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# **Developing Preferred Stories of Identity as Reflective Practitioners**

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### Abstract

This article describes the “Preferred Stories of Identity” assignment through which social work, counseling, psychology and family therapy students directly experience the narrative practices they are studying. The author offers the “Preferred Identity” assignment as a vehicle through which to teach five aspects of narrative practice: (1) reauthoring conversations (2) intentional understandings of identity; (3) double listening; (4) re-memembering practices; (5) outsider witness practices and definitional ceremonies. Throughout the article, excerpts of students’ work illustrate the power of this assignment in aiding reflective practitioners to become clearer about their own personal values and perspectives, and about the applicability of narrative practices in the teaching process.

As an educator of therapists and human service providers, I have discovered that students often better understand and integrate a concept when they apply it to themselves. Students become “reflective practitioners” (Schon, 1983) by learning specific practices through which to think in action and put espoused theory into practice (Argyris & Schon, 1974). This article describes a four-part assignment through which students apply narrative ideas and practices to their own lives and identities<sup>i</sup>. Through mapping and expressing their personal values and perspectives, students directly experience the practices they are studying. Rather than studying in isolation, students develop a sense of community as they share their commitments and offer each other reflections. The stories generated by this exercise are so compelling as to demand to be shared. My hope is that this paper will contribute to a growing body of literature on teaching practices that afford students that all too rare space to make real connections between classroom teachings and their own lives and relationships (Epston, Rennie, & Napan, 2004)<sup>ii</sup>.

This assignment is given halfway through a narrative therapy course that combines classroom meetings and online communication (Sax, 2003). The online component is organized around a course website that provides multiple on-line forums for students to reflect on reading assignments as well as in-class group discussion, video review, experiential exercises and guest speakers. I provide the basic website structure and design, with students becoming active collaborators in co-authoring and co-editing evolving material. Teaching narrative practice online offers opportunities to build upon the ethic of circulation and innovative practices

that narrative therapists use to incorporate audiences into the therapy process (Lobovits, Maisel, & Freeman, 1995).

### The Preferred Identity Assignment

The “Preferred Stories of Identity” (“Preferred Identity”) assignment brings home students’ learning about the narrative therapy concept of intentional understandings of identity. This exercise further connects them to their own personal values, beliefs, passions, commitments and ethics, and encourages them to imagine the effects of these preferred ways of working on (near) future directions as a social worker, psychologist and/or family therapist<sup>iii</sup>.

Briefly, the assignment has four parts: (1) participation in an in-class four-part interview, (2) developing a personal micro-map of preferred identity as a reflective practitioner; (3) a letter of commitment; (4) online posting of assignments in small cyber-groups of three to four students who also reflect on each others’ work.

#### *Part One: In-class Interview*

Before applying the assignment to themselves, students participate in an in-class four-part narrative interview with outsider witness practices. The exercise, adapted from the work of Michael White (1992), helps students to experience the themes of their lives linked together (White, 1995b). The steps are as follows: With the rest of the class as audience, I interview a student volunteer about turning points in her career as a reflective practitioner, the realizations that have emerged over time, and the subsequent effects of these understandings on the evolution of her career. Guided by White’s map for outsider witness responses (White, 2003), the students then reflect aloud on and actively interview each other about ideas and questions

sparked by the first interview. I then interview the initial volunteer student about her experiences of hearing the reflections, while her fellow students again take up the audience position. Finally, everyone debriefs their experiences of all parts of this interview.

*Part Two: Personal Micromap of Preferred Identity*

Students are given an electronic template of a micromap that applies the “reauthoring conversations” map to their own personal stories of identity as reflective practitioners (see Figure 1). Reauthoring conversations is a key concept in narrative practice, which I address in detail further on. I encourage students to create a comfortable milieu for personal reflection by taking a long walk, soaking in a hot bath or conversing with a good friend. When possible, some students arrange to interview each other outside of classroom time. At their computers, students use this template to construct their unique development as reflective practitioners in training. Some computer-savvy students create their own versions of the original template, adding personal touches such as color coding and sophisticated formatting. Olivia’s micromap illustrates her preferred identity as a social worker. (see Figure 2).

Each student maps a recent time in which her<sup>iv</sup> actions resonated with how she aspires to perform her work, traces a brief history of her commitment to helping others, and thereby explores her preferred identity as a reflective practitioner. For example, by situating influential events in their identity as social workers and unique realizations that emerged from these experiences on a timeline, social work students learn how the storyline of their own lives can be “reauthored” according to their preferred ways of being as a social worker. I tell students that there is no right way

and it is up to them to decide what they wish to share. I share some of what prior students have told me about the personal memories that this assignment brings forth, and their expressions of enthusiasm despite the challenges posed. I try to assuage students' fears and arrange to communicate privately with students who express concerns.

*Part Three: Letters of Commitment*

After completing their personal micro maps, students post a letter of commitment online, addressed to whomever they select to witness their written statement. A series of questions are designed to provoke students to form commitments to their preferred ways of performing as a reflective practitioner, to notice ways in which they act in accordance with these preferences and to speculate about future possibilities that might follow from such preferences. Each student also ponders who and what stands by them in their preferred ways of working, and speculates about the effects of this way of working on the people who will consult them in the future. Students are asked to close with a personal statement of their ethics and commitments, describing how these ethics are connected with past experiences, and how they imagine they will be carried into the future.

The letter of commitment provides a firsthand experience regarding performing an alternative story based upon their cherished values for an audience of their choice. Students write letters of commitment to a wide array of people who become uncovered through their micro-mapping process: parents, family members, classmates, colleagues, mentors, teachers, friends, clients and spiritual guides. Some students write

to themselves and to their future selves. Wendy provides a good illustration of the power of this experience in a letter to her parents:

*I had no idea that this path as a social worker started early in life. Did you? I realize that I started caring for other people and being concerned about their well being in grade school. I was always looking for the person who was down and out. Once I found them I would try to comfort them. As an adult, I had always believed that my work in this field was just that, my work. I now realize that this “social work” is something that I bring into almost everything that I do.*

#### *Part Four: Reflecting in Small Cyber-Groups*

Students are assigned to small groups in which they become “outsider witnesses” to each others’ assignments. Students post their work and share their reflections on each group’s online forum. Some small groups choose to meet in person as well or instead of meeting electronically. Reading each others’ work sparks new ideas and questions. Through responding online to each others’ work, they learn from each other, and their reflections convey accounts of “two-way effects” (White, 1997). Students often comment on the personal meaning of discovering similar themes when they read fellow students’ micro maps and letters of commitment. Relief is acknowledged in hearing words put to shared experiences, as illustrated in this online reflection from Jen to Lisa:

*Your landscape of consciousness allowed me deep into the world of Lisa and I felt I had a Birdseye view of who you are in practice as well as who you want to be. I found myself thinking, "Hey why didn't I think of that?" often and then incorporating some of that into my ever-changing story of myself as a social*

*worker. Perhaps that is one of the greatest gifts of this project and by extension, this class, to me...the ability to be part of the transformative nature of dialogue. It still amazes me how my story about myself can change (although it seems that my foundational beliefs do not really) as a result of witnessing others' stories.*

### Teaching Narrative Practice

The Preferred Identity assignment focuses on five aspects of narrative practice, maps for guiding therapeutic conversations into new territories.

- Reauthoring conversations
- Intentional understandings of identity
- Double listening
- Re-membering practices
- Outsider witness practices and definitional ceremonies.

### *Reauthoring Conversations*

The entire assignment takes place as students are studying “re-authoring conversations”. This is a key concept of narrative practice which invites people to link some of the more neglected events of their lives in sequences through time to recreate an alternative story line based upon their preferred ways of being (Carey & Russell, 2003; White, 1995a). The reauthoring conversations map helps people develop alternative storylines to address and fill in gaps in their own history and provides options for people to re-engage with what they value most in life. Throughout all parts of the assignment, I ask students to focus on their preferred ways of performing their human service work. Thus, someone whose memory of himself at school was as the “troublemaker” who could not seem to do anything right might “re-author” the

conversation by recalling instances when he resisted archaic traditions and rules that he experienced as unfair and oppressive, which contributed to a lifelong commitment to social justice and human rights, and paved the way to his current choice of a career in social work.

It took me some time to grasp the reauthoring conversations map based upon Michael White's creative adaptation of Jerome Bruner's ideas about the dual landscapes of action and consciousness (Bruner, 1990). I have been amazed at how readily these theoretical constructs come alive when students use this map to contemplate turning points in their own development on a timeline stretching from the past to the present as well as their preferred near future. "Landscape of action" questions encourage people to situate influential events within the past, present and future. "Landscape of consciousness" questions inquire into the *meaning* of developments that occur in actions, which can include perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, speculations, realizations and conclusions. In the reauthoring conversations map, both types of questions inform the individual's exploration.

In her letter of commitment, Rebecca described how she used the reauthoring conversations map to trace her history as a social worker:

*In this assignment, I had to start with a "unique outcome" in the present in my practice with people and trace my history back through recent and distant time to find where my beliefs and commitments came from. From you, Mom, I certainly learned about compassion and a commitment to volunteering as a part of life. Remember when I went off at a young age to volunteer in an institution for children with severe disabilities? And then I had a fascination with mental*

*institutions and volunteered in a few? These were not your interests, but the spirit of sharing oneself with other people I clearly learned from you. From you, Dad, I developed an early sense of social justice, fairness, and honesty. None of us will ever forget you holding forth at the dinner table each night about the latest injustice in the business world, and these values have been an integral part of my growing into an adult. My determination to be an effective advocate for the elders I work with comes out of the fire I saw in your commitment to social justice.*

#### *Intentional Understandings of Identity*

Students of postmodern and relational therapies are generally familiar with structuralist understandings of identity and their influence on psychotherapy. As a rule, students expect to learn theory and tools with which to interpret behavior, so as to get to “the truth” of the inner self –the ultimate, fixed essence of a person’s identity. Alternatively, narrative therapy encourages students to question whether people actually have fixed identities at all, and asks “What are we today” (Foucault, 1988) (p.145)? Narrative therapy views identity as a public and social achievement, supported by communities of people, shaped by historical and cultural forces as well as by ethics, beliefs and values (Thomas, 2002). Through therapeutic conversations, individuals are encouraged to co-author intentional states of identity, based upon a person’s hopes and dreams, intentions, commitments, purposes, beliefs, values and principles(White, 1997a).

The personal identity assignment enables students to directly experience how conversation and the stories we tell about ourselves actually shape the ways we think about ourselves. Students become personally familiar with how their own lives have

been shaped by particular life events, which in turn guide their hopes and dreams, underpin their beliefs and values and influence their ethics and life commitments.

In her letter to herself, Sara offers herself encouragement to develop and stand by her own values, to learn from her experiences and to have confidence in herself as a social worker and a person. *“From early on, my parents, brothers, and grandparents (four of whom were teachers and social workers) encouraged me to develop my own identity, speak my mind and do what makes me happy.”* She genealogically links how her family’s values and their belief in her informed the decision she made to become a social worker as well as her current view of herself: *“They modeled caring and generosity in their daily lives and supported my interest in learning about and developing relationships with people. They consistently shared their belief that I could do anything I set my mind to, and urged me to be persistent and courageous in pursuing what is important to me.”*

### *Double Listening*

Students of therapy and social work are typically taught to examine how people’s families of origin have negatively impacted their lives and relationships, and to develop analytic skills to overcome the obstacles of growing up in “dysfunctional families.” This psychopathologizing practice in training contexts is often culturally expressed through unspoken assumptions of mother-blame (Caplan, 1998; Coll, Surrey, & Weingarten, 1998) that are further reinforced through unexamined adherence to the foundations of psychoanalytic theory. Trained to “double listen” to and against problems (Epston, 2003), practitioners of narrative therapy pay particular attention to “the absent but implicit” experiences in which people are guided by an

unspoken adherence to what they hold as being most precious in life, their intentions for their lives, the particular skills and knowledge evident in a person's unique response to life challenges and to the social, relational and cultural genesis of these responses (White, 2005). Hence, a therapeutic conversation that addresses trauma in a person's history attends to psychological pain and emotional distress in response to the trauma as well as to experiences of violation that can give testimony to cherished beliefs, values, personal ethics, hopes and dreams.

In this assignment, students often reflect on their parents' positive influences on their hopes and dreams, beliefs and values, ethics and life commitments. I could fill an entire book with poignant illustrations from students' letters to family members. Letters of commitment to parents continually defy the common practice of mother blame and psychopathologizing of dysfunctional families of origin. Students often attribute their most precious held values and turning point experiences to one or both parents' positive influence. They express profound gratitude for their parents' guidance, human kindness, sacrifices, social conscience, determination, modeling of steadfast commitments, generosity, hard work, strength of character, selfless contributions, loyalty, dedication, gifts and small gestures, and expressions of love. As a tribute to her mother, Laura wrote,

*The presence of my mother in my life is very deep, as an independent, caring, strong survivor; she has made me a more aware, respectful person. Having to take on a caretaking role early and being "adultified" by the reality of my father's mental illness and thus being raised by a single mother has a direct correlation to my working with people. My advocacy work for women's rights*

*and being drawn to crisis-oriented work has to stem from experiencing my mother's own strength to leave my father. I knew my passion for work with women came from my own life experience, but seeing it on my map re-affirmed how strongly I feel that people have the right to live free from violence and abuse and to be treated with respect and dignity.*

*Re-membering Family Members, Friends and Mentors*

Through this assignment, students learn firsthand about “re-membering conversations” (Russell & Carey, 2002; White, 1997b) by applying these practices to their own lives. Michael White draws the “re-membering” metaphor from the work of the cultural anthropologist, Barbara Myerhoff (Myerhoff, 1982). Re-membering conversations invite people to purposefully engage with significant figures that have contributed to their lives, to contemplate how this connection has shaped or could potentially shape their sense of who they are and what their life is about, and to imagine what they may have reciprocally contributed to the life of this significant figure. Figures and identities can include significant or potentially significant people in one’s present life or the past, as well as heroic figures such as favorite authors, actors or athletes, and even animal companions or stuffed toys.

In constructing their personal micro maps and letters of commitment, students explore the influential people who have contributed to their discovery of preferred ways of being as an aspiring social worker and human being, as illustrated in this excerpt from Rebecca’s letter to her parents:

*After tracing back the roots of my social work values to both of you, I recognize that you “stand with me” in my way of working with people. Along with you*

*stand my supervisors Carol, Heidi, and Fiona, all of whom have affirmed their belief in me as a person who brings a lifetime of experience of meeting people with disabilities where they are, and offering them my help along the path to their potential. That has helped so much when I have doubted my “lack of experience” as a social worker.*

Often, the letter of commitment links students to important figures from early in their lives. Linda credits a number of those who influenced her decisions about educational pursuits and career choices. *“I haven’t thought about or seen some of those people in such a long time. I should try to track down a few of them and let them know how they influenced me. I can see how that could be quite powerful and affirming for them and for me.”*

Anne wrote to her former guidance counselor, who has since become a mentor and a friend:

*You, my friend, are by far the best listener I have yet to meet. You allow me the room to make mistakes over and over without feeling ashamed. You have helped me to see my own strengths and to realize that I have been fighting for the underdog ever since I can remember, and that this field is a natural next step. You taught me that all emotions are okay, which allows me to accept the whole range of emotions in others, and that just being present, listening, and witnessing is perhaps the best thing to do at times.*

#### *Definitional Ceremony and Outsider Witness Practices*

Narrative therapy draws from the “definitional ceremony” metaphor to structure rituals that acknowledge people’s lives (Myerhoff, 1986). The definitional

ceremony draws from intentional understandings of identity to create contexts in which to publicly acknowledge a person's preferred claims about her or his identity and history. In this assignment, I extend Michael White's therapeutic applications of the "definitional ceremony" metaphor (White, 1995b) to a teaching context. The Preferred Identity assignment enables students to experience the communal nature of narrative work with multiple online tellings of their own preferred stories as social workers. Students' online reflections of each others' work in their small groups are guided by White's map for outsider witness responses (White, 2003). They readily identify aspects that catch their attention, capture their imagination and resonate with their own experiences. They describe images that strike a chord, and embody their responses with images from their own lives. They acknowledge what White refers to as "transport," describing how they have become other than who they were at the onset through witnessing these expressions from their classmates. Often, their reflections are as sophisticated as those of a highly trained reflecting team. Amber posted online her letter to Paul, a young foster child whose enduring memory contributed to her decision to become a social worker:

*Thank you Paul, for all you have taught me over the years. You have had a huge impact on whom I have become both as social worker and as a human being. I met you when you were only 2 years old and I was 10 or 11, and 18 years later you remain fresh in my memory. When we met, you had been taken out of your home because of constant physical abuse; I was helping out at your foster home. I remember the connection we developed where you felt you had finally found a safe place in my arms. I wanted to care for you, undo the pain that you had suffered, and protect you from*

*harm. As a young girl these seemed realistic goals, however I did not understand the multiple systems at play. I had to witness you be returned to your original home and I was filled with fear and hope. I soon saw you again, as you were returned for once again suffering abuse. I was filled with frustration and anger at the injustice of it all.*

*You taught me lessons of love, being present and available, how to let go when needed and about my responsibility to do my part for other people. I also learned to accept some doses of reality of the injustice and pain that people face all around me. These have been hard, but have made me a fuller person. I don't see people as one-dimensional. I know they have stories of pain and strengths, joys and sorrows that are not always apparent. Over the years I have committed myself to be available to people and to welcome their differences and strengths. This has made me a richer person.*

I encourage students as outsider witnesses to experiment with taking an interrogatory stance of earnest curiosity. In response to Amber's further description of her struggle with "not being able to protect those that need protection," and her experiences of wanting to "undo the pain that (Paul) had suffered," Joanna queried, *I was reminded of the many times that I just wanted to reach out and hug a youth that I was working with, take away their pain, stop their sadness. I try to remember some of the "sparkling moments" with them and wonder if you recall some of your sparkling moments from your time with Paul. What are they? How do they sustain you and give you hope? How will you nurture and support yourself? What are some things that you are doing now or have done to support yourself? How would you like others to support you?*

### Concluding Thoughts

Students often describe a mixture of excitement, stimulation and being overwhelmed as they learn about narrative therapy through video viewing, exercises, classroom and online discussion, guest speakers and extensive assigned readings. Faced with multiple invitations to re-examine cultural and professional discourses and their relevance for family therapy, one student aptly described the experience of learning about narrative therapy as “confusing and in some ways goes against many of the concepts I have previously been taught.” Yet students often remark on how much their understanding is enhanced by their firsthand experience of many of the narrative concepts and interviewing practices they are studying. What is it about this assignment that works so well?

It is impossible to exaggerate the power of this assignment, the generosity with which students share their lives with each other, and the potent effects of acknowledgements through small group reflections. Students use terms such as “profoundly life altering,” and “one of the three most important experiences of my life.” When I share these experiences with others who teach narrative therapy, they express surprise at the apparent sophistication of students’ understanding as demonstrated by the quality of their work.

Rebecca expresses the impact of writing to her parents:

*For me, writing the letter of commitment came after quite a bit of thought about the roots of my gratitude to both of my parents. That is not something that came easily over the years in my very Protestant family – meaning we had great difficulty expressing our emotions. We have always been better at writing these things to each other than verbalizing them, so the letter was a*

*perfect vehicle for me! I have been feeling some urgency lately about not letting more time go by because of my mother's gradually growing dementia; she will still be able to grasp my gratitude at this point, although she may not remember it for long. And of course, with my father already gone before I had a clear vision of his influence on my ethical development, I have some regrets. But it was deeply satisfying to publicly express my gratitude to him, to my classmates and through your reading of the letter, as a way of honoring him after his death.*

The Preferred Identity assignment affects people's lives in ways that extend beyond usual academic studies. Catherine describes the bonds formed among classmates. *"What stands out most is the relationships I developed with the other class members."* Many students maintain contact with me well beyond the end of the course, which I take as testimony to the impact of this teaching approach. Morrie described his experience as transformative:

*After we finished our class, I felt more confident and sure of myself and more able to roll with the stresses that I encountered in my relationships and everyday life (I think because I began seeing these stresses as external and not fundamental to my identity). Sometimes, I feel myself slipping back into the old way of being, at which point I re-read my letter of commitment. It's been an amazing help and I think will continue to be so in the years to come.*

### Next Steps

This firsthand experience with narrative concepts and practices gives students a base of understanding from which to expand their explorations. Some are inspired to

continue their studies of narrative practice. Whether or not they decide to pursue further formal learning about narrative practice, I remain convinced that the experience of the Preferred Identity exercise provides them with the means to apply these concepts to themselves and will make them better reflective practitioners, clearer about their own personal values and perspectives, and better able to relate to people who come to consult with them in whatever their future roles might be.

I have experienced a similar influence on my practices as both teacher and reflective practitioner. Reading students' micromaps and letters of commitment is a privilege that enlivens my commitment to my work. The generous witnessing with which students reflect on each other's maps and letters inspires me to enact similar practices of acknowledgement to people across many contexts in my daily life. Writing this article has provided the opportunity to reflect on the personal values that guide my teaching and in particular, the commitment to collaborative practices that seek congruence between theory and practice and build community. Getting such positive reactions from students has increased my intrigue with narrative therapy pedagogy. In particular, teaching this assignment has piqued my interest in possible applications of narrative ideas and practices beyond the realm of psychotherapy to train social practitioners in such community service contexts as child protection social workers, school counselors, early childhood care and education specialists, intensive family based practitioners and community based crisis workers. I will carry students' moving stories with me as I continue to reflect on possibilities in the classroom and through the online medium for students to link narrative concepts to their own lives and relationships.

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### **Figures**

Figure 1: Micro-map Template (see attachment)

Figure 2: Olivia's Micromap (see attachment)

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<sup>i</sup> This assignment is an adaptation of the "Personal Micro map" exercise that Betsy Buckley and Phil Decter (Simmons College of Social Work) adapted from the work of Michael White's (White, 1988) adaptation of Jerome Bruner (Bruner, 1986, 1990) work on the Landscape of Action and The Landscape of Meaning. Sarah, a Simmons social work student also graciously offered to share her computerized version of a personal micro map

<sup>ii</sup> My primary experience with this assignment is with MSW students at The University of Vermont Department of Social Work and The Smith College School of Social Work. I have also adapted a version, "How Do I Want to be in the World?" for undergraduate psychology students at Middlebury College. I believe the assignment is adaptable to many teaching contexts for training "reflective practitioners" in relational and postmodern therapies.

<sup>iii</sup> Because I primarily teach in social work programs, many of my illustrations draw upon social work identity. Whenever possible, I use the term "reflective practitioner" to make room for the reader to substitute a range of professional identities such as family therapist, psychologist, mental health counselor, early childhood mental health specialist, and so on.

<sup>iv</sup> For purposes of brevity, I chose to use feminine pronouns to represent both men and women.