

Instructional Identity Development Through Narrative Discovery

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In an exploration of perspective transformation for educators, Susan M. Brigham found that “teachers sharing their stories as a way of educating communities about issues related to teaching and learning in diverse contexts” had the potential for social transformation—which could in turn lead to transformative education.¹ How might such experiences impact librarians who engage in instruction and how they think of their identities as educators, learners, and library professionals? In this chapter, I apply narrative and story principles to the instructional librarians’ identity development. In my work as a librarian, a first-year writing instructor, and a doctoral researcher, I have used narrative pedagogies to advance identity development for both teachers and learners. My goal, then, is to explain how instruction librarians might make sense of their own instructional journeys and identities so that they can guide learners through similar experiences. Ultimately, I seek to outline a strategy for transformative education that draws on the idea that we are all wired for stories; by looking at our teaching and learning experiences through a narrative lens and telling those instructional stories, we can become transformed teachers, learners, and people—and help our students to do the same.

In this chapter, I share a narrative development workshop and accompanying worksheet that can help instruction librarians understand their own stories of teaching and learning.

Our emotions and holistic life experiences are important threads in these stories, and educators and researchers alike acknowledge that they play significant roles in the learning and development processes.² Both this chapter and the workshop I propose encourage readers and participants to grow through critical reflection and through acknowledgment of emotions, intuition, and other elements of self. Instruction librarians should first apply narrative discovery elements to their own lives and teaching experiences so they can then use such approaches to offer students transformative learning experiences.

DISORIENTING DILEMMAS AND CATALYSTS FOR TRANSFORMATION

In my first years as an instruction and research librarian, I was quick to realize that despite my academic preparations, I had much to learn in the realm of teaching, learning, and instructional librarianship. In my position as a university librarian at Midamerica Nazarene University (MNU), a small private liberal arts university where I began my professional work as a librarian, I am ranked as a member of the faculty—not distinct from them but one of them. Yet, as not only a new faculty member but also a young one (at age twenty-three when I started the position), my sense of imposter syndrome was strong. I knew, based on my previous academic library experiences, that I could be a good librarian, but could I be a good teacher?

Fortunately, MNU offered a robust faculty development program, and so I went at it hard from the beginning of my tenure, attending every session that fit into my schedule. I participated in sessions on learner-centered syllabus design, facilitating experiential learning in the classroom, crafting assessment tools, and many others. All were useful and helpful to me, but in my teaching, I still found something to be lacking—I felt a disconnect between myself and my students. And I still felt that who I was in the classroom was disconnected from who I was outside of it.

During this time, as an avid reader, I was engaging in a variety of texts, one of which was *The Courage to Teach* by Parker Palmer. Palmer describes the importance of teaching from a place of authenticity and wholeness—that teachers should not wear masks or build walls between them and their students.³ Instead, Palmer believes that students will learn best when their instructors are open and wholly themselves. Allowing one's authentic self to be present in the classroom, of course, takes courage—hence the title.

During an international teaching experience in the Czech Republic, I was able to practice Palmer's philosophy of teaching firsthand. I decided to temporarily put away my study of practical teaching strategies and tools and focus predominantly on *who* I was in the classroom. I spent time considering, processing, and making sense of my own story, with the mindset that understanding my own story (i.e., who I was, who I am, who I meant to be) would impact my sense of authentic identity in the classroom. Yet, I still did not have practical, firsthand knowledge of whether my instructional identity would directly impact my teaching. Could effective teaching flow out of me more fully when I was wholly myself? Would students connect and learn more when I allowed each facet of my identity to express itself in the classroom? The answer to both questions, of course,

was a resounding yes. My experience teaching in the Czech Republic was marked not only by authenticity but also by relationality—my students got to know me and I got to know them. Our stories were able to become connected because I had done the hard work of making sense of my own story, of recognizing who I was as a teacher and living that narrative. And based on feedback from my students, they noticed. Students stated in their assessment of my teaching that they felt I was born to be a teacher.

Thus, this experience helped me realize that as much as practical teaching strategies and faculty development are helpful and should be pursued, it is even more important that instructional librarians—and, really, all teachers—first make sense of their stories, developing their identities as teachers and learners. The ways we teach (i.e., strategies) flow out of who we are (i.e., identity).

EXAMINING, EXPLORING, AND REFLECTING

In order to explore narrative instructional identity development, we can first look at two of the ideas or theories that form the basis for this mode of discovery.

Narrative Theory

Narrative theory states that “narrative is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with fundamental elements of our experience, such as time, process, and change.”⁴ According to William Randall, the topic of narrative “is intrinsically interdisciplinary,” and it is “a fundamental mode of thinking, of knowing, of learning.”⁵ Through the way we weave stories around the events of our lives, past, present, and future, we make meaning—thus, “the narrative impulse, so it seems, is hardwired into our very brains.”⁶ Stories serve as a common language through which all people see the world, see themselves, and see each other. If humans are, then, wired for story, it follows that storytelling could potentially serve as an ideal means not only for us to better understand ourselves (as individuals, and as teachers) as we frame our experiences as narrative but also to better understand those who have different perspectives—and come from different backgrounds—than our own.

Narrative theory offers some profound applications for our work in a higher education context. Viewing our lives as narratives and recognizing that others have their own stories—their own ways of understanding themselves and others—impacts how we teach. Applying narrative theory to my teaching means recognizing that the meaning I ascribe to my learning experience may be very different from the meaning another learner ascribes. It means that while I connect my learning to my past and toward my ideal future (plotting a cohesive narrative in my brain), another student’s learning fits into a completely different, individualized narrative. Not all learners learn in the same way. Educators should come to an understanding that all learners must have freedom in crafting their own stories—their own educational narratives. Teachers, then, serve as facilitators of these stories, providing the framework for students to learn and acting as guides as students navigate the complexities of their educational growth and narrative connectedness. It is natural for there to be differences in the way different people teach and learn and a variety of ways that learned content fits into learners’ unique narrative arc and identity development.

Transformative Education

Louis Cozolino states that “stories connect us to one another, help to shape our identities, and serve to keep our brains integrated and regulated”—that stories are so “ubiquitous in human experience that we hardly notice their existence.”⁷ While such narratives are important, we often do not realize that we maintain these single stories of teaching and learning. Moreover, we may not recognize the damaging effects that imposing our own narratives of teaching and learning on students can cause. All educators need to understand the consequences of teaching in a way that does not represent the needs of their students, whether those consequences are due to teaching in a way that caters to a limited number of learning styles or teaching in a way that implicitly excludes certain categories/groups of students from educational experiences. As educators, it is important for us to “see and value our students as fellow travelers on this educational journey” and “care enough to help them reach *their* destination” (emphasis added)—not *our* destination.⁸

Education is all about learning, and learning is all about identity development. As Klipfel and Cook assert, “The way to establish an emotional bond with learners is for them to experience us as the kind of person who understands and accepts them for their authentic selves.”⁹ Accepting students for their authentic selves means that we, as teachers, must not allow our own perceptions of literacy and learning, our own narratives, to be projected onto our students. If the goal of education is identity development, then students must be taught to learn in a way that develops their identity rather than imposes an identity upon them. Through education, students have opportunities to become more fully themselves through a process that continues throughout their lifetimes.

Teachers have the choice to partner with their students—to allow for a diversity of stories to exist simultaneously within the classroom, and for the tension between these disparate stories to point toward something greater than our limited single stories. We do, in fact, have something to gain through listening to each other’s stories—teachers and learners alike. No teacher or learner knows all the secrets of the universe—or of the classroom. There is truth that none of us will ever fully grasp, and there are biases we will always cling to of our own accord. However, through an anti-single-story model, we can help the narratives of our lives and those of our students to be bigger and more beautiful than they ever could be on their own. We are all, after all, connected. Our narrative identity development—that is, our education—will only be truly transformative when we allow ourselves to each play a role in teaching and learning and when we, as teachers, understand that our students’ individual stories matter. Education can, indeed, be transformative, so let us—teachers and learners alike—strive to live into that story.

BUILDING SKILLS AND CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE

Now that we have explored these theoretical concepts related to narrative and education, we can get more practical. To move into narrative identity development, there are a few skills that we need to develop as instructional librarians. We need to (1) learn to make sense of our stories, (2) learn how to become storytellers, and (3) learn how to listen to others’ stories.

Make Sense of Your Story

Dr. Dan Allender, a professor of counseling and a private practice therapist, says the following in his book, *To Be Told*:

Most of us have spent more time studying a map to avoid getting lost on a trip than we have studying our life so we'll know how to proceed into the future. When we're preparing to make significant decisions, why will we study a stock report but fail to look at our own story? Why will we read various op-ed pieces to help clarify our views on a controversial topic but ignore our own past, which helped form our most important views? If we're taking a course, we're willing to study books that bore us to pieces, but we won't take time to review our own life.¹⁰

Based on my experience in addressing the process of making sense of one's story, I find this assertion to be true. How many librarian professional development courses have you seen about making sense of our stories? Yet, professional development is a key opportunity “to cultivate transformative learning” as it “gives us a new perspective on our goals, what we do in our practice, and how we think about our work.”¹¹ How many of us have taken the time out of our busy schedules to sit down with our story—to write it down, process it, and identify themes? Likely, very few of us. A few years ago, I would have also fallen into that category. The first step toward narrative instructional identity development is learning to make sense of our stories, recognizing the importance of this seemingly impractical step, and making space for it regularly in our lives. Making sense of our stories is not a one-and-done ordeal. Rather, it is a process that takes continual attention throughout our lives as we are continually learning, continually experiencing, and continually processing life events. Thus, narrative discovery can be compared to the very research process that we teach as instructional librarians; it is a continual cycle of exploration, developing conclusions, voicing those conclusions, and then even more exploration/discovery.

Become a Storyteller

In addition to making sense of our stories, we need to learn to tell our stories. This act is powerful as there is power in naming something to be true. Additionally, storytelling has the capacity to help others make sense of their stories as our stories can move other people, draw things out of them, and help them ask questions or process their own experiences. For our stories to have an impact on our students and those around us, we need to be comfortable telling our stories in simple yet authentic ways—in our teaching and our actions.

Listen to Students' Stories

Finally, it is important that we learn to listen to the stories of others. There are no single stories of teaching and learning; we all learn and teach in different, unique ways. Thus,

it is important to consider narrative approaches in light of learner-centered pedagogy. Educational inequalities are prevalent within our classrooms unless we actively seek to dismantle them. Thus, through listening to the stories of our students and adapting our instruction to meet the needs of our students, we can cease to perpetuate single stories in the classroom.

PLANNING AND PILOTING IN PRACTICE

The ideas described above—both the process of making sense of my own story and the research conducted on the power of narrative for identity development—led me to consider how I could leverage these principles to help others develop their identities narratively. I first applied this idea while working as a first-year writing instructor with the goal of identity development for student writers. In this setting, I developed a Narrative Discovery Workshop, a fifty-minute session that can be used in the first-year writing classroom. This workshop is meant to guide students in making narrative connections that will assist them in their learning and writing as they seek to develop their identities as learners/writers and move toward making sense of their stories. The process of making sense of one's story involves tailored reflection, telling stories from one's past, listening to the stories of others, and considering one's life in light of story structure. Through creating this workshop, my goal was to answer to following questions:

1. What current literature exists related to the benefits of connecting story work, rhetoric and writing research, and narrative theory toward student identity development?
2. How does learning about these concepts and principles positively affect student perceptions of their own identity development as writers?
3. How would first-year writing students, specifically, react to a class period that is centered in this kind of narrative discovery? What comments/thoughts would they have after the session?

Some of the comments from those students will be included in the next section; however, it is important to recognize one important truth related to the efficacy of the workshops I taught. As the teacher, I had already gone through this process myself by intentionally exploring and making sense of my own story by answering similar questions. I believe that it is even more important that we, as teachers, make sense of our stories as our very identities in the classroom will inform how our students make sense of theirs. After all, as Daniel Siegel explored in his research, “The best predictor of what will make someone a good parent is not their circumstances, but their own ability to make sense of their own story.”¹² In the same way, as educators, we can create an environment where students can explore, understand, and construct their own secure identities.

Now, it is important to shift the focus specifically toward instructional librarians as teachers. In appendix A, I outline a Narrative Discovery Workshop aimed at teaching/instructional librarians—specifically crafted, based on narrative research, to help teaching librarians make sense of their stories and develop their identities as teachers and learners. This connects back to transformative learning theory as well, as critical reflection is one of the primary components of Mezirow's conceptualization of the theory, as teachers

“distinguish their sense of self as a teacher from the collective persona of teacher.”¹³ While this worksheet can serve as a valuable guide, it is important for librarians and administrators alike to recognize the importance of focusing more on “who” than “what” in pedagogical development because, indeed, who we are informs what we do. Thus, while practical pedagogical skills are valuable, their successful implementation—or lack of success—will flow out of our identities.

The workshop described in appendix A, then, is meant to guide participants in making narrative connections that will assist them in their teaching and learning as they seek to develop their identities as teaching librarians and move toward making sense of their stories. The process of making sense of one’s story involves tailored reflection, telling stories from one’s past, listening to the stories of others, and considering one’s instructional experiences in light of story structure. Each of these aspects is included in the worksheet, which means that participants can expect there to be some reflection, some writing, some discussion, and even some storytelling involved. However, it is very possible to adapt this workshop to specific contexts and to pull out facets of the worksheet that could be most valuable for various institutional and professional environments.

TAKING TRANSFORMATION FORWARD

Teaching the narrative discovery workshop as outlined above has allowed me to develop more significant conclusions about the importance of identity development toward our instructional identities as well as the power of narrative as a means of such identity development. The participants of the workshops I gave noted that simply taking the time to make sense of their stories through this workshop produced the following results:

- “Able to accurately convey my view of myself.”
- “I am an introspective person and it was great to examine myself.”
- “Understanding my identity as a writer and learning what my focus and motives are through writing.”
- “It showed me my strengths and weaknesses and what I can do to improve.”
- “I can expand my mind and find my own personal identity by thinking about these questions.”¹⁴

If such a workshop can have these kinds of results for undergraduate writing students, imagine how such a workshop could benefit and inform the pedagogical practice of teachers. Ultimately, my literature review has determined that there are significant gaps in the extant literature related to narrative-centered teacher development. While a few studies do exist on the subject, there is no established theoretical framework or significant research done on the efficacy of narrative-based faculty development. Furthermore, several studies on faculty development programs broadly point to the idea that a more comprehensive approach toward faculty identity development is needed.

My explorations into narrative theory and inquiry introduce a potential framework (narrative theory) that could provide valuable insights for instructional librarians as they seek to make sense of their stories of teaching and learning, develop their identities, and increase the learning of their students. Finally, the literature on learner-centered pedagogy

produces a compelling argument for why narrative-centered approaches to faculty development are important for the learning of students.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL IDENTITIES

Developing critical reflection and critical subjectivity—or “a quality of awareness in which we do not suppress our primary subjective experience”—can help us become more connected to others and become more aware of ourselves as teachers and individuals.¹⁵ To critically apply the principles introduced in this chapter further, a potential first step is to go through the Narrative Discovery Workshop outlined in appendix A. Then, these principles and this workshop can be revised and reinterpreted for your students. Making space in the classroom for students to make sense of their stories of learning and writing, etc., can be transformational, as illustrated through my own teaching experiences. However, more applications can certainly be made to librarians specifically, as we begin to consider other ways to apply narrative identity development to our work and lives. The following are some questions to consider in application and in taking these ideas a step further:

- How can the Narrative Discovery Workshop (or another form of narrative identity development) be incorporated into the professional development of teachers/teaching librarians?
 - The efficacy of this kind of narrative identity development has been demonstrated through research and practice; however, a system for implementing something similar broadly in a variety of contexts is yet to be established.
- What are some of the practical results of narrative instructional identity development?
 - In what ways does narrative instructional identity development impact us as humans? As librarians? As teachers? In what ways does it impact our students and our work?
- What opportunities exist more broadly for applying story- and narrative-based pedagogies to our instruction and identity development?
 - Much research has been done on the power of narrative (centered around narrative theory); however, more research can be done on practical applications of story-centered pedagogies.

Appendix A. Narrative Discovery Workshop for Instructional/Teaching Librarians

WHY TEACH? YOUR STORY AS A TEACHER/LIBRARIAN:

1. Reflect on the characters that have been important parts of your story as a teacher/instructional librarian—e.g., a mentor, friend, inspirational teacher, etc. Who has influenced you most, for better or for worse? In what ways?
2. Reflect on the recurring motifs and themes that have made up your life as a teacher/librarian. Reflect on the dreams, goals, and/or callings that you have had throughout your life. Identify connections between the motifs/themes, your goals/callings, and your life as a teacher and/or librarian. **Write down reflections here.**
3. Shared storytelling: In a small group, tell a story from your life that was important to your positive development/growth as teacher/librarian. Listeners, provide feedback regarding:
 - a. How did you feel in response to the story? What emotions did the reader elicit in you?
 - b. What details are left out of the story? What do you want to know more about?
 - c. What do you think it was like to be the teller in this situation?
 - d. How does the teller's story relate or differ from your own story as a teacher/librarian?
 - i. How does telling, and hearing feedback on, your story help you see that story more clearly?
 - ii. Consider your future identity as a teacher/librarian. Who do you want to be? Who do you feel called to be? Who have others painted you to be? Create a prospective glimpse of your future as a teacher/librarian. Write reflections and/or defining characteristics of your future self as a teacher/librarian. Especially consider differences between your past, present, and prospective future selves/identities.
 - iii. Were these exercises challenging? Do you see one set ideal future for yourself as a teacher/librarian or is there more ambiguity? Continual discovery is a part of the process of growing and becoming. **Discuss observations/reflections as a group.**

NARRATIVE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

The 5 Elements of Story: Something to Care About, Something to Want, Something to Dread, Something to Suffer, Something to Learn (One Year Adventure Novel textbook)

Write answers to the following reflection questions:

1. What do you most care about related to teaching/librarianship?

2. What do you most want to learn / how do you most want to grow as a teacher/librarian?
3. What are your goals, dreams, callings, and/or story goals (can restate from the last page) as a teacher/librarian?
4. What barriers or obstacles stand in your way of accomplishing these goals, pursuing what you care about, and growing in your identified ways?
5. How have challenges, suffering, and difficulties impacted who you are as a teacher/librarian (positively or negatively)? How does this fit into your narrative arch?

Discuss with your small group.

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AS DECONSTRUCTING AND REFINING (ON NAMES)

Identity is both static and changing (Bronfenbrenner's ecological system's model)

Read aloud and discuss “She Unnames Them” by Ursula LeGuin (http://lchc.ucsd.edu/mca/Mail/xmcamail.2013_01.dir/pdf4gQ1dofJT0.pdf). Then, answer the following discussion questions:

1. How does this short story illustrate the power/importance of names (and/or of stripping away names)? Do you agree or disagree, and how?
2. How do names have power? What names/labels that you have given yourself (or that others have given you) are positive? Which are negative?
3. What elements of your identity do you believe are set? What elements of your identity do you believe are ever-changing?

PROCESSING THROUGH STORYTELLING

Storytelling can serve as a means for reflective professional dialogue in order to understand oneself better and thus write, teach, and live better. (Savvidou).

1. **Reflect on your failures, fears, insecurities, doubts about your callings/dreams as a teacher/librarian, identity as a teacher/librarian, etc.** What stories have you told yourself (in your mind) related to these things? (e.g., I am not good enough, or I will never succeed in this, etc.)
2. **In small groups, tell each other another short story** from your life of an experience that was formative to your identity as a teacher/librarian—but, specifically related to something challenging (related to a failure, fear, insecurity, doubt, etc.). Describe how it affected/influenced who you are. Listeners should acknowledge each story but not comment/critique. If there is time, members can tell another story.
3. How did telling this story help you process? Are there ways you can dismantle the negative stories you tell yourself and turn them toward your own growth and development? **Write down your reflections.**

SINGLE STORIES VS. COUNTER STORIES

“If we hear only a single story about another person or country, we risk a critical misunderstanding.” (Adichie)

1. Watch Adichie’s TED talk on “The Danger of a Single Story”: https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en
2. Discussion: As teachers and librarians, how can we more fully listen to the stories of others as well as teach in a way that recognizes that there are no single stories? How does this TED Talk relate to your identity as a teacher/librarian?

IDENTITY AS A TEACHER/LIBRARIAN AND THRESHOLD CONCEPTS OF WRITING

1. **Identities are multifaceted:** What are a few different identities you carry as a teacher/librarian?
2. **Writing is not isolated:** How have your prior experiences and communities influenced who you are as a teacher/librarian?
3. **Voicing our stories constructs identity:** How does voicing your stories construct your identity?

CONCLUSION: ASSESSMENT/REFLECTION

1. Process all of these exercises, reflections, and thoughts. What practical steps can you take to move in the direction of growth as a teacher/librarian?
2. How have you grown as a teacher/librarian simply through completing this workshop?
3. What overall comments do you have relating to this workshop?
4. How did this workshop positively affect your own perceptions of your identity development as a teacher/librarian?
5. Would you recommend other teachers/librarians take this workshop?

NOTES

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