Abstract. The present study explores the contribution of narrative discourse to novice student teachers’ collaborative learning-process in a closed asynchronous forum inaugurated for the discussion of practicum problems. The author’s current studies that focus on problem discourse in educational and non-educational settings show that troubled selves often verbalize their lot in narrative formats that are rich in self-building evaluative resources and that participants make functional use of these resources. The present study further explores whether narrative discourse was conducive to digital dialogue among 20 student teachers attending their final college year. Qualitative analysis of the messages showed that the production of narrative problem messages provided other participants with emotional, cognitive and behavioral dimensions of the presenter’s problem and enhanced involvement and interaction, whereas non-narrative messages were not conducive to a fruitful dialogue and resulted in a more abstract discussion.

1. INTRODUCTION

Novice teachers engaged in the demanding multi-faceted process of learning to teach (Wideen, Mayer-Smith & Moor, 1998) often define it as a ‘shock’ that is experienced when they ‘emigrate to a foreign unknown culture’ (Sabar, 2002) where cognitive, affective and performance complexity is often unbearable.

A recent qualitative study further explored novice teachers’ discourse in a closed asynchronous forum inaugurated for the discussion of their practicum problems (Kupferberg & Ben-Peretz, in press). The study shows that participants’ learning process was enhanced by the interactive digital channel where classroom-oriented awareness, insights and professional knowledge were co-constructed by forum-mates in narrative and non-narrative messages (see Appendices). In addition, the forum constituted ‘a safe place’ where individual participants gradually turned into an empathic support group engaged in interactive meaning-making process related to the more turbulent world of practice (ibid).

Following the narrative turn in psychology, sociology and philosophy (see overview in Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001), there is a consensus among educators and educational researchers that narrative discourse both enhances professional development, and at the same time constitutes a central research tool to explore it (Conle, 2000). Adopting a discourse analytic perspective, the present study set out to explore if and how narrative presentation of problems in a closed asynchronous forum enhances the student teachers’ interactive learning process.
2. NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING IN PROBLEM DISCOURSE

The present study espouses an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that combines current scholarship on interactive technologies in education as well as functional approaches to discourse analysis. The first group of studies emphasizes that interactive technologies enhance development and change in new learning environments (Salomon, 2000) and that interactive digital processes are conducive to learning especially when social (Perkins, 1993), cognitive (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1995) and affective (Gackenbach, 1998) dimensions are involved in the meaning-making processes.

Asynchronous forums – the computer-assisted site where participants in the present study learn to teach – comprise written messages that display properties of speech (Crystal, 2001). For example, the messages expect an immediate response as in spoken language, and they display much of the urgency and energetic force that is characteristic of face-to-face conversation. However, they lack immediate feedback, and their rhythm is slower than that of face-to-face interactions. When a topic is presented, it is entitled by the writer. The other messages are indexed linearly in relation to the first message. This organization constitutes the map of the messages (Ibid).

To explore the multidimensionality of cyber problem discourse, the present study also espouses functional approaches to discourse analysis (Schiffrin, 1994) that share the tenet that different narrative genres and discursive resources such as syntactic structures, lexical choice, constructed dialogue, pronouns, tense shift and figurative forms are the building-blocks of interpersonal social communication, self-construction and learning processes. Following institutionally-oriented conversation analysis (Drew & Heritage, 1992), the study looks at the sequential production of discourse rather than through it, in quest for discursive resources which constitute participants’ subjectivity markers (Georgakopoulou, 1997).

Following narrative analysis (See overview in Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001), the second functional approach that is adopted, the study explores problem discourse as a site where self-construction (Bruner, 1997) is often accomplished in local contextualized narrative versions. These are rich in discursive resources that narrators use to position themselves (i.e., situate themselves in discourse in relation to other participants) explicitly and implicitly in three worlds: the narrated troubled past world, the world of the present ongoing interaction and sometimes also in future worlds (Kupferberg & Ben-Peretz, in press). Troubled selves produce different genres of narrative discourse such as specific, generic, future and hypothetical stories while they attempt to make sense of their past experience and explore possible future worlds. A specific personal story focuses on the problem-inducing past events. Generic or habitual personal stories constitute a skeletal narrative genre derived from specific stories when narrators repeatedly verbalize the meaning of related past experiences. In addition, narrators often relate to future or possible worlds, where the problems of the past can be solved.

Labov (1972) defines six structural elements of specific stories that narrative analysts often use: abstract summarizing the gist of the story, orientation providing
3. NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION IN A CYBER FORUM

the background, complicating action, or the sequence of events that creates a problem or an unexpected situation, evaluative devices that provide the narrator’s attitude, resolution that shows what happened finally and coda that shifts the perspective to the present. Following Labov’s (1972), evaluative devices have been defined as self-displaying discourse markers. For example, repetition of identical or semantically-similar lexical items or syntactic structures can indicate that the narrator wishes to emphasize an important point. Tense shift (i.e., when the narrator telling the story in past tense suddenly shifts to the present tense) shows that the narrator may be in an intensive emotional state. Constructed dialogue (i.e., when narrators recycle speech that was produced during the problem-causing events) often presents the voice of others intermingled with the narrator’s voice.

Recent studies that focus on face-to-face problem discourse in the educational settings provide empirical evidence that cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions of novice and experienced teachers’ professional development can be explored via their evaluative resources in longitudinal studies (Kupferberg & Gilat, 2001), reflective life-stories (Kupferberg & Green, 2001) or naturally-occurring problem discourse (Kupferberg, in press).

The findings of these studies were implemented in a project developed for the enhancement of face-to-face communication in the educational settings (Kupferberg & Gilat, 2002). The project is based on two assumptions. First, teachers may develop and change when they elaborate on professional events in speech and writing. Second, interactive problem discourse facilitates the construction of solutions if participants are tuned to each other’s evaluative resources, notice them and make use of them. A follow-up study (Kupferberg, in press) showed how interactive negotiation of problems between a professional and a novice practitioner was conducive to the student teachers’ professional development.

Kupferberg and Ben-Peretz (in press) adopted the same instructional design in a cyber forum, showing that student teachers’ reflection on-action (Schön, 1983) was relevant and conducive to their professional development. In addition, participants tightened their inter-personal relations and turned the digital multilogue into a support group. Bearing this theoretical framework in mind, we further asked the following research question: To what extent does narrative presentation of problems enhance the ensuing digital forum discussion?

4. THIS STUDY

4.1. Participants

Participants were 20 women, bilingual or trilingual EFL (English as a foreign language), novice teachers attending their final college year. Their ages ranged between 28-38 years. The forum constituted an additional channel of communication that participants used. They all attended a face-to-face yearly course on the theoretical and practical dimensions of inter-personal problem discourse in the educational setting.
4.2. Data collection and analysis

Data comprised 250 messages produced in 20 sequences initiated by a problem message sent by each participant during the first semester of the academic year 2003-2004. Data analysis was based on a two-phase qualitative method (Kupferberg & Green, 2001) for the analysis of interactive cyber problem discourse. In addition, guided by ethical concerns, the author requested the participants’ permission to use the forum messages in the study, and she took necessary precautions to protect the participants’ anonymity.

In phase one, the data was micro-analyzed in quest for discursive resources that show how participants presented their problem and how they co-constructed solutions. The micro-analysis was guided by ‘the next turn validation’ (Peräkylä, 1997), a conversation-analytic procedure aiming at the discovery of preceding or following co-text that provides confirming evidence that what one digital participant wrote had also been noticed and used by other participants. Subsequently, the findings gleaned from the micro-analysis were related to a broader macro educational framework in an interpretive interface (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

5. ANALYSIS OF THE DIGITAL SEQUENCES

Analysis of the messages showed that 8 participants presented their problems in narrative and 12 in non-narrative messages. The decision to entitle a problem message ‘narrative’ was based on the identification of some or all of the Labovian criteria. Especially important was the identification of a problem-inducing complicating action. For example, a student teacher named Tami produced a personal story that took place in class a few days before she entered the forum (see Appendix 1).

Following the detailed narrative presentation of this classroom event, other students responded with their own classroom stories that were related to Tami’s story, weaving together possible solutions to the contextualized problems that were packaged in narrative formats. In addition, they also related to cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions constructed in Tami’s problem message via evaluative resources (e.g., ‘giving a second chance’ is an evaluative device displaying Tami’s emerging professional generalization), interactively strengthening their interpersonal relations in the present. Some students also shifted the discourse to future worlds where certain courses of action could be tried.

A message was entitled ‘non-narrative’ if the problem was presented in general terms (see Appendix 2). Analysis of the non-narrative sequences showed that answerers did position themselves vis-à-vis the presenter by trying to show empathy and support. However, since they were not provided with a specific and detailed context, their unfocused pieces of advice and recipes were futilely oriented to different courses of action without reaching any conclusion.
STUDENT TEACHERS’ NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION

6. DISCUSSION

The analysis provided an answer to the research question. When participants chose to position themselves vis-à-vis other participants by using specific detailed narrative formats, the ensuing digital dialogue was relevant, related to various dimensions of the problem and often resulted in a serious negotiation of a solution. In addition, narrative discourse was conducive to the enhancement of involvement among the forum-mates. When, however, participants presented problems in general non-narrative terms, the interactive digital dialogue remained in a somewhat abstract world where different ad-hoc recipes were proffered but the dialogue futilely moved in no direction. The findings of the present study are supported by recent studies showing that in face-to-face and telephone problem discourse when problems are presented in narrative formats (i.e., in specific past tense stories), it is easier for participants to reach global coherence (i.e., relate to the same themes (Kupferberg, Green & Gilat, 2002; Kupferberg, in press).

From a practical perspective, the study emphasizes the potential contribution of a cyber forum to professional problem solving in pre- and in-service programs. Such sites, as the study shows, may constitute support groups that can enhance the emotional and cognitive development of students teachers, as well as other groups of learners engaged in the co-construction of meaning in computer-assisted learning environments.

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REFERENCES

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Excerpt from a narrative message
When I entered class a few days ago, I saw that the class was very dirty and pupils were making much noise. One of the pupils was shouting so loudly that I demanded to speak with her mother. Then, I started the lesson. During the lesson she wrote me a letter. In the letter she apologized, and asked me not to inform her mother, underlining the words “I promise”. After the lesson she came to me and asked me if I had changed my mind. I told her that I forgave her and that I would give her a second chance. I think she is afraid of her mother, but I don’t know if I did the right thing. I would really like to hear what you think about this episode. Thank you. Tami

Appendix 2: Excerpt from a non-narrative message
Teaching English is not simple. It calls for the activation of the four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening). I know we can use games, songs, work sheets etc. The problem is how to do everything? How will I know what to teach? What to focus on and how to teach them everything that is important for them so that at the end of the year they will be prepared for the future. My problem with the new curriculum is that it is so vague and abstract! Please, tell me what you think about my problem and give me practical advice so that I will be more confident next year. Thanks a lot. Tina.