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Invited paper

Developing a language for talking about learning
Toward a narrative view: what you say is what you get

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I'm very pleased to have been invited: any group of people which creates a set of guiding questions like those you have created for today is a group of people I want to work with. While preparing this paper I sometimes feared I would have little to say, since I have my own clear and simple answers to the three guiding questions:

What evidence do we have about how pupils talk about their learning? – lots.
Should we be encouraging teachers to model a more reflective language for thinking and talking about learning? – Yes (but don't overemphasise "modelling")
Is the acquisition of such a language a precondition for pupils becoming more autonomous learners? – Yes.

So am I saying it's all plain and simple? Certainly not, for the biggest problem in the guiding questions is the smallest word: we. Who are the "we" that have evidence, that should encourage teachers, and so on? My quick answer is that "we" are precious few and that our privileged knowledge and attempts at change have to work against the grain of dominant discourses regarding learning and unhelpful practices of schooling. We are not quite as badly off as the state of affairs which led Gardner, Perkins and colleagues to call their Harvard project "Project Zero" (i.e. that the starting point for the study of arts learning was zero), but we're probably at about 2%.

So I will want to consider as much about what hinders generative talk about learning, as what supports it. One of the main culprits is the (increasingly?)common practice of NOT talking about learning while claiming to do so. And I will propose a resolution which excites me as a way forward.

Talking about learning is tough. But when it happens it is empowering and liberating.

A.(1) So how do pupils talk about their learning?

As with all forms of talk, context is crucial. So if the context for talking about learning is one of an open-ended enquiry with a researcher or an experimental teacher, we can find some inspiring accounts and transformational results. But if the context is everyday life in everyday classrooms, a very different picture of talk emerges,

I particularly enjoy the work of Ingrid Pramling with 3 to 8 year olds. She first showed that their conceptions of learning develop over time. Conceptions of *what* they learn developed from (a) to do something, (b) to know something, to (c) to understand something; conceptions of *how* they learn developed from (a) learning as doing (b) learning as growing older, to (c) learning through experience, either passive with the passing of time or active with practice[1]. She later showed that this development could be accelerated with teaching practices designed to promote children's greater awareness of their own learning[2]. Through what were called "metacognitive dialogues" (i.e. meta-learning dialogues) the children were

asked to reflect and ponder about what they were doing and why they were doing certain things which are normally taken for granted, for example:

"How come that we [did X] yesterday?"
"Did you find out anything that you didn't know before?"
"How did you go about finding out?"
"Can you find out some more on that by tomorrow?"
"How would you go about teaching other people all you have learnt about this?"

Finally it was shown that "children who have been involved in this form of educational activity [including meta-learning] are better prepared for learning (understanding new content)". Six year olds showed greater understanding in three real-life learning experiments than did their peers in parallel groups[3]. Children also showed a richer conception of learning: when asked *"If you were the one who had to decide what the children will have to learn next, what would you suggest?"*, their answers were more about learning to know than about learning to do. When asked *"Imagine you are as old as your teacher, and have to teach children in another pre-school all that you have learned [about X], how would you go about that?"*, their answers were more about teaching by planning experience, rather than teaching by telling.

So young children, in an enquiring climate about what is usually taken for granted can be sophisticated. Perhaps they can also be strategic. I find rather endearing that evidence which suggests that children who learn something new then say they always knew it[4].

Simple prompts of an open enquiry type can promote illuminating conversations with young children. In connection with a Learning about Learning project, Juliet Bodger at Fox school has been developing a range of class discussions. In one with her class of 8 year olds, the theme was "What does it feel like when you're learning?", to which one reply was "I feel dizzy"! A recent discussion focused on "What helps us with our learning?". As the class' responses were heard, four broad categories emerged:

Doing things (practising, sharing, …)
Feelings (own and others', positive feelings, …)
People (family, friends, not much mention of teachers, …)
Things/resources (objects, materials, …, fingers!)

When asked which of these areas was most contributory to their learning, the reply came "feelings" - especially connected to support and encouragement, feeling safe and other aspects of the group climate. This later became part of a whole-school assembly which the class gave for 300 pupils and parents! And in St Thomas' school Jess Finer has been helping the whole school (teachers and pupils) have conversations about their learning, and display their views on Learning about Learning in the school hall - including the *teachers'* responses. The reception teacher has tried "having a chat" with her class about learning. She was very surprised at how much pupils could say about their views (and in some cases the sophistication of what they said).

Some learners enjoy talking about learning even though they may be deemed not very good at it: some key researchers in the field write: "Involvement and enthusiasm have generally been high. Students who have not liked writing have nonetheless seemed to like analysing the task and the process"[5].

But if we were to go beyond about 8 years and seek a positive developmental pattern for all, I fear we will be disappointed. This is where surveys paint a rather different picture of classroom life and the later years. In this, a very important distinction emerges, both in how young people talk about learning, and also in associated beliefs and actions: the distinction between learning and performance. Three decades of major studies in a number of countries[6] have shown that different learners approach achievement-related tasks with different goals, orientations or motivations, and that the distinction between learning and

performance is key. It relates to different beliefs about success, motivations in learning, and responses to difficult tasks.

"learning orientation" concern for *improving* one's competence	*"performance orientation"* concern for *proving* one's competence
• belief that effort leads to success	• belief that ability leads to success
• belief in one's ability to improve and learn	• concern to be judged as able, concern to perform
• preference for challenging tasks	• satisfaction from doing better than others
• derives satisfaction from personal success at difficult tasks	• emphasis on normative standards, competition and public evaluation
• uses self-instructions when engaged in task	• helplessness: evaluate self negatively when task is difficult

So learners with a learning orientation talk to themselves more about their learning, while those with a performance orientation say "I can't do it" when the going gets tough. This difference has also recently been shown in learners' talk with their peers: those with a learning orientation engage in "on-line theorising", ask questions which focus on explanations or discrepancies, use personal experiences, and give more elaborate explanations[7]. Verbatim comments in class included:

- self-evaluating their ideas: "I've figured out what I want to say",
- recognising blocks "No, I don't get it",
- maintaining commentary "I didn't draw that right: I'm getting confused", and
- self-questioning when problems arose "What am I going to do?" "Have I come across this before?" and "What do I know about this?"

Some evidence suggest that children demonstrate difference in learning orientation as young as 6 years[8]. And survey evidence of the everyday classroom suggests that by the later primary years pupils become less learning-oriented, culminating in a "fourth grade slump" probably associated with teaching isolated skills for state-mandated tests[9]. By the age of 10 children show significantly differences in their orientations to learning[10], These results are replicated at the age of 11[11], at which age the different orientations are associated with differing beliefs about intelligence, whether it is fixed or malleable. By the time students are 14 to 15, some researchers in England and Finland have concluded that they have no clear understanding of how they learn[12].

Rather than view these results as showing that this aspect of development is difficult to achieve, I feel it says much about the learning climate of current-day classrooms. Many learners, through the dominant discourses of their homes, schools and neighbourhoods, are saddled with the common simplifications surrounding learning, those which view it as a quantifiable product and a performance with high stakes attached. Such learners have much less to say when asked about their learning by a researcher or curious teacher. Indeed their conversations confirm that their performance orientation leaves them cold about the focus on learning which excites us, since they have noticed so little about their own learning. The challenge of helping a learner with strong performance orientation take steps towards being a more proactive learner is one which many teachers recognise. The resolution is to help that learner to talk differently about their learning and themselves, to themselves and to others.

That is the challenge which also applies to our teachers and our schools (and ourselves): to continue talking about learning when the pressure is to talk about performance. In our

schools today much of the talk which claims to be about learning is on closer examination about performance. The same can be said about many government initiatives and research projects which rather too easily use phrases such as "assessment for learning". The dominant view of learning in our schools is one which mystifies the role of the learner: it is a transmission view, as encapsulated in the National Curriculum mantra "pupils will be taught that …".

From this contextual perspective I find those stances which claim that particular add-on teaching methods can trigger an irreversible change in pupils' thinking [13] less than convincing. I also have the hunch that Piaget would not have enjoyed his interest in genetic epistemology being hijacked for instrumental educational programmes. Although the claims for accelerated learning and improved performance which are associated with interventions based on this approach may be welcome, I am interested to note that the latest version for explaining these effects invokes the concept of metacognition (of which more later), even though the focus of the intervention as I understand it has not been on the learner's view of learning.

How learners talk about learning may also be associated with how they view knowledge (as fixed or constructed) and an interesting strand of research is developing here[14].

A (ii) And what can teachers do?

The learning environment which teachers and pupils co-create in their classrooms is a major (though not the only) influence on learners' ways of talking about learning. Classrooms may differ significantly on learning orientation, but pupils' orientations are not simply defined by this: some pupils perceive teachers' expectations as predominantly about competition and performance but nevertheless maintain a learning orientation for themselves[15].

And the role that peers play should not be underestimated: when peers adopt a practice of structured question-asking and explaining[16], 12 year-olds can enhance each others' learning whether or not they are more knowledgeable about the matter in hand (a condition which most stances on peer tutoring seem to take for granted and therefore carry as a hierarchical assumption).

In considering what teachers can do, I hope to avoid the dominant "hostile witness" perspective on classrooms, which focuses only on the teacher and on what the teacher is "failing" to do. So rather than say that teachers should model a more reflective language for talking about learning I would like to say that classrooms should be fostering a spirit of inquiry, including inquiry about learning. Seeing it that way, we do not load everything on the teacher, but also have to consider the very many other things which influence classroom life (including teachers' lives) – curriculum, testing regimes, school structure and climate, and the wider discourses about learning. This helps us realise that classrooms which focus on learning may be working against the grain, and this is probably a more comprehensive (albeit more challenging) way of proceeding than just the teacher modelling reflective language about learning. Modelling seems to connote possession of a "correct" answer or approach, which is then learned by imitation.

For it would be unwise to assume that teachers have the reflective language about learning. On a Masters course for teachers. "Guiding Effective Learning", which Eileen Carnell and I lead, we have found it essential to give significant time to activities where teachers examine in detail their own learning – without this, the concepts and accounts from elsewhere remain exactly that – elsewhere. So I am implying that teachers need to be helped to learn about learning, and that it will have a significant effect[17]. I was confirmed in this view when told that Chris Woodhead was asked at a Society of Education Officers conference whether he believed teachers needed to learn more about learning: he answered "No" so the answer is clearly "Yes".

Teachers can promote learning about learning[18] by using classroom activities which:

- make learning an object of attention
- make learning an object of conversation
- make learning an object of reflection
- make learning an object of learning

Each successive one probably needs some of its predecessors to have been in place, so the foundation is noticing things about one's learning, an element which cannot be assumed and has to be returned to regularly. Overall these activities promote meta-learning where pupils build up a richer more complex language for describing and thinking about their learning. But there is not a fixed repertoire, nor even an agreed vocabulary for addressing aspects of learning. In a recent resource collection[19] we found that much could be covered under five headings:

the why	*purposes* in learning
the how	*strategies* in learning
the result	*effects* in learning
the how feel	*feelings* in learning
the when, who with, where	*context* of learning

But overall what is being built up in learning about learning is built up piece by piece. "We are assuming, … that metacognitive knowledge must be constructed like any other kind of knowledge. Insight into one's own mental processes does not occur because of a window opening on the mind but because in the course of long experience one manages to piece together some kind of coherent knowledge on the basis of fragmentary data" (page 61)[20].

Alongside the building up of a richer language, teachers can help learners to build up greater understanding of how their learning works. Making learning an object of learning is supported through a process of plan-monitor-review, in other words through a meta-learning process. In this way students not only add language and add strategies, they also build the crucial conditional knowledge of how to monitor and review whether their learning is working. The combination of strategies together with meta-learning is what is needed[21]. This is necessarily the approach, since attempts to teach knowledge-processing strategies as rules regularly fail, whether they operate at the algorithmic level or the heuristic[22].

The stance I am taking also contrasts with a language of learning which is informed by fixed categorical views such as are embedded in talk of "learning styles". Some of these have little to do with a conception of learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Some are reception channel-processing preferences (Visual/ Auditory/ Kinaesthetic) and others are preferences for particular phases in a cycle (Activist/ Reflector/ Theorist/ Pragmatist).

In developing learning-centred classrooms, where learning becomes an object of learning, teachers can (and do) play a major part. However, survey research can again prove dispiriting here, suggesting that in many classrooms teachers rarely propose approaches to learning[23], although there is hope to be gained from the same surveys, which demonstrate that small differences (for example the difference between 0% and 2% of time spent on learning strategies) can make a significant difference for learners.

We should not expect such classroom development to be easy, working as it is against the dominant discourses and the dominant practices of schooling. Pupils may be seen to "resist", since old orientations sometimes die hard. For example, after 8 months of a project promoting meta-learning in science[24], two students came to their teacher.

> One said: "We see what all this is about. You are trying to get us to think and learn for ourselves"
>
> "Yes, yes" replied the teacher, heartened by this long-delayed breakthrough, "That's it exactly"
>
> "Well", said the student, "We don't want to do that".

Teachers too will embrace a meta-learning agenda to greater or lesser degree, given the general and specific contexts in which they work. In a Learning about Learning project I started with teachers from seven primary schools, a number dropped out after one term, and it seemed to me no coincidence that they were the ones with the highest "Instruction" scores on a views of learning scale. I do not view this as something "essential" about those persons, but a reflection of the particular combination of forces which currently characterise them and their context.

A (iii) And is more reflective language about learning a precondition in promoting autonomous learners?

Some words seem to bring with them strong connotations, and I often find that the word "autonomous" carries individualist connotations, in a similar way that the phrase "independent learners" seems to, in many minds. I also find that some of the phrases in the literature, such as self-regulated learner, call up a very rationalist, controlling image of what the effective learner is like[25]. The effective learner is collaborative: they have come to know that their learning is enhanced, indeed created, through various social processes such as dialogue, trying out ideas and constructing new meaning with others. They are self-directed but not with any connotation of being asocial. And they can engage this strand of their learning repertoire in different ways in different contexts. So I am currently using the term "versatile learner" which I hope invokes/invites the sense of variation across situations and contexts, and does not have too pre-set a sense of goals to it.

Whichever of these terms we come to use, the evidence is that the autonomous learner or the self-regulated learner or the versatile learner has developed (and is still developing) a rich language about their own learning. How this language is best conceived and developed will be addressed in the next section.

Suffice it to say here, that even within the limited conceptualisations of self-regulated learner (self-controlling learner), there is evidence which suggests that such processes as goal-setting, and questioning play a key part[26], with an extra link to students' self-verbalisation[27]. The sort of goals which are described as a learning orientation are associated with self-regulation/autonomy[28]. Again the context of the classroom plays a significant part[29]. Writing activities in classrooms which support self-regulated learning helped 7- and 8-year olds monitor and evaluate their writing in productive ways, use peers effectively, and see teachers as collaborators[30]. In the secondary school, similarities across subjects outweigh differences[31]. So just as a learning orientation reflects in part what learners say to themselves, and believe they can do, so for involvement in self-regulated learning.

In UK some evidence suggests that the National Curriculum did nothing to increase the likelihood of schools promoting student autonomy or strategies for enhancing students' self-regulated learning.[32] While in work with Dutch university students, it seems that a process-oriented programme which integrates and makes usable students' metacognitive knowledge already present is effective in promoting self-regulation (and in this case, better exam results).[33] The authors explain that the programme "turned out to be a powerful way to activate students to reflect on their learning and to develop their mental models of learning". Others[34] describe this as a "bootstrapping" process which develops newer forms of self-regulated learning from prior forms. In this there is a need for sufficient practice, remembering how learning was enacted, and reasoning about factors that affect learning.

What sort of language and what sort of processes are most likely to do this on a wider basis?

B. Developing a language for talking about learning

If "we" are to make a contribution to the development of this language, there are strategic choices and challenges to be faced, and the way that we resolve each of these may crucial in terms of whether anything valuable about learning is honestly advanced in the process.

Some starting issues in developing a language for talking about learning may be highlighted under the headings which have been used to decompose language at large - vocabulary, syntax, use - I will briefly consider each of these and then propose a move beyond them.

B (i) what is the vocabulary in a language for talking about learning?

Here it might be fruitful to wonder whether the vocabulary we seek is any different from the human vocabulary for talking about other activities? I guess the answer is Yes and No: Yes in the sense that there's something special to be captured in learning as knowledge-creation. But the simultaneous answer is No, in that the vocabulary for talking about learning is that of an activity, and composed of similar ingredients to other aspects of human activity. Indeed, when trying to specify the way in which learning is delimited as a sub-set of human activity, there are inspiring accounts which propose no boundary - learning as a way of being[35]. A smaller illustration comes from the fact that five headings - *Purposes*, *Strategies*, *Effects*, *Feelings* and *Context* - have proved useful for us[36] in highlighting very many important aspects of learning, and that these five could equally apply to the description of many other human activities. So if we hold on to the idea that learning is and emanates from activity, we may avoid inadvertently slipping into a specialist vocabulary: there are a number of these on offer, and often their pseudo-scientific appeal makes them somewhat seductive, but many readers (learners and teachers) find such specialist literature on learning distinctly unappealing.

A sub-set of these considerations applies to the vocabulary for talking about oneself as a learner. Recent experiments in this area confirm for me that (given a good enough context for believing that there is reason to describe oneself as a learner) people call on similar resources of experience to describe themselves as learners as they might to describe themselves in any other domains. These include history, biography and key experiences, followed by various references to contexts, preferences and activities. This confirms for me that the (again seductive) sets of categories for describing oneself as a learner which are promulgated through current discourse of "learning style" are not a vocabulary which effective learners would freely choose. The disadvantages of putting learners into sets of categories such as this are legion: self-description becomes self-labelling in these terms, and the ultimate challenge of helping learners become competent in all "styles" is downgraded to the suggestion that those in charge of learning environments should tune their planning to learners' "preferences", an altogether more passive proposition. While I am not surprised that categorical forms of description circulate widely in our current society, I am increasingly convinced that they call out actions which do not move us on.

B (ii) what is the syntax in a language for talking about learning?

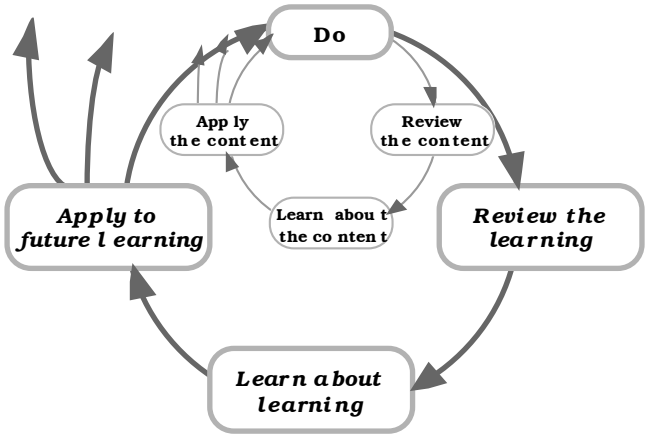
Perhaps the Subject-Verb-Object syntax which is so dominant in English and other languages leads to one of the dominant constructions of learning: "He taught me". The low level of responsibility for the learner in this construction is a major problem. As in the area of behaviour "He hit me", this punctuation of the stream soon supports a particular attribution of responsibility (or blame). But try the verb "learn" in this syntax and we get "He learned me", demonstrating what could be one of the most valuable recognitions in the language for talking about learning: the verb "to learn" is transitive, but not in respect to another person, only in respect to whatever is being learned. Pupils in a reception class of a primary school recently showed that they already have picked up this dominance in their

syntax of learning, when they focused on learning from the teacher, and the teacher as doing the learning for them.

Bruner[37] has highlighted that the dominant syntax for learning in our society is that we learn by being told : “This is probably the most adhered to line of folk pedagogy in practice today. Its principal appeal is that it purports to offer a clear specification of just what it is that is to be learned and, equally questionable, that it suggests standards for assessing its achievement. More than any other folk theory it has spawned objective testing in its myriad guises.” (page 55)

I find a “learning as construction” syntax essential for moving beyond that of “learning as instruction”, and use the simple Do-> Review-> Learn-> Apply in many ways, adding two further elements: meta and social.

Adding a meta-cycle is what makes learning an object of learning,



and adding the social and collaborative dimension ensures the shift from construction to co-construction.

B (iii) what is the use of a language for talking about learning?

The language use perspective reminds us that whatever the component parts of an utterance, the purpose and intention of language is a crucial element. So we need a focus on the purpose of talking about learning. Again, there may well be important and challenging patterns in when people do this. People tell me that, although it usefully makes a non-threatening scenario, the idea that a friend or peer asks you to tell them about yourself as a learner, is rare in their lives. Conversations with young people about occasions when someone else helped with their learning, highlight major differences between contexts (home and school), each with its own syntax, and probably each with its own use[38]. The danger in school contexts is that the use becomes performance-oriented and problem-saturated[39].

C. A language for talking about learning must be a narrative language

Not all experiences and ways of processing experience are equal in their ability to provide data for the process of meta-learning. I propose that a narrative approach to the language for talking about learning would not only resolve some of the issues discussed above, it would also best capture the higher qualities of learning and of human beings, and reflect recent experiences in the area.

A social constructionist approach on social life asserts that people’s patterns of behaviour and life expressions reflect the sense they make of their lives and their selves. A narrative approach proposes they do this through the stories they have for their lives. We give meaning to our experience by “storying” our lives. Applying this to learning, I take the stance that people’s patterns of learning and learning expressions reflect the stories they tell themselves about learning. Sure enough, many people tell themselves precious few

stories, reflecting the lack of notice which has been brought to bear on their learning. So we may say that in this society we expect to find the majority of narratives which people have available to make sense of their learning are underdeveloped. They are "thin descriptions", and are likely to use categorical forms of language.

For a rich description, something different is needed, and (while there is no fixed vocabulary or syntax) narrative offers elements such as *Players, Events, Sequences, Scripts*, and *Plot*.

Note that I am not talking about narrative as an after-the-fact description given by someone who later constructs an account - that is more akin to biography - but as the very process of constructing life and living it by living the narrative we give ourselves. The meanings from our stories are not neutral but have real effects on what we do: life expressions are constituted through narrative[40].

I am finding that when people exchange their narratives of learning, it seems easy for real dialogue to ensue. Differences do not seem to be a problem; competition and conflict are rarer than in other exchanges. This finding has also been reported to me (unprompted) by teachers of 8 year olds. It's as though when people exchange what they have noticed about their experience there is no hint of "correct answer" (as in debate or discussion). When supported by some of the practices of Appreciative Inquiry[41] which move away from deficit discourse, such dialogue is not only likely to be a learning dialogue it is also likely to be expansive and proactive learning dialogue.

I have found that when people are given an open framework and a relational invitation to talk about themselves as learners, they soon include key moments in their learning careers, each with its heroes and villains, stories, scripts and key episodes, alongside some generalisations about themselves which usually cut across the given categories. In that sense I consider that narratives of the self in the domain of learning relate closely to narratives of the self elsewhere[42].

Note that some other writers who seem to be adopting this stance [43] are actually focusing on the place of narrative <u>in</u> learning, rather than the stance I adopt which is learning as narrative. This stronger position is nearer to Bruner's life <u>as</u> narrative [44], and the stance of narrative therapists for whom narrative is not a construction of life, living is living a narrative. Perhaps a good illustrative example of this stance is the captivating analysis of intelligence which has been cast in these terms[45].

Narratives about learning seem easily available to people, even when they question the taken-for -granted nature in which learning is usually held. For example, if you ask people in the corridor "How do you know when you are learning?", I find they have an immediate answer. The immediacy seems to make one point, and the content of their response another, ranging from those with an internal noticing "A green light goes on", those with an external noticing "someone tells you", and those with a transfer to action noticing "when I find myself doing something differently some time later".

A narrative perspective would possibly promote a better connectedness between the various areas of research findings in learning. The position of the performance -oriented learner when faced with difficulty - "I can't" - can be seen as a disqualifying and pathologising narrative. The learning-orientation is characterised by a "rich" descriptions of learning experiences which leads to promoting competence, and to a wider range of options for engaging in learning at any one time. Considerations of learner agency, the different ways to create learning goals, and the important issue of self-efficacy can be handled though thinking about the different scripts in different learners' heads.

- that learners' narratives about their own learning are often simple and unhelpful (for example "I'm no good at maths", "Computers aren't for me")
- that narratives about learning will have real effects on approach to learning (what you say is what you get, for example "I could try something like last time" encourages action, "I wonder what will happen if …" encourages experimentation)

- that classrooms and classroom practices embody specific narratives about learning (sometimes hidden to learners, and occasionally even to teachers)
- that schools as organisations differ in their predominant narratives of learning (for example “we’ll learn from any mistakes” contrasted with “these kids just can’t learn”)
- that narratives may become more complex through externalisation and dialogue (some learners have not yet developed the ‘plot’ of learning, let alone lost it)
- that learners with complex narratives on learning will be more free to respond to a greater range of learning opportunities (multi-story learning)
- that working with teachers to enhance and create more shared narratives could enhance the learning orientation of the school

Bruner[46] argues that narrative is irreconcilable with a categorical language, indeed that these are irreconcilable modes of thought. This has many implications, one of which is to signal a shift from *measurement* of learning (with its assumption of quantitative and goal of correctness) to *mapping* of learning (with its qualitative concpetion and goal of enriching) .

A narrative approach also supports better connectedness in studying the individual and their context (in its proximal and distal sense) Contexts for learning may be investigated for the stories they carry about learning: in any story the influence of individual, organisational and cultural narratives may be identified. Already discourses about learning at the organisational level are shown to vary[47].

On a wider scale in current education, a narrative form would contribute to the much-needed move away from the current *discourses of deficit and failure, “standards”,* and compliance to a better *discourse of honouring, of human agency*. and *of interaction and construction*[48].

Yet wider still, following Geertz[49], it would be helpful to consider the Culture of Learning as the ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about our learning. And the story-lines, plots and outcomes would likely ensure that a narrative perspective could not escape considerations of and implications of power and language in our society.

So what?

The stance which views learning as the construction of meaning, occurring through social interactional processes, is enhanced by a narrative perspective. Elements of the personal, social, and emotional dimensions are embedded directly (rather than having to be added back together again as in traditional psychology), and there is a key role for the concept of purpose. In that sense development may occur reasonably unaided, if a narrative approach is encouraged.

In the more proactive sense of development, where one person aims to aid another, conversations can shape new realities and new lives, re-authoring the experience to date. The Vygotskian principles may inform this construction of new meaning , in that the act of producing a narrative, of verbalising itself, may bring on new understanding:

> "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (inter-psychological) and then inside the child (intra-psychological). …All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals." (page 57)[50]

so the fact that talking about what one notices in one’s learning is difficult at first is both understandable and constructive.

Seen from a narrative point of view, meta-learning comes from engaging in the construction of narratives about learning, and the richer the descriptions of learning which are created, the more able the person is to engage in a range of learning in a range of life contexts. But we know that meta-learning is rare enough, and the triggers to take the meta-perspective

are not well understood, so are not well facilitated. Here the structuring of social situations as developed in narrative therapy may have much to offer.

Learners can be helped to develop richer descriptions of their learning by:
1. describing learning experiences
2. engaging in dialogue with other learners about learning experiences
3. listening to others' re-telling of their narratives re learning

People who experience "learning difficulty" are sometime those who have predominantly problem-saturated narratives, and here the technique of externalisation of can really help[51]. Through being able to say "I get in a mess with my learning when Mr. Guessing comes along" a space is created for the learner to learn again about how to cope with the predominant pattern which had been built up.

The course of development is that of increasing complexity, which fits well with those analyses which conclude that the outcome of learning is variation[52]. Complexity is indicated by higher levels of both differentiation and integration, and this can well apply to our understandings of our learning, realised through richer descriptions. It also relates to versatility, since the learner who has a rich description of their learning has greater range for engaging with learning.

In the social domain, studies of the development of narrative have already been undertaken, indicating that there are age- specific patterns of interpretive thinking and characteristic forms of talk. 10 year-olds interpret stories through seeing a plot, whereas adolescents see a plight, and adults a dramatistic pattern[53]. Is there a parallel for the learning domain? Or, while the language of learning is as under-developed as it is, are young people to find themselves aware of addressing the drama of relationships, while missing out on the drama of learning?

For teachers, the idea that their focus could include developing richer narratives would doubtless soon mean the engagement of their own narratives. Perhaps this would be one element in achieving the redefinition of their professionalism which is needed for the 21st century. this is said to imply three primary features[54]

- recognising oneself as a learner;
- using that learning-centred spirit to transform schools into learning organisations; and
- reasserting one's own moral autonomy to provide space and time for serious, reflective thought and study.

In the process, teachers might once again take on a role in enhancing the discourses which circulate in our society, rather than fall prey to them as at present. In doing so they need a meta perspective to stand outside the very narratives which can have such a self-perpetuating impact: "Culturally prevalent narratives lead us not only to interpret facts in a particular way, but also to generate those very facts through the acts we perform in consonance with these narratives" (page 17)[55].

C. So what shall "we" do now?

"We" who are privileged to consider these matters might:

- Treat learning as a literacy, which is currently not that well taught in our schools or supported in society.
- Continue to focus on learning, not performance, as a proper educational goal. The performance discourse makes a fundamental confusion in substituting for learning itself some of the products and indicators of learning. Similarly the standards movement is a twentieth century approach

Meta-learning is an entitlement in a fast-changing knowledge-producing world, and should therefore be a goal of twenty-first century education systems. Versatile learners should be supported and encouraged.

- Continue to gather evidence that a focus on learning can enhance performance, whereas a focus on performance can depress performance.
- Help teachers to buffer themselves from the performance agenda and regain their professional agency through a learning agenda, recognising that policy-makers and politicians have a short-term low complexity narrative[56]
  This will also entail "keeping at bay" the other discourses which take the place and space of a proper learning discourse. A dominant displacing metaphor here is the discourse of work (homework, schemes of work, "get on with your work"). A primary teacher Naheeda Maharasi, has banned the word work from her classroom, and proposed that whenever people feel about to use it they try substituting the word learning. The effects have been electrifying: higher pupil engagement, greater fun in learning, more talk about learning, and now colleagues in the school asking what's happening in her class.

The idea of "consulting pupils over teaching and learning' would be relieved of some of its power dynamics if this approach were adopted. In a learning-centred classroom where narratives of learning are exchanged and accepted, the power relations change so that there is less need for the teacher to have extra mechanisms to inform "their" planning. Instead these processes would form a core process for building classrooms and schools as learning communities[57].

I am now unsurprised that the state of affairs where learning is so little talked about should be the case. The whole of the twentieth century, its advances, lines of thinking and beliefs are embedded in our current metaphors, through which we treat ourselves, each other, and our organisations as machines. It is difficult to side-step this discourse and its associated constructs of effectiveness and efficiency. Those who do (e.g. the narrative therapists such as Michael White) help me realise the extent to which the structuralist project has taken over our lives.

Human beings, thanks to their gift of consciousness and their orientation towards language and interaction, are the only species to live in such a richly symbolic meaning-saturated world. Sometimes they demonstrate considerable ability to learn, and sometimes not. What is most puzzling is how so few human beings recognise their major part in the co-construction of their lives. It's as though a twenty-first century version of Marx's false consciousness pervades, and I wouldn't doubt that it serves similar functions in maintaining power relations.

A final implication of this approach would be possible in an everyday outside school sense. I have never been excited about a society which asked it's young "What did you learn today"[58] (page 304), but I would be excited about a society where people asked "What did you notice about your learning today?" or even "Tell me some stories about your learning".

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