CONCLUSION

An Evolution of Ideas: The Transformative Ecological Imagination in Adult Learning, Education, and Research

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The main objective of this book has been to chronicle the recent evolution of narrative and auto/biographical methods in research on adult education and lifelong learning, as well as of narrative forms of intervention in professional fields with a variety of groups. Contexts and communities constantly evolve and asking new questions is existentially essential. Furthermore, we have engaged in this book with an evolving community of scholars – the ESREA network – consisting of a mixture of experienced and early career scholars, to explore, with them, their evolution, in relationship, as narrative researchers. We have posed a question as to the extent to which the Network itself is a good enough ecology of learning, and thus life enhancing in its own right. This in a world in ecological, cultural and political crisis, where entities are often viewed in isolation, and where learning and education are often reduced to narrow, instrumental purposes. There has been neglect of understanding our interactions with the natural world, in our patterns of consumption, or our engagement with others, and otherness, including otherness within. We offer no claim to neutrality, certainty of approach or outcome in these pages: all of us are engaged researchers, in varying ways, struggling towards using research and narrative methods to create a better, more ecologically aware, sustainable, and socially just, egalitarian world.

While writing this conclusion, or rather what is merely a marker on a larger journey of methodological and epistemological pilgrimage, the idea of evolution came firmly to mind. Evolution as a kind of viaticum, defined as a supply of provisions for an onward, never ending journey. Evolution, we suggest, is intrinsic to ecology: life is dynamic, ever-changing, striving to create new forms – of which some persist and blossom, and others die. Life, however – at least any life worth living – is deeply relational, and life-based research methods engage us within unprecedented, complex relationships, one with another and whole worlds. The relationships can eventually bring us to the new and life enhancing, as our perspectives and relationships broaden and deepen, in heartfelt, embodied as well as intellectual ways. If life is complex: narrative

research is (or should be?) respectful of the complexity. The contributions presented in this book tell a lively, dynamic story, intrinsically generative and transformative, in which complexity is respected. They demonstrate the evolution of our methodological family towards greater complexity and the power of illumination, bringing creativity, relationships, connections, epistemological and ethical subtlety to life. We suggest, on the evidence of these pages, that the work is both necessary, and often beautiful and life enhancing. This is a big, but justified claim, especially if, as we believe, this book will speak to many others struggling to be, to know and connect with others in difficult and disturbing times.

Ecology as a topic revealed itself powerfully when bringing together various threads: the biological and the social, natural and human-built environments, the capacity (or resistance) of organizations and communities to change, and the openness (or closedness) of individuals to learning. Lights and shadows. Hate and love. Hope and desperation. And yet there is determination in the writing to keep on keeping on in the work, to live with uncertainty rather than close this down in false, forced and premature ways. And also, to speak truth, however provisional this might be, to power; many if not all our authors are committed to forms of learning and education that are deeply dialogical and emancipatory. There is an implicit, at times explicit challenge to instrumentalism: to the idea of targets, as well as a calculus that sets instructions as to how this is achieved and objectifies the other. Rather the research and learning at the heart of the book are grounded in the importance of relationship and trust, which are not amenable to simplistic technical solutions. It is about living and acting in ways that evoke trust and mutual respect in the perpetual experiment called life and learning.

An ecology of life is strong and flourishing when it evolves, and when the obstacles to flow are removed or minimized: we have challenged, in these pages, a mainstream conceptualization of learning and education disconnected from the ecology of natural and social life, or as simple cause/effect instructional processes, ignorant of the many hindrances that intervene in lives and learning. What is rigid, fixed and unchanging, dies. A narrative is not 'a photograph', but is a constant, evolving series of questions, a quest, in short, in which meaning making lies at the heart. This is the essential basis for good enough adult education and research.

Our authors embody and bear witness to an extraordinarily strong ecological and evolutionary sensibility, deployed through diverse narrative studies, auto/biographical and psychosocial theories and methodologies. There has been a diversity of perspectives finding expression across these pages. There is a sensitivity to suffering in the work, mindful as we are of writing this

'conclusion' in the time of Coronavirus. Not only are people suffering, but so too is the natural world and diverse species, while our cities, towns and villages are often in pain. Our governments too seem on the rocks, while the arts can be relegated to museums. So, we infuse our final reflections from the perspective of biodiversity, and care-full-ness, as a common thread across the book, and as an imperative in our lives and times. We will list the values we have found in reading the chapters, and which seem essential to a healthy research and learning community; in short, to an ecology of life and learning.

1 Biodiversity as a Value Celebrated in Narrative Research

Biodiversity, which is necessary to maintain life on the planet, is also the engine of historical and cultural evolution: without it, civilization would never have happened, and today both are at risk. We are not only confronting ecological disaster and life-threatening events (there were many, during the crafting of the book), but the shrinking of cultural, linguistic, expressive diversity too. Even individually, a closed, monothematic, saturated story is anti-ecological, minimizing desire and hope. Cultural evolution, as well as personal growth, is deeply rooted in meeting, merging, and the clashing of different ideas, practices, identities, selves, and communities. But the clash can be destructive and a retreat from any learning from the other and otherness. This is the very opposite of what adult education, historically and constructively, has sought to achieve.

Narrative research is a powerful means to chronicle the role of difference – a “difference that makes a difference”, as Gregory Bateson would say (1979, p. 250) – in triggering awareness, reflection, reflexivity, and transformation, over time. Not only at the individual level, but in relationships, in proximal systems and communities (Formenti, 2018). Across these chapters, most adult learning seems to happen while engaging with the Other, which can mean another social actor, another idea or paradigm, another species, or the environment itself as otherness. One that challenges our existence, or balance; and – last but not least – the other that lies within our psyches, perhaps at an unconscious, repressed level. Personal struggles, for example with colonial pasts, familial relationships, or professional demands, are well documented in many chapters, each entailing the author's struggles to re-compose divergent aspects of his/her life and learning as well as to understand more of the other.

Plurality, then, is what makes us come alive; it nurtures our needs as individuals and as a species and offers potential solutions when we get stuck. When we tell a story, we can compose and respect the differences without blurring,

recognize, name and celebrate them, we can name them, openly, and then see the patterns connecting them. We can be deeply respectful to different lives, different cultures, and ways of being and seeing. But ultimately, noting a common humanity, vulnerability, and power to act for good or ill. Private and public selves, personal and professional identities, rational and emotional reasons for our choices merge: narrative methods have a deeply inclusive aesthetic quality that transcends binary ideas. We can tell multiple stories, from many points of view, and engage with many actors with different interests and stories to tell. Stories, as the writer Elif Shafak (2020) makes clear, can be the means to sanity in an insane world. When we feel able to tell our stories and are listened to, we can then learn to listen to others. This process of self/other recognition has always characterized the best of adult education.

2 Telling One's Life Story Illuminates the 'Collective'

The collective stories of specific human groups (working class academics or students, adult educators, women, migrants, health workers, Palestinian and Israeli Jewish educators) are revealed by interviewing individuals, encouraging them to be personal, to talk in the first person. Macrophenomena like cultural difference, power and oppression, genocide and cultural domination/colonialism are illuminated in these individual biographies, in ways that no distant, more abstract historical account can do. The personal is historical, cultural, social, relational, psychological and political at one and the same time.

The tension between individual and collective life is extraordinarily strong in the contemporary world. "My rights", "my freedom", "my idea" are too often opposed to the interests of society, or of another group. 'Our' own group, team, family, gang or even militia, is what really matters. We have tried to illustrate how personal and environmental dis-ease, illness, disconnection emanate from troubles, tensions and differences that have not been addressed. Neoliberalism positions one against the other, in a competitive war, hindering dialogue and significant learning. The only collective we understand is 'us': my people, my generation, my family, my gang. Ultimately, we are the chosen or the historically exceptional, supposedly superior, in various ways. Ours too is most often a time of wall building rather than the opening of gates to welcome another.

Alan and Linden painfully reflect, in their chapter, on the difficulty, or even impossibility, of providing a good/safe space for dialogue when deeply held assumptions and unresolved histories meet, and where there is resistance to change and questioning. Conflict is more often the norm. His, and her story,

particularly of Palestinian peoples, often go unheard, while the deep, unresolved trauma of the Holocaust still plays out at the individual and collective level in the seductions of colonialist exceptionalism. Similarly, Rob Evans speaks of the post/communist experience, where stories often go unheard outside the countries affected. What do we do with our past, individually and collectively, when the story is saturated (White & Epston, 1990) by problems, blame, hate, or hopelessness, rather than curiosity and respect? Narrative methods offer no simplistic solutions for meaningful dialogue: a dialogical narrative space is difficult and hard fought for. Dissonance and difference will find space: what matters is our response to it, and the genuineness and self-knowledge with which we encounter the other. The best of narrative inquiry and adult education asks not less than everything.

Sometimes, it allows us to cross boundaries, of time (see Evans on memories and the reconnection with past micro, meso and macro structures), of space (see Sawyer on using dialogue with and through places to deconstruct the past and imagine other possible futures), of structures and organizations (church and family, in Moen's chapter; the health system in Mazzoli Smith's); and of specific events like a conference (Wright & Høyen); or even cultural boundaries (see Chan, and her caution about cultural appropriation and colonialist incursion). Crossing boundaries may be good and exhilarating but it may raise fears of being hurt, rejected, despised, and of losing one's bearings and doing damage to self and the other.

3 Narratives Are about Meaning Making

A common preoccupation for narrative researchers is taking proper care of transcription, translation, and interpretation (as Rob Evans shows in his detailed and thoughtful micro-analysis). We are aware that meaning is already partly lost when the spoken word is written down, and even more so when we must use a different language. Our network's community has been bilingual French/English for a long time, but now the English language often prevails. However, most authors in this book do not speak English as their first language, nor do their participants. There is a need to be critically reflexive about the non-linear, asymmetric power relationships in speaking, listening, and writing. Different cultural assumptions and personal meanings will be in play for the listener, the speaker, and the reader of a narrative text. Power circulates within all the processes, for good or ill.

All of which happens, even before we start analyzing, coding, categorizing, and interpreting. From an ecological, complex, circular perspective, the

researcher is not a God in the machine, all-controlling, and all-knowing. In a way, we are but part of the circular game of narration; however, this too can be a source of meaning and new life.

Hervé Breton warns us, that the researcher must be mindful of different levels of (self) narrative: a level of phenomenological description, where experience is captured by senses, and perception is at the forefront; and a narrative or historicized level, devoted to represent an ecology of experience, or a complexity of life, via meaning-making. Hervé shows us what can be gained by interweaving these two levels in our effort to make meaning out of experience. He plays with 'double' or 'multiple' description, which creates a sense of depth, or 'perspective' (Formenti & West, 2018).

For Mazzoli-Smith, the construction of meaning entails moving from the powerful but reductive medical categorization of illness or ageing, to sensitivity towards the particular other's experience – especially of patients but also practitioners – hence creating new learning opportunities for everyone, practitioners and patients alike. Multiple knowledge is better knowledge for everyone. Del Negro follows this principle, by using multimodal methods to invite professionals to explore their ways of knowing, which can challenge ultimately reductive certainties of professional expertise; and bring to problems and possibilities a more diverse, imaginative, richer and satisfying, personal as well as professional aesthetic.

4 A Story Is a Composition and Re-Composition

Ecological diversity and plurality are celebrated and re-composed by narrative researchers in many ways. For example, by taking life-as-a-whole into account. We read in Kjetil Moen's contribution that life and death are umbilically linked; far from being opposed, the one does not exist without the other; and yet, stories of death can be silenced in our cultures, as are many other topics linked to spirituality, meaning, wisdom and even religion in secular contexts. Mainstream accounts of life tend to be sanitized and the messiness, ugliness, unpleasant and uncertain feelings, and the search for meaning, integral to living, are washed away.

Adrienne Chan's chapter is maybe the most "ecological" of the book: her analysis of indigenous metaphors and stories, and even more so the practices of action research, are aimed at reconnecting people to the land, to their cultural roots, as well as to nurturing dialogue between older and younger generations. Experiences of genocide and cultural annihilation must be named and recognized if we want to heal disconnections. We may ask questions of youth:

are they, or can they be fully immersed in the indigenous narratives? Or have they been incorporated into the colonializing mentality in which they live, work, and study? The composition of different roots, weaving them together into more of a whole, is a learning dimension of trans-migratory societies, but it can also be a story of the colonized psyche. There is an important task here for many of us, at a time of mass migration and new manifestations of colonialism. Capitalism itself can be a form of colonialism, the worship of Mammon, which seduces us to accept a one-dimensional and ultimately anti-ecological way of being.

Rick Sawyer is the inventor of a method – duoethnography – that is based on the composition of different experiences and perspectives, embodied and enacted by the involved researchers/participants (Norris, Sawyer, & Lund, 2012). They learn and accept to stay with the tension provoked by place and difference and to re-compose resistant and often unhelpful narratives. In this chapter, he explains how stories of place can reveal a diversity of elements of culture, power, ethnicity, racism and abuse; only by looking at the bigger picture, past and present, can we gain a deeper, more satisfying and maybe healing way of knowing.

Paula Stone celebrates the unity and complexity of life by including her whole self in her autoethnographic effort. She does not hide from the uncomfortable or uncanny aspects that we often learn to remove from our official, edited self-narration. But the feeling of not fitting in, despite our attempts to do so, via editing and conformity, is ultimately a rebuke to anti-ecologic and oppressive practices of exclusion, subjugation, and mystification, so common in the academy and across society. Here finding your own place, voice, and identity, can be a life wrenching struggle against the power of class, privilege or particular ways of knowing.

5 We Do Not Silence Challenges and Struggles

Stories can also teach us about the challenges of encountering diversity, or the lack of a sufficiently diverse culture. As in our own conferences, where Hazel Wright and Marianne Høyen see the Network as a community of mostly aged/experienced researchers, predominantly female, and many UK-based scholars, which can be a problem for a network celebrating diversity. How do we facilitate the necessary encounter with diversity and create a more eclectic family in which to learn? The Network has sought to meet the challenge and to create a space quite different from historically dominant university cultures. In the latter, there has been emphasis on mastery, individual displays of achievement,

of competition and a survival of the fittest. Doubt, the personal and emotions are often silenced. In the Network, emphasis has been given to cooperation, to equality, to mutual exchange across differences of discipline, methodology and personal inclination; to listening and mindfulness about language, place, and subjective life. This includes the geographical and symbolic places of our conferences, and their complex histories of inclusion, exclusion, and silencing. It is a never-ending struggle to be sensitive to what is unsaid, erased or unheard. And the fact of the continuing vitality of our work suggests, despite failures, that we have been ecologically good enough in creating a space in which many can thrive.

Alan Bainbridge and Linden West reflect on struggles – for researcher and researched – to stay in the presence of radical, almost violent, expression of difference and refusal. We question, legitimately, if a research method can be extended into pedagogic practice, and used as a healing tool, or to create a facilitating environment, when conflict is so harsh, and some histories denied? What are the ethics entailed by ‘exposing’ the other, through narratives, to possible confrontation, challenge and blame by the relatively powerful? Ethical questioning of this kind is a necessity in narrative research, and in creating ecological sensibilities, because we must learn to treat difficult material delicately, in our responsibilities to those with whom we work, and toward a wider world full of danger as well as possibility.

The vulnerability, uncertainty and precarity of the human condition are engaged with, not expunged, in narrative inquiry. It may be the uncertain nature of professional knowledge in a neoliberal world, as in Gaia Del Negro's chapter, or as a result of the Palestinian/Jewish conflict, and the desperate search for safety and security, as in Alan Bainbridge and Linden West's writing; and or in the complex and uncertain nature of human experience, given the power of oppressive and destructive forces chronicled in many of the chapters. The point here is to keep on keeping on, and not to give up, in the face of those who would diminish our humanity.

6 Seeking to Overcome Reductionism and Simplification

Ours is a complex research methodology that needs and takes time, not only to collect authentic narratives and to be with the participant(s), but also to engage sensitively with emerging issues. It demands re-learning, again and again, and to be with the other in the here-and-now of such a process.

The principle of accountability, a pillar of positivistic research, may be useful, but only if balanced with the recognition of the partiality of any account.

Mere rationality or conscious purpose – Bateson warns us (1972) – needs to engage with the reasons of the heart, play, art, dream, and the workings of the unconscious, or what he calls ‘thinking in terms of stories’ (1979, p. 14). Accountability alone cannot represent how life works, in good enough ways. Even Bronfenbrenner’s model – used by Wright and Høyen to evaluate a conference – is only one tentative solution to representing experience in a complex, systemic way. Its form is concentric and rigid. Who, what and why is ‘in the centre’ of collective encounters? Who and what are excluded from the frame?

Laura Mazzoli Smith criticizes simplistic cause/effect ‘evidence-based’ biomedical models, since they cannot give a good enough or sufficient explanation of the experience of illness: hence, the need to foster narrative knowledge of patients’ (and one’s own) illness and wellness stories, to enable practitioners to better understand the other, and themselves.

Feminist informed methodologies (used by Barbara Merrill with working-class university students) acknowledge complexity including spheres of influence, power relations and the need for good enough spaces, and listening, for, and to, frequently silenced voices. Class and gender in this work refuse to be silenced.

7 In the End, Our Research Asks, “What Is a Good Life?”

Different cultural perspectives have different expectations of ‘the good life’. Narrative workshops can be places where different perspectives on notions of the good are shared. Thanks to narratives, it is possible to imagine the good life across time: past, present, and future. As Paula Stone states, ‘Working reflexively is not nostalgia but courage to confront pain and difficulty’. Fergal Finnegan observes, we will never fully know or capture what exists, and is real, but narrative methods still generate deep and rich insight into individual and collective experience. And into what is good, beautiful and life-enhancing as well as what is destructive, life-constraining, and ugly. To work in good enough ways requires courage, not least to think outside boxes, and our own lives. When Lake Eerie is polluted, we are polluted too, if we turn our backs and refuse to see and know, as Laura and Linden wrote. Refusing to recognize our responsibilities in what we do and perceive at micro, meso and macro levels, is proving catastrophic. Recognizing, for instance, our complicity in the pain of species extinction, in the harm we do to others, in turning our backs to the vulnerable migrant, or to the violent abuse of women and people of colour, really does matter. As does what can be our willful ignorance in refusing to see how the problems of our planet relate to what we greedy humans consume and

pollute. Doing narrative and auto/biographical or autoethnographic research in ecologically sensitive ways, and making connections between environmental degradation, psychological health, and meaningful learning, really does matter.

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