Narrative Learning in Adulthood

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Narrative is on the move. Actually it's been on the move for some time, but education, and more specifically adult education, has only begun catching the wave relatively recently. Of course, using stories to teach has always been part of the practice of adult educators. What is more recent is the theorizing of how we learn through narrative (Clark, 2001; Rossiter and Clark, 2007), but even that has deep connections to the core elements of adult learning theory, as we'll see. Our task in this chapter is to examine what narrative learning is, how it works, and how it can be used more intentionally and effectively in the education of adults. We hope to stimulate further conversation and thought about the possibilities inherent in conceptualizing learning as a narrative process. We begin with an overview of narrative theory, examine the connection between experiential and narrative learning, and follow that with a description of what we mean by narrative learning and how learning itself can be conceptualized as a narrative process. We then look at several examples of narrative learning in practice and conclude with some thoughts about the potential of narrative learning theory for the field of adult education.

Fundamentals of Narrative Theory for Narrative Learning

Human beings are the creatures who tell stories—a point Fisher (1987) makes when he gives us the label *homo narrans*—and those stories serve a function, namely to make meaning of our experience. This basic idea has been developed by a number of theorists in recent decades (for example,
Polkinghorne, 1988; Bruner, 1990; Irwin, 1996; Sarbin, 1986) who argue that meaning making is a narrative process. This makes sense at a very basic level. Everyday we are bombarded by a dizzying variety of experiences and we make sense of those by storying them, by constructing narratives that make things cohere. Coherence creates sense out of chaos by establishing connections between and among these experiences. Sometimes it's a matter of locating experiences within a particular cultural narrative, for example recognizing that advertising is part of the cultural narrative of consumption and is not just a bid for us to buy particular products. This recognition also makes possible the critique of that cultural narrative and offers the possibility for development of a counter narrative; with respect to advertising, for example, a counter narrative is the anticonsumption message of the simple living movement. At other times it's a matter of constructing a narrative for ourselves that enables us to deal with an experience. An example here would be responding to an illness by constructing a narrative of restoration and hope, as opposed to a narrative of victimization, struggle, or loss. The choice of narrative—the sense we make of an experience—determines how we respond to and manage that experience.

Narrative is also how we craft our sense of self, our identity. Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992, p. 1) argue, “Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned.” McAdams (1985) works from a similar premise in his life story model of identity in which the self is understood as an ever-unfolding story. We story our identities in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways; in one context we can see ourselves as the hero of the story, while in another we are someone whose agency is limited. These multiple narratives that constitute our identity enable us to manage the complexity of who we are. Understanding identity as a narrative construction is another way of conceptualizing personal change. Kenyon and Randall (1997) think of this process as restorying our lives, which is to say that when a story of the self no longer coheres, no longer helps us make sense of our experience, then we must change it. Randall (1996) in fact describes transformative learning as a process of restorying.

Closely related to the understanding of identity itself as an unfolding story is, of course, the narrative orientation to lifespan development. People understand not only themselves but also the changes over the course of their lives narratively. A narrative approach to development, in contrast with other theoretical orientations, attempts to describe development from the inside as it is experienced, rather than from the outside as it is observed (Rossiter, 1999). The focus is on subjective meaning: how people make sense of their experiences over the life course. In this view, construction of an acceptable life narrative is the central process of adult development. The life narrative is repeatedly revised and enlarged throughout one's life to accommodate new insights, events, and perspectives. Developmental change
is experienced and assessed through this process of storying and restorying one's life. As one moves into midlife from young adulthood, for example, one advances the plot of the life narrative accordingly, sees oneself in a new role, and understands the developmental change in relation to the similar passages of others in one's social or family groups. The stories of significant transitions throughout life, such as landing a first job, losing a parent, coping with major illness, or retiring from a career, when considered collectively express the meaning one makes of developmental growth throughout one's life. According to Cohler (1982), narrative may offer a better understanding of the life course than stage theory because it closely parallels the storying process that people use in making meaning of their own lives. A key feature of narrative development is that it defines development according to the interpretations of the developing person. Freeman (1991) describes this as an ongoing process of “rewriting the self” and argues that it is fundamentally retrospective. He says, “It is only after one has arrived at what is arguably or demonstrably a better psychological place than where one has been before that development can be said to have occurred” (p. 99).

It is also important to recognize that construction of a narrative is not purely a personal process; it is also social in nature. We live in what Sarbin (1993) calls “a story-shaped world” (p. 63), surrounded by narratives of all kinds that embody our cultural values—popular movies and television shows, myths and folklore, religious histories and traditions, social scripts and mores, to note only a few—and that all of these provide “libraries of plots . . . [that] help us interpret our own and other people’s experiences” (p. 59). Linde (1993) makes this point in another way, noting that we construct our narratives by drawing on a cultural supply of normal events, reasonable causes, and plausible explanations and that these cultural elements confer legitimacy on our narratives. The other social aspect of personal narratives is that they require an audience, an Other either real or imagined that responds to the narrative in some way; in this sense these narratives are performances of identity, played out in various ways but always shaped by cultural norms.

Narrative learning falls under the larger category of constructivist learning theory, which understands learning as construction of meaning from experience. The fundamental principles of narrative underlie this type of learning because the meaning construction is done narratively. Experiential learning theory also informs narrative learning; experience is the object of the meaning making. We turn now to a discussion of this connection.

Connections Between Experiential and Narrative Learning

Learning in adulthood is integrally related to lived experience. The relationship is understood in various ways by theorists of experiential learning
(Fenwick, 2000, 2004; Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner, 2007) but has been a theme running through the literature since the earliest conceptions of adult learning. In the 1920s, Lindeman drew on the work of Dewey to advocate for adult education structured around the life world of the adult learner because this is the source of the adult’s motivation to learn. His claim that “experience is the adult’s living textbook” (Lindeman, 1961, p. 121) has served as a mantra for experience-based adult education for nearly a century. Equally well-known, of course, is Knowles’s conception of andragogy (1980) in which experience has a prominent role. A main assumption of andragogy is that adults bring a store of life experience to the learning encounter and experience can serve as a resource for learning. Knowles called for more participatory methods that draw on the adult learners’ lived experience in the educational setting.

In the development of adult learning theory, experience plays a central role, but there are several ways in which experience and learners are understood to be connected, and associated with conceptualizations of where the learning is located. In constructivist learning theory, learners connect to their experience through reflection on that experience, and learning is located in reflection. The nature of the reflection process varies—happening after the experience (Kolb, 1984), in the midst of the experience, as well as afterwards (Boud and Walker (1990), and taking in not just the experience but also underlying premises and assumptions (Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow and Associates, 2000). Fenwick (2004) argues that constructivists presume the person and his or her experiences exist separate from one another. In situated learning theory, learning happens in the interaction between learners and their contexts; reflection is not erased, but it occurs within this social and highly contextual interaction. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that adults learn by working together within a community, using tools that are part of the community. This learning is highly pragmatic and deeply embedded within a social context, and in fact it is the form of learning most common to our everyday experience (Hansman, 2001). In narrative learning theory, we argue that there is an even closer connection between learners and experience. The nature of experience is always prelinguistic; it is “languaged” after the fact, and the process of narrating it is how learners give meaning to experience. Narrative learning is constructivist in character, but the construction of the narrative is necessary to make the experience accessible (that is, to language it), and how it is constructed determines what meaning it has for the person. To help clarify these connections, we turn now to a discussion of the nature of narrative learning.

**Narrative Learning**

Working from the premise that narrative is a uniquely human way of meaning making, we believe narrative learning is a twofold concept: fostering
learning through stories, and conceptualizing the learning process itself. We consider these aspects separately.

**Learning Through Stories.** As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, using stories to foster learning is anything but new. Learning through stories is a multifaceted process. Most simply, it involves stories heard, stories told, and stories recognized. First, the *hearing* of stories implies reception; the stories come from outside the learner and must be received and interpreted by the learner. Stories are powerful precisely because they engage learners at a deeply human level. Stories draw us into an experience at more than a cognitive level; they engage our spirit, our imagination, our heart, and this engagement is complex and holistic. Good stories transport us away from the present moment, sometimes even to another level of consciousness. They evoke other experiences we’ve had, and those experiences become real again. A particularly moving example of this is stories told at a funeral about the person who has died; the stories are powerful because they make the person present again, and that presence is relational, speaking to the connections all of us make with others and how significant those connections are.

Second is the *telling* of stories, and now the learner is the actor rather than the receiver. In the classroom context, this means the learner moves from a cognitive understanding of a concept to link it to his or her own experience. But this does not simply mean the learner has plucked an example of this concept from a collection of personal experiences; it means the learner has made a connection between the two, and in the making of the connection new learning occurs. The course content now is also more real and personal and immediate, which in turn makes the engagement the learner has with the content more complex; more is involved than mere cognitive understanding. The learner is more connected to the course because of a personal contribution to it. An example here is when students in a course on adult learning share stories of transformative learning experiences; in the telling they not only recreate those experiences but do so from within a theoretical framework about this type of learning. This positioning enables them to understand their experiences of transformative learning in a new way.

The third element, *recognizing* stories, is more abstract. It presumes that learners begin to understand the fundamental narrative character of experience. As they gain understanding, they also begin to understand that they themselves are narratively constituted and narratively positioned; this applies to themselves personally, as well as to groups, societies, and cultures. One example would be Americans recognizing they are positioned within a particular cultural narrative, one that privileges the individual over the community and emphasizes rights more than responsibilities; by recognizing this narrative situatedness, American learners could critique this larger narrative, question underlying assumptions and inherent power relationships,
and identify whose interests are served and whose are exploited by this narrative. This level of learning through stories connects with critical pedagogy and its emancipatory possibilities.

So, how is this layered notion of learning through stories related to the core tradition of experiential learning in adult education? We believe narrative learning builds on this tradition and extends it. Narrative links learning to the prior experience of the learner, but at a profoundly human level. It is constructivist, but it involves more than reflection on experience. It is situated, but in way that differs from the practical, problem-solving character of situated cognition. It is critical in that it enables learners to question and critique social norms and power arrangements, but it does so by enabling learners to see how they are located in (and their thinking is shaped by) larger cultural narratives. We believe narrative learning opens us as educators and as learners to greater possibilities.

**Conceptualizing Learning as a Narrative Process.** Narrative learning also offers us a new way to think about how learning occurs. We said at the beginning of this chapter that meaning making is a narrative process, and meaning making is the constructivist definition of learning. When we’re learning something, what we’re essentially doing is trying to make sense of it, discern its internal logic, and figure out how it’s related to what we know already. The way we do this is by creating a narrative about what we’re learning; in other words, we work to story it, to make the elements of what we do not yet fully understand hang together. We work to achieve coherence. We can do it in our heads, we can do it out loud, we can do it on paper, and it can be done alone or with others. The process of constructing the narrative, the story, is how we can see our understanding of something come together and make sense. It’s a complex process in which we identify and struggle with the pieces we cannot make fit together (that is, what we do not understand yet), and we see the gaps (what we still do not know); seeing both helps us keep working on the construction of the narrative until finally it begins to hold together and make sense. Those of us who have lived abroad for any period of time experience this vividly—the shock of the new culture gradually subsides as we learn how to make our way in this new context. We construct a narrative of what was at first strange now becoming familiar, of values and ways of being in the world slowly making sense to us who are outsiders to the culture. It’s a continuous process, of course; narratives like this are always tentative and evolving, which is appropriate because learning itself has no endpoint. But this narrative construction, this storying of our growing understanding of something, is how we make our learning visible to ourselves. What we’re arguing here is that constructing a coherent narrative is how, in fact, we learn.

This concept of learning is something we commonly experience in practice. When we try to teach someone something for the first time, we know the truth of the common saying, “To teach something is to learn
twice.” Before we can teach anything, it must first make sense to us in some way, but putting our understanding in words that make sense to someone else—in other words, narrating it—furthers our own understanding of the subject. This is illustrated by the increasingly popular strategy of peer teaching (Brady, Holt, and Welt, 2003; Rubin and Hebert, 1998). When one student teaches a concept to another student, not only does the peer teacher benefit by creating the narrative but there is the further benefit that comes from having the student learner question or challenge the narrative. Those questions force the peer teacher to refine and develop the narrative, which is to say that the peer teacher learns in the very act of teaching. A similar thing happens when we write. Writing is a way of making our thinking visible, and we believe this becomes part of the thought process itself—thinking on paper—because we are trying to narrate our understanding of something, trying to achieve coherence. It’s a powerful tool for learning.

Narrative Learning in Practice

Here we present three modes of narrative learning: learning journals, concept-focused autobiographical writing, and instructional case studies. In each case we examine how the learning is accomplished narratively.

Learning Journals. All the characteristics of narrative learning are caught up in the writing of learning journals. In this assignment, students are asked to articulate what they are learning in a course and to do so in a sustained, regular way. It is this sustained element of journaling that creates the opportunity for students to watch their understanding of the topic grow over time. Because the journal is a personal learning tool for the student, the structure is usually open, allowing the student to craft it in a way that works best. In it the students create a conversation between themselves and the material they’re learning, and they construct a text which itself becomes an object of reflection that enables them to examine their own learning process. The openness of the journal encourages students to engage with the material not only cognitively but also affectively. It becomes an iterative process of construction in which students weave old and new ideas together, connect what they’re learning to prior experience and with personal beliefs and assumptions, and through all this generate new questions that stimulate further learning.

Concept-Focused Autobiographical Writing. Apart from formal autobiographies intended for publication, autobiographical writing is typically associated with the private realm, with self-reflection directed toward greater self-understanding. But it can also be a teaching strategy. Concept-focused autobiographical writing is used to examine a topic in a course from a personal perspective and thus develop an inductive understanding of that topic. It can take many forms. Karpiak (2000) had students in an adult development course write five short chapters of their
life story as a final paper, making their own development a focus of study. Dominicé (2000) has developed a structured seminar in which students write about their educational journey in order to examine “the way they have learned what they know” (p. 35); the concept being studied here is their own learning process. We ourselves have written about educational life histories and autobiographical learning portfolios (Rossiter and Clark, 2007). The purpose of an educational life history is to examine the experience of schooling in a person’s life and is especially useful in exploring gender-based personal and structural inequities in educational institutions. The purpose of the autobiographical learning portfolio is to enable students to tell the story of their own learning in adulthood and in the process reflect on what they’ve learned in higher education, to understand themselves as lifelong learners, and to envision the role learning will play in the rest of their lives. In all cases of concept-focused autobiographical writing, students construct a narrative of their life experience, which must cohere in terms of a given concept and illuminate that concept. This brings together their life experience and an abstract concept to create a new narrative from which they learn.

**Instructional Case Studies.** This method is probably the most common mode of narrative learning and has been used extensively in professional education, particularly medicine, law, business, and public administration (Lynn, 1999; Tomey, 2003). A case is a story of professional practice, real or fictional, and it has the usual elements of story: characters, setting, and plot. It presents a problem that must be solved or an issue that must be addressed, and this is the location of the learning because the problem or issue is complex, reflecting real-world practice. The challenge to students is less to find the solution and more to figure out how to decide what to do. At one level, the narrative learning here is straightforward because students engage a problem that’s in the form of a story. Their engagement is complex, however, because the story is not finished and multiple endings are possible. This open structure brings students in and makes them part of the story; they’re both reader and writer. Any ending they write is by definition open and carries them deeper into the complexities of practice. They are learning to think like practitioners, which involves putting theoretical concepts in conversation with prior experience to come up with new insights and interpretations. The narrative learning here is multilayered.

**Where to from Here?**

In this chapter, we’ve laid out what we hope is a persuasive argument for narrative learning as an effective educational approach and as a valuable way to conceptualize the learning process. The question remaining is, What is the promise of this perspective? We think the concept of narrative learning opens a number of doors. For one, it should constitute a theoretical means to connect lived experience to learning at a more complex and profoundly
human level. For another, it offers a different and potentially richer way to conceptualize transformational learning. We believe it can enrich adult education practice by enabling us to use stories more intentionally and effectively because narrative learning theory helps us understand how this learning works. Those are some of our ideas, at least. But, believing in narrative, we must also believe that the story is not finished, that there are other possibilities, and that other voices will enrich and expand it. We look forward to this further development.

References

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