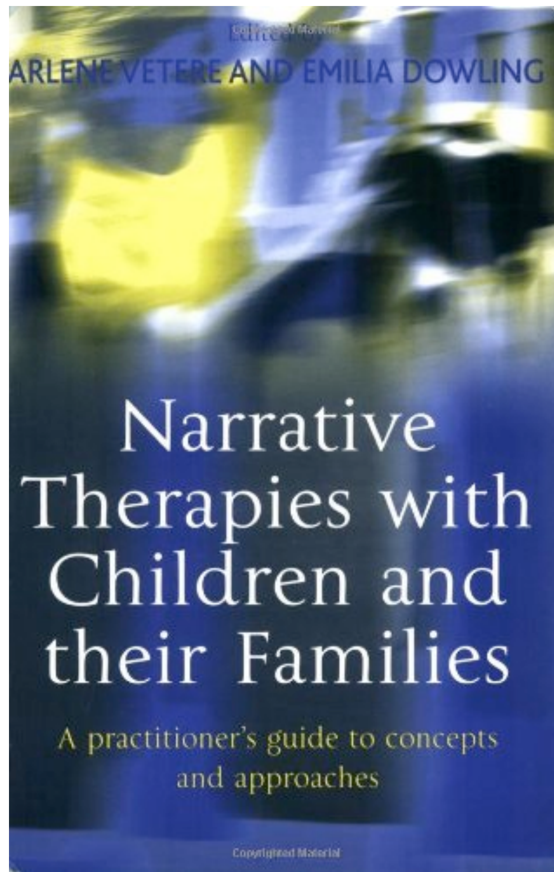

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Narrative work in schools

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This chapter offers an account of the use of narrative ideas and approaches by two practitioners in different but overlapping relationships with schools. We describe some of our understandings and practice, but also argue that the particular stance on narrative we adopt has transformational potential, a capacity for making connections, and the power to illuminate core processes of schooling.

Since "the narrative turn" in the human sciences, we find the term narrative used in very many ways, but with significant differences. We position the particular stance on narrative which best describes our understanding and our intentions on the following brief map of the field. Uses of the term vary on two aspects: location and level. First, location: by this term we aim to highlight the different "places" that authors and practitioners seem to think that narrative is located. We suggest three places – in texts, in accounts, and in all life and action.

Literary texts have long been analysed for their construction through various types of narrative, its components and devices. Locating narrative in texts is not limited to literary theory. The story-telling of young children across countries and cultures displays different narrative conventions, which are viewed as reflecting qualitative differences in children's life worlds (Carlsson et al., 2001). And this overall stance has been applied to professional life, suggesting that, for example, social work may be analysed in terms of the way that its texts are constructed (Hall, 1998) or that medical knowledge may be understood in its narrative structure (Hunter, 1993). Helping interventions based on the "narrative in texts" stance include bibliotherapy where others' texts are selected and recommended for their therapeutic potential.

Narrative is sometimes located in a writer's account of their experience (in contrast with other's experience or fictional accounts above). Examples include life-history accounts, the lives of children (Engel, 1999) and teachers' lives (Thomas, 1995). On a smaller scale the professional lives of school psychologists, as reflected in narrative journals, have been analysed in themes of affiliation and isolation

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(Henningstout and Bonner, 1996). Helping interventions from this stance on narrative utilise the increased reflection which can follow the writing of accounts.

The third location for narratives is in all life and action. This stance is reflected in phrases such as “the storied nature of human conduct” (Sarbin, 1986). Here the focus is not a text, nor a separately analysed account of experience, but the idea that all human experience is understood through stories and enacted through stories. Bruner (1987) uses the phrase “life as narrative” to indicate the view that we organize our experience of human happenings in the form of narrative. Story-telling is life-making: we are our stories: “a life as led is inseparable from a life as told” (page 31). The way that human intelligence is organized in terms of stories is one of the major understandings to emerge from decades of research on artificial intelligence (Schank, 1995). The stance, which may be abbreviated as the narrative construction of reality, is a special case of the wider perspective called social constructionism. This perspective holds that knowledge, social relations and life forms are created through human interaction rather than being provided by some external reality or based on some objective view. It stands in contrast with dominant ways of thinking, and Bruner (1985) proposes that narrative modes of thought are irreconcilable with the dominant categorical modes of thought. White (2001) describes his narrative stance as non-structuralist and contrasts the terms by which an individual is understood in contrast to the dominant, structuralist ideas of the 20th century:

Structuralist Identity Categories	Non-Structuralist Identity Categories
Behaviour	Action
Needs	Conscious Purposes
Properties	Commitments
Personality	Values
Assets, strengths	Dreams
Motives	Hopes
Weaknesses, deficits	Visions
Attributes	Intentions
Drives	Preferences
Resources	Plans
Characteristics	Aspirations

Helping interventions which adopt this stance are likely to stand alongside White’s (1995) phrase of “re-authoring lives” and to adopt narrative therapy's key orientations and practices (e.g. notions of voice and power, influence mapping, problem externalization, exception stories, audiencing). These will be illuminated later.

Our second dimension for mapping the various uses of narrative is that of level. Here we value the fact that the term narrative is sometimes applied to an individual (as in life-history), sometimes to a family, sometimes to an organisation, and sometimes to large social groups such as “children” or to whole societies. What is to be made of such diversity? One answer is to embed individual in family or organisation and then again in society. The hazard here is to invoke an unanalysed notion of hierarchy,

where “larger” levels are subtly attributed larger power and even homogeneity. The constructive alternative may be developed from the work of Pearce and Cronen (1980). In any utterance or collection of utterances it should be possible to listen for narratives at any level - individual/family/organisation/culture – and it is not necessary to place these in a relationship of hierarchical power All of us are multi-voiced and can speak with the voice of family, organisation, and society (both dominant and non-dominant modes). So each of these levels can be viewed horizontally, that is, as contexts for one another (Hoffman, 1992).

In our practice we adopt the ubiquitous multilevel stance on narrative, and consider this choice no coincidence given the context of our work with complex human systems and their values.

The Educational Psychologist and her context

Educational Psychologists working in local education authorities describe their role as applying psychology to finding solutions to complex questions in educational settings. Such questions are often presented by schools and teachers as problems residing in individual children or young people, sometimes in groups and less often as concerns at the organisational level. Yet these levels are embedded and replicated one in the other and are most usefully conceptualised when those connections are made overt. The family, however, is often seen as the origin of problems of individual children in schools. Government initiatives encourage the identification of individual children for special provision or programmes, so that individuals become the centre of attention, explanations that are within-the-person come to predominate and deficits and labels abound. In such a context, concepts of narrative and related practice is immensely powerful in creating alternative viewpoints and realities.

My teaching experience, training as an EP at the Tavistock Clinic, and further training at the Institute of Family Therapy in London, has led systemic thinking to be an important part of my way of trying to make sense of concerns that arise in social systems, whether schools, classrooms or families. The inter-relating systems of school, family, local education authority, local community, and local services and agencies, within the wider political, social and technical system make up my context and consequently, systemic thinking, in particular, has been significant in providing a guiding framework (Wagner, 1995). Collaborative, solution focused consultation based on interactionist and systemic understanding has been a grounding for my engagement as an E.P. in my consultation work with schools, teachers and families (Wagner and Gillies, 2001), and post-structural narrative developments have taken that thinking and practice to a different place. Ideas about narrative described by Bruner (1986) and about social constructionism (Burr, 1995 and Gergen, 1991), developed in practice by White and Epston (1990), Nylund (2000) and Morgan (1999 & 1999), have been inspirational.

The narrative metaphor proposes that everyone lives a multi-storied life. Consequently, no *one* story can speak the totality of a person’s lived experience.

However, single stories can come to dominate and these single stories are often problem-saturated stories about loss, incompetence and vulnerability etc. They can then come to constitute the totality of a person's life in a way that creates a dead-end and a restriction. Narrative work aims to uncover the stories of skills, competence, resilience and strengths so that a person can tell themselves a different story and in so doing bring to light that different story and see themselves differently. The act of deconstructing the dominant story of deficit and uncovering and celebrating a more explicit story about competence is the crucial act. In this way, narrative therapists focus on the construction of reality moment by moment in interaction.

Alternative stories of competence are often needed when working with school-based difficulties. Terms such as low self-esteem, attention seeking, dysfunctional, disruptive, hyper-active, disaffected, depressed, anti-social, at risk, vulnerable have become common currency in our schools. This discourse of deficit discredits the individual, drawing attention to problems, shortcomings, weaknesses or incapacities, which then attract a corrosive and spiralling process of negative attributions. In this course of events, expectations are reduced and disapproval increases. Teachers and parents have often been inducted into such negative terms, and the thin stories that accompany them and the children and young people who are the subjects of such labels and stories have little power to reverse the story that is told. A constructionist stance holds that a discourse of deficit promotes continuing and escalating difficulties, whereas a discourse of competence, strength and resilience promotes the amplification of those very qualities. Narrative therapy provides key practices for uncovering stories of competence and skill, and then thickening those stories. The processes of externalising the problem and developing alternative stories of competence are crucial in the following story of a consultation in which the initial concern focused on an individual.

A thin story of boredom, disaffection and dyslexia versus a story of engagement and success

Dion was raised as a concern in consultation with the school's E.P. when he was 8 years old, after a term in year 3. He had joined nursery class aged three and a half and was described as settling well into school. He was one of a few children of Afro-Caribbean heritage in a school with an ethnically mixed population. The school was appropriately welcoming of pupils and families of all ethnicities and pupils achieved well. Dion was described as an active, bright, verbally articulate and happy child who loved construction, music and stories. In reception class Dion's teachers were puzzled, as he did not progress as they expected in literacy skills. Dion was to them a "bright" child who should do well. He had an advantaged background. When he was in year 1, aged six, Dion's parents separated, and put in place cooperative arrangements for sharing care of Dion and his brother.

By Year 3 the teachers felt that something more needed to be done: the school were concerned that he was not making progress as expected, especially in reading and writing. His teachers viewed him as fast becoming a disaffected child, who did not seem interested in class-based learning. By this time, Dion had been given

substantial amounts of additional help in class as well as sessions out of class to help him with his reading, with a teacher who had a qualification in teaching children who had a diagnosis of dyslexia. The school reported Dion's parents as keen to be very supportive to Dion and the school, and they too were of the view that Dion might have dyslexic-type difficulties, especially since his father had had difficulties in learning to read. Dion's younger brother had joined the nursery class and was progressing well and finding reading easy. It seemed, therefore, that the difficulties were specific to Dion. He was not making progress and had become more and more 'switched off' in class, to the point where his behaviour was becoming a cause for concern.

Up to this time two stories had developed in school to 'explain' Dion's difficulties. One was the "dyslexic story", supported by the view that Dion's father had literacy difficulties in school. However, investigation of Dion's literacy difficulties was inconclusive, other than he was, clearly, very behind. In that sense, at least, everyone agreed that he was dyslexic. The other "disaffection story" included worries from his parents about what would happen as Dion got older and went to secondary school. At this point there was little that illuminated Dion's competencies and skills in a positive light and an emphasis on his ability to avoid learning and create disruptive effects in class, which fed the disaffection story. There was a depressed air in the stories about Dion that forecast a school career of prolonged failure and disaffection, and a view developing that a formal statement of special educational needs would be required.

The concept of self-defeating stories that make problems insoluble seemed to be operating. Dion appeared to have taken somewhat of a stance against the dyslexic story, by rejecting the attribution of reading difficulties. He had said how he did not care about reading and how it was 'boring' and not for him. This might be seen in systemic terms as creating a supportive link with his father and providing a bridge between his estranged parents, which brought them together as caring and co-operative parents over the concern about Dion's reading. In areas such as practical construction, storytelling and music making Dion had a very positive view of himself: he rejected the one thing that did not make him feel good about himself. Dion's disengaged approach to anything to do with reading and writing meant that he could not progress in a school system predicated on those skills.

Systemic and interactionist practice, aims to take account of the perspectives of all the key players: the school, the family, the individual, and other agencies as appropriate, and bring these perspectives together to develop an explanation of the concern, and to explore stories of competence and possibilities that construct a different reality. On this occasion the school and family meanings for dyslexia were important, and how they might have helped as well as hindered progress. It became clear that the label "dyslexia" (which stood for a difficulty in learning to read) had, indeed, been helpful to the school, the parents and to Dion, since it helped everyone feel that Dion's difficulties were not due to any fault on his part, but to his dyslexia. This meant that no one felt blamed. The down side was that everyone now accepted

that Dion's dyslexia meant that he would be very slow to progress and that this "explained" his lack of progress in spite of skilled help in school.

In class, Dion was not acting as an engaged and active learner when the learning involved anything to do with literacy. He tended not to start unless prompted by an adult and then he acted as if he thought he could not do what was presented to him, even though it was within his current capacity. He tended not to get involved with other children in talking about the topic when any reading or writing was involved and, at those times, he seemed generally disinterested. As a result he was not motivated by learning with other children. And, as a way of engaging with other children, he tended to distract them when they were absorbed. This strategy of social engagement was causing difficulties with the other children as well as with the teacher as it was hindering the planned learning. When asked about his learning, Dion had told his teacher that he was mostly bored in class.

When a child says "I'm bored" or "It's boring", the tendency is for this to be viewed as a pejorative statement which is then sometimes taken as a comment on the teacher, the teaching style, the curriculum and curriculum differentiation, as well as on the learner and his approach to learning. In any blame game around boredom, however, there is a tendency for the pupil to come out with a label of lazy …. or worse!

The practice of externalising the problem aims to separate the problem from the child. Once everyone involved can see the problem as the problem, rather than the child being seen as the problem, then blame becomes less important and tends to evaporate. Dion was already clear that he was bored in class, so externalising the problem as boredom was not difficult. Once the problem has a name then questions can help to separate it further from the child and help the child to see its effects and then begin to work out how to avoid it, trick it, or otherwise overcome it. For example:

"So, how long has boredom been around?"
"Can you spot boredom coming? How? Does it creep up on you slowly or spring up suddenly?"
"What does boredom look like?"
"How does boredom distract you when you're in class"
"What does boredom tell you to do.. not do?"
"How do you feel when boredom is around you?"
"Is there ever a time when boredom isn't around, what's it like then?"
"Has there been a time when you've been able to ignore boredom? How did you do that?"

Children seem to find it very easy to externalise a problem and to discuss how such a problem can then be tackled. Dion described boredom as slipping in to the room and then sitting like a dark cloud on top of him, which made him feel 'not very happy'. When he felt this way he did not want to do what the teacher was asking him to do, but he still wanted to talk with the other children. Dion liked the idea of thinking about the things he could do to stop boredom from getting to him and was creative in thinking about ways to outwit it. This process helped Dion to establish more personal agency and control and, most importantly, it removed blame and deficit from the

picture and pitted Dion with his teacher and his classmates against boredom. Involving Dion's teacher and parents in this was an important part of the process so that they, too, could engage with him in externalising conversations, and help him to review the success of his strategies. A process which involved the other children in the class in constructing positive stories about their own learning, meant that Dion was not singled out in his class, but part of a whole class initiative to improve learning.

The practice of developing alternative stories of competence is crucial in deconstructing negative stories. Winslade and Monk (1999) describe this as "carefully assembling, with the client, a story line that is invigorating, colourful and compelling". The alternative story becomes more compelling and convincing when all the key players who share the concern are involved in its development. In a school context this includes the child, the people who work most closely with the child, and, ideally, the parents/carers. In this case, assembling a story of competence started with Dion's teachers and with Dion himself , and then continued with his teachers, parents and Dion all together.

Dion already had a lot of success in focused and engaged learning. These occasions, however, had been overlooked by the school and the family, as they were not occasions when traditional literacy skills were very evident. However, they were excellent examples of when Dion showed his capacity to be an active learner and to avoid any hint of boredom in class. By exploring these alternative stories about imagination, creativity, ingenuity, concentration and effort it was possible to build up a picture that began to challenge the power of the story of boredom and disaffection. Narrative work is very explicit about uncovering the events that help to create alternative stories of competence and skill. This practice is referred to as re-storying, a process through which alternative stories and rich pictures emerge via questions which reduce the potency of thin stories of deficit. White and Epston (1990), following Bruner (1986), describe two overlapping categories of questions in the process. The first is *Landscape-of-action questions*. These seek to identify exceptions to the problem story, and comprise mainly "when" and "how" questions, which are addressed to all the people, involved. For example:

"When does Dion show that he is able to keep himself interested?"
"What does he do to show that he is interested?"
"How do you explain that he is able to do that?"
"What might you or others be doing on those occasions to help him to be more interested and engaged?"

Questioning for exceptions resembles the practice of solution focused brief therapists (de Shazer 1982) and helps to convey that there are times when the problem is not present and that the child, therefore, has the power to overcome the problem. Asking school staff these questions about when and how Dion managed to focus his attention/avoid boredom helped to elucidate that he had these skills and capacities. Asking Dion similar 'when' and 'how' questions helped him to clarify that

he had many ways of being interested in class and that he could keep 'boredom' away when he wanted to.

The second category of re-storying questions is *Landscape-of-meaning questions*, which "encourage children and families to reflect on and give meaning to the positive developments that have occurred in the landscape of action. By asking the client to address, specifically, the meaning they are making about themselves or new events, we underscore the meaning of the new story and further expand the client's experience of their preferred identity." (Nylund, 2000: 132). These questions are equally meaningful and compelling when used with school staff and parents/carers. For example:

"What does it tell you about Dion that he is able to be so very focused in class on certain occasions?"

"What abilities and capacities do you see in Dion when he engages so positively?"

Through these practices the emerging story of competence and effort helped reduce the power of the boredom and disaffection story.

The third element in re-storying is Re-Membering, which places the child outside the problem identity, in this case "Dion is a disaffected and dyslexic child". Although the "dyslexia" story had helped everyone not feel blamed, its simplicity also veiled important ideas. As Ravenette (1968) puts it: "For every child with a specific handicap who cannot read, there are plenty more with the same handicap who can". Ravenette proposes that reading difficulty must be understood in terms of the child's construing of reading, of the reading task and of himself as a reader. Through the process of re-membering it emerged that Dion was a competent learner who had the attributes of what makes a good reader.

At this stage an important part of the family story emerged that helped everyone to make sense of how Dion's difficulties may have started. When Dion was a baby, his parents had separated, his mother returning to her home country, France, with Dion who was brought up for the next two years speaking only French. The family rejoined later in England, and Dion quickly picked up English at this time, to the extent that by the time he started in nursery class none of the difficulties were apparent which could have led Dion to receive help as a child with English as an additional language. It was unsurprising that Dion's literacy skills in English – especially those of reading and writing - did not emerge as quickly as some of the other children in his class who had English as a first language. Dion was a child who had succeeded easily with most of the things that he did, other than learning to read and write in English. He had found lack of success in learning to read very trying. His solution in the nursery had been to avoid literacy development skills and to excel in the areas in which he could excel and enjoy his competence. The avoidance trend only became noticeable as he progressed to reception, by which time he was becoming 'bored' and had developed a negative view of reading and of himself as reader. The fact that his little brother, who was born and brought up in England, found learning to read very easy compounded the difficulty for Dion. Added to all of this, Dion's father,

determined that Dion would not experience the difficulties he had experienced in learning to read, had alighted on ways of helping Dion that they both found stressful, as well as unsuccessful.

The last strand in putting together a different story about reading for Dion was to help Dion reclaim reading and writing as something that could be pleasurable, and which he could share with his parents as a competent reader. This was achieved by taking a language experience approach, (Goddard 1974), which utilised Dion's personal interests and enthusiasms to create books from stories which he dictated to a learning support assistant who had been trained in the approach. He was then able to learn to associate what he had said with the written word and could then read the story to others, to his teachers, classmates and parents, because the story was *his* story. In his way Dion could show he was not only a reader, but also an author. This was the last piece in the story that helped Dion become a successful reader and to progress well in school.

From this account of narrative work in consultation we now turn to consider the wider narratives that circulate in school contexts.

Addressing the narratives of schooling

As someone with a training in school counselling and a great interest in systemic intervention, narrative has formed an increasingly important part of many aspects of my practice and my theorising of the core processes of schools. The idea that narrative is the only form that humans have of relating lived experience (Ricoeur, 1989) has informed my now everyday use of the term "story". When meeting teachers applying for a course, my request "Tell me the story of how this application came about" gives rise to a more holistic and human account than anything created in response to clever interviewer questions. When helping teachers find their voice in the unusual activity of writing, the starter "Tell me the story of how the writing's going" provides a smooth entry into their priorities and challenges. Here the non-technical use of "story" seems perfectly acceptable and does not activate the voice of doubt, "it's only a story", which sometimes arises when adopting narrative as a research method.

Narrative concepts are of great value when viewing schools as human institutions as constructed by their members (Campbell, 2000) – even for illuminating what the forces of opposition are to that project! 21st century schools display many tensions in the stories they use to construct themselves as organisations and to maintain their daily practices. Recent decades have witnessed a new powerful voice in the picture, that of government control and specification. The effect has been that the stories of classroom life now show more resemblance with those from the earliest known classrooms in Sumerian society 5,000 years ago (Kramer, 1963): teacher control, learner passivity, pupil conflict and other phenomena associated with hierarchical control – people acting strategically in order to look good in the eyes of the surveillance agents.

But there is a better way, and it involves focusing on the very narratives of learning which are generally silent in classrooms. For organisations which are sometimes referred to as "seats of learning" the narratives of learning in schools are predominantly "thin". By this I mean they are of low complexity and low status. Because of this, to focus on narratives of learning is difficult at first, and soon speaks of the complex interplay between individual, familial, organisational and cultural narratives. But this recognition is ultimately more empowering than disempowering when held alongside the awareness that if our professional purpose is to help people get the most from themselves and their worlds then it is bound to challenge the patterns of privilege and power which the dominant narratives play a part in maintaining.

Three major narratives of learning

Many (but not all) young people start school with little explicit narrative for learning. Perhaps families tell their young people "you'll learn when you get to school" - another version of a "blank slate" metaphor. Schools are likely to compound this stance, since as the first socialising agency outside the family their practices are designed to help young people reproduce the routines of classroom life, and may underplay the role of a learner. Thus the dominant conception of learning is born: *"learning = being taught"* (Watkins, 2003). This conception is often clear when asking someone to tell you their story of an experience of learning: they tell you an experience of being taught and focus their story on what the teacher (or equivalent person) did. In this way the role of the teacher is privileged and the role of the learner is underplayed: learners become passive and ineffective, saying things about themselves such as "The best way I learn is by listening to the teacher but if there is noise around, the teacher's words just go through one ear and out the other" (Hamza, 11 years). This view in the voice of the learner is maintained by the dominant practices of school in the later years, in which teachers decide and plan the themes and processes of teaching which create the regular patterns of classroom experience. The story of "transmission", that children learn what teachers tell them, is embodied in views of curriculum and learners' narratives such as "I learn quickly and it stays in my head" (George). In this example the individual notion of the head as a container for learning is no coincidence; it is a key metaphor in the transmission view of things.

"Learning = being taught" is an example of a story which is both thin and stuck, maintaining itself over millennia probably supported by cultural assumptions about the relative roles of young and old, power relations, etc. Increasingly the systemic isomorphisms of this multilevel picture are clear: teachers in their turn are treated as infants. "Teachers regard students the way their superiors regard them - that is, as incapable of dealing responsibly with issues of power, even on the level of discussion" (Sarason, 1990: 83), Under these conditions the experience of classroom learning is disempowering for all, for not only is the activity of the pupil downplayed and discredited, so is the role of the teacher in human relationships dishonoured.

Learners who somehow start to notice and tell the story of their learning in terms of their own processes soon move on from the dominant cultural narrative and into individual empowerment: "The way I learn is to work it out by myself" (Emily). The act of focusing attention and meaning to one's own lived experiences of learning and one's own actions within them positions the learner in the centre of the narrative. In this way the learner becomes an active agent.

The narrative "*learning = individual sense-making*" highlights the human capacity for making meaning, and that of standing back from experience, so that reflection and review are important. Thinking about thinking (metacognition) becomes an element, as well as the wider capacity for learning about learning (meta-learning): both of these support the self-determining learner. Teachers who develop classroom practices along these lines become more guide on the side than sage on the stage, but experience increased tension with dominant cultural narratives. It may arise in the voice of the pupil: "Why don't you give us the right answer?", in the voice of the parent "just tell them when they've got it wrong", in the voice of the organisation "that class is getting noisy", or the wider system "you have not complied with delivering the prescribed curriculum". Yet the voice of research during the latter half of the 20th century gave so much evidence of the greater explanatory power this narrative has (Bruner, 1995).

The third narrative of learning is perhaps even less frequently evident in classrooms yet is evident in most elements of learning outside school and throughout life, including teachers' working lives. I abbreviate this to "*learning = building knowledge as part of doing things with others*". Although the title may seem cumbersome at first, adults soon recognise this as describing key features of their richest learning, in which the construction of new knowledge occurs in non-linear often unpredicted ways resulting from interaction with others on a task which was not chosen for learning something – a teachers' working group creating a policy, a group of photocopier technicians fixing a new model without ever opening the manual, a team of professionals devising new practice in relation to changing conditions, two people learning about mig-welding as they fix a LandRover. At a wider level this narrative can describe the processes of scientific communities, in which the testing of truth claims is more formalised.

Occasionally young learners narrate the core process of co-construction: "You learn more [when working with others] because if you explain to people what to do you say things that you wouldn't say to yourself, really. So you learn things that you wouldn't know if you were just doing it by yourself." (Annie, 10 years). Or more prosaically "Learning is cooperating" (William, 5 years).

Knowledge in this conception is much more situated than is suggested by the depersonalized and decontextualised version found in school curricula, Yet there are classrooms in which this stance operates, and they address current curricula in more successful fashion, with improved achievement, more engaged behaviour and more pro-social moral development (Watkins, 2004). It is no coincidence that the richest learning narratives are associated with the notion of a learning community: enriched

narratives honour more people, embrace diversity and support community processes.

How do learning narratives develop? Strategies for enrichment

To some degree the experience of schooling and the maturational processes which promote greater agency in growing children may contribute to learners taking more charge of their learning, and increasingly recognising the role of collaboration with others in it. But this seems to happen for those children who have always been privileged by schools, and cannot be attributed to the experience of classroom life when we know that a focus on learning may be happening at most 2% of the time. So classroom practices are needed which help pupils (a) notice (b) discuss, (c) reflect on, and (d) experiment with their lived experience of learning. These not only satisfy the drive for better results (Watkins, 2001) but also contribute to the development of classroom life along lines which may honestly be described as learning communities. In such settings pupils narration of their own learning becomes richer, more complex, and more reflexive as with the 10 year old girl who said:

> "I think learning is … you watch, and you teach yourself sometimes or other people or other objects help you, and you like listen, you watch, and you like add to what people say"

Within the creation of a broadly dialogic stance, strategies from narrative therapy take a key place. The very act of focusing on stories of lived experience forms an important antidote to the categorical forms dominantly used to describe learners (Bruner, 1985). Finding the exceptions to the thin stories which an individual learner tells of themselves (White and Epston, 1990) is a challenge which teachers embrace. The process of externalising difficulties (Huntley, 1999) is liberating for learners, and combats the worst effects of the "right answer" culture as told by the classroom poster from an Ealing school "Mistakes are our friends: they help us learn".

Barriers to narrative practice

Barriers to the wider adoption of a narrative stance exist, and I find it useful to think about them as yet another set of narratives. Given the power and dominance of categorical thinking, deterministic assumptions, and the idea of depersonalised knowledge, it would be unusual if there were no barriers to change. Often the processes of self-handicapping operate, as when teachers adopt the voice of disqualification to down-play their local knowledge of classroom life, and their stories of change and resistance: "It's not important" "It's only an anecdote" "It doesn't prove anything". Beyond these, I meet two particular sorts of stories that teachers tell (to themselves and to others) which stop them experimenting with alternative classroom practice:

a. "I'll be caught out"
- by a noisy classroom, by not looking like a teacher should look, by not "covering the curriculum", by my class getting poor measured performance

b. "It will all fall apart"
- I'll lose control of the classroom, this learning-centred is laissez-faire and has no role for the teacher, …

Each shows the ways in which the voice of fear does its life-negating work through exaggeration, over-stating each of the likelihoods of "you'll get caught" and "it will be dreadful", and creating a story which masks the real evidence. Nevertheless teachers do experiment, with support and with the vision that classrooms have to change. These people may seem to others to be acting confidently, but they are not immune to the voice of fear: they have learned that confidence is continuing to act in accordance with your principles while in the presence of the voice of fear.

The final barrier is an understandably powerful one – it is to go silent on learning and the developmental voicing of learners' narratives, so that the status quo returns. This would be a more common occurrence if it were not for the transformational effect which comes through teachers themselves experiencing the process themselves, noticing more about their own learning, putting aside the voices of judgement, and talking it over with their pupils. As an experienced teacher wrote last week: "You've helped me reinforce the belief that I can achieve success in learning. Your 'effective learning' course has increased my general confidence immensely. When I started I didn't believe that learning could change you as a person, but I do now!!!"

From individuals to families, organisations and wider systems a post-structuralist stance on narrative can prove transformational, and can offer an entry into addressing wider societal difficulties today (Smith, 2004). With awareness of the role of dominant narratives in society, a practice which is "against the grain" becomes more appropriate and more achievable.

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