

Using Student Narratives in Teaching¹

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Abstract: This article examines how student narratives may be utilized as pedagogical tools for attaining diverse educational goals. Central to this examination is a description of a project involving the use by students of their own narratives about experiences of violence as a way of illustrating crisis theory. The project aim was to develop a pedagogical method for linking practice and theory closer together. Research findings about its effects are presented indicating that narrative methods appearing to increase student understanding of a theoretical phenomenon may also lead to heightened self-insight as well as positively influencing the social environment of the classroom. The findings indicate, however, that while a few students experience these methods as emotionally burdensome, most students report that the project resulted in increased personalized knowledge, heightened self-reflexivity and improvements in the social milieu of the classroom.

Keywords: narrative, reflection, praxis knowledge

Background:

The use of student narratives in educational settings has become the focus of considerable attention in recent years. This has involved both research projects as well as pedagogical exercises. Loftus (1998) describes, for example, how the narratives related by nursing students about providing care to the dying have led to increased consciousness about their own vulnerability. Students experienced as well how difficult it was to provide such care when they found themselves so moved by their own feelings about the dying. By telling the researcher about themselves in encounters with dying patients, the students appeared to gain training in monitoring changes in their own emotional processes as well as in increasing their understanding of what care in this field may often involve.

It has also been found that praxis informs theory when experiences expressed in student narratives are used as teaching instruments. In so doing, this demonstrates how such experiences may be regarded as valid knowledge (Hosmand & Polkinghorne 1992). By employing their own narratives, students also can be trained to reflect about their understanding of their own actions as well as in terms of theoretical perspectives (Schibbye 1995).

Self-reflection has been found to be an important part of the learning process especially when related to themes drawn from psychological theory (Ibid.). Often, it is fairly common in education for one's own evaluations to be linked to the end product: "Show what you have learned" rather than the process: "How did you learn and what kind of knowledge did you use to understand?" However, it has been shown that providing space for narratives often serves as a powerful tool for allowing students to use their own lives for discovering relationships between

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theory and practice as well as for making evaluations of their own learning (Kramp & Humphreys 1993).

Narrative theory focuses on the human phenomenon that we tell tales about what happens to us and in so doing construct understandings of what we experience in storytelling terms (Mischler 1996). A narrative involves not only accounts of happenings, but more importantly our experiences and understandings of what has happened (Polkinghorne 1991). One reason that narratives have become the focus of increasing attention is because lived life is made material in the words of our tales and the stories we relate function as the major way of *understanding* life as it is lived (Becker 1999, Ewick & Sibley 1995). Thus, life as it is lived is inseparable from what is told about it. Life is not something that “is” or “was”, but happenings that are interpreted, reinterpreted, told and retold as long as we are alive (Bruner 1987, 1990).

Many regard personal narratives as one way of bringing the individual back to the social sciences. Narratives make visible how individual members of society create meanings and relationships in their lives (Bruner 1987, Polkinghorne 1991, Gee 1991, Becker 1999). The psychologist Jerome Bruner has defined narrative in relation to two forms of cognitive functioning: two ways of ordering experience serving as the bases for constructing reality. One of these he terms logical-scientific or paradigmatic. This form, heavily influenced by positivism, includes argumentation based on truth norms. The other form Bruner terms narrative. Rather than arriving at truths, narratives bring to life experiences and provide meaning and connections to it. He further claims that these two forms of cognitive functioning are based on different standards for confirmation and verification and as such are irreconcilable in relation to each other. Narrative research, for many social scientists today, is regarded as a theoretically solid tool for understanding human experience equal to those employed in positivistic research (Larson 1997, Bruner 1990).

In educational settings, narratives also involve our understandings of ourselves as learners as well as to that which is to be learned. Narratives linked to student learning processes can also provide knowledge about one’s own learning strategies and understandings one has when entering a new discipline (Kramp & Humphrey 1993). A teaching arrangement including students’ narratives can also contribute to their empowerment: They bring their own experiences to a field of knowledge and these are recognized as relevant by both their teachers and their fellow students thus enhancing their own sense of self. Studies also show that the use of their own narratives by students make them more aware of their own values and attitudes, and that in so doing they see themselves as active learners and thus add to their self-esteem (Kramp & Humphrey 1993, Loftus 1998).

In learning situations, narratives, too, can be used to examine relationships between power and knowledge. A common feature of education programs for professionals is enculturation in the language and rationale of the chosen profession. These are often framed as apolitical and neutral in relation to existing power structures. The language of profession provides its members with legitimacy and power to define reality in one way – often to the detriment of other definitions of reality which are thus devalued. Sanchez and Fried (1997) point out that in a genuinely multicultural world, a central task is to provide space for student narratives so that other voices from both individuals and groups can be provided with legitimacy.

The Project: Examining Crisis Theory with Narratives of Experienced Violence

Being a student in further education in mental health involves considerable work with theories challenging one's own feelings – especially those related to vulnerability, dependence and death. A major challenge in this kind of education is to create a learning environment where psychological theories may become personalized, so that these can be employed when students meet psychological phenomena in praxis (Nygren & Blom 1999). Using this as a point of departure, students in a course focused on reactions to crises were invited to write about their own experience with violence. They were presented with the following set of instructions: *“Tell about an incident of violence you have experienced. It can be an violent incident you experienced directly or one you heard about or witnessed. What happened and how did you react? How do you recall the incident today?”* Students were asked to submit their narratives without identifying themselves and these later were worked with in small groups and plenary sessions involving the entire class.

Methods

This project was carried out in two different classes involving a total of 72 students. The data was comprised of 51 completed questionnaires and 65 narratives. Ninety percent of the students were represented by the narrative materials and seventy-one percent completed the questionnaires. As noted, the narratives were anonymous and thus could not be related to the responses to the questionnaire.

Student Characteristics

The students enrolled in these two classes had a mean age of 40 years while the age range was from 28 to 60 years. One third of the students were males and the occupational makeup of the students was as follows: nurses 45%, social workers 20%, physical therapists 10%, nursing aides 8%, occupational therapists 10% and other occupations 7%.

The Questionnaire

Each questionnaire had 19 variables. These were formulated in such a way so that responses to statements could be made along a scale divided into fifths. The statements focused partly on cognitive and partly on emotional aspects of student views of the methods and procedures employed in the project's use of narratives.

Analysis

Data collected from the questionnaire were then analyzed with the help of SPSS, version 10.1. The narrative data were analyzed only in terms of type.

Results

The Narratives

Analysis of the narrative materials showed that 86% were incidents involving students' own experiences of violence, while the remaining 14% involved incidents students had heard about or witnessed.

Half of the narratives involved experiences from students' own occupational histories and concerned violent patients as in the following example:

It was at my workplace where the violent incident happened. At that time we had an autistic patient who acted out a lot on the ward. In order to get him to function, it was necessary for us to work with him in pairs. One day while I was observing he threw a pair of scissors at me and hit me in the arm. Treatment personnel had an agreement that every time we were hit by this patient, we were to ignore it and continue our instructions as if nothing had happened. I sat there the necessary time (for the observation) with blood running down my arm until I left the ward. Once in my office, the reaction came – crying. The doctor wanted me to take sick leave and this was done. But after having worked with this patient for some time, I began to experience problems whenever strangers were behind me, especially when I was alone like in a cafe. I remember one time when the hairs on the back of my neck stood up when a man walked slowly behind me. When I look back at the episode today, I still have problems understanding why we had been ordered to relate to that patient in the way we did.

Two of every ten narratives were drawn from childhood and involved such happenings as sexual assault, bullying, physical abuse and experiences with parents who were alcohol and drug abusers. One example of these is as follows:

My father was an alcoholic, but not a street drunkard. He held his facade in order and managed to hold on to a job and a family. He started beer drinking when I was just a small child, but then it was within what was regarded as acceptable by society. . . . Nobody in the family talked about it. It was something to be ashamed of and to “shit in our own nest” was viewed in my family as being unacceptable. My father often hit my mother. He couldn’t tolerate that she was trying to forge a career in her job and he did such things as refuse to let her attend courses involving overnight stays. He was extremely jealous (and paranoid, I would say today). He also beat us kids when he was angry, but he never did this sadistically. The violent episode I wish to recount happened when my father was delirious. I was visiting home while I was studying in Oslo, something I did then two or three times each semester. I had heard my mother and sisters and brothers talking about something that seemed to be completely crazy, but I had never experienced it myself. That Saturday, he drank a whole lot and became very nasty. I have always been very direct with him and told him when he was wrong. On that day, he couldn’t take it. He became more and more enraged and “crazy”. Finally, he threw me out of the house, hit my mother and threw her out, too (without her shoes). It was early May and we had to hide ourselves outside. I was so frightened. One of my sisters was still asleep in the house and I knew my father had some hunting firearms. The worst memory I have of that day is when his calling to me (he couldn’t see me but knew I was out there someplace). He shouted: “I’m going to tear your head off and throw it away!” Completely crazy. After that, I never called him “Dad” anymore. He died a half year later of natural causes. Luckily, I don’t feel ashamed about telling this. . . . After he died, I’ve talked with many about what happened in our family, but never about that terrible night in May.

The narratives were both victim and mastering oriented, especially narratives from the youth of the students were characterized by accounts of how attacks had been repelled and how one had overcome difficulties, etc. In ways similar to the above, 10 of the 65 narratives relate that what is being related has not been told before, either wholly or partially. For example, after recounting being attacked by one patient, one student told of losing control and running to hide in a toilet for protection. After writing this, the student added: *Afterwards, I told about what had happened, but never about how I lost control.*

Understanding Theory Through Narratives

In addition to writing their own narratives, students were asked as already noted to analyze narratives in small groups with their classmates. Thus, in this way, two sources for learning were incorporated into the project: one's own narrative as well as those of others. Table 1 below shows the percentages of students who responded respectively yes, partially and no when asked to evaluate what was learned during the project in relation to understanding theory.

Table 1 Evaluation of Theoretical Value of Project (percentage and mean)

	No	Partly	Yes	Mean
- Writing about something I experienced was a good way for working with reactions to crises	14	29	57	3.5
- I learned about reactions to crises by listening to the narratives of others	10	20	70	3.8
- By using students' experiences as examples I gained more insight into how one may react to incidences of violence	8	35	57	3.6
- I would have learned just as much by listening to a lecture about reactions to crises	78	14	8	2.0

Six of every ten students felt that their own narratives contributed positively to their understanding of crises reactions, while seven of every ten felt that they learned something by listening to the narratives of others. These two groups correlate but are not overlapping (sign <05.-level, $r=.285$). Of the 36 students making up the 70% who answer affirmatively to the statement that they learned from the narratives of *others*, one half answer yes to the statement about learning from their *own* narratives. Collectively, 57% of the students report that this method provides increased insight into crises reactions following incidents of violence, while 35% report partial increases and 8% report no increases in insight. This demonstrates that the majority of students report a theoretical benefit from this method. Eight of every ten disagree with the statement that they could have learned just as much by listening to a lecture about reactions to crises.

Personal Gain

Research focused on the project was also concerned about how this form of pedagogy could contribute to feelings of personal gains related to questions about increased insight or more knowledge about one's own classmates. Table 2 shows the responses by students to statements about these areas:

Table 2 Personal Gain (percentage and mean)

	No	Partly	Yes	Mean
- I learned something about myself by writing my narrative	20	43	37	3.2
- I became better acquainted with my classmates by listening to or reading the narratives of others	16	33	51	3.5
- I was saddened by the narrative I wrote	61	16	23	2.3
- I was saddened when reading/listening to the narratives of others	33	26	41	2.9
- After writing my narrative, I regretted writing something that was too personal	88	8	4	1.2

We see here that students report a somewhat lesser benefit in using the method on a personal plane rather than a theoretical one in comparison to the results of Table 1. Nonetheless there are only 20 and 16 percent respectively who report that they did not learn something about themselves or became better acquainted with their classmates through working with the narratives. The fact that more than half the students felt that they had become better acquainted with their classmates after having participated in the project suggests that personal narratives can have a positive influence on the relationships of students to one another.

The next two statements in table 2 show that students become more emotionally moved when listening to the narratives of others rather than their own. One fourth of the students report that they are saddened by their own narratives, while nearly one half are saddened by the narratives of others. Not unexpectedly, those reporting these feeling states correlate in relation to one another: those who are saddened by their own narratives, become even more saddened by the narratives of others (sign<.01-level, $r=559$). The material also shows there is a strong relationship between being saddened by thinking about one's own narrative and whether one felt something had been learned about one's self in the process (sign<.01-level, $r=511$). There also exists a correspondingly strong relationship between one's reactions to one's own narratives and how emotionally one was influenced by the narratives of others. Becoming emotionally moved involves as well a stronger experience of having learned something theoretically than if the narratives were not experienced in similar ways. Thus it seems that the feelings a narrative awakens may then serve as a port of entry for understanding more – about one's own self, others and the theoretical themes towards which attention is focused. With regard to the final statement in table 2, there are approximately 12% of the students who regret the narrative they wrote, either partially or fully. This group, comprised of 6 students out of 51, can not be reckoned especially

large. Nevertheless, this reaction suggests that there is a need for a strong ethical consciousness to be linked to pedagogic forms such as this one. It is crucial therefore for students to receive good information prior to participating in such projects to insure that they can think about the possible consequences involved in choosing to involve themselves in this kind of work in the classroom.

Evaluating the Method's Features

The course comprised 5 hours, 3 of which involved work by the students with their own narratives as well as those of others. The responses in table 3 below show that this was evaluated by students as a good use of time: 82 percent reported that the method was not too time consuming and a similar percent reported that they viewed the program was a useful way of working with the themes of the course. In looking at students' reckoning of the general personal costs of the method, not a single student reported that the method should not be used because it could be too emotionally intense or strong. However, 18 percent felt that this was partially true. These, however, were not the same students who reported being saddened by their own as well as those written by classmates described in the foregoing description of the results shown on table 2. In the main, those students who found the method to be too time consuming were identical with those who found the use of narratives to be too strong in the classroom.¹¹ But this is a tiny group who reject using the method basing their arguments partially with reference to emotional factors (too strong) and partially with reference to practical concerns (too time consuming).

Table 3 Evaluating the Method's Features (percentage and mean)³

	No	Partly	Yes	Mean
- It was too time consuming first to write, then to go	82	10	8	1.7
- through the narrative in groups, and finally present				
- them in the classroom plenary				
-				
- Working with narratives in this way was useful as I	6	18	76	4.0
- see it				
-				
- It can be too demanding to use such negative				
- experiences, student narratives shouldn't be used	82	18	-	1.7
-				
- I recommend greater use of student narratives in	16	28	56	3.6
- teaching				

Approximately 60 percent of the students felt that the experiences they had would lead them to recommend that student narratives be made more use of in teaching. One third of the students would recommend this to some degree, while 16 percent would not recommend this pedagogic form.

² Sign<.01-level, r=.559

¹¹ Sign<.01-level, r=.620

Discussion and Conclusion

Professional wisdom must include the ability to evaluate and to criticize one's own understandings and actions and by continually monitoring student experiences, this ability may be developed and privileged (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1986, Schön 1987). As we see it, including students' own narratives linked to themes in mental health both illustrates theory as well as contributes to reflections about their own praxis. The ability to see processes in and of themselves as well as in relationships is especially important for those working in this field. By drawing upon their own experiences and experiential knowledge, students can be better equipped to understand their own situations and be more open to deeper understandings of what diverse phenomena involve (Van Manen 1990).

As I see it, the ethical caution needed to be exercised in such a program as the one described here need not set limits for narratives presented by this kind of student group. In order to help those experiencing psychological distress, one is required to be equipped with a great capacity for relating to feelings, both one's own as well as those of others. All strong emotional experiences involve a storehouse of dormant feelings and these may be activated by telling tales about what has happened (Skumsnes 1997). It is therefore the teacher's role to make room for these reactions, to normalize them and to give them the status they deserve as relevant materials within the field being explored. Feelings are also facts in this structure. They are bound up in the field of praxis and provide color to the narratives, which in turn can be useful in examining the theoretical perspectives in focus.

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