

**“NOW THE PIECES ARE IN PLACE...”:
LEARNING THROUGH PERSONAL STORYTELLING IN THE ADULT CLASSROOM**

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Abstract

This article examines the potential of personal storytelling as a pedagogical method. When incorporated into the educational experience, autobiographical stories serve as a primary and fruitful link between lived experience and curricular content, a connection integral to adult learning. These stories enable learners to identify congruencies and incongruencies between their meaning systems and the concepts being learned. They also give adult learners increased insight into their own learning and development. In this article we discuss the “truth” of these stories, examine some important issues related to their use in the adult classroom, and then give a detailed example of one particular method, that of concept-focused autobiographical writing.

It was an unusually large class for a graduate course—24 students—especially considering that it was an advanced course in qualitative research, but its size was not the only departure from the norm. Carolyn was teaching with a colleague from a different college at her university, so the class really consisted of two sections put together, one in Education and the other in Communications, and the two groups of doctoral students were largely strangers to one another. The course was on narrative analysis, a type of qualitative research that elicits stories from informants and then interprets them using a variety of analytic methods, so on the first night it made sense to start by asking everyone to tell a story about themselves that would help us get to know one another. It turned out to be an inspired decision. The stories tumbled out, many of them funny, some about embarrassing moments or memorable achievements, and more than a few that were very personal and intimate. A quest story to satisfy the sudden longing for some Krispy Kreme donuts that took one student across Houston late on a Saturday afternoon to find a shop still open, only to have his car break down and have to give away the donuts to thank the guy who got the car started for him again. The rueful story of a woman in the class whose wedding was coming up, who had found the wedding dress of her dreams, bought it and made arrangements for the necessary alterations, then when she went to pick it up, discovered that the store had inadvertently sold it to someone else; since neither she nor the store had a record of the exact style of the perfect dress, she had to settle for another that was merely OK. Other stories

were more intimate - the decision to divorce, the loss of a beloved pet, an injury overcome - but all were real and meaningful to the teller, and each story made that student known to the others in the room in a more personal way than typical introductions allowed, and those stories served to create the foundation for a community of learners that was built on over the semester.

In this instance personal stories were used as a strategy to connect students who were new to one another. They were also used to introduce the class to the principle that narrative is a basic structure through which we make meaning of our lives. In recent years, theorists from the human sciences have explored narrative understandings of human meaning making, identity formation and life span development (e.g., Bruner, 2002; Freeman, 1993; Kenyon & Randall, 1997; Kerby, 1991; McAdams, 1988; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986; Tappan, 1991). Narrative psychologist Theodor Sarbin (1986) states the “narratory principle” this way: “Human beings think, perceive, imagine and make moral choices according to narrative structures” (p. 8). Polkinghorne (1988) explains the basic premise more fully:

Narrative is a scheme by means of which human beings give meaning to their experience of temporality and personal actions. Narrative meaning functions to give form to the understanding of a purpose to life and to join everyday actions and events into episodic units. It provides a framework for understanding the past events of one’s life and for planning future actions. It is the primary scheme by which human existence is rendered meaningful. (p. 11)

Narrative process brings meaning to experience. The facts of our existence - events, actions, happenings large and small - constitute the raw material of life. The facts are merely a data set without some process of understanding what they mean. Meaning has to do with values and beliefs - what do we want to happen, what do we hope to be the next event in our lives? Meaning has to do with context - what is the importance of certain facts or happenings in relation to others, and when considered as a part of a larger whole? Meaning has to do with interpretation - how do we bring our own store of knowledge to bear on our understanding and put our own spin on the actualities of life? Valuation, contextuality, and interpretability are qualities of narrative. To make meaning narratively means that we understand the raw material of our existence in a story-like form. In short, as developmental psychologist Irwin (1996) puts it, “People make sense of their lives by emplotting their actions and the sequences of the events that make up their lives in stories. . .” (p. 109).

From an appreciation of narrative as central to human meaning making, it follows that we can understand human development and identity itself from the narrative perspective. Developmental psychologist Mark Freeman (1984) asserts that “The study of the life course. . . . demands the acknowledgment of its narrative structure. More than a simple mapping of discrete and isolated events. . . , it is, in a distinct sense, an ongoing story to be told” (p. 3). Taking the narrative orientation yet another step, identity itself is understood as an unfolding story by some theorists (McAdams, 1988; Kenyon & Randall, 1997; Kerby, 1991). The task of the person is to “arrive at a life story that makes sense—provides unity and purpose—within a sociohistorical matrix that embodies a much larger story” (McAdams, 1988, p. 18). Given the centrality of narrative in meaning making, it is not surprising that insights from the narrative perspective are being applied to pedagogical practice and theorizing.

In this article we want to explore the educational value of personal narratives for adult learning. This is distinct from the growing body of work on the use of narrative as a research method, in which stories are studied as a unit and their meaning interpreted through analysis of their content and their structure (Lieblich, Tuval, & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 1993). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) offer a particular approach to qualitative research which they call narrative inquiry, but there are many ways in which narratives are studied and analyzed. There is also a broad range of narrative methods, to include approaches like life history research, biography and autobiography, autoethnography, and discourse analysis. Richardson (2000, 2001) takes this further when she argues for writing, by which she means the creation of narratives, as a method of discovery and inquiry. In the past 25 years an interest in narrative has grown exponentially across disciplines and professions, constituting what is commonly called the narrative turn in the human sciences. More recently it is appearing in education (Dominicé, 2000; Hopkins, 1994; Lauritzen & Jaeger, 1997; McEwan & Egan, 1995; Rossiter, 1999; Rossiter & Clark, 2007; Witherell & Noddings, 1991) where it is used to address schooling, curriculum development, pedagogical practice, and learning. This article examines one particular mode of narrative pedagogy, the use of personal storytelling in the classroom.

It is our belief that incorporated into the educational experience, autobiographical activities serve as a primary and fruitful link between lived experience and curricular content. Because adult learning has to do with making meaning, these autobiographical connections are integral to the process. Brady (1990) expresses the centrality of the autobiographical connection in learning this way:

An act of autobiography is among the most natural acts we perform as human beings. It is an act which recalls the self, and makes an accounting of it, and trusts it enough to respect it as both the subject and object of our thought and discourse. Do such acts not belong in the very center of our attempt to learn and develop as human beings? (p. 51)

We believe that they do. Autobiographical writing or storytelling in the educational setting encourages learners to identify the congruencies, as well as the incongruencies, between their meaning systems and the new concepts or ideas in the curricular content. The autobiographical link defines and motivates the learning. The autobiographical learning activity introduces the learner's self story into the educational experience and brings into focus those areas of dissonance around which learning is necessitated. Learners are *involved* with the content because the meaning of it matters to some aspect of their own story.

Autobiographical writing also stimulates learning in that it requires reflection on our lived experience and leads adult learners to heightened insight into their own learning and development. Autobiographical learning activities direct attention to and contribute to the larger life narrative, and increasingly the relationship between the construction of the self narrative and transformative learning is evident. Indeed, Randall (1996) has elaborated on transformative learning as a process of "restorying" one's life (p. 99). Through autobiographical learning activities, learners can begin to embrace the empowering realization that they are not only the main character but also the author of their life narratives - a realization that opens up new horizons of possibility. In Hopkins' (1994) words, "Our narratives are the means through which we imagine ourselves into the persons we become" (p. xvii). The point is that autobiographical activities are not merely "feel-good" fillers in the adult education setting; they are very powerful

tools through which learners can engage with curricular content with potentially transformative results.

Our central focus in this article will be on what we are calling concept-focused autobiographical writing, the use of self narratives to teach something. This differs from traditional autobiography which has as its central goal the enhancement of self understanding (Chandler, 1990; Kenyon & Randall, 1997). We will specifically examine one form of this pedagogical method: educational life histories used to illuminate how gender shapes the experience of schooling for women. Before doing that, though, we first want to discuss what we mean by truth in these autobiographical narratives and then lay out some issues that must be considered in order to use self narratives safely and effectively in the adult classroom.

Fact and Fiction: The “Truth” of Self Narratives

If the self narrative is essentially an interpretation of meaning, and if we construct our narratives according to the type of story we want to tell about ourselves, what can we say about the truth or factuality of the self narrative? This is a question that students in our classes often ask when learning about the basic concepts of narrative, as well as when they are actually engaged in life story or other autobiographical writing. They question the emphasis on meaning making and interpretation over objective facts and accuracy. They ask, “Well, if facts don’t matter, can’t you just make up anything?” Three considerations help clarify the role of factuality in self narratives.

First, the essence of interpretation is that it involves something given - discovered or revealed - as well as what we bring to it. We start with something as given or presented such as a painting, a play, or a story; and we bring something to it - our own perspective, personal history, and meaning system. In his discussion of the work of the ethnographer, Jackson (1988) offers a useful description of the interpretive act. His article is appropriately and cleverly entitled “What We Are Saying When We Say We Are Saying the Truth.” He makes the point that the scientist seeks value-free accuracy in objective facts. The artist, on the other hand, has freedom to create, without obligation to be true to any particular facts. The product of science is something disclosed, whereas the product of art is something made. And, in Jackson’s perspective, the product of interpretation is something that is both disclosed, or given, and something made. In the construction of the life narrative, of course, the “something given” is the series of actual events and experiences of our lives. But the events themselves, as a sequence of events, do not make a story and do not offer the coherence that we need as meaning making human beings. Some interpretation is required. The “something made” is the sum of our own perspectives and habits of thought that we bring to the interpretive task. Mezirow (2000) speaks of these as complex meaning structures:

A frame of reference is a “meaning perspective,” the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions. It involves cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions....A frame of reference is composed of two dimensions, a habit of mind and resulting points of view. A *habit of mind* is a set of assumptions—broad, generalized, orienting predispositions that act as a filter for interpreting the meaning of experience....A habit of mind becomes expressed as a *point of view*. A point of view comprises clusters of meaning schemes—sets of immediate specific expectations, beliefs,

feelings, attitudes, and judgments—that tacitly direct and shape a specific interpretation and determine how we judge, typify objects, and attribute causality. (p. 16)

Mezirow is describing what we bring to the task of interpreting experience; what we want to stress is that interpretation is not pure creation—when we construct a life narrative, we begin with the actual happenings of our lives. Further, the interpretation of life experience is not permanent, but changes as it evolves through time. One’s most acceptable life narrative is interpretation of events that seems to make the most sense at any given time (Cohler, 1982; Freeman, 1984). As Bruner (2002) says, “Through narrative, we construct, reconstruct, in some ways reinvent yesterday and tomorrow” (p. 93). Memory and imagination work together in the ongoing construction of meaning.

A second point to consider is the distinction between objective fact and narrative truth. Narrative does not make a claim to ‘just the facts’ as does science. Objectivity is a realist assumption; constructivists and postmodernists, among other critics of positivism, assume that language is constitutive of reality rather than a means to reflect it. In reference to life story data, Polkinghorne (1996) comments that while life stories refer to actual events in that person’s life, “the importance of narrative data is not the correctness of their factual references, but rather the significance placed on reported events, even if those event did not occur in the way they are described in the story” (p. 95). Riessman (1993) makes the point that “informants’ stories do not mirror a world ‘out there.’ They are constructed, creatively authored, rhetorical, replete with assumptions, and interpretive” (p. 4). We are speaking about the use of life stories for pedagogical purposes rather than in narrative inquiry, but the point is the same: Sometimes the ‘objective’ facts really do not matter to the meaning of the story. As Bluck (2001) says, “The details of autobiographical events may not be crucial. . . . In creating a life story, it is largely the gist of the event and its interpretive value that is important” (p. 70). The essential narrative truth of the story is not dependent upon the accuracy of certain facts.

The following example illustrates the point. One participant in a guided autobiography class writes about the death of her mother when she was four years old and how that affected her childhood. As she explains her relationship with an aunt, she writes:

When I try to explain the members of my family to others, it gets pretty confusing. Even though relatives were introduced as aunts and uncles, they weren’t really aunts and uncles, they were cousins. But because they were so much older, it was not considered respectful or polite to call them by their first names. Aunt Marie, who was my godmother, was really my cousin.

Perhaps the contribution of this passage to the story lies in what it communicates about respectfulness within the family. But, in terms of the narrative truth of this story, it is irrelevant whether Marie the godmother was an aunt or a cousin. What is important is the writer’s relationship with this person in the wake of her mother’s death. Obviously, the extent to which the objective facts matter depends upon the purpose for which one is writing or telling the story. If one is trying to write the story to provide an historical account of the event, then factuality is a serious consideration. So, context is important. But particular facts really do not always matter to the meaning and relevance of self stories in an adult classroom setting.

A third consideration related to the “truth” of the self narrative is the concept of narrative intelligibility. This means that it must be understandable to others and at least to some extent conform to the generally accepted conventions of narrative within which it is being told. In his discussion of the psychological construction of the life narrative, Cohler (1982) comments that, “Lives are organized in the same manner as other narratives . . . and are understandable according to the same socially shared definition of a sensible or followable presentation” (p. 207). Coherence, internal consistency and followability are necessary elements of an intelligible narrative. A key point here is that the narrative must be intelligible not only to the teller, but also to other people who share the same social or cultural background. Some theorists frame identity itself as an unfolding story (e.g., Hermans, 1997; Kerby, 1991; McAdams, 1988). In identity development, the task of the person is to “arrive at a life story that makes sense—provides unity and purpose—*within a sociohistorical matrix* [italics added] that embodies a much larger story” (McAdams, 1988, p. 18). Linde (1993) goes so far as to define life story as a social unit and argues that the very nature of the story is constrained by particular social demands, such as meeting expectations about chronology and sequence, the inclusion of certain information about the teller, and a fundamental congruence between the life stories of both the teller and the listener. This underscores again the profound contextuality of the narrative orientation as it calls our attention to the reality that narrative itself is socially and culturally defined. Thus, it is very risky business to assess the “goodness” of a life narrative outside of our own social groups. It is essential to honor a diversity of life paths without privileging one over others on the bases of values and standards of narrative that are defined by culture, race, class, or gender.

Issues Related to Self Stories in the Classroom

Using personal stories in an educational context requires sensitivity and careful planning. We believe several issues are particularly salient for the effective use of this method.

Ground Rules and Climate Setting

Developing ground rules and a supportive climate, usual activities in the adult education classroom, are especially important in facilitating learning that involves the sharing of life stories. As we have seen, life stories express one’s very identity; when we share a story from our experience, we are sharing a part of ourselves. We cannot overemphasize the point that there is a level of vulnerability involved in the sharing of any life story, even if the topic seems to be fairly superficial or lighthearted. We should not assume that just because students are telling stories that are humorous, they are not susceptible to the wounds of insult or indifference. So if we incorporate autobiographical learning activities and story sharing into the classroom, we need to structure a safe and supportive environment for our students. The issue of safety is not straightforward, however. As Tisdell (1998), drawing on poststructural feminist theory, cautions, “the question perhaps becomes ‘safe for whom?’ and ‘under what conditions?’” (p. 148). As adult educators we must be sensitive to differing positionalities and power relations that are at work. “Classrooms can be untidy spaces where politics, differences and conflict are intrinsic to critical learning” (Grace & Gouthro, 2000, p. 20). Autobiographical approaches have the potential to enable students to confront and learn from issues of difference, but the possible vulnerability of some students must always be a concern and requires vigilance and on-going reflexivity on the part of the instructor.

Probably the most fundamental ground rule for story sharing is that of receptive listening. Students need to know at the outset that a life story shared in class is not a target for disagreement, judgment, or argument. The ground rule must be that when someone tells a life story, we listen. The telling is an act of sharing and an act of trust. Listening is the act of receiving the story as offered. The purpose in this phase of autobiographical learning is not to debate or dissect the story, nor is it to evaluate or try to ‘fix’ the teller. Of course, in the classroom it may well be the case that the learning activity itself is to perform some analysis on stories from the participants. But the analysis is not to be confused with nor is it simultaneous with the listening and receiving.

Emotionality

Another dynamic of autobiographical story sharing in the classroom has to do with the intensity of emotion that attends the public presentation of self stories. This is not always an issue, but can be when the story topic is something meaningful to the student. In our experience, strong emotion is most evident when students have written stories and then share those stories with the class. The act of speaking out loud to other people our story of an experience can be intense. To hear our own voice telling the story, saying our feelings and understandings, gives us a different perspective on it. The intensity of emotion that one sometimes feels in sharing a story with others often exceeds that which accompanied the writing of the story. Thus, it may come as a surprise (possibly an embarrassing surprise) to students who find themselves becoming emotional when sharing a story with the class. The teacher or leader can help students deal with this eventuality by mentioning to students *before* stories are shared that strong emotion is not uncommon when sharing certain kinds of stories and by remaining calm and relaxed if students happen to shed some tears while telling their stories. Birren and Deutchman (1991) address this matter in their guide for leading autobiographical writing groups and conclude with these encouraging words, “The best advice we can offer is bring a box of tissues, and do not take the occurrence of tears too seriously. It is not a sign something has gone wrong. It is a sign something is going right” (p. 50). It is also important to stay in touch with our own level of comfort with emotionally charged moments in the classroom. In his discussion of the tensions inherent in teaching, Palmer (1998) reminds us that our task is to hold open the space for learning and not leap to resolve discomfort prematurely: “We cannot teach our students at the deepest levels when we are unable to bear the suffering that opens into those levels” (p. 85).

Self-Disclosure

We know that confession is good for the soul, but how much self disclosure is appropriate for the classroom? After all, a classroom is not a confessional or therapy group, but some level of openness and trust is important among learners who are sharing their stories in an educational setting. Adult learner self-disclosure in the classroom raises ethical considerations for the educator who leads life story sharing activities. These considerations are addressed in the context of counselor education by Goodman and Carpenter-White (1996). In their discussion of autobiographical assignments in counselor training programs, they recommend that: (a) such activities be strictly voluntary and not considered in evaluation; (b) teachers be aware of the development of personal relationships with learners; and (c) teacher present cautionary information to students. Before life stories are shared in class, it is important for all participants

to consider the level and limits of sharing with which they are comfortable. Students also need to respect the limits of how much others in the class wish to hear. We concur with Birren and Deutchman (1991), Palmer (1998), Apps (1996), and others who use life stories in the classroom that it is essential for us to discuss and clarify with learners “appropriate boundaries” for story sharing in the class. We emphasize that criteria for appropriate boundaries are not fixed; they will vary according to the purposes and participants of the class. The important point is that whatever the level, the class members have some shared understanding of the guidelines. Even with clear guidelines, however, it is not uncommon for some students to get carried away on their own story line and plunge into a depth of disclosure that is inappropriate for the class setting. This situation calls for extreme sensitivity and tact to redirect or interrupt a student’s story. Such action is difficult but it is called for if a student’s self disclosure does any of the following: makes the other members of the class very uncomfortable, violates the agreed upon guidelines or ground rules, slanders or demeans another person, or drifts far from the purpose of the story sharing activity. In those cases, inaction on the part of the instructor will weaken the trust and confidence among the other students that the class is a safe place for story sharing. The perception that the activity is not controlled or managed in any way is not comfortable for most students (Birren & Deutchman, 1991; Palmer, 1998).

Invitations Lead Stories

If telling one’s stories is an act of meaning, an act through which the self is both revealed and created, then the stories we encourage our students to tell will influence the meaning they make. We know that as self stories are told out loud, written or presented to other people, the essence of those stories solidifies and takes on a prominence in our identity. As Bruner (2002) notes, “A self is probably the most impressive work of art we ever produce, surely the most intricate” (p. 14) and we produce it through narrative. Ochberg (1994) echoes this idea when he says that “identities are formed by the public telling of stories” (p. 115). As we have seen, to some extent at least, we become the character we present in our self stories. The narrating ‘I’ creates the ‘me’ of our stories, and we tend to live up to—or live down to as the case may be—the self of our stories. It is also the case that in a classroom, the stories told by students respond to the invitation of the teacher or leader. That is, the type of stories students select for sharing in the class is shaped by, even determined by, how the invitation is framed. If we ask students to tell a story of when they were at their best, that is the type of story they will tell. For students, the image of their ‘best self’ will be reinforced in the construction and the telling of that story. What if we ask them to tell a story of being a victim, being oppressed, or being angry? Will the telling of those stories contribute to the reification or entrenchment of those qualities in the student’s identity? Invitations must be made with care for their possible consequences.

Perhaps we are not asking for a particular type of story and feel that our students are quite free to tell whatever type of story they choose. Here it is important to be mindful of the subtle ways in which our own assumptions and values are communicated to students. Brookfield (1991) reminds us as adult educators that, “You must always remember that your actions will be imbued with enormous symbolic significance by students” (p. 209). Off hand comments, nonverbal messages, facial expressions, the climate in the classroom, the structure of the course as well as many other things, all communicate to students something about what kinds of stories we are inviting into the class. This is not unrelated to the dilemma familiar to adult educators-- the

power asymmetry inherent in our relationship and interactions with students--that has been addressed by a number of theorists in our field including Ellsworth (1994), Robertson (1996), and Tisdell (1993). We appreciate the fact that it is not possible to deny or ignore positionality and the influence of power imbalances in the adult learning classroom. This makes our framing of the story invitation even more critical. The role of the learning facilitator carries with it the responsibility to use our expertise, authority, and position authentically (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Brookfield, 1991; Robertson, 1996; Tennant & Pogson, 1995).

Having laid out what we consider to be some of the major issues surrounding the use of personal storytelling in the adult classroom, we turn now to a description of concept-focused autobiographical writing, one particular pedagogical method that we have found effective and meaningful.

Concept-Focused Autobiographical Writing

We usually think of autobiographical writing as a private enterprise serving personal needs, but autobiographical writing can also be used in formal and nonformal educational settings to help students learn something. Perhaps it's best to begin with an example. Coia and Taylor (2001) are faculty in a teaching preparation program at a small liberal arts college in New York. One of their goals in a course they taught for preservice teachers was to move the members of the class from thinking as students to thinking as teachers. To facilitate this, they asked students to write five autobiographical reflections on specific topics: identity; adolescence; literacy; curriculum, teaching, and assessment; and diversity and multiculturalism. Because these topics relate closely to the school experience, these writings helped students "unearth, clarify, and make concrete the beliefs and concepts that they already had about teaching" (Coia & Taylor, 2001, p. 7). Once they could identify what they believed about teaching, then they could begin thinking like teachers.

Carolyn teaches a graduate course, *Women and Education*, which examines women's experience with schooling, both as students from grade school through graduate school and as teachers at all levels. It is important to note that the students who enroll in this course are overwhelmingly women; when there are men, they are few in number, and they have always been men who are supportive of women's issues. The texts and readings are centered around women's learning, equity issues, barriers to and facilitators of learning, and how their experience is shaped by the masculinist structures and models of learning within which they are located. At the very beginning of the course, the group generates an additional text—their educational life histories—which becomes available to the entire class. This collection of personal narratives is used as a kind of mirror against which the theoretical material of the texts and readings are assessed.

The directions for writing the educational life histories are straightforward and open-ended. Students are asked to reflect on their experience in school—grade school, high school, college, and graduate school—and to describe their most memorable experiences at each level of schooling and explain their significance for them. What results is a collection of stories that are alive and engaging, which illustrate the structural and personal inequities that girls and women face in educational institutions. We provide excerpts from several of those journals here with the

permission of the students themselves, having, of course, changed all names. The first excerpt is from one educational life history by a student we will call Denise:

I remember as far back as first grade, in which I experienced a couple of significant events. In my elementary school there were three classes for first graders; one of them was set aside for learning disabled, slow learners, immature kids, and so on. I was placed in this class because someone along the way decided I was dyslexic. I'd been reading to a certain extent since before I entered school, and was having difficulty reading out loud since my mind was ahead of my out-loud voice. I'd be several words ahead of myself as the teacher tried to slow me down and get me to read to her or to the class.... What I remember feeling at the time was suddenly being separated from the other "normal" kids and placed in a class with a bunch of kids with real problems. I never felt like I was one of the problem kids, so it wasn't exactly traumatic for that reason. I think I rather felt like my previous teachers didn't like me and got rid of me....

[In later elementary school] I was recognized as one of the smart kids, but I was never exceptionally motivated to follow through on very much that the public schools dished out. I just kept getting the highest scores on their standardized tests, but when I was given the opportunity to learn advanced material I would lose interest. This may have been in part because my friends got very angry when I was recognized for my talents. They used to admonish me for using "big words." It seemed more important that my friends liked me than that I did well at school....

In college Denise was on her own for the first time and was shocked to discover that she had to work hard to get the good grades that had come so easily in high school. She responded at first by rebelling, which included doing some serious drinking, and then flunking out, but she got herself readmitted and began to take her education more seriously. She continues her story:

I was drawn to two professors in particular. One, Dr. Westlake, was running a big econometric model out of a research center he had opened in the university. I did an independent study with him where I helped to design one of the equations in this model. That ended in a terrible way; he made a pass at me. The other professor was Dr. Janes, a socialist feminist, and her ideas really made a difference in my life. She talked about the role of women in the economy, and particularly the impact on social life of women entering the work force. I learned about sexual harassment from her, and felt at least a little better about the harassment I was experiencing in my part-time job. At least I knew I wasn't the only one subject to it, and that it wasn't something I'd invited. As I reflect on my educational life history, I realize that Dr. Janes was important to me for another reason. Social class had been a big part of my educational experience, and here was someone who addressed the issue of class head on. I remember telling my boyfriend at the time that I was going to be like her when I grew up....

[My master's program] was a breeze for me. I was clearly a different kind of student [now]... I worked very hard and I was a perfectionist. This annoyed some of my colleagues, but my attitude was very different from how it had been. I had spent all my early years worried about who liked me and who didn't, and now I didn't care. I now felt like the line from "Dolores Claiborne"—"Sometimes being a bitch is all a woman has." Being nice and solicitous had never seemed to get me anywhere with people and only made me feel depressed....

It's been a long strange road. My occasional cheating, lying, ditching classes, and drinking seem like reasonable acts of rebellion against something unpalatable being forced down my throat. I was like an adult learner who needs to control her own learning. But I was also immature and acted out in some self-destructive ways. In graduate school I was able to take control of my own learning and at the same time in my life, I grew up. Now the pieces are in place and I can really shine!

Denise's experiences with schooling echoes many of the themes found in the other educational life histories and in our texts: the importance of relationships; the experience of both good and bad teachers; experiences of gender-based discrimination; and the need to figure out how they learned best. For Denise there is a growing sense of confidence and development of her own voice, and her educational life history shows an unusual level of social critique. For most students this awareness of how larger forces were playing out in their own stories came as the course progressed and these insights were articulated in the postscript written at the end of the semester. Millie, another student in the course, provides a good example of this. In her life history she describes her first encounter with a man as a teacher:

I had my first male teacher in sixth grade. Mr. Thomas....I remember him holding his head high and paying attention ONLY to the boys in my class. Every analogy was related to a sport of some kind. Particularly football. I like football now and I liked the game then, but I remember thinking there must be another way to make a point or to teach a concept than to relate it to football or basketball. I remember trying to relate to him, but the harder I tried, the more I failed. Not in my studies, but in my relationship with him and since relationships were so important to me, I was devastated.

In this initial telling, Millie takes responsibility for the problem, noting that "possibly I needed more attention than he had the time or care to give." When she wrote her postscript at the end of the course, though, she had a different interpretation:

I understand the struggle I faced with my sixth grade male teacher. I now know that I did not look to him as a personal leader. I realize that my belief that "I could do or be anything" was dashed by my inability to understand his inability to understand me as a woman. He was unaware that my ways of knowing were different than his and because of that he was ineffective for me.

While she doesn't label this as gender-based discrimination here, she does see things in those terms when interpreting her experiences in college:

As I look over my original history, I see now the inequality that existed throughout my years in higher education. Most of my professors in the university were male, and as I look back over those years, I clearly see the stereotyping that went on in and out of the classroom....I remember times in classes, where women's opinions were often dismissed, ignored or treated as though they were of no importance. This treatment exists today, women's views continue to be trivialized and ignored. Through the readings, I can better understand the phenomenon, and therefore can better work to institute change.

One of the men who took this course connected to the experience of women in education in a very personal way. Bill had worked in the technology field and, when he came back to school for his masters degree, he got a job providing assistance to groups of faculty in

developing distance education courses. When he was asked about his educational background, he felt he was taken less seriously because his expertise was based on experience rather than education. He notes:

As long as everyone assumed I had more education than was really the case, everything was fine. But I knew that I had to hide my lack of formal qualification for my position in order to be heard, no matter how knowledgeable I really was in my chosen line of work. I heard this same story under a different guise in the stories of the women in academe.

He goes on to connect this with his own experience as a gay man:

My own experience of voicelessness was based on real issues of merit, unlike the experience of so many women who, according to the literature, are discriminated against, often unconsciously but sometimes quite purposefully, by a society that frequently judges them on the basis of their gender. The only other thing I have to which I can compare that experience is my sexual orientation, which for me can be easily hidden, at least for short periods of time. Women have no such luxury, and our readings have illuminated a great deal about women's experiences of being "other" in workplaces and academies that have been shaped and are still largely dominated by men. I now find myself watching the dynamics of classes, entertainment, and even church for action and symbolism that literally tell women that they are in some way inferior to men.

What we see happening in these educational life histories is a type of narrative learning that involves not just learning from the stories themselves, noting patterns and themes across the set, but also learning by putting those stories in conversation with educational theory about women's learning. It is important to note that this was a feminist course, so it was informed by principles of feminist pedagogy. There are many different strands of feminist pedagogy, but Maher and Tetreault (1994) identify four common themes: how knowledge is constructed; the issue of voice; the concept of authority; and the notion of positionality. All these themes were present in this course, many of them embedded, as we have seen, in the students' educational life histories. Tisdell (1998), in her analysis of the various types of feminist pedagogies, focuses specifically on the poststructural approach, and this course was designed from this perspective. As Tisdell explains:

...poststructural feminist educators deal with both similarities among the participants (including themselves) in the learning environment and the differences based on factors of gender, race or ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and so on. Difference and similarity are dealt with partly using portions of participants' autobiography and life experience around the various categories of positionality as well as by examining similarities and differences in understandings of group readings. As adult educators such as Brookfield (1995) and Middleton (1993) imply, such sharing of individual autobiographical information in a supportive group environment can contribute to group bonding and group understanding around these various sociostructural categories in relationship to an individual's identity development. (p. 148)

We see, therefore, the value of autobiographical writing in this type of course for achieving its goals.

While we have used this particular example of concept-focused autobiographical writing to make our case for the value of personal storytelling as a pedagogical tool, we want to be clear that we are not arguing that narrative pedagogy is a derivative of feminist theory, nor that it is appropriate for use only in that subject area. The value of this approach is much broader than that. This method of concept-focused autobiographical writing has enormous potential for use in studying experiences that are part and parcel of everyday life. Potential topics include adult development and aging, racial and ethnic discrimination, the impact of socioeconomic status in a society that ignores class, the role of spirituality in making meaning of life experience, and more. The pedagogical possibilities of autobiographical writing are limitless.

And the Story Continues

Personal storytelling in the classroom is just one mode of narrative learning but it is one that is highly effective because it is a powerful way of linking the theoretical with the practical lived experience of the students themselves. The telling of stories makes the learner not the receiver but the actor. Most simply it means that the learner is moving from a cognitive understanding of an idea, principle, or concept—whatever is the object of the learning—and linking it to their own experience. The eliciting of personal stories makes what's being studied more real, more immediate, and more personal. And it also creates a new and deeper level of engagement by the learner with the content, and that engagement is more complex than the cognitive engagement was because now there is more involved.

There is an additional dimension to personal storytelling as a learning method that is perhaps even more important. 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. Personal stories, then, serve not only to link the concept to students' life experiences, but also to transcend those experiences and see the larger social and cultural structures that shape their lives and their meaning-making. What more powerful tool could any educator want?

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