

# The Identity of a Storyteller in Teachers' Facebook Status Updates

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**Abstract**—This paper explores how teachers discursively construct the identity of a storyteller when posting Status updates on Facebook Timelines. Data were generated using participant observation where 29 Timelines belonging to Malaysian secondary school English language teachers were observed throughout a six-month period. A total of 178 teaching-related Status updates were recorded and then analyzed using a discursive analytical approach combining 'broad discourse analysis' and Edwards and Potter's (1992) discursive psychology. The analysis shows that most of the Status updates fit the structure of a narrative genre and the teachers use various storytelling and discursive psychology strategies to engage readers. This paper argues that teachers' Status updates are more than just an account of mundane teaching-related experiences but serve as a mechanism for them to construct desirable identities.

**Index Terms**—English language teacher, Facebook, identity, storyteller, discursive psychology

## I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook and Twitter, provides teachers with a platform to construct their desired identities. Their postings on the sites may be read by other users who will then recognize them 'as a certain *kind of person*' (Gee, 2000, p. 99, - original emphasis). In the case of Facebook, teachers are simultaneously 'watched' by Friends with various backgrounds, such as ex-classmates, co-workers, students' parents, and acquaintances. How do teachers present themselves to multiple audiences? Do they maintain their institutional identity on the site? How do they manage their identities to fit into an online community? How do they craft their postings so that their images are not tarnished? These are some of the questions that arise regarding this new phenomenon. Employing Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework, which views identity or the self as a theatrical production influenced by individuals' behavior, the Timelines can be seen as public spaces where people engage in social performances through communication. This study explores how teachers discursively construct their desired identity on the site to fill the gap in the literature on teachers' identity in the context of social media.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have examined identity through various lenses, such as the psychological (Bruner, 1995; Erikson, 1959), sociolinguistic (Schriffin, 1996; Al-Ramahi et al., 2021), and educational perspectives (Hammersley, 2002; O'Keeffe et al., 2007). Nevertheless, the precise definition of identity remains difficult to determine (Lawler, 2014) and has been subject to various interpretations in the literature (Gee, 2000). Lawler (2014) emphasizes the intrinsic challenge of establishing a single, all-encompassing account of the existence, production, and utility of the issue under consideration. Despite these inherent challenges, a promising beginning is the idea that identity exists not in the mind, but in the public and domain of communication, where it is created, shaped, enacted, or generated continuously in everyday discussions (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006).

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Benwell and Stokoe (2006) defined identity in a way that aligns with Gee's (2000) definition, which states that identity is the recognition of oneself as a specific type of person within a specific context (p. 99).

Examining identity through the frameworks proposed by Gee (2000) and Benwell and Stokoe (2006) recognizes that identity is not fixed but rather fluid. The perception and acknowledgement of others in society, based on their activities, shape the numerous identities that people possess. Gee (2000) defines discursive identity as 'D-identity' and highlights its socio-constructivist nature, emphasizing that it cannot be attained independently. It is only because 'other people treat, talk about, and interact' with them that their traits, such as being a charismatic teacher, are recognized (Gee, 2000, p. 103). Put differently, identity emerges from social interactions rather than as a personal trait or role (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006).

Several researchers, including Edwards and Potter (1992), Gee (2000), Bamberg (2003), Benwell and Stokoe (2006), and Rashid et al. (2016a), concur that discursive identity can be interpreted as the active accomplishment of individuals or as individuals' attributes. For instance, they may actively recruit charismatic traits by behaving or interacting in a specific manner, thereby enabling others to identify charismatic individuals. Alternatively, others may perceive them as charismatic without conscious effort. Benwell and Stokoe (2006) emphasized that individuals may reject the assignment of a specific identity if they do not wish to do so. Discourse enables the ascription and realization of identity, as we intentionally or inadvertently disclose and construct aspects of ourselves and our self-perceptions each time we speak (Richards, 2006). According to Richards (2006), discursive construction may occur unintentionally; however, Gee (2014) highlights the intentional nature of the construction process. Gee (2014) stated that as speakers or writers, we have two main tasks: 'recipient design' and 'position design' (p. 21). Recipient design is the practice of adapting one's speech or writing style to suit an intended audience. According to Gee (2014), we use distinct speech patterns when interacting with strangers and friends to convey our level of social closeness or distance. Position design refers to the act of adapting language and writing style to influence the audience's thoughts, emotions, and actions to achieve the intended image or identity (Gee, 2014).

The accomplishment and ascription of discursive identity resonate with Goffman's (1959) 'self-presentation' (p. 4). Goffman (1959) posits that when an individual is in the company of others, they are typically motivated to engage in behavior that creates a specific impression on others, which aligns with their own interests. According to Jones and Pittman (1982), individuals can portray themselves in a specific manner by employing five impression management tactics through their communication: self-promotion, ingratiation, exemplification, intimidation, and supplication. Individuals employ self-promotion to highlight their abilities and accomplishments, while using ingratiation to cultivate a favorable image of likability. Exemplification conveys a sense of diligent dedication and commitment that exceeds expectations for completing specific tasks. People use intimidation to project a sense of dominance, whereas they use supplication to elicit empathy and aid from others by portraying themselves as vulnerable.

In addition to impression-management techniques, discursive identity may also be accomplished using Edwards' (2005) discursive psychology strategies of factual description, assessment, and extreme case formulation. Edwards refers to the strategy whereby people produce descriptive statements that seem to be true and 'witnessed on many occasions [and] predictable' (p. 262), and hence avoid being seen as imposing their personal judgment when constructing a particular disposition or character. 'Assessment' as a discursive psychology strategy associated with evaluative expressions. Edwards (2005) posits that we should not view the expression of liking, disliking, and similar attitudes as independent assertions but rather as integral components of specific social activities, such as giving compliments, refusing, making offers, persuading, making requests, and disagreeing. The third discursive psychology strategy, the extreme case formulation, is the use of extreme expressions such as 'the best,' the 'most' and so on to indicate the speakers' stance or attitude (Edwards, 2005, p. 269). Edwards (2005) adds that factual description, assessment, and extreme case formulations can be made more effective by using emotion terms, or words to describe emotions or emotional behavior, as people tend to respond constructively to emotions (p. 263).

Interactions with others shape discursive identity, which people construct in various contexts, or others ascribe to them. People may employ a variety of discursive psychological strategies and impression-management techniques to achieve or attain their desired identities.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study is a component of a broader investigation that analyzes how teachers collaborate to provide social support on a social networking site (SNS) (see Rashid et al., 2016b). Whilst data generation methods for the larger study involve participant observation, survey questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews, this paper is based on the data generated from the participant observation, where 29 Timelines belonging to Malaysian secondary school English language teachers were observed throughout a six-month period. A total of 178 teaching-related Status updates were recorded and analyzed using a discursive analytical approach combining 'broad discourse analysis' and Edwards and Potter's (1992) discursive psychology.

The term 'broad discourse analysis' is used to distinguish it from Foucauldian discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis, which are two contemporary conceptualizations of discourse. Atkinson et al. (2011) asserted that neo-Marxist perspectives on social inequality form the foundation of Foucauldian discourse analysis. It primarily investigates the ways in which language perpetuates and cultivates inequality. However, critical discourse analysis associated with

Fairclough (1995) explores how individuals within social groups either reinforce or challenge power dynamics, dominance, and inequality through their use of language. We determined that Foucauldian discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis were not appropriate approaches because this study did not investigate inequality, power, or dominance as key notions.

When analyzing Status updates using the broad discourse analysis approach, our focus was on traditional theoretical linguistics. This included examining the selection of syntactic constructions, choice and structure of referring expressions or noun phrases, selection of tense and aspect, and choice of word order. We investigated how discourse addresses and controls identities by integrating broad discourse analysis with discursive psychology. Our focus was on the specific aspects proposed by Edwards and Potter (2005), including blame, justification, and defense.

When classifying Status updates as stories, we examined the four fundamental elements of a story proposed by Carter and McCarthy (1997). These elements consist of references to time and place settings; the involvement of characters in the events; a plot or sequence of extraordinary, peculiar, amusing, etc.; events that make the story captivating; and a resolution or conclusion to the events. Carter and McCarthy drew on the seminal works of Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Schiffrin (1981). To categorize a Status update as a story, thus arguing that the identity of a storyteller is salient in the posting, it must have all the four defining characteristics highlighted above. However, Carter and McCarthy (1997) add that good entertaining story often has additional characteristics, such as exaggeration, intensification, suspense, amusing details, dialogue, be in the historic present instead of the past tense and have an evaluation of the event (p. 23).

#### IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

We chose a story to discuss in this section as this story does not only have the four ‘basic ingredients’ but also the additional characteristics that make up a good story, as highlighted by Carter and McCarthy (1997). The story is taken from Salina’s (pseudonym) Timeline, and since the story is lengthy, we analyze the post fragment by fragment.

##### Extract 1

- 1 So here’s a public confession:
  - 2 After 4 months into teaching,
  - 3 I came back from a class this morning,
  - 4 put my books on my desk,
  - 5 coolly walked to the ladies,
  - 6 and broke down; with tears, sobs,
  - 7 frantically fanned myself with my hands
  - 8 thinking that could help calm me down,
  - 9 the whole enchilada.
  - 10 Something I have not done for a very long time.
- (Salina/SU1)

The first fragment of this Status update is what Labov and Waletzky (1967) refer to as an ‘abstract’ of a story that gives a brief summary of what the story is going to be about. It also serves to introduce the topic that it is about a *confession* (line 1) that she cried in the ladies’ toilet (line 5), which is something that she has not done for a *very long time* (line 10). By highlighting this story as a *confession* Salina can be said to employ a discursive psychology strategy of ‘factual description,’ defined by Edwards (2005) as ‘producing descriptive statements that seem to be true’ to avoid being seen as imposing her ‘personal judgment’ (p. 262). This is because a confession is a statement made by a person who acknowledges some personal facts. Thus, readers are persuaded to believe that Salina tells a true story.

The use of the phrase *for a very long time* (line 10), or what Channell (1994) refers to as a vague category identifier, enables Salina to avoid giving specific numbers. This is important, as what is considered a very long time for her might not be considered a very long time for readers. Thus, by using a vague category identifier, Salina convinces the reader to believe that this is a rare event. The phrase *for a very long time* can also be seen as an exaggeration which is an ‘embellishment or decoration by the teller’ to make the story ‘entertaining’ (Carter & McCarthy, 1997, p. 23).

Salina begins the confession using the discourse marker *so* (line 1), which in this case functions as an initial attention getter (Thornbury & Slade, 2006). The use of *so* here reflects a feature of spoken discourse thus resonating with Crystal’s (1995) ‘complex medium,’ that is, ‘language which involves a switch’ (p. 35). The switch here is that it is written for Salina to ‘speak’ to her Friends. As a conjunction, *so* means *as a result* and it implies that something has happened that brings her to this confession. By doing this, she attempts to encourage readers to keep reading the story to understand what she went through prior to this confession. She describes the account as a *public confession* (line 1), which suggests her desire to be heard by others, not only her Friends but also other Facebook users. This is confirmed by the privacy setting of the Status update, which is set to be seen by the public.

She highlights the ‘reference of time’ (Carter & McCarthy, 1997, p. 23) after which this event takes place. *After 4 months into teaching* (line 2) portrays herself as a novice teacher. She then continues with ‘reference to place and setting’ (Carter & McCarthy, 1997, p. 23), where she came back from a class, put her books on her desk in the staffroom, and walked to the ladies’ toilet (lines 3-5). What she writes in these lines seems to be the normal routine for a teacher; hence, readers are left to think – what is so special about the routines that she mentions in this *public confession*

(line 1)? She frequently uses commas (.). Up to line 6, she uses five commas between the actions described, creating a sense of drama in this story. Using commas to create a dramatic sense is associated with Carter and McCarthy's (1997) 'embellishment or decorations by the teller' (p. 23).

She uses 'emotion terms' (Edwards, 2005, p. 263), such as *tears* (line 6), *sobs* (line 6) and *frantically* (line 7) to describe herself when alone in the ladies' toilet. According to Edwards (2005), using emotive terms is a discursive psychological tactic to attract constructive responses, as people tend to respond constructively to emotions. The fact that she gives in to her emotional disturbance only when she is alone in the ladies' toilet and not in public reflects her concern about maintaining her professional identity. She does not cry or act out of control in front of other teachers or students, but she does so in a private space-the toilet. She constructs the identity of a professional novice teacher who manages to control her emotions in front of others in the workplace, including colleagues and students. In this sense, she can be said to engage in 'self-promotion' (Jones & Pittman, 1982, p. 241) as she shows that she is strong enough to keep her problems to herself. To some extent, Salina is constructing the identity of a naive person to think that crying and *frantically* fanning herself (line 7) would help calm herself down and *the whole enchilada* (line 9). The use of the American idiom *the whole enchilada* instead of just saying 'the whole thing' makes this confession sound more interesting and engaging. As pointed out by O'Keeffe et al. (2007), the use of idiom makes monologic interactions 'interpersonally charged' thus projecting 'a high degree of interpersonal closeness' (p. 92).

The first fragment ends with the phrase *Something I have not done for a long time* (line 10), which strongly suggests that she has been in this situation before. At this point, readers might think that perhaps she did this (crying in the toilet) when she was even newer to teaching, and thus became more sympathetic towards her. However, in Extract 2, as will be analyzed later, she confesses that she has never cried since she joined the teaching profession despite having various problems. She uses the present perfect tense *have + done* to suggest that she will probably cry again in the future, thus projecting her views that teaching is a challenging job and that she will be continually challenged in this profession. However, she emphasizes that giving in to emotional turbulence is something she has not done for a long time, which suggests that she is a strong teacher who is not easily affected by problems at work. Hence, having a breakdown with tears and sobs this morning is not because she is fragile, but because of the very bad incident, which she will explain later in her confession. Blaming other factors is another discursive psychological strategy for identity management (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

#### Extract 2

- 1 In the last four months, I could have cried
- 2 when a disruptive boy decided to get up in the middle of my lesson,
- 3 ran around the room and banged every table
- 4 before he ran out of the class despite me calling after him
- 5 and then having him come back
- 6 and literally went on the floor,
- 7 hugging my feet and begged for my forgiveness the same day,
- 8 or when I was locked in the school building
- 9 and then had to come out through the roof (long story)
- 10 or when a big fat rat, literally, decided to chill
- 11 right in front of my front door

(Salina/SU1)

The second fragment begins with *In the last four months, I could have cried* (line 1). This line is powerful in the sense that it provides a clear hint to readers of what is to follow, which is all the troublesome experiences encountered throughout the four-month period. She encourages readers to keep reading to find out what she has gone through, which emotionally challenges her. The phrase *I could have cried* suggests that she chose not to cry even though she could have done so, portraying herself as a very strong teacher.

Using the flashback technique, Salina recalled three problematic moments encountered since she joined the teaching profession (lines 2–11). The first problematic moment that Salina chose to recount in this confessional story was when *a disruptive boy* misbehaved in her class (line 2). Using imagery, she portrays the whole moment as very chaotic: *the boy ran around the room and banged every table* (line 3) and then *ran out of the class* despite her calling after him (line 4). As pointed out by Tannen (1989), using imagery makes the story more vivid as it 'creates visual representation of the objects, people, and scenes in which they interact' (p. 3). Despite facing this chaotic moment, she remained strong and did not cry because of this problem. When recounting this difficult moment, Salina positions her students as having unruly behavior, thus implying that the students are responsible for making her teaching life challenging.

Salina then moves on to the second challenging experience when she was locked in the school building and had to get out through the roof (lines 8–9). She recounted this incident in such a way as to construct it as very challenging that she needed to climb all the way up to the roof to get out of a locked building. Given the severity of this problem, it is easy for readers to remember this incident; hence, she chooses not to provide a detailed account of this moment, writing *a long story* (line 9) to end her account of this problem.

The third problem she chose to recount was when she found a rat sitting in front of her front door (lines 10-11). Again, to make this problem more interesting and memorable to readers, she uses poetic devices: the alliteration in *fat rat*, the imagery of *a big fat rat*, and the personification as the rat decided to *chill* in front of the door. This is the second time she has used the word *literally*; the first is in line 6, and the second is in line 10. The word *literally* here serves to emphasize (Hawkes, 2013) the severity of the problems highlighted. She also repeats the word *front* twice in line 11, *right in front of my front door*. Again, this repetition serves to emphasize the severity of the problem, as rats are often associated with back doors or dark and dirty back alleys, but in her case, the big fat rat chose the front door. She uses the word *decided* which suggests that the big fat rat made a specific decision to be out in the open, thus engaging in ‘supplication’ (Jones & Pittman, 1982, p. 247), portraying herself as powerless. This is emphasized by using the word *chill* to show that the big fat rat did not fear her, and thus her identity as a powerless teacher was more transparent. This could be seen as one of her attempts to construct the identity of a strong teacher, as given the severity of all these problems, she remained strong and did not cry in the toilet as she did this morning after class.

What Salina writes in this second fragment can be associated with Carter and McCarthy’s (1997) third ‘basic ingredient’ which pertains to a plot or sequence of extraordinary, peculiar, amusing, or similar events that enhance the appeal of the story or ‘a complication’ (Thornbury & Slade, 2006, p. 152) or ‘catalyst’ (Gee, 2014, p. 160). As can be seen in Extract 2, Salina presents herself in conflict with not only her students, who seem to bully her by being disruptive in the classroom, but also with the personified *big fat rat* (line 10).

The third fragment is presented in Extract 3, where Salina continues to elaborate on the story’s complexity. Nonetheless, she no longer uses flashbacks but changes the focus of the story back from the interjected scenes that took the narrative back in time and returned to events of that morning to give a detailed account of the incident that took place.

#### Extract 3

- 1 This morning, however, was different.
- 2 In fact, I wasn’t teaching at all this morning.
- 3 So, what was I doing with the entire class?
- 4 I was invigilating their midyear exam, History Paper 3 to be exact;
- 5 An open book test where students are required to write an essay on a topic given.
- 6 Just as I finished handing out the exam papers to all 35 students,
- 7 one boy put his hand up and asked, “ujian apa hari ni, cikgu?” (English: “what paper is today, teacher?”)
- 8 and I went, “HOW CAN YOU NOT KNOW WHAT PAPER YOU ARE SITTING FOR ON THE DAY OF THE EXAM AND EVEN AFTER I HAVE HANDED OUT THE EXAM PAPER” silently in my head.
- 9 Out loud, I said, “Ujian Sejarah, kertas 3. Ujian ni boleh tengok buku, so keluarkan lah buku”. (English: “History, paper 3. This is an open book test, so take out your book”).

(Salina/SU1)

The first line of this fragment highlights the change in Salina’s routine that morning (line 1). She continues, *in fact, I wasn’t teaching at all this morning* (line 2). She uses the discourse marker *in fact* to ‘assert the truth of what follows, despite contrary expectations’ (Traugott, 1995, p. 6). Here Salina sets up the context of the incident as not being taught. Playing around with her readers’ expectations, she then asks a rhetorical question in line 3, which she answers with detailed descriptions in lines 4 and 5. As highlighted by Thornbury and Slade (2006), the use of questions in storytelling has ‘a strong interpersonal function’ to ‘facilitate and maintain involvement’ (p. 88). Thus, by using the question, Salina engages her readers so that they will continue to follow the topic introduced.

Salina uses a ‘constructed dialogue’ (Tannen, 1989, p. 111), *What paper is today, teacher?* (line 7) to make the story live and show the readers how ill-prepared the students are, that they do not even know what paper they are going to sit. She emphasizes the unpreparedness of the students when she writes in capital letters her response: ‘HOW CAN YOU NOT KNOW WHAT PAPER YOU ARE SITTING FOR ON THE DAY OF THE EXAM AND EVEN AFTER I HAVE HANDED OUT THE EXAM PAPER’ (line 8). Salina uses capital letters for her response, giving readers a mental image of her yelling at students for their unpreparedness and ignorance. However, she then reveals that she said this *silently* in her head (line 8). From Tannen’s (1989) perspective, Salina constructs a dialogue of ‘inner speech’ when she reports her own thoughts as speech to make the story more interesting and engaging (p. 144). Note the contradiction; while she says this silently in her head, when she writes about it, she gives a sense of loudness by using capital letters, suggesting how she wanted to say those lines out loud to her students. However, she chose to shout in her head, as it would have been inappropriate for a teacher to yell or reprimand the students about their lack of preparedness in an exam hall when the exam was about to begin. Salina constructs the identity of a teacher who knows how to manage emotions and take appropriate actions in particular situations, thus again engaging in ‘self-promotion’ (Jones & Pittman, 1982, p. 241).

In the fourth fragment, Extract 4, Salina presents her conclusion or what Gee (2014) refers to as the ‘evaluation’ (p. 160) of the students based on her experience of invigilating them during the exam. She teaches English in this class but

invigilates a history exam paper. After reaching this unpleasant conclusion, Salina explicitly indicates her desire to cry, which is the climax of the story. The climax is the turning point of the story, when things finally start to move in a different direction. In this extract, Salina, who was strong enough to not cry, reveals that she can no longer hold back tears.

Extract 4

- 1 I went to one of the girls and asked her to read the question and then looked for the answer in the book.
- 2 The first question she asked after I told her that was, “bab berapa tu?” (English: “What chapter is that?”)
- 3 and I could sense the whole class was waiting for me to tell her which chapter to open to.
- 4 I knew then that they have never read a single thing from their textbook
- 5 nor have they learned anything in the past four months of school.
- 6 Heck, I wouldn’t be going too far
- 7 if I said they barely learned anything in the last 10 years of school.
- 8 At that moment, I saw their future flashed through my eyes
- 9 and I wanted to cry

(Salina/SU1)

Salina continues the story and how she told one of the girls to read the question and find the answer in the book (line 1). It is important to highlight that she repeated the instructions to the students as she was going to draw a conclusion about them in this post. Salina uses the ‘constructed dialogue’ form again (Tannen, 1989, p. 111) whereby the female student asked which chapter she needed to refer to (line 2). Salina wrote how she sensed that the whole class was waiting to be told which chapter to refer to (line 3). She used the word *sense* to show her awareness of what the whole class expected her to do. Based on this awareness, Salina ultimately deduced that she comprehended the fact that they had not perused a single item from their textbook, nor had they acquired any knowledge during the preceding four months of education (lines 4–5). She engages in the ‘extreme case formulation’ (Edwards, 2005, p. 269) when she says that the students *never read a single thing* and *nor had they learned anything*. In line 6, Salina interjects, *heck*, to express her annoyance at her conclusion which she believes could be true that it would not be going too far to say that the students had *barely learned anything in the last 10 years* at school (lines 6-7).

After her conclusion about the students’ lack of learning, Salina explains how she saw their future flash in front of her eyes and wanted to cry (lines 8-9). This is when her readers finally found out why she cried in the ladies’ toilet this morning because of her worries about the students’ futures. Given that they have barely learned anything in school, their future is dark and foreseeing this darkness makes Salina cry. The phrase *I wanted to cry* (line 9) is the ‘affective-I-statement’ (Gee, 2014, p. 173) used by Salina to tell readers that she was emotionally affected by this particular experience.

## V. CONCLUSION

Like the other 28 teachers observed in this study, Salina updated her Status to portray herself as having a very challenging professional life by describing her students as problematic individuals who not only behave in an unruly way but are also unable to cope with their studies. She also directly informs readers how she is emotionally affected and attracts supportive comments, and carefully crafts this Status update into an engaging story by using various kinds of ‘decoration and embellishment’ (Carter & McCarthy, 1997, p. 23), such as suspense, amusing details, dialogue, evaluation, factual description, and emotive terms. By making this story interesting and engaging, Salina tries to persuade readers to give her ‘preferred responses’ (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, p. 295) which are comments that can help her to accomplish her desired identities.

What can be concluded from this study is that teachers are strategic in crafting Status Updates on Facebook. Salina, who is discussed as an example in this paper, provides rich insights into teacher discursive behavior in constructing the identity of a storyteller, which enables them to construct several other identities as they unfold their stories. The strategic construction of the postings suggests that the postings are more than just an account of mundane teaching-related experiences but serve as a mechanism for them to construct desirable identities.

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