

# A folkloristic approach to understanding teachers as storytellers

LYNNE HAMER

University of Toledo, OH 43606-3390, U.S.A.

This article presents a folkloristic analysis of two history teachers' performances of lectures in an eleventh-grade American history course. Folklore is defined as the situated performance of a traditionalized text (in this case, from the course textbook) in which the performer (the teacher) takes responsibility for communicating a version of the text to the audience (the students) that is meaningful to them in their current situation. Using performance analysis grounded in folkloristic theory, it is shown that the history lecture is a complex genre combining such simple genres as anecdote and personal experience story. In so doing, a folkloristic approach to the study of teachers as storytellers is explained.

## Introduction

Increasingly we acknowledge that good teachers are good storytellers, but analysis of how stories function pedagogically lags behind this recognition. Close textual analysis of the content and process of storytelling is needed to grasp the full import of teachers' storytelling. Through stories, the meanings of events are shaped and reshaped, envisioned and revisioned as the storyteller mediates between a traditional story and his or her audience, often combining different stories into a new story, in order to make a point that the teller believes is important for the audience to hear. Stories are a primary way in which distant, past, and unfamiliar people and events are made relevant to the present. This is especially apparent if we look at history teachers as storytellers, and at their lectures as stories.

In this paper, I focus on the oral performances of ordinary teachers as events. In so doing, I explicate a folkloristic approach to studying the role of storytelling in schooling, and introduce key theoretical works as entrance points for further qualitative studies in folklore and education. My thesis is that storytelling in the classroom mixes nationally canonized, textbook information with the teller's own repertoire of stories, and thus constitutes an important vehicle through which personal and local knowledge are brought together with professional, academic, nationalized knowledge. Such subjectively presented history not only 'comes alive' for students, but it also makes clear that there is no standardization in the teaching performance of what is often assumed to be a standard curriculum. Therefore, it seems only right to embrace the subjective nature of performed history, and in so doing to recognize history teachers as the artistic, expert performers that they are while simultaneously developing pedagogical strategies that put students themselves in the roles of critical audience members and, more importantly, active storytellers.

## Methodology

This study took place in a midwestern town of approximately 6,000 during the 1991–92 school year. My goal was to illuminate the process of learning history by looking at ‘history-making’ (Thelen, 1991; Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998) as performed inside the school through the lens of ‘history-making’ as practiced outside the school.

### *Site selection and participants*

The first criterion for selecting a school was that it be located in a community with a clearly identifiable and easily accessible public interest in history. The town selected had held an annual Fall Festival since 1935, and contemporary festivals regularly commemorated local, state, and national historical events. Second, I wanted a school that was not recognized in any official way as a ‘model school,’ and teachers who had not been publicly recognized as exceptional (cf. Elbaz, 1991). In the school chosen, all three U.S. history teachers would be classified as solidly ‘mainstream American’: all ‘white’ men, Mr. Glenn was a retired military man and devout Christian, Mr. Michaels was a former businessman and avid sportsman, and Mr. Johns (who is not included in the present report) was a three-season sports coach and popular culture enthusiast. Most importantly, all three teachers were professional and generous in their willingness to let me come into their classrooms with a typically vague qualitative research agenda of ‘wanting to understand how kids learn history.’

### *Data collection*

The study involved 14 months of participant-observation, supplemented by semi-structured interviews. In addition to fieldwork throughout the production of two fall festivals and in the homes of area residents, during the entire 1991–92 school year I attended five sections of U.S. History at the local high school. Before and after classes, I chatted informally with teachers and students in classrooms and halls, and occasionally participated in extracurricular activities. I made jotted fieldnotes during history classes, and wrote descriptive fieldnotes on the computer every evening. In school, I audiotaped and occasionally videotaped class periods, many of which I later transcribed.<sup>1</sup> Although I mostly talked to teachers and students informally, I also arranged multiple, semistructured interviews with all three teachers and with 50 students.

### *Data analysis and interpretation*

Transcriptions of audiotaped class interactions and fieldnotes of untaped class interactions were reviewed repeatedly to discover narrative patterns. These reviews were informed by two other important sources of data: (1) transcriptions of interviews about the course with the teachers and their students; and (2) descriptive data of two case studies of history-making outside of classrooms (Hamer, 1995). The study is heavily interpretive: the teachers and students interpreted history in their own ways, and here I interpret their interpretations by identifying genres, and comparing themes as I recognize them in the stories.

### **Educational research on teachers as storytellers**

Carter (1993) notes that stories as 'a way of knowing and thinking' are particularly relevant to both teaching and research on teaching (p. 6). She identifies three areas of research on teachers' storytelling: (1) stories that novice and expert teachers tell about learning to teach; (2) teachers' personal, biographical stories in which life histories frame teaching events; and (3) stories told by teachers as part of their curriculum. Of these three areas, the third has been least developed, and studies in it generally lack close textual analysis. Carter thus urges development of this area, and especially of 'folklorists' ways of viewing stories, where stories are told ... spontaneously to listeners' (p. 8).

Attention to storytelling in teaching reveals teachers' problems with, and improvised solutions to, mediating between their private and public spheres, i.e., reconciling their personal beliefs and experiences with their professional responsibilities (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lederhouse, 1997; Schubert & Ayers, 1992). Storytelling plays an important role in such reconciliations: in Benham's (1997) words, 'In part, it is through stories that I am able to discover my own professional and personal 'self' and balance the paradoxes of living in both the margin and the center' (p. 282). However, how teachers actually do reconcile *and use* resources from professional and personal experience in their teaching has not been deeply examined. Gudmundsdottir (1991) moves toward doing this when she notes how teachers' stories 'are their attempts to transform an inadequate [textbook] story into a more complete, compelling, and convincing one' (p. 212), and when she proposes the notion of 'personal curriculum,' i.e., 'texts' that teachers create in discussions and assignments in order to connect 'in a meaningful and memorable way interpretations of historical events to the reality students know' (1990, p. 49). Gudmundsdottir's work redefines the problem of mediating between personal and professional by expanding 'professional' to include academic content, or, insofar as academic textbook culture is oriented to the national rather than the local and personal (cf. Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991), between personal and national. The folkloristic analysis of teachers' in-class stories as complex genres elucidates how teachers manage to combine national-academic and local-personal knowledge.

### **A folkloristic framework for analyzing teachers' storytelling**

Folkloristic methodology has always emphasized close textual analysis of oral texts collected in their 'natural' contexts (Goldstein, 1964; Ives, 1995; Toelken, 1996b). Many folkloristic studies explore the pedagogical functions and performance of storytelling in noninstitutional settings (Briggs, 1988; Mullen, 1992; Narayan, 1989; Toelken, 1996a). Folklorists have also documented and interpreted what happens when students bring stories from their indigenous communities into classrooms as part of official, i.e., teacher-sanctioned activities (Cazden & Hymes, 1978; Chevalier, 1995). However, classroom teachers as storytellers have largely been ignored by folklorists. This gap undoubtedly stems from folklorists traditionally avoiding institutional in favor of noninstitutional culture: folklorists more often than not have questioned whether folklore, as essentially anti-institutional, has any logical place in schools – the most central of institutions (Bauman, 1982; Bulger, 1991). Folklorists' examinations of school culture have tended to focus on less institutionally powerful groups (e.g., students, as in Delamont, 1989; Koske, 1988; Shuman, 1986), rather than on those with relative

power (e.g., teachers). The few folkloristic studies of teachers' stories told in naturally occurring contexts and analyzed from a folkloristic base include those told in nonofficial venues frequented by teachers (Kainan, 1997; Swidler, in press), as well as in the official venue of classrooms (Georges, 1993).

Several concepts in folkloristic studies are relevant to the study of teachers as storytellers. Primary among these is the concept of *performance*. 'Performance' is defined as occurring when someone assumes responsibility to an audience for communicating competently; such performances are characterized by heightened speech that functions beyond denotation (e.g., use of parallelism, repetition, alliteration) (Abrahams, 1983; Bauman, 1977, 1986; Crowley, 1966). Much of the time, when 'covering' required material in a limited amount of time, teachers 'report,' in the stereotypical droning monotone, a listing of people, places, and dates that will be 'on the test.' The transcripts of performed stories that are presented here are examples of teachers' 'breaking through into performance,' that is, taking responsibility for the story as being something that they believe is important and that they wholeheartedly want to communicate effectively and meaningfully to the students (Hymes, 1975).

Any performed text is unique and will never be exactly replicated as a printed text can be, because every performance situation – the place, time, audience, events surrounding it, mood, purpose – is different (Georges, 1969). Traditional cultural texts are passed on largely intact, but are changed, subtly or dramatically, by the individual who retells or remakes them. Whereas folklorists see tradition/transmission and innovation/transformation as two inseparable sides of the same process – Toelken (1996b) calls them 'twin laws' – educational theorists have tended to frame the pair as an either/or matter, and to argue for the value of transformation over that of transmission (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1995). In analyzing the texts that follow, the twin laws are important in that they suggest there is no standardization in actual teaching performance.

This transformation is accomplished through combining *genres*, defined as forms of discourse, each with 'its own rhetorical features, vocabulary, disposition toward reality, use of descriptive language, types of characters, and symbolic meanings' (Ben-Amos, 1976). For example, simple genres identifiable in the following stories include *personal experience narratives*, defined as 'first-person narratives usually composed orally by the tellers and based on real incidents in their lives' (Stahl, 1983, p. 268); *legends*, defined as 'monoepisodic, localized, and historicized traditional narrative[s]' that are told as believable and that reflect 'the collective experiences and values of the group' (Tangherlini, 1996, p. 437); and *anecdotes*, defined as short, believed stories 'centering on a particular individual' and often focusing 'on things said in a particularly witty or effective way' (Barden, 1996, p. 28).

More interesting than identifying simple genres is examining how complex genres are created in performance (Abrahams, 1975; Bauman, 1992; Dorst, 1983). When a person performs a story, she or he uses primary generic forms, i.e., known stories and known types of stories, as building blocks in order to construct a new, complex story. In doing so, the performer plays two or more genres off of each other in what Bakhtin (1981) describes as a 'dialogue of genres.' One genre provides context for, and therefore shapes the meaning of, another genre.

The dialogic process of creating complex stories can be seen as requiring the performer to 'decontextualize' a simple genre from one context (e.g., the history textbook, or a corpus of family stories), and to 'recontextualize' it into another (e.g., the history lecture). Bauman and Briggs (1990) explain:

To decontextualize and recontextualize a text is ... an act of control, and in regard to the differential exercise of such control the issue of social power arises. More specifically, we may recognize differential access to texts, differential legitimacy in claims to and use of texts, differential competence in the use of texts, and differential values attaching to various types of texts. ... [A]ccess, legitimacy, competence, and values... bear centrally on the construction and assumption of authority. (pp. 76–77)

The process of decontextualizing and recontextualizing constitutes a ‘mediating performance’ (Hamer, 1995) analogous to the sociological construct of ‘mediating structure’ (Berger, 1976; Berger & Neuhaus, 1977). Just as mediating structures provide legitimization for personal experience while at the same time endowing ‘megastructures,’ such as the nation, with meaning and value (Berger, 1976; Mechling, 1989), mediating narrative performances, as agent-driven artistic verbal enactments of such structures, recognize the value of personal experience stories while endowing public stories with personal meaning. By layering advice stories, personal experience stories, and anecdotes with the historical stories more commonly thought of as ‘U.S. history,’ teachers effectively mediate between, or connect, the personal and the national, telling stories which recognize the value of personal experience and individual actions in national history, while at the same time imparting personal meaning and emotional value to characters and events at the national level. Thus personal experience stories and anecdotes focusing on the personalities of historical figures cannot be dismissed as incidental and as inconsequential context for the ‘factual’ historical stories that are the focus of most published and tested history curricula and their critiques, nor can they be accounted for as merely facilitating the interpersonal relations of teacher and students. Rather, such genres are essential to the structure and meaning of the historical stories performed in classrooms.

As will be seen in the examples that follow, the crucial questions are, Who has the ability *and the right* to take texts that are recognized as valuable (e.g., national history) from one context, and to recontextualize them in order to create a story with a particular meaning and purpose? Who is allowed to create stories in which their personal and community experiences are significant to national and world history?

### **Two teachers’ stories**

I now focus on examples from two of the teachers’ histories. In so doing, my purpose is not only to illuminate a neglected characteristic of history pedagogy, but also to demonstrate how a folkloristic approach draws our attention to aspects of classroom activity that are usually overlooked, yet upon closer examination appear to be crucial to the educational process.

In one classroom, Mr. Glenn had begun teaching after having had a full career in the Air Force. He recalled that with having to work to support his family after his father died, he had not done particularly well in high school, ‘scraping by’ in school with mostly ‘Cs.’ When he graduated in 1949, he joined the Air Force, and served for 26 years. Through the service, Mr. Glenn came to consider events taking place all over the world as being ‘part of my way of life’; he also came to recognize the role of individuals in history, and to focus his attention on individuals. Mr. Glenn believed:

Everybody’s got a story to tell, just about everybody, and there are some fascinating stories floating around in this world: why people do what they do, why

people say the things that they say, and why they act in such ways as they act. When I think of history I think of the many, many stories of many, many different people. (11 January 1993-ti)

Mr. Glenn described himself first and foremost as a Christian, and said of what he tries to accomplish in his teaching:

I think that we need to know about things that have happened in the past, and one of the reasons for that is to try to prevent these same things from happening in the future. I know that's a very common expression, but I think it's extremely important. If we look at the Old Testament ... the people kept making the same mistakes. Different names, different times, different places, but they were the same mistakes: disobedience.

And I'm afraid ... America is headed in the same direction. I'm concerned about that, I really am, because God will not permit or tolerate a nation's becoming Godless as Israel did on numerous occasions, and America is very quickly moving in that direction. ... By looking at a story in the past you have something to compare to where you are now. ... (11 January 1993-ti)

Thus Mr. Glenn's history was not conceptually organized as primarily linear (although for scheduling purposes it had to be presented more or less chronologically to conform to the textbook and to the curriculum of the entire department). Rather, his history was primarily cyclical, consisting of repeated similar situations: 'different names, different times, different places, but they were the same.'

Down the hall, Mr. Michaels said that he did not remember having had much interest in 'history' until he was at Franklin College, from 1958 to 1962, and a professor there 'got me to think in terms of history as a movie' (14 October 1991-ti). In college, he was certified as a teacher, but he did not start his career teaching history; rather, for several years he taught industrial arts, agriculture, geography, Indiana studies, and physical education. He then went into business with his parents for 5 years before returning to teaching in 1974.

Mr. Michaels volunteered parallels between himself as a history teacher and storyteller-historians in other cultures and contexts. Early in the year, he had the class read aloud from the textbook an excerpt about griots from Alex Haley's *Roots*, then said:

When the old man talked about events, did he ever mention a date? No. How did he relate it? Do you recall? We do the same thing with dates. I'm terrible with dates. ... For instance, I can't tell you the year that Kennedy was shot without thinking about what I was doing at the time. I was teaching elementary phy. ed. in Frankton, and it came on the loudspeaker that President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated. 1963. (21 August 1991-wo)

Mr. Michaels asked if there were events that become marks on our timetables of history, as they did for the griots, rather than the dates we usually think about with history, and mentioned personal experiences that were benchmarks for him: 'the year I was coaching,' or 'the year my first child was born.'

Mr. Michaels said he tended to teach most about things that he is interested in, like the Industrial Revolution and the Depression, and saw himself as particularly focusing on how certain situations and events in history seem to be repeated over time. In

addition, Mr. Michaels said he tried to try to present ‘both sides’ of any situation because he was conscious that he, like all other people, had his own particular perspective on the world:

I’m not sure if I’m racially biased or not ... because I did come from an all-white community, all-white school, ... so I think I watch myself, so that I don’t say things that I can’t support, that would come off as having racial overtones. (14 October 1991-ti)

Mr. Michaels recognized that any one teacher has limited authority in the classroom: as a teacher, he can only speak from his own experience, and his understanding of others’ experiences is filtered through his own experiences. In keeping with this recognition, Mr. Michaels’s main concern in teaching history was that students comprehend:

There’s always another view, and so many times when we read something in history we think that that’s the gospel, because it’s written down, but who knows? (14 October 1991-ti)

He was aware that his particular views and beliefs could not be generalized, and had developed a strategy of dealing with this by talking at length mostly about local events about which he had first- or second-hand knowledge.

### *Introductory stories*

Mr. Glenn and Mr. Michaels both began their classes by combining personal experience stories and anecdotes with stories found in their U.S. history textbooks.

*Mr. Glenn’s introduction:* As the bell rang on the first day of class, Mr. Glenn held up a large red, white, and blue textbook (Gary B. Nash’s *American odyssey: The United States in the twentieth century*, published by Glencoe, 1992), and said:

- (1) This is a new textbook and I like it. It’s written from the standpoint of the individual, and if you don’t think people are interesting, you stand back in the corner and watch them sometime. A man named Art Linkletter, whom you might not remember, said, ‘People are funny,’ and he got rich by saying it. The gentleman who is the author of this book, Gary B. Nash, has written it from the standpoint of people. In fact, thumbing through it I came across a blurb about a lady talking about the kinds of flags people used to fly in their homes when they had a son or daughter in the military.
- (2) A woman in Waterloo, Iowa, had a flag with five blue stars, which meant that she had five sons on active duty. Then all of them were turned to gold. What did that mean? [*Girl in class: They died?*] [Mr. Glenn nods yes.] The sons had all been stationed together on one ship, and that ship had been sunk.
- (3) I was asked to speak at the [local] Memorial Day service last May, and I wanted to talk about this family. So I flipped through the encyclopedia to find them. Nothing. I looked in other history books. Nothing on the Sullivans. But then I was looking through this book, and there they were.
- (4) The importance of the Sullivan family and their five gold stars was that Congress passed a law based on that case saying that they wouldn’t put more than one family member on any one ship. (20 August 1991-wo)

In telling about the Sullivans, Mr. Glenn alternated between telling a general story about how history is told in everyday life, and telling a particular history of the Sullivan family. In the first paragraph Mr. Glenn establishes that his focus in history is on the individual. His anecdote about Linkletter establishes a connection between, or mediates between, everyday life and textbook history.

In the second and fourth paragraphs Mr. Glenn retells the story of the Sullivan family much as it was printed in the textbook, but also as it is part of popular legendry: Mr. Glenn clearly knew the story well before finding it in a book, and believed it would appeal to the beliefs, values, and experiences of his local audience. This story is interrupted in the third paragraph with Mr. Glenn's personal experience story about speaking at a community event. With this story, Mr. Glenn demonstrates how history is useful beyond the bounds of the classroom, and he also points out that not all history can be learned in school: until Nash's book came along, he could not find the story in any textbook. Thus his personal knowledge of the Sullivans had supplemented textbook stories: both were necessary in telling an adequate history.

This introductory story proved to be typical of Mr. Glenn's stories, through which he created an ideal model of the nation in which service to self, family, community, and nation are compatible. The Sullivan story inserts a personal experience narrative into a textbook historical story in order to emphasize the role of individuals in history and the usefulness of history in everyday life.

*Mr. Michaels's introduction:* In contrast, Mr. Michaels's initial story introduced a different central theme of his course: conflict between loyalties to family, locale, and nation. Leaning against his podium on the first day of class, Mr. Michaels said:

- (1) History changes. You can't believe everything that was written about it in the past. When I was a young man, my father was killed [in World War II] and I hated the Japanese, people and products. I felt that way for a long, long time.
- (2) I thought about going into the Navy, but I wanted to get into either flying, because I'd flown as a little kid, or the frogmen, but at that time government regulations wouldn't let me because I had dentures.
- (3) Then later I started thinking: we call upon people in our country to do certain things or else they're not loyal. The Japanese do the same. I can't hold a grudge against all Japanese. I'm not sure that I could even if I knew the person who killed him: he was doing the same thing my dad was except they had political differences. (20 August 1991-wo)

Mr. Michaels tells a personal experience story within which he refers to the national historical story as is found in the textbook. With this initial narrative, Mr. Michaels establishes his view of history as centrally linked to his life experiences, including the loss of his father and his rethinking as an adult the nature of political loyalty, as well as his questioning the veracity of written histories. By telling a story that is primarily personal experience and only obliquely refers to textbook history, Mr. Michaels emphasizes his approach to history: personal experience or the experiences of known individuals are most useful in understanding the past as well as the present.

The story encapsulates a paradox that more generally informed Mr. Michaels's histories throughout the year: the conflict of loyalty to oneself, and one's family and friends, versus allegiance to larger collectives, primarily the nation. This conflict was



never fully resolved in his stories – no doubt because in his experience and belief it was ultimately irresolvable.

### *Typical stories*

The two stories that follow are chosen as providing contrastive examples of the core themes of the two classes under consideration, as well as typical examples of more fully developed stories. The first, told by Mr. Glenn, shows how personal experience can reinforce the seamless unity of nation, and the second, told by Mr. Michaels, shows how personal experience can disrupt and problematize the veneer of national unity.

*Mr. Glenn's lecture:* In general, Mr. Glenn juxtaposed personal experience narratives with historical stories in order to foster an emotional bond with the nation as well as an appreciation of the importance of individuals' mundane actions. In the following example, Mr. Glenn told about the U.S. entry into World War I following the sinking of the *Lusitania*. The passages excerpted here came after notes that he put on the overhead, reading, 'The American people were outraged at Germany's [sinking the *Lusitania*]. ... Germany pledged not to sink passenger ships and instructed its U-boats not to attack. ...' Thus the textbook version of the story was that Germany backed down when they realized the U.S. was a serious adversary. In telling the story, Mr. Glenn elaborated to announce the moral of the story:

- (1) Now this works in life – in the classroom, on the playground, at home. Everywhere there are bullies, and sometimes all you can do is tell someone you're going to beat them up if they don't leave you alone. I'm not advocating fighting, but I can tell them if they don't leave me alone, I'm going to go get my good buddy Todd [he points to Todd, a student in class], who's a tremendous wrestler.
- (2) When I was little, I'd size up the force against me, and get the one of my brothers best sized to fit. I had four brothers, Lonnie, Calvin, Gene, and Ralph. Depending on how strong the bully was, I'd get Calvin, or Gene, or Ralph to help me.

*Gil: What about Lonnie?*

- (3) Oh, Lonnie was a diplomat. He was the best brother a person could have. My father passed away when I was three and Lonnie was thirteen and a half, and he became like a father to me. He was the diplomat. When he went to a movie, he'd bring home a hamburger for me and put it under my pillow.

*Gil: Your pillow? [other students laugh]*

- (4) Yeah, I'd wake up, and there'd be a big old hamburger, and I'd eat it for breakfast. Or candy-corn. You could get a whole pound bag for a nickel. He's a great brother. This year he sent me a dollar and told me to buy myself some candy corn. I called him up and asked where's the nickel for tax? [students laugh].
- (5) Generally, if you're a bully, you're gonna get beat up. That was the problem with Mr. Hussein last fall: he was too stupid to realize he was picking on some pretty strong people, and that when they said he better not go into Kuwait, they were serious.
- (6) So Germany backed down and pledged not to sink unless the ships resisted or tried to escape. (5 November 1991-wo)

In the first paragraph, Mr. Glenn marks the beginning of the simple story that will complicate the textbook story with 'Now.' He brings the textbook story of the past event into the present situation, first by removing boundaries of time and space ('everywhere there are bullies') and then by bringing a student in the present context into the timeless story of bullies. In the second paragraph, Mr. Glenn's personal experience story moves the story back in time. Students respond to his experience and thus shape the story told in this particular storytelling event: Mr. Glenn is not going to talk about Lonnie until Gil pushes him with his question, because it is the character of the three older brothers as potential defenders rather than that of the 'diplomat' that is particularly relevant to the larger story told. The third part of the story thus emerges from the social situation: with Gil's prompt, the story may seem to be diverted off track, but in fact this part elaborates on the character of the brothers, a central point in the overall historical narrative. In part four, the staying power of such association is brought out with the recent birthday present: the history is brought into the present with the anecdote about Lonnie's sending money for candy corn. Although this is not illustrative of the bully theme, it provides a parallel for the fifth part of the story, when Mr. Glenn returns to the historical story and makes the point of the story originating with the *Lusitania*: Lonnie's past actions have parallels in the present; the past actions of the U.S. with Germany in World War I have parallels in the more contemporary actions of the U.S. with Saddam Hussein in the Persian Gulf War. Paragraph six concludes with a return to the initial, textbook story.

In performing this complex story, a combination of the textbook story with three other stories, Mr. Glenn mediates between the history lesson and the students' experiences. First, he establishes familiarity by referring to the student Todd and then by recalling his own childhood. Then he builds intimacy by acquiescing to Gil's interest in his personal experience. Finally, he brings the story back around to the historical event, via the story of a recent, familiar historical event. Through this complex story, emotional involvement in the collective nation is encouraged through the emotional involvement with the brothers. The diverse narratives, of different durations and locations, and in past, present, and future, are layered together into one narrative. Most importantly, it is in the telling of the narrative itself that these connections are made: the particular narrated stories are given their shape and thus their meaning by being put into the context of each other. In this particular storytelling event, none of the four stories that make up the complex story is dispensable.

*Mr. Michaels's lecture:* As was indicated in his initial story, a central characteristic of Mr. Michaels's history was that it brought ambiguity to the fore, and left it in the fore. That is, his histories presented situations about which no conclusive, authoritative generalization could satisfactorily be made, and thus from which no absolute rules could be abstracted, because individual particularities in the form of personal experience stories continually interrupted the master narrative of the nation. These personal experience stories also served to emphasize empathy with the individual predicament in the face of institutional power. For example, in teaching about the U. S.'s problems fighting in Vietnam, Mr. Michaels told:

- (1) The U.S. was looking for support of the [South Vietnamese] peasants, but it's pretty obvious, ... if I was a peasant, I would not support the American cause. What did they do? We said that we're looking for peasant support, but what proved just the opposite?

*Sarah: We burned their houses.*

- (2) Yeah, we burned down their houses. You know, it's kind of like – now I remember, as a kid in school, that if somebody did something, we all paid the price for it; we all suffered. [He mimics a teacher's voice:] 'If he does something, by golly, you're all staying in detention.' ... But you shouldn't massively ... condemn everybody for the actions of one or just a few people.
- (3) Yet we did, over there, because [our soldiers would say], 'There may have been some fire from one or a couple of these huts,' but we would then burn them all down. ... Now, there might be a reason for that, the reason being that that would give them fewer places to hide.
- (4) On the other hand, take yourself as a peasant. That's the only thing those people owned; the only thing they had were these little shacks. But that's still your home. My house is not much. It's a little shack in a sense. But it's all I've got, and boy, I would be upset if someone came in and burned my house down, destroyed it.
- (5) So, you can kind of get the feeling of what it would be like for someone to come in and destroy the only things that you have. (7 May 1992-to)

In the first paragraph, Mr. Michaels sets himself up as empathizing with the Vietnamese peasant, saying, 'If I was a peasant, I would not support the American cause.' In the second paragraph, he tells a personal experience story that is highly relevant to the students in order to personalize the peasant's story further.

In the third paragraph, Mr. Michaels briefly presents the U. S. soldier's side of the story, before, in the fourth paragraph, he follows his own instructions and 'takes himself as a peasant,' with a modest house (and, later in the lecture, with grandchildren). Shifting into first-person singular, he reacts fervently, as he imagines a Vietnamese peasant would to someone 'com[ing] in and burn[ing] my house down, destroy[ing] it.' Then he immediately shifts to what he intends for the students to get – 'the feeling of what it would be like ...'

On the personal level, Mr. Michaels reasons, people have similar needs, desires and duties; on the political level, people become implicated in situations that cause conflict and suffering. Conflating the Vietnamese peasant experience with his own personal experience establishes the primacy of a personal discourse as opposed to a national discourse.

### **Reception of stories by students**

In an interview midway through this fieldwork, a junior history student named Audrey indicated clearly that she and I had been hearing different stories as we listened to her teacher's lectures. Following research done by the Center on History-Making in America (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998), as part of my interviews I had been asking students about both 'the past' and 'history' in order to broaden the discussion beyond the narrow definition of 'history' as a subject taught with particular methods in the classroom. Use of the two different terms proved salient in soliciting students' critical analysis of what constitutes history as taught in classrooms. Audrey's and my conversation began as follows:

LH: In case you've forgotten from what I told you at the beginning of year, my study is on different kinds of views people have of the past.

Audrey: Oh! I thought it was just history classes and what students think of them.

LH: So 'the past' and 'history' are different? How?

Audrey: ... The past is like feelings you have about the past, or things that happened that you think about. ... History is not the people's point of view. It's just ... details like dates and times and what happened there. ... You think of the past, and the feelings you had, and what you thought about it, but history is just things that happened. (4 December 1991-ti)

The distinction drew my attention, since, as is clear from the foregoing analysis, I had consistently noted the teachers' points of view and engagement with the past as they blended their personal experiences with national history. Their subjective involvement had seemed to me to restore, at least to some extent, what Audrey called 'feelings you have about the past and [thinking] about the past' to a sketchy textbook history that lacked subjective voice despite the author's efforts to include the voices of some 'ordinary individuals.' For my part, I heard these personalized stories when I listened to lectures, and I called them 'histories' because as a folklorist I valued them (cf.; Glassie, 1982; Frisch, 1986). But for their part, while they enjoyed and even remembered the stories their teachers told, students focused on the 'details like dates and times and what happened there' as 'history': their experiences in school and especially on tests had verified that the isolated facts rather than the stories were the 'history' of their U.S. History course. The stories, therefore, were relegated to being 'about the past' rather than 'history.'

Similarly, Audrey's classmate Mary said:

History is something that people write down in books and make you remember [laughs]. The past is just whatever you want to remember. (14 February 1992-ti)

History is imposed on students, but students choose to remember the past. History is written in books, but the past is remembered. Mary added, 'If they like wrote stories about it or something, like true to real life stories about what happened, I think you'd remember that.' Going a step further, late in the year Mr. Michaels mentioned to me that one student who did badly on tests had complained, 'Why don't you test us on the stories you tell us? I can remember those.' Mr. Michaels had explained that he always tells different stories to different classes, so he cannot fairly test everyone on the same stories. Thus despite his constant use of personal experience stories to convey the meanings of historical stories, Mr. Michaels never included these stories on tests, nor did he ask students to tell their own – even though he stated a concern that students learn there are different points of view and was explicit about his own concerns with his own biases. Similarly, although Mr. Glenn believed 'everybody has a story' and went so far as to invite two community members and the principal in to tell about the Depression and the Korean War, respectively, students' stories were not part of the course.

I note these discrepancies between teachers' views of how history works and their actual classroom practices not to criticize these teachers but rather to highlight a crucial point that many students' comments (including Audrey's and Mary's) suggested: the lack of formal, institutionalized recognition of what occurs between teachers and students beyond the transmission of 'details like dates and times and what happened there' accounts in large part for students' not considering the teachers' stories to be history. That is, nothing in students' – or teachers' – experience in school legitimizes the

teachers' – let alone the students' – stories as valuable, and little in the students' school experience validates either personal and local experiences, or the emotions and motivations of those involved. Thus history, in their views, is learned in school and from books, and is something one 'must' remember, while the past is learned from people, and is something one wants to remember. It follows that 'history' is less interesting and more impersonal than 'the past' (cf. Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998).

In addition, many students raised the question of who had the authority to determine what stories would be told and retold, and from whose point of view. Despite the lack of institutional validation of narratives, those students who were particularly articulate about the past – that is, those who talked most in class and those who gave lengthy answers or told stories in answer to my questions in interviews – tended to tell stories that were similar to their teachers' in that they told them from their own point of view and in so doing connected the personal with the national and the past with the present (Hamer, 1995).

Insofar as 'history' is equated with forms of knowledge sanctioned in the classroom, students generally considered history to be both distant and dispensable (cf. Loewen, 1995). The two basic kinds of distancing they discussed are important. First, as did Audrey and Mary, many defined history as dates and details, detached from human agency and emotion, and therefore devoid of human interest. Second, students made distinctions between a story told by someone about their *own* experiences, and a story told (or 'opinion given') by someone about someone *else's* experiences. The former is a personal experience story, and is told authoritatively but with recognition of the limits of that authority. The latter is considered a historical story, and is told authoritatively but often without recognition of the limits of authority. To many students, the relationship between the teller of the story and the protagonist in the story was of paramount importance. That is, it mattered that the teller spoke with the authority of personal experience; if the teller did not speak from personal experience, it mattered whether or not she or he had legitimate authority to tell about someone else's experience, and in doing so, to make that experience into their own story (cf. Shuman, 1986; Borland, 1991). Students saw as an issue the question of whose viewpoint was presented (cf. Loewen, 1995, p. 317), i.e., who had the power to construct the story told.

Both the students' critiques of their history classes and their own stories about the past showed students' awareness of the uses of history and of the relationship of storytellers to their texts, even though these metahistorical issues were not part of their history curriculum. Students recalled stories in which they made clear connections between the personal or local and the national – between their immediate situations in the present, and the historical situations in the past (cf. Loewen, 1995, p. 316). In recalling historical stories, students paid as much attention to the narrative event in the present as they did to the narrated event that was ostensibly the subject of the stories.

## Conclusion

In this research, both the teachers' storytelling and the students' discussion suggest that the history curriculum, if it is to be recognized as useful in everyday life, needs to be as much about the process of telling history in the present as it is about the particular events in the past. Folkloristic theories and analytic methods offer a lens through which attention is directed to how individuals create connections through time and space, and in doing so, construct their places in the world. The process of taking stories about

distant times and places from one source and retelling them with reference to other times when the stories have been told, as well as reference to oneself and one's immediate situation, constitutes a mediating performance. The act of decontextualizing a text from the national context and recontextualizing it into a personal or local context requires asserting the authority to make oneself a responsible agent who is central to telling about national events, and whose experiences are directly related, through the dialogic process of narrating, to national experience.

Rosenzweig & Thelen (1998) authoritatively show that for adult Americans of all ethnicities, regions, and socioeconomic statuses, 'the past [is] pervasive, a natural part of everyday life, central to any effort to live in the present,' but "history" as it is usually defined in textbooks [is] not' (p. 9). Similarly, the current study shows that in actual practice, when people tell about national events, their histories include elements of the personal, the local, and the national, all mixed together. This calls into question the convention in high school history curricula of presenting national history independent of personal and local history. In actual practice, too, when people tell about events in the past, their stories refer to other events nearer the present – often up to and including the event of telling the story itself; thus we must question the convention of talking about historical events without also including as part of the current story the lived situations in which the stories have been and are told.

### Recommendations

Teachers who have read my descriptions of performed history all have immediately recognized it as what goes on in history classrooms every day. Some have raised the question, 'So what?' and the critique, 'It's nothing new.' Several have disagreed with some of the teachers' particular interpretations of historical events. However, while most teachers may recognize their own practices, I have found none – in person or in print – who has considered critically the implications for his or her own practice and for the professional development of history curriculum and instruction.

As the preceding analysis shows, typical high school history teachers asserted their right to take texts from the impersonal, national context of the textbook, and retell them in the local context, and in so doing validated the importance of the local actions of known individuals. Students, however, for the most part did not recognize in these stories the 'history' they thought they were supposed to be learning – even though outside of class they recalled their teachers' stories and told their own. First and foremost, then, this research suggests that orally told stories, i.e., folkloristic performances, need to be recognized officially as significant parts of the history curriculum.

Specifically, teachers need to be more aware of how they tell complex narratives. Though it is accepted as a truism that history teaching is dominated by textbooks (Downey & Levstik, 1991; Loewen, 1995; Ravitch & Finn, 1987), my research suggests that this understanding is not based on ethnographic observation of what actually happens in classrooms, where the teachers do indeed tell their own versions of stories based on and roughly organized by the textbook.<sup>2</sup> However, this research does not suggest that because teachers tell stories, all is well in classrooms. Teachers need to be more aware of their personal biases, based on life experiences and stories they have heard about the past and the 'other,' in order to make choices about the kinds of stories they tell, to begin to interpret the effects that these stories have on their students' understandings, and to be reflective enough to teach students to recognize and critique

the different genres that constitute complex narratives. The conceptual framework of folkloristic performance, as presented in this essay, provides a tool for teachers to evaluate and critique their interpretations of history.

It follows that students need to be taught to distinguish between the different genres present in complex narratives told by their teachers and textbook writers (as well as storytellers outside the classroom, e.g., news reporters), and thus to be critically aware of the particular, motivated interpretations of events that their teachers make, both in telling particular stories and in contextualizing them with explanations. As Stearns (1993) has argued, 'Critical analysis, not mere descriptive knowledge either of conventional materials or of newer topics, should be the central goal of humanities curricula from the middle school level onward' (p. 131). Such critiques would not be to imply that their teachers are 'wrong,' but rather to recognize the multiplicity of authoritative, though at some levels contradictory, versions of history that exist.<sup>3</sup> Mr. Michaels's statement that there is 'always another view' needs to be explicitly central not only to the teacher's understanding of what he or she can legitimately discuss (which is necessarily limited), but to the curriculum itself, which needs to systematically facilitate expression of diverse voices. Such measures would greatly increase the substantial critical ability that many students in this study already demonstrated, but had little formal and validated opportunity to develop.

Furthermore, students should be allowed to create and perform their own histories – not as culminating experiences or as entertaining diversions, but as basic to the curriculum of history. As Loewen (1995) notes, 'For students to create knowledge is exciting and empowering' (p. 316). Though Herr and Anderson (1993) have found that minority students in particular suffer from 'the institutional neglect of students' stories and the inability of many students to 'connect' with their school experiences,' no doubt all students would benefit from seeing themselves as storytellers – as historical agents with the power to decontextualize school stories and recontextualize them as their own. As Lemke (1992) has discussed, personal narrative 'can provide a bridge between [academic discourse] and colloquial culture, lessening students' alienation from academic discourse and strengthening connections between abstraction and practice' (p. 30). Recognition of how history teachers narrate meaningful stories should lead us to acknowledge how students' narrations can help improve the status of history classes from that of 'most irrelevant' (Loewen, 1995, p. 12).

Finally, theorists and practitioners admonish teachers to view 'teaching as storytelling' and to develop their storytelling skills (Egan, 1986, 1995; Ribar, 1989; Wanner, 1994). These prescriptive accounts ignore and thus discount the complex stories that teachers already do tell, and that are clearly recognized when viewed through a folkloristic lens. Worse, if heeded, such prescriptions threaten to replace complex stories with simple ones, e.g., those relying on binary opposites (Egan, 1988). Rather than a lack of teachers telling stories, the problem seems to come in the institutionalized definition of what counts as knowledge, i.e., items that make it into the national canon, as codified in textbooks and enumerated on standardized tests. Indeed, the problem lies in the assumption that a national canon can usefully exist. A folkloristic framework helps redirect our attention away from institutionally defined and described knowledge and practices, and toward the actual dynamics through which knowledge is acquired, developed, tested, and used: the interactive and community-constituting narratives that are characteristic of the storytelling events central to classroom culture.

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## Notes

1. Transcription conventions are as follows: A date followed by 'fn' (for 'fieldnotes') indicates that information is from notes taken after a day of participant-observation.

A text followed by a date and 'wo' (for 'written observation') is constructed from written notes taken during a history class. A text followed by a date and 'wi' (for 'written interview') is constructed from written notes taken during an untaped interview. Texts from written observations and written interviews accurately indicate the content of a speaker's comments, but are necessarily incomplete as to that speaker's style and her or his elaboration of the story. In contrast, a text followed by a date and 'to' (for 'taped observation') is transcribed directly from an audio- or videotape made during a history class. A text followed by a date and 'ti' (for 'taped interview') is transcribed directly from an audiotaped interview. All transcriptions of taped observations and interviews are verbatim except for minor editing.

2. Downey & Levstik (1991) note that whereas research shows that lectures, discussion, and 'listening' dominate methods used in history classes, the questionnaire surveys on which the research is based tell nothing about what actually happens in using these methods.

3. As Sleetor and Grant (1993), among many others, argue, such presentation and analysis of alternative viewpoints is standard practice in implementing a multicultural curriculum. Loewen (1995) provides a five-question process through which students 'will [learn] how to learn history' (pp. 316-317).

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