

CHAPTER 4.

MAKING SENSE OF A PERSON'S LITERATE LIFE: LITERACY NARRATIVES IN A 100-YEAR-STUDY ON LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

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A longitudinal study sets out to collect data continuously as time passes; it assembles a whole picture by collecting a large amount of data at different points in time (Bazerman, 2018). Being retrospective in nature, literacy narratives may initially seem counterintuitive to the purposes of a longitudinal study. However, they offer invaluable insights into the processes of people making sense of their literate lives, and of the *meaning* they attribute to literacy as they tell and interpret their lives. If collected at different points in time and carefully connected to longitudinal data, literacy narratives may serve an important function in a longitudinal study on literacy development. In this chapter, I will demonstrate why we should try to make this connection, and how it can be achieved in data collection and analysis.

Literacy narratives are personal narratives or life stories with a specific focus on literacy development. Definitions of literacy narratives range from fictional to non-fictional texts; from written to oral texts; from texts elicited in a classroom setting, closely informed by a pedagogical agenda, to texts elicited in a research setting; and from texts that follow a biographical arc, such as in Brandt (1994, 1995, 1998), to texts that will zoom in on a few pivotal life events. For instance, Eldred and Mortensen (1992) define literacy narratives as fictional texts—“stories that foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy” (p. 513). Alexander (2011) and Carlo (2016) view the literacy narrative as a genre, while Lawrence (2015, p. 304) considers literacy narratives to be “personal accounts of literacy-related experiences.” In this chapter, I will refer to non-fictional texts only. This does not mean I treat literacy narratives as factual, but that I consider them to be meant by their creators to be understood as non-fictional.

People's recollections of their past—or, in our case, of their literacy development—are necessarily shaped by a number of factors, for example their

memories, or the overall meanings they attribute to their lives. And yet, literacy narratives offer insights into the *meaning* literacy takes on for writing individuals across different contexts and life events. However, to make use of literacy narratives, we need to be careful not to stop at the content level when we analyze them (Lawrence, 2015). To avoid dismissing literacy narratives on the grounds of their constructedness, we need to focus on exactly this quality—their constructedness—to deepen our analysis of the content.

I will make my argument for literacy narratives in four steps. First, I will argue why we should use literacy narratives in a longitudinal study. It is important, though, to consider that they cannot be treated as just facts about a person's literate life, as I will show in the following section. I will then highlight some key decisions that need to be considered when planning for the collection of literacy narratives and their connection with longitudinal data. Finally, I will suggest ways to deepen the analysis by including methodologies that focus on the constructedness of the narrative, using the neighboring field of life history research as a source for useful approaches to analysis. Life history research shares many of the interests of literacy narrative research: an interest in people's perspectives on their (writing) lives, on their meaning-making, and on their interpretations of their lives and writing development trajectories.

WHY WE SHOULD USE LITERACY NARRATIVES IN LIFESPAN WRITING RESEARCH

I want to point out four ways in which literacy narratives can be important for longitudinal lifespan writing research: First, they give us insight into a person's sense-making of their literacy development. Second, they tell us about social value systems towards literacy and thus provide important context for other data in the longitudinal study. Third, literacy narratives might themselves serve as sponsors of literacy development (Lawrence, 2015). Finally, a longitudinal, multi-site study on lifespan writing allows us to compare literacy narratives from very different social and institutional contexts and thus gain a deeper understanding of the genre itself.

The first contribution that literacy narratives offer to lifespan writing research is that they tell us about a person's sense-making of their literacy development. Autobiographical narratives tell us about the present of the narrator rather than their past (Bruner, 1991; Freeman, 2007; Schütze, 2007). In creating a coherent story, segmenting and ordering their past, research subjects are making sense of their present. If we follow this train of thought, we can use literacy narratives to gain profound insights into the present of a writer at one point in time and to find out about the meaning that person attributes to literacy—an important

dimension of literacy development (Bazerman et al., 2018, p. 371). The literacy narrative's potential then would be the in-depth and structured analysis of a person's evaluation and sense-making of their literacy development at a given point in time.

In addition, literacy narratives may themselves be sponsors of literacy, as Lawrence (2015) points out. She argues that the genre of literacy narrative may be viewed as a scene for literacy development, in the sense that the "productive rhetoric" of the narrating event may actually sponsor literacy development: She points out that is important to view

[t]he rhetorical practices of literacy narratives (autobiographical or otherwise) *as sponsors of literacy*—as material conditions that enable and constrain what and how literacy is thought, felt and lived by researchers and teachers, as well as by recounters of literacy narratives. (Lawrence, 2015, p. 306)

In a similar vein, Rosenthal (1995) talks about the "healing effect of biographical narrating" (p. 167; translation by MK). The process of creating and owning their life story, to experience the validation of their version of their life through an avid listener, and maybe just this very process of creating coherence and presenting their life story as the "history of a proper person" (Linde, 1993, p. 17) might have a healing or sponsoring effect on the narrator.

Furthermore, literacy narratives provide important insights into cultural and social value systems towards literacies and literacy development. Both master and little narratives (Alexander, 2011; Carlo, 2016; Daniell, 1999) can serve as key analytical tools for this. We can look out for both master and little narratives in a longitudinal study in order to learn more about cultural and social expectations about literacy at specific points in time. This might provide important context for analyzing other types of lifespan writing research data.

We might also compare literacy narratives across diverse populations to find out more about the culturally different and the universal structuring principles of the genre of literacy narratives. It might be interesting to research shared and changing systems of coherence, such as the "success story." It would also be possible to compare literacy narratives from education systems where this is not a well-known genre (and almost never a school-based assignment), to literacy narratives that were created in education systems where literacy narratives are a very common assignment.

Literacy narratives provide a rich source of data for lifespan writing research. However, we have to be careful not to treat literacy narratives as documents about a person's past. The next section will show the factors that shape a literacy narrative and that need to be taken into account when analyzing them.

LITERACY NARRATIVES AREN'T FACTS ABOUT A PERSON'S PAST: THE CONSTRUCTEDNESS OF LITERACY NARRATIVES

Literacy narratives cannot be taken as documents that provide facts on a person's (literate) life. Both life histories and literacy narratives are genres that entail strong cultural expectations as to the content and the shape of the stories that can be told. At its heart, a literacy narrative—and a life history—is expected to be a story of positive development, of learning, and of mastering a skill (literacy), or a life. There are two consequences of this: first, some things cannot be told in a literacy narrative; and second, some things will only be told because of the generativity of the genre. Webb-Sunderhaus (2016) uses the term *tellability* to draw attention to stories that are culturally favored, and to the stories that tend to be omitted or suppressed: “Tellability is a lens for evaluating which narratives are worth telling and for further assessing who can tell which narratives in what context” (p. 12). She critiques the portrayal of combined poverty and illiteracy in studies on marginalized persons that leave no room for their actual involvement with literacy, which might happen “in ways that are untellable in public discourse” (2016, p. 13). Likewise, Bowen (this volume) highlights how ageist ideologies frame age with intellectual and bodily decline and shows how this might shape our perception of writing in old age negatively. Also, writing development research tends to frame the gains of literacy development in a rather unchallengedly positive way, as Viruru (2003) critiques. As a consequence, any losses in that process, such as a loss of oracy, are not tellable and will not be told.

Some things might also not be remembered. The ability to recall memories at all could be enabled and limited by existing social frameworks, as Halbwachs' (1992) notion of *collective memory* conveys. He posits that the availability of frameworks within which memories can be placed is a precondition for people having those memories at all: “Many stories and histories simply cannot be told when the social frameworks are not there” (cited in Plummer, 2007, p. 402). For example, being homosexual only became a part of told life histories when the social frameworks to talk about being homosexual had been built and claimed by the LGBT community.

The genre itself provides a strong framework for the ways in which a literacy narrative will be told. This becomes most apparent when analysis is approached with a narratological lens. Both literacy narratives and life histories can be viewed and analyzed as “stories,” as narrative texts with a plot, subscribing to the linearity of time as a structuring principle, with “nuclear episodes,” “thematic lines,” and “characters” (McAdams, cited in Plummer, 2007, p. 399-400). Nuclear episodes are “specific autobiographical events which have been

reinterpreted over time to assume a privileged status in the story” while thematic lines are “recurrent content clusters in stories” and characters are “recognizable stereotypes” (Plummer, 2007, pp. 399-400). Norman Denzin (1999) points out that life histories usually are centered around a crisis-like event, something that Denzin names “epiphany.” These genre-typical frameworks are productive or generative; thus a particular literacy narrative might be shaped in the way it is because genre conventions ask for it.

The generativity of the genre also shapes the interaction between listener and narrator, which influences the way a story is told and the self that is created in the process. Linde (1993) shows how life histories (she prefers the term “life stories”) are shaped by the social demand of coherence: A story needs to be told in a coherent way in order to be comprehensible and narrators need to present a life story as a coherent course of events “in order for the participants to appear as competent members of their culture” (Linde, 1993, p. 16). There is also an internal demand for coherence, that is, “our own individual desire to understand our life as coherent, as making sense, as the history of a proper person” (Linde, 1993, p. 17). Narrators refer to systems of coherence or “popular versions of expert theories and systems” (Linde, 1993, p. 18), that they think they might share with their audience. And, with different audiences, narrators refer to different systems of coherence. Similarly, Angrosino (1989) highlights the role of the audience in the creation of the story. In his view, the story is a “document of interaction,” the interaction is a “drama” between narrator and listener—“the process that creates the narrative” (1989, p. 4). Correspondingly, the narrated self that is created in this process is seen as fluid and changing, “not a timeless, finished product but . . . rather a fragment of an evolving process” (Angrosino, 1989, p. 105).

As a consequence of both the limitations and the generativity of the genre, there will be one prevailing form of the literacy narrative if it is given as an assignment: the success story. Daniell (1999), Alexander (2011), and Carlo (2016) make use of Lyotard’s term “master narratives” to explain the potency of these cultural narratives. The most common master narrative in the field of literacy narratives seems to be the “success story,” wherein literacy development is seen as a key to social and financial upward mobility and success and students tend to position themselves favorably within this frame. But Daniell (1999), Alexander (2011), and Carlo (2016) also encounter “little narratives,” or stories that may counter and resist master narratives within their research.

All of these factors shape the form of literacy narratives yet this does not make them unsuitable for lifespan writing research. If we take this very quality—their specific constructedness—into account and make it part of the analysis, then we can gain valuable insights into the meaning of literacies for people and their lives.

COLLECTING LITERACY NARRATIVES: KEY DECISIONS

Before we start collecting literacy narratives as data in a lifespan study, we need to carefully consider several aspects that each allow for different research strategies. I want to highlight five of them: the different possibilities for collecting literacy narratives within a longitudinal study, the different forms they might take (written, oral, and visual), the prompts we might use to elicit a biographical arc, the impact of different listeners, and the institutional contexts for literacy narratives across sites.

COLLECTING LITERACY NARRATIVES WITHIN A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

To make the most use of literacy narratives as part of a 100-year longitudinal study, I advocate for two types of data collection: a) the planned collection of literacy narratives across different contexts with different populations and at several points in a person's life; and b) the analysis of literacy narratives that occur as a by-product in an ethnography. Plummer (2007) distinguishes three types of data collection: everyday naturalistic, researched, and reflexive-recursive. "Everyday naturalistic" are life histories that occur as part of everyday interactions with subjects in an ethnography (Plummer, 2007, p. 396). "Researched" means that a researcher elicits a life history, usually with a prompt, while "reflexive-recursive" is a term to signify life histories that are more self-aware of their process of construction (Plummer, 2007, p. 396). They are often done by a researcher, for example as part of an autoethnography (e.g., Zebroski, this volume). We should both collect "researched" literacy narratives and "everyday naturalistic" stories on literacy development as part of ethnographies. Ethnographies will provide rich context data for the analysis of the literacy narratives that occur within them and literacy narratives will also allow insights into social and cultural values towards literacies that will then provide interesting context for analyzing other ethnographic data. It might also be interesting to compare researched and everyday naturalistic forms of literacy narratives.

WRITTEN, ORAL, VISUAL AND MATERIAL FORMS

Literacy narratives are multimodal and may consist of written, oral, visual, or material forms and any combination thereof. Literacy narratives might be oral, in particular if they are everyday naturalistic types of data. Orally presented literacy narratives might create a more accessible space to persons who developed oracies rather than literacies in their lives, or to persons who developed both. To collect oral forms of literacy narratives could also serve to value oracy. This could

be particularly important in light of Webb-Sunderhaus's and Viruru's critiques of literacy development research as being prone to overlook and/or devalue oracies or less socially valued forms of literacies. We could also try to elicit oracy narratives, i.e., stories about the development of a person's oracy and compare them to literacy narratives. Whilst this might be a worthwhile research objective in itself, this might also shed light on both productive and suppressing interrelations between oracy and literacy development. We also might combine the collection of visual and material data with written or spoken narratives. Bowen's suggestion (this volume) to do *literacy tours* with the research participants when listening to their narrative enables the narrators to include material objects into their story that serve a function for their writing activities, such as writing desks, clocks, and much more. It is important to be open to the multimodality of literacy narratives when deciding which type of data to collect so that participants are able to express the complexity of their experiences.

PROMPTS

It is important to ensure that the narratives we collect have a biographical arc. If the narrative only focuses on a few select episodes in life, it might become difficult to extract developmental trajectories. To achieve this, we need to construct our prompts carefully. In my study with 58 literacy narratives written by students who did not know literacy narratives as a genre or assignment (Knappik, 2018), this was accomplished by using a prompt with cues like "over the course of your life" or "in your life" ("Write your writing biography. Which kinds of writing have you encountered over the course of your life?" were the first two sentences of the prompt). The narratives took on the form of written life histories with a focus on literacy development. If we successfully elicit literacy narratives with a biographical arc (or "literacy life stories") we can make better use of existing methodologies for analyzing a person's sense-making of literacies in their life, (e.g., Linde, 1993 or Rosenthal, 1995) as I will discuss below.

MULTIPLE AUDIENCES

To account for the social expectations on literacy that different listeners/researchers might represent, we could ask participants to tell their literacy narratives to multiple listeners, including some that might share their economic, cultural or local backgrounds and some that might represent other backgrounds. We could also ask participants to interview other participants about their literacy development. As this might be tiring for research participants, this research strategy might only be feasible if some time has passed between the points of data collection.

CONTEXT: BEING AWARE OF ASSIGNMENTS

As the literacy narrative is such a well-known and ubiquitously practiced genre within US higher education, we should actively collect literacy narratives in institutions in different contexts where literacy narratives are scarcely known as a genre and contrast them with literacy narratives collected in the US. We should also consider collection sites outside of institutions since we might encounter different varieties of narratives if the genre is not a well-known writing assignment. For instance, success stories were not the master narrative in my study, even though it was conducted in an institution of higher education. Instead, narratives of resentment towards the types of literacies that the narrators developed were quite common. There were also stories that mourned the loss of other, more joyful types of writing as part of their portrayal of development (Knappik, 2018). It will be interesting to compare literacy narratives across contexts where they are well-known genres and where they are not.

ANALYZING LITERACY NARRATIVES: MOVING BEYOND THE CONTENT LEVEL

Literacy narratives are clearly shaped by genre and by broader institutional and cultural factors. Those factors both limit and enable individuals to use literacy narratives for making sense of their literacy development and the meaning of literacies in their lives. To unlock the potentials this holds for lifespan writing research, we need to equip our analysis with tools that are able to recognize meaning beyond a content level. Methodologies within life history research provide excellent tools for this. In this section, I will present two of them: (1) a story-focused approach that will foreground narratological devices in the narrative to highlight which parts of a (literacy) narrative might be subject to social frameworks rather than individual experience (Linde, 1993); and (2) a methodology that combines a story-focused and a content-focused approach in order to find out which guiding principle a narrator uses to make sense of their (literate) life (Rosenthal, 1995). I present both of them to show that there exists a range of approaches to analysis that move beyond the content level. Linde's is more narratological while Rosenthal decidedly advocates for an inclusion of the content level into the analysis, albeit in a very sophisticated and form-conscious way. Both Linde and Rosenthal argue that the sequentiality of a life story¹ is the most important guiding principle of the analysis of life stories, as they view the way

1 I choose to use the term "life story" in this section because Linde uses the term "life story" and Rosenthal uses "Lebensgeschichte" in German, which translates directly to "life story."

a life story is structured as a most important tool to understand the processes of meaning-making expressed in this structuring.

LINDE: THE CREATION OF COHERENCE

Linde's (1993) approach is very useful to gain a deeper understanding of socially established principles that speakers (and listeners) presuppose when they create and make sense of a life story. In her investigation of principles of construction and coherence in life stories, Linde presents a wide array of useful linguistic vocabulary to describe and analyze the discourse units of a narrative. Drawing on Labov & Waletzky's (1967) definition, the following are typical parts of narratives: "the optional abstract, the orientation, the narrative clauses, and the optional coda" (p. 69). These parts are usually sequential. Narratives often also include evaluations—why the story was worth telling—which may occur at different locations throughout the narrative. In a narrative, the evaluation "is socially the most important part" because it conveys "how [its addressees] are to understand the meaning of the narrated sequence of events and what kind of response the speaker desires" (Labov & Waletzky, 1967, p. 72). It will be very productive to look out for evaluations in literacy narratives since they will tell us about the expectations of the narrator and what we as researchers represent to them in regard to literacies. Research on literacy narratives suggests that the "success story" might be one of the main systems of coherence that narrators draw on when telling a literacy narrative. This is important in particular for all research interested in developmental aspects. A success story will usually describe at its core some kind of development. This means that we need to reconstruct the narrator's expectations of what constitutes development in between the narrator and the listener.

ROSENTHAL: CONTRASTING THE LIVED AND THE TOLD LIFE

As Rosenthal (1995, p. 14-15) incorporates both "the lived life" and "the told life" into her analysis, her approach lends itself most usefully to the analysis of retrospective data within a longitudinal study. In Rosenthal's terms, the narrated story is the "told life." The "lived life" needs to be reconstructed from context information about the narrator's biography and their historical and social contexts. If a literacy narrative is part of a longitudinal study, for instance an ethnography, it will easily be possible to gather these facts. The longitudinal study might even provide considerable detailed facts about a whole lived literacy/life.

Rosenthal aims to contrast the "lived life" with the "told life" in order to find out about possible life courses that did not happen and to look for things that

the narrator might have been silent about. Those omissions transpire when we contrast the lived against the told life. This is a way to account for the tellability of literacy narratives and the non-tellability of unvalorized forms of literacy: We can find out what was not told.

Rosenthal's goal is to reconstruct the overall "gestalt" of the life story. This, again, is a contrasting technique. There is the idea in gestalt theory that we can interpret a part only in relation to its whole and that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. The parts/segments that we analyze will be continuously contrasted against the whole. The whole—the gestalt—is the guiding principle that a person chooses to organize their life story—the "red thread," as it were. For her, this individual guiding principle is something that a person has actively formed, rather than a given framework within which someone might operate. To find this guiding principle is, for Rosenthal, the key to understand a person's process of sense-making.

As we do not know this guiding principle at the start of our analyses, we will generate multiple hypotheses about it as we move from segment to segment. For any line of data interpreted, Rosenthal asks us to imagine consequences of this interpretation—fantasies about how a life will unfold if the initial interpretation proves true. When continuing our analysis sequentially, the data will show that some of those interpretations are rendered implausible while others may be affirmed. We will dismiss the implausible readings and continue with the plausible ones, generating multiple new ones as we go along. This is important in order to break up routine assumptions made by the researcher and to avoid jumping to conclusions based on the specific ideas of normalcy any researcher might hold.

Rosenthal's approach allows us to make use of both literacy narratives and any data that we have gathered across a person's lifespan. In a longitudinal study, we are well positioned to collect both types of data, contrasting told lives against lived lives to find out what people decided to include or omit in their literacy narratives. Rosenthal's abductive process of analysis helps to avoid, or at least reflect, our preconceptions about literacy development. It seems very promising to reconstruct different guiding principles that people created to make sense of their (literate) lives and to contrast and compare them across different contexts and sites.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I aimed to show how literacy narratives can make an important contribution to longitudinal writing research. While they are not suitable as a source of facts about a person's life because they are shaped by a number of factors, they offer a number of other possibilities to researchers. The generativity

of the genre “literacy narrative” with its requirements for a story arc (Denzin, 1999; Plummer, 2007) and the creation of coherence (Linde, 1993) influence the narrative as well as the social expectations that the researcher represents. Collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992) and social expectations for the literacy or illiteracy of research participants (Viruru, 2003; Webb-Sunderhaus, 2016) form frameworks that enable “tellable” stories and dismiss others. Literacy narratives are necessarily highly constructed forms of data on literacy development.

Literacy narratives reflect social frameworks, interactional demands, and the narrator's choices to select and order the events that, in their perspective, form their literacy development. And this is exactly why they are valuable for lifespan writing research: They allow us to analyze how people are making sense of their literate lives. Smith (this volume) warns that we might overlook analyzing change in itself if we just compare data from different points in a person's literate life. She invites researchers to look at “the in-betweens . . . to draw focus to the means and mechanisms *through* which writing development is realized.” Research participants' ways of ordering their pasts—of attributing meaning to literacy and life events while omitting others—is a way to analyze these means and mechanisms from the writers' own perspectives. What counts as change to a person? What counts as development to a person? What is valued or devalued by a person and their environments? How do their definitions of “change,” “development,” and “values” function in their processes of making sense of their lives?

Literacy narratives also make an important contribution to understand different and, with Dippre and Smith (this volume), ever-changing, protean contexts. Their narratives reflect the expectations of their listeners as well as social valorizations and devalorizations of literacies at specific points in time and space. Linde's (1993) methodology of analyzing the construction of coherence in a narrative allows us to deepen our understanding of the interactional and social relationships between narrator and listener and how they translate to the shape of the narrative. The social frameworks that we can reconstruct in this analysis serve as important context for longitudinal studies.

The act of sense-making that a narrator undertakes in a literacy narrative might also in itself be a sponsor of literacy development (Lawrence, 2015). This idea is highly valuable for lifespan writing research. If we are able to collect literacy narratives of the same person at different points in the lifespan, we may analyze how this narration might have changed their views on themselves or their literacy practices, and how this might have stimulated changes in their literacy practices.

As the members of the Writing Through the Lifespan collaboration consider how to launch a 100-year study on writing development, I suggest that literacy narratives have an important role to play, especially when combined with

longitudinal approaches such as ethnography and when researchers have the opportunity to collect more than one literacy narrative per research participant across the lifespan. By combining retrospective and longitudinal data, we are able to contrast both types of data. This is, admittedly, very ambitious, but also highly promising. Rosenthal's (1995) methodology is built around the careful comparison between the "told" and the "lived" life. If we have longitudinal data on the "lived" life, we have a source of data that is unprecedented in its richness. To contrast this data with the narrative that a person constructs out of the same thing—the lived life—must be an incredibly interesting analysis. It will allow us to analyze very thoroughly which life and literacy events have been omitted, which have been highlighted, and what overall guiding principle a person uses to convey their story. This guiding principle might shed light on what it is about literacy that matters most to persons.

To use literacy narratives as part of a longitudinal study opens a pathway to an important dimension of lifespan writing research, the dimension of the *meaning* of literacy in a person's life (Bazerman et al., 2018). We can analyze what (changing) meaning a person attributes to their literacies and their literacy development, we can investigate the functions that literacy narratives have for making sense of a person's life, and we can research the ways in which the act of narrating one's literate life is a sponsor of literacy development in itself. A longitudinal approach to lifespan writing research provides an excellent site to make the most use of literacy narratives as complementary and contrasting data, and as data of its own merit.

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