Fictional narratives as didactical tools: using Frank McCourt’s *Teacher Man* in pre-service teacher education

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In this article we describe a teaching project that focuses on the introduction of fictional narratives as basis for critical reflection about major issues in the teaching profession. Our main aim is to help pre-service teachers to make appropriate decisions at particular moments of interaction in their classroom. From a theoretical perspective we are inspired by the cultural and narrative turn in the humanities and the social sciences. In our project pre-service teachers were invited to read *Teacher Man* by Frank McCourt, a major novel about teaching, and were asked to comment on key topics and scenes. We argue that using fictional narratives offers a unique opportunity for imaginative engagement, perhaps even empathy in the ways that theoretical textbooks do not provide.

Keywords: pre-service teacher education; narratives; language teaching; fiction; teaching methodology

Introduction

At Ghent University, pre-service language teachers are expected to acquire expertise in their subject area and at the same time follow method classes for language teaching. Graduates are allowed to teach in the highest grade of secondary education. Each pre-service language teacher enters the teacher education programme with at least a bachelor’s degree in modern languages, but with no experience in teaching. Our main responsibility in the language teacher education class is to give lessons in the methodology of teaching modern languages and literature. This methodology course has the same goals as the teacher education programme as a whole:

The teacher education programme focuses on the development of a critical mindset and attitude so that pre-service teachers are trained to take ethically founded and well-considered decisions in their future teaching activities. The teacher education programme aims at a mastery that expresses itself in a student’s full awareness of his own capacities, an engagement to continuous professionalisation and a scientific and reflective attitude. From these general perspectives, pre-service teachers are instructed to be capable of turning the subject content into inviting and meaningful pedagogical subject content. (Ghent University; http://www.lerarenopleiding.ugent.be/index.php?position=1x2x0)

The above text specifies the primary objectives of our teacher education, but also implicitly reveals the items that have to be dealt with: classroom management, how to turn knowledge and expertise into subject matter and how to create a positive environment in the classroom.

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image of the teacher and teaching. All items are closely related to – what seems to us – the core business of the teacher education curriculum: stimulating critical reflection.

In our teaching methodology class we want to improve this reflective process. Teaching theory and inviting students to reflect upon their practice are the main tools for obtaining this target. Our hypothesis is that using narratives is an interesting way to invite pre-service teachers to explore their values and to bring these values to full consciousness (see also previous work: Soetaert, Mottart, and Verdoodt 2004).

In this article, we discuss a teaching project that we designed to engage our students in the process of critical reflection. In what follows, we first describe our theoretical framework, embedded in the latest developments in narrative research. Subsequently, we discuss the project design and analyse the project results by a close examination of student reactions. Next, we consider what our students have learned during the project. We conclude with a critical reflection upon the project and discuss some points of special interest.

Narratives
The narrative turn
During the second part of the last century, there is a rise in the theorisation about narratives and a revival of the importance of narrative knowledge in human and social sciences. Simultaneously comes a narrative turn which changes the approach from narratives as formal, intrinsic and literary-hermeneutical objects into objects with a political, ideological, cognitive and social function (Polkinghorne 1988; Kreiswirth 1992; Czarniawski 2004; Phelan and Rabinowitz 2005).

Rorty (1989, xvi) points to a shift “against theory and towards narrative” and argues for approaching narratives as tools for the interpretation and the meaning-making of a specific culture. Similarly, Bruner (1986) suggests that next to a logico-scientific mode of thinking there is a narrative mode which is context-rich, fully aware of the spatial and temporal ordering of human acts and activities and based on the logic of plausibility. As a consequence “the imaginative application of the narrative mode leads to good stories, gripping drama, believable (though not necessarily ‘true’) historical accounts” (Bruner 1986, 13).

Personal narratives
Due to the narrative turn, there is also a great interest for narrative research in pedagogy and more specifically in pre- and in-service teacher education. A striking insight, however, is that narrative research in contexts of teacher education largely focuses upon the importance of personal narratives of teachers and their usability in the teacher education. Cortazzi (1993), for instance, argues for pre-service teachers to keep a diary in order to reflect upon their own teaching practices. The main idea is that teaching is inextricably bound up with the identity – and thus: the life story – of the people concerned (Carter and Doyle 1996, 120).

Although introducing teacher’s personal narratives in teacher education can be fruitful, exclusively focusing on them causes problems and inevitably neglects certain aspects of the curriculum of teacher education programmes. According to Elbaz
(1997, 79), the possible unwillingness of the narrator to talk publicly about specific topics and experiences is one of the main difficulties to overcome:

I have watched the frustrations of students taking part in undergraduate and graduate courses in teachers’ knowledge and narrative research, when the teachers they were interviewing suddenly became unable or unwilling to continue, or insisted on making major deletions in the interview transcript.

After all, telling personal stories implies one has to be willing to show vulnerability, as embarrassing topics can show up.

Fictional narratives

Although there has been a lot of academic research into the hazards and opportunities of using personal narratives in the curriculum of teacher education, there seems to be a shortage of reports in research about using fictional narratives to teach aspects of teacher education. Quite more remarkable is the lack of research into the possible added value of introducing fiction in language teacher education programmes. As the profession of a language teacher is very oriented towards language, literature and culture as a whole, there are certainly possibilities for fiction in the teacher education courses. Nevertheless, Waldo (1968) already investigated the various ways in which fictional narratives can enhance learning. But it was Coles (1989) who brought to fruition the idea of using fiction in higher education and who made it more applicable and available. In The call of stories, he turns out to be an advocate for extending students’ experiences through fiction, as, according to him, fictional narratives offer a unique way to extend people’s understanding of themselves and their life experiences. Since then, numerous researchers have pointed towards the successful use of fictional narratives as didactical tool in a variety of disciplines: business and organisation studies (Bouckaert and Ghesquière 2004; Tosey 2005), medicine (Hodgson and Thomson 2000; Wolf 2006), psychiatry (Schlozman 2000; Zerby 2005), geography (Brooker-Gross 1991), law (Davis 1997), history (Muller 2002; Schwebel 2003), psychology (Boyatzis 1992) and sociology (Crocco 2005). Common themes emerge from the literature, which illustrate how fictional narratives can become powerful teaching tools in all kinds of educational settings. In his research project, Brooker-Gross (1991) shows that fictional narratives can be used in teaching for diverse reasons, such as motivating students, providing information and fostering cross-cultural comparisons and contrasts. Phillips (1995) illustrates that fictional narratives are useful in teaching contexts because indeed narratives are generally non-reductive: they throw light – through the various characters – on different topics and problems. Davis (1997) declares that fictional narratives can make intrusive aspects or taboo items more easy to discuss when presented in fictional narratives. Research from Solomon (1991), Sarachek (1995) and Patient, Lawrence, and Maitlis (2004) have shown that fictional narratives are powerful teaching tools when confronting students with different kinds of emotions. McLellan and Jones (1996) and Hodgson and Thomson (2000) argue that fiction plays an important role in stimulating imagination and so empathy. Their findings confirm Rosenblatt’s assertion that “literature fosters the kind of imagination needed in a democracy – the ability to participate in the needs and aspirations of other personalities and to envision the effect of our actions on their lives” (1995, 212). The successful reports from practice in other fields also indicate potential success for language teacher education.
Situating the project

Under the authority of the ministry of the Flemish Community (Flanders is the Dutch-speaking area of Belgium) and supported by the Flemish Reading Foundation, we started an educational project in which we implemented a fictional narrative in the teacher education curriculum and tested the added value of the experiment. In this article, we discuss the outcomes of the project. The discussion is based on the papers of 81 pre-service teachers (divided into two cohorts of respectively 42 and 39 pre-service teachers over the academic years 2006–07 and 2007–08) and their reactions on an online discussion forum (entries: \( n = 941 \)).

We asked our students to read McCourt’s *Teacher Man* and to submit a critical paper in which they select and comment two to five story segments (quotations, excerpts or chapters), based on the following questions:

1. Why have you selected these specific story segments?
2. How and to what extent do they stimulate reflection on teaching?
3. What did you learn from reading and discussing McCourt’s *Teacher Man*?

Subsequently, we confronted our students with the four most selected story segments and asked to discuss them on a digital platform. The student reactions in both, the papers and the digital platform, provided us with interesting material, illustrating how pre-service teachers think and argue about using fictional narratives in teacher education and in their own teaching practice.

Frank McCourt’s *Teacher Man*

Frank McCourt’s *Teacher Man* is an account of an English teacher in New York during the 1960s and 1970s and deals with the expectations and disappointments of teachers and teaching. The novel has been advertised as “the true story of a teacher”. McCourt describes the difficulties of keeping a class in check and tells about the constant confrontation between what he has learned in theory and what he has experienced in practice. *Teacher Man* is more than just an account of the American teaching system of the 1960s and 1970s but turns out to be an autobiographical Bildungsroman in which the protagonist is in constant search of himself as a teacher and human being. Besides, the novel is a narrative about the importance of using storytelling. The protagonist, Frank McCourt, incorporates narratives to overcome his students’ inhibitions to teaching materials and simultaneously makes use of them to defuse conflicts. The various themes dealt with in the novel make that Frank McCourt’s *Teacher Man* has a rich potential for pre-service teachers to stimulate discussion and reflection upon pedagogical and didactical issues and to become fully aware of their future position as a teacher.

Student reactions

After our students had read the novel, we invited them to select passages and comment upon them (see also Section “Situating the project”). A close analysis of the papers showed us that there were three themes dominant in the selected texts: classroom management, teaching methods and the representation of (the social status of) teachers. In our analysis, we were confronted with “ideological dilemmas” (Billig et al. 1988, 163), opinions and assumptions that imply a specific positioning towards an intrinsic controversy. These dilemmas can also be described as binaries
creating an opposition or a continuum for situating the arguments. In the theme of classroom management the binary centres around teacher-centred (prescriptive) and pupil-centred (participatory). In the theme of teaching methods, the discussion moves on a continuum between theory-driven and practice-based education. In the theme of the representation of (the social status of) teachers, there is a binary between a positive (optimistic) and a negative (pessimistic) representation of the teaching profession. In what follows, we present a selection of the student writings in the papers and on the discussion forum and illustrate the different (op)positions.

**Concerning classroom management**

The most popular – and consequently most selected – excerpt from McCourt’s *Teacher Man* \( (n = 71) \) is one in which the main character narrates an anecdote that happened on his first day of teaching. He is confronted with a pupil, throwing a sandwich through the classroom. Unfamiliar with such a kind of situation, McCourt interrupts the act with “Stop throwing sandwiches” (McCourt 2006, 15), exhorts the pupil and starts eating the sandwich. Although hilarious, the excerpt strikingly exemplifies “the human factor” of teaching. As a result of the anecdote, McCourt criticises the teacher education curricula in not dealing with such unusual and unexpected practical situations:

> Professors of education at New York University never lectured on how to handle flying-sandwich situations. They talked about theories and philosophies of education, about moral and ethical imperatives, about the necessity of dealing with the whole child, the gestalt, if you don’t mind, the child’s felt needs, but never about critical moments in the classroom. (McCourt 2006, 16)

*Teacher Man* is stuffed with similar anecdotes, which students experience as instructive:

> I think that beginning teachers can learn a lot from these simulations, pointers and anecdotes, so that they can stand in front of their class with more self-assurance. It is here that the current teacher education fails.

Many students also selected other excerpts in which aspects of classroom management were highlighted, such as problems concerning authority \( (n = 18) \), nagging \( (n = 23) \), punishing \( (n = 8) \), admitting errors \( (n = 17) \), understanding unmannerly conduct of pupils \( (n = 37) \), etc. The forum discussion clearly shows that they think differently about managing them. While reactions, such as “Young teachers have to be tough and severe, as they have to enforce respect” reveal students’ preference for a teacher-centred approach \( (n = 9) \), others show a clear preference for a pupil-centred proceeding \( (n = 17) \):

> Pupils are no bundles of contradiction, which have to be stuffed with knowledge. They are human beings with their own problems and feelings. And whether you want it or not, they bring those problems and feelings at school and their learning process is heavily influenced by them.

Other student reactions show that McCourt’s *Teacher Man* makes them think about a balance between both approaches \( (n = 40) \):

> McCourt makes me think about how I can maintain order in the classroom. Will I do it the authoritarian way when I am no longer able to handle the class situation? Or will I choose for a dialogue with my pupils and try to reach a consensus?
The fact that the majority of our students have chosen these smaller anecdotes about how to behave in practical classroom situations illustrates the importance of discussing real and practical stories about real teachers – although in this case presented in a fictional narrative.

**Concerning teaching methods**

Over 80% of our students \((n = 66)\) selected the following excerpt from McCourt’s *Teacher Man*:

> Andrew knows the tilting chair will annoy you, at least get your attention. … I don’t like the arrogance of his delicacy. … and wonder if I should try to win him over or to destroy him completely. A voice in my head tells me, make something out of it. Turn it into a lesson on observation. Pretend you’re planning the whole thing. And I say to the class… (McCourt 2006, 149–50)

The excerpt illustrates how McCourt succeeds in transforming a practical situation (a tilting chair) into a lesson in observation, so changing a practical nuisance into a part of the curriculum of English teaching. Moreover, the anecdote gave our students the opportunity to discuss the opposition between theory and practice and suddenly to attack the practicality of theoretical insights. Many pre-service teachers \((n = 17)\) stress their aversion to exclusively theory-driven education and propagate the opinion that only subject matter that is connected with the social environment of pupils is appropriate as teaching material:

> Preconditions for a good class atmosphere are that there is a connection between the learning content and the world of the student and that the student is able to experience the practical applicability of this knowledge.

In general, McCourt’s anecdote created ample opportunity for our students to discuss the opposition between what happens in the classroom and what should be taught from the perspective of the curriculum.

**Concerning the representation of (the social status of) teachers**

The representation of teachers in popular media is often stereotypical: either extremely flattering or extremely negative. In many school films, for instance, the teacher is represented as a weakling, a failure, a frustrated, effeminate or depressive individual, an adulterous husband, a paedophile, a brute, etc. (see also: Dalton 2004; Williams and Zenger 2007; Dalton and Linder 2008). Such representations are not beneficial to the general perception of teachers and teaching. According to Dyer (1993, 1), “how social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in life”. The impact of representations is a major issue in the reactions of our students. They selected quite a lot of excerpts \((n = 14)\) in which McCourt passes judgement on the representation of teachers and made them a starting point to reflect upon the topic. The following excerpt was a popular one:

> In America, doctors, lawyers, generals, actors, television people and politicians are admired and rewarded. Not teachers. Teaching is the downstairs maid of professions. Teachers are told to use the service door or go around the back. They are congratulated
on having ATTO (All That Time Off). They are spoken of patronisingly and patted, retroactively, on their silvery locks. (McCourt 2006, 4)

This excerpt leads to a discussion among the students about how teachers are represented. They started theorising; they gradually became aware of how those representations affect their social status as a future teacher and influence the construction of their self-image:

Concerning teachers, negative reporting comes from the media and often also from people within the profession itself. Either teachers are looked down upon, or they are envied because of their supposedly large amounts of free time. I confess that I myself was also guilty of this. Indeed: was. My image of the teacher consisted of one big stereotype of the teacher in which the mannerisms (e.g. the infamous raised finger), clothing (very chaste and strict), a negative attitude towards drugs, smoking… were strongly exaggerated.

Moreover, one of our students remarked that McCourt’s *Teacher Man* contributes to the rather negative representation of teaching and teachers:

At times, he portrays a kind of oversimplified image of education, seems indeed somewhat embittered. We shouldn’t just follow him.

The student reactions on the topic of representation also reveal that for the most part they consider being a teacher as a noble profession. Some of our students even explicitly declare that teachers are more or less heroic heroes with great ideals, which hints at their position in the opposition concerning the theme:

Being a teacher is important because younger people constitute to a large extent the society of tomorrow. Being a teacher does not limit itself to teaching and enjoying “all that free time”. It also entails educating, being involved in the lives of your pupils, the shaping of independent and critical individuals.

Others are more nuanced as they emphasise that being a teacher implies serious but also frivolous tasks:

I’m glad I can be both the drill-master and the shoulder to cry on, the referee and the therapist, the fool and the critic.

Some of them even tell of the contempt they have been confronted with when revealing their choice of becoming a teacher:

When I started, as graduated master, the teacher education programme, many of my friends confronted me with disparaging comments. They reproached me that my choice proved that I am a man of low ambitions, as teachers hardly achieve everlasting glory, have few career opportunities, etc. They maintained that, instead, a drab staff room and annoying scamps awaited me. Why couldn’t I become a manager or a journalist?

The majority of the students take the negative representations in popular culture seriously and take some excerpts from McCourt’s *Teacher Man* as an opportunity to problematise stereotypes about the teaching profession. Anyway, although the discussions reveal they are aware of the disdain some people have towards the teaching profession, our students seem not to be discouraged to become a teacher.
**Fictional narratives as part of the curriculum**

In their reactions in the papers and on the online discussion forum, our students testified they did like reading the novel as an eye-opener for teachers to particular problems. Moreover, they stressed that McCourt’s *Teacher Man* offered them a unique possibility to discuss issues with peers and gave them the opportunity to link this narrative with personal narratives about similar experiences. Some of our students remarked that certain parts of the novel lead up to a correction of the abstract theoretical insights they have been taught in other courses and made them think about issues which have never been dealt with in teacher education. According to them, fictional narratives can furthermore be considered as a supplement to theory classes and course books. Since the latter aspects largely list up pedagogical and educational issues without offering the opportunity to reflect upon their usefulness in specific contexts, students feel they are rather unprepared to deal with practice. Narrative fiction may instead be offering contextualised situations which elicit critical reflection and offer possible solutions for specific problems. The major part of our students indicated that – by identifying with the main character and his problems – they were inspired for their own teaching (especially using narratives to discuss problems). It may thus be clear that the student reactions reveal some major functions of reading fiction and of teaching through fiction. One of our students concisely summarises the added value of reading McCourt’s *Teacher Man* in teacher education:

> McCourt’s *Teacher Man* offers a sampling of the mixed feelings a pre-service teacher can be confronted with. *Teacher Man* is a simulation of situations that can happen in real-life teaching, presented through the eyes of a teacher. The story urges the readers to reflect upon teaching tasks and upon their own views on teaching. It, moreover, gives pre-service teachers the opportunity to empathise with the situations in which Frank McCourt is and to devise own teaching strategies. In this respect, fictional narratives such as *Teacher Man* are very useful in teacher education. They add to the theory, support practice and ask for critical reflection.

Although the bulk of the students were enthusiastic about the project, some students stressed that reading McCourt’s *Teacher Man*, writing a paper and discussing the topic on an online discussion forum ask for quite a time investment, which is too big compared with the whole curriculum.

**Conclusion**

In this article, we have described a project in which we introduced McCourt’s *Teacher Man* in the curriculum of the teacher education programme at Ghent University during the academic years 2006–07 and 2007–08. Our hypothesis was that fictional narratives could be an interesting tool for stimulating reflection about the teaching profession. The novel made our students problematise those issues, illustrated the issues with practical examples and finally made them thematise the issues on a more abstract level. This does not imply that we suggest to replace theory by fiction in teacher education, but that we are convinced that a fictional perspective can be beneficial for stimulating the discussion. This insight can be situated in the plea for the narrative turn in general and the suggestion to use fictional narratives in education in particular.

Introducing fictional narratives in a classroom and using and implementing them as a tool for reflection imply among other things the selection of a fictional narrative...
that is suitable for a specific domain. With respect to teacher education, McCourt’s *Teacher Man* seemed to be very appropriate. As a result of the project our students suggested examples for similar projects and advised us to create a database of interesting fictional narratives that could be used by/for particular kinds of students and particular knowledge domains and school subjects. According to them, there’s a real need for differentiation when dealing with different perspectives and different kinds of students. Although we can agree with such argumentation, we became aware that selecting only one appropriate text for a group of students is beneficial, as suddenly all have a shared knowledge of the cultural artefact that is discussed.

Just presenting the text to the students is not enough in a teaching environment because, as teacher trainers, we should carefully create a teaching strategy. In our project, the strategy involved open but clear assignments, giving the pre-service teacher as researcher the opportunity for selecting interesting fragments and stimulating a debate about major issues. The benefit of inviting our students to select fragments is certainly that we have a general overview of what issues are important for the particular public. Making a selection from these fragments (based on the most quoted) has the advantage that we can restrict the number of examples to be shared by the students.

Organising the discussion was and probably is very difficult if restricted to face-to-face situations. That is why we decided to combine paper discussions with discussions on a digital environment in which students could voice opinions and reactions. Also important is the realisation that the teacher trainer should act as a facilitator during these discussions and should stimulate his students to further elaborate upon particular issues.

Of course this project is only a limited example. It, however, illustrates how fictional narratives can enhance critical reflection in teacher education. In a next research project, we will examine how the use of fictional narratives can be more systematically integrated within course topics in language teacher education.

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**References**


