

The First Day of School: A Reflective Narrative Analysis

Tim Boerst

New Fifth Grader,

When you get to fifth grade you find your desk and then Mr. Boerst starts to talk about himself . . . Since this is your first day you'll listen to Mr. Boerst talk and talk, about how he's really happy to have you in his class and that he hopes you all have a great year. Be prepared to be bored! . . . Then you'll probably go outside for recess. You'll find out he's got a couple easy rules so be sure to follow them. . . . In the middle of the week you will probably start easy fifth grade work. . . . The totally best thing about the first day is that it's a half-day of school!

—Merged excerpts from multiple texts/fifth-grade students, June 1996

Sometimes the thought of teaching 30 students makes me nervous, turns my stomach, and makes my heart beat a bit faster. This phenomenon happens within many different time frames. Each morning as I drive to work I think through my day. At some point on Highway 23 North, M14 West, traveling through Plymouth or seeing the Inkster Road exit, I think of something new or newly remembered that begins that mixed feeling of unease and anticipation. I get the same feeling often enough on Sunday nights that my wife and I have dubbed it the "Sunday Troubles." After roughly considering the week ahead and plotting out what I hope to accomplish I become unnerved at the thought of teaching. Aside from the daily and weekly battles with this feeling there is one particular time the thought of teaching causes emotional turmoil, the start of the new school year. (8/25/97 Teaching Journal)

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To everything there is a beginning, and the school year is no exception. If possible, the first day of school takes the normally complex act of teaching to even greater levels of difficulty. The first day of school marks a time when teachers and students must begin to undertake work that cannot be accomplished in one day. In fact, much of what is undertaken on the first day of school will continue to be a work in progress, never fully finished even by the end of the year. On the first day of school, anxious groups of students and teachers need to strike out on an ambitious learning adventure without a shared understanding of destinations, maps, basic knowledge of one another, or how they might work together to reach their goals. Each group has its own account of the first day of school, as you can see from the excerpts that begin this chapter. The intersection of my students' narratives, filled with boredom and inactivity (aside from recess); my own nervous unfulfilling narrative; and my peers' quirky, often incompatible narratives indicated that critical examination of the first day of school was in order. Could I design and enact an approach to the first day of school that might yield more satisfactory narratives?

Aside from a personal desire to begin the school year in a positive way and student concern about what transpires on the first day, is there any foundation for believing that success on the first day of the school is critical? Relevant literature on this topic, while scarce, is primarily found in journals and books written for and marketed to practicing teachers. Messages such as those of Wong and Wong (1991) help to create a sense of urgency about the first day of school: "The first days of school can make or break you. What you do on the first days of school will determine your success or failure for the rest of the school year. You will either win or lose your class on the first days of school" (p. 3). It is not enough to be prepared with content or rules on the first days of school. Teachers are encouraged to be passionate and personable so that they can make positive impressions on those they wish to lead. "Students don't just want someone who is nice. They want someone with personality. Put yourself in your students' squeaky new shoes. While they're anxiously asking themselves, 'Who am I going to get?', ask yourself, 'How am I going to be me?' (Amato, 1995). Perhaps another indication of the importance of the first day of school in practitioner literature is the sheer volume of space devoted to sharing of "surefire" first-day-of-school activities. With the varied content and goals of these activities, there appear to be many essential tasks to accomplish on the first day. While there are many different views about what it means to have a successful first day of school, practitioner literature underscores its importance.

With the importance of the first day of school confirmed by practitioner literature (albeit scantily available), there are four reasons to study the event carefully. The first two concern me personally, the third concerns practitioners, and the last concerns educational research. First, by making the first day of school a focus of study I hoped to more carefully construct what I planned to do on the first day and better understand what happened on that day through structured reflection. The combination of these undertakings would better inform me for subsequent first days of school. Second, I honestly wondered what factors might contribute to the feelings of worry and anxiety that I feel each year before and during the first day of school. If I examined events and factors leading up to the first day, I might be able to think about future first days in a more enlightened way, reducing to some degree the emotional stress of that initial day of teaching. Third, the first day of school is a phenomenon in which other teachers take strong interest. Since little research has focused on this event, research could spur other practitioners to more carefully consider what they do during the first day of school, why they do these things, and how they feel about the day. My thinking about this issue in the context of my own teaching may provide practitioners with a familiar frame of reference from which to glean useful ideas, even if their own teaching circumstances are not identical. Fourth, most educational research frames inquiry in ways that tend to omit or strongly downplay temporal considerations. Most practitioners realize that teaching Monday morning is far different from teaching on Friday afternoons, teaching in mid-October is different from teaching the day before Halloween, teaching on the first day of school is much different from teaching near the end of the year. By researching the first day of school I will contribute a different frame to educational research. With all these considerations in mind, I undertake the research of my own teaching in hopes that it will bring me closer to a different narrative for my students and myself, one filled with participation, learning, and excitement (but with less stress).

CONTEXTUALIZING AND FRAMING THE FIRST-DAY-OF-SCHOOL NARRATIVES

The particular first day of school that is the focus of this chapter occurred on September 2, 1997, in a small metropolitan suburb of Detroit, Michigan. The school day started at 8:45 A.M., a new school-start time mandated by state changes in school-year requirements, and ended at 11:50

A.M. The class was composed of 30 students of varied economic and racial backgrounds. I was assigned 15 boys and 15 girls, in a self-contained fifth-grade classroom. This would be my fourth year teaching Grade 5 in a building with two sections of each grade and a student population of nearly 350. Only one student in the class was new to the school, and the majority of students came from blue-collar, two-parent families. This is as much as I knew about the class when the school year began, not counting the hallway encounters, teacher gossip, and sibling insights that would undoubtedly color my perceptions.

In this chapter I will analyze several narratives, only one of which was constructed in the context just described. Other narratives that will be analyzed include one developed from collective experiences of first days of the past, one developed in planning for this particular first day; and one that anticipates future first days of school. Each of these narratives has its own unique context, but they are inextricably tied together in my mind because they all affect and are affected by this year's first day of school. The narratives are of my own construction, but they are flavored and influenced by the narratives of peers and students. I will frame my investigation of the first-day-of-school phenomenon through analysis of a chain of temporally ordered stories. Initially I will share an analysis of a "historical narrative" that is cobbled together from pre-1997 first days of school. Following this, I will analyze a "scripted narrative" that describes the story I hoped/planned to enact on the first day of school in 1997. Then I unfold an analysis of a "spontaneous narrative" in which I attempt to capture what happened and my thinking about the first day of school of 1997. The set of narratives cannot end here. One of my purposes in this research was to use deep reflection to construct an improved "future narrative" of subsequent first days of school. I end with my ideas about themes that I hope to embed in next year's first-day-of-school narrative.

A NOTE ABOUT METHOD AND DATA

Before delving into the narrative analysis, I should briefly share some relevant features of my approach to data collection and analysis. To aid my construction and analysis of narratives I employed Brown's (1996) use of multiple texts to reflect on teaching. In this method, "chains of stories" that document classroom practice are compared over time to scaffold reflection. The act of constructing new text based on previous writings deepens the researcher's perspective on practice, thereby enhancing possibilities

for future action in that setting. I created a chain of stories through my teaching journal and used these writings to construct my "historical narrative" and "scripted narrative."

I compiled the detailed teacher journal through August and September 1997 with my thoughts about the first day of school, preparations for that day, and interactions with others before and during the day. I developed and analyzed my "spontaneous narrative," using several data sources, including an audiotape of the entire first day of school, student work samples from the first day, and my teaching journal. These records of practice can be viewed as a collage of historical markers that document the first day of school. Each source has its own texture and unique dimensions, but it is through the sources' overlapping and through the spaces between components that I could create a more critical narrative of experience. Finally, I created ideas for a "future narrative" of subsequent first days of school. To do this I critically conflated my past and present first-day-of-school narratives, to envision the following first-day narrative.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE: PRECURSOR

Across my 5 previous years of teaching, I had developed a first-day-of-school narrative that entwined personal plans, actions, and rationale, with memorable occurrences from past first days and ideas from peers and students. The basic elements of this narrative, each of which I will address in more detail later, include appearances (personal and the classroom); composition of students in class; helping students get to know me; learning classroom procedures and rules; and portraying what fifth grade is "really" like. These elements are influenced by the instructional setting, events that happen in it, protagonists, and outcomes of the first-day narrative. When coalesced into one story, they illustrate the difficulties I faced in creating a first-day-of-school story with a personally satisfactory solution. A satisfactory solution would be a first day that provided a "good start" to the year in light of multiple instructional goals and a workable yet thoughtful template for future first days of school. My teaching during previous first days of school was inevitably disappointing and yet exhilarating, frenzied in pace but seemingly null in content. My peers contributed ideas to this narrative that revealed excitement about new beginnings tempered by summer regrets. Some half jokingly doubted personal skill, while others were concerned about what to wear or how to decorate inviting bulletin boards. My own thoughts were focused on ideas I had not heard from my

peers, but my thinking was flavored by their comments. Any peer consensus about the first day of school or personal knowledge of the first day must be considered all the more tentative and situational when 30 fresh, relatively unknown students enter the picture. The actions and comments of my students regarding the first day of school tempered the construction of my narrative. A major theme that dominates this historical narrative and made my thinking about the upcoming first day of school most troubling was that thoughtful planning and well-founded concerns prior to the first day often seemed ill-suited to the actual dilemmas occurring that day. In other words, this narrative has a foreboding moral: Planning (or practice, for that matter) doesn't necessarily make perfect.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE: REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS

A colleague of mine said that she needed to get a new outfit for the start of the year. Not an outfit with slacks, but a dress. I asked her why this was important, implying that I didn't think it mattered. She said that if she could find the right outfit, it would make her look more professional and send a message to students that she meant business. (Teaching journal, 8/25/97)

Many of my peers were preoccupied with concerns about setting the right tone for learning on the first day of school. This could be done in many ways and mean many different things. For the teacher referred to here, looking competent and businesslike would encourage students to respect her and know that she expected them to work hard. Dressing more casually might have courted familiarity, making teacher authority more difficult to establish. For other teachers, setting the right tone meant discussing the rules and consequences for following and disobeying those rules. This conception often includes the idea that the first few weeks of school and especially the first day is the best time to rigidly enforce these rules. Failure to do so may set a course for classroom anarchy later in the year. Whether a businesslike tone or an orderly rule-following tone is the "right tone" for a particular teacher, it appears that one theme in contemplating the first day concerns establishing an appropriate learning atmosphere and facilitating its creation from the very start of the year. Setting the tone on the first day is a high-stakes venture, not only because incorrectly setting the tone could conceivably have significant long-term repercussions, but also because there is an incredibly limited window of

opportunity, one half day of school, in which successful execution needs to occur.

In the course of the in-service days leading up to the first day of school teachers invariably inquire about the students in my new class. Depending on the teacher I may be asked to share some names to help with remembering the group as a whole, after which comments are made regarding the general behavior, intelligence, and parental involvement of "that group." In other cases teachers ask to see the list of students and make the same sorts of comments about individual students. (Teaching journal, 8/26/97)

While there is debate among teachers about the appropriateness or necessity of this type of interaction, it is difficult to avoid prior to the first day of school. For better or worse, peers accentuate the challenges and possibilities presented by each new group of students. The clairvoyance of their perceptions often cannot be easily challenged before the start of the year, leaving me to attempt to ignore negative comments while comforting myself with their positive insights. Hearing these ideas prior to the first day of school runs contrary to my predisposition to avoid clouding my thinking about new students with their documented past. I consciously avoid "learning" more about my students through the files kept in the office. Ironically, a theme of the historical narrative that causes much consternation before the first day of school is this lack of knowledge about new students. So much of what needs to be done as a teacher depends upon knowledge of them—their personalities and understandings. Knowing them cannot be replicated through peer comments or office files. The first day initiates the gargantuan process of learning about students, which needs to be augmented throughout the year, but also needs to start as quickly as possible. On the first day of school, I will seat students next to one another and may require them to work together, with either wonderful or disastrous consequences, which result from my lack of knowledge.

Other themes of the historical first-day narrative were more personal in nature. It occurred to me that I was as unknown to students as they were to me. They might have heard of me through peers, siblings, or parents. Exposure to the "folklore" about Mr. Boerst could work to my advantage or disadvantage, depending upon which stories were remembered and shared. At the start of the year, and particularly on the first day, I wanted to convey to students what I was about as a teacher and, in some sense, what I was about as a person. I did not think that my first-day attire would do enough to es-

tablish this. My new students would come in with vague ideas about me and better formed ideas about school in general. I wanted to do things the very first day that let the students know that I was worthy of being trusted, worked for, and maybe even liked a little. I realize that these things are time-consuming ventures and cannot be accomplished easily. It was difficult to know what I could do to help students learn about me or if this was something that students would find out naturally over time. It was stressful to consider that students might get a possibly long-lasting impression of me that first day, so I wanted to make it an accurate and, hopefully, positive one.

Another theme that dominates my narrative is concern about quickly establishing classroom procedures, possibly including a message about rule enforcement. Well-formed procedural patterns could help students efficiently manage their time and foster productive classroom interactions. While many of the procedures of classroom life become second nature as the year progresses, those very same routines need to be taught to students at the start of the year. Poorly establishing routines on the first day of school could be a costly mistake. Determining which procedures were worth teaching, what rationale supported their use, and how to teach them was a nerve-rattling experience.

It is not as if I know the exact way to start these patterns of classroom life, but there are certainly ways not to. Last year I remember I tried to get many routines going the very first day. One was lining up and walking to specials. It is not as if kids hadn't walked in line before, but I've seen some classes get pretty rowdy going through the halls. I talked about this procedure and even stopped the students once or twice on the way down to Music to insist upon quiet and order for fear that slack at this point would promote greater disorder later. Well, we arrived at the music room to discover that we didn't have specials on the first day! Trying to salvage some routine, I decided that we'd just practice walking our fire escape route. (Teaching journal, 8/26/97)

Here the establishment of multiple procedures on the first day caused some apprehension, but it also illuminated a few of the potential factors that make mistakes a very real possibility on the first day of school.

A final theme of this historical narrative was contributed through the letters that my previous fifth-grade students had written at the end of school the preceding year. In creating comments to be read by future fifth-grade students on the first day of school, many children wrote about how boring the first day of school was and how I had talked the entire day. This could

be an amalgamation of their experiences on first days of school throughout their school careers, but I felt that it spoke pretty accurately about the first day in my classroom. However, many students went on to write glowingly about their fifth-grade experiences in the classroom over the course of the year. It seemed that the students saw a discrepancy between the start of the year and the rest of it.

I began to wonder how the way I taught on the first day of school compared with how I regularly managed, planned, and interacted with students during the year. I don't think that my first-day teaching matches well with the kind of teaching I tried to do on a regular basis during the year. The fact that the two may be markedly different is one thing, but the necessity of it is another. Does the dichotomy need to occur? Could I avoid it and still develop the many first-day ideas I want to?" (Teaching journal, 8/27/97)

The question here was how to compose the day and my teaching so that they would not be as markedly different from the teaching and learning occurring in the room during the remainder of the year. This relates back to presenting students an accurate impression of what learning in fifth grade would be like. This spurred me to consider what else was missing from the first day of school.

My historical narrative operates under the assumption that it would be best on the very first day to establish classroom procedures and rules, to dress and decorate the room appropriately, to tell students about myself as a teacher, and to speak about what fifth grade was like. In isolation, any of these goals may plausibly help students and myself begin a productive year together. In concert, these first-day components would place students in a decidedly receptive role. While they could make conjectures based on previous grades, they would know little about the direction of the fifth-grade curriculum. Since they also knew little about what I'm like as a teacher or what procedures were particular to this classroom, student participation would amount to guessing and listening. No wonder former fifth-grade students were thankful that the first day was a half day! This is an even greater concern, since a key point I would be making throughout the year was that students in my class have a critical role in discourse and planning. By filling the first day with topics they couldn't contribute to in powerful ways, I had set up the first day at odds with what I wanted the students to learn that day. I was trying to tell them things that they might more powerfully learn, possibly in some small way on the first day, through engagement. By having students sit and listen, I was also

delaying the important process of learning about my students. On their own and in concert, the themes described in this section contributed to making my historical first day of school narrative a problematic one.

SCRIPTED NARRATIVE: PRECURSOR

In thinking about the first day, I see that a curious absence from the agenda was subject matter. It seemed that everything done on the first day revolves around getting ready to learn at some point about the content matter of fifth grade, but that the first day had no hint of it. Since my usual teaching centered strongly on teaching subject matter, it is no wonder that the first day felt out of the ordinary, adding to all the other reasons mentioned earlier. Also, by incorporating subject matter into the first day I could begin to build notions about students' content knowledge and how they were able to use that knowledge. However, there were many things to be accomplished the first day, so adding subject matter would be a tricky, but justifiable, proposition. Even if I did find a way to incorporate subject matter into the first day, there was no telling how students would receive it. I also did not have an idea about how the intent to teach subject matter could be feasibly translated into actual practice that first day of school.

SCRIPTED NARRATIVE: REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS

The room was decorated and arranged, meetings with teachers and administrators had been completed, and school supplies were dispersed to studentless desks. I was ready to plan the first day. It being only a half day, there was no question that it would be easy to fill. The goal I started with was to plan a first day in which students could experience what fifth grade would really be like during the year, even if only in a small way, while also laying the foundation upon which the rest of the year could productively be built.

One possible way to both lessen my anxiety about the first day and to represent what I'm like as a teacher/what it's like to be a fifth-grade student, would be to include some meaningful yet reasonable amount of subject matter in the first day of school. I can't close my eyes to the necessity of other components of the first day, but I need to find some way of including subject matter in a first day of school way (whatever

that means). The question then becomes what subject matter and in what guise. (Teaching journal, 8/28/97)

After much consideration I decided to structure the subject matter learning of the first day of school around the topic of "school." So school is the theme of this scripted narrative. Since the rest of the day would be spent doing many school-centered things, such as creating rules and learning procedures, it seemed that I could incorporate subject matter applications most naturally around this topic as well. I also wanted to do something that integrated subject matter areas so as not to send a message to students that there would be one subject that mattered the most in fifth grade. Brainstorming and scanning many sources, I decided to have the students read some excerpts from the letters of Laura Ingalls Wilder (1991) that discussed what schools of the early 1900s were like and how people viewed the role of schools. In this way I could listen to students read. I could engage them in historical comparison of past and present schools and use some components of the stories to solve math problems about the cost of textbooks and the amount of work it would take to buy them now as opposed to then. This plan was integrated and connected to the topic of schooling, would involve students in several ways with subject matter, and hopefully would allow me to vacate center stage on the first day of school.

In addition to this, I planned to accomplish several other things in our half day of learning time. Students would make desk name tags as they entered until everyone had arrived. I would briefly introduce myself, using my professional portfolio. Then, students would get to know one another through a brief cooperative learning activity. We would also discuss the classroom rules and consequences, as well as determine assignments for school-related jobs known as "safety duties," which our class was responsible for performing the very next day. Throughout the morning would be smatterings of procedures necessary to complete the various tasks. It would be a more-than-busy first day, but I was determined to give this plan a try. However, I knew from my historical narrative that this script was for a story that would never come to pass, no matter how thoughtful or well intentioned its outline.

SPONTANEOUS NARRATIVE: REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS

My day started with an ironic twist. I looked at the shirts I had ironed for the week and realized that I did not own a tie to match any of them. It

would be the first time in my career that I had not worn a tie for the first day of school. The importance of the first-day-of-school wardrobe came to mind again. I chose not to wear a tie, hoping that doing so would not haunt me by the day's end. I do not mean to make light of what had been shared as a very real concern for others. Each teacher has beliefs, just as I do, that may cause anxiety about the first day of school. For some it is wardrobe, for others it is the necessity of an immaculate classroom, and for me it was a worry that students would form false impressions about what fifth grade would be like in my room. I am not trying to establish particular teacher beliefs as legitimate first-day narrative themes, but rather to call attention to the fact that teacher beliefs complicate the first day.

Wary of being center stage the entire first day, I structured my plans in hopes of better involving students, thus better mirroring what the rest of fifth grade would be like. The plans included interaction between students, involvement in whole-class discourse, and integrated subject matter. Each of these planning decisions had been made with great care, and I felt relatively comfortable that the plan would indeed involve students more strongly in the first day activities. However, in examining the tapes of the first day, I found that I still occupied a large amount of the discussion space. Since students had few ideas about components such as school safety jobs and information about myself, they understandably participated less. I was troubled by the blank stares that greeted my requests that they discuss ideas with their new classmates. They roamed the room to learn about one another's interests for approximately 20 minutes. What follows is the extent of the whole-group discussion that ensued:

Teacher: Did anyone find out something interesting about someone that they didn't know before? (long pause) So two people didn't know everything about the people they talked to, but everyone else knew everything about everyone?

Max: That Kareen wants to go to Disneyland.

Teacher: Anything else?

Bart: That Jake's dream car is a Slingshot.

Jasmine: Albert's favorite color is blue.

Teacher: All right. Did anybody find out anything interesting? Kurt?

No? Did you change your mind about it being interesting? (Class transcript, 9/2/97)

This discussion is not what I would characterize as highly engaging or student centered. After this, I talked a bit more about the task and then started

the next planned task. There were two notable exceptions when students did participate more: I will discuss one of these here and explore the other later. At times, in the morning students would contribute ideas—which I hadn't anticipated—that appeared to spur greater student involvement. The first time this occurred was when I was sharing information about myself using my portfolio.

Teacher: I used to live in Iowa before teaching here. I taught fourth grade there for 2 years in Cedar Rapids, which is [pulling down map] right here. I taught third grade in Wausau, Wisconsin, which is right about here. Now I teach in a place called South Redford. Have you heard of it?

Students: (Laughter)

Teacher: This is my 3rd year here and I think I have it figured out. Ha!

Albert: Can I come up and show you something on the map?

Teacher: Sure

Albert: During the summer I, um, we started right here, we went down from Michigan into India [he meant Indiana] through Illinois, Nebraska into South Dakota. Then we went . . . [the story of his trip continued]

Teacher: Wow! How many of you went on trips this summer? OK, let's see here. I went on trips, but I didn't go anywhere exciting, just to Wisconsin and back to Michigan. How many of you went to Maine? Some of you and, oh, Albert too. Imagine that! How many of you went to New York? Oh, Albert again. How many of you went to Pennsylvania?

Students: (Laughter [Albert is the only student to raise his hand again.])

Teacher: OK, now that we know where Albert has been, did anyone travel over here? [pointing to the Midwest]. How about over here . . . (Class transcript, 9/2/97)

After this exchange students asked questions about me. It may at first seem trivial, but this move, initiated by students, changed my thinking about how I would use my plans. Seemingly a more effective way to involve students in the first day was to allow them to help determine the direction of our discourse and even the content of our work. In other words, I would not rigidly stick to the ways I had planned to involve students. Many times during the day students interjected comments that called issues to my

attention that would be useful or interesting to discuss on the first day of school. I still could guide the discourse and tasks toward what I thought needed to be accomplished, but capitalizing on these opportunities and leaving other tasks I had planned unfinished did markedly improve student involvement. It encouraged the kinds of interactions more typical of what students could expect during the school year, thus helping me realize my goal in a way I hadn't considered. This type of interaction also encouraged me to be more spontaneous, inquisitive, and even humorous at times. This is the kind of person I wanted to portray to the students on the first day of school, instead of the hot-air bag that made students long for the bell at noon. I could more easily show students what I was like as a teacher and a person, instead of trying to tell them using my portfolio.

A second source that fostered active student participation and discourse was the subject matter included in the first day of school. The subject matter was also affected by student interest. In fact, the grandiose integrated subject matter idea that I had constructed in my plans was only afforded 25 minutes of class time right before the bell that ended the day. Instead, a mathematical problem arose early in the day when students swooned upon hearing when I was born.

Teacher: My birthday is October 21, 1968.

Students: Oooooooo!

Teacher: That means I will, I'll let you figure that out.

Student: You're 30.

Teacher: That's pretty close.

Jackson: 32.

Teacher: Well let's figure it out. If you want to figure it out we'll figure it out.

Albert: 39

Students: (Laughter)

Student: 32!

Teacher: Whoa, now hang on a second. If you do have a comment to make in our classroom you're going to need to raise your hand.

Now that is a first-grade rule and we will keep following that in here. So if I was born in 1968, about how old am I? Why don't you talk it over with someone you're sitting next to?

Teacher: (After excited discussions in small groups) Do you have an idea? How did you figure that out? Raise your hand and tell us about it.

Loni: Um, I counted up 6, 7, 8, 9 and I noticed 9. The 9 . . .

Teacher: So you counted up from this (6) to this number (9)?

Loni: You need to add one year because it is an 8 and not a 9.

Teacher: Uh, ha. So you went up 3 tens and then add one to that 3 tens because it's 1999. Then 31 is what you got. OK, that is one way to do it. Other ideas? How did you do it?

Kurt: It was 37.

Teacher: You thought it was 37. How did you get that?

Kurt: I don't know.

Students: (Laughter)

Teacher: One thing we will talk about or the thing you will learn about being in fifth grade is that when we talk about stuff in class . . . It's great that you have ideas and I want to encourage you to share those as much as possible but I will also be asking you, whether you're right, wrong, or in between or whatever, how you got that. How did you think of that? Does that make sense? So when you share something I want you to kind of be thinking in those ways and you can think about other peoples' answers in those ways too. (Class transcript, 9/2/97)

There are several points that can be made from this excerpt. Since the content of the first day included learning about others, the "How old is Mr. Boerst" problem was a natural way to delve into subject matter thinking. In fact, this was much more natural than a later transition to work on the subject matter tasks I had planned. Building upon student contributions helped generate discourse earlier, so I had more reason to believe that an impromptu chance to do subject matter work based on student interest would be productive. Interestingly enough, mathematical work on this problem set the stage for work later in the day about the age of Laura Ingalls Wilder's writings.

Even within this brief excerpt, I can also see the opportunity that subject matter afforded me to teach procedures that would be useful in creating a smoothly running classroom. Instead of trying to teach procedures as discrete topics on the first day of school, I could teach students the procedures when they needed to know them, in order for them to participate in a meaningful discussion. Students were learning about two important types of procedures in this situation. They were learning the necessary components and format of sharing answers, an important subject matter procedure. They were also learning more mundane procedures such as how to be recognized in the room when they wanted to share their thinking. So the introduction of subject matter on the first day of the year not only helped

me to engage students in discourse, it also helped me to conduct the first day in a way that more realistically captured what fifth grade would be like. In addition, it helped me to address classroom procedures, which was another stressful factor involved in starting the school year.

I had hoped that use of subject matter, even at this early point, would help facilitate a quick start in compiling the information I needed about each student's knowledge and skills. Based on what I now know about these students, transcripts of classroom discourse on the first day provided sketchy information that easily could have lead to incorrect impressions about my students' academic prowess or lack thereof. Students I have since found to be highly effective critical thinkers and engaged classroom participants were either absent from the recording of the first day or were unwilling or unable to share much in the way of reasoning to support their ideas. Students with reading difficulties, typically silent in reading class during the year, were answering reading questions with accuracy. However, retrospectively considering the class as the unit, I see that already on the first day there were accurate foreshadowings of the overall demeanor and work style of the class that I came to know over the year. Of course, any meaningful impression of students cannot be formulated in one day. The process is invariably made murky by scattered performances and the diversity of classroom tasks. Collecting information about students on the first day related to a bit of subject matter work, be it well aligned with typical performance or an outlier, it at least allowed me to be hazily proactive as I planned the subsequent days of instruction to meet student needs.

FUTURE NARRATIVE: PRECURSOR

I heard that a principal encouraged his staff to really get to know their kids during the first weeks of school. To facilitate this, he actively instructs teachers to avoid teaching subject matter the entire first few weeks of school. (Teaching journal, 8/28/97)

This puzzling statement has new meaning for me following my research into the 1997 first day of school. I wholeheartedly agree that I need to learn about my students, but I now believe more strongly than before that subject matter is an important medium through which I can learn about my students and they can more accurately learn about me as a teacher and person. While it is unlikely that the first day of school highly reflects what learning will typically be like for fifth-grade students in my classroom,

the inclusion of small, student-centered or timely subject matter topics helped to make the first day less of the troublesome outlier it had been in the past. I can use subject matter as a tool through which to meaningfully teach about various procedures and rules of my classroom that are necessary for a successful school year. Through the events of the first day of 1997 I have come to realize the possibility of coordinating, instead of juxtaposing, themes from my historical narrative. There are pedagogical strategies that could assist in lessening the tensions between numerous legitimate aims for the first day of school, including establishing classroom procedures and rules, telling students about myself as a teacher, and showing what fifth grade would be like. The first day will probably never be an event about which teachers are calm or self-assured, but the process of researching the event can strengthen awareness of why it is so often a troublesome occurrence. While there are no definitive answers, because of the personal beliefs or goals of individual teachers and the ever changing contexts in which they work, teachers empowered through critical reflection can take action to improve the first day of school for themselves and their students. While I have not been able to construct a "dream story" of the first day of school, I am moving toward facilitating more satisfying first days of school for myself and, hopefully, for my students.

NOTE

To learn more about Tim Boerst's teaching, see *Exploring the Rule of 3 in Elementary School Mathematics*, at his website, <http://www.goingpublicwithteaching.org/tboerst/>

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