

# Narrative Learning in the Adult Classroom

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**Abstract:** Narrative is a fundamentally human way of making meaning. In this study we explore how narrative can be used to foster learning in higher education and how it provides a way to conceptualize the learning process itself. To do this we examine the use of autobiographical learning portfolios in a nontraditional undergraduate program and the use of learning journals in a graduate course in adult education.

Narrative is a uniquely human way in which we make meaning of our experience and by which we construct our own identities. This is fundamental to our everyday lives; as Fisher (1984) proposes, as a species we are *homo narrans*. But what use are we to make of narrative as educators, especially educators of adults? We believe that narrative provides a powerful way to both conceptualize the learning process in adulthood and to foster that learning. Our purpose in this study is to examine how narrative learning achieves both those ends.

## Theoretical Framework

Narrative learning means learning through stories—stories heard, stories told, and stories recognized. The hearing of stories suggests reception. Those stories can come from anywhere, but they come from outside the learner and must be received by the learner and the learner, in turn, has to make sense of them. That sense-making happens at a deeply human level given our fundamental nature as storyers of our experience. Stories draw learners into an experience at more than a cognitive level. The best stories engage us at multiple levels and that engagement is holistic and multifaceted. Prior experiences are evoked and become real to us again, and they become part of the conversation now created between us, the experience under study, and the story itself. That conversation is where the learning is happening. The telling of stories makes the learner not the receiver but the actor, moving from a cognitive understanding of an idea, principle, or concept and linking it to their own experience. The eliciting of personal stories makes what's being studied more real, more immediate, and more personal. As learners become sensitized to the narrative nature of experience, they also begin to recognize that they are themselves both constituted by narratives and situated within multiple narratives as individuals, families, organizations, cultures, and societies. This recognition of this narrative situatedness creates the possibility for critique, for the questioning of underlying assumptions, of power relations, of whose interests are served by a particular narrative, and whose interests are being exploited.

But narrative learning is more than learning through stories in all these ways. It's also a way of conceptualizing the learning process. When we are learning something new, we're trying to make sense of it, to figure out its internal logic and how it's related to what we already know. We do this by working to story it, to make this new idea coherent to ourselves. The construction of that narrative is how we see our understanding come together and make sense. We confront and wrestle with the pieces that don't yet fit together (what we don't yet understand) and we identify the gaps (what we don't yet know), and seeing both enables us to work further on the construction of that narrative until it does begin to hold together. The narrativizing of our understanding is how we make our learning visible to ourselves, and we argue that it is how we learn to begin with.

Narrative learning has its roots in experiential learning, going back to the work of John Dewey. Fenwick (2000) argues that more recently experiential learning has been shaped by a constructivist perspective emphasizing the role of reflection, by situated learning examining the interrelationship of learning and its context, and by a critical cultural perspective that reveals how ideological and cultural discourses shape how we think about and make sense of our experience. We believe that narrative learning builds on all of them and extends them further. Narrative learning opens us as teachers and as learners to greater possibilities.

### **Methods and Findings**

In this research we look at the application of narrative methods in two higher education settings. The first is a senior capstone seminar in a baccalaureate degree program designed especially for returning adult students, and the second is a graduate course on women's experience of education. We describe the use of narrative learning activities in each and the narrative analysis of student writings that result from those activities. Our inquiry in the two courses focuses on the effectiveness of autobiographical writing and journaling as methods through which the learner's lived experience is brought into relationship with course content. We also demonstrate how narrative provides a way to understand the learning process itself.

#### *Autobiographical Learning Portfolios in an Adult Degree Program.*

The first setting is a capstone seminar in a bachelor's degree program designed for adult nontraditional students. The basic purposes of the course are to enable students to reflect upon their college experience, to understand themselves as capable lifelong learners, and to develop the role of learning in their lives after college. The readings for the course come from narrative psychology, adult learning theory and life span development. The metaphor of the storied life constitutes the framework within which the topics are addressed. Students prepare an autobiographical learning portfolio as the major course project, telling the story of their own learning as an adult. It may incorporate a variety of materials, artifacts and media. In addition students are required to relate their autobiographical writing or presentation to the concepts and literature covered in the course.

Twelve adult learning portfolios were analyzed narratively, first with a holistic focus on the type of story told by the student through the portfolio. Attention in this analysis was given to the overarching plotline, progressive and regressive movement of the narrative, and correspondence with generic narrative storylines. A second analysis

focused on three components of the life story as described by McAdams' (1985) model of narrative identity. According to this model, identity is actually a life story made up of four components: an ideological setting, imagoes or characters, nuclear episodes, and a generativity script. These components are influenced by the presence of recurrent themes of power or intimacy and by the complexity of the life narrative. This analysis focused on: the ideological setting, that is, the assumptions and belief systems that constitute the meaning-making milieu within which learning occurs; nuclear episodes which are understood as the critical scenes in the life story, often experienced as turning points or moments of new insight; and generativity script, understood generally as evidence in the life story of the inclination to care for those beyond oneself.

The plots of these adult students' stories as revealed in their learning portfolios clustered around the following action lines: pursuit of higher education as a quest, an adventure into unknown territory; return to college as the completion of an interrupted goal; and pursuit of a bachelor's degree as a pragmatic necessity for career advancement. As expected, the learners' comments related to ideological setting were characterized by descriptions of transformational learning—changes in perspective and critical reflection on entrenched habits of thought stimulated by the educational process. The nuclear episodes selected by students for inclusion in the learning portfolio tended to crystallize in story-form the turning points and milestones of their learning experience. What is clear is that the autobiographical learning activity enables the students to recognize and claim the full extent of their transformational learning.

#### *Learning Journals in a Graduate Classroom.*

The second setting was a graduate course on women's experience of education. The 14 students in this class were required to identify one or more aspects of the course of interest to them, find research articles on that topic, and post a learning journal on-line. The structure of the journal was somewhat open-ended: summarize the major ideas, then engage them by putting them in conversation with themes from the assigned texts, with their own experience, and with the experience shared by other class members. The overall goal of the course was to enable students to see how gender shapes the experience of schooling, both as students and as teachers.

These data were analyzed narratively, that is, each entry was examined as a narrative to determine its structure (e.g., linearity, recursiveness, linking ideas), and the use of language (e.g., metaphors, passive/active voice, affect)—in other words, how they made sense of the material; then the journal as a whole was examined to determine how the student's thinking evolved. In writing the learning journal, students are trying to make sense of new ideas and concepts, so the journal is first of all a sense-making vehicle. They are beginning to construct a narrative for themselves and the critical property of text that applies here is coherence. Linde (1993) argues that coherence is achieved through sequencing, establishing causality, and creating themes. In the learning journals this is an iterative process of construction, weaving old and new ideas together, generating new questions, engaging various ideas with prior experience and with personal assumptions and beliefs.

The way students created coherence varied. Some were largely linear, building ideas one upon another, and using the texts and personal experience to illustrate the concepts being learned. The structure resembled a largely orderly arrangement of

building blocks and followed a rather traditional notion of knowledge construction. Overall it was possible to see what they ideas they had learned, but this mode did not produce much personal insight and there was little evidence of affect.

The more complex learning journals were far less orderly and the structures were more varied. Some resembled mazes, with their narratives posing questions, evaluating material in light of those questions, being dissatisfied with those answers or only partially satisfied, and posing new questions. The best ones were highly recursive, with their thinking turning back on their earlier entries and reevaluating their understanding. This recursive mode was particularly insightful and somewhat destabilizing of previous assumptions. Also as the journal progressed, they brought in more of their own prior and current experiences and began to critically assess them. These students usually evaluated their journaling experience at the end as personally transformative, not just because they had encountered and wrestled with new concepts, but because they now were evaluating and making sense of their own experience in new ways. The impact of gender had become more real to them.

A particular striking example of the more complex learning journals is that of Frieda, an educator with experience in public schooling and with adults in ESL programs. While the other students posted separate documents for the three iterations of their learning journals, Frieda created a single document that allowed her to return to earlier entries and reflect further on them. She was particularly taken by a study of women superintendents by Skrla (2000); what follows are excerpts from her recursive entries.

[June 11<sup>th</sup>] Skrla's opening section describing female superintendents as "the most marginalized group in educational administration" (p.612) struck a cord with me as I have work with female administrators and some superintendents who have argued that no gender inequality exist in K-12 educational environments. Despite the appalling statistics presented by Skrla (woman hold only 7% of superintendent positions while 75 % of the teaching force is female) I have heard these educated and successful women describe K-12 educational environments as a level playing field. It is also reminded me of how often I have heard female educators state that they would prefer to work under a male administrator! This kind of stuff just gets under my skin and makes me want to scream! [June 18<sup>th</sup>] I have read this article several times-strange that only in this last read did the omission of details of the women's lives (family and children) appear odd to me. This not to say that I think we should ask questions about women and their family status. I am unsure on this question and what it would mean for women. Always in my work environments I kept my family life to my self. This always seemed like the smart thing to do because, in my opinion, if you wanted to be taken seriously you had to act like a man. [She goes on to describe support given to a male colleague when he became a father and took time to care for his child.] I tell you for sure if any of our female staff had done the same things...our devotion to family would not have been perceived as a positive quality but rather a distraction to our work. Of this I am sure. [June 25<sup>th</sup>] One of the most powerful points of the Skrla article is her recognition of the connection between researcher and those who are researched. ...What is the impact on those who are researched? This question troubled Skrla enough to bring her back to these women and their voices. The title chosen by Skrla, *Mourning Silence*, powerfully describes the potential (*inevitability?*) for

research to force participants to reconstruct their thinking as their former ways of viewing the world are brought into question. This topic brings to mind the old saying “ignorance is bliss” –I know I have mourned my ignorance a few times since entering graduate school.

In this brief excerpt we can see how the complexity of Frieda’s thinking is revealed in the recursive structure of her learning journal, as well as in her use of the active voice and the high level of affect evident in her language. She puts the ideas from the readings in conversation with her own experience, reflects on the changing meaning she gives to those experiences, and shows how her learning is destabilizing her initial assumptions. The learning journal provides a narrative means for her to accomplish all of this, and it gives researchers a window into her complex learning process. For adult educators it illustrates the potential of this method as a powerful learning tool.

### **Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

Good teachers have always known intuitively that stories in any form are effective educational tools. The narrative orientation helps us to understand the dynamics of the educational effectiveness of stories. Narrative allows us to link learning with the prior experiences of the learner but at a profoundly human level. It is constructivist, but involving affect as well as reason. It is situated, but it is more than the problem-solving. And it is critical, enabling learners to pose questions about ideology and power, but it does so by showing learners how they are positioned within and shaped by larger cultural narratives. Narrative learning opens us as teachers and learners to greater possibilities.

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