After life review: autobiography as ‘art of the future’

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When adult students write their life story, they gather selected life experiences and transform these onto the written page. In the course of this literary process they revisit sites of the past and reflect on the meaning of past events; many reconstruct these events from the point of view of the present, and most close their narrative by affirming their identity in the present and envisioning a possible future. Through an analysis of the written life narratives as well as research with one group of writers, a case is made for autobiography’s power as an instructional method to bring new light to the past and deepen our sense of self and others.

Keywords: autobiography; adult learning; continuing education; adult education

Autobiography as the ‘art of retrospect’

The author of an autobiography assembles the scattered memories of the past into a unified whole that becomes ‘the story of my life’. In the past autobiography has been the impulse of prominent and more or less famous persons, who recount their life to an obliging public. More recently, the line between public and private has shifted through the proliferation of memoirs of relatively ordinary individuals lining booksellers’ shelves, as if the reading community has come to see that their lives, too, can be as large as those depicted in fiction. Life writing, what Eakin (2008, 148) has aptly called ‘art of retrospect’, has been a privilege also accorded to older adults, whose natural inclination to engage in life review has paralleled the growing recognition on the part of professionals of the personal and cultural value of this sort of endeavor. Still, the young soldier, looking back over the signal events of his life, an adult student, appraising the challenges of her educational journey, the midlife adult, contemplating what possible life is still ahead – these represent a wholly unique population of potential writers. For them, unlike for those writing their life story nearing the end of their life, much is still ahead after their life review. For them, autobiography represents ‘the art of the future’ (Eakin 2008, 148), a prospect of what still ahead is possible and worthwhile.

The power of life story to further growth and change has enriched the literature of adult education of the past decade, as educators have recognized autobiography as one means by which adults can come to enlarge their perspective on themselves and others, and even to heal. Curriculum theorists have acknowledged the place of autobiography as giving new understanding to curriculum through illuminating the lived experiences of students and teachers, as well as giving voice to marginalized

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Norwegian adults, refers to this as an inner dialogue, distinguished by its focus on the inner life of the narrator, wherein the author asks the questions 'who am I?' and 'how did I come to be the way I am?' (4). As Gulstad so aptly points out, 'There is a distance between the self who writes and the self who was, a distance between the now of the writing and the then of the narrated past' (5). Lejeune (1989) further distinguishes autobiography from other forms of life writing. Unlike a private journal or diary that records the writer's experiences, impressions and mental states, and unlike the memoir, in which the subject may be a particular moment or period of an individual's life, autobiography extends its retrospect over the entirety of a life. Accordingly, the author writes her story, steps back and reflects on the pattern of her life and on the meaning of certain events and experiences. Autobiography has the distinction of being the sort of narrative in which the author, the narrator (of the story) and the protagonist are one and the same (Lejeune 1989). In his definition Lejeune highlights the process of writing as integrating the outer and inner life of the individual toward an appreciation of the growth of his or her personality.

Writing our story changes us; it surfaces happenings, it highlights life-changing moments and draws these to conscious awareness that places us, as Kegan (1994, 293) has noted, 'in grave danger of growing'. Eakin approaches autobiography as integrally related to the ongoing process of human identity development and concludes that, contrary to being created after the fact, autobiography is an activity 'in the making', one that maps our lives over time and 'helps us to keep track of who we are' (170). Further, he observes that the memory work of autobiography may be driven not only by the past and present, but also by the ongoing interplay between our past and present, and our future (2008). On a similar note, Janet Mason Ellerby (2001), whose publication of her own memoir transformed not only her life, but also that of others, refers to life writing as 'a testimony of our hopefulness' (101). She notes the power of life writing to heal and to liberate us from the past, even to engender social transformation.

My story of life story

My appreciation of the power of putting pen to paper came some years ago, through a writing project, as a midlife adult, returning to further graduate study. Having been given a choice of topics in a graduate class on adult development, I wrote a highly charged and deeply personal account of a shattering personal event that awakened me and spun me, as wife and mother, from kitchen to career and, within a short time, to graduate study. Up to the time of the writing, this event still held a presence, a preoccupation, even a compulsion. But once it made it to print, once relived and revealed, its power dissipated. My present sense is that the event was not 'let go', rather, as Jean Houston (1987) would suggest, it was integrated as part of the 'Larger Story' of my life and identity.

My experience deepened my appreciating of the worth of writing about the significant, signal or traumatic events of our life. As Gébler concluded, writing does not change the experience, but it draws some of the poison out of it. Years later, as an adult educator, I was introduced by chance to the power of life story; and guided by my own earlier experience, I began to incorporate autobiography as an instructional method in adult education courses, beginning with those courses directly related to adult learning and development, and extending this option to students in other of my
graduating classes. The format is always the same: I ask students to imagine that an
editor has invited them to write five chapters of their life story. What would be the
titles of their chapters; and what quality or character would they assign to each one?
I request a brief outline, so that I may offer some direction or guidance; and I provide
an example of a possible outline. The guideline is to write about three pages for each
of their chapter titles and, finally, to assign to their story a title.

Throughout the past decade and since embarking on this work with autobiography
I have received over 400 student narratives, and have responded to each and every one.
My teaching both in the US and Canada, and on various military bases throughout
Europe and parts of Asia, has generated a rich array of narratives, of which I have
retained a sizeable number for my research. I have been shaken by the subject of the
stories and often puzzled by the choice of students to undertake this project, when
other options are so readily available. These writings, so unlike their more formal
assignments, are deeply personal, so revealing in detail and expression, at times so
light-hearted, even comical. Deana illustrates this rich mix of capacities. She
introduces herself in this way:

The first time I was born, I died. At 4:55 A.M. on a February morning, I came from the
light to be mortally bound. As I lived, I died. When I took my first breath my lungs
collapsed and I was declared dead.

She then turns to boast her triumph over death. 'My family is a mixture of Italian,
Irish/Scots, and Sicilian background ... My story is that the Irish/Scots in me
wanted to fight it, the Italian in me bet on it, and the Sicilian in me fixed the
outcome'.

Researching autobiographies and the autobiographical process

Concerning the research into the actual autobiographical writings, my approach to
the narratives of my students is in general psychological with respect to adult
development and personal and transformative with respect to learning. More
specifically, I apply myself to explore in these narratives the human urge toward
individuation, integration and self-actualization. This approach, I notice, accords
with the guidance that Rosenwald (2003) provides to his own students as they
interpret life history. Doubtlessly, my stance has been shaped by my own personal
background, including my own written autobiography, my education, which has
included the study of psychology and sociology, my professional practice in social
work and more recently teaching in adult education.

My work draws on phenomenology and interpretivism that seeks out the
meaning structures of lived, personal experience (van Mannen 1997; Morse 1994).
It entails a subjective process of exploration, reflection and interpretation of the
meanings that are conveyed through these autobiographies that I have been
collecting throughout the past decade. The results include an in-depth reflective
description of these experiences of those who lived it.

I begin with a process of reading, reflecting and sifting through the many
autobiographies in order to uncover particular intentions, themes, problems or
questions. I pay close attention to each writer's choice of title for her or his narrative
as well as the title for each of the chapters, and I try to tease out the overall motive or
purpose of the writer. I look closely at where the writer's story began, what

background experiences and events have shaped his or her life, what turning points
have presented themselves either from within or without, and what choices have been
made at these points. I have kept notes and reflective comments concerning these
narratives since my research began.

As my work has progressed and as I have focused on the emergent issues in the
field of narrative, life writing and adult education (in this case the processes and
gains of lifewriting) I have returned to this wider pool and drawn from it those
narratives (about 30) that illuminate these phenomena. As did Gullesstad (1996),
I select individual narratives, and I study each as an extended case, as I have done
with the theme of this paper.

Features of the autobiographical process

If you, the reader, were to imagine a solicitation to write five chapters of your life, no
doubt one or two possible chapter titles would spring forth – a move, a marriage, a
choice, a loss – signal events, turning points, eras or circumstances that shaped your
life's circumstance and future. Similarly, for these student writers memories of signal
events arise and beckon them to the various sites of their past. Some choose to
maintain a primarily descriptive approach throughout, outlining and detailing
selected events. Others move further, engaging more directly with past material,
teasing out features, conveying the associated emotion and exploring their signifi-
cance. Others peer deeper still into periods of change, turmoil and transition,
examining them and their efforts to cope and to prevail, and then acknowledging the
gains that have followed. And most close their narratives with some attention to
the question, 'how am I to live?'

The revisit

In the darkness, the headlight of the motorcycle picked out the next curve ... A flash
of metal is reflected by the headlight ... Time slows down ... At sixty miles per hour
the motorcycle and car meet. A loud bang, followed by a screeching of metal. The motorcycle
rider flies through the air with one thought: 'This is going to hurt'. (Todd, student)

In these opening lines of Todd's first chapter, he both details the accident and begins
his exploration of the decisive instances and actions that shaped and altered his life
in ways unimaginable. Like Todd, students look back on their life, first in memory,
now in written form, often for the first time. They generally turn to the time and
place of their childhood, and their position in their family of origin; some even begin
with the courtship and marriage of their parents. They delve into signal events:
cultural and geographic dislocation, family breakups and parental departures,
childhood nurture and childhood neglect. Most revisit the turning points that have
presented significant challenges either in their education, work or their personal life.
They recollect efforts to adjust to life without father or without mother, and to fit
into their new schools or surroundings. They highlight these through their chapter
titles, 'Guilty until proven innocent', 'Moments of loss, a lifetime of change' and
'A well-pieced life'. As one writer recalls, 'as you are writing you are editing, you are
thinking of all the incidents that relate to why you are writing, what you are writing
and what your actual feelings are ...'
Whereas most revisit their childhood, some even relive it. One man begins a chapter about his military enlistment in the voice of the young recruit: 'So here I am, 18-years-old, away from home, friends, and family for the first time ever without any true education to speak of and I am also going through Army Basic Training'. Similarly, Angelina, who also has enlisted in the military relives her moment of bewilderment: 'I must be out of my mind I'm thinking. That would be the only reason why I'm in the Army. Escape is one thing but sanity is another thing entirely and I think I've just lost mine'. Each of these writers relives past scenes by assuming the voice of the 'narrative present', a strategy described by LeJeune (1989) as 'a small revolution', one by which the author makes the past speak.

This unique structure reveals itself throughout Angelina's narrative, titled 'Looking backward'. Writing from the perspective of a woman about to give birth to her first baby, Angelina returns to selected scenes of her life on a tiny Caribbean island, beginning with the sunny kitchen of her grandmother's home. Writing in the voice of a child, and in the present tense, she is once again the young girl, who is beside herself with joy and anticipation over the delightful news that her mother is coming home or Christmas, 'I attend the M. Secondary School and am in the sixth grade. As far back as I can remember in my twelve years of living things have always been the same'. She falls back onto the narrative present at various times throughout her narrative, especially when she is recounting a memory of intensity, of either pleasure or pain, as when, years later, she returns home.

Now a soldier in the army, Angelina determines that her continuing idealization of home is forestalling her moving forward, so she resolves to return to the place of her birth. The chapter, 'Going back', describes the painful experience of her return. Still wanting desperately to stay connected to her family and to this place, she recognizes, however, that she has changed in ways that she has not. She has become disciplined, determined and goal-directed. Panic sets in, and as before, is expressed in the narrative present voice:

... if I do not belong here I am in great turmoil because I do not fit in anywhere else... I will admit I am scared. This trip is not turning out to be what I thought it was going to be. I almost regret coming back because I now realize no matter how much I desire it I can never go back. I can only move forward and [the Island] is a fond memory and that is all, it is just a beautiful memory, which I will always treasure.

In the above passage, this use of the 'narrative present' continues its compelling effect. Here her narrative structure becomes even more complex. She moves back in time, switching seemingly effortlessly between past, present, and future present in what LeJeune (1989) calls the 'indirect free style'. She takes the reader back again to the past, and then writing in the present, imagines the future and her feelings concerning what is about to happen. I have been struck by the complexity of this structure, by one who has likely not ever written anything like this before; and I wonder: does she know her own capacity to write?

The reflection

When I look back on the significant events of my life – those that have led to real learning – I see colour. For example, images of my childhood are surrounded by a soft shade of rose, much like the color of a pale, sparkling blush wine. For that reason, the theme, or through line, connecting my five chapters is colour. (Donna, student)

As writers revisit episodes and eras of their life, they reflect, draw meanings and try to make sense of their own life and of life in general. Donna, above, chose to print her chapters on sheets of different color, from rose through purple, orange, black and blue, graphically illustrating the diverse periods and progress of her life. For most, the process of reflection, of looking back over their life as though it were another's, is perhaps the most significant from the point of view of personal learning. Parents, teachers and loved ones are portrayed, not only in descriptive terms, but also in influential terms as shaping their life. Events are mulled over, some in isolation and others in relation to the whole story of their sense of their identity. Dreaded events spilt out for scrutiny, success and failures are assessed, and insights emerge. The process seems to affirm experiences, connect them, look at cause and effect relationships, explore consequences of certain events, and for some to bring a sense of order to experiences. These activities mirror the 'construction scars' that Pinar and Pautz (1998) have associated with the autobiographical process.

The signals of learning mostly show up in the last chapter of their life story, where the various insights and new understandings are articulated. However, the actual process of this reflection seems to occur throughout each narrative, and perhaps Leann's structure exemplifies this. Her learning about herself is evident throughout the various paragraphs; as she writes, she learns. In an unusual 'voice of reflection', which she introduces through the use of a different font, she intersperses her story with observations and new understandings, commenting on her life and on her own nature, engaging in a 'dialogue' with her narrative as though it were written by someone other than herself:

I remember my father coming home with bubble gum in his pockets on Friday nights and comic books on Saturday. In his perfect imitation of Donald Duck he always read the comics before we were allowed to. *Fanny I thought I had worked through all this many times over on the counselor's chair but here I sit once again the child, stomach in knots, tears flowing down. At that time of my life tears never flowed, big girls didn't cry and I was my daddy's girl a perfect fit for the box he created.*

Leann writes to herself as she writes of herself. She employs her autobiography to engage her own reflections on the self that is described by the self. It is as if, in the course of her writing, she is doing an analysis of herself. As I read her work, struck by its style, I wonder: Could it be that others are also doing this, engaging in this same kind of inner dialogue, but not actually bracketing this process as manifestly as Leann has done?

In subsequent interviews students affirmed the value of going back and dissecting their life, and in the course if it, discovering more about themselves. One student described the writing as, 'A process of unraveling, pulling [my life] in a bunch of pieces and then putting it back together'. Others noted the opportunity to put things into perspective, to balance their positive and negative experiences. As one recalled, 'For me [writing] was enriching because I was at a point in my life [when] I needed to take a step back; I needed to look at my life in order to move forward'.

The reconstruction

I've come a long way from those dark days in Detroit. That day of childhood dreams where the seeds of the future were planted. Remembering where I came from is...
humbled and I don't ever want to forget my roots. I appreciate what I have achieved because of where I began and where I am now... The fields were barren a long time. Although, it was a tough row to hoe, I never gave up my quest. (Rhonda, student)

Writer Toni Morrison (1987, 120) observes that life writing engages the author in a 'literary archaeology' — a return to a previous site and, from its remains, to reconstruct the life once left behind. Rhonda, having returned to the site of the losses and pain of her childhood and early adulthood, acknowledges now how far she has come. Similarly, writing their story motivates students to consider what they have gained and what they have come to know, either about themselves or others. Some begin to see the past in a new way, now noting something different in it that was not so evident before. Others theorize about their own behaviour and the behaviour of others. As one student, in considering her past behavior, remarked, 'In retrospect, I played the role of the innocent. I believed tomorrow would always be there'. They make observations about the past and about life in general, 'The lessons I learned were through pain or loss - very much like life'. For some, writing offers the possibility of validation and self-acceptance. For still others, focusing on their accomplishments becomes a confidence building experience that provokes a focus on future initiatives.

Through their narratives some writers confront their past and relive and reveal even what Britzman (1998) and Karpiak (2003) has called the unsayable, the 'uncanny' in their life. Their writing appears to affirm and legitimize what they have gone through and gives it a distinct quality or character. For instance, Susan titles her autobiography 'Patterns of my rope', which she then organizes through the metaphor of 'knots'. She begins with childhood and the tightening of the knots within her family, 'The rope of my protectors, my parents was a somewhat cruel one; it tied itself around me and my heart, violating the trust a child automatically gives to their parents'. Her narrative continues through her exploration of the nature of these knots, through her process of confrontation and self-assertion, and then, to see them come 'Undone', finally to be re-tied into a self-fashioned 'Bow-tie' that serves the title of her last chapter. Writing her story entailed looking backward and then looking forward, integrating her past life with her future.

In her subsequent interview, Susan characterizes the writing process as painful and emotional, yet validating and nurturing. She recalls her spouse's counsel to write about something else, 'He wanted me to just make up something and not cover that part, be it that it was the part that was me'. But she does it differently; in her words, 'because I knew it was important and that I needed to do it, so almost like to help give me some kind of closure to a stage in my life, and to look back in order to look ahead...' (my italics). She notes also that writing 'puts things into a better, manageable state for me'. The value of writing about childhood trauma is supported through the extensive work of James Pennebaker. One study (Pennebaker and Stone 2004) reported that writing about trauma was associated with improved functioning and health, that writing helps to bring order and cohesion to the events that in turn promotes their integration and the subsequent sense of control, manageability and some sense of resolution.

Perhaps the most powerful instance of reconstruction was exemplified by Lori's autobiography. One important chapter of her story deals with the death of her second born son when he was four-months-old. She opens this chapter, 'This is naturally the one chapter in my life that I would rather not be writing'. She describes his sudden death and her subsequent efforts, throughout the following nine years, to cope with and to recover from this tragic loss. In her subsequent interview, reflecting back on her autobiography, Lori recalls the intensity of the emotion and she reveals that it was written for her son, 'And in some crazy way it was my way of showing him that I was OK now, and that I had gotten through all of this... She sums up her view of this exercise as one that opens the space for her to move ahead with her life and to welcome the birth of another child:

When you do something like this, it is so intentional and you are forced to go back and reflect. It is a totally different viewpoint, a totally different way of looking at things; and you can be more objective. I think in my case the objectivity was that I gave myself permission to tell myself that you've done really well. You've come through it, and now its time to move on and develop the next stage in life.

The ReVision

Having come to the realization in the last few years that this is life, this is all there is and I have to make the most of it, I recognize that it is up to me to shape the life I want to live especially once my children are grown and living their own lives. What shape my story will take I don't yet know, it will be up to me to decide. (Beth, student)

Beth, whose life story detailed the losses associated with divorce and illness, ends on a note of hope and resolve concerning how she is to live. As the student writers come to the end of their chapters, now understanding more about their life and the way in which events have shaped their identity, they most often turn their eye to the future, as the place of their possible action and attention. From this vantage point of narrative knowing, they articulate a moral position and possible vision for a future for themselves and for close others, again, echoing Nuala O'Faolain's earlier observation, 'A memoir may always be retrospective, but the past is not where its action takes place' (2003, 52).

Writers express their resolve concerning how they ought to or want to live, to what they aspire as professionals, what kind of partners and friends they hope to become, the sorts of things they want for their children, in what way they intend to serve others, and what they hope to leave behind. More specifically, some vow to pursue further graduate study and other pursuits, even a full-length autobiography. Some give voice to the importance of taking personal responsibility for actions, for making personal choices for doing what is right. They express their awareness of the universality of many of life's problems, issues and concerns. And whereas their actual future actions in this regard cannot be predicted, their heightened consciousness and intentionality would suggest that they have been somehow changed and that this change will find its expression in their world.

Earlier I noted that Angelina, who wrote of her enlistment in the military and then of her trials of her relationship to home, below closes her autobiography with a vow to her child:

I still carry the scars of not having that bond with my own Mother and I will try my best to ensure my baby develops that bond. I hope my baby does not choose to walk in my shoes because they were very heavy at times. Yes, the choices I have made and what fate has dealt me have made me a stronger person, but the tears and turmoil it took me to
get there were sometime more than I could bear... I believe in building a strong foundation from day one with my baby. Adding layers of cement so strong that no weak links can pass through.

Of autobiography and autobiographical process

I have been noting throughout this paper that the work of autobiography continues both during and after life review. As these student writers revisit the sites and eras of their life, they reflect on these happenings and on their possible meanings. They reconstruct them in light of the present. This feature of their writing – the reconstruction of their assumptions, beliefs and perspectives – is arguably the most significant with respect to transformative learning and any possible future benefits. Some, albeit to varying degrees, even consider modifying their life. In the following sections the importance of these processes are considered, from the point of view of some of the theories that would suggest the prospect that these autobiographers become co-creators of their life, that they extend their consciousness, and that they engage in ‘psychic events’ and transformative learning.

Autobiography as transformative learning

Transformative learning in adult education shares some features of the therapeutic process, wherein, among its processes, adults engage in critically examining and revising the cultural and personal assumptions and meanings that underlie and shape their view of life (Mezirow 2000). Transformation theory attempts to explain the process by which individuals formulate more dependable beliefs about their experiences; its function is to permit a more inclusive, differentiated and integrated view of individuals and their world (Mezirow 1991). Mezirow (2000) asserts, ‘Our understandings and beliefs are more dependable when they produce interpretations and opinions that are more justifiable or true than would be those predicated upon other understandings or beliefs’ (4). With respect to its process, Mezirow highlights the feature of ‘becoming critically aware of one’s own tacit assumptions and expectations and those of others and assessing their relevance for making an interpretation’ (4).

These features of adult learning have been presented throughout this paper through the highlighting of the features associated with autobiography. Both in their writing of their life story and in their subsequent reading of it the authors confront their assumptions, behaviours, beliefs and defining metaphors: ‘from puppet to dancer’, or ‘the barren fields’, or ‘burning down the barn to see the moon’. In so doing, they envision an alternative to what has been. Throughout this paper I have brought in the voices of the student writers that have illustrated the shifts in perspective that have followed from their work of writing their life.

Autobiography as ‘a psychic event’

When autobiography is viewed as an educational process and approached from the viewpoint of a psychoanalytic framework, it becomes a method for the advancement of self-knowledge and one’s ‘otherness’ (Britzman 1998). Educator Deborah Britzman brings to education a psychoanalytic perspective that involves the exploration of the

‘otherness of the self’ in the service of human development. This perspective affirms ‘the psychic creativity of selves: how the self crafts its meanings of the self in the world, what these meanings do to the psyche, and what the psyche does to these meanings’ (10). Britzman characterizes education as ‘a psychic event’, charged with emotion wherein the subject, who is the learner, meets the object that is the knowledge. She similarly draws attention to the ‘complications of learning’, to the ‘tensions of learning’ and the depth of experience and feelings that reside within the learner: old conflicts, unresolved issues, past experiences.

As these student writers take to the task of writing their life, they do become the subject, who is to confront the object of their writing (their own life). Further, they come into the position of learning from the event (of ones autobiography), where insights gained permit them to ‘alter and craft’ themselves. They demonstrate in various ways the gains in personal learning and reflect Anna Freud’s and Britzman’s observation of education as ‘new editions of very old conflicts’ (2). Yet, these same tensions that Britzman (2006) identifies will surely be encountered as students embark on their life story. As student writer, Susan, noted concerning her writing, ‘At first I deleted as much as I could... I was a little bit hesitant about it more because of the experience that I have had’. Another writer compared her writing to a ‘one night stand’, wondering what I, the reader, would think of her in the aftermath of my reading.

As I have noted earlier, whereas all students engage in the ‘revisit’ in the course of their writing, they vary widely in the extent of their engagement in reflection, reconstruction, and revision. I have addressed this range in an earlier paper (Karpnak 2003). Notwithstanding, students in their interviews remarked that even if they chose not to write something, they still had reflected on it.

Autobiographers as weaver of their life

In his book, titled Threads of life, Richard Freedman (2001) introduces the evocative metaphor of the threads of a weaving to characterize the evolving nature of human life and, by extension, the evolving nature of writing ones own autobiography. He states, ‘threads are a powerful metaphor for some conceptions of free will: we are the weavers of our story and so, too, of our life, and through creative acts of consciousness, we essentially create ourselves’ (17). Freedman adds a further note: in autobiography the weaver is the one whose life is being woven, whose image is the one being created in the weaving; and remarkably, where each step of the process arises from what the weaver has previously woven. Correspondingly, as student writers sit down to write their life, they do the work of the weaver, of gathering the threads of their life together so that a pattern of that life emerges on the page. They, too, become both subject and object of their craft. And as their life patterns become revealed to them, they, as the weaver, can envision and construct an alteration in the pattern, and thereby, in the life ahead. As Eakin (2008) was noted to remark earlier, autobiography is the ongoing process of identity development: ‘an activity in the making’ (170).

One student noted precisely that: describing the memory of past experiences as a ‘landing site’, he wrote: ‘You develop from that landing site. You sort of use that to go on to the next point. You use that to build your next landing site’.
Autobiographers step into the light

The direction of autobiography toward clarity, illumination and pattern recognition has been noted by William Gass (1994), who comments that autobiography throws 'a full beam on the life already lived' (52), that it gathers aspects of the author into a 'shaping self'. His observation would suggest that in the case of these student writers the events that earlier may have appeared slightly distorted become revealed in greater detail and complexity; and more aspects and elements of these events become defined and related to one another. Bringing events and experiences to awareness and composing them as a narrative, similarly engages these writers in a process of 'shaping' themselves.

This relationship of autobiography to the growth of human consciousness is further advanced by the work of Antonio Damasio (1999), whose research in cognitive neuroscience has yielded deeper understanding of human memory and human consciousness. Damasio identifies among the tasks of human developmental to be the growth of 'extended consciousnes', such as to include that which has remained unconscious or nonconscious – various hidden images, dispositions, 'know-how' and wisdom. One avenue for the growth and enrichment of consciousness is through the reactivation and display of the systemized memories of situations and events. Damasio refers to this process as the extension of the 'autobiographical self'. According to Damasio, as we enrich our autobiographical self, we similarly extend our consciousness, and, in turn, are enabled to draw on its contents to deal with presenting problems, to develop a concern for others, and enlarge our capacity to improve the overall quality of our life. Eakins's (2008) recent work has supported Damasio's observations and has argued for the important function of autobiography for the growth of consciousness. One student writer highlights the process of 'shaping' her developmental capacities:

...it helped put into perspective in your life that it was just a small portion of what you have gone through; and yeah, you came through it OK. So that the next time a stumbling block has come along, perhaps you are able to deal with it better. Hopefully never being the same mistakes or problems again. But knowing that I got through it once, I can get through it again then.

Autobiography as the 'art of the future'

The one thing that I do know is that I will make what I want of my future. Having survived and grown as I have in my forties, I am confident that, no matter what circumstances life throws at me, I will keep control of my story firmly in my own hands. Nothing will ever again push me into the background of my own story. (Jenny, student)

My work with autobiography has drawn me into the life stories and lives of my students, and through their stories I have come to view students in a different light – as individuals with a story, with a life of which I know nothing, yet a life that surely accompanies them and occupies its seat next to them. Through the intensity of their stories and characters, their language and tone, the events they have undergone, and the actions they have taken to free themselves of their past, these writers have become a part of me, the characters of my life, who have been teaching me about life. Through their stories I have come to know more about the human condition and the human response than I would have in any other way; and I have received answers to questions I never asked.

Educators contemplating the use of autobiography in their instruction may find encouragement for doing so in this paper. I realize that questions arise concerning the effects on students of writing about themselves and their situations in ways that expose them to further pain without the advantage of counseling. I have given this possibly a great deal of thought and have found no evidence to suggest that this process harms individuals. My observation has been that students write at the level of their comfort, thus the wide range of material with respect to depth and disclosure. What I have found is that providing a timely and thoughtful commentary on the narratives is critical – to acknowledge the story, the struggles and gains, and the impact that it has had on both them and on me, the reader. Invariably students write back with thanks and a further commentary on their experience of writing.

As revealed through the autobiographies and the subsequent interviews, in the course of writing their life story in five chapters, these students are taken back to reassemble into an order or pattern of connections and meanings the various random events and scattered experiences of their life. Albeit to varying degrees, it appears that these processes serve them in several ways. They come to appreciate the beginnings that had shaped their lives, choices made that determined their life course, and roles they played that once defined or limited their freedom. Some reconstruct their sense of self through working (once again) through pain, and holding themselves so deeply engaged with past trauma, so as to 'draw the poison out of it'. Finally, they envision a future for themselves and close others – what they would want for their children, how they would relate to others, and what their place is in the world. As weavers of their life, as those who have surveyed those life efforts and happenings now woven into their tapestry, they have gained some capacity to alter the form and pattern of the weave, thereby permitting more options for action and response. It would be fitting to turn over the last word to one student, who can best convey what gains can be made:

All the events of my past, and the occurrences of my present, have served to teach me well the one simple truth: this is life. It is not always a fair-haired child surrounded by sunshine. It is sometimes ugly and startlingly dark as a moonless night. However, this is the life that you have been given and it is up to you as to how you deal with its joys, sorrows, trials, and triumphs. My body will grow old and my mind will mature, however, I have promised myself never to look back and dream on what might have been. I intend to look for my successes (however small) in all that I have experienced and learned as a traveler along life's road.

References


Learning and adapting for organisational change: researching union education in Australia

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The last quarter century saw a restructuring of employment, production and trade and a dramatic decline in union membership and density levels. There are many explanations for this, including the hostile industrial relations framework imposed by many governments, but there have been other factors such as the growth of new non-unionised industries that often rely on casualised labour; new attitudes to unions by younger workers; a political/cultural decline in the workers' movement under neo-liberalism; and an inability by many unions to adapt to these changes. Now dramatic economic changes arising from the global financial crisis that will see increased unemployment and further industry restructuring, along with the restructuring and re-skilling implications of climate change, pose new challenges for trade unions. Drawing on research with senior Australian union officials about the movement's education and training activities this paper considers the relevance of the adaptive systems literature for understanding the operational environments facing unions as they become larger more complex organisations. It considers the existing suite of education activities with reference to Illeris' tension field and the literature of union renewal that emphasises the need to develop new solidarities and therefore a broader conception of education, learning and development.

Keywords: organisational adaptability; organisational learning; union education; union renewal

Introduction

The last quarter century saw a restructuring of employment, production and trade and a dramatic decline in the membership and density levels of unions due to factors including changes in the external environment as neo-liberalism took hold after the post-war boom, restructuring and downsizing of industries that had been union strongholds, and a hostile legal framework. Many unions were structurally and politically ill-equipped to respond to these changes. Much of the effort devoted to turning this situation around has focussed on attempts to recruit new members, establish footholds in new industries and among previously un-organised workers and workers joining the new growth industries. This has generally become known as the 'organising model' and has contained within it the intention of establishing new relationships with activist members; with organisations outside the formal labour movement (Fine 2006; Tattersall 2006; Turner and Cornfield 2007); employing new education and development opportunities for union staff and members; and developing innovative recruiting and bargaining campaigns. An extensive literature

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