

Chapter 10

Narrative learning for non-traditional students: a Model for Intervention in Higher Education¹

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Introduction

This chapter will discuss the use of a narrative device, based on four narrative codes, in supporting and improving learning for non-traditional students at university. We will discuss a European research project, INSTALL, which is researching an innovative methodology, the Narrative Mediation Path (NMP), based on the use of narration. The project has a two-fold purpose: on the one hand it fosters the acquisition of a Key Competence, ‘Learning to Learn’, which is central to the improvement of students’ academic performance; on the other hand, the project seeks to evaluate the narrative methodology designed specifically to develop that competence. We will focus here on theoretical bases of the methodology used, and will illuminate this with reference to a pilot project undertaken with a group of non-traditional students at Federico II University, Naples.

Narrative and Biographical Methods in Teaching and Learning

The use of auto/biographical narratives clearly has a place in both research and training. As a research instrument, written narratives offer first-hand biographical material

covering the individual's recent history as well as social, cultural, family and educational experiences. This subjective perspective fosters an experiential approach to historical and socio-cultural issues. It could be argued that the creation of life stories is important in the development of motivational learning contexts; focusing on the lives of students and oriented towards the achievement of a level of education that integrates cognitive, emotional and social aspects.

Experiential learning, and sharing with others, provides a basis for learning and change. Through learning the learner symbolically travels from dependence to autonomy, from passivity to activity, from selfishness to altruism, from self-rejection to self-acceptance, from imitation to originality, from narrow interests to broader interests (Fraser, 1995). From here it is suggested that the sharing of autobiographical writing and personal accounts in small groups can promote personal understanding as participants reflect on their lives in an informal atmosphere of free exchange. In contrast, education has often been seen, traditionally, as mere instruction, the transmission of a set body of knowledge. While more recent times have seen important changes in the social context, educational policies and the development of pedagogical methods which have challenged this approach, it is still the case that education is generally viewed, as noted throughout this book, as a rationalistic and cognitive process neglecting the leaving affective, emotional and interpersonal dimensions. Naranjo (2004) maintains that this stance is congruent with the patriarchal system, based on authority, hierarchy and rationalism.

However, this is not the end of the story: new ideas have developed to challenge the traditional and conventional models of educational practice. Concepts such as interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence, emotional intelligence, emotional education and emotional literacy, conceived in the eighties and made popular in the nineties, have at least raised some opposition and critical interrogation. According to Steiner (2003, p. 34), "emotional education

consists of three skills: the skill to understand emotions, the skill to express them in a fruitful way, and the skill to listen to everybody and to feel empathy in relation to their emotions”. Furthermore, self-understanding implies, among other things, “an activity of reminiscence, which involves a contact, through remembering, with the past experience; this retrospective clarification is stimulated by the written and oral expression” (Naranjo, 2004, p. 185).

Autobiographical learning, we would argue, can be a most effective instrument for emotional and interpersonal education because it can be helpful for working with the past, by helping to process conflicts and crisis, Narrative methods can help us to work in depth around the personal and family worlds of the students, integrating and creating skills in the cognitive, operative, and affective dimensions. Working with spoken and written personal narratives improves self-knowledge, allowing a more mature approach to be taken to problems, difficulties, crises and interpersonal relationships. The exploration of personal, educational and social journeys is an important way to work on issues around personal identity.

In this chapter we will focus on narrative learning (Biesta et al., 2011; Dominicé, 2000), examining a model of intervention designed for Non Traditional Students (NTS) in higher education. This model of narrative learning will be thoroughly tested and validated in the European funded project INSTALL (Innovative Solutions to Acquire Learning to Learn), to be developed in a partnership between Italy (leading partner), Romania, Denmark, Ireland, and Spain. The aim of INSTALL is to foster the acquisition of the key competence described as Learning to Learn, by developing and implementing a group training process that utilizes an innovative methodology, the Narrative Mediation Path (NMP), developed for Non Traditional university students.

Disadvantaged Students and Non Traditional Learners: The Challenges of Inclusion in European Higher Education

The definition of disadvantaged students often includes those belonging to a disadvantaged part of society; migrants, students from migrant households, women, working students and disabled students. It is common to include this category of students in the wider typology of those who are defined as “non traditional learners” (Council Conclusions on Social Dimension of Education and Training, 2010/C 135/02). These students, besides their disadvantage, may wrestle with several other issues such as, for example, starting their studies later than the average, or being first-generation students enrolled on a full-time basis (Eileen, 1997; Miller & Lu, 2003). Despite the differences, the two separate conditions of ‘disadvantage’ and ‘non – traditional’ students, share some similarities (Merrill & González-Monteagudo, 2010). Moreover, in both categories, students are exposed to the risk of achieving their goals at a later stage in their university career, facing, as a consequence, the risk of dropping out (Metzner & Bean, 1987; Choy, 2002). Bearing in mind how the two categories overlap, our work is concerned with the wider typology of Non Traditional Students.

In general, we take the view that Non Traditional Students are more at risk of dropping out of their studies and/or of poor academic performance because of their disadvantaged socio-cultural backgrounds, which have made their academic development and integration into university life more problematic (see also West and Galimberti, this volume). The need to deal with their disadvantage leads them to take longer in the achievement of their university goals and, sometimes, as a consequence, to abandon their studies. INSTALL aims to reduce the risk of such drop-out by designing narrative training paths with the purpose of promoting the Key Competence of Learning to Learn (L2L), to help them to improve their University performances. INSTALL targets the Non Traditional Student group during their crucial transition from the first to the second year of the university course of study, the time when

they are most vulnerable to dropping out: in Italy for example, 17 to 20% of drop out occurs in the passage from the first to the second year of university.

The research carried out by partners, in the INSTALL project, shows that these students experience low academic achievement in the first academic year, which affects their entire academic experience, and ultimately can put them at risk of drop-out. This is extremely important as, reportedly, 20 to 45% of European students are non-traditional learners (Eurostudent III 2005–08, Social & Economic Conditions of Student Life in EU, Higher Education Information System). This is confirmed by the results of the research carried out by partners: approximately 25 to 35% of their respective academic populations comprise underachievers exposed, potentially, in various degrees, to long term patterns of social and educational exclusion.

We move now to the theoretical bases and narrative methodology developed; we will outline the modality through which the narrative device has been applied, by describing a pilot-study carried out with a group of students who were struggling to meet deadlines and gain appropriate academic achievement.

The Theoretical Framework of the INSTALL Project:

The Key Role of Narration and Mentalization

As stated above, the INSTALL project is concerned with fostering the acquisition of the key competence of Learning to Learn; in a university context this includes being able to study, as well as knowing how to study. Importantly, it involves becoming aware of one's learning process and needs, which then helps with the identification of both the available resources, and of any obstacles which need to be overcome, in order to learn effectively. L2L

key competence is, therefore, regarded as a reflective meta-competence, or rather a higher-order competence, which consists of becoming aware of what, how and why one knows. We want also to examine the concept of reflexive competence, in order to explain the modalities through which INSTALL seeks to develop this with non-traditional students struggling with their studies.

The terms 'reflexivity' and 'reflection' share the same Latin root that refers to the verb “re-flectere” (double bending), indicating the activity and the mental process which enables thinking subject to attain self-knowledge. Reflection is commonly referred to an important step on the journey to reflexivity, because through reflection the subject can recognize himself/herself as a subjective source of meaning making (Freda, De Luca Picione, Esposito, 2012, in press). Then, through reflexivity, the subject can think about the relational and inter-subjective processes s/he is involved in.

The INSTALL project is based on the assumption that, in order to develop the required competence for study, it is necessary to facilitate what can be described as a mentalization process, through a self-formative and development path. Mentalization, also known as reflexive competence, or reflexive function (Allen & Fonagy, 2008; Fonagy, 2002; Fonagy et al., 2009; Fonagy & Target, 1997; Meehan et al., 2009) is an imaginative ability that allows people to imagine and interpret their mental states (desires, thoughts, emotions, etc.) of themselves and others. From this standpoint mentalization is a significant process concerning one's own and others' behaviour, experienced by the subject within several inter-subjective contexts (Bateman & Fonagy, 2012). Essentially it is a social as well as a mental skill, necessary for the subject's effective adaptation to different contexts. University can be seen as one of those contexts in which the individual deals with stressful events and development tasks requiring functional and adaptive behaviours.

With regards to the two processes mentioned above, reflection and reflexivity, we argue that, within the university context, mentalization is a process that aids the understanding of the reasons for one's own and others' behaviour (reflection); and to an understanding of how these determine the relationships in which the student is involved (reflexivity). In effect, mentalization, is a method of approaching and understanding relationships. It is the ability to see the significance of the processes involved in relationships, and, in particular in this project, the role that s/he plays in determining the direction of relationships in the university context, which is important if the student is to re-position herself in a more productive way. (Freda & De Luca Picione, 2012). We believe that the student can engage in a reflexive way when, within the INSTALL framework, the group-facilitator uses a process-oriented approach, taking relationships with the overall educational setting as the focus of reflection. The intervention designed to develop mentalization involves working on the here-and-now of the group inter-subjective processes and relationships. It encourages the group to understand mental states and relational processes by making comparisons between the relationships experienced within the INSTALL group and the wider university (Karterud, 2011; Karterud & Bateman, 2012). Students then need to focus on the types of action/reaction evident in this comparison, in order to understand what was going on in relationships at different times, and to recognize the impact of the role s/he plays in determining the outcome/tenor of relationships in each context. The relationships and interactions in the training group are therefore used as resources for developing mentalization abilities.

The link is clearly made between here and now events/feelings and those experienced within the wider university. External/university events will always trigger feelings and reactions in the here and now of the group, and the group facilitator must be sensitive to this and move between these two contexts in a way that ensures a flow is retained in the group. Work in the group is based on the relationships between the group members and the wider

inter-subjective relations within the university; and this is made possible by transference phenomena. According to the mentalizing approach, transference is not intended in a classical psychodynamic sense (where transference phenomena can be interpreted in light of the past and conceptualised as associations with past episodes or people); the group facilitator uses a device called “mentalization of transference”. Participants are encouraged to think about the interactions they are involved in, and they are also asked to focus on the other’s 'mind' and to describe their own perception of themselves, and of the way they think they are perceived by the other members or by the group facilitator (Karterud & Bateman, 2012; Stokkebæk, 2011). Through this application of the transference, the student can be aware of the states of mind/attitudes/feelings at the heart of his/her own actions; and then, in the light of the other members’ points of view, can formulate a mindful account of the how their relationships within the group reflect their relationships within the university.

We believe that paying attention to their own and to others’ mental states facilitates the movement from reflection, understanding the reasons of their actions/feelings, to reflexivity, leading to an understanding of the way the student relates to others, including the university. Essentially the main objectives are to promote a sense of an agentic self (Bateman & Fonagy, 2012) and to encourage a new configuration of the student’s interactions within the University context, one more oriented to purposeful development and more effective in achieving academic goals.

Reflexive activity, although it is associated with, and included in, a metacognitive approach, often ascribes a fundamental role to emotion and to the need to name emotions in order to recognize and orient them, in an attempt to change dysfunctional behaviours. Therefore, the group facilitator using a mentalizing approach needs to focus on the affective dimension of educational relationships, in order to foster reflexive processes within the here-and-now of the educational intervention. Bateman and Fonagy (2012) coined the phrase

“mentalized affectivity” to highlight the attention to such interconnected dimensions: it assumes that the action, functional and adaptive in any environment, depends on the ability to reflect on different mental states (cognitive and emotional) between which a close interrelation is assumed.

In the project, narration - the invitation to build a formative life-story - is the medium chosen to foster mentalization processes. A number of theorists support the key role that narration plays in developing mentalization. It has a bi-directional and circular relationship with narration. Mentalization presents itself as a narration – whether spoken or written – insofar as the individual is constantly engaged in creating stories concerning his or her own and others' mental states. The process is also defined as “a psychological self-narrative” (Bateman & Fonagy, 2012); it is carried out through narration and narration can be generated in the interpersonal relationship through mentalization. People narrate their experiences in various styles depending on their ability to mentalize. For example, individuals using more fragmented and less coherent narrations, following a chronological time flow, have less ability to mentalize. Conversely, those who produce coherent narratives, and use internal instead of chronological time, have better mentalizing competences. Narration, therefore, can be used as a promoter and at the same time an indicator of the efficacy of this kind of intervention (Allen & Fonagy, 2006). Narration acts both as an activator and a promoter of mentalization when it is used in a continuous alternation between narrative and meta-narrative processes. This alternation promotes a transition from narrative sequences - describing the events - to reflective narrative sequences in which the subject uses narration to reflect about he own being, in the experience. This happens through the “narrative group” which activates and improves the potentialities of reflection inherent in the narration, such as the ability to address complex problems and to build knowledge through experience (Freda, 2008a; 2008b;

2011). A narrative group strengthens a student's ability to mentalize by harnessing the impact of the representation of an individual's mind, as seen by a number of people.

The group is therefore a crucial resource for fostering the narrative processes which enable the students to highlight the behaviors acted out within the here-and-now of the group, which shed light on the ones acted out within the university context. The narrative input, along with the resulting interrogation of both narrative and meta-narrative dynamics, fosters processes of reflection and reflexivity. Narration becomes the object of reflection, enabling the subject to recognize himself in in the group, to become aware of the self in action, to recognize and to process the representation he has of him self.

The narrative methodology designed for the project makes use of different discursive codes, at different stages of the training path, pertaining to affective and emotional dimensions, and thus contributes to the students making better sense the university experience. We will now describe how the individual codes alternate, at different levels and degrees, between what we term the analogical and the digital plan, as well as between affective and cognitive dimension.

The INSTALL Methodology: The Narrative Mediation Path (NMP)

INSTALL uses an innovative methodology based on Narration, that is, the Narrative Mediation Path (NMP), with the aim of promoting the Learning to Learn Key Competence, by developing, as stated, mentalization competence. Specifically, NMP comprises a group intervention training process targeted at groups of non-traditional students, behind with their examinations, enrolled in the second year of University, and who have made an explicit request to participate in the light of their difficulties.

NMP is implemented through a cycle of six meetings conducted by Narrative Group Trainers (NGTs) who have been trained in the theoretical and methodological bases of the mentalizing approach.

NMP combines four discursive narrative codes into one methodology: the Metaphoric, Iconographic, Writing and Bodily codes. Through the four codes the students have the opportunity to mentalize their own personal way of participating in university education, and they are encouraged to develop the learning to learn competence strategically and adaptively in this context. There is a module for each code, each of which makes use of specific narrative inputs: in the metaphoric one there is a reference to proverbs and mottoes related to university experience; in the iconographic code we use vignettes portraying students involved in a typical university situation; in the writing code three narrative tasks are given; lastly, in the bodily code, the students are asked to “sculpt” the future of the participants in the training, representing it through their own bodies, by means of body performances. These codes have all been used individually in earlier research activities seeking to foster reflexive processes within educational and psychotherapeutic settings. However, the methodology applied here combines all four codes in an innovative way.

Mentalization is a multifaceted capacity, characterized by multiple functional polarities: it is a dynamic capacity involving analogical and digital levels, implicit and explicit, of the self and of the others. So, to respond to this complexity, the use of a set of different codes - using metaphors, images and inputs mediated by writings and sculptures that activate group meta-narrative discourses and give the opportunity of working, at the same time, at different levels and degrees, on the several polarities - provides students with the opportunity of looking at problems from a range of different angles. .

Each code is distinctive in the way it evokes a different “version of the mind” with which to reflect, and, citing Bateson (see Chapter 1, this volume) to build a specific ‘map’

representing the student's way of reading his/her relationships within the 'territory' of the university. The use of multiple codes within a single narrative device, which draws on different versions of the mind, is able to produce multiple maps through which the territory can be read and better understood, facilitating the detection of analogies and differences. Lastly, it promotes research into, and selection of, the most suitable maps in terms of functional representations, geared towards the subject's purposes. The codes are activated progressively through the training setting; giving students the opportunity of seeing themselves and their situation from different angles; it gradually fosters a different representation of the self, more delineated, contextualized and action-oriented.

The Metaphoric input invites the students to choose proverbs and mottoes that represent their own university experience but are embedded in particular cultural contexts. This input directs them to an epistemology of common sense and recognition of themselves in it; which enables them to see that they are being "narrated" by the specific chosen proverb or motto. Specifically, the metaphoric code allows participants to acquire a knowledge of their own representations of the Self in training/education; the group members are not asked to 'reveal themselves' by giving an account of their educational experience, but rather they are asked to recognize such an experience in a metaphorical representation, suggested by other people. Using this approach, moreover, the sense of the sharing experiences is brought to the fore. This code has the aim of gaining a representation of the university experience from the account of each participant, and also to foster knowledge and awareness of representations of educational university experience in each participant.

The set of metaphorical tools used includes a list of proverbs and mottos typical of the local culture. The proverbs represent a generalization of the educational experience, while mottos work as specific slogans suitable to describe one's own formative experience. In the proverbs students identify possible reasons for their problems with exams, such as

incompetence and an inability to be tuned/managed into the university routine (e.g. “as you make your bed, so you must lie in it”), listlessness (e.g. “slow and steady wins the race”), preference for extra-curricular activities, difficulties with peers or the tendency to envy them (e.g. “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence”). Mottos on the other hand are more aligned with the field of “doing” and to possible strategies which could be adopted to overcome the condition of the underachiever: putting confidence in one’s own resources (e.g. “yes, we can!”), committing oneself to fate or trusting oneself to luck, playing it clever in order to get a change (e.g. “fortune favours the brave”), becoming aware of difficulties related to the university context which the student chose (e.g.: “easier said than done”), or waiting for a change dependent on some external cause.

The Iconographic inputs provide the opportunity of showing oneself beginning to delineate the features of his/her self as a student in action; this happens while s/he is still in the shoes of the hypothetical student who they can tentatively identify with, but which does not yet “clearly” and completely correspond to the self. The Iconographic code makes use of vignettes, which are seen as a projective tool that allows trainees to analyze the deeper meaning and the symbolic value associated with the objects or characters drawn (McCloud, 2001; 1996; Wilks, 2004). Despite the condensed and synchronic dimension proposed by metaphoric inputs, compared with the previous code, the vignette functions at a more diachronic level, suggesting the subjects imagine a typical situation of their university life. The objectives of this code consist of analyzing the educational experience at a diachronic level; and promoting reflection about one's own being-in-action within situations representing the university career.

The writing narrative input asks students to give an account of themselves in past actions, and encourages a clearer view of the construction of experience. Students are asked to

produce three narratives: the narration of a low point, a high point and a decision turning point (e.g. see McAdams, 2008; McAdams 2006; McAdams, 2006; McAdams et al., 1997). In this phase of the training path the participants are deemed ready to work on how to use the theoretical and procedural knowledge acquired through the other codes, in order to operate in a strategic way which is effective in successful university achievement. Writing, in response to the request to tell a story about university experience, encourages greater involvement of the students in the construction of the subjective meaning of those educational experiences. Participants are invited to reflect on their own competences and in-competences, in order to analyze them and identify a possible turning point, starting from which it is possible to focus on the strategic objectives necessary to achieve one's own developmental goals. The narrative writing, therefore, fosters the passage from reflection on the participants' weak and dysfunctional points, to the detection of stronger points in their own experience. This can lead to a representation of the Self in training/education as potentially able to make use of what has been learnt, to be successful in the achievement of goals in university, and later in working life.

Finally, the bodily input invites students to become protagonists in future actions, to represent themselves acting as students in the university context. This code uses the technique of sculpture, a creative, dynamic and non-verbal form of representation. Students are asked "to sculpt the university future of the whole group, by shaping how they imagine it will be by the end of the educational path..." The role of the sculptor is played by the whole group of participants who are asked to create a representation of the most significant relationships that bound them together, and of relationships within and to the educational context. In this final phase, the sculpture also offers a synchronic and condensed level of analysis of personal experience in the training. The sculpture enables the students to achieve the following objectives: to convey non-verbal and symbolic representation concerning the future of the

whole group and to encourage a synchronic, condensed, and shared representation of the ultimate phase of the process, of the achieved objectives and of the goals to be achieved in the future, after the training is completed.

In summary, the training is designed as a circular reflexive process looking at participants' individual university experience that, starting from a synchronic and summarized representation of it (proposed by proverbs and mottos), gradually leads to a diachronic analysis focused on specific moments and situations (proposed by the iconographic and the writing codes), to finally move back, in the bodily code, to a synchronic level in which the same experience is re-investigated in the light of the reflexive and meta-reflexive processes previously activated.

The training is designed as a path designed to foster the following processes:

- a) the progressive cognitive and emotional involvement of the student;
- b) the gradual transition from an exploration of the entire university experience to the focusing on a specific and individual experience;
- c) the gradual transition from a reconstructive function of the formative experience to a planning function allowing the students to act in an effective way within the university context.

During each training meeting (irrespective of the specific code) the same methodological sequence is used, as follows.

Tab.1. Methodological sequence

1. Presentation of a narrative input
2. Narrative construction of the experience through different discourse codes
3. Group narrative meta-discourse on the proposed narration
4. Transformation of the narrative experience

Narrative Codes in the Narrative Mediation Paths: A Pilot Project with Italian Students

We now look at an example of the Narrative Mediation Paths (NMP) methodology which has been used as a pilot project with a group of 18 students at the University of Naples Federico II, Italy. This will enable us to illuminate how the four codes, and the related narrative inputs, have been applied with these Italian students, giving examples of how the narrative methodology has been applied within each code. The students were recruited to the project by means of posters and leaflets distributed throughout the university, email shots and reading about the project through the website of SINAPSI centre at the Federico II University. We will now look at the training process, referring to the methodological sequence described above (Tab 1), and highlighting some significant moments. We will then go on to look at examples from students.

The meetings took place once a week, in extra-curricular time. The Narrative Group Trainer (NGT) was a psychologist and an expert in promoting mentalization competence through narration.

1. Metaphorical Code (1st meeting; two hours):

As explained before, the proverbs are used to address various typologies from amongst which the students can choose the one they feel corresponds best with their situation and university experience. Where the student feels that none of the suggested proverbs are appropriate s/he is asked to write a suitable one. Then in the Narrative Construction of the Experience phase, the NGT asks each participant to tell the group the proverb and motto he/she has chosen and the reasons for that choice. The students' most common choices focused on specific proverbs and mottos such as "More haste, less speed", "Fortuna audaces

iuvat”, “Mission impossible”, “Only the brave”. Based on these choices and on the motivations given by the students, NGT activated a Narrative Group Meta-Discourse analyzing proverbs and mottos at two different levels: firstly classifying the typology and the quality of students' representations and use of a specific proverb or motto, then observing their process of attributing the meaning to such a proverb/motto.

Interestingly, two students chose the same motto “mission impossible” but with very different motivations. The first one chose this saying that it was impossible for him to change his university performance; the second one selected this motto as a way of expressing his willingness to change his condition (that of a student very behind in his studies) apparently perceived as impossible. In one case feelings of incompetence, defeat, and a sense of inferiority predominate, whilst in the other case it shows a powerful trust in the student's own capabilities, a proactive attitude and some ability to change.

Then, from this level of analysis, the NGT, building on the group meta-narrative discourse activated within the training experience, moved to the next phase, namely the Transformation of the Narrative Experience, feeding back to the students the influences such representations and feelings can have on university performance. This, as stressed throughout, was to help the participants to begin to recognize their active role in making sense of their university experience.

2. Iconographic Code (2rd-3rd meetings; two hours per meeting):

Here the participants are situated in a context, through the vignettes, which depict significant events in the participants' university experience, and are encouraged to ask themselves questions about the “doing”, that is, about the actions carried out by the protagonist in each of the proposed situations. The vignettes depict typical and significant situations in university experience, such as enrolment (Fig. 1), attendance at university

courses, personal study at home, written and spoken university examinations, and periods of waiting with colleagues.

Fig. 1. *One of the six vignettes: enrolment in University courses*



During the phase of the Narrative Input, each participant was provided with a set of six vignettes. The students were asked to choose one of the protagonists in each vignette, to draw a blank bubble, to put themselves in the protagonist's shoes, and finally to write in the bubble what the protagonist is thinking or saying in that situation. The NGT asked each participant to read out loud what he/she had written in the series of six vignettes, with the aim of creating a story, helping the students to identify different states of mind associated with each vignette; and to use the vignettes to find some continuity between the six narrations, giving a coherent meaning to what they wrote (Narrative Construction of the Experience).

Then, the NGT developed a group discussion (Narrative Meta-Group Discourse) in order to use group inter-subjectivity to activate a process of reattribution of meaning, which was followed by the NGT's feedback on the prevalent dynamics emerging from the stories

narrated (Transformation of Narrative Experience). For example, one student narrated, through the different vignettes, stories of feeling bad about receiving insufficient marks for examinations; of anxiety or boredom during university lessons; and a sense of continuing repetition of content in the lectures. Such cues could be interconnected across the whole narration indicating the student's representation of university life and experience, as a setting, perhaps, which produced anxiety and or where it was not possible to learn, and to have collaborative exchanges (with peers/colleagues, with professors, etc.). The NGT could work on this representation to show how it might influence poor university performance because it was characterized by dysfunctional states of mind, such as anxiety, fear of evaluation, etc.

3. Writing Code (4th-5th meetings; two hours per meeting):

Group members were asked to write three narratives on the following: a low point, a negative event which happened in the individual's university experience; a high point, a positive event in the individual's university experience; and a decision that proved a turning point in the individual's university experience. One student, for example, produced the following narratives:

Low point

A critical moment happened after 4 months after the course of study started. I studied with my colleagues for the first exam in Analysis subject. The written part of the examination went well, but I was rejected at the spoken part. It was a critical event, because since that time I have been afraid to attend other exams.

High point

I decided to try for the written part of the examination, but I had strong doubts about the possible outcome. However, I did it and so, I passed the examination; in that moment I felt the desire to get back in the game. I changed my mind about myself.

Decisional turning point

I had a turning point thanks to this training group. I began to doubt. Before this training I thought it was University to adapt to me, but now I think I have to adapt to the University requests.

In the past, University appeared to me as a challenge against professors, but now it feels like a place dedicated to education and growth.

During the Reconstruction of Narrative Experience, the NGT asked the student to explain the reasons why she narrated the stories reported above, and the significance they had in her personal life. From this it became possible to explore with her the states of mind associated with each episode alongside their influences on her university performance.

During the Narrative Group Meta-discourse, NGT asked each participant to talk about the thoughts and feelings evoked by the stories they heard. He then underlined the link between the low point and the high point, in order to analyze the different states of mind as well as the differences between internal/external cause attribution for the same event/examination and the different behaviours of the student. The NGT went on to define an area of competences associated with each narrative, which included an analysis of the way the student made use of the awareness of his/her competences, to begin focusing on strategic goals.

The subsequent stage consisted of feedback, given by the NGT, about the decisional turning point, which the student linked with taking part in this group. This enabled her to examine the suitability of the course of study she had enrolled on, particularly in relation to her real interest in the disciplines included in it (Transformation of the Narrative Experience).

4. Bodily Code (6th meeting; two hours):

The whole group decided what to represent and how to sculpt it, using the participants' bodies to give shape to what they imagined their futures at the university might be (narrative construction of the experience). The NGT asked each participant to describe his/her emotions

in relation to the representation; the role s/he played in the sculpture; the significance it had at a personal level and in terms of his/her ideas about future university experience. This allowed the participants to identify themselves as belonging to a shared group representation depicting, at the same time, significant aspects of their personal university experience. During the Group Meta-discourse the NGT gave the group reflected on the correspondence between the original idea of the group sculpture and what the group actually made, in order to analyze the level of coherence between the expectations for the future and the actual behavior of the group within the university context. As an example we include a photograph of the sculpture made by a number of students (Fig. 2). The students said they wanted to represent a university future made up of different stages, describing different feelings and emotions at each stage. The first step represented reflexivity, the second one the pleasure of studying, while the third one represented grit and tenacity; the last step, finally, (performed by the student appearing at the right corner of the figure, raising a hand) represented the goal of graduation. The student appearing on the left side of the picture, with his body leaning towards the student depicting graduation, represents the effort of going through all the stages to reach the final goal. During the Transformation of the Narrative Experience, the NGT worked on giving the students feedback on the discrepancy between the group's initial plans for the sculpture, and what they actually performed: it looked more like a way of bypassing intermediate steps in order to reach the goal of graduation directly.

Fig.2. An example of sculpture about University Future



Conclusion

This chapter illuminates how narrative, and a particular way of framing key dimensions of it, and used in a training setting, can be a powerful tool for building greater self-reflexivity, and agentic understanding. And in the process, university, like the self, can be perceived as rather more than a simple given, but can be thought about, represented in diverse ways, and acted upon to encourage more positive relationships and outcomes. The potential role of narrative, and the provision of space to understand the stories we tell, is an important theme across the book. What is distinct in this chapter is to use various techniques – including sculpture and metaphor – to feel and think about what stories are being told and how these might change for the better when working with others in a supportive group.

Note:

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