrelling. Soon the other two members of the band got involved in the argument as well. I was thinking of convincing him that it was not a good idea. At the same time, I was trying not to impose my opinion on him. I'm not sure how the other two felt about it, but I think that they were listening to us, trying to figure out what is right and what is wrong.*

Not necessarily a great story, this one sets a scene with attendant expectations: "It happened one afternoon when my band gathered to practice the repertoire for the show". Trouble comes quickly when "one of the members of the band was trying to persuade me to include in it "Tamara", a song by Bajaga. … The two of us started quarrelling." Trouble in this plot escalates as "the other members of the band got involved in the argument," and the narrator/protagonist shares his reflections about his role and the others' perceptions. Vahmata does not resolve the specific conflict of whether to include "Tamara" in the band's play list but uses the story to enact his position as a reasonable and empathetic leader. This youth, whose life has been defined by war, doesn't mention bellicose events or consequences, but his emphasis on what he was thinking about what others were thinking is an intense psycho-social plot strategy that is, moreover, characteristic of autobiographical narratives by youth growing up in the country acknowledged as the major aggressor in the 1990s wars. Given the opportunity to complete a story started with a scene at a ground-breaking for a new community center, Vahmata introduces more blatant trouble and less idealistic circumstances:

> *Partizan and Zvezda: The news they received was that a group of the young Red Star supporters was threatening the Partisan supporters. Reportedly, they were provoked by being called bad names ("Gypsies, Gypsies"). Both sides got involved in a bad argument which ended in the cessation of any type of collaboration.*

Vahmata uses this fictional story to raise some issues in his country, like nationalistic sports teams (such as "Red Star"), biased slurs against the Roma population (calling someone a "Gypsy"), intra-national animosities of those with "last-century mentalities" (as one of Vahmata's peers wrote) and those trying hard to distance from that past. This pair of stories illustrates a larger pattern of youth using narrator stances, whether as a character in an autobiographical narrative or

as potentially omniscient outside a fictional story, to engage with a range of knowledge and experience. Most young authors used the fictional option to remain outside the story, but also, quite remarkably, to engineer story worlds with settings, events, metaphors, and troubles evocative of very real unique local or national circumstances (Daiute, 2010).

We observe a similar type of structuring in two narratives by thirteen year old Emina, whose family fled Bosnia during the war on a journey that led her to be an immigrant in the United States. Although beginning life in the same country as Vahmata, Emina makes different moves with the same two narrating activities.

> *The one girl in my class Johanna was saying really mean things about this girl Jessica and they got in a fight and they were punching each other. Johanna kept on yelling "stop!" and Jessica kept on hitting her. I wasn't part of the fight so I didn't handle it. It turns out that they both got suspended from school.*

The brief setting of "class" sets expectations of a peaceful, maybe even boring classroom, then troubled by violence. Emina's narrative includes resolution strategies requiring interventions by third parties, a role her character denies and leaves to be passively assumed by whoever "suspended" the fighters from school. Such a plot turning on physical conflict and others' intervention was common among Emina's peers, as was the contrasting agentic orientation in the fictional story she titled "Amena & Sanela".

> *The news was that the mayor decided to cancel the making of the building! Everyone involved was really sad because they thought that this building would make their city even more beautiful. Trns out that after 2 years of protests and begging the building was made.*

To address the unnamed, imaginary characters' being "really sad," Emina introduces "protests and begging" as collective action strategies achieving the building that "would make their city even more beautiful." We see from these few examples that even in quite rudimentary narratives, young narrators structure stories around reversals, albeit not always with aesthetic flair or balance.

This development of narrating up through and past adolescence in problematic contexts is consistent with prior research in more normative ones (Berman & Slobin, 1993). We extend inquiry of narrative development over time to variation in the nature of literary trouble and resolution across genres. Narratives by participants aged 7 through 10 in U.S. urban public schools included plots to match the values in a violence prevention program, while their fictional stories increasingly expressed counter-curriculum values over time (Daiute et al, 2003). Similarly, analyses of narratives by participants aged 12 to 27 across the former Yugoslavia indicated that autobiographical narratives of conflicts among peers revolve around

a wide range of issues (relationships, differences of opinion, character, physical altercations, etc.) and resolution strategies (psychological, communicative, etc.), while plots in fictional narratives revolved around political issues with collective action resolution strategies (Daiute, 2010). These within-person differences across systematically varied narratives indicate the functionality of genres and their relevance to context.

Trouble around narratives

When Bruner's inquiry entered the courtroom, he wrote "… narrative generally, like culture itself, is organized around the dialectic of expectation-supporting norms and possibility-evoking transgressions" (2002, p. 16). In prior more slowly transforming societies, researchers, educators, and therapists could reasonably assume certain backgrounds for individuals' narratives. Where there were clearly understood master narratives, interpreters could identify matches and counter-narratives, an unrealistic duality today. When we shift to problematic contexts, like war, culturally heterogeneous educational contexts, nations in transition from dictatorships to democracies, or courtrooms, the need to examine how individuals use narrating in relation to multiple contexts, is great.

Analyses of institutional values in educational practice, communities, human resources, and other institutions should be part of the repertoire for examining individuals' dialectics with the multiple narratives in systems where they live. In one study, for example, we analyzed values in a violence prevention curriculum for whether and how teachers' and students' narratives conformed to those values, contested them, and transformed them (Daiute et al., 2003). Other inquiries of interactive individual-societal narrating include an investigation of how human resource professionals in a newly capitalist country understand changing values of what it means to be a good person (Ninkovic, forthcoming); research investigating the transitions of U.S. veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars from military culture to college (Messina, forthcoming), and research investigating the use of children's rights discourse in the narratives of humanitarian aid organizations' narratives about the children of war in their charge (Izadpanah, forthcoming). A study inviting teenagers in a large U.S. city to re-narrate a miscommunication in a text-message for what immigrant and non-immigrant readers of the message might have been thinking and feeling showed that immigrant youth employ linguistic devices of English to align with U.S.-born youth and other immigrants differently, a relational sensitivity not presented by their U.S. born peers (Lucic, forthcoming). Results of such designs implore us to consider narrators' work between their narratives.

Trouble between narratives

"What we know intuitively about stories is enough to get us through the familiar routines, but it serves us much less well when we try to understand or explain what we are doing or try to get under deliberate control" (Bruner, 2002, p. 4).

Applying the idea that narrating mediates one's relations in the world (rather than merely reporting) means positing the narrator-audience-context relationship as integral to all knowledge and expression, in research and practice designs, as well as in life. This meditational function emerges clearly in young people's uses of fiction to address issues that are taboo or not cool. My focused inquiry into differences between plots of narratives of conflicts among adults and fictional narratives showed, for example, that fictional narratives revolve specifically around political relations ("didn't have a permit," "selected a location in the wrong zoning area," "ran out of public funds," etc.) with collective action resolution strategies more than around personal social systems. In contrast, autobiographical adult conflict narratives revolve around social systems ("people show their frustrations on the bus," "argued about how to raise their child") with interpersonal resolution strategies. Given the overwhelmingly political nature of the fictional stories, we can imagine young narrators' decision-making between narratives (probably implicitly) to reserve certain issues for fiction. For example, teenage Moira in Croatia recounted a nationalistic justification of war, in a thinly veiled fable of the Greens (Serbs) and the Blues (Croatians), which would be an unacceptable public narrative in her candidate nation to the European Union required in numerous ways to move beyond war. That such political statements appear in young people's fictional but not in their autobiographical narrating indicates adjustments between narratives. Designing research to invite such relational complexity with narrating reveals not only the politics of fiction but also its profound utility and developmental possibility.

Asking for trouble

Implications for research and educational practice emanate from observations about these largely unexamined dynamics. The emphasis on personal authenticity (Graves, 2003) and coherence (McAdams, 2006) in narrating rather than on complexity and contradiction may stem from suspicions that "too good a story … implies something fake" (p. 5) and therapeutic concerns. Equally, if not, more importantly, is that story is a powerful tool for mediating "the canonical and the possible". Those in power create canonical narratives for their purposes, to get children to behave, to justify wars, to direct new nations, to tell patriotic stories,

or to refrain from bellicose ones, so unearthing the devices used to do so is difficult and sometimes dangerous. When we acknowledge that the explicit content, structure, and implications in a narrative are inextricably entwined with what goes on before, during, and after it, we must honor narrating as a cultural tool whose working parts require detailed examination. It takes cultures a long time to create their devices, like marking intensity, focus, and minimalizations, for doing things with language, so we can use them as keys to reading what is especially significant to the narrator.

If human development means, at least in part, transforming canons, developmental uses of story are those that imagine new possibilities. Inviting research participants, students, (and ourselves as researchers) complexity, contradiction, and multiple tales opens possibilities, like using fiction to express what we decide to silence in autobiography. With out shifting activities, what else can we expect but canonical stories. The following strategies are useful for engaging some uses of narrating:

1. Invite complexity of narratives in context by always asking participants to narrate more than once
2. Engage narrators in various relational stances, with various purposes, and audiences, such as employing fiction, which allows them more freedom to explore and critique, as well as autobiography, which involves aligning with the context.
3. Involve narrators to re-visit and reflect on their narratives, with others and on their own in relation to issues in the society in which they occur.
4. When analyzing narratives and narrating contexts, the details of language help us unlock "magic… beyond banality into the realm of the possible" (Bruner, 2002, p. 10).

To advance narrative inquiry and developmental uses of narrating, we must, in brief, ask for trouble with multiple diverse narrating activities. Rather than reducing the story and the story-maker as mirror images, we then join with others to use narrating and enjoy it.

Note

1. Names are participant-chosen pseudonyms.

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