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## **Negotiating learning through stories: mature women, VET and narrative inquiry**

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*This paper explains my choice of narrative inquiry as a methodological approach in my recently completed PhD study. My research investigated learning experiences of mature women learners in VET. Notions of learning as negotiated lived experience called for a methodological approach that privileged the learner's perspective and opened space in which alternative notions of learning might emerge. From interviews with twelve mature women, I explain how I use stories of learning to understand how these women, as learners with distinct yet diverse life experiences, contextualise their everyday into their VET learning. Some ethical considerations in using other people's stories in narrative research are also identified. I argue for the use of stories to research women's understandings of their VET learning and to reconceptualise learning as an ongoing and integrated process that must be understood within the everyday contexts of women's lives.*

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## Introduction

In Australia, many mature women are participating in vocational education and training (VET), and in some age categories women's participation surpasses men's (NCVER 2007). Yet critics of the Australian VET system (Butler & Ferrier 2006) claim that the representation of women in general has lessened, and women have become less visible in research publications and policy documents. While women's issues remain, they are no longer talked about: *women* as a distinct yet complex category are now drawn into the generic mix of VET learners.

If mature women are subsumed into such generic representations along with other groups, how do researchers then understand diverse experiences of learning in VET? When the discourse assumes a similarity of experience with men how do mature women make their experiences known? What happens to women's everyday contexts of life when these are not recognised and so cannot be expressed in VET discourse?

In my recently completed PhD research I investigated these experiences. I wanted to know how mature women understood their learning, what values they placed on their experience, and specifically how they negotiated that learning within the contexts of their everyday lives. In this paper I discuss my methodological approach and how this shaped the perspective from which I gathered and analysed my data. I explain how, through the use of narrative and stories, the diversity of mature women's experiences in VET can be made visible, and understood.

## The research context

Educational researchers have long understood the usefulness of narrative as a tool in qualitative research (Carter 1993, Clandinin & Connelly 1998, Newman 1999, Phillion 2002). Narrative inquiry

is used in many adult education settings, yet there is a notable exception: current research in VET in Australia has taken an instrumental turn, focusing on statistical and gender-neutral representations of its learners. A recent document explains:

[T]he main client group of VET ... comprises individuals across all post-compulsory schooling ages, and ranges from early school leavers to older persons re-engaging with the workforce. (NCVER 2006: 5)

While *clients*, *individuals* and *persons* are considered according to age, ability, ethnicity, previous qualifications, areas of study and destinations, these categories elide the significant differences that gendered living presents for – and amongst – women and men. In fact, Butler and Ferrier (2000) claim that, within much Australian VET research literature, women have become increasingly silent and unseen. VET's 'master script' (Bloom 1998: 67) tells stories *about* women and co-opts them into a framework that simultaneously renders them invisible, making it difficult to find a location from which to begin exploring women's learning.

A 'relational ontology' (Mauthner & Doucet 1998) that has informed a great deal of feminist educational research has been used to argue the need for an alternative approach to educational provision (Hart 1992, Thompson 1997). My study advances this concept of women as relational learners, and learning as a contextualised process. It is through connections and relationships that women build a sense of achievement, self-esteem and success. In addition, learning is more than exposure to facts and ideas and the generation of knowledge that occurs – equally relevant are the processes that are engaged in doing so, and the value that women attach to those processes and to the meanings they make from the experience.

## Describing learning experiences

Learning occurs throughout life, and *in relation to* other life events and activities (Luke 1996, OECD 2007). Whilst formal learning – such

as in VET – requires some degree of separation from other activities while the learner attends class and studies for assignments, I believe that these activities are best understood as part of a contextualised ‘everyday’. For many women, commitments such as caring for children or aged parents may still need to be considered; previous negative experiences of education impact on how a woman anticipates her engagement with formal learning; she may be recovering from ill-health or abuse, or lack confidence in herself as a knowing woman. These considerations will impact on a woman’s engagement with learning, but are unlikely to be taken into account as she makes her way into the VET system; and they are not factored into current VET research on learners.

Learning does not take place in isolation, but is a negotiated experience. Borrowing (badly) from John Lennon, I suggest that *learning is what happens while you’re busy doing other things*. Learning is experienced as part of a complex interplay of other events, memories, feelings and actions. As such, it can best be understood when it is communicated by those who experience the experience. Based on this premise, I considered three factors to be important in this investigation into learning: the main sources of information were to be the learners; stories would be used as data; and learning was understood within the context of everyday life.

#### Focusing on the learner

The work of researching learning and learners is, naturally enough, usually undertaken by academics, who, as educational researchers, take an educator’s perspective into their research. But does this perspective offer accurate information on how learning is experienced *by the learner*? The process of learning engages both educator and student, but the meanings that they attribute to that learning – its purpose, values and their understandings of it – may be very different indeed.

Contributions from feminist educators who have shaped educational provision for women (hooks 1994, Tisdell 1998) have tended to focus on the development of suitable curricula, the learning environment or on their own role as facilitator rather than on what the learners’ perspectives might be. Flannery and Hayes (2000: 7), lamenting the absence of studies of women learners in adult education literature, describe the aims for their own study about women and learning:

We each wanted to look for our own learning stories and those of our relatives and friends, sisters and mothers, grandmothers and nieces. Where were they? Could we find them reflected in the literature we might be able to identify?

What Flannery and Hayes identify is a lack of knowledge pertaining to women’s learning as a broad spectrum of experiences in diverse settings, and from the perspectives of the learners. Women’s learning, they claim, is not fully addressed under the rubric of adult learning, since the influence and effects of gender relations in society is significant in shaping ‘women’s and men’s experiences in different ways, giving them the opportunity to acquire different sorts of knowledge and abilities’ (Flannery & Hayes 2000: 4).

Within feminist scholarship, there have in fact been some notable attempts to understand women’s perspectives on learning (in addition to Flannery & Hayes 2000, see also Edwards 1993, Parr 1998, Jackson 2004 – women in higher education; Fenwick 2002, Bierema 2001 – women and work; and Knights 2000 – women in adult education). What these studies reveal is that how women learners think about learning does not always concur with commonly held notions of expectations and aims of learning.

To understand mature women learners’ perspectives on the process and experience of learning, I chose to begin from ‘ordinary lived experience’ (Clandinin & Rosiek 2007: 42), taking as my starting point women’s stories. What did they say about learning? What were the contexts in which they related their learning stories, and what

were the values and meanings they gave to them? How did they weave their VET learning into the multiplicity of stories within which experiences are made, felt and performed? I wanted to understand their stories, set within the contexts in which they lived them. To do this, I chose narrative inquiry, which 'begins and ends ... in the storied lives of the people involved' (Clandinin & Rosiek 2007: 42). While people 'lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives' (Connelly & Clandinin 1990: 2), I use both *narrative* and *story* to define specific facets of my research: *narrative* describes the inquiry and *stories* refer to the related experiences of participants.

#### Stories told

Narrative inquiry is useful to study experiences of the less visible members of any group in society. For this reason, feminist researchers (Bloom 1998, Barr 1999, Mohanty 2003) encourage the use of stories as a means of providing opportunities for women to relate experiences imbued with their own meanings and values. According to Mohanty (2003), women's own words in 'testimonials, life stories and oral histories are a significant mode of remembering and recording experience' (p.77) and of bringing that experience back into the realm of accepted knowledge of everyday life. Stories give women a space to talk, and to present the everyday from their own perspectives. This, according to Clandinin and Rosiek (2007: 50), makes narrative inquiry an appropriate choice:

For the narrative inquirer, a person's experience must be listened to on its own terms first, without the presumption of deficit or flaw, and critique needs to be motivated by the problematic elements within that experience.

As is the case across the social sciences, education (and VET perhaps particularly so) is still largely informed by 'the androcentric assumptions ... that men's lives and activities are more important than those of women and/or constitute the norm from which women's lives and activities deviate' (Chase 2005: 654). My intention therefore

was to identify how each woman made sense of and contextualised her own experiences in VET, but neither as a response or reaction to, nor as a deviation from, that 'norm'.

Stories are also the starting point in narrative research (Connelly & Clandinin 1990, Chase 2005). By placing women's stories as the point from which to begin the analysis, I hoped to open up possibilities for considering, differently, experiences of VET learning. Because stories offer a way of presenting the experience in context, and from the speaker's perspective, I was able to explore aspects of the experience of learning that moved beyond the assumptions of learning as an action with a beginning (participation), a completion and an outcome, as VET research tends to be categorised.

#### Contexts negotiated

Stories of learning have also been shown to offer valuable insights into the complexity of layers that construct each individual's learning experience. As Clandinin and Connelly (1998) explain, 'individual stories are shaped by living in a narrative landscape with its own network of stories'. What such stories represent, therefore, is experience as a transactional process (Clandinin & Connelly 1998, Clandinin & Rosiek 2007). Experience is not 'the truth', but the representation of a relationship between an individual and her environment. Mature women already have years of life experience behind them when they contemplate enrolling in VET. Experience is built upon experience through partnerships, marriage, family, death, previous education, employment, voluntary work and many other activities. These richly complex contexts of daily life need to be considered when attempting to research women's experiences:

Describing the way people go about making sense of their experience within these contexts, and contributing to that ongoing sensemaking, is the purpose of narrative inquiry. (Clandinin & Rosiek 2007: 45)

Having found a method of inquiry that addressed my three considerations of learner-centredness, stories and context, I collected stories of learning from unstructured interviews with my twelve participants.

### What are stories of learning? Cassie's story

My next step was to identify *stories* from the transcripts. Riessman (2003: 334–335) asks: 'how does an investigator discern ... segments for analysis?', adding that selection is in itself an interpretive action. I identified passages that were to my mind responses to my questions and prompts. The final selection was made according to the context in which the woman placed her reply, not on the chronological correctness and adherence to my presumed focus of the question. In the following example, Cassie<sup>1</sup> responds to my question: 'what were your expectations when you enrolled in VET?':

I felt as though I was just learning so much about, um, yeah, not everything of course, but about lots of things. You know, our history... you know, which really um, ah, our assignment was great because the questions that we needed to ask, I, I asked my mum, so that was a really lovely thing, then I got to find out more about my mother, and her history, and her family's history, and um, yeah, I just became hooked. So I don't, I honestly don't think that I had expectations, except for to fulfil myself, and then I think it was probably leading up to, must have been the second year that I'd been doing just one subject at a time each time, very gently taking it. And then that was when I decided: OK, I'd like to do the Certificate, and do the core subjects. I think except for *Returning to Study*, all the subjects I did were electives. So I did masses of electives that you don't have to do, but that was wonderful. And, and I think that the cost was a huge factor for me, because I wasn't working, and, uh, to be able to do something for, I think it was, you know, might have been \$15 a term or something like that, these, this was really fantastic, yeah. (Cassie. Interview 1, p. 5)

In this piece of text, Cassie relates a number of stories woven into each other: finding out about her mother, the financial considerations of studying, and her own decision-making around her learning. She emphasises how these experiences *felt*, too. She recalls that being able to study by choice was 'wonderful', and interviewing her mother was 'a really lovely thing'. There is a suggestion of learning as fulfilment and even addiction, although very little about her expectations. What she expected from her learning was evidently less important – or less memorable perhaps – than how she felt about it, and how she connected it to other aspects of her life.

If Cassie's text is understood as layers of stories, all important to the concept of her learning, then it can be understood how an experience such as learning is not a separate action but is dependent on and informed by many other events, memories and experiences. Learning is a contextualised experience, developed in negotiation with other parts of people's lives.

### Discussion

This research, and the lens through which it investigates learning, may offer a way of understanding why women have not been well served by VET in the past, and why their lack of voice assumes an absence of ongoing concerns. Researching women's learning experiences through narrative inquiry lets women speak, and speak in their own words, rather than through a master script (Bloom 1998) that limits their expression to already defined meanings. Such a perspective allows for the differently contextualised experiences of mature women learners to become part of the negotiations of entering a learning environment. Expectations, aims and outcomes can then be seen as contextualised in their meanings.

Researching through stories also offers possibilities for a broader approach to understanding the purpose of learning, that is, not as a textbook procedure, but as an evolving, changing process. Narrative

1 Not her real name

inquiry is eminently suited to exploring learning in this way, since that changeability is part of the inquiry process. I am drawn to narrative inquiry *because* it addresses the indefinite – it is a different way of conceptualising inquiry, and, in the case of my study, of understanding learning:

[T]he fact that the inquiry is altering the phenomena under study is not regarded as a methodological problem to be overcome. It is the purpose of the research. (Clandinin & Rosiek 2007: 45)

The narrative researcher faces some necessary considerations when using stories as data. Decisions are made – by the researcher – about which stories matter, and which contexts should be favoured over others. As with any research, the researcher makes subjective choices (Wolf 1996), and mine were undoubtedly influenced to some extent by my own experience as a mature age learner and my own ‘take’ on the women’s stories.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) explain the complexity of the process of collecting and analysing stories, in which the story is interpreted and re-interpreted simply by being heard, considered, documented, read and re-read. It is ‘a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and restorying as the research proceeds’ (p. 4). Indeed, stories are a shared experience, involving the narrative inquirer in recalling their own memories, which are then re-interpreted as well as informing the interpretation of other people’s stories. During my research, I remembered many experiences of my VET learning: some were prompted by similar stories told by the participants, and others were very different, and were very much my own learning experiences.

The stories of the women in my study are therefore presented through the lens of my own understanding of the issues and concerns of which they talk, and my perception of the values they attribute to these. Chase (2005: 657) describes the process thus:

As narrators, then, researchers develop meaning out of, and some sense of order in, the material they studied; they develop their own voice(s) as they construct other’s voices and realities; they narrate results in ways that are both enabled and constrained by the social resources and circumstances embedded in their disciplines, cultures and historical moments.

Narrative researchers must, however, be careful not to commit ‘academic violence’ (Clandinin & Rosiek 2007: 60) resulting from good intentions, such as the desire to contribute to a generalised knowledge base. Clandinin and Rosiek explain how this can result in people’s stories being ‘ripped’ from their context and used to create ‘common themes and universal narrative structures’ (p. 61). The data become fixed, but dislocated from their context.

Narrative inquiry cannot be context-free – its aim and purpose is not to generalise and universalise but to illustrate the uncertainty and changeability of experience. The stories are bound up in the tellers’ (changing) lives, and if severed from their source they lose their meaning (Clandinin & Rosiek 2007). Since stories create meaning in the telling (Clandinin & Connelly 2000), a study using narrative inquiry must be understood as representative rather than truth. Narrative inquiry recognises the nature of experience – any experience – as an event constantly undergoing change. Learning is just such an experience.

## Conclusion

Within the context of VET research in Australia, there is a need to attend more to the voices of mature women learners, who bring into their VET learning rich and diverse, yet often unacknowledged, life experiences. If VET learning is researched as an instrumental process, and findings presented as numbers or generic categories, findings cannot represent equitably the range of what learners think about learning. In addition, much of the richness of the learning experience

remains hidden. Using stories of experience to investigate learning, researchers can gain insights that are not possible using methods that preclude individual experience as a starting point.

Learning is a contextualised and relational experience, and as such requires a research methodology that takes as its purpose the unsettled and complex nature of the phenomena being studied (Clandinin & Rosiek 2007). I have addressed these considerations in my doctoral research, using narrative inquiry and focusing on the learners, their stories and the contexts in which they are experienced.

Within such a research framework, possibilities exist for dialogue between mature women and the VET system. The voices of mature women learners can provide insights into a broader notion of what learning means, and how their everyday lives are integral to the process. As well as enriching practitioners' understanding of their students and informing education and training provision, such storied approaches to research can make VET more relevant to all learners – not only the increasing number of mature women who participate in Australian VET.

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