This chapter outlines the foundations of narrative theory, describes narrative learning, and examines some of the possibilities of a narrative perspective for understanding transformational learning.

Narrative Learning: Its Contours and Its Possibilities

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So, what exactly is narrative learning? And why should adult educators know about it and use it in practice? Well, the short answer to both questions is that we make sense of all experience by narrating it (constructing it as a kind of story), so understanding how narrative works will make the practice of adult educators more effective. But short answers to large questions are never enough, so the purpose of this chapter will be to spell out in more detail the fundamentals of narrative and how it connects with learning in adulthood. Once that foundation is in place, I’m going to explore the possibilities narrative has for theorizing about adult learning by focusing on one type, namely, transformational learning.

Narrative Foundations and Its Contours

To be human is to tell stories. This concise claim was made by Fisher (1984) when he coined the term *homo narrans*, an apt description of what separates us from all other beings on this planet. Being storytellers means that this is our way to bring some kind of coherence to the chaos of experience that bombards us daily. Narration is a sense-making act. It’s what we do as individuals but, importantly, as individuals situated within various social contexts.

All narratives are culturally bound, so I need to be clear that here narrative is understood from a Western perspective. Even with that caveat, there is no commonly shared definition of narrative in our culture, but there
is what can be called an everyday understanding of the term. I like the one offered by Riessman (2008, p. 3) who uses the terms narrative and story interchangeably, as I do:

... in everyday oral storytelling, a speaker connects events into a sequence that is consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners to take away from the story. Events perceived by the speaker are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience.

Noteworthy in this definition is the social nature of narrative; there is always an audience (real or imagined, the other or even the self) and that fact shapes the structure and determines the purpose of the narrative.

We live in a narrative-saturated world, which is to say that narratives are everywhere. Sarbin (1993) speaks of this as “a story-shaped world” (p. 63), one populated by folklore, myth, popular culture (carried by modalities such as movies, television, YouTube, music, and the like), social scripts, religious traditions and parables, political discourses, history, literature. . . the list goes on and on. All of these embody particular cultural values. They also provide “libraries of plots. . .[that] help us interpret our own and other people’s experience” (Sarbin, 1993, p. 59). Linde (1993) argues further that these cultural narratives establish what constitutes normalcy by defining reasonable causality and plausibility. We, individually and collectively, are narratively constituted, so pervasively that it is often beyond our conscious awareness.

If we make sense of our experience through storying it, it follows that we construct our understanding of ourselves narratively. Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992) refer to “storied lives” and see personal stories as “the means by which identities may be fashioned” (p. 1). Yuval-Davis (2006) develops this idea further: “Identities are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not).” But these identities are never fixed; they are dynamic and fluid, “always producing itself through the combined processes of being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong. This duality is often reflected in narratives of identity” (p. 202).

When I teach about narrative, I tell my students that stories always have work to do, that they are, as Riessman (2008) says, “strategic, functional, and purposeful” (p. 8), and that our task is to understand what the teller is trying to accomplish through the story. Riessman suggests seven different purposes of narratives, some used by individuals, others by groups, and some by both.

To remember the past. At the personal level this is vital to identity construction because, as Brockmeier (2000, p. 56) says, “every narrative about my past is always also a story told in, and about the present as well as a story about the future.”
To argue. A courtroom is a dramatic example of this, as lawyers try to convince juries of the credibility of their clients’ stories.
To persuade a possibly skeptical audience. Here truth claims are made, which in turn must be examined.
To bring the audience into the experience of the teller. Story worlds invite us to take on the perspective of the other.
To entertain. Professionals and novices engage in this all the time, to our delight.
To mislead. This is the province of the con man and, sadly, of many politicians.
To mobilize others for social change. Stories are powerful instruments in initiating and maintaining social movements.

And Riessman adds one more purpose: to survive as human beings. Isak Dinesen's famous words, cited by Hannah Arendt (1958, p. 175), capture this most beautifully: “All sorrows can be borne if you can put them in a story.” It makes sense that this would be the ultimate purpose of narrative, given our nature as homo narrans—it is a fundamental property of our humanity.

So, how does all this connect with adult learning? Marsha Rossiter and I have elaborated on this connection elsewhere (Clark and Rossiter, 2008; Rossiter and Clark, 2007), but here’s a short summary of our argument. I think I’ve already established the foundational concept that narrative is a sense-making act; thus it is how we give meaning to our experience. The link between learning and experience lies at the core of adult education, going back to Lindeman (1961), who, drawing on Dewey, argued that learning is located in the life world of the learner; moving forward to Knowles (1980) and his principles of andragogy, a key one of which sees experience as a major resource for adult learning; and moving further in our own day to the extensive work on experiential learning, particularly in the areas of constructivism, situated learning, and a critical cultural perspective on learning (elaborated and critiqued by Fenwick, 2004). Marsha and I argue for a narrative theory of learning, one that connects experiential learning and the notion of narrative as a sense-making medium. Experience itself is prelinguistic; it exists prior to and apart from language. We access it, reflect on it, make sense of it through languaging it, which is to say, through narrating it. In short, we learn narratively.

In practice we argue that narrative learning means learning through stories. This occurs at three levels. First, we learn from hearing stories. This mode couldn’t be more familiar: Some examples are religious parables, myths and other moral tales, and personal experiences. As I write this chapter, we are just a few weeks beyond the tragic earthquake in Haiti. On the news we hear the numbers of the dead, the injured, the dispossessed, and we see haunting photographs of the devastation. But the most riveting, the most
compelling are the stories of individual Haitians, and it is their stories that bring us into this terrible experience. Such is the power of hearing stories. Second, we learn from telling stories. When we hear, we are the receiver; when we tell, we are the actor, the one putting all the details together and making the experience coherent for ourselves and for others. One genre of narrative that is an excellent example is the illness narrative. It is in the telling of the story of such a dramatic and life-changing experience that people make sense of it for themselves. A famous example is that of Arthur Frank (2002) reflecting on his long battle with cancer, but it also happens in the present moment as people blog about their day-to-day experience of living with their illnesses. It is through the act of telling that we learn what an experience means to us. The third way we learn from stories is by recognizing the narratives in which we are positioned. This type of learning is critical and even emancipatory. It presumes that our thinking is shaped by sociocultural forces; recognizing our narrative situatedness enables us to identify and critique how that shaping takes place. One example would be Americans traveling or living in a non-Western culture and being able to recognize their own positioning within a Western narrative that privileges the individual over the community, and rights over responsibilities. Seeing this narrative enables people to examine and critique it, identify its underlying assumptions and what interests are served by those assumptions, and thus learn not only how their own identities are narratively constituted, but also how they can choose to think differently. Broadly, then, hearing, telling, and recognizing stories are three ways in which we learn narratively.

We also argue that learning itself can be conceptualized as a narrative process. When we learn something new, we story our growing understanding of it. In so doing we are able to see for ourselves what we understand and what we do not, and we are also able to see what we do not yet know. This process of narrating our evolving understanding of something is how we make our learning visible to ourselves and to others; we can track it and thus be encouraged by its growth and be aware of what help we need to learn further. For educators this is a common way to assess how well a student has learned something; for peer teachers it is a way of solidifying their learning. And, of course, for self-directed learners it is an iterative and often internal process of thinking about what they’re learning. Narrative and sense making and learning are all connected.

I turn now to explore the possibilities of using narrative to theorize adult learning by considering transformational learning from a narrative perspective.

**Transformational Learning Through a Narrative Lens**

John Dirkx and I have argued elsewhere (Clark and Dirkx, 2000) that how we conceptualize the self is foundational to how we conceptualize learning.
Understanding the self as narratively constituted opens up new possibilities for learning theory, and given that in this perspective we see meaning as both constructed through and mediated by narrative, a type of learning that addresses major changes in understanding the self in the world offers rich possibilities for narrative theorizing. Which brings us to transformational learning. I'm going to start, predictably, with a story...well, actually two stories. I think they can serve as launching points for examining some of the ways that transformational learning can be understood narratively.

The first is the story of a woman I'll call Barbara. At the time I interviewed her she was a highly successful history professor at a major university. She earned her Ph.D. in the late 1960s. The historical period is important here. She endured the nightmare of a dissertation advisor who, throughout her program, harassed her sexually and emotionally; she was able to defend herself against his sexual predation but the toll on her emotional life seriously undermined her sense of self personally and professionally. In the 1960s public understanding of sexual harassment was limited; if Barbara told anyone what was happening to her, she rightly feared she would be blamed and that her academic career would be ended, so she struggled alone and in silence. She completed her course work, then left the state to teach while she worked on her dissertation, a process impeded by her abusive advisor who continuously criticized and rejected all chapter drafts that she sent him. Her first teaching job was at a historically black college; she found herself teaching history during the height of the civil rights movement, trying to help her students make sense of this period of momentous emancipation. She spoke of this as an exhilarating time. She moved to another college two years later, became caught up in the second wave of the feminist movement, and helped establish the first women's studies program at that institution. But all this time she also continued to struggle with her abusive advisor and because of him was getting nowhere on her dissertation. More importantly her clock was running out (i.e., the period of time allowed by universities for completion of the dissertation). ...unless he granted her an extension on the deadline for completion, she would not be able to graduate and her academic career would be over. He refused to grant the extension. She demanded a meeting, and it was as she walked across her old campus to meet with this man that she became filled with rage at all that he had done to her over the years, and that rage transformed and empowered her—she confronted him and threatened to go to the dean with the full story of his abuse. He backed down immediately, granted her the extension, and she went on to complete her dissertation on her own terms and graduate with honors.

The second story is my own, and it's shorter and no doubt more familiar to any of you who are “of a certain age.” For years I have had chronic arthritis. The part of my body most seriously affected was my right knee. In the last ten years or so that knee became more painful and more demanding of
care, and finally the cartilage was gone and I was dealing with an important joint that was bone-on-bone, plus the meniscus, a crucial piece of tissue that stabilizes the knee, was shredded. A combination of drugs and exercise kept me going, along with a steady supply of ice packs, but despite everything I found my world narrowing. I had to limit my walking and cut back on favorite activities like birding and gardening. I thought I had reached my low point when I started using a cane but I was wrong; the true low point came the day my knee buckled on me without warning and I found myself face down on the ground, sprawled like Raggedy Ann. I had been gradually moving toward a sense of myself as disabled but that fall clinched it—I was there. Not only could I no longer move around freely and do all I was used to doing, now I could not trust my knee to hold me up, which also meant that I was at risk of serious injury with the next fall. That isn't the end of my story, of course; thanks to the wonders of contemporary medicine, I had a total knee replacement and I'm now happily bionic. My new knee (her name is Daisy) means that I can walk without pain and no longer live with an “I can’t” mindset. My life has improved significantly.

If I were to plot the concepts of narrative and of transformational learning, the point of intersection would be psychology. It makes sense, of course, to think about a profound change in someone's life in psychological terms, and theorists of transformational learning (such as Dirkx, 1998; Mezirow, 1991) draw heavily from that field. Narrative also has its roots in psychology; early theorists, many of whom I cited in the first part of this chapter, were psychologists who viewed human conduct as storied (Bruner, 1986; Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992; Sarbin, 1993) and who began to conceptualize psychology in narrative terms. It is in the area of psychotherapy, though, that the narrative connection is most obvious. Lieblich, McAdams, and Josselson (2004) assert that “therapeutic interventions of many kinds often involve the coconstruction of healing narratives in the face of personal, moral, and social adversity. Therapy is a process of developing a narrative that brings integration and some degree of coherence to a chaotic life” (p. 3). White and Epston (1990) created a specific process they called narrative therapy in which therapists work with clients to re-story their lives, altering the plot in a way that will better serve them. Central to their method is helping clients identify alternative stories to the problem story that brought them to therapy; these are “stories of identity that will assist people to break from the influence of the problems they are facing...and create new possibilities for living” (Morgan, 2000).

With these ideas in mind, let's return to Barbara's story and see how we can explain her transformational experience in narrative terms. During her graduate program Barbara was living the story of a victim. When she walked across that campus to meet with her advisor, I would argue that her personal narrative changed at that moment—she moved from victim to vanquisher—in no small part because she had played an active role in two major historical
narratives of emancipation in those recent years of college teaching. The civil rights movement and the feminist movement provided alternative stories for her own life. I believe her participation in those larger narratives enabled her at last to rewrite her own story, a story now of personal emancipation and empowerment.

To analyze my own story I want to draw on another area, that of illness narratives. A major illness, whether acute or chronic, is often transformative, and there is an extensive literature on how people make sense of their experience through narrative. The work of two scholars is particularly relevant for me. The first is Cheryl Mattingly (1998), a medical anthropologist who studied occupational therapists working with patients with major spinal cord injuries; she analyzed how, as part of their work, they helped their clients identify what plot they were in at that point in their life. Understanding what story they were in also helped address their “need to locate desire” (p. 107) and slowly construct a new plot that would better serve them in their radically altered life circumstances. The second work is that of Arthur Frank (1995), a sociologist who himself experienced two major illnesses. He identifies three types of illness narratives: restitution, chaos, and quest. Briefly, the restitution narrative centers around the (hoped for) return of good health; the chaos narrative has no center—it is disturbingly lacking in coherence and therefore in sense making; and the quest narrative seeks to use the illness to gain something of value.

As the arthritis in my knee worsened, my life plot changed. In narrative terms I was in a new story, a disability narrative of apprehension, self-doubt, and an overarching theme of “I can’t.” Once I fell it became a narrative that enveloped not just my body but also my mind; I was too overwhelmed to ask myself, “What story am I in?” and so wasn’t able to consider other possible plots. The turning point, of course, was the surgery that gave me a new knee and a new narrative. In Frank’s terms, my story is a restitution narrative. Now I am abled, not disabled—but shifting to a new narrative hasn’t been as immediate or straightforward as I expected, I think because it is truly a new narrative, not a return to the ability narrative I lived in earlier years. It is one in which I do “locate desire,” in Mattingly’s sense; now I treasure what I’m able to do because I can no longer take mobility for granted. And furthermore, I know this is only one reprieve in the inevitable physical decline of aging, so I look to the unfolding of this story with what I hope is more wisdom and confidence that I can construct a new plotline, if needed, that will serve me well, whatever happens.

These two stories illustrate some of the potential a narrative perspective offers to make sense of how transformative learning happens. I purposely chose very different stories, each of which called on different elements of narrative theory to illuminate the learning process. In Barbara’s story it was the complex act of restorying her life through her locatedness in and engagement with two emancipatory sociocultural narratives of our
times; those larger narratives provided an alternative narrative for her own life that was more affirming, powerful, and life giving than the original one she had. In my own story, the notion of narrative emplotment, of being located within a particular story and living it out, consciously or unconsciously, was the fulcrum of my transformational learning. Once I was aware of the story I was in, the possibility of changing the plotline presented the opportunity for change.

**Where to from Here?**

What I have tried to do in this chapter is to open a kind of door to narrative theory and invite you, as adult educators, to enter and explore with me some of the possibilities this perspective has for adult learning theory. Although the specific territory I brought you into was transformational learning, I hope you will see that as only one kind of learning where our understanding can be enriched by a narrative perspective. Like any good story, the ending remains open, and Marsha and I hope that many others will continue to develop the story of narrative learning in adult education.

**References**


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Narrative Learning: Its Contours and Its Possibilities. Article. Jun 2010. New Dir Adult Cont Educ. M. Carolyn Clark. This chapter outlines the foundations of narrative theory, describes narrative learning, and examines some of the possibilities of a narrative perspective for understanding transformational learning. View. Show abstract. (3) Merril: “its object of analysis is the earth's surface, and its purpose is to understand how the surface is structured or differentiated.” These are three of the seven definitions quoted by Arjun. Monkhouse also has a contribution to make. His definition is as follows: The geographer” seeks to describe the diverse features of the earth's surface, to explain if possible how these features have come to be what they are, and to discuss how they influence the distribution of man with his multifarious activities” (Monkhouse 1983:144). The researcher agrees w Its aim is to help students acquire and use the knowledge and techniques necessary for the stylistic analysis of a text, i.e. find and interpret language phenomena of different levels of the language structure, which carry some additional information of the emotive, logical or evaluative types, all serving to enrich, deepen and clarify the text.Â 70 per cent of our lifetime is spent in various forms of communication activities - oral (speaking, listening) or written (reading, writing), so it is self-evident how important it is for a philologist to know the mechanics of relations between the non-verbal, extralinguistic, cognitive essence of the communicative act and its verbal, linguistic presentation.