

# Discourses We Live By

Narratives of Educational  
and Social Endeavour

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# Learning from Narratives, Discourses and Biographical Research

## An Afterword

*Hazel R. Wright and Marianne Høyen*

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### Our Intentions for the Book

The introduction set out our editorial stance as embracing diversity by welcoming chapters with a broad range of content written in a range of styles. We knew that we could end up with ‘this-and-that’, a little like the Chicago Sociologists, but as Sacks acknowledges, ‘this-and-that is what the world is made up of’ and can lead to work that is ‘worth criticizing’ (Sacks, 1992a, p. 27). As our explicit motivation was to be inclusive and open up the possibility of publication to as many researchers as possible, we were prepared to take this risk. We were confident that we would gain some interesting insights and committed to shaping the book into a coherent publication. On reflection, however, we may also have been making a stand against the neoliberal practices constraining higher education, which increasingly limit what gets published and by whom.

A great deal of biographical research is about ‘doing being ordinary’ (Sacks, 1992b, pp. 215–21), ‘attending the world, yourself, others, objects so as to see how it is that it’s a usual scene’ (p. 218) and this book collects together a good number of everyday narratives of ‘life as lived’ (Ricoeur, 1986a, p. 121). Some chapters will have interested the educated reader as they echo his or her own experiences, but others

enter the lives of those less fortunate in society so bring us into close proximity with the unfamiliar; many occupy positions between these two extremes. But, apart from being interesting stories, what other value derives from a reading of the different chapters? What insights do we gain from looking beyond the information articulated within each chapter?

Before addressing those questions, we need to engage in a little '*travail négatif*' and set aside the content, context and findings from each chapter and 'the connections that are recognized as given before the game starts' (Foucault, 1969, p. 34, translated by Evans). Then, engage in processes that could be termed '*travail positif*', asking in turn: Why does this chapter matter? What is it doing? What do we learn from it? Through such a process it was possible to identify specific themes and then to group them together into meta-themes that we could discuss. Through doing this we found the chapters delivered some unexpected riches, justifying the latitude accorded authors to write as they chose.

## Emergent Themes Within the Book

### Methodologies

We stated in the introduction that authors were asked to focus on discourses and narratives rather than on describing methodologies, unless these were key foci, nevertheless, some of the chapters offer very clear descriptions and / or exemplar of particular approaches. Dyson's work closely follows the Narrative Inquiry methodology as set out by Jean Clandinin and Michael Connolly (Ch1), exploring the process of thinking *with* rather than *about* stories and providing an explanation of a process that others have used instinctively. Similarly applicable elsewhere, Breton (Ch2) uses a case study to show how the dynamics of biographical inter-comprehension can be harnessed to turn lived experience into expressible content and explains how this could be of benefit in therapeutic education.

Formenti, Galimberti and Ferrari (Ch11) present three alternative ways of writing a life history, one relational to the actual interview, one pursuing a specific interest and one written as fiction. These materials are there to draw on, to study and decide when you might use each style

or which one you prefer. A clear account of Conversational Analysis and how to use it appears in Evans' chapter (Ch17), and in chapter 20 Sprung discusses both participatory approaches and the use of a documentary film as a reporting mechanism. Brayshaw and Granville also describe a filmmaking project and their text itself is a collage that both parodies and presents elements of the stages of filmmaking. It also draws attention in a very honest way to the problems encountered by creative researchers when asked to submit written papers; as a result there is a mine of information in chapter 24. Chan (Ch21) provides an insightful discussion around successfully using Indigenous Research Methods (IRM) and there are ideas within this account that are transferable into other work with minority groups. Woodley (Ch26) focuses on a journaling method that developed from her need to reflect and make field notes as her work progressed, while Horsdal (Ch28) contributes to debates around method in clearly describing how differing interview styles provoke narrative responses that are qualitatively distinctive. Mazzoli Smith (Ch25) provides a well-sculpted example of reflection and reflexivity in practice that enables her to move from her own experiences to her research participants, seamlessly, and with greater understanding. Together these chapters offer authentic accounts of methods that are far removed from the 'do this, do that' style of many textbooks; as such a wider variety of researchers will find them useful.

### Narrative Power

**T**he powerful role played by narrative is clearly visible in many chapters. Dyson's entire chapter (Ch1) is about the strength of narrative and an exploration of how fictional narrative can often capture, even concentrate, the significance of an event or emotion giving it impact and making it memorable long after the narration is complete. Breton (Ch2) discusses how storytelling and writing can make the unsayable 'sayable' and transform patients' relationships to their illnesses, enabling them to gain a greater sense of control. He claims that it also generates understanding of their experience as, 'in articulating and in developing it, it becomes itself' (Ricoeur 1986b, p. 62). Castiglioni and Girotta (Ch12) see maturation as dependent upon the impact of official dominant narratives on personal internalized scripts, necessitating

adaptation, and also argue the need to develop counter-narratives when life goes askew. Mascarenhas (Ch18) finds that through the creation of stories from interview material she was able see behind some of the horrific situations migrants faced and find meaningful ways in which they could be encouraged to learn English, foregrounding their needs as humans, ahead of governmental aims of making them merely employable.

### Family Influences

Mascarenhas also reveals the importance of biographical research in understanding the formative influences in people's lives. Others find significance in objects, events or family: Mazzoli Smith (Ch25), for example, clearly links her life choices to reading Murdoch's novels as a young person. In Høyen and Rasmussen's work (Ch5) family influences relate to professional life; their study quite clearly shows how decisions to teach particular academic subjects reflect family members' affiliation to the sciences or humanities in their working lives. Wright (Ch4) demonstrates how individuals construct their own understandings of nature but shows too that, alongside education and life experiences, family funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) play a part in the development and retention of ideas. Individuals may conceive a personal sense of what nature 'is' but this is shaped by those with whom they have regular contact. Family values can be a source of conflict, too. Evans' chapter (Ch17) conveys in detail the tensions that arise when a young migrant woman wants to go to university whilst her family think marriage a more appropriate choice. Yet for Rasmussen's converts to Islam, the family moderates a new Muslim's beliefs to accommodate their needs — celebrating Christmas, for example.

### Researcher Positioning

Our chapters offer interesting insights into how the researchers position themselves within the study undertaken — many choose research topics where they have the benefits of being an insider researcher. One would assume this was for ease of access but the commitment that resonates in the chapters suggests that the desire to

make things better may be more important. Middleton (Ch8) clearly states, 'I wanted to influence policy-making' and Woodley (Ch26), who was working in a setting for excluded pupils, 'was keen to carry out research that might benefit them'. It is evident, too, in the passion with which González González (Ch14) addresses his theme: phrases like 'scandalous data' and 'the number of minor victims of corruption, is unbearable' do not denote detachment. Language, again, demonstrates enthusiastic participation in Sprung's chapter (Ch20). She describes how 'filmmakers, stepped into the scene and became visible' and how she finds a discussion within the project 'exciting'. Researchers are often keen to address power imbalances, too. Zientek (Ch16) even chooses participatory action research because, '[f]or me, PAR is a form of resistance to all forms of control limiting our freedom'. Evans (Ch17) describes data as 'constituted in the interview process jointly', implying that talk-in-action is a democratic research process. Even when not a true 'insider', there may be a parallel association. Chan (Ch21), for example, does not share a cultural identity with her research participants but has an alternative Chinese heritage that 'I believe, provides me with some understanding'. Such links enable empathy.

### Researcher Identities

**T**he informality of the biographical research process, with interviews more often resembling conversations than structured processes, draws the researcher into the participant's life even as s/he seeks to draw the story out. We seek to generate trust and expect to be part of the interaction; this is a privilege that we need to be aware of constantly. It can make it difficult to settle for anything less when engaging in other types of project. For Oikarinen-Jabai (Ch27), a transdisciplinary project caused stress, as she was constantly 'trapezing between paradigms', unsure of expectations. This chapter gives a candid account of membership of a large-scale research project which reveals how these can be difficult to co-ordinate and focus. It is interesting to read in Ylitapio-Mäntylä and Mäkiranta's chapter (Ch22) that they, too, found working 'in a huge transnational cluster where researchers do not even know all the people with whom they must cooperate' challenging — their task at odds with their feminist pedagogies. We may wonder if being part of such a

process is especially difficult for the biographical researcher who more normatively engages in one-to-one interactions. Ylitapio-Mäntylä and Mäkiranta explain the issue in terms of a clash between the neoliberal expectations of 'busyness' with the need to have 'enough time for meeting with participants', because caring is 'an important factor in the learning process'.

### Caring and the Relational Nature of Biographical Research

Together, the chapters in this book reveal the relational nature of researcher/participant engagement when using biographical and narrative methods, something specifically addressed by Horsdal (Ch28). As you move through the book there is a growing sense that the researcher 'cares'; there are no less than sixteen chapters that talk about vulnerability and/or focus on studying vulnerable people. Caring was evident in the earlier discussion of researcher position and is directly raised by Ylitapio-Mäntylä and Mäkiranta in chapter 22. It is central to Breton's chapter (Ch2) in both context and research intention. Bainbridge and West's chapter (Ch3) draws attention to the 'shared humanity' in the WEA classes and the sense 'of belonging' found within fundamentalism, prompting us to think further about the consequences of social isolation and marginalization. Rasmussen's chapter (Ch19) discusses conversion to Islam in a different context and country. The two converts to Islam she interviewed both rejected branches that they found 'cold and lacking in spirituality'. Respectively, they saw Islam as 'about inclusiveness' and as a 'spiritual comfort zone', fundamentalism plays no part, yet their stories testify to the need to belong.

Noddings, in her work on the ethics of care, makes sense of the relational processes we identified within other chapters. Analysing how caring functions, she talks of 'engrossment', the attentiveness of the carer who receives what the cared-for is feeling and saying and undergoes 'motivational displacement'. This manifests in an outflow of energy 'toward the needs and wants of the cared-for', who recognizes this caring and makes some sort of response (Noddings, 2005, p. 2). Thus, she sees caring as essentially relational — clearly its interactive nature carries the potential to strengthen over time. The combination of relationality and insider identity offers a possible additional explanation to why caring is so apparent in these biographical interviews.

## Transformational Effects

Our own experience of carrying out biographical interviews is that the participants often find their involvement rewarding, perhaps due to the attentiveness of the interviewer, striving to listen closely, constantly monitoring the exchange to determine when to prompt, when to question, when to affirm and when to simply listen. Some will learn things about themselves or their views that they did not previously realize, in a process akin to that described by Breton (Ch2) who draws attention to ‘transformative processes that take place during the activities of wording, meaning-making and storytelling’. The notion of transformation is well-established within education following the works of Freire (1970) and Mezirow (1975) among others, and fits well with the broader theme of changing lives that resonates across many of the chapters. The potential — maybe a need — to change, is embedded in notions of vulnerability already discussed, and is particularly problematic when people are in crisis: the prisoners in Mathiassen’s (Ch13) and Cooper’s (Ch23) studies, the gamblers in Castiglioni and Girotti’s (Ch12) project. It is captured in religious and cultural beliefs in chapters 3, 12, 18, 19 and 27 in particular, and more subtly in Chan (Ch21) as the project around Indigenous peoples is a collaborative one of ‘doing with’ rather than ‘doing to’. As Andrews (2014, p. 27), reminds us narrative imagination offers a way of seeing the world as one of ‘infinite possibilities’, and this adds a positive note for the resolution of problems.

## Empowerment

It is relevant, too, to consider the number of chapters that directly relate to larger-scale emancipatory projects, for Indigenous people in chapter 22 (as well as Ch21), for migrants in chapters 20 and 27, the ageing population in chapter 24, and through educational support in chapter 18. These projects all specifically aim to change lives in some way, and in Zientek (Ch16) we saw how an educational course in Poland specifically aimed to enable citizens to work for change — changing society not just individual lives. In Mazzoli Smith (Ch25), we saw how personal reflection can offer insights that may further change society by supporting the functioning of the UK educational ‘widening

participation' agenda (Bridges, 2005), something that has proved somewhat difficult to operationalize. Empowerment is an important factor here, but in other chapters participants (students) develop agency despite the educational system. This is apparent in Wallin's study in a Swedish school (Ch15), in the actions of the Kenyan students in Dahl (Ch6) and Sheridan's study of Irish students (Ch 10). Such narratives contrast with that of the Irish adult educators in Bates Evoy (Ch7) who, instead of demanding change, find reward through intrinsic motivation. Poorly enacted empowerment through education can, however, become a source of internal conflict and social challenge, as is visible in Mathiassen's study of an ex-offender (Ch13).

### Protected Enclaves

Some authors refer to 'safe spaces', echoing the notion of protected enclaves common within adult education (Boud & Walker, 2002). These phrases imply tutor support to create student opportunities for testing and planning change, and this concept appears in several chapters (2, 8, 12, 13, 16, 20, 24 and 27) but can refer to very different structures. Breton's study reminds us that these may be carefully orchestrated and be established in health settings, too (Ch2). Middleton (Ch8) shows that they may be enclosures within a larger institution (the Nurture group within the school), Zientek (Ch16) that they may be actively established to further the cause of societal change.

### Change Agendas and Counter Discourses

The need for change at social level is also apparent in the discussion of counter-productive agendas (chapters 5, 6, 14, 15, 18), and counter-productive practices in Pathak (Ch9). For example, Høyen and Rasmusen (Ch5) discuss an official counter-educational narrative of 'competence' that has turned the gaze away from a 'fundamentally inappropriate' counter-productive division between arts (cultural) and science (natural) subjects. There are a number of other chapters that call for change and suggest possible ways forward. Pathak (Ch9) believes that curbing the use of violent language and reward systems in schools might, in the long-term, challenge the dominance of punitive discourses.

Castiglioni and Girotti (Ch12) endorse the value of narrative in changing internal scripts controlling individual behaviours. Mascarenhas (Ch18) demonstrates how English Language teaching could do so much more to support migrants in taking their place in society. Rasmussen (Ch 19) makes several salient points: Firstly, she calls for a 'greater attention to discourses' and research that asks questions anew rather than simply testing existing beliefs, lest it ends up simply endorsing prevalent views, mindful that her own small study that was hypothesis-free, challenges normative understandings. Secondly, she raises the concern that outdated modes of thinking may actually 'slow the pace of change', important when dealing with issues that divide societies, like religion. In chapter 25, Mazzoli Smith demonstrates how counter-discourses could help people 'to think beyond the one that predominates', and Woodley (Ch26) also hopes that through sharing narratives, professionals may be able to 'offer a counter-discourse to that which is generally accepted' within teaching. Changing the prevalent discourse is a reliable means of embedding a change of culture but may not be easy to achieve.

## Education

Finally, and importantly, we turn to the theme of education which underpins all the chapters, if sometimes a little obliquely. In most cases, chapters address *adult* education in some way but with approaches ranging across the spectrum: incidental, informal, non-formal and formal (Foley, 2004), varying in the degree to which they mention pedagogic practices. In terms of sectors, many relate to the tertiary sector, whether higher (for example, 10, 14, 25) or vocational/professional (for example, 1, 5, 6, 7), but a few attach to the compulsory sector (for example, 8, 15, 26). Only a small number of authors were still directly working within a formal adult education sector at the time of writing (for example, 7, 16, 18), an area sorely diminished through successive cuts to purportedly 'non-essential' services (a label we strongly reject). However, their number is boosted by the funded community-based projects (12, 20, 21, 22, 24, 27) where the target audience is adults (or youths as preparation for adulthood), usually from groups that are socially marginalized, giving this work a 'remedial' connotation.

In reality, many chapters straddle these administrative boundaries: Brayshaw and Granville's chapter (24), sits within higher education but serves an adult education purpose in catering for senior citizens; Mazzoli Smith (Ch25) and Woodley (Ch26) closely juxtapose the personal and the professional; with the prisoner narratives the educational element is implicit in Cooper (Ch23), and a tentative plan in Mathiassen (Ch13), and for these and other accounts (4, 11, 17, 19), informal learning is buried within the individual life stories, or discussed from a historical/philosophical perspective (2, 3, 9, 28). These categorizations are only loosely applied to give an overall sense of coverage, they are indicative rather than definitive. Perhaps one of the outcomes from their application is the reassurance that, despite cuts in adult education provision across Westernized societies, the field continues in alternative ways: through the community project, the individual researcher pursuing an interest or further qualification, or simply fascinated to 'see what is really happening' in a context familiar to them. Perhaps a book like this can serve to keep the flame alive — nourish and promote the importance of education for everyone, endorse a shift away from the focus on test-led schooling from infancy, through to the credentialism and performative ideology that saturates the tertiary sector and neoliberal societies, detracting from the pleasure of 'education for education's sake'. Certainly, when good practice turns students' lives around, as in Sheridan's story of enabling progression after examination failure (Ch10), we see the possibility for hope to have a tangible shape.

### Looking Forward

To look ahead, we first return to caring. It is salutary to note Noddings' claim (2005, p. 6) that continual testing 'is largely a product of separation and lack of trust', a sign of a society that makes neither time nor space for caring. Her topic is children's education, but her arguments have wider application. We endorse her claim that when society looks for easy and efficient ways to evaluate complex ideas 'then fear and competition take the place of eager anticipation and shared delight in learning'. Like Noddings (who would have been seventy-six when the paper cited was published) we adult educators need to keep making a stand until things change. Perhaps this book has played a role here and can continue to serve the cause of adult education by

demonstrating that there is still some pleasure in teaching, in learning and in examining these processes in action! To embrace Raymond William's conceptualization, may it serve as a 'resource for hope' (Williams, 1989), even a resource for 'educated hope' (Giroux, 2012, p. 38) given its overall focus.

Henry Giroux, in his statements about hope and educated hope, provides us with a fitting framework through which to view the achievements of this book. He sees hope as 'a pedagogical and performative practice' that helps humans to become 'moral and civic agents' and, fittingly, as the:

[...] outcome of those educational practices and struggles that tap into memory and lived experiences [...] linking individual responsibility with a progressive sense of social change. (ibid., pp. 38–39)

He makes a clear link between pedagogy and performance, agency and work that relates to recall and real life — the fundamental sources for biographical research like ours. Equally relevant is Giroux's description of educated hope as:

[...] a form of utopian longing, [that][...] opens up horizons of comparison by evoking not just different histories but different futures. Educated hope is a subversive force when it pluralizes politics by opening up a space for dissent, making authority accountable, and becoming an activating presence in promoting social transformation. (ibid., p. 39)

These notions — of lived experiences, 'horizons of comparison', difference, pluralization, dissent leading to change — resonate clearly with the narratives unfolded within this book. In its turn, our book may be viewed as a resource for 'educated hope', for its varied chapters reflect the different strands identified by Giroux. However, other important messages derive *directly* from the research into *Discourses We Live By*, so we give the final words to three of *our* authors. Firstly, to Horsdal (Ch28) who inheres to 'the sharing of life story narratives [...] a significant role in supporting social harmony'. Secondly, to González González (Ch14) for his explicit reminder that 'the human being is to be projected as an end, never as a means', prompting us to keep the person at the heart of his/her story. And, thirdly, to Mazzoli Smith (Ch25) who points to learner identity as a 'capacity that can be shaped and reshaped anew', thus signalling that educators *can* initiate change — an affirmation that

encourages us to renew our efforts. These are surely important messages for a book that foregrounds biographical methods and coalesces around educational themes, presenting them as Narratives of Educational and Social Endeavour.

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