What are the influences that govern how people view their worlds? What are the embedded values and practices that underpin the ways people think and act? Discourses We Live By approaches these questions through narrative research, in a process that uses words, images, activities or artefacts to ask people – either individually or collectively within social groupings – to examine, discuss, portray or otherwise make public their place in the world, their sense of belonging to (and identity within) the physical and cultural space they inhabit.

This book is a rich and multifaceted collection of twenty-eight chapters that use varied lenses to examine the discourses that shape people’s lives. The contributors are themselves from many backgrounds – different academic disciplines within the humanities and social sciences, diverse professional practices and a range of countries and cultures. They represent a broad spectrum of age, status and outlook, and variously apply their research methods – but share a common interest in people, their lives, thoughts and actions. Gathering such eclectic experiences as those of student-teachers in Kenya, a released prisoner in Denmark, academics in Colombia, a group of migrants learning English, and gambling addiction support-workers in Italy, alongside more mainstream educational themes, the book presents a fascinating array of insights.

Discourses We Live By will be essential reading for adult educators and practitioners, those involved with educational and professional practice, narrative researchers, and many sociologists. It will appeal to all who want to know how narratives shape the way we live and the way we talk about our lives.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher’s website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com.
Laura Mazzoli Smith considers widening participation in higher education in the light of Williams’ notion of resources of hope. Taking an autoethnographic approach, Laura demonstrates how her reading of Iris Murdoch as a young person facilitated her own entry into higher education. Through understanding Murdoch as someone who challenged orthodox worldviews, she found the confidence to develop a personalized counter-narrative to allow her to break with family tradition and open up new pathways of progression.

‘...there are in fact no masses, but only ways of seeing people as masses’. (Williams, 1989, p. 11)

This chapter commences from the critique of how some research and practice with marginalized or disadvantaged learners utilizes an impoverished and generalized discourse of individualistic capacities — such as aspirations, motivation and self-esteem — to explain educational ‘success’ or ‘failure’. It is a chapter focused on correcting what can be the rigid discourse of widening participation to higher education through appeal to the idea of ‘resources of hope’, in the words of Raymond Williams, which sits outside of an abstracted set of concepts that are now axiomatic in the field. It is a chapter drawing on
biographical methods as a critical/emancipatory approach in opposing the reductions of the dominant discourse, by seeking to understand how one or more counter-discourses may help people to think beyond the one that predominates. It is a chapter, too, where I reflect on personal experiences in order to better understand some of the issues around widening participation as a concept and practice, an aim and/or an achievement, drawing on my longstanding interest in stories as both research tools and outcomes.

The discourse of widening participation has a number of unintended consequences. It promotes binaries, simplistic models of success versus failure, or aspiration versus lack of aspiration (Taylor, 2008) and employs deficit discourses, which position non-traditional entrants to higher education as ‘other’ (Burke, 2002; Walker, 2003). The discourse contains value judgements, such as in the ‘civilizing’ function of higher education in shaping democratic, inclusive societies (Archer, 2003); and draws on stereotypes of different groups (Taylor, 2008). Indeed the seminal phrase ‘raising aspirations’, in use almost universally in the discourse of widening participation in England, has itself been critiqued as being a largely misconceived conception, since a focus on low aspirations is not the problem per se — rather realizing aspirations is the issue when successive barriers are to be faced (Carter-Wall & Whitfield, 2012; Cummings et al., 2012). The paucity of aspirations may then be what significant others read into the behaviours and narratives of marginalized youth, but research into these narratives and lived experiences conveys a more complex picture of aspirations that are successively — and arguably rationally — reconfigured in the face of challenges and lack of recognition (Cummings et al., 2012).

This chapter will articulate these critiques through the deployment of reflexivity in biographical methods to investigate and make available what is referred to in this chapter as counter-discourses. In the first and main example, I employ auto-ethnography to situate myself within such spaces and access what were for me resources of hope — constitutive of a particular counter-discourse — in navigating an unconventional route into higher education. This has the benefit of changing the power dynamic from those instances when the researcher remains abstracted from the structures of feeling that such discourses engender, as in much widening participation research.
The terminology of discourses and counter-discourses is in use here to identify the role of language in shaping social relations and the social world (Tamboukou & Livholtz, 2015). The approach could also be termed a form of cultural discourse analysis situated wholly within the reflexive positioning of the researcher in the first example. It draws on Burr’s (2003) socio-constructionist premises of epistemology in taking a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge (here the discourse of student progression and widening participation); the historical and cultural specificity of knowledge (here within the micro-specificities of the life worlds of researcher and student respectively); knowledge as sustained by social processes (that is as socially constructed); and knowledge and social action as coterminous (here demonstrated by what counter-discourses enable in the way of social action). Burr describes truth as a discursive force for the production of knowledge about what it is possible to say and, in this example, I explicitly interrogate how different truths about social identities and relations may be productive of counter-discourses producing different forms of knowledge. In asking students to explore how they shape self in storied form, as part of my own research, I was led inadvertently to reflect on this same question in relation to a similar point in my life.

Conceptualizing counter-discourses as ‘resources of hope’ offers an enriched, complex web of potentialities that should be central to widening participation work and which could provide a better framework from which to work towards the diversification and shifting of discourses that constrain, dominate or hurt, however inadvertently. This could reorient the framing of the problem, from strategies done ‘to’ students, for example to raise their aspirations/attainment, to resources, both individual and collective, from which they can draw hope and work around dominant cultural representations. This research aims to uncover discursive resources that work to enable young people to think around those that dominate (because we know that this is the case for some — those that ‘succeed against the odds’), that create a cultural image of success, which employ the binary of the achieving/aspiring student and the likelihood of failure for others from the ‘wrong’ backgrounds. This chapter will demonstrate how through reflective biographical work we can see examples of the counter-discourses that enable new socio-cultural structures of experience to arise. I am therefore
interested in employing discourse as a vehicle for both constraining and enabling critical change processes for individual learning (Evans, 2013).

A focus on available discourses of progression to higher education should also produce a shift away from the individualization of perceived ‘lacks’ to a focus on relationships and socio-cultural representations. This is another way of saying that we should attend more closely to how individuals create culture and society through access to discourse and not primarily to how culture shapes individuals in both structural and discursive ways in widening participation work. It is this bottom up cultural creation and appropriation by individuals that I am interested in with respect to higher education discourses of progression throughout the life course. Understanding how individuals adopt and shape particular stories from the discourses available to them is a challenge for widening participation research, not least because, as I will demonstrate through an auto-ethnographic piece of work, these processes are not necessarily immediately obvious.

Both ‘having voice’ and also ‘finding a voice’ are then part of the problematic status quo with respect to which learners are routinely dissuaded from accessing, or even conceiving of, higher education. The reflective, retrospective element elaborated here may be problematic for approaches focused on an objective version of the ‘truth,’ as I will suggest that the meaning of counter-discourses that facilitate new representations may sometimes only become available on reinterpreting past events through later understandings and insights. Counter-discourses may, we could say, work at a deeper, or less conscious level, and as such be less amenable to interrogation in the present.

This chapter, finally, is oriented in the values-based perspective that supporting learners to higher education at any time of life is a good thing, not because this choice is routinely the best one for everyone, but because choices may have been restricted through lack of access to knowledge of and support for diverse routes through learning and it is important to strive to ensure meaningful choice exists here, particularly in a climate of high tuition fees, as is now the case in England. (This is notwithstanding the fact that all choice is adaptive to the extent that contextual framing is a given, as discussed well in the context of widening participation by Bridges, 2005, for instance.) It is also based on a number of suppositions about identity and narrativity, particularly
work around the notion of identity capital and articulating a narrative of the self (Warin, 2015).

Narratives of Learning Take Many Forms, and Diversity Matters

‘We must emphasise not the ladder but the common highway, for every man’s ignorance diminishes me, and every man’s skill is a common gain of breath’. (Williams, 1989, p. 15)

As Raymond Williams speaks about culture as ordinary (1989), the remit and creation of us all, so we must see diverse discourses about higher education and lifelong learning as ordinary — although not always accessible to us all. I do not mean ordinary in the sense of unexceptional (although a previous research participant articulated with great passion how he would not have succeeded against the odds were he to believe himself doing something extra-ordinary, (Mazzoli Smith & Laing, 2016), but ordinary primarily in the sense of ubiquitous and necessary. A hegemonic discourse of university access, the ultimately successful student climbing successive rungs of the ladder, from which other ‘non-traditional’ discourses are deviations, marginalizes an array of deeply significant, plural and diverse stories, yet these are often unrecognized as such, or not thought to be significant if they are not about progression in learning in some explicitly causal way.

In writing about and researching the dominant discourse on widening participation to higher education, I found myself unexpectedly accessing for the first time a personal resource of hope on my own journey to higher education, which I will argue functioned as a counter-discourse to the dominant cultural trope of the successful student. Whilst the specificity of my story is likely to differ from others, some theoretical generalizations suggest ways in which we in the research community can support the diversification of discourses of widening participation, by drawing on more varied methods than usually pertain in the field, to explore how resources of hope can manifest in counter-discourses, which help us ‘work around’ those that dominate.

In my case, I reflect on how the novels of Iris Murdoch provided me with narratives of new and diverse structures of feeling before, and throughout, my higher education years. Through reflective analysis I
now understand these to have been functioning as a counter-discourse, a way of thinking beyond and so undermining the dominant, narrow, discourse of student success and progression, despite the fact that the novels are not explicitly about this. Auto-ethnography is not an approach that I had previously used, but it became the default method to describe this systematic reflective analysis of a period of my own personal experience, which had returned to the present as I engaged with analogous periods in my research participants’ lives. The self-conscious and socially conscious nature of this act was neither planned, nor initially welcome. The resulting small auto-ethnographic study is therefore a reflection on this period of my life, as the process by which I analysed how my participants were able to access counter-discourses led to a self-reflexive analysis of how I, too, had done so. I argue that these varied counter-discourses served a similar functional purpose in diversifying the discourse about educational progression that was predominant.

The Novels of Iris Murdoch: Thinking Beyond a Narrow Discourse of Success

Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) was an Anglo-Irish novelist and philosopher, author of some twenty-six novels focused on the key themes of morality, relationships and the unconscious, as well as plays, poetry and philosophy. Iris Murdoch’s many novels hold within them narratives of flawed, neurotic, complex and contradictory characters living and learning in a multitude of ways: the successful, wealthy psychoanalyst paid to alleviate the trauma of others, busily committing incest at weekends; the successful writer in his seaside retreat quietly enslaving his long lost love; the postulant nun and schizophrenic, passionately in love with the failed priest who leads her lay religious community. On the face of it the particularities of these contexts bore no relation to my own, yet nonetheless between the ages of 16 and 21 these novels enabled me to connect with diverse structures of emotion, thought and action, taking me far beyond my own context and enabling a wider imaginary of other lives and the structures of feeling that these opened up. Murdoch was pre-eminent at evoking the inner world of fantasy, projection and delusion, whilst celebrating a diverse range of
ordinary foibles and eccentricities in her characters. As her biographer Peter Conradi says:

> One source of positive pleasure in the bizarrerie offered by her plots comes from our sense that, as Murdoch has often averred, people are secretly much odder, less rational, more often powered by obsession and passion than they outwardly pretend or know, and that the novelist is revealing such secrets in creating her (imaginary) people. (Conradi, 1989, p. 6)

In writing about the dominant discourse of progression to higher education in my research, I came to reflect on how Murdoch’s novels constituted for me in their imaginary worlds a discourse that countered the institutional educational discourses that tended to the conservative and the rhetorical, ill-defined recourse to ‘realizing potential’ or ‘aiming higher’ for instance in order to achieve ‘success’. In their holding together of these individual eccentricities and foibles in the ordinary and quotidian, Murdoch’s novels introduced me to a multiplicity of ways to succeed and fail — often at the same time — which ran so counter to the hegemonic discourse of the successful student and a linear, rational trajectory of university progression that I felt subject to. The educational discourses during those years felt overpowering yet were narrow. In struggling to stay on track and epitomize the successful student, the only alternative to not doing so felt like failure.

The method I embarked on involved a self-reflexive re-reading of Murdoch’s novels, whilst writing about resources of hope as counter-discourses for other students. This auto-ethnographic analysis positioned Murdoch’s novels as a resource of hope I drew on, in the form of both introducing and legitimating diverse discourses of progress through life. Whilst a sociological understanding of these novels would be as a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2011), imparting a rich set of cultural values and meanings otherwise not accessible to me, I argue that this is not an adequate explanation, as the concept of cultural capital fails to engage with the subjective experience of objective possibilities (West, 2014). A psycho-social approach would suggest that these novels helped me to work and think around the tyranny of the simplified, narrow discourse of successful progression that I felt constrained by. The richness of Murdoch’s characters and plots, in contradistinction to what was my narrow socio-cultural context and the equally narrow messages
of what educational success meant and for whom, provided me with not only models, but more crucially structures of feeling that could enable me to imagine difference and contradiction as other than failure.

In this retrospective narrative of my youthful, somewhat obsessive relationship to Murdoch’s *oeuvre* and its role as a resource of hope, I would suggest that an important element was the unconscious juxtaposition of the glossy pictures of university undergraduates on prospectuses — the successful student — with Murdoch’s array of eccentric and earnest protagonists, muddling through chaotic lives, and prey to contingencies which they tried, but routinely failed, to control. Graham (2013), utilizing Foucault, describes the constitutive effect of brochure images, marking out the ‘ideal’ student as a dividing practice. Without diversity, these images take on substantial power, creating megaliths of the mind, likely to leave many young people and adults feeling inadequate.

I now look back on how Murdoch’s characters’ vulnerabilities and aberrances likely constituted a resource of hope by enabling me to think beyond the boundaries of highly prescribed, singular identities and expectations of a particular kind of success, and therefore failure, to a more diverse array of lived lives. The ‘success discourse’ and related images of the ‘good’ student construe such young people as rational, self-governing, autonomous and empowered. Murdoch’s novels abound with characters that are driven by irrational desire, repeatedly failing to self-govern, who depend — often fatally — on others and who are prey to contingency. Yet, simultaneously, they were often accomplished in their career and the development of their intellect, reflecting explicitly on matters philosophical as ends in themselves, and in so doing subverting the discourse of instrumental educational outcomes or narrow models of success against which I was straining.

Arguably the widening participation discourse of ‘aiming higher’ and ‘realizing potential’ carries a particular moralizing force. Murdoch’s novels are full of characters who attempt to moralize and coerce the world, but for which they often pay a high price, while the hedonists get off altogether more lightly, another reason a young person may well have taken pleasure in these novels. Murdoch’s characters’ lives are given to disjunction and rupture, as they create, or have foisted upon them, the shocking or the unforeseen in life, particularly those who are
most earnest to control and preordain. The critic Lorna Sage commented that Murdoch’s plots were a ‘device for humiliating those who wish to contain experience or abstract from it’ (in Conradi, 1989, p. 99). I took great delight in such irreverent narratives and I now reflect on how they gave me permission to question those who attempted to control and preordain my future through a discourse of making use of one’s talents and aiming ‘high’ in a linear, narrow route to higher education progression as the foremost measure of success for a young person after leaving school. I have found similar concerns articulated by some of the widening participation students I have worked with, interviewed both in order to understand non-traditional routes to higher education (Mazzoli Smith & Laing, 2016) and about what constitutes fairness in education (Mazzoli Smith et al., 2017).

The Importance of Diverse Structures of Feeling and Social Imaginaries for Widening Participation

My interpretation from this auto-ethnographic study is that these novels were read and reread in part because they offered a way of working through and thinking around the contradiction that successful students are made to feel if they don’t aspire to a particular pathway and/or feel they are failing. What may well have been provided was a way in which to learn to live with this perceived contradiction. The dichotomy often articulated by students in distress — aiming to conform, or being expected to, or thought to conform to the empowered self-regulating student, whilst feeling the opposite — inevitably produces anxiety. I suggest that diverse discourses of progression to higher education throughout the life course could militate against anxiety borne of nonconformity to some ideal as portrayed through narrow discourses of student success. Through the personal tutor system within the university, for instance, students have told me that they have resisted applying for extensions to assignments or temporarily suspending studies, even when they have had strong medical evidence to do so, because this is not what ‘successful’ students do.

My experience as a researcher leads me to argue that we fail to see with adequate sensitivity the implications of positioning young people as both lacking in various capitals — social, cultural, emotional — alongside
promoting a narrow discourse of success in widening participation activity. What is often read as an individual deficit could also be read as a discourse deficit in terms of narrow vision, and over-simplification. The data with which we structure our knowledge of young people as marginalized or disadvantaged, alongside the methodologies that we then employ to solve the problems that follow, too often eclipse what may actually be significant resources of hope to a young person, or indeed any person. I suggest that these may come in the form of counter- or diverse discourses, which if recognized and/or promoted as such, could support working around the structural and discursive barriers that too often become unassailable.

Such counter-discourses may provide a means to imagine, accept and recognize the self as complex and contradictory, yet crucially without the evocation of intolerable anxiety, which we know many students experience. The argument of this chapter is that the promotion of diverse discourses in various fields — here widening participation — may be a functional vehicle through which we can promote this perspective and facilitate how we can live with complexity and contradiction that at other times can threaten to overwhelm or limit. This may in turn help students who face multiple challenges to live with an imaginary of possible versions of student progression beyond narrow ideals.

Re-Description and Diversification

Richard Rorty’s philosophical work informs the supposition that the imaginary can play an important role in shaping identities and achievements. Rorty (1989) argued that human solidarity is not to be achieved through willed, individual self-creation and self-reflection, but through imagination and novels, for instance, which let us ‘re-describe ourselves’. He spoke about self-knowledge not as a process of discovery, but as one of creation. Rorty discusses Proust and Nietzsche, for whom, he says, there is nothing more powerful than self-re-description and he talks about how only other human beings can propose languages for us to speak — on his view, truth is made, rather than found. Yet the framework in which much widening participation work happens is largely positivistic, focusing on how language gets at the truth, rather than how it creates it, which could be construed as one of its de
facto limitations. In Iris Murdoch’s novels I was provided with a novel language for re-description and simultaneously warned about the pitfalls of seeing one description — in one dominant discourse — as a final truth about self, place, and others. Rorty’s view of the need for equal opportunities for self-creation is therefore highly pertinent to this chapter and yet this is of course not a normal part of what we mean when we talk about equal opportunity in education. This chapter is intended to highlight how taken-for-granted and likely unrecognized and under-theorized such opportunities may well be.

As has been said, Murdoch routinely challenges her characters through her plots and those that come away less scathed are those, often, who can hold conflicting emotions and thoughts together. Those who desire wholeness and completeness, which she often associates with moral hubris and the desire for goodness, flounder. In her philosophical writings, such as Against Dryness (1961), Murdoch does not argue for a choice between realism and myth, but for a dialectic or mediation between them. In her novels I found such a dialogue between forms of life and modes of thought, which in repeat re-reading, provided me with access to structures of feeling that would have helped allay anxiety. Murdoch’s characters therefore provided a way of mitigating against the outcomes of the cognitive dissonance that must result for many students who become invested in narrowly conceived educational discourses about success. Freeman says that:

...in becoming aware of the ways in which we are determined and in considering alternate modes of living our lives than the ones bequeathed us, we denature and demystify the established order of selfhood itself, thus paving the way for different stories to be told. (Freeman, 2015, p. 186)

I did not ask whether there was any truth in the actions of Murdoch’s characters, but in what possible worlds these actions could be true, the very fact of which altered the range of my own possible worlds. If, increasingly, learning and educational achievement are tightly bound to particular models of ‘the good student’ (Taylor, 2008) in a narrow range of possible worlds, then a version of freedom for me was found in the highly wrought depictions of adult learning and development that continued alongside, in spite of and sometimes in virtue of, personal failings.
A main concern of this chapter is that we need to find more and better ways of researching, understanding and promoting how individuals not only counter the narrowing of opportunities for self-creation in an increasingly performative educational landscape (Ball, 2012) and in the face of a narrow dominant discourse of higher education progression, but also our own prejudices and lacunae in recognizing these in our own lives and in those of others. The last section of the chapter sets out several examples, which demonstrate how this may be possible through alternative methodologies and what challenges there are inherent in these, not least that the focus on care leavers as marginalized in some of these studies serves to confirm this position even as it seeks to ameliorate it.

Recent life history work with care-experienced adults (Duncalf, 2010) demonstrates how a synchronic research perspective can itself negate or obscure diverse and complex patterns of progression through education and lifelong learning, here with respect to what care-experienced adults were doing later in their lives than is often the focal point. When research views learning lives diachronically, these care leavers were not so likely to be out of education, but rather were accessing education at different points in their lives, in different ways to what a perspective at age eighteen would reveal. It was argued that lifelong learning for care leavers was possible only when more basic support needs were first met (Maslow & Herzberg, 1954), something I heard directly from care leavers on a panel at a National Network for the Education of Care Leavers event in London in 2015. Hence accessing education later in life, when other needs had been met, was more likely to be the case than at age eighteen. In this example a diachronic research perspective offers more diverse narratives not only of, but also for this particular group and can provide support for thinking beyond the dominant discourses of care leavers’ relative failure in education when measured at a single point in time. As one of the participants in a previous research project said to me, knowing the statistics on educational progression for care leavers as a teenager made him feel backed into a corner, but these statistics were of course for progression to higher education at one point
in life only and therefore unnecessarily restrictive if seen as a single end-point (Mazzoli Smith & Laing, 2016).

So, a relevant issue here is whether the politics of hope is connected to the idea of epistemic justice. Fricker (2007) says that one can be harmed in one’s capacity as a ‘knower’ by virtue of a marginalized status and if so, are structural determinants implicated in the availability of resources of hope, in either implicit and tacit, or more explicit ways? Are diverse discourses of progression to higher education more available to some young people and adults than to others, both literally and in terms of what they can convey? Does democratizing knowledge through diversifying discourses mitigate the impact of this? I want to suggest that the answer to these questions is yes.

One way of attempting to deliberately democratize or widen a narrow discourse about university progression and widening participation is through the use of the digital medium to share stories. I will mention two projects designed to change and diversify stories through horizontal dialogues, which bypass professional mediation, but in different ways. One is an app, *Inspire Me!*, designed as a vehicle to inspire, advise and mentor care leavers in an exogenous way by The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education. The other, *Changing Stories*, is a project at Newcastle University, with aims of democratizing who has the power to speak, through utilizing varied life stories and narrative learning to diversify the over-arching discourse of successful student progression to higher education.

*Inspire Me!* enables young people in care to access aspects of the life stories of young adults who were themselves care-experienced. These are unlikely to be lengthy life histories, rather they are designed as short fact-filled pieces providing young people in care with information and so provide some of the mentoring they may be missing out on in their everyday experiences. It is ostensibly about raising aspirations through the provision of knowledge from the very people who benefitted from it themselves and went on to succeed against the odds. *Changing Stories* is a portal for current university students of all ages to tell their own digital story of getting to university and becoming a student, in an unmediated way, i.e., using their own words, videos or images. This project aspires to put students at the heart of a widening participation intervention, but also takes account of critiques of widening participation work,
which suggest that higher education institutions are necessarily, at
times, part of the very cultures of elitism from which disadvantaged
students feel themselves excluded, hence the stories are to be hosted
on institutional sites to mitigate this. A literature review on widening
participation to higher education had as one of its key findings that
‘higher education students and other positive role models can make a
significant contribution to delivery of information, advice and guidance
interventions’ (Moore et al., 2013, p. 5). Yet I would suggest that this has
to happen in such a way that removes the likelihood of hegemonic ‘good
student’ discourses (Taylor, 2008).

Students are invited to share with others their journey to and through
higher education, in order to expose others to multitudes of ways to learn
and progress in education, which encompass varied failures and varied
successes, these being defined by the students themselves. Narrow
discourses of success do not of course always fit even those supposedly
‘entitled’ to higher education, the middle-classes, those with cultural
capital, the right postcode and parents who have been to university.
Moreover, diverse narratives can challenge the notion of ‘kinds’ and
‘types’, recalling the quote by Raymond Williams at the start of this
chapter, and simple stories of success or assumptions about end points
in learning lives. Diverse discourses of this kind would potentially bring
with them much needed recognition of diverse forms of knowledge,
experience and learning potential; ‘learners can bring diverse forms
of capital into universities and via good enough recognition, claim
space for self, agency, and social justice’ (West, 2014, p. 80). Access to
diverse stories that make contradiction not only possible but normal and
bearable, could function for others as resources of hope, analogous to
what I accessed through the novels of Iris Murdoch as a young person.

Goodson’s (2010) conception of narrative learning and action
potential drives this conception of narrative capital. By default, these
narratives will be oriented towards action potential because of the
context in which they are generated (progressing to higher education)
and towards diversity both between and within narratives. The aim of
Changing Stories is that personal stories can contribute to public, political
(counter) discourses. Goodson argues that ‘strategies to facilitate
narrative learning are currently unexplored and hence underdeveloped’
(2010, p. 132) and an approach like Changing Stories and similar others
that have begun to appear in higher education institutions, could provide a learning resource to test and utilize narrative learning as a widening participation tool.

The expectation is not just that these narratives will communicate realist events in a transparent way but will perhaps more importantly constitute a varied array of learning journeys, making available many more possible imaginary worlds than are usually known to prospective students. A narrative is generally purposive, moving towards an ending and, in this sense, I am taking the critical humanist perspective of an optimistic view of narrative learning, ‘posing narrative as a means to recuperate individual and social agency’ (Andrews et al., 2002, p. 7). Jacobs (2002) is one of many authors writing on narrative to state that civil society must contain public spaces for constructing alternative narratives and that these introduce new perspectives through narrative creation, or put a different way, provide the opportunity for counter- or diverse discourses that enable thinking around those that predominate. In our recent chapter (Mazzoli Smith & Laing, 2016), such transformative learning spaces were discussed, where the telling of varied life stories created new horizons of possibility for others. Yet it is striking how few such spaces are available through institutional forums, especially for prospective students.

Conclusion: Narrative Imagination and Discourse

‘...the revelation of the diversity of individual world-views, of the plurality of ethical life-worlds, of deviance, fluidity and irony, is itself a liberation in the context of ubiquitous frameworks of social institutionalism proclaiming behavioural and moral homogeneity’. (Rapport, 2010, p. 21)

Rapport is here reflecting on the conflicted nature of fieldwork and the limitation of one’s own vantage-point, and the moral benefits that result from putting into comparative perspective societal roles and beliefs, however partial the overall study may be. He also draws on Ricœur in reflecting on how far individuals know themselves and are known by others through the stories that they and others tell about themselves. Rapport draws on this idea of ‘narrative identity’ for ethical advantage, claiming that it is of benefit for people to recognize that individual, group and cultural level identities are not fixed and this
stance may make us more able to accommodate the stories of others. He goes on to say that the stories of others may make it more possible for us to imagine their lives (as in fiction, for me with Iris Murdoch’s characters) as ‘we might extend a generosity towards our own stories [...] not being rigid in our conception of them’ (Rapport, 2010, p. 22). Again, it is this openness to fluidity and thinking/working around the rigidity of dominant discourses, not only in widening participation but arguably in much of education today, which may be a resource of hope for others, too.

Diversifying the discourses of student progression through sharing widely narratives of progressing to higher education across the life course draws heavily on the concept of narrative imagination, that ‘the way we see the world is only one way amongst infinite possibilities’ (Andrews, 2014, p. 27). Nussbaum (1997) says that narrative imagination is necessary to transport an individual into the frame of meaning of another person whose life circumstances are different, which gives us the tools to decipher meaning from another’s perspective. Going back to Murdoch’s narratives, these different perspectives expand the horizon of the possible: ‘Through exercising our narrative imagination, we increase our awareness of the choices available to us’ (Andrews, 2014, p. 110).

Narrative imagination thus depends on access to narratives that not only diversify but unseat, transgress and liberate us from hegemonic stories and discourses, de-centring the idea of centralized knowledge. This way of displacing central knowledge and discourses makes ideology visible (Burke, 2002), hence the importance of Changing Stories being hosted on higher education websites and platforms. More diverse narratives of pathways to higher education and through learning will be of use not only to potential students, but importantly also to those working in higher education, who can engage in a creative re-positioning of the marginalized learner. Such institutional-level reflection is also important and part of a much-needed shift in higher education from a politics of representation of certain groups, to a politics of recognition of more diverse knowledges and identities alongside (Fraser, 2014).

Finally, increased access to diverse narratives of educational progression may also function as a means through which young pupils may be able to develop identity capital (Warin, 2015). Warin demonstrates how particular kinds of discourses and the opportunities made available
in privileged families foster the construction of a personal sense of self. This may also be fostered through narrative learning, and we should not only see the formation of cultural capital as resulting from the crucible of the family, as the dominant discourse maintains. Walker (2003) refers to how gaining knowledge and constructing successful learner identities should go hand in hand. In this chapter I have advocated the availability of diverse narratives of progression to higher education as well as a better understanding of resources of hope that may function to counter and transgress the dominant narrow discourse, and through recourse to narrative learning, support the development of more agentic learner identities. But this is not to see the learner identity as a fixed or generalizable quality, but rather as a capacity that can be shaped and reshaped anew through articulating and re-articulating a narrative of the self in order to achieve what Walker refers to as ‘deep participation and ownership’ (2003, p. 176).

References


25. Diversifying Discourses of Progression to UK Higher Education


