Restor(y)ing lives:
Autobiographical reflection and perspective transformation in adults returning to study

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Abstract
Throughout the course of our lives we are at times presented with the opportunity to reflect on our learning, to consider the experiences, the people and the environments that have contributed to the shaping of our sense of self, and to the expectation we subsequently have of ourselves and our future capacity. Nelson (1994) suggests we have the potential to transform our perspective if we are enabled to explore the schemas woven into the fabric of our self-identity and to consider the impact this brings to bear on our life and learning. He speaks of the autobiographically reflective process as coming to imagine a future previously unknown.

This small-scale Masters research study, in one Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institute in Australia, examined the process and self-articulated outcomes of five participants in a qualitative, narrative based inquiry, investigating the capacity of autobiographical reflection to promote perspective transformation in adults returning to study within the context of vocational education and training (VET). Drawing predominantly on the work of Brookfield (2005), Mezirow (2000), Freire (1972), Brady (1990), Shor (1992), Cranton (1994), Frankl (1964) and Rogers (1980), it explored the personal and social dimensions of meaning-making, identifying the role of critical reflection in transforming learners' perspectives as they come to critique the power relationships and hegemonic assumptions that have influenced their construction of self-identity. Utilising a storytelling methodology, the thesis honours the narrative tradition in weaving the process and findings of the study through the stories of the participants as they dance on the edge of their knowing (Berger, 2004).

Introduction – how stories came to matter

> "… you need only claim the events of your life to make yourself yours. When you truly possess all you have been and done, which may take some time, you are fierce with reality." Florida Scott-Maxwell (1968)

My knowing of the transformative power of narrative has emerged over many years, through various environments where identifying and attending to the psychosocial needs of others has been paramount. Early employment in a hairdressing salon held stories of incongruence of the inner and outer world of the self and necessitated the development of a creative hand coupled with an empathic heart. A move into marriage and motherhood and the joys of storytelling with children created a keen awareness around the need to nurture and seed creative, authentic self-expression for optimal growth and development (McKeough, 1998; Rosen, 1986). As I stepped into aged care where the psychosocial support of elders in a nursing home became my new focus, the health and wellbeing of my elders was richly enhanced through the telling and sharing of stories, in spite of an environment where the reigning medical model afforded no value to the subjective and unquantifiable benefits of narrative. Stories of love and hope, guilt and regret, of pride in achievement and survival, of lifetimes of self-denial and unspoken and unrealised dreams were shared and reconciled through the telling and retelling. As a personal trainer in a health club, stories of self emerged reflecting the same expressions of perceived inadequacy, personal barriers and self-defeating

1

behaviours articulated across the diverse age and ability spectrum of my clients in each vocational context along the way. It became evident to me that in order for these people to move forward with a sense of authority and personal power regarding their health and wellbeing, it was essential that I provided space for the telling and unpacking of these stories. Ongoing undergraduate studies fostered the development of my skills and knowledge that enabled me to better support my clients as they located and claimed a transformed sense of personal strength, perspective and purpose in this space of storytelling.

Through converging career and learning pathways, I now find myself in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector as a facilitator of professional development and learning across a broad range of contexts, and although the theoretical understanding of my diverse experiences with story was limited in my early years, it has founded a personal knowing and applied practice around the biopsychosocial[1] benefits of narrative - uncovering, examining, allocating meaning and ultimately honouring the self. My ongoing studies have uncovered the link between disparate aspects of self as they relate to health and wellbeing (Marmot & Wilkinson, 1999), and within each of the contexts along my learning and career pathway I have come to know that stories have the power to heal fractured aspects of self. Stories transform learning and lives. Stories matter.

Validating storytelling's strengths *within the context of Vocational Education and Training*

My purpose in undertaking this research has been to examine the validity of the anecdotal findings gathered along my own journey, and to determine if others have experienced and documented similar outcomes related to the use of narrative, utilising a Transformative Learning theoretical framework, in adult learners returning to study within the VET sector.

Vocational education and training is not traditionally, let alone contemporaneously, designed or recognised for its transformative role and potential. In the work-dominated discourse of VET policy and practice it is commonly and officially assumed that vocational education and training, as the name suggests, is directed towards preparation for work or developing skills for employment. Within this domain, my aim has been to uncover the contexts within which research may have taken place; to establish what findings have emerged, and to identify opportunities for further research related to the following questions:

- In what ways can telling and reflecting on their stories provide adult learners returning to study with a greater knowledge of self that may foster a richer engagement in the learning process, build learner self-identity and potentially promote more beneficial learning and vocational outcomes?
- How might any transformations in the perspectives of adult learners returning to study extend beyond the individual to their immediate environment and society?
- What are the potential implications of these findings for pedagogical practice and curriculum design within the VET sector?

Literature review - finding oneself through story

My preliminary inquiries into this arena of telling life stories commenced with the works of Bourdieu and his theory of habitus[2], the deep-seated values and structures of thought,

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1 bio·psy·cho·so·cial: of, relating to, or concerned with the biological, psychological, and social aspects in contrast to the strictly biomedical aspects of disease. http://www.merriam-webster.com/medical/biopsychosocial

2 A cultural theory of action developed in response to one's early family influences. Bourdieu suggests that structures are created that frame our unconsciously held expectations and subsequent behaviours and life choices. A system of embodied dispositions – lasting culturally acquired schemes of perception, thought and action. (Bourdieu, 1986; Swartz, 1997)

perception, appreciation, and action shaped in our formative years, most notably around the notions of structure and agency (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Coleman, 1991; Swartz, 1997). Bourdieu and other contemporary social scientists (Giddens & Held, 1982; Novak, Giddens, Lloyd, Ormerod, & Institute of Economic Affairs (Great Britain). Health and Welfare Unit, 1998) explore the central sociological issue of the relationship and interaction between the subject and the object – the subjective within objective structures, and the influence each exerts on the other. In what ways do social structures and subjective experience influence individual self-identity and enacted agency? How does individual agency influence change from within constraining external structures? Through my initial engagement with the Marxist concept of individual emasculation at the hands of unseen and unrecognised structures of ruling ideologies (Freire, 1972), I found the beginnings of congruence that gave voice to the kernel of knowing that was emerging within me.

This emergent seed was further cultivated by discovery of Brookfield (2005), (and through him) Mezirow (2000) and the theory of transformative learning. Their interrogation of the concept of perceived personal capacity and agency within an externally constructed and imposed environment captivated me, and a tremendous yearning emerged around finding meaning in the questions that had for so long remained unattended and unanswered for me.

As I travelled the path of coming to know and clarify what had been written before me and to explore the foundations on which I would build my own rendering, it struck me that the very process of this journey itself mirrored the issues I was seeking to examine, and was contained within literature accessed. As I researched the topics of my endeavour and interrogated the ways in which storytelling might evoke change of perspective in those returning to study, I found myself and my own knowing transformed through the undertaking. This transformative process is framed by Mezirow (2000) in his theory of transformative learning:

1. *A disorienting dilemma – loss of job, divorce, marriage, back to school, or moving to a new culture*
2. *Self-examination of feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame*
3. *A critical assessment of assumptions*
4. *Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared*
5. *Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions*
6. *Planning a course of action*
7. *Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans*
8. *Provisional trying of new roles*
9. *Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships*
10. *A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective*

Figure 1: Mezirow's ten phases of transformative learning (2000)

Transformative learning theory describes the process an individual undertakes, ignited by a disorienting dilemma, which leads to the questioning of long-held assumptions about themselves and the world around them. This critically reflective passage seems ultimately to bring about a reassessment, a renewed recognition or a completely transformed understanding of their ability to engage with and influence the differently perceived world, viewed through the lens of this new perspective. This examination of the subjective experience challenges the previously perceived relationship and interaction between the individual's agency and external structures, and can lead to a newly constructed sense of authorship and influence in one's life.

> *(Transformative learning) … the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide actions (Mezirow, 2000)*

Brookfield supports Mezirow's assertion that critical reflection can be part of the transformative learning process, but proposes that without examining the power relationships and hegemonic assumptions that exist in one's immediate and larger environment, transformation is unlikely to take place. He sees that transformation requires the critically reflective process to be politicised in order to identify the impact of ruling classes and social structures on human agency. Brookfield suggests that transformative learning occurs when what was once was seen to be permanent and stable is recognised by the individual as being relative and situation specific, and often shaped to accommodate the needs and interests of ruling others. (Brookfield, 2005)

Stories already told

According to Brady (1990), narrative is about going back to the beginning and examining the course of life. In *Redeemed from time – learning through autobiography* (Brady, 1990) he speaks about autobiography as originating in "bios" – the course of life – and proposes that in reflecting on this life we have three aspects of self on which to focus

- *the remembered self* - recalling the scraps that slowly link together to form the story.
- *the ordered self* - finding a way of making sense – meaning making that enables the construction of a foundation on which a new future – a new story - can be built.
- *the imagined self* - the dreaming, the possibilities, the creation of the yet to be told.

Brady sees the *remembered self* as the drawing of a self-portrait with words … storytelling … the memories, and the interrelationship between past events and the memories of these events. Through a second reading of the human experience we might re-member, reconnecting to aspects of self in a new and more congruent way (Myerhoff, cited in Brady (1990)).

The ordered self refers to an aerial view of one's life, and Brady suggests that without memory we lose our history and our past. Through remembering, human life is given shape that extends back into the past and forward into the future. He refers to the Ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus who spoke of the act of bringing logic and order to the universe and proposed that a person cannot step twice into the same stream - that in one's integrity, the whole harmony of the universe is entirely, and as it were uniquely existent (Brady, 1990). If one were to look through the lens of this perspective, the critically reflective inquiry that one experiences through the narrative process might be seen as a hero's journey to discover one's very intimate and unique capacity, through drawing together the learning and strengths developed over the course of one's life.

Brady's representation of narrative theory and its benefits (1990) aligns closely with Mezirow's transformative process (Mezirow, 2000) in his discussion of *the imagined self*. According to Brady, in the recalling of one's story a cosmology takes place. The impulse is to create, and in the autobiographical act one creates the self, becoming the hero of one's own mythic tale. William Butler Yeats (1955) alludes to the names and faces that may be forgotten, but suggests that the creative spirit recalls the ideas and truths that lay behind and within them. What was unremembered was invented and reflected his deeper perceived realities - it wasn't necessarily what happened, but his memory of what happened. He called

4

this his memory for eternal things (Olney, 1980) and proposed that every autobiography is a work of art and a work of enlightenment.

> "One goes from year to year gradually getting the disorder of one's mind in order and this is the real impulse to create. Until one has expressed a thing it is like an untidy, unswept, undusted corner of a room. William Butler Yeats (1955)

Karantzakis, (1961) like Yeats, examines the tension between the truth of historical fact and the truth of imagination.

> "The truth which had been storing up anguish in my breast for such a long time was not the real truth; The real truth was this newborn creature of imagination. By means of imagination I had obliterated reality, and I felt relieved." Karantzakis, (1961)

In the account of his passage undertaken as a priest critically examining his life, Nelson proposes that by reviewing and interpreting one's life story … 'accounts of transformative and emancipatory learning emerge …' (1995) and one has the capacity to construct a new reality that can contain a strongly identified and enacted authorship of one's life course. He suggests that a transformed perspective can develop through the imaginative and critical process of what became known to him as 'autobiographing', using methods that can include "interviews and hermeneutic conversation … artwork, metaphor analysis, and parable." (A. C. Nelson, 1995) In imagining, he suggests, the individual's conscious and unconscious domains of knowing are connected, and the ongoing critical analysis and synthesis of this inner and outer experience and knowing has the capacity to reshape previously inculcated behaviours and attitudes. Nelson speaks of coming to imagine a future previously unknown through undertaking the transformative process of narrative. Andrews et al (2008) depict narrative as combining "… the Modernist interests in describing, interpreting and improving individual human experience … with the Postmodern concerns about representation and agency …", while Candy (1991) relates life history narratives to the rewriting of a manuscript that still retains evidence of the previous story … a palimpsest … and suggests that it contains the potential to draw together all the aspects of one's diverse cultural and life influences. Personal and societal aspects of life are connected – a web of life:

> "We each bring forth our world by living, because to live it to know, and what we know serves as a lens through which we interpret new experiences. Candy (2005)

Kenyon and Randall (1997) propose a way of "… understanding what it means to be a person. To be a person is to have a story. More than that, it is to be a story." They speak of the power inherent in providing opportunities to support individuals in telling their story, and cite Alheit's reference to the facilitators of these opportunities as 'agents of restorying' and 'biographical coaches' (1995), further suggesting that through the process of restorying, the lives of both the storyteller and facilitator are changed – that personal healing is possible for all.

> Restorying is a complex process, indeed an aesthetic process, for it concerns the shape we assign to our experience overall. In a sense, it is a poetic process, where 'poetic' derives from poeisis, a Greek word for 'making by imagination into words' (Hillman, 1975). From poeisis, we also get 'poetics,' which means the study of the literary arts--or literary theory. Restorying, we could say, is the

> *literary process of re-composing the stories we have 'made up' about who we are, where we have come from, and where we are headed ... in so assisting them you will likely be restoried yourselves ... the very act of intervening in their lives changes both them and you ... it is about healing ourselves. (Kenyon & Randall, 1997)*

Kenyon and Randall speak of the cumulative layers of texts residing within each of us, and reflect both Denzin (1989) and Reissman's (1993) reference to creating and interpreting the texts that represent the stories of our lives. Dominice (2000) highlights the difference as he views it, between autobiography and educational biography, identifying the specific nature of educational biographies as a tool to foster understanding around one's learning pathway. He concludes that whereas autobiographies are a broad platform in which one can examine any aspects of one's (hi)story the educational biography requires focussed attention on the details of one's learning process.

I discovered many writers whose research has uncovered rich value around the inclusion of life reflection in educational contexts, and in each of these methodological representations, I found strong connections to the emergent story of my research. Consequently, my methodology reflects the synthesised appreciation I have of the many attributes of each, that is appropriate within particular contexts. I see this approach as an extension of my fluid perception of the uniqueness of each individual, each moment, each life, each opportunity. There is no one lens, or one defined approach that can capture the richness and depth of meaning of all, just as there is no one story that captures the heart of experience for all learners.

Wading through the myriad of terminologies given to diverse approaches to data collection and analysis, I eventually came to Atkinson (1998), Brady (1990), Denzin (1989), Dirkx (2000), Dominice (2000), Nelson (1994), Riessman (2008) and others (Andrews, Puzo, Squire, Ludington, & Treacher, 2000; Bruner, 1983) who inspired me to use narrative as my method of inquiry, and who gave significant value to the realised power of storytelling. As I considered the ways in which Mezirow, Brookfield and associates (Mezirow, 2000) named and identified the transformative process, and related it to my own journey of transformation, narrative-based inquiry became the vehicle through which the burning quest of my search for knowing found voice. As I began preparation for my research and read more widely, the writings of Freire (1972, 1974a, 1974b, 1985) and other radical educators captured my imagining and flamed an unquenchable fire that continues to consume with seemingly no abate.

Education and gardening – promoting growth

> *" ... your job is to walk around with a can of water in one hand and a can of fertilizer in the other hand ... try to build a garden." Jack Welch (Joss, 2007)*

Business guru Jack Welch was Chairman and CEO of General Electric between 1981 and 2001. In 1999, *Fortune* named him the "Manager of the Century," and the *Financial Times* recently named him one of the three most admired business leaders in the world today. His reference here to building a garden is within the context of organisational leadership, but his esteemed voice joins a distinguished chorus that ties us as leaders, whether in business or education, to the rhymes and rhythms of nature. So with the agronomy model in mind, my literature review drew on several writers as they link the processes of agriculture to the process of adult learning. Carl Rogers, the father of humanistic psychology, originally

6

commenced studies in agronomy - *"the science of soil management, land cultivation, and crop production"* (Rogers, 1961) and related, across the span of his career, the idea of cultivating and nurturing the relationship between the teacher (or therapist, as his primary career as psychotherapist evolved to include education) and the learner as the soil through which their inherent but often latent potential emerges.

Whereas our earlier Modernist approach favoured a leader/teacher-centric and results oriented focus, Rogers' person-centred approach, both in a therapeutic application and in an educational context, has as its foundation the three tenets of unconditional positive regard, authenticity and empathy (1961). He posits that in order to be effective in leading a person through a process that enables and fosters learning and growth, one requires unconditional positive regard for that individual. It is not necessary to agree with or even to like the person - the authenticity encourages honesty and transparency – but one needs the insight and wisdom of being able to step into the shoes of the other and to attempt to gain understanding of their perspective - empathy. Rogers uses the agricultural analogies of tilling the land, planting seeds and watering, cultivating, nurturing, supporting growth and harvesting, and the image of fallow fields being rested to enable strong regeneration.

Promotion of future productivity can also be conceptualised within this model and applied to adult learners returning to study within our educational environments, and was a concept foundational to my research study. Just as Rogers ponders the process of enabling and establishing a relationship that provides the groundwork in which the individual can cultivate their personal growth, the aim of my study was to examine the ways in which undertaking the quietly reflective process of telling the stories of one's life might foster future growth and productivity. These same analogies relating to the idea of cultivation can be seen in M. Scott Peck's conceptualisation of education:

> *"Education is derived from the Latin 'educare', literally translated as 'to bring out of' or 'to lead forth.' Therefore when we educate people, if we use the word seriously, we do not stuff something new into their minds; rather we lead this something out of them; we bring it forth from the unconscious into their awareness. They were the possessors of the knowledge all along." (Peck, 1978)*

Time and space for reflection

To illustrate how this 'something' might be enabled to be led forth from our learners, I will return to the notion of providing the 'space' for this process to unfold, and link it the Socratic notion of the educator as midwife. In supporting the 'birth' of this 'something' that lies within each of our learners, we also need to consider the quality of time required for them to inhabit the 'space' most effectively, as creating space for something doesn't necessarily mean it will emerge. Rämo explores the Greek bifurcation of the concept of time, as it relates to the notions of chronos and kairos, (Ramo, 1999). He highlights that where chronos refers to *'the concept of time as change, measure, and serial order'*, the quantifiable, measurable aspects of passing time according to the clock in a neutral, absolute sense, the kairos notion of time relates to the *'right or opportune time to do something'*. He gives as an example a farmer's 'kairic' or intuitive sense of the right moment to sow and harvest, adding that it is tied to the self-determination of the individual. Smith (1969) identifies three aspects present within the concept of kairos – the right time, a time of tension that calls for a decision, and an opportunity to accomplish some purpose. Elliott Jaques (1982) and philosopher José Luis Ramírez (1995) also stress kairos as episodes of intentions and goals, while Hammond (2007) proposes that in Hellenistic Greece, kairos denoted a time in which something could happen.

7

He proposes a fitting or opportune time - a 'season', a time for 'something'. In De Categoriae (107a 8–10, 119a 26–37), Aristotle suggests *'What happens at the right time (*Kairos – season*) is good'*. The Oxford English Dictionary (Simpson, Weiner, & Press., 1989), defines Kairos as '*Fullness of time, the propitious moment for the performance of an action or the coming into being of a new state.*' And Prigogine and Stengers (1984) have suggested a 'kairo-logical' right moment in their discussions around chaos theories. Wheatley, in her contribution to the Chaos Theory conversation (M. J. Wheatley, 2005), links these 'right times' and 'seasons' where 'something' can be led forth, to the natural rhymes and rhythms of life:

> " ... *I've learned that if we organize in the same way that the rest of life does, we develop the skills we need: we become resilient, adaptive, aware, and creative ... and life's processes work everywhere, no matter the culture, group, or person, because these are basic dynamics shared by all living beings." Margaret Wheatley (2006)*

These references to nature, the basic tenets of horticulture and responding to 'the right or opportune moment' suggest to me that we as educators can respond to our learners in a way that can more effectively and productively foster their growth and development, and it is this approach that underpins the narrative tradition, providing the space for transformative learning's journey to unfold. Much like Mezirow's identified stages (Mezirow, 2000), and utilising the analogy of the agricultural model, we can see elements of Brookfield's critical theory (Brookfield, 2005) through the cultivating process before optimal growth potential can be achieved. Goethe reflected these same connections:

> *"Nothing in nature is isolated. Nothing is without reference to something else. Nothing achieves meaning apart from that which neighbours it."-Goethe (1749-1832)*

These writers from diverse disciplines join Mezirow (2005), Nelson (1994), Brookfield (2000), Cranton (1994), Rogers (1961), Frankl (1964) and Freire (1972b) and many other writers who advocate the cultivation of a process through which we can interrogate what, why and how we have come to know, and having gained this new perspective, begin to imagine who we have yet to become (Brady, 1990).

Research method - using story to locate meaning

My intent in undertaking this research was to locate adult learners, those newly returned to study at the TAFE Institute in which I work, and to invite them to engage in the reflective process of storytelling as part of their reintroduction to learning, and at the conclusion of this session, to invite them to consider volunteering to be a participant in my research. My initial search for potential participants took me across various departments and cohorts within the TAFE Institute that included Indigenous Studies, the Certificate in General Adult Education and migrant adults from diverse backgrounds undertaking English Language and various other vocational studies. After unsuccessfully navigating the many barriers experienced as part of gaining ethics approval, I eventually gained permission to work with students enrolled in a Diploma of Liberal Arts. This altered the original intent of my research - to work with adults newly returning to study - as the students to whom I had access were already well entrenched in the learning process, six months into their diploma course. Further delays around notification of ethics approval resulted in access to a limited selection of students who were now in the second year of their diploma studies – a different cohort than that originally

8

planned.

As part of their learning program in the Diploma of Liberal Arts, all students are encouraged to engage with the concept of a reflective process, and to build it into their practice, so it was arranged that I would provide a guest session on developing a critically reflective practice, using the methodology of storytelling, and in which I introduced the concept of reflective writing, facilitating an applied activity using a storytelling framework. The session included a shared discussion of prior experiences and current attitudes to learning, linking the concept of past experience with current perspective. Space was provided for participants to engage in the storytelling methodology utilising a method of expression that was meaningful to them – writing, drawing, poetry, oral storytelling.

In the TAFE sector, deeply grounded in a competency–based approach, objective, measurable observations, statements and outcomes are valued and actively sought. I felt it critical that I establish the importance of each individual finding and honouring their authentic voice through this exercise, and that they be encouraged to allow themselves the freedom of expression that was truly reflective of their own experience and knowing - that it not be an environment of the models Piaget and Nicholson-Smith reference (Piaget, 1979), of pressure on the side of the educator and receptiveness and compliance on the part of the student.

During the introductory session, we explored some of what has been written about the benefits of deeply critical reflection within other contexts, and all students were invited to take time during the session to explore, to think critically about the experiences, environments and people who had contributed to their learning pathway and constructed self-knowing about capacity. I encouraged them to write, draw, or utilise a combination of methods to record their story in a way that most effectively utilised their individual preferences, and gave them permission to be free to write or draw as thoughts arose during our session. Individuals were invited to share any thoughts about the activity, about any recognition that may have come to the fore for them, and around the potential benefits of the reflective exercise and of its possible incorporation into applied practice. At this point my proposed research was introduced, and I explained that in undertaking the storytelling process required as part of participation, a potential existed for disorienting and painful memories to emerge that might require therapeutic intervention, and informed the participants that support was available to them if this turned out to be the case.

Data gathering - new stories

In response to my invitation, four volunteers came forward and were asked to take time to reflect further on their learning pathways, on their sense of identity as learners, and to give further consideration to the ways in which circumstances and environments may have influenced this construction of self-identity. They were again encouraged to find ways of recording their reflections that were meaningful to them, in the lead-up to the individual interviews arranged with each of them. These interviews were clarified as providing the forum in which we would discuss the individuals' insights gained through the process of their reflective journey and where we could flesh out stories of how the transformative process unfolded for each of them. Through this recruitment process, an additional participant, who had commenced a course at the TAFE Institute in the previous year and had withdrawn prior to its conclusion, came forward. He had become aware of the study and expressed an interest in taking part, as a possible means of examining ways of moving forward on his learning and career pathway.

Alongside my five participants, I am deeply situated as a learner on a discovery tour within

this research. My own story forms the foundation of my research study - it has initiated, informed and continues to direct the process of my inquiry, and has been brought to the table of the interviews with my storytellers so that we could share the joys and the turbulence of the path to our knowing and becoming. This inclusion created a rich dynamic that enabled the continued exploration of ideas, as each participant came to the interview with their unique motivation, and an approach to the task at hand that saw a weaving of a tapestry of life stories that truly honoured the narrative tradition. Through observing this uniquely individual approach, each story of learning took different paths, and found its own way through the process of exploring the experiences and influences of the people and environments of each of their lives.

The ninety-minute individual interviews were conducted in locations identified by the participants as uniquely comfortable to each of them and where the participants were invited to share the reflective process each had undertaken as part of the lead-up to the interview, and to discuss the method they had chosen to record these reflections. Utilising the narrative methodology, each individual was encouraged to express their story in a way that was meaningful to them, and questions structured to draw out potential evidence of Mezirow's ten phases of transformative learning (2000) were included where needed to guide reflections. Self-determination and freedom of expression was explicitly highlighted to each individual as we undertook the interview, to give them permission to explore anything that came to mind that they considered relevant to their learning story, and to promote a stream-of-consciousness participation in the reflective exercise. Their right to exclude anything, or to cease the interview at any point was also strongly articulated and reinforced both prior to commencement and throughout the sessions. These interviews have been extensively documented in my Masters thesis and a summary of outcomes will be included within this paper.

Two weeks after the last individual interview took place, a focus group was held with three of the participants only, due to various other work and study commitments. Individual phone interviews were undertaken with the two participants unable to attend, and the interviews, both individual and group, were digitally recorded with supporting notes.

I invited each of them to reflect on the ways in which the autobiographical process had fostered the unfolding of stories and understanding, and influenced the perspectives and learning of each participant. Opportunity was also provided to reflect on changes of attitude or behaviour, in response to any recognised perspective transformation achieved through the process.

Findings and discussion - stories unfolding

Narrative and other forms of reflective autobiography value expression as well as explanation (A. Nelson, 1994) and as my participants came to the place of telling their stories, I was overwhelmed by the enthusiasm that each demonstrated as they engaged with the opportunity to look back over their lives. Transformative learning as autobiography claims that the learner composes their life by using imagination and critical reflection to gain insight and understanding around the circumstances of their becoming (A. Nelson, 1994) and as each participant immersed themselves in the writing, the drawing and the telling, threads of stories emerged that flowed freely into associated memories woven together meaningfully to affirm known truths, and highlight previously unconnected, or perhaps unexpressed knowing. Although a format had been framed to prompt thought and response where needed, throughout most of the interviews, questioning and deeply critical reflections arose naturally

10

and fluidly from each participant as they became increasingly absorbed by the process of restorying their lives, re-examining and re-membering the learning in all that had gone before, within the cultural and social contexts and confines of the time.

The inspirational voices of Brookfield (2005), Mezirow (2000), Freire (1972), Shor (1992), Cranton (1994), Frankl (1964), Rogers (1980) and others urge us to draw on the political and social dimensions of meaning-making, identifying the power of critical reflection in the transformative learning process through the recognition of the power relationships and hegemonic assumptions that exist within our immediate and larger environment. Throughout the study, the research participants were encouraged to apply this critical focus in examining the knowing expressed by them, in order for space to be provided for identification of assumptions that might found their knowing. Brady's *remembered self* (Brady, 1990) was brought to the fore through the process of storytelling, drawing together the disparate and seemingly unconnected aspects of past experience. As their stories wove together, meshing historical fact and truth of imagination (Olney, 1980), each participant has had the opportunity to create meaning that has to various extents enabled a more *ordered self* to be formulated – the foundations on which a new story can be built. Now the *imagined self* can begin to take root, as new possibilities, new dreaming is seeded and nurtured (Brady, 1990). Each of them has articulated an awakening sense of possibility of how they might now step forward, and have expressed a sense of freedom in choosing to claim and enact a more personally authentic and self-authored life. Like me, and the many I have spoken to along the way, they articulated the transforming journey of self-discovery undertaken through the course of this self-narrative, and communicate insights that mirror my own experiences and those of the individuals discussed here and in the literature reviewed. The stories told and shared by them identify and articulate the place of self-recognition individuals arrive at through the storytelling process, and illustrate how examining our lives can enable a change in perspective through the preliminary identification and acknowledgement of previously unrecognised and unchallenged life views. Telling our stories seems to provide the space for the identification and allocation of meaning to behaviours and attitudes that may have been carried with us for decades, but which might now be seen as unproductive, sometimes destructive, and often dispensable (Frankl, 1964). My participants articulated the knowing that once identified and acknowledged, these un-owned and limiting beliefs and behaviours are able to be released, and leave the storyteller more fully open to the possibilities inherent within their journey of adult learning - making sense and reconciling aspects of the past that have bound them to a sometimes narrow window of existence and knowing. Through understanding more fully their capacity as lifelong learners on a new path of identity formation, they are now able to step with greater personal authority into a future of previously unimagined possibility (A. Nelson, 1994).

Conclusions

The work-dominated discourse of VET suggests that learning involves the acquisition of a set of skills or competencies that are external to the learner, and which the learner lacks, reflecting Freire's notion of a deficit/banking approach (Freire, 1972), which aims to overcome learners' 'deficiencies' by 'topping up' their existing skills or 'adding value' to their productive capacity by way of depositing extra skills, ultimately rendering the learner 'employable'. This approach assumes the locus of learning and curriculum lies outside the learner rather than within the learners themselves. I would argue that the findings of my research explicitly problematise, if not overturn, such assumption and narrow conceptions about the purpose and outcomes of VET, identifying that the nature of learning is far more complex, multifaceted and potentially empowering in non-vocational ways than is

11

conventionally presumed (Anderson, 1999). It suggests that the most potentially valuable and transformative learning that occurs within the context of VET may well be that which emerges from a 'curriculum' that is generated from within learners themselves, wherein they are working on and from their selves - restorying their lives - which may also include the development of new technical skills or workplace competencies, but which cannot be simply reduced to the latter. Indeed, it could be argued that the development of new technical skills or workplace competencies may not translate as effectively into employment unless the learner has at the same time, as an integral part of the whole learning process, also rewritten, relearned and reoriented their life stories in ways that incorporate and embody the new skills and competencies in a newly constructed sense of self. I argue that for the learner returning to study within the context of VET, enormous potential exists for change at an individual level through utilising the storytelling methodology. In applying the Socratic notion of the educator as midwife (Maxwell, 2009), we can support the 'birth' of these individuals as they draw forth their own knowing (Peck, 1978; Wilshire, 1990).

My quest for credibility in my approach to providing space for returning learners to undertake a reflective storytelling approach has found rich support in literature across many seemingly incongruent arenas. I found rich endorsement from writers who promote a Socratic and person-centred approach to encouraging the learner on their transformative journey, all advocating, in various forms, a critically reflective, self-determined cultivation of and by the individual. They concur that in order to optimise personally meaningful learning outcomes, we as educators must ensure that safe spaces are provided for our learners to explore and critically question assumptions, and where they can deconstruct what has been unquestioningly assimilated. Through creating the conditions where this critical consciousness can be cultivated, individuals have the opportunity to more effectively construct an authentic sense of self-identity and personal capacity. Nelson (1994) speaks of discovering authorship of one's life, and that relative to the capacity we have to imagine how else life might be, there develops a buoyant sense of personal authority. He referred to critical internal and external factors that can often act as catalysts to a previously unimagined future, and of this moment of change " ... *the instrument of transformation ...trouble that leads to crisis ... if this disruption to order is unable to be accommodated within the existing social structure, there may arise the legitimation of a new order ...*" (A. Nelson, 1994). As choices and deeply rooted changes in behaviour and enacted personal authority came into play for each of my participants, an altered sense of self emerged that holds great promise for progression beyond their self-identified barriers. As their knowing arises, deliberate decisions will need to be made to enact alternative ways of being that will constitute a conscious shift away from previously valued personal commitments that may contravene long held practices and the strong influences of institutional or cultural norms (Taylor, 2007). The transformative journey, as Taylor has indicated, can be an arduous, and often drawn out affair, where new epistemological frameworks take time to percolate and gain clarity (Taylor, 2007). He speaks of "… *developing a sense of trust in the process of transformative learning, allowing for students to live with some discomfort while on the edge of knowing, in the process of gaining new insights and understandings."* Each of my participants has articulated an awakening sense of possibility of how they might now step forward, and have expressed a sense of freedom in choosing to claim and enact a more personally authentic and self-authored life. The brief opportunities provided to lay open the depths of their memories through the telling of their stories is limited in its capacity to achieve a totally transformed perspective for these learners, but it is a springboard to another level of understanding. Is it re-creating or re-storying? Is it re-membering? Is it reconciling? However we call it, it is coming, perhaps for the first time, to our truth – the unfolding of the story yet to be told. My storytellers are on the edge of their own knowing (Berger, 2004), along the continuum of the ever-morphing path of

12

becoming.

My research was a small-scale study conducted in one TAFE institute involving a relatively small, self-selected sample of participants and limited data gathering activities, all of which restrict the generalisability of my research findings. Due to the limitations of the study, there is much that remains unanswered and a broader, large-scale research study is required to interrogate what has yet to be uncovered around the transformative benefits of providing space for reflective storytelling within the context of vocational education and training. Rich opportunities exist for more extensive research to examine how this storytelling methodology might be applied and incorporated within foundational and other programs across the diverse spectrum of VET educational contexts, and to further investigate the implications of these limited findings as they relate to the potentially greater social benefits of individual perspective transformation within the context of vocational education and training.

Recommendations

My recommendations relate to the identification of funding opportunities to support a collaborative research project (and pilot program), across a range of VET and Adult Community Education (ACE) providers. Its purpose would be to examine the path and ultimate learning outcomes, both qualitatively expressed and quantitatively measured, of learners returning to study within a program guided by the framework of a storytelling methodology. In my facilitation of the *Course in Assessment of Informal Learning (21812VIC)* across the VET sector, and in disseminating the ongoing progress of my research within academic circles, intense interest has been expressed in developing the implementation of this storytelling methodology, and it is in this domain that I would propose the utilisation of the currently accredited *Course in Recognised Informal Learning (21896VIC)* to guide and underpin the program's implementation. Possible considerations might be a partnership between ACFE and TAFE providers, in developing a project proposal to Skills Victoria or NCVER. Consultation with interested stakeholders is required to clearly define the project's scope, aims and targets.

> *What we call the beginning is often the end, and to make an end is to make a beginning … the end is where we start from. A people without history is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern of timeless moments. We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time. T.S Eliot (1970)*

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14

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