

### Issues and Identity

What do literacy narratives have to do with issues of identity? Although literacy narratives have been discussed in terms of the events students relate and how to use them in the classroom, only recently has attention been paid to the **identities students construct, for themselves and for their teachers**, when they write literacy narratives. Of course, every writer in every piece of writing constructs an identity for an audience. Yet some teachers and scholars are examining more carefully the **kinds of identities students tend to construct** when they are writing about literacy for a **teacher of reading and writing**. These scholars are finding that many students, when writing such assignments, tend to adopt one of several recurring **narrative structures**. To adopt a particular structure, then, requires that students adopt a particular identity within that narrative. Often they construct a particular identity for teachers in the narrative as well. By looking more carefully at the **identities students gravitate toward** in their literacy narratives, and by responding overtly to this part of their text in our work with literacy narratives, we can **uncover another layer for students about how literacy has influenced their lives and how they might alter such patterns in the future**.

The cognitive awareness for what identities we gravitate towards provides insight into our own self-image (and perception of others)

Carpenter and Falbo (2003), for example, noted how their first-year writing students, when writing literacy narratives, often portray themselves as the **heroes of their stories**, overcoming all obstacles to succeed in writing and reading at school. These researchers have also shown how powerful this heroic identity is for students who consider themselves to be successful writers. In these narratives it is the **traditional individualistic heroic attributes—perseverance, self-reliance, self-confidence**—that allow them to triumph. "They often write of the demanding language arts teacher who had to be appeased, of the difficult assignment that had to be unlocked, and of the physical and emotional terrains of the educational system that had to be navigated" (Carpenter & Falbo). (Another example is my student who found a love for writing though an assignment

Heroes "rise to success" "child prodigies" "winners"

about the Civil War.) Yet the hero identity constructed in the narrative portrays the student as confronting and eventually surmounting progressively difficult challenges.

### Shifting Identities

After a year of working as undergraduate peer tutors, the students in Carpenter and Falbo's study were again asked to write literacy narratives. The researchers found that a student's identity often shifts from being the lone hero, overcoming adversity to succeed, to someone who is more **critical of his or her literacy practices** and who sees them **more connected to relationships with others**—either teachers or writing peers. This awareness of the more complex and social nature of literacy "gained as a result of working with their peers causes not just a shift in identity, but, at least initially, an **identity crisis**. They discover, for better and worse, that they are not the writers they think they are" (Carpenter & Falbo, 2003). This shift in identity opens the door for more complex and nuanced considerations of literacy practices.

Social learning impacts self-perception  
How might Discourses be involved in this

Paterson's (2003) research has gone further in exploring the identities students construct when they write literacy narratives. Paterson looked first at the kinds of available narratives students chose when completing such an assignment. By looking at those narratives, it is possible to see the kind of identity the author presents. For example, Paterson noted that many students who are **confident in their abilities** write what she calls "**rise-to-success**" narratives where, much as Carpenter and Falbo pointed out, the writer is the **hero of the narrative**. Yet Paterson also saw different kinds of identities different students displayed in such narratives. Some students portrayed themselves as "**child prodigies**," able and willing to excel at reading and writing from an early age. (This is like the student of mine who read with her father every night.) Others described the rewards and prizes they have accumulated through reading and writing, portraying themselves as

My narrative may have been a "rise to success" narrative  
Can child prodigies cross over to stigmatized experiences?