

Narrative Learning

**Ivor F. Goodson, Gert J.J. Biesta,
Michael Tedder and Norma Adair**

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‘For Martin Bloomer, Committed Educator’

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1 Introduction

Life, narrative and learning

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard has famously said that life must be lived forwards but can only be understood backwards. The question we ask in this book is how people come to develop such understandings and what the significance of such understandings is for how they live their lives. The focus of this book is on stories: on the stories people tell about their lives and the stories they tell about themselves. Such stories are not entirely optional. It is not that we can simply choose to have or not to have them. In a very fundamental sense we exist and live our lives ‘in’ and ‘through’ stories. When we are born, we enter into a world full of stories: the stories of our parents, our generation, our culture, our nation, our civilisation, and so on. Over time we begin to add our own stories and through this may alter the stories that have been told about who and what we are. When we die the stories of our lives continue in the stories of others. Stories have the potential to provide our lives with continuity, vivacity and endurance. They can create a past of which we have memories and a future about which we have hopes and fears and can thus bring about a sense of the present in which our lives are lived. Stories can give our lives structure, coherence and meaning, or they can provide the backdrop against which we experience our lives as complex, fragmented or without meaning. Stories do not just provide us with a *sense* of who we are. To a large extent the stories about our lives and ourselves *are* who we are. Where, after all, would we be, and what would we be, without stories?

We tell stories in different contexts and settings, for different reasons and purposes and with different outcomes and effects. Many of our stories are closely interwoven with our everyday lives. They consist of brief exchanges, short anecdotes, things we want to share with others, either for a particular purpose or just for the sake of sharing. Some stories are factual and descriptive; others express our experiences and feelings. And while most stories are about something – an event, an experience, an encounter, a person – they always also express something about ourselves, even if it is only our particular perspective on the situation. Stories serve the purpose of communication;

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either communication with others or communication with ourselves, such as in the case of diaries or in our 'internal conversations': our musings, thoughts and daydreams. Sometimes our stories become more reflective and evaluative. This can happen when we begin to ask why certain things in our lives went the way they went, or when we are trying to understand why we acted in a particular way, why we have chosen to do A rather than B, and so on. For some people such reflections come naturally; with others they are triggered by particular events in their lives: by transitions and crises, when normal patterns are interrupted. The stories we construct about ourselves and our lives in such situations can help us to find new meaning and new direction or can support us in coming to terms with the way things are and with who we are. Whilst the way we tell stories is often episodic – focusing on an event or experience – some people develop storylines around which they cluster, relate and re-present the experiences and events of everyday living. Such storylines can become life stories.

The stories we tell about our lives and ourselves can play an important role in the ways in which we can learn from our lives. Such learning, in turn, can be important for the ways in which we live our lives. But the relationship between life, self, story and learning is a complicated one. It is not that the story is just a description of the life and the self, a kind of picture we can look at in order to learn from it. In a very real sense the story *constitutes* the life and the self. Life and self are thus at the same time 'object' and 'outcome' of the story. What complicates the matter further is that the self is also the author of the story. All this means that the *construction* of the story – the *storying* of the life and the self – is a central 'element' of the learning process. In this book we refer to the ways in which we learn from life through storying as *narrative learning* (for this term as initially developed by Goodson and employed herein see Goodson 2006). Narrative learning is not simply learning *from* the stories we tell about our lives and ourselves. It is learning that happens 'in' and 'through' the narration. The stories we tell about our lives and ourselves are therefore to a large extent already the result of such learning processes (see Tedder and Biesta 2009[a]), although it is important to see that in most cases such stories remain unfinished – they are part of ongoing narrative construction and reconstruction.

Since storying is an integral part of how we lead our lives, narrative learning is not necessarily or exclusively a conscious process. Moreover, because stories serve a communicative purpose, narrative learning is often a kind of 'by-product' of our ongoing actions, interactions and conversations. It is only in more exceptional circumstances that we engage deliberately in narrative construction in order to learn from it. This can happen, for example, in adult education programmes that focus on autobiographical work (see, for example, Dominicé 2000; Van Houten 1998; Rossiter and Clark 2007). It can also play a

role in forms of psycho-therapy. In this book we are primarily interested in narrative learning as it occurs 'spontaneously', that is, 'in' and 'through' the stories people tell about themselves and their lives without a particular intention to learn from such storying. The stories we present in this book were collected in the Learning Lives project. In this project a group of researchers from the UK conducted repeated interviews with 117 adults aged between 25 and 84 over a three-year period. The interviews were open-ended and used a combination of life-history and life-course approaches in order to gain an understanding of the past and the ongoing present of the participants' lives. All interviews were organised around the simple but crucial question: 'Can you tell me about your life?'

One of the advantages of life *story* research is that it can access the long tradition of work in the life *history* genre, both in the field of adult learning (see, for example, West *et al.* 2007) and in the social sciences more generally (see, for example, Chamberlayne *et al.* 2000). This tradition, with its roots in anthropology, sociology, phenomenology and hermeneutics, has employed life histories as data for over a century. Hence many of the methodological issues have been, if not resolved, at least confronted and discussed (see Goodson and Sikes 2001). The focus of this book, however, is not on life history work as such but on the ways in which people *learn* from their lives 'in' and 'through' the stories they tell about their lives. The focus of this book, in short, is on *learning* and we engage with people's life stories through the lens of narrative. Whereas narrative approaches have been developed and come to fruition in a range of disciplines – including political science, psychology, sociology and economics (see Czarniawska 2004: 3) – there has been relatively little attention to narrative and learning in education and adult education (notable exceptions being Hopkins 1994; McEwan and Egan 1995; and, in the field of adult education, Rossiter 1999; Rossiter and Clark 2007). In North America a good deal of work has focused on the use of narrative in education but without explicit reference to the meaning of the significance of narratives for learning (see Connelly and Clandinin 1990; Clandinin and Connelly 1991). The ambition of this book, therefore, is to cover some new ground through an exploration of the interconnections between life, narrative and learning.

The ideas and insights presented in this book stem from extensive engagement with the data collected through interviews in the Learning Lives project. The stories the participants in the project shared with us were essential for developing our understanding of the relationships between life, narrative and learning. This is why the major part of this book is devoted to the presentation, discussion and analysis of these stories. Even within a book-length account we can only present a small portion of the wealth of material available. We have decided to focus on the stories of eight of the participants in the project, albeit

that our understanding of narrative learning has been developed on the basis of the study of a much larger number of participants (see Biesta *et al.* 2008). By confining ourselves to these eight cases we are able to present a more detailed account of the stories and, through this, of the individuals who presented themselves in their stories to us, although even in this way we can still only present a selection of the interview data. The main reason for selecting the eight cases is that they provide the kind of variety needed to develop our argument about the relationships between life, narrative and learning and to present the outlines of our theory of narrative learning. We return to the selection of cases in the final section of this chapter.

The book is organised in the following way. In this introductory chapter we set out the main parameters for our explorations. We start with some information about the Learning Lives project in order to give the reader a sense of the wider context of our work and of some of the methodological aspects of the project. Next we provide a discussion of ideas from narrative theory in order to give a more precise meaning to the notions of ‘narrative’ and ‘narration’. Against this background we then present the analytical framework we will be using throughout this book. This framework focuses on the ‘narrative quality’ of life stories and life storying and on relationships between narrative quality, learning and action. Our aim has not only been to identify significant differences in the narrative quality of the stories people tell and the storying they are engaged in, but also to get a sense of what people actually do with their stories and storying, both in terms of what they can *learn* from stories and storying and in terms of how this learning may or may not ‘translate’ into *action*. Our wider ambition has been to develop a theory of narrative learning that brings together the different dimensions of our analysis and sheds light on the different relationships between narrative quality, learning and action. In the concluding chapter of this book we present the outlines of this theory.

Before we start, however, we must make some important provisos. The ambition of this book is to explore the potential of the stories people tell about their lives for the ways in which they might learn from and for their lives. This and nothing more than this is what we aim to do in the chapters that follow. We are therefore not suggesting that people ought to have stories, and even less that they ought to learn from their lives and ought to do so by using stories. We are aware that people can live good, happy and rewarding lives without learning, without stories and without narrative learning. As a matter of fact, in the chapters that follow we will encounter some individuals for whom talking about their life was actually a rather artificial experience, something that didn’t come to them naturally. We might therefore compare the stories people tell about their lives to a tool – a tool people can use to learn from and for their lives. Our focus in this book is on the qualities and characteristics of this tool

as we aim to understand how stories with different ‘narrative quality’ allow for different ways of learning and different ways of acting. While it is interesting to ask *why* different individuals tell different kinds of stories and do different things with them, these are not the questions we aim to address in this book. Similarly, there are important sociological questions to be asked about the different ways in which individuals engage with stories, narrative and learning and about the crucial social patterns that can be discerned, but these are also beyond the scope of what we aim to do in this book. The main reason for our focus is that we do not have the data that would allow us to engage with these questions in any depth. Our data, after all, are narrative data, not explicitly at least psychological or sociological data. Our ambition with this book, in other words, is to contribute to the development of a theory of *learning*, not a theory of living.

The Learning Lives project

The individuals whose stories we present and discuss in this book were all interviewed as part of the Learning Lives project, a four-year longitudinal study into the learning biographies of adults. The project was conducted between 2004 and 2008 by a team of researchers from the universities of Stirling, Brighton, Leeds and Exeter. The stated aim of the Learning Lives project was to deepen understanding of the complexities of learning in the life-course whilst identifying, implementing and evaluating strategies for sustained positive impact upon learning opportunities, dispositions and practices and upon the empowerment of adults. More generally our ambition was to investigate what learning ‘means’ and ‘does’ in the lives of adults. To this effect we used a broad conception of learning in order to include learning in the context of formal education and work-settings and learning in and from everyday life. Within these different contexts we took a biographical approach (see also Alheit 1995, 2005), focusing on individual adults and their biographies and trajectories, rather than focusing on the characteristics of the institutional contexts.

For the purposes of the project we approached learning as having to do with the ways in which individuals *respond* to events in their lives, often in order to gain control over parts of their lives (see Ranson *et al.* 1996; Antikainen *et al.* 1996; Biesta 2006). Such responses might take a number of quite different forms, ranging from adaptive to more active, creative or generative. To understand learning as having to do with the ways in which people respond to events in their lives implies that it is seen as *contextually situated* (the individual interacting with and participating in the social and cultural milieu) and as having a *history* (both the individual’s life history and the history of the practices and institutions in and through which learning takes place). The events to which

individuals respond may be *structured* transitions or they may be changes of a more *incidental* nature, including critical incidents such as redeployment or illness. Many such events stimulate encounters with new formal and informal learning opportunities. They can also result in forms of tacit learning of which individuals sometimes only become aware (long) after the event. Learning also occurs, however, in relation to the routines of everyday life, where 'turning points' are not immediately discernible (see also Ecclestone *et al.* 2009).

Over a period of 36 months we conducted a total of 528 interviews with 117 people, 59 male and 58 female, aged between 25 and 84 at the first interview. The average number of interviews was four to five, but in a small number of cases we conducted up to eight or nine interviews. Most interviews lasted for about two hours. The interviews, which used a combination of life-history and life-course approaches, explored the life histories of the participants and tracked their lives over a period of about 36 months. In addition we analysed data from the British Household Panel Survey, an annual panel survey of each adult member of a nationally representative sample of 5,500 British households (comprising approximately 10,000 individuals per wave). Researchers were guided by the research ethics code of the British Educational Research Association. We ensured that participants understood the nature of the research and that they were aware that they could withdraw from the project at any time. We asked for signed consent for participation and the subsequent use of data for academic publication. Participants used self-chosen pseudonyms (except where they insisted on using their own names). We omitted sensitive data where publication might be harmful to participants and anonymised background data in order to protect participants from possible recognition.

The first interviews we conducted with each participant focused on the life history ('Can you tell me about your life?'); subsequent interviews increasingly focused on ongoing events in the lives of interviewees. Interviewers took an open approach, asking for clarification and elaboration, with progressive focusing on key project interests and themes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and checked by the interviewer. Transcripts were made available to the participants; they were not required to read or check them. In the final interview participants were asked about their experiences of taking part in the project. They were invited to comment on the experience of being asked periodically to talk about their life and, in those cases where they had read transcripts from previous interviews, to comment on that experience as well. A large number of participants indicated that they had 'enjoyed' being interviewed and used positive language about their experience of taking part in the project. There were comments about the process being 'thought-provoking' or giving 'food for thought' and some spoke specifically about reflection and

the value found in being given an opportunity to reflect on their experiences with an interested listener.

Responses to the transcripts were more varied. Our approach had been to produce full transcripts that included redundant words and sounds, including hesitation features such as ‘ums’ and ‘errs’ and discourse particles like ‘you know’ or ‘I mean’, as well as non-syntactical sentences. Indications were also given of pauses and distractions. We found that some of the participants never read the transcripts, whilst others were delighted to have a printed record. Most participants, however, found reading the transcripts an uncomfortable experience – but primarily for reasons of language and grammar than because of content. Several of the participants commented on different kinds of fear that the interviews had generated: fear associated with traumatic experiences recalled from the past; fear of the future; fear that the life portrayed in a transcript appeared boring. Although most had enjoyed the experience, at least one participant said that it was not an experience to be repeated.

The crucial element in our research concerns the ways in which the participants were able to narrate their life story. Such stories are not to be treated as an objective account of the facts of one’s life. Life stories are ‘lives interpreted and made textual’ and should therefore be seen as ‘a partial, selective commentary on lived experience’ (Goodson and Sikes 2001: 16). Given that the life story is the *current* interpretation of one’s past, the way in which a life is storied will crucially depend on the present. The ‘now’ is, in other words, always present in one’s story of the past. This is not to say that each different ‘now’ will produce a completely different life story. But people do adjust their interpretation and evaluation of their past in the light of new experiences. Current experiences of success, for example, may lead to a quite different account of one’s past than current experiences of failure. It is not just the present *situation* which influences one’s understanding of the past. The way in which people *understand and articulate* their present situation is important as well. It is, in other words, not just the ‘now’ that is always present in one’s story of the past; it is also one’s *story of the ‘now’* that impacts on one’s story of the past. But just as the present and our understanding of the present influence our stories and interpretations of the past, the past also impacts on the present. Past events do both enable and restrict our opportunities to act in the present. In this respect we can say that the past is present in the ‘now’. It is not only the way in which the past enables and restricts what is possible in the present that is important. The past also influences our *understanding* of the present and our ability to articulate and narrate the present, just as our stories of our past and our ability to make sense of our past influence the present and the stories we tell of it. The longitudinal character of the Learning Lives project allowed us to collect stories about the past and stories about the ongoing present. Through this we were

able to deepen understanding of the complex interplay of retrospective and contemporaneous dimensions of narrative and narration and it is this which provided us with a unique outlook for the study of learning through the life-course.

Narrative and narration

In his work on narrative, Jerome Bruner (1990) has argued that human beings have two modes of thought or types of cognition or rationality: *paradigmatic* (or *logico-scientific*) *cognition* and *narrative cognition*. Paradigmatic cognition is the process whereby we classify a particular event as belonging to a category or concept and establish the connections between categories and concepts. Such thinking brings order to the complexities of experience by enabling a person to see how individual things belong to categories, what qualities are held in common, and how categories relate to each other. Narrative cognition, on the other hand, starts from the recognition that human action is the outcome of interaction between a person's previous learning and experiences, their present-situated pressures, and their proposed goals and purposes. It focuses on the particular and special characteristics of each action. Narrative cognition is a process through which we can understand the temporal and structural coherence of an individual situated story. Bruner claims that all cultures have such forms of thinking but that different cultures privilege them differently. Western societies in particular have tended to privilege paradigmatic cognition over narrative cognition.

Bruner's views on narrative are closely connected to his notion of 'folk psychology' (see Bruner 1990). Bruner defines folk psychology as 'a set of more or less connected, more or less normative descriptions about how human beings "tick," what our own and other minds are like, what one can expect situated action to be like, what are possible modes of life, how one commits oneself to them, and so on' (ibid.: 35). Folk psychology is related to Harold Garfinkel's notion of 'ethnomethodology' (Garfinkel 1967, 2002) in that it is an approach which focuses on 'the social and political and human distinctions that people [make] in their everyday lives' rather than using 'the classical sociological method – positing social classes, roles, and so on *ex hypothesi*' (Bruner 1990: 37). Folk psychology is thus interested in the *reasons* for human action rather than the *causes* of human behaviour. 'Folk psychology is about human agents doing things on the basis of their beliefs and desires, striving for goals, meeting obstacles which they best or which best them, all of this extended over time' (ibid.: 42–43). Agency is therefore central to folk psychology. 'At their core, all folk psychologies contain a surprisingly complex notion of an agentive Self' (ibid.: 41).

The organising principle of folk psychology is 'narrative rather than conceptual' (ibid.: 35). As Donald Polkinghorne (1995: 5) explains: 'Narrative descriptions exhibit human activity as purposeful engagement in the world. Narrative is the type of discourse composition that draws together diverse events, happenings, and actions of human lives into thematically unified goal-directed purposes.' Whilst acknowledging that there are multiple uses of the term 'narrative', Polkinghorne favours conceptualising narrative as a *story* in which the distinctive feature is a *plot* (see Polkinghorne 1988; see also Brooks 1984; Booker 2004; Ricoeur 1991). A plot serves as 'a type of conceptual scheme by which a contextual meaning of individual events can be displayed' (Polkinghorne 1995: 7).

Plots function to compose or configure events into a story by: (a) delimiting a temporal range which marks the beginning and end of the story, (b) providing criteria for the selection of events to be included in the story, (c) temporally ordering events into an unfolding movement culminating in a conclusion, and (d) clarifying or making explicit the meaning events have as contributors to the story as a unified whole.

(ibid.: 7)

A plot thus provides temporal structuring and ordering of a story and enables the selection of events for their relevance in the story. However, causal linkages are likely to be recognised only in retrospect and the significance of any particular event may not become evident until a moment of denouement.

Bruner makes a similar point when he emphasises the *sequential nature of narratives*. He explains that 'a narrative is composed of a unique sequence of events, mental states, happenings involving human beings as characters or actors' (Bruner 1990: 43). The constituents of a narrative derive their meaning from the overall configuration of the sequence as a whole, which is the plot of the narrative. The act of grasping a narrative is therefore a dual one: 'the interpreter has to grasp the narrative's configuring plot in order to make sense of its constituents . . .; but the plot configuration must be extracted from the succession of events' (ibid.: 43–44). According to Bruner narratives are also characterised by their *factual indifference*. A narrative can be real or imaginary 'without loss of its power as a story' (ibid.: 44). This is not to suggest that it is impossible to make a distinction between fictional and factual narratives, but rather to highlight 'the structural kinship' between the two forms of narrative (see ibid.: 52).

With regard to the question *why* we construct narratives, Bruner claims that they are only constructed 'when constituent beliefs in a folk psychology are violated' (ibid.: 35). Bruner refers to this as the 'canonical status' of folk

psychology, which has to do with the fact that folk psychology ‘summarises not simply how things are but (often implicitly) how they should be’ (ibid.: 39–40). This means that narratives specialise in ‘the forging of links between the exceptional and the ordinary’ (ibid.: 47). At the level of cultures Bruner argues that each culture must not only contain a set of norms, but it must also contain ‘a set of interpretative procedures for rendering departure from those norms meaningful in terms of established patterns of belief’ (ibid.). The function of narratives is precisely ‘*to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from canonical cultural patterns*’ (ibid.: 49–50; emphasis in original).

According to Bruner it is not only at the level of cultures that narratives perform a justificatory role. The same ‘quality’ can be found at the level of the narratives of individuals, that is, in the stories individuals tell about themselves and their lives. Bruner emphasises that such autobiographical accounts are not simply descriptions of one’s life; they rather should be understood as accounts ‘of what one thinks one did in what settings in what ways for what felt reasons’ (ibid.: 119). Narratives are thus based on the principle of ‘justification by exceptionality’ (ibid.: 121). They reveal ‘a strong rhetorical strand, as if justifying why it was necessary (*not* causally, but morally, socially, psychologically) that the life had gone in a particular way.’ (ibid.). The self as narrator therefore ‘not only recounts but [also] justifies’ (ibid.).

This means that narration is not only about the construction of a particular ‘version’ of one’s life; it is at the same time a construction of (a particular version of) the self. Bruner refers to Polonoff’s idea that the self of a life ‘is a product of our narrative rather than some fixed but hidden “thing” that was its referent’ (ibid.: 112). The self, as Polkinghorne puts it, ‘is not a static thing or a substance, but a configuring of personal events into a historical unity which includes not only what one has been but also anticipations of what one will be’ (Polkinghorne, quoted in Bruner 1990: 116). Narrating one’s life story can therefore be understood as the act of constructing what Bruner refers to as ‘a longitudinal version of the Self’ (Bruner 1990: 120). Although narratives are constructed, such constructions are not totally free. They are constrained ‘by the events of the life’ but also ‘by the demands of the story the teller was in the process of constructing’ (ibid.: 120). At the centre of each autobiography we are therefore likely to find ‘a protagonist Self in process of construction: whether active agent, passive experiencer, or vehicle of some ill-defined destiny’ (ibid.: 121).

The self is not only the object or product of the narrative but at the very same time the subject of narration. Narratives inevitably have ‘something approximating a narrator’s perspective’ – they cannot be ‘voiceless’ (ibid.: 77). This is the reason why there is ‘something curious’ about autobiography in that