TELLING TALES: METANARRATIVES, COUNTERNARRATIVES AND OTHER STORIES IN LIFELONG LEARNING SUCCESSES AND FUTURES

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ABSTRACT

Lifelong learning attracts various stories to tell the tales of its successes and futures. These stories include marginalising metanarratives, resistant counternarratives and other accounts. This paper illustrates these stories by referring to information literacy, critical theory and informal learning as gleaned from the refereed proceedings of the first four conferences.

KEYWORDS

counternarratives – critical theory – informal learning – information literacy – metanarratives

INTRODUCTION

Telling tales is an evocative and powerful device for examining claims about reflecting on lifelong learning’s successes (and failures) and for framing its possible futures. Depending on the skills of the teller and the receptiveness of the audience(s), tales can be allegorical, lyrical and/or satirical, and they can convey the multiple perspectives on and interests attending particular conceptualisations of lifelong learning.

Rather than engaging here with possible definitions of lifelong learning, I have selected three among several themes commonly associated with this phenomenon: information literacy, critical theory and informal learning. While other topics could have been chosen, these three feature prominently in the refereed proceedings of the first four international lifelong learning conferences that I take as my principal text for this paper, and they encompass a considerable diversity of ideas about and approaches to understanding what lifelong learning is and might be and whom it might benefit and/or disadvantage.

Before I examine these three themes, I present a conceptual framework synthesised from poststructuralist notions of marginalising metanarratives and resistant counternarratives and other forms of story telling. The paper’s argument is that lifelong learning tales present some viewpoints but not others and that they constitute necessarily limited and partial representations of educational aspirations and experiences in the broadest sense. Moreover they provide opportunities for lifelong learners, educators, policy-makers and researchers alike to reflect on their successes and frame their hoped for futures.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Like many ideas derived from poststructuralism, metanarratives and counternarratives are liable to denote varied ideas across a range of writers and are at risk of setting up a conceptual binary of fixed essences of the kind that poststructuralists seek to avoid. While I wish to highlight the boundary between the two kinds of narratives as porous, clearly they evoke different types of stories about lifelong learning, with divergent purposes and serving dissimilar interests. Hopefully the potential for oversimplifying conceptual complexity is offset by the analytical benefit of identifying those purposes and interests and considering their possible impact on lifelong learning successes and futures.

Metanarratives recall the French postmodernist Jean-François Lyotard’s (1979) scepticism towards grand narratives, understood as conveying some form of universal and transcendent truth that overcomes the diverse particularities of specific contexts and situations. For Stephens and McCallum (1998), “conservative metanarratives” are “the implicit and usually invisible ideologies, systems, and assumptions which operate globally in a society to order knowledge and experience” (p. 3). While metanarratives can serve a useful purpose (for example, in relation to bringing to greater civic and government attention some issues of public education and health), their principal disadvantage is the tendency to homogenise, essentialise and totalise our understandings of the world and thereby to elide crucial differences of experience and interest. Their effect is therefore likely to be marginalising and deleterious for minority groups and communities.

Postmodernism and poststructuralism are also of course potential metanarratives (Harvey, 1990; see also Lingard & Gale, 2007). My point here is not to assert that particular commentators –
myself included – are incapable of deploying metanarratives or their constituent elements but instead to highlight the conceptual utility of considering the concept when reflecting on lifelong learning’s successes and seeking to frame its futures. Similarly it is important to recognise the political situatedness of those who evoke counternarratives, sometimes for advantage in personal positioning that might have little to do with the form of marginalisation being contested and/or simply reverse its polarity (as again this paper might be accused of doing).

By contrast with metanarratives, counternarratives are conceived as resistant alternative stories that tell the tales that metanarratives strive to silence. Peters and Lankshear (1996) distinguished helpfully between two types of post modern counternarratives, both of which are relevant to this discussion:

*The first observes the existence of counternarratives which function generically as a critique of the modernist predilection for “grand,” “master,” and “meta” narratives... Counternarratives in this sense serve the strategic political function of splintering and disturbing grand stories which gain their legitimacy from foundational myths concerning the origins and development of an unbroken history of the West based on the evolutionary idea of progress.*

*... Counternarratives, then, in a second sense counter not merely (or even necessarily) the grand narratives, but also (or instead) the “official” and “hegemonic” narratives of everyday life: those legitimating stories propagated for specific political purposes to manipulate public consciousness by heralding a national set of common cultural ideals. (p. 2; emphasis in original)*

Of course there are many other kinds of tales able to be told about lifelong learning apart from metanarratives and counternarratives. There are the culturally situated stories told by Indigenous community members (and the equally culturally situated texts by researchers interpreting those stories) (Atleo, 2008). There are the multiple forms of data collection constituting doctoral research, a recent example of which included “the research questions, dreams, memory work and collective biography workshops with my participants” (de Carteret, 2008, p. 235). There are the interwoven processes that link oral tellers of (sometimes sacred) stories with their listeners (Josephs, 2008). There are the tales told variously through dance (Toncy, 2008), painting (Reader, 2008) and writing (Mantle, 2008). There are the items of gossip and ‘in jokes’ that bind – and sometimes divide – families, community clubs and workplaces. Many of these ‘other’ tales might be seen as falling within Foucault’s (1980) identification of types of subjugated knowledge (including ‘local’ or ‘indigenous’ forms of knowing); all of them belong to the innumerable utterances constituting Bakhtin’s (1984) notion of unfinalisability, whereby the final word is never spoken and individuals and groups retain the potential for change and transformation.

What has this conceptualisation of various approaches to telling tales to do with lifelong learning research and scholarship? At the most general level telling tales encapsulate what it is to be human, alive and engaged in learning (thereby aligning with the definitional conundrum that it is perhaps as difficult to say what lifelong learning is not as to say what it is). More specifically, telling tales encompasses the formal, non-formal and informal dimensions of lifelong learning, being equally at home in accredited programs of instruction, training courses and the private endeavours of self-improvement. Similarly telling tales involves both the lifelong and the life-wide trajectories of learning (or respectively the vertical and horizontal axes of lifelong learning [Danaher, Moriarty & Danaher, 2002]). Telling tales also evokes such varied elements of lifelong learning as the intellectual, the spiritual, the emotional and the ethical (Jarvis, 2000). Finally, as an example of some of these types of tales, the authors of a recent review of lifelong learning research literature (Edwards, Clarke, Harrison & Reeve, 2002) deployed the illuminating set of “three narratives of the project: algorithmic, strategically improvised, and reflexive” (p. 129) to describe their empirical study of flexibility and lifelong learning in further education in the United Kingdom.

Thus the telling of tales lies at the centre and the heart of lifelong learning research and scholarship. Some of those tales are inevitably metanarratives, seeking to ensure collectivity, compliance, conformity and consensus in relation to the status quo and currently privileged learning interests and perspectives. Others are deliberately provocative, resistant and subversive, concerned with decentering that privilege and power and creating other strategies and structures for learning. Others still are accidental, ephemeral, incidental and temporary – yet also capable of mobilising effective and sustainable change and transformation. My interest in the remaining sections of the paper lies...
in exploring a few of the apparent and possible convergences and divergences among the narratives clustered around the three previously identified themes in lifelong learning research: information literacy, critical theory and informal learning. As noted above, these narratives are necessarily restricted (and potentially restrictive) in their representations of lifelong learning objectives and opportunities, but they also contain possible new and more hopeful ways of conceptualising and enacting those objectives and opportunities. These narratives are also crucial to understanding and interrogating multiple reflections on successes and framing futures in relation to lifelong learning.

**Information Literacy**

Information literacy can be considered both a pre-requisite and a litmus test of the success of lifelong learning, as well as a key to framing its future. The multiple attributes of what makes an individual learner information literate are vital to that person's capacity to locate, organise, analyse, critique, apply and reconstitute the material from which knowledge derives. Information literacy signifies a confident, engaged and productive member of several intersecting communities, as well as trajectories of learning and involvement that are both lifelong and life-wide.

This notion of the intersection between information literacy and lifelong learning has been a recurring theme in previous conference refereed proceedings. In 2000 Breivik (2000) identified ‘the magical partnership’ between information literacy and lifelong learning, contended that ‘lifelong learning is the goal for which information literacy is an essential enabler’ and argued that ‘Academic institutions...will have failed their graduates if they do not empower them to be independent lifelong learners who can access, evaluate, and effectively use information to address the needs or questions which confront them’ (p. 1; emphasis in original). In 2002 Hallam and Partridge (2002) linked the two terms by referring to ‘Information literacy and lifelong learning: the capacity to learn and maintain intellectual curiosity and a commitment to continuous learning throughout life’ (p. 198). In 2004 Grace (2004) cited the importance of information literacy as an enabler of lifelong learning and contended that “information literacy pays an important role in holistic lifelong learning” (p. 133). In 2006 Lloyd (2006) noted that “The issue of transfer appears critical for information literacy practitioners if we are to continue to define information literacy as a critical practice and a prerequisites for lifelong learning...outside of tertiary contexts” (p. 188). Despite – or indeed because of – its prevalence, there is potential for this claimed and hoped for status of information literacy to assume something of a metanarrative. In making this assertion I am not seeking to position information literacy researchers as necessarily wishing to promote a totalising discourse that elides difference and homogenises diversity; as I indicate below, a number of those researchers acknowledge and take up the importance of resistant as well as celebratory takes on information literacy. My point here is that (like critical theory and informal learning) information literacy can become complicit with narrowly defined conceptions of lifelong learning and thereby enhance an equally narrow range of interests and perspectives (such as those associated with ‘big business’ and late capitalism that coopt individuals’ capacities and energies to serve the very different interests of global enterprise). This enhancement is perhaps inevitable, given the complex intersections among tertiary education (the site of most information literacy research [Edwards, Bruce & McAllister, 2005, p. 26]), paid employment, career trajectories and the accumulation of individual, national and global capital. Evaluations of the success of information literacy nevertheless entail privileging formal and cognitive over informal and emotional or spiritual learning outcomes and considering the proportion of (mostly formal) learners who demonstrate their acquisition of capabilities that serve simultaneously the interests of those learners and late capitalism – a potential dilemma neatly encapsulated by Bruce (2004): “[Information literacy] is generally seen as...central to achieving both personal empowerment and economic development” (p. 8). More broadly, questions attend whether information literacy (identified in the singular rather than the plural) is a Western-centric and/or a middle class concept (questions that also attach to lifelong learning), reflected in the argument by Kapitzke (2003) that “because the assumptions of the information literacy framework hail from print cultures, a modernist paradigm and psychologistic discourses, it is not so much a panacea but a hindrance to critical and transformative literacy practice” (p. 53).

Of course the riposte to this charge of information literacy as a potential metanarrative and as characterising lifelong learning successes and futures in somewhat restrictive terms – a riposte that has been made already by some of the authors referred to here – is that information literacy is much more than the instrument of late
capitalism and economic activity. For example, Edwards’ (2006) four categories of information searching were elicited from Internet-rather than print-based literacy; Bruce’s (1997) seven faces of information literacy emphasise “becoming aware of different ways of experiencing information use through engaging in relevant information practices and reflection” (2004, p. 9), implying a heterogeneous understanding of the phenomenon; and Breivik (2000) reminded us that “Access [to both information and literacy] is key” (p. 4). In further examples of information literacy as a counter-narrative to the totalising potential of global capitalism, Lupton (2004) has challenged the limitations of library-centric approaches to information literacy; Hughes, Bruce and Edwards (2006) have argued for a critically reflective approach to promoting information literacy in the increasingly pervasive online learning environments; and Hughes (2004) has highlighted the cultural specificities of promoting information literacy among international students.

The interplay between these metanarratives and counter-narratives creates particular opportunities and challenges for reflecting on successes and framing futures in lifelong learning by means of information literacy. On the one hand, initiatives such as the development of information literacy standards by bodies such as the Council of Australian Universities Libraries and the Council of Australian State Universities (Pedley, 2006, p. 257) augur well for lobbying for minimum levels of access and contain the prospects of more diverse and heterogeneous approaches to understanding and enacting information literacies. On the other hand, the existence of counter-narratives renders difficult reaching definitive conclusions about the breadth and depth of the effectiveness and impact of information literacy strategies and fuels the continuing debate about assessing particular dimensions of information literacy. Furthermore, unless vigilance is maintained, information literacy, like generic skills (Coombs, Danaher, Anteliz & Danaher, 2000) and graduate attributes, can become the vehicle for implementing a narrow range of education experiences that constrain and restrict lifelong learning’s successes and futures.

Critical Theory

The connection between critical theory and counter-narratives in lifelong learning research and scholarship is axiomatic. Critical theory is predicated on challenging current power bases and political structures and on explicating the intangible and invisible ways in which certain interests and perspectives are privileged and others are devalued and silenced. This process is crucial if claims about lifelong learning successes are to be substantiated and if more equitable and enabling lifelong learning futures are to be framed.

The application of critical theory lenses to lifelong learning scholarship is a recurring theme in previous conference proceedings. For example, in 2000 Jarvis (2000) argued that “learning is moral in itself but both what we choose to do with and how society seeks to control our learning, are much more problematic” (p. 20) and, resonating with this paper’s title, that an ethical discourse about lifelong learning is needed “in which the story sounds better and the reality might just be affected as a result” (p. 26), while Parry, Dwyer, Reid-Scarl and Baillie (2000) called for critical theory to “become an essential part of the nursing curriculum” in order “to address the moral and emancipatory aspects of knowledge” (p. 274) in such curriculum. In 2002 Findsen (2002) deployed the political economy perspective within the critical gerontology paradigm to critique lifelong learning participation by and provision for older adults in New Zealand, while Harreveld, Danaher and Kenny (2002) pondered whether “the institution’s use of the language of the lifelong learning community is actually a strategy of entrapment” (p. 207) in relation to a distance vocational teacher education program. In 2004 Kenny (2004) articulated the enduringly significant questions about lifelong learning discourses “…who preaches; who is the moral trendsetter? And from what platforms can the dominant discourse be challenged?” (p. 21), illustrated by reference to various minority communities in Ireland, while Priest and Quaife-Ryan (2004) advocated the disruption of the dominant economic rationalist discourse and the objectivist epistemology attending lifelong learning by the re-enchantment of education and the rediscovery of teaching as a sacred activity. In 2006 Grace (2006) examined the extent to which previous keynote presentations in the lifelong learning conference “demonstrate critical intelligence, with foci on options, evaluations, decisions, freedom, and ethics?” (p. 3), while Tyler (2006) explored the possibilities of critical spirit in animating the lifelong learning of technical and further education teachers in Queensland.

Despite the analytical advantages of articulating these and other counter-narratives in lifelong learning research and scholarship, it is important to acknowledge that critical theory – like any paradigm or worldview – can become a metanarrative if its speaking positions become
dominant in particular contexts and situations. This can occur if the tenets of critical theory are held to be the most insightful, or even the only, ways of understanding and engaging with the world, neatly summarised in the charge by some critics that critical theory “attempts to reduce or totalize all phenomena so that they fit within a single integrated framework” (Johnson & Dubeley, 2000, p. 143), as well as in the linking of “a critique of Critical Theory” with “A question...[about] the extent to which Critical Theory itself, as a systematisation of the system of the culture industry, necessarily falls prey to the very tendencies it claims to criticize: the subsumptive tendency of the system” (Weber, 2004, p. 235). There is also the potential concern that it is easier for critical theory to critique the status quo that to proffer sustainable alternatives. There is as well the curious paradox that some proponents of critical theory are seen as conducting themselves in ways that resemble the marginalising strategies that they contest; this recalls Kenny’s (2004) telling observation that “the gap between the myths or gospels preached by [ideologues] and the reality of practice was unconsciously wide” (p. 21), as well as feminist writer Gur-Zev’s (2005) reference to the paternalism of some strands of critical theory. Given this paper’s subtitle, perhaps a key challenge for critical theory renditions of lifelong learning is the extent to which such accounts allow for other stories that lie outside the interplay between metanarratives and counternarratives to be heard and read. Despite the analytical utility of that interplay, it can become totalising (and therefore a new metanarrative) if it is used to reduce all formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences to the clash between corporate managerialism and neoliberal globalisation on the one hand and efforts to resist those forces on the other. This could mean that, in addition to Grace’s (2006) valuable connection between critical intelligence and a characterisation of people as “historical subjects with instrumental, social, and cultural needs” (p. 15) and Kell’s (2006) equally vital identification of “The challenge of achieving social justice with education and training [as] one that merges aspects of human rights and redistributive justice in economic terms...” (p. 24), we might wish to give greater space in lifelong learning scholarship to the emotional, the informal and the spiritual dimensions of such learning, as well as to other genres of telling lifelong learning tales like art, blogs, music, poetry and prose fiction. Part of the rationale for this suggestion is the apparent difficulty of using critical theory (as with information literacy) to make definitive claims about past successes of lifelong learning policies and practices and to frame unquestionably sustainable and transformative lifelong learning futures on the basis of those claims.

Informal Learning

Initially a relatively minor but subsequently an increasingly popular theme in previous conference proceedings has been various examples of informal lifelong learning. These have encompassed workplace learning, community engagement, recreational pursuits and post-retirement activities. In 2002, as noted above, Findsen (2002) identified the informal, non-formal and formal learning opportunities available to older adults in New Zealand, while Hurworth (2002) examined the effectiveness of the University of the Third Age in Victoria in helping to create “a set of stronger, more permanent learning communities” (p. 214). In 2004 Kennedy (2004) explored the possibilities for knowledge management and workplace learning in complex organisations, while Penman and Ellis (2004) outlined several ways in which the University of South Australia’s Whyalla campus established educational links of varying degrees of formality with its regional community. In 2006 Jackson (2006) analysed the role of the British National Federation of Women’s Institutes in promoting informal participation in learning by older women, while Danaher (2006) exemplified his notion of inalienable interconnectivity as a promoter of lifelong learning by reference to a hypothetical small reading group or book club.

Informal learning’s status as a counternarrative in lifelong learning scholarship is centred on its contestation of deficit views that derive from structuralist paired terms in which the first term is privileged over the second, such as formal—informal, male—female, public—private, urban—rural and sedentary—itinerant. This was encapsulated in Findsen’s (2002) insight that, in relation to lifelong learning and older adults, “we do not have to agree with deficit explanations of ageing — those that depict older adults as decrepit, frail or physically and mentally wanting — a more active and positive image of older adult can be projected instead” (p. 173). It is precisely because informal lifelong learning research makes explicit otherwise invisible aspects of learning that these more enabling stories can be told — often very evocatively and powerfully.

At the same time, and paradoxically, it is this increasing scholarly acceptance of informal learning that renders it liable to capture and transmutation into a metanarrative. This is because — like lifelong learning — informal
learning once taken over by the forces of measurement, regulation and surveillance loses its joy, spontaneity and non-cognitive and non-economic aspects. (This process can be likened to the risks associated with changing an ad hoc set of relationships based on informal collegiality and mentoring to one with prescribed meeting schedules, performance indicators and outcome targets.) The totalling tendency of metanarratives therefore threatens the agency and energy associated with informal learning that make it (as a counter-narrative) vital to the sustainable futures of workplaces, rural communities and groups of retirees, among others.

As with information literacy and critical theory, then, informal learning constitutes something of a paradox in relation to lifelong learning successes and futures. Even if it is the case that, "if all learning were to be represented by an iceberg... the submerged two thirds of the structure would be needed to convey the much greater importance of informal learning" (Coffield, 2000, p. 1) than formal learning, it is difficult to evaluate the successes or otherwise of such learning unless it is subjected to much greater critical scrutiny than is currently the situation — and that brings with it some attendant risks. From this perspective, framing lifelong learning futures by means of a focus on informal learning as potential counter-narrative and metanarrative might be considered simultaneously an inexact science and a strategic uncertainty (Coombes, Dinnen & Danner, 2004).

CONCLUSION: TELLING TALES, REFLECTING ON SUCCESSES AND FRAMING FUTURES IN LIFELONG LEARNING

All conceptual frameworks are open to contestation and critique, not least in relation to the inevitable limits on reflexivity of their proponents. That certainly applies in this case, where the position interplay between metanarratives and counter-narratives pertaining to lifelong learning research and scholarship might be perceived as excessively binaristic and polarised (even though I see their relationship as intuitive, relative and mutually constitutive), and where the other types of narratives promised in the paper's subtitle have been overshadowed by that interplay. Equally it is important to interrogate the relatively privileged position of the author as a university academic in a developed nation and the limits placed by that position on his understanding of the issues and on his capacity for empathy with proponents of alternative viewpoints.

Nevertheless I contend that telling tales of the kind examined here as well as of the many other types that are represented in the proceedings of this and the previous lifelong learning conferences is a useful activity. As I noted in the introduction, the telling of lifelong learning tales communicates representations – however limited and partial – of educational aspirations and experiences and provides opportunities for striving for new approaches to educational policy-making and provision.

More specifically, in very different ways, information literacy, critical theory and informal learning demonstrate the potential to become metanarratives that reduce the range and narrow the focus of understandings of lifelong learning successes and futures. From this perspective, a more celebratory discourse might attend claims about such successes, as measured by the massification of tertiary education and the enhanced prospects of international mobility for purposes of study and work. This discourse implies that lifelong learning futures should be framed in terms of "more of the same" and "one size fits all".

By contrast, information literacy, critical theory and informal learning also exhibit both types of counter-narratives articulated by Peters and Lankshear (1996): those that disrupt "grand stories which gain their legitimacy from foundational myths" and those that contest "the 'official' and 'legitimate' narratives of everyday life" (p. 2; emphasis is original). The former include the paired but differently valued terms such as male-female, urban-rural and sedentary-itinerant identified above; the latter encompass policy pronouncements that all of us should be lifelong learners when that injunction refers to a narrow range of signifiers held to constitute lifelong learning. The effect of these counter-narratives is to question excessively optimistic claims about the lifelong learning successes that have been achieved and to facilitate the framing of a broader range of lifelong learning futures than might otherwise be the case.

For all these reasons, then, telling tales (whether metanarratives, counter-narratives or other stories) has much to recommend it in examining and enlarging lifelong learning research and scholarship. Let us use this conference, as we reflect on successes and frame futures in lifelong learning, also to tell new and different tales, so that they too become telling and compelling in their own right.
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