Including Student Narratives in Teaching

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Abstract: This article deals with an educational structure where students´ personal narratives are used to deepen their understanding of what reactions to crises may imply. Through writing about experienced violence the students introduced into the learning environment stories that could be analyzed and serve as illustrations of ways of reacting to crises. The project aim was to develop a pedagogical method for linking practice and theory closer together. Research findings indicate that the method can be used as a way of personalizing knowledge, heightening self-insight and influencing the social environment of the classroom positively . The article also considers the ethical and clinical considerations that must be taken into account when involving student narratives in educational programs.
Keywords: narrative, reflection, praxis knowledge

Background:
The use of student narratives in educational settings has become the focus of considerable attention in recent years. This has involved both research projects as well as pedagogical exercises. Loftus (1998) describes how the narratives related by nursing students regarding the provision of care to the dying led to increased consciousness of their own vulnerability. In addition the students experienced how difficult it was to provide such care when they found themselves so moved by their own feelings. By telling the researcher about their reactions in encounters with dying patients, the students appeared to gain experience in monitoring changes in their own emotional processes as well as in increasing their understanding of what care in this field may involve. By employing their own narratives, students can thereby be trained to reflect about their understanding of their own actions as well as of theoretical perspectives (Schibbye 1995).

Narrative theory focuses on the human phenomenon wrapped in the tales we recount about what happens to us. In doing so we construct understandings of what we experience in storytelling terms (Mishler 1996). A narrative involves not only accounts of happenings, but more importantly our experiences and understandings of what has happened (Polkinghorne 1991). One reason why narratives have become the focus of increasing attention is because lived life can only be made visible through narratives, they are the major way of *understanding* life as it is lived (Becker 1999, Ewick & Sibley 1995). Thus, in this epistemology life as it is lived is inseparable from its narratives. Life is not something that "is" or "was", but happenings that are interpreted, reinterpreted, told and retold as long as we are alive (Bruner 1987, 1990).

Many regard personal narratives as one way of bringing the individual back to the social sciences. Narratives make visible how individual members of society create meanings and

connections in their lives (Bruner 1987, Polkinghorne 1991, Gee 1991, Becker 1999). The psychologist Jerome Bruner has defined narrative in relation to two forms of cognitive functioning: two ways of ordering experience that form the basis for constructing reality. One of these he terms logical-scientific or paradigmatic. This form, heavily influenced by positivism, includes argumentation based on truth norms. The other form Bruner terms narrative. Rather than arriving at truths, narratives bring to life experiences and provide meaning and connections to it. He further claims that these two forms of cognitive functioning are based on different standards for confirmation and verification and as such are irreconcilable in relation to each other. Narrative research, for many social scientists today, is regarded as a theoretically solid tool for understanding human experience equal to those employed in positivistic research (Larson 1997, Bruner 1990).

A teaching strategy including the use of students' narratives can also contribute to the students sense of empowerment: The students bring their own experiences to a field of knowledge and they are recognized as relevant by both teachers and fellow students, thus enhancing their own sense of self (Kramp and Humphrey 1993). Studies also show that the use of students´own narratives can make them more conscious of their own values and attitudes. In so doing they see themselves as active learners and thus add to their self-esteem (Loftus 1998).

Other ways of using student narratives can be to examine relationships between power and knowledge. A common feature of education programs for professionals is enculturation in the language and rationale of the chosen profession. These are often framed as apolitical and neutral in relation to existing power structures. The language of profession provides its members with legitimacy and power to define reality in one way – often to the detriment and devaluation of other definitions of reality. Sanchez and Fried (1997) point out that in a genuinely multicultural world, a central task is to provide space for student narratives so that other voices from both individuals and groups can be provided with legitimacy.

The Project: Understanding Crisis Theory through analyzing Student Narratives of Experienced Violence

Participating in further education in mental health involves working with theories challenging one's own difficult feelings – such as those related to vulnerability, dependence and death. A major challenge in this kind of education is to create a learning environment where psychological theories may become personalized, so that these can be employed when students meet psychological phenomena in praxis (Nygren & Blom 1999). Using this as a point of departure, students in a class focused on reactions to crises were invited to contribute to illuminating elements in crises theory by writing about their own experience with violence. They were issued with the following invitation: "*Tell about an incident of violence you have experienced. It can be a violent incident you experienced directly or one you heard about or witnessed. What happened and how did you react? How do you recall the incident today?*" Students were asked to submit their narratives without identifying themselves. They were cautioned not to choose incidents that represented an emotional burden at the moment. Both writing and submitting a narrative was voluntary and students who felt in need of counseling afterwards, were invited to contact the project supervisor. The students who did not want their stories to be included in the material, that is both analysed and possibly quoted, wrote a NO on their card and picked up their stories after class Of the 72 students included in this project, three students did not write a story, four students

did not want their story to be included in the project data, and two students felt in need of counseling after class.

The narratives were processed through three stages. First students wrote their stories for 20 minutes in class, on a small sheet of paper handed out to them. This provided limits in both time and space and supported the intention of anonymity. In the second phase the students were divided into groups and given stories from other groups to work with. For 45 minutes the groups analyzed the assigned narratives in terms of elements in crises theory such as the protagonist's reactions and strategies of coping. In the third phase the students again gathered in a classroom plenary and each group chose one narrative that they felt gave a good illustration of the subject matter and presented it to the class.

There are both clinical and ethical issues in this kind of assignment. Students may have experienced traumatic events that have caused them great pain. Recounting these events as part of illustrating a subject matter could be considered unreasonable and stressful. In the above structure it is attempted to avoid this by practicing three principles: Ensuring voluntary participation, providing an overview of the process, and the offer of counseling.

Data and Method

The project was carried out in two different classes involving a total of 72 students. Of these 65 wrote their narratives anonymously, stories that were analyzed in class. At the end of the session a total of 51 students completed anonymous questionnaires – and these constitutes the data the present article is based on. Thus we have no way of telling if the non-responders differ to responders when it comes to viewing this method.

The students enrolled in these two classes had a mean age of 40 years while the age range was from 28 to 60 years. Two thirds of the students were female and the the group as a whole was made up of students from the following professions: nurses 45 percent, social workers 20 percent, physical therapists 10 percent, social educators 8 percent, occupational therapists 10 percent and other professions 7 percent.

The variables of the questionnaire were formulated in such a way so that responses to statements could be made along a five pointed Likert scale. The statements focused partly on students views of both cognitive and emotional aspects of the method. In the presentation of the students´ scores in table 1-3 below, the scores of 1 and 2 are summed up under the category "no", score 3 is categorized as "partly" and the scores 4 and 5 as "yes".

Data show that 84 percent of the narratives involved the writer, while the remaining 14 percent involved incidents students had heard about or witnessed. Half of the narratives involved experiences from students´ own professional histories, as in the example below.

Results

The Narratives

The content of the narratives is not analyzed as qualitative data in this paper. However, to illustrate the kind of stories provided by the students and see how they may be related to theory

on crisis reactions, two narratives are presented in full, one from working life and one regarding family matters.

I: The violent incident happened at my workplace. At that time we had an autistic patient who acted out a lot on the ward. In order to get him to function, it was necessary for us to work with him in pairs. One day while I was observing he threw a pair of scissors at me and hit me in the arm. Treatment personnel had an agreement that every time we were hit by this patient, we were to ignore it and continue our instructions as if nothing had happened. I sat there the necessary time (for the observation) with blood running down my arm until I left the ward. Back in my office, the reaction came – crying. The doctor wanted me to take sick leave and this was done. But after having worked with this patient for some time, I began to experience problems whenever strangers were behind me, especially when I was alone like in a cafe. I remember one time when the hairs on the back of my neck stood up when a man walked slowly behind me. When I look back at the episode today, I still have problems understanding why we had been ordered to relate to that patient in the way we did.

There are many ways of interpreting a narrative. Different people will view the same story differently, and a person's interpretation of a narrative will change throughout one´s life (Larson, 1997). The group of students analyzing the above narrative, used it as an illustration as to how an anxiety derived from being treated violently can expand to other parts of one´s life – the narrator experienced for awhile an increased anxiety-level in situations reminding him or her of the incident. The group also also focused on the struggle of making sense of what happened: How could the staff agree upon such a way of working? In another story the female student had experienced being hit in the face at a discothèque by a strange man. She wrote: "The hardest part was to understand why he did it. It kept turning my mind for months afterwards: Why did he hit a girl whom he did not know hard in the face with a clenched hand? I kept asking everybody, but no one could answer". To the students the elements reflected upon could serve as illustrations of how a person had reacted to, and dealt with, a violent experience.

Two of every ten narratives were drawn from childhood and involved such happenings as sexual assault, bullying, physical abuse and experiences with parents who were alcohol and drug abusers. One example of these is as follows:

II: My father was an alcoholic, but not a street drunkard. He held his facade in order and managed to hold on to a job and a family. He started beer drinking when I was just a small child, but then it was within what was regarded as acceptable by society. . . .Nobody in the family talked about it. It was something to be ashamed of and to "shit in our own nest" was viewed in my family as being unacceptable. My father often hit my mother. He couldn't tolerate that she was trying to forge a career in her job and he did such things as refuse to let her attend courses involving overnight stays. He was extremely jealous (and paranoid, I would say today). He also beat us kids when he was angry, but he never did this sadistically. The violent episode I wish to recount happened when my father was delirious. I was visiting home while I was studying in Oslo, something I did then two or three times each semester. I had heard my mother and sisters and brothers talking about something that seemed to be completely crazy, but I had never experienced it myself. That Saturday, he drank a whole lot and became very nasty. I have always been very direct with him and told him when I thought he was wrong. On that day, he couldn't take it. He became more and more enraged and "crazy". Finally, he threw me out of the house, hit my mother and threw her out, too (without her shoes). It was early May and we had to hide ourselves outside. I was so frightened. One of my sisters was still asleep in the

house and I knew my father had some hunting firearms. The worst memory I have of that day is when his calling to me (he couldn't see me but knew I was out there someplace). He shouted: "I'm going to tear your head off and throw it away!" Completely crazy. After that, I never called him "Dad" anymore. He died a half year later of natural causes. Luckily, I don't feel ashamed to say. . . .After he died, I've talked with many about what happened in our family, but never about that terrible night in May. In working with this narrative the students focused on the situation where the narrator, after having lived with this partly malicious father all her or his life, suddenly finds one self in a situation where the boundaries of acceptable behavior were being exceeded, causing great fear for both oneself and relatives. The situation was non-negotiable, the relation forever changed. And the solution, "never to call him father again" was seen as a way of coping, of making a necessary distance.

The narratives were both victim and mastering oriented; especially narratives from the years of youth were characterized by accounts of how attacks had been repelled and how one had overcome difficulties, etc. In ways similar to the above, 10 of the 65 narratives relate that this has not been told before, either wholly or partially.

Understanding some Aspects of Crises Theory through Narratives
In addition to writing their own narratives, students were asked as already noted to analyze narratives in small groups with their classmates. Thus, two sources for learning were incorporated into the project: one's own narrative as well as those of others. Table 1 below shows the percentages of students who responded respectively yes, partially and no when asked to evaluate what was learned during the project in relation to understanding theory.

Table 1 Evaluation of Theoretical Value of Project (percentage and mean)

	No	Partly	Yes	Mean
- Writing about something I experienced was a good way for working with reactions to crises	14	29	57	3.5
- I learned about reactions to crises by listening to the narratives of others	10	20	70	3.8
- By using students' experiences as examples I gained more insight into how one may react to incidences of violence	8	35	57	3.6
- I would have learned just as much by listening to a lecture about reactions to crises	78	14	8	2.0

Six of every ten students felt that their own narratives contributed positively to their understanding of crises reactions, while seven of every ten felt that they learned something by listening to the narratives of others. These two groups correlate but are not overlapping (sign <05.-level, r=.285). Of the 36 students making up the 70 percent who answer affirmatively to the statement that they learned from the narratives of *others*, one half answer yes to the statement about learning from their *own* narratives. Collectively, 57 percent of the students report that this

method provides increased insight into crises reactions following incidents of violence, while 35 percent report partial increases and 8 percent report no increases in insight. This demonstrates that the majority of students reported an increased understanding of crises theory through analyzing narratives. This impression is reinforced by the fact that eight of every ten disagree with the statement that they could have learned just as much by listening to a lecture about reactions to crises.

Are these personal narratives better tools than i.e. cases presented in books or by lecturers? The autenticity of the narratives, produced by students themselves or by people they knew, added a intensity to the learning environment that can be seen as beneficial to learning. One sign of this intensity is that two thirds of the students reported to have been saddened by listening to the narrative of others (table 2). In this material, being emotionally touched, correlate significantly with evaluating the method as valuable for working with the teoretical theme in focus. That is the case both conserning being saddended by one´s own narratives (sign <.05-level, r=332) and learning something about one self by writing one´s narrative (sign <.01-level, r=619).

Personal Gain

Even though the objective in this project was to enhance students´understanding of crises theory, exploration of the statistical data also comprised whether this form of pedagogy was seen to contribute to feelings of increased insight of one self or being better acquainted with one's classmates. Table 2 shows the responses by students to statements about these areas:

Table 2 Personal Gain (percentage and mean)

	No	Partly	Yes	Mean
- I learned something about myself by writing my narrative	20	43	37	3.2
- I became better acquainted with my classmates by listening to or reading the narratives of others	16	33	51	3.5
- I was saddened by the narrative I wrote	61	16	23	2.3
- I was saddened when reading/listening to the narratives of others	33	26	41	2.9
- After writing my narrative, I regretted writing something that was too personal	88	8	4	1.2

Students report a somewhat lesser benefit in using the method on a personal plane rather than a theoretical one in comparison to the results of Table 1. Nonetheless there are only 20 and 16 percent respectively who report that they did not learn something about themselves or became better acquainted with their classmates through working with the narratives. The fact that more than half the students felt that they had become better acquainted with their classmates after

having participated in the project, suggests that personal narratives can have a positive influence on the relationships of students to one another.

The risk of becoming emotionally moved when in touch with personal experiences with violence is inevitable. 39 percent of the students stated becoming sad to some degree thinking about their story. However, getting to know the narratives of others seem to have an even greater impact, as 67 percent of the students were saddened by this. Not unexpectedly, the scores of those reporting these feeling states correlate in relation to one another: those who are saddened by their own narratives become even more saddened by the narratives of others (sign<.01-level, r=559). The material also shows there is a strong connection between being saddened by one's own narrative and whether one felt a gain of self-knowledge in the process (sign<.01-level, r=511).

As in one of the narratives above, 10 of the students included reactions in their narrative that they had not spoken of before. The mute part of their stories contained reactions they regarded as disgraceful: "*Afterwards, I told about what happened, but never about how I lost control"*. In light of the strong correlation between feeling sad and learning shown above, making text out of one´s own narrative may create a personal space where experiences can be interpreted anew, recognised and related in public. Being able to reveal one´s narrative without having to reveal oneself, may also have added to the trusting position these students were taking.

Approximately 12 percent of the students report to regret writing the chosen narrative. If we look closer at this group of six students, their tendency to regret correlate positively with feeling sad thinking about the incident (sign<.01-level, r=550). However, a high score on this variable ("regrets") do not seem to imply skepticism about this way of working with crises theory. Comparing mean scores by these 6 students with the remaining sample, the former score higher, both with regard to thinking this a good way of working with the subject matter (M 4.2 versus 3.5) and regarding learning about oneself (M 3.7 versus 3.1).

Thus it seems that the feelings awakened by the narrative may serve as an entrance to further understanding – about oneself, classmates and the subject matters. However, as discussed above, the risk of evoking strong emotions in the wake of a pedagogic form like this, implies the need for a strong ethical consciousness to be linked to it.

Evaluating the Method's Suitability

The course comprised 5 hours, 3 of which involved work by the students with their own narratives as well as those of others. The responses in table 3 show that this was evaluated by students as a good use of time: 82 percent did not think the method to be too time consuming and a similar percent reported that they viewed the program was a useful way of working with the themes of the course.

Table 3 Evaluating the Method's Suitability (percentage and mean)

	No	Partly	Yes	Mean
- It was too time consuming first to write, then to go through the narrative in groups, and finally present them in the classroom plenary	82	10	8	1.7
- Working with narratives in this way was useful as I see it	6	18	76	4.0
- It can be too demanding to use such negative experiences, student narratives shouldn't be used	82	18	-	1.7
- I recommend greater use of student narratives in teaching	16	28	56	3.6

In looking at students' reckoning of the general personal costs of the method, not a single student reported that the method should not be used because it could be too emotionally intense or strong. In the main, the students who found the method to be too time consuming were identical with those who found the use of narratives to be too strong in the classroom (sign<.01-level, r=559). This group reject using the method, basing their arguments partially with reference to emotional factors (too strong) and partially with reference to practical concerns (too time consuming).

As the last question show, the favourable assessment of the method used on crises theory, is somewhat lessened when anwered on a general basis. Here, 60 percent of the students recommend greater use of student narratives in teaching, while 20 percent think partly so.

Discussion and Conclusion

Professional wisdom must include the ability to evaluate and to criticize one's own understandings and actions and by continually monitoring student experiences, this ability may be developed and privileged (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1986, Schön 1987). Including students' own narratives linked to themes in mental health both illustrates theory as well as contributes to reflections about their own praxis. The ability to see processes in and of themselves as well as in relationships is especially important for those working in this field. By drawing upon their own experiences and experiential knowledge, students can be better equipped to understand their own situations and be more open to deeper understandings of what diverse phenomena involve (Van Manen 1990).

The ethical caution needed to be exercised in such a program as the one described here, need not set limits for narratives presented by this kind of student group. In order to help those experiencing psychological distress, one is required to be equipped with a great capacity for relating to feelings, both one's own as well as those of others. All strong emotional experiences involve a storehouse of dormant feelings and these may be activated by telling tales about what has happened, as illustrated in this survey. It is therefore the teacher's role to make room for these reactions, to normalize them and to give them the status they deserve as relevant materials within the field being explored. Feelings are also facts in this structure. They are bound up in the field

of praxis and provide color to the narratives, which in turn can be useful in examining the theoretical perspectives in focus.

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