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Narrative, meaning making and personal development: Teachers' storied experience in Montessori, Steiner and other primary classrooms

Gayle C. Ward
University of Notre Dame Australia

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Chapter I

Narrative, The Meaning-Making Tool

Having experienced the effectiveness of using narrative in different ways in my own classroom, my exploration began to focus on what constitutes narrative and what properties make it such a diverse and powerful meaning-making tool. Although my search began by viewing narrative as a powerful linguistic genre, my exploration soon ventured through philosophic portals to marvel at the power of the properties of narrative in shaping our perspective of our worldviews and ourselves. My search led me to resources revealing that prominent philosophers (MacIntyre, 1984; Gaardner, 1996), psychologists (Jung, 1968; Polkinghorne, 1988; Robinson and Hawpe, 1986; Sarbin, 1986), and educators (Bruner, 1988, 1990; Sutton-Smith, 1986; Egan, 1985, 1986, 1997) have each contributed support to the idea that for humans, narrative is the doorway to meaning.

Narrative can be defined by its structure and properties. Structurally, it is an account of events in either a linear, circular, or recapitulationist form. The properties that link narrative to so many disciplines and explain its universality include:

dramatic engagement,

temporality,

conflict and resolution,

characters and roles,

voice,

audience perspective,
integrative force,
cultural mediator,
change in perspective – history and reconciliation and
life cycle reflection.

Narrative can also be described as fictional or non-fictional and may have elements of both. To demonstrate this diversity, a contemporary novel, Fortune's *Rocks* (Shreve, 1999), and a historical narrative, *The History of the Olympics*, will be viewed below in terms of their narrative properties.

The Structure of Narrative

The inherent structure of narrative links this genre form to a specific type of thinking. In literary terms, “a narrative is a story, whether in prose or verse, involving events, characters, and what the characters say and do” (Abrams, 1993, p. 123). In other words, narrative thinking gives an account of actions and events and, thereby, has a different communication purpose than the other discourse options of describing, explaining, instructing, and arguing (Knapp and Watkins, 1994, p.22). Although this definition of narrative thinking would include simple recounts without any prioritising of events, the term “narrative” usually implies a genre with some plot structure (Abrams, 1993, p. 124). Stories differ from recounts in that some details are sacrificed in constructing an intelligible order “all in the attempt to discover and reveal what happened in a way that is faithful to reality and at the same time illuminates it” (Robinson and Hawpe, 1986, p. 114).

Primary teachers, versed in teaching the narrative genre to their students, usually define narrative as an account having a beginning, a middle with a complication, a resolution and an ending. The *First Steps* Genre Guideline (Ministry of Education, 1992, p. 18) gives the framework headings of Orientation, Initiating Event, Complication, Resolution, and Coda/Moral/Concluding Statement for narrative planning. In highlighting complications and resolutions, events are prioritised. This cognitive structuring implies that underlying thought processes are forming the link between the actual events and their communication. Egan, an educator, defines narrative “as a basic intellectual tool we use in making sense of the world and experience” (1985, p. 399).

Using the coding of language in its narrative form, we perform the cognitive operation of sequencing in the temporal order of beginning, middle and end to show connectiveness while at the same time prioritising significant events (Gergen and Gergen, 1986, p. 25). In Jerome Bruner’s words, “What gives the story its unity is the manner in which plight, characters and consciousness interact to yield a structure that has a start, a development and ‘a sense of ending’ ” (1988, p. 106).

Paradoxically, a striking property of narrative is that it can be viewed from both a linear and circular perspective. Narrative is partially defined by its linear properties linking past, present and future. However, it also has the power to philosophically link the ending to new beginnings mirroring not only a unique life, but also the relation of that life to previous and subsequent generations. “The pathway of this life leads into the pathway of the next” (Goble, 1993, p. 22). Acknowledging this

philosophic truth elevates the protagonist – real or imagined – into another plane of meaning, universal rather than individual.

In *Eating Fire and Drinking Water* (Chai, 1996), for example, there is a subnarrative in the book about a stone that passes from leader to leader empowering them for a time in a cyclical pattern that emphasises that aspects of history repeat themselves. Realising this, the protagonist, Luis Bayani says, “It [*the fight against injustice*] doesn’t end ... We just see things in a linear fashion. Beginning, middle, and end. But in reality life isn’t linear. Look at our history. It’s filled with cycles ” (p. 243).

Another contemporary novel, *Jewel* (Lott, 1991) traces the life of the protagonist in coping with the challenges provided by a large family including a handicapped daughter; we experience the power of the circular narrative through 80 year old Jewel’s realisation:

And with those eyes on me, I finally knew the truth of why we were here in a house in Saugus: it wasn’t the end of my life we were preparing for, but the beginning of the next life for Brenda Kay. My lives, the long string of them that started with the death of my daddy and went on from there, right up to and including this moment, that long string of lives wasn’t over. My life would never be over, but would be carried on, I saw, in Wilman here at my side, and in James in Texas, in Burton in his big house in Palos Verdes, in Billie Jean in her mobile home in Buena Park, and in Annie in her house in Torrance, and in all the hordes of grandchildren and great-grandchildren to follow after me.

(Lott, 1991,p. 352)

Circular tales also carry with them the idea of recapitulation. As we return and revisit aspects of cycles, we develop understandings on deeper and deeper levels.

“Repetitions build up energy patterns and strengthen already existing ones in us.

Healthy patterns connect us with the flowing regularities out of which our whole earth, the solar system, and the worlds beyond are built and maintained. In a story, a circling journey through exactly the same territory enlivens our sense of place and time” (Mellon, 1992, p. 31).

For the teacher, a focus on circular tales can lead to a study of life cycles of all creatures as well as subgenre literary studies such as “Home is Best” where the protagonist ends where he began, but with an extraordinary depth of wisdom. In John Marsden’s *The Journey* (1988, p. 182) Argus exclaims, "All the time I had a garden at home, but I had to go away to understand it!" He is expressing the realisation that we gain perspective when travelling that enables us to appreciate home. The importance of recapitulation is evident in curriculum in child-centered, constructivist classrooms where children revisit “stories” at deeper and deeper levels as they become capable of more complex understandings.

It is very difficult to separate the genre of linear and circular narrative structures from life experience and from our cultural framework. As our basis of organisation, we use our social and cultural experiences that we recall in narrative form. Thus narrative bridges language and psychology as well as language and philosophy. “For human existence, linguistic forms are paramount, for they filter and organise information from the physical and cultural realms and transform it into the meanings that make up

human knowledge and experience” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 158). Each of the modes of narrative discourse which Polkinghorne (1988, p. 62) identifies as “historical, literature and myth” are “grounded in the actual generalised experiences of a people and are the results of cultural attempts to impose a satisfactory, graspable humanising shape on experience.” Moreover, this tool or “meta-code” is a “human universal” (White, 1987, p. 1). It is used by every culture – both oral and literate (Bruner, 1990) which suggests that it is an essential key to interpreting cultural experiences in a meaningful way no matter what those experiences and cultural parameters may be. Sarbin (1986), a narrative psychologist, noting the tendency of all peoples to use narrative to understand the world, hypothesises that although there is no physiological support for a premise that narrative is part of our nervous system, “it is endemic enough to the human condition to propose the narrative principle: that human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structure” (p. 8). MacIntyre (1984), a philosopher and theologian, believes that we make meaning of our world and purpose through story because man is “essentially a story telling animal” (p. 216). These powerful statements imply that narrative is a connecting force between the branches of the humanities and hence a central tool that humans employ in their quest for meaning – for making sense of their lives. What characteristics or properties of narrative make it such a universal meaning-making tool?

The Properties of Narrative

Dramatic Engagement

One aspect of the narrative is dramatic engagement which Gergen and Gergen (1986) describe as “the capacity to create feelings of drama or emotion” (p. 28). For a reader or listener to engage with a narrative, they must be interested. This interest, which establishes the give and take between storyteller and audience, must be established early on for the recipient to be affected by the story in some manner. Often, appealing to a human condition, feeling or quest with which the audience can identify creates this dramatic engagement. Take, for instance, the very popular Harry Potter books. Readers of all ages are engaged from the beginning pages of *Harry Potter and The Philosopher’s Stone* (Rowling, 1997) by the genial character of a boy with mysterious gifts who lives a lonely and unappreciated existence with ordinary humans (referred to as Muggles), the Dursleys. Certainly, every human being feels or has felt undervalued and unappreciated – hence, immediate engagement in Harry’s tale.

Or, consider the following words of protagonist, Clara, from the opening pages of *Eating Fire and Drinking Water*:

How was I to know that this dead stranger would appear in my life again?
That he had been there right from the beginning, holding the secret to who I was so that the very mysteries of my own life would find their answers at last.
How was I to know that this fire in a street I had never been to would somehow eat away at my life’s invisible boundaries so that into it would come rushing names and faces which until then were unknown to me? (Chai, 1996, p. xiii)

We are immediately filled with curiosity to find out what mysterious secrets the protagonist will uncover. This curiosity may be linked to some semiconscious awareness that we too are on a quest to uncover the secrets of our being or we may relate to Clara's revelation that a single event can change a life in extraordinary ways.

Clearly, an affective link has been forged and the listener is keen to hear the story unfold. As Egan (1986) observes:

...stories are largely about affective matters – they are about how people feel. These feelings can either provide the motives for actions or they can provide the point and result of actions....From this observation we can see the importance of human emotions and intentions in making things meaningful. To present knowledge cut off from human emotions and intentions is to reduce its affective meaning. This affective meaning, also, seems especially important in providing access to knowledge and engaging us in knowledge. (Egan, 1986, pp. 29-30)

It is clearly important for educators to use story to engage their students in a journey of exploration. Engagement, though, need not be at the beginning of a story. We can be effectively engaged in a story by being drawn into the middle and then by moving backwards and forwards until we have ordered

events in some way that makes sense of the cause and effect of actions and feelings. *Snow Falling on Cedars* (Guterson, 1995), for example, starts with a murder trial not comprehensible until we know the stories of the accused, the victim, his wife and the journalist. Once we are committed to understanding the story, we can use our imaginations to carry us backward and forwards until we gain an understanding of the sequence of events and of the relationship that is a metaphor for the blending of two cultures.

Temporality

There is no doubt that this property of moving from a beginning towards an ending through a sequence of events is an essential ingredient in the meaning-making power of narrative. This movement through time of the narrative structure is a metaphor for human life itself. Knowledge of our own life narrative can thus help us to understand stories we read or are told. Stories we hear or read can help us to interpret our own lives. There is a ready passage from narrative form to life experience.

Without a visualisation of an ending, there is no cognition of the thread that ties events together as the character, Grace Marks, suggests in *Alias Grace*:

It is morning, and time to get up; and today I must go on with the story. Or the story must go on with me, carrying me inside it, along the track it must travel, straight to the end, weeping like a train and deaf and single-eyed and locked tight shut; although I hurl myself against the walls of it and scream and cry, and beg to God himself to let me out.

When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion, a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else. (Atwood, 1996, pp. 345-346):

It is the idea of an ending that creates the motivational aspect of narrative. We want to discover why the characters (real or imagined, others or ourselves) are moving towards that conclusion. Motivation both links events to a closure and the participant to a moral judgment. "The closure of the story or 'how the story ends' (e.g. as a tragedy, a comedy of errors, a victory, or a defeat) is the passage of moral judgment on the agents of 'eventhood' within the narrative and thus provides a framework for meaning production that would not otherwise be possible given a series of disconnected events" (Sandlos, 1998, p. 2). Narrative thus works towards unity and integration of thought and one could hypothesize that the use of narrative in a classroom would work towards unity of concepts and subjects.

The sequenced aspect of temporality makes the narrative an excellent memory-enhancing tool perhaps evidenced by the popularity of historical novels. Stories in a context of meaning are far more memorable than lists of dates (Bruner, 1990). I recall a teacher's workshop with Glenn Capelli (1996) in which he effectively demonstrated that even random words could be remembered if woven together into a story, especially one of the individual's own making. After experiencing this workshop, I was confirmed in my belief that children should never be taught isolated dates and

facts or lists of words without a meaningful context. Although I find much support for this view in narratology today, the seeds for my viewpoint were planted by quite an innovative teacher in the 1960's who chose to teach the history of industrial America including an exploration of entrepreneurs, labour laws, government lobbying, and even anti-monopoly legislation through studying the story of the Standard Oil Company. The story of one company became the window to explore a century of American history. Thus narrative enhances memory not only by providing a context for linking events, but also by providing a metaphorical framework for similar stories. My memory of the Standard Oil Company story has given me a framework for understanding the current Microsoft court battle today.

Conflict and Resolution

Narratives usually have a central conflict or complication and resolution and may have many small conflicting situations as well. In literary narratives such as *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952), for example, the central problem is that some way must be found to keep Wilbur, the pig, from being eaten. Other challenges and conflicts include making friends, changing one's image, and dealing with death. In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Rowling, 1997), the stone must be located and trials (not unlike those of Hercules) overcome to keep the treacherous wizard, Voldemort, from regaining his evil power. However, other conflicts concern dealing with Muggle relatives, preparing for and adjusting to a new school, making friends, coping with bullying, and learning about one's past. Historical narratives follow the same pattern and thus we might explore the stories of people who face freedom vs. servitude as a conflict or perhaps nomadic vs. settler life styles (Egan, 1986). One year, my 9-12 year old class assumed roles as either Aboriginal inhabitants of

Australia or as early settlers. The drama was a court case with a settler accusing an Aboriginal of stealing food from his property. Dramatised in this way, the complexity of conflict and resolution became readily apparent as arguments ensued over such related issues as the private ownership views of the settlers vs. the view of the Aboriginals that they coexisted with the land that could not be “owned”.

Educator Kieran Egan (1985, 1986, 1988) advocated that we view narrative as a tool to construct meaning and implied that it is the adherence of the classroom programme to the conflict and resolution aspect of narrative that provides potential for a meaningful and integrated curriculum. He suggests that there should be an engaging beginning that highlights the conflict to be explored through aspects of the curriculum before arriving at some resolution. The conflict might be good vs. evil or perhaps freedom vs. servitude – something with an emotional, humanistic factor. Explorations to resolve the conflict would require a variety of cognitive skills in potentially all disciplines. Narrative plots offer models often paralleling human conflicts and dilemmas and suggesting possible solutions. The implication is that students who study narrative may amass a repertoire of problem-solving strategies.

Characters and Roles

MacIntyre (1984) compares our life scripts to narratives in that we have certain roles to play and we learn the intricacies of our roles from our culture’s stories. “ We enter human society...with one or more imputed characters – roles into which we have been drafted and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed.” He further cautions that “Deprive children of stories and you leave them anxious

stutterers in their actions as well as in their words”(p. 216). Again, we have the notion that stories are linked equally to words and actions and the implication that society will be fragmented without the cohesion of meaning provided through using narrative in teaching our children. Through modelling, narrative helps to define which characters are permitted on the cultural stage. This fosters a realisation of both expectations and limits simultaneously nurturing a tolerance for a tremendous variety of characters. Narrative plots are also models in that they parallel human conflicts and dilemmas and may suggest possible solutions. In *I am David* (Holm, 1965), for example, David, separated from his family in war, is freed from a camp and goes on a journey to find his family. On the way he must learn skills of survival and autonomy, but he must also relearn trust. As David deals with the conflict of dependence vs. autonomy, survival vs. perishing and trust vs. distrust, he is a model for any youth on life’s journey who must face some or all of these challenges.

David remembered all the pain and bitterness he had ever known – and how much he could remember in such a short time! He recalled, too, all the good things he had learned about since he had gained his freedom – beauty, laughter, music and kind people, Maria, and a tree smothered in pink blossom, a dog to walk by his side, and a place to aim for...(Holm, 1965, p. 184)

Voice

Persuading someone to adopt our viewpoint means making our story real to them so they adopt it as their own. Connor (1999) emphasises that “one of the most difficult,

but most crucial historiographical lessons to learn, is that there is ‘no such thing as history, only histories’ – it all depends who is telling the story. Understanding that the storyteller – wittingly or unwittingly – selects, highlights, obscures, evades and manipulates ‘the facts’, is also one of the tenets underpinning critical literacy and informed social action” (p. 4).

Historical novelists intentionally weave fiction with nonfiction to engage the imagination of the reader and to evoke the details of events that would be lost or meaningless without a story to tie the events together. In a memorable historical novel, Haley (1976) reconstructed history in presenting the story of *Roots* tracing his family history from the birth of his ancestor Kunte Kinte in Africa in 1750 through generations of slavery in America to a contemporary family setting of scholars and professionals. He used fiction to fill in the gaps in the facts to create his narrative. The fictional aspects of his account make it truer because it lends relevance and credibility to the reader. Another example is Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996) in which she fills in a scant outline provided by publicity on the mid nineteenth century murder trial of Grace Marks and some prison records. This is a work of fiction but so carefully researched as to portray quite an accurate picture of life in Canada at this time. An important property of narrative highlighted by the power of such historical novels is that sometimes more truth can come out of fact and fiction being merged than in non-fiction.

There is support in this premise for teachers to encourage the links between literature and cultural studies as they use story to foster the development of critical literacy skills as well as an understanding of historical events. Furthermore, not only in

listening, but by being granted the opportunity to tell their own stories based on their own histories or in which they assume the voice of a selected character or historical person, children are given a forum for developing cognitive skills.

Throughout the construction process, judgments and references are required at two levels: about discrete items of information and about the adequacy of the unfolding story. Selecting, comparing, inferring, arranging and revising are activities, which we regard as cognitive strategies (Robinson and Hawpe, 1986, p. 116).

This all happens in a humanistic context when facts are merged with feelings. “One’s emotions, imagination and intellect mutually support and enrich one another. Our positive feelings give us the strength to develop our rationality” (Bettleheim, 1997, p. 4).

Audience Perspective

Since each teller will create a story based on the same events in a unique way, and each listener will hear the story differently depending on what experiences and feelings they bring to bear, how can we judge the truth in a narrative? Is the story that is believed by a society or by a court representing a society necessarily the one that is

the truest, or is truth always relative? I recall the film *Amistad*¹⁷ (motion picture, 1997) in which John Quincy Adams challenges the young lawyer defending the mutinous slaves with the question, “What is their story?” In fact, the lawyer doesn’t know and Adams advises, “It is the one who tells the best story who wins the case.” The young lawyer then perseveres to learn “their story” and is ultimately successful in his defence. There is an implication here that the most persuasive story is the one most able to incorporate the known facts in weaving a credible tale.

A jury – perhaps more aptly referred to as “the audience” – is always present when we tell our story. This audience might be our own consciousness reflecting and making sense of our actions as we relive them and put them in context, or it might be a parent, a colleague, a friend, a stranger or a group of any of these. If we are telling our stories orally, then the characteristics of the audience might modify our telling. “The story is being told to particular people; it might have taken a different form if someone else were the listener” (Reissman, 1993, p. 11). If the story is written in the form of a personal letter, then the writer probably anticipates the receiver’s response to his/her statements. If the story is written for a public reading, then the audience is imagined and more generalised. In all cases, narrative provides a venue for dramatic engagement from the audience perspective because each and every person will find elements in the story with which he or she can identify.

¹⁷ *Amistad* – the story of a slave ship mutiny in 1839 and the subsequent trial of the recaptured slaves in 1841.

Integrative Force

Narrative, not only naturally merges fiction and non-fiction, real and imagined accounts, but it is a naturally integrating force for disciplines. Polkinghorne (1988), a narrative psychologist, delineates the idea that narrative is our tool for constructing the meaning of the world by explaining that “the narrative scheme serves as a lens through which the apparently independent and disconnected elements of existence are seen as parts of a whole” (p. 36). Story is thus a natural integrating force for the classroom. Students are engaged and motivated by story as it lays the groundwork for investigations in language, cultural studies or mathematics. Ideas and facts are integrated, connected to classroom events, and interpreted by story. "Through story, then, teachers transform knowledge of content into a form that plays itself out in the time and space of classrooms" (Carter, 1993,p. 173).

Cultural Mediator

Bruner indicates that one of the properties of narrative is its ability to “forge links between the exceptional and the ordinary” (1990, p. 47). The stories of a culture perpetuate its mores and traditions, but the conflict and resolution structure of a narrative allow for negotiated meaning when there is a conflict, when intent must be considered. Narrative “mediates between the canonical world of culture and the more idiosyncratic world of beliefs, desires and hopes” (1990, p. 52). So one of the properties of narrative is a tool for moral decision-making. Narrative engages us to stay with the story until we find a suitable ending to support our cultural values, experiences and feelings, even if the ending might be contrary to traditions and habits. The decision making involves prioritising some values over others to make the preferred ending suit the selected chain of events.

A timely example in Western Australia is the forestry clearing issue. People inhabit or tie themselves to ancient trees to save them. On the one hand, we hear about interdependent life in the forest including narratives of people, animals and the trees themselves, while, on the other hand, the forestry workers relate how they will lose their livelihood if forest clearing is suspended. Each view has strong support with selected past and present events that contribute to a future proposed resolution. Narrative form is used to make people envision an outcome and actual stories are used to engage support. In using narrative to educate children, we give them a cognitive tool with moral and ethical implications through which to identify the nature of conflict, to prioritise values, to predict possible outcomes, and to support a feasible resolution.

Change in Perspective – History and Reconciliation

Sometimes, instead of guiding people forward to imagine different endings, we change views by going backwards and, in effect, change the beginning or create a different beginning by revealing new facts, variables or perspectives. This shows the conflict in a new light and alters the resolution. Presently, in Australia, the history of the Aboriginal relationships with European settlers is being rewritten. Several writers, among them Henry Reynolds, the Queensland historian, have condemned

The Great Silence.

The more I read, the clearer it became that between 1900 and the 1960's the Aborigines were virtually written out of Australian history. 'The Great

Australian Silence' settled over the new nation soon after Federation and was unbroken for over half a century" (Reynolds, 1999, p. 94).

Reynolds breaks the silence, relating in first person how he became aware of injustices levied on fellow Australians. He listened to oral histories, read colonial journals, correspondence and records. It is difficult for the reader's views not to alter as one journeys back in history identifying with Henry Reynolds' first person story.

Reading *Why Weren't We Told?* provides a good example of how we use narrative to explain our viewpoint. Historians portrayed a picture of white settlement with little violence. The truth has now been revealed and Reynolds reports that records indicate that, in Australia, while 2500 settlers were killed by Aborigines, over 20,000 Aborigines were "killed as a direct result of conflict with the settlers" (1999, p. 113). With these new facts, history books no longer bear the semblance of truth and need to be updated to be credible to readers and listeners.

In the case of indigenous peoples, reconciliation is about the reweaving of stories to acknowledge the factual basis. The Aboriginal people of Australia

"want to have the truth told about numerous things – about the taking of the children, about the exploitation of labour, the systematic abuse of women. But above all is the matter of violence, the long history of frontier conflict. They want white Australia to own, to accept, and to identify with a past that they know only too well. Reconciliation means the reconciling of the two stories about what happened when pioneer settlers met indigenous people all around a vast moving, ragged frontier" (Reynolds, 1999, p. 126).

Reynolds uses the phrase 'reconciliation of story'. He is acknowledging the powerful attribute of narrative as a tool of negotiation.

He also mentions "the two stories". Having unearthed the evidence of extraordinary violence towards the Aboriginal people, he needed to answer the question, "Why?"

So he continues to investigate to find that the early settlers acted out of a real and desperate fear. The burning of homes, the driving away of cattle and the deaths that occurred in these silent night-time raids threatened the economic viability of many of the settlements (1999, pp. 140-142).

Having read so many accounts of anxiety and anguish, I came both to understand and sympathise with the plight of beleaguered pioneers, their own often violent response to the stress of the frontier notwithstanding. Fear rendered their violence much more explicable and their hatred more understandable. It made the pioneer far less heroic but much more human. In a sense, the image of the heroic frontiersman depended on the existence of the inoffensive Aborigines (Reynolds 1999, p. 142-143).

A parallel denial of history occurred in the USA regarding the Native Americans. Growing up in America, the only image I had of these indigenous people was the "Indians" from Cowboy and Indian pictures where they were portrayed as savages to the civilised cowboys, evil to the good. I recall as an older primary school child that Alvin Josephy, Jr. came to speak to my school with stories and pictures to be used in a book he was publishing, *The Patriot Chiefs* (1961), on Native Americans. This was my first inkling that "westerns" were pure fabrication. The American Indians were

not “the bad guys” – although they occasionally committed evil acts, they also committed heroic acts. The cowboys were not “the good guys” – although from time to time they were heroic, they also committed many unwarranted violent acts. Rewriting stories that are viewed as ‘history’ takes a long time. It means uncovering details and revisiting stories until we can experience them as truthful representation of what occurred. Prior to my move from the USA to Australia in 1975, cowboy pictures were in the fantasy basket where they belonged, as too many facts had surfaced to allow them to represent history. There was an interest and awareness of the way Indians were being treated on reservations and I participated in concerned discussions with anthropologists and sociologists. Dee Brown’s book published in 1970, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* may have revealed America’s silent history in a similar way to Reynolds’ disclosure of the hidden Australian story. Brown unearthed the facts from oral histories and official records that would enable the American Indians’ story to be told and, in effect, the story was rewritten by delving into the past.

This is not a cheerful book, but history has a way of intruding upon the present, and perhaps those who read it will have a clearer understanding of what the American Indian is, by knowing what he was. They may be surprised to hear words of gentle reasonableness coming from the mouths of Indians stereotyped in the American myth as ruthless savages. They may learn something about their own relationship to the earth from a people who were true conservationists. The Indians knew that life was equated with the earth and its resources, that America was a paradise, and they could not comprehend

why the intruders from the East were determined to destroy all that was Indian as well as America itself.” (D.Brown, 1970 p. xvi-xvii)

Nevertheless, there was still little mention of the Native Americans in school curriculums; their story remained a silent history. I don't know when the change occurred but I do know that when I went back with my family for a year in 1994, a study of Native American culture was an integral part of the primary school curriculum. History had been rewritten in accordance with fact and, in so doing, the beauty of the Native American culture was allowed to be shared. As with indigenous people in Australia, the price of denying their stories was to deprive students of exposure to a rich culture. American children now study the indigenous stories, crafts and philosophy of Native Americans. Similarly, Aboriginal mythology, philosophy, art and bush craft now inspire Australian children. Children can now learn from the narratives of these oral cultures precisely because the details of their historical narratives have been revealed.

Although Henry Reynolds contributed significantly to my education about the Aboriginal people, it began with reading novels about the “stolen generation”, such as Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl* (1987) and Alice Nannup's *When the Pelican Laughed* (1992). In both autobiographies, these courageous women describe being kidnapped from their families by the government because they were partially white, being brought up in orphanages and trained to serve Caucasian families. Sally Dingo's (1997) book, entitled *Dingo*, also uses first person to share her journey of learning about Aborigines. In her case, she tells her own story from a Caucasian viewpoint about getting to know the Aboriginal family into which she married. It is a

gripping tale because we are on the journey with her. It is a powerful story, because the tale of this family is the tale of many families striving to maintain a purpose, a dignity and a rich culture in the face of prejudice, antagonism, and limited opportunities. In all three books narrative bridges the individual message with historical, communal meaning.

Life Cycle Reflection

MacIntyre suggests that narrative is our pathway to meaning, because our lives are a narrative. “And to someone who says that in life there are no endings, or that final partings take place only in stories, one is tempted to reply, ‘But have you never heard of death?’ ” (1984, p. 212) The power of narrative is that it mirrors our own life space. This effect is heightened by the overlap of life narratives; the interplay of generations that gives us clues to interpreting our own life events.

When we enter human life, it is as if we walk on stage into
a play whose enactment is already in process – a play whose
somewhat open plot determines what parts we may play and
toward what denouements we may be heading. Others on stage
already have a sense of what the play is about, enough of a sense to
make negotiation with a newcomer possible (Bruner, 1990, p. 34).

When one begins to view one’s own life as a personal narrative, one can harness its properties to deepen understanding of our own life journey and to effect change. We can suppose varied endings to our circumstances and brainstorm a variety of solutions to our conflicts.

Gergen and Gergen (1986, p. 27) note that narrative becomes a powerful psychotherapy tool when patients feel empowered to identify their conflict and look toward possible positive resolutions. They identify three potential paths and note that most lives are a combination of the three:

1. Progressive — The progression toward the goal is enhanced such as in overcoming shyness;
2. Depressive¹⁸ — the progression toward the goal is impeded (can't control life);
and
3. Stable — no change occurs.

As in the narratives of our lives, classic literary forms are also combinations so that tragedy is a progressive/depressive, comedy is a depressive/progressive and romance is a series of depressive/progressive steps. Changing the ending of our subnarrative demands that we accept that events are connected and move over time (Gergen and Gergen, 1986, p. 25), and that there are times of choice when we can alter the probable ending of our stories by imagining what that might be.

The Italian film, *Life is Beautiful* (1999), is a wonderful example of a character turning a tragedy with a depressive form, into a progressive one. Basically it is the story of a young man who always writes his own story according to a positive script

¹⁸ depressive – The term 'depressive' has been used in lieu of the term 'regressive' used by Gergen and Gergen as regressive might infer moving backwards or being reduced to simpler forms, whereas the meaning was meant to imply a tragic-like or depressive nature.

no matter what besets him. This practice enables him to entwine his 4-year-old son in a hopeful story that ensures the child's survival in the midst of the horrors of a concentration camp. The protagonist helps his son to view the holocaust as a survival game with a prize task at the end. The story is one representation of reality. Another story, equally real but told more tragically, might have led to depression and certain death.

Narrative mirrors our lives with a myriad of choices at every turning point.

Paradoxically, each individual's narrative also mirrors the history of mankind.

Children's mythic understandings parallel that of traditional oral cultures. Their move from myth and magic to a world of rationality and reality reflects historical orientations beginning with the ancient Greeks. By early adolescence, their thought processes are more like the philosophic understandings, the search for theoretical truth, particularly characterising seventeenth through nineteenth century orientations. (Finser, 1994; Egan, 1997).

Having delved into the literature of narratology, I became even more convinced that narrative may be the single most powerful educational tool available to us because it is the primary tool of meaning construction. Its extraordinary properties are evident. The properties of narrative discussed above (including dramatic engagement, temporality, conflict and resolution, characters and roles, integration, cultural mediation, perspective change – history and reconciliation, and life cycle reflection) are frequently present within a single narrative work whether fiction or non-fiction. This is apparent when one considers the two narratives that I am reading and reflecting on at the moment: firstly, *Fortune's Rocks* (1999) by Anita Shreve, a

literary narrative set in the early 20th century, and secondly, *The History of the Olympic Games*.

Two Narratives – A Novel and a History

A Novel

In *Fortune's Rocks* dramatic **engagement** begins in the first paragraph when the reader encounters a young woman, who, having shed her boots and stockings, is walking along the beach. Her every movement is noted by male admirers. One's senses are engaged by a visual scene of the beach combined with the smell of the "ocean air as if it were smelling salts" and the tactile sensation as "she touches the linen brim of her hat" (Shreve, 1999, p. 3). One is drawn in by the senses, but also by the situation – at one time or another, most people dream of being admired.

The **temporality**, the promise of more to come, is also suggested early in the first chapter. "This first brief awareness of desire – and of being the object of desire, a state of which she has had no previous hint – comes to her as a kind of slow seizure, as of air compressing itself all around her, and causes what seems to be the first faint shudder of her adult life" (Shreve, 1999, p.3). One is instantly engaged by this reference to the temporality of human life. As references are made to childhood past and to being on the eve of adulthood, we understandingly confront the next phase of Olympia's life with her. Every young adult or adult reader can relate to this time reference. We are also effortlessly transported back in time by the narrative to when women wore boots and stockings and linen brimmed hats even to the beach.

The central **conflict** of this story is epitomized by a trial when it is to be decided if Olympia Biddeford can regain the custody of her illegitimate child who was taken from her at birth or whether he will remain in foster care. As is normally the case, the conflict is more involved than this, however – it is also about having a purposeful loving life vs. a miserable lonely one and about experiencing passion vs. a long-term married relationship. The **resolution** is life-like in its complexity. Although regaining custody, Olympia does not take her child from his foster parents and thus her dream of experiencing conventional motherhood is thwarted. She has in a sense both “lost” and “won”. Nevertheless, she does find a purposeful life by helping other young women to keep their offspring and she does find an enduring loving relationship.

Part of the impact of the novel is in presenting **characters** whose complexity forces us to move away from judging them as good or bad, intelligent or foolish. Olympia is a dutiful, upper middle class, refined and educated daughter but she is also a very independent person capable of deep and passionate emotions and commitment. This combination creates a humanism with which one can relate parallel to the sympathy evoked for Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850/1981). The male protagonist, John Haskell, is a caring physician working for improving conditions for the deprived in society; he is also an essay writer and a caring, sensitive lover. Yet, by falling prey to his emotions, he hurts everyone he loves.

We hear Olympia’s **voice** from a century ago pleading the case of a woman born in an era where a life could be ruined by actions quite acceptable today. We, **the audience**, are asked to view past events as a contemporary jury. In a sense, Shreve's use of the

properties of voice and audience underscores the fact that similar human dilemmas reappear in all decades, although, in different guises.

The **integrated** pathways one can choose for further exploration from this novel are many and varied. Firstly, there is frequent reference to the mill conditions which might lead the reader to want to explore early factory life, the rights of children, or factory related disease. One might wish to review how society's structure and class structure changed with the growth of factory work. One might choose to further explore the rights of women regarding education, job prospects, finances, property and children which might lead to a study of the suffragette movement. Alternatively, one might explore fashion in the early 20th century, or artistically explore the settings of the beach side vistas or factory towns. This novel could also provide a catalyst for discussions on morality.

For **cultural mediation**, *Fortune's Rocks* presents two stories for one's consideration. On the one hand, we are asked to believe that a woman who has an affair with a married man is depraved, immoral and in no way a fit person to be mother to a small boy. On the other hand, we are asked to believe that this same person is a courageous, purposeful woman, who would be a nurturing mother. Witnessing many heroic qualities of the character, Olympia, one begins to wonder how she could be so condemned by society. Many readers engaged in this narrative will be persuaded to believe the latter story when the protagonist gives her child up for his own happiness. Through this Solomon archetype action, one cannot help but be persuaded that she is, in fact, a virtuous woman. Having accepted this, the reader can be persuaded that the persecution of single unmarried mothers is grossly unfair.

Hearing stories such as Olympia's, a history that condemns single unmarried mothers is called into question. Are two parent families always preferable for the child?

Likewise, hearing stories such as that of the foster parents, Albertine and Telsphore Bolduc, one wonders if it can be assumed that a child is better off in a home that can offer more material opportunities. Similarly, as the tragic tales of children working in factories are revealed, one can no longer express support for factory labour practices. As the rigidity of viewpoints is dissolved through the telling of stories – in the case of unwed mothers and factory workers, a **change in perspective** occurs and **reconciliation** becomes possible.

Fortune's Rock is a linear tale of a young woman's life from 15-27 and yet it is also a circular tale in many regards. For one thing, the protagonist returns to the scene of her joy and tragedy where her youthful passions are relived at the deeper level of commitment to her cause – having a say in her child's life and allowing other single mothers to have the same choice. Her lover becomes her partner in her mature life's work. It is also a circular tale in that it is the story of a person fighting a restrictive society, a tale replayed in various forms in every culture and in every era. In some manner Olympia and John's lives **mirror our own lives** in that, despite the difference in time frame, we all mature physically and change emotionally and cognitively as we face life's challenges and are called upon to make moral decisions.

A History

I have also been revisiting Greek history with the Story of the Olympics and, similarly, in historical narrative form, one becomes aware of the same powerful

narrative properties contributing to motivation and understanding. I was **engaged** by the whole concept of the Olympics – extraordinary to think of different city-states coming together to compete on equal terms over 2000 years ago!

The first Olympic games were held in 776 BC in honor of Zeus, king of the Greek gods. They were held every four years until AD 394 – a period of nearly 1200 years (Purdy and Sandak, 1982, p. 4).

Temporality played a role in my wanting to go back in time to revisit the first Olympics and explains why I carefully viewed a timeline on the Web describing the torch carrying tradition and ceremony throughout the years. The **conflict** in the modern Olympics is the rivalry between nations and athletes. In Ancient Greece, it was a rivalry between the city-states including the trading Corinthians, the military minded Spartans, the culture minded Athenians and others. My interest focused on the great contrast between the Spartans and the Athenians, with totally contrasting lifestyles and values. The Spartans took the male offspring away from their parents at age 7 to raise them in austere military camps – not to live at home again until the Age of 30. Literacy was not valued but only physical prowess. Women in Sparta, on the other hand, were fairly liberated, being the major landowners. How different from Athens where culture was lauded and artists, philosophers and playwrights respected. Sparta was autocratic, whereas Athens formed the first democracy. In Sparta, the human form was appreciated only for its use as a military machine; in Athens the beauty of the human form was immortalized in sculptures. In fact, a reverence for

beauty and balance led to such breathtaking architecture as the Acropolis. How curious to be at the early Olympics, a forum for these differences!

I find myself imagining my **role** as a Spartan and then as an Athenian. As a Spartan male, I led “a harsh and often brutal life in the soldiers barracks” (Donn, 2000,p.3). I was hungry; I lived a life of “discipline, self denial and simplicity” (Donn, 2000, p. 9). I didn’t mind lying and cheating if it helped me to win the battle. As a Spartan woman, I felt more fortunate than women in other city states. When I was at school I learned “wrestling, gymnastics and combat skills” (Donn, 2000, p. 10). As an adult, I was a property owner with slaves to do my work.

Role-playing Athenian characters, I found I was more comfortable with the male than the female role. As a boy, I was educated, trained in the arts and prepared for peace and war. As a man, I was away from home a great deal – working in the fields or running the government. In contrast, as a girl, I had very little education and spent most of my time in the courtyard of my home. Even as a woman I had “very limited freedom outside the home” (Donn, 2000, p. 5) My job was to run the household and direct the slaves. I was not allowed to attend the Olympic Games “as the participants in the games did not wear clothes” (Donn, 2000, p. 6).

Exploring ancient Greece in this way, one hears the **voice** of the Spartans opting for physical superiority and military prowess. One also hears the **voice** of the Athenians promoting art, theatre, democracy and fair play. Detailed descriptions of life in these city-states allow the audience to interact with these early societies and evaluate aspects of the contrasting cultures for themselves.

Integration occurred for me as, engaged and motivated, I set out to learn more about Ancient Greece. Some of the explorations that have resulted from the story of the Olympics with my own children and in other classes I have visited have included revisiting the history of the alphabet and having a debate over Plato's concern that writing would have a negative effect on culture in that it is a "mechanical inhuman way of processing knowledge, unresponsive to questions and destructive of memory" (Ong, 1982, p. 24). We have compared our own democracy to that of Athens. We have studied some of the myths – even rewriting some in contemporary terms such as *Theseus and the Minotaur*, *King Midas and the Golden Touch*, *Hercules and the Twelve Labours*. Other stories explored, dramatised and transformed were *Aesop's Fables* and *The History of the Trojan Horse*. Students studied the philosophers, dressed in Greek dress, built Greek temples and houses and identified Doric, Ionic and Corinthian pillars in an Australian city. They enjoyed participating in a mock Olympics and comparing these games to our own organised for Sydney in 2000. Great Greek mathematicians such as Pythagorus and Euclid gave new meaning to the study of geometry. Personally, we have looked at our own heroes and why we chose them. Are they athletes, artists, or scholars? In short, the richness of the story of the history of the Olympics, which led to an exploration of life in ancient Greece, integrated study in all the disciplines.

Story can be a **cultural mediator** for many issues arising out of a study of the early Olympics and ancient Greece. As history revealed, the democratic government model was more enduring than the hierarchical Spartan model. One also notes that to be in the early Olympics, one had to be a free Greek male. All the city-states had slavery.

Debating the issue of liberty vs. servitude can lead to many stories throughout history and the world and even an exploration of how our freedom is ensured in Australia. Is everyone free? Are there people in our own country who are denied liberty?

Olympic game politics is another area that one might shed light on through a study of the early games (Classics Dept., 1996. “Politics, nationalism, commercialism and athletics were intimately related in the ancient Greek games.” Sotades in the 99th Olympics of Ancient Greece won the long race for the Cretans. During the next festival he made himself an Ephesian (Classics Dept., 1996). Knowing that political rivalries were a characteristic of games over 2000 years ago changes our perspective. Perhaps it isn’t globalisation or a lack of nationalism that causes athletes to move from one country to another. Perhaps it has always been a question of personal fame and income. Then, as now, winning athletes are viewed as heroes and the politics doesn’t destroy this. This historical narrative can be viewed in its linearity as the games are traced for almost 2500 years as well as cyclically as the issues created when different groups – countries or city-states come together repeat themselves in different forms.

From a perusal of *Fortune’s Rocks*, a literary narrative, and *The History of the Olympics*, an historical narrative, one can see that the narrative properties discussed in this chapter are clearly present in some form in these very different stories. In addition, each of these narratives incorporates several substories that also have striking narrative properties that alter our thoughts and ways of perceiving our world.

Humans are storied animals. Story is the primary structure through which humans think, relate and communicate. We invent stories and live stories because they are an integral part of being human (Sillick, 1997, p. 65).

This literature review reveals that narrative is a particularly important tool in helping the child construct herself/himself — to create her/his own story. It is also apparent that there is a broad spectrum of applications of narrative related to its varied properties and characteristics. On one level, narrative can be used as context for linguistic and genre studies and to nurture cognitive skills related to the sequencing and prioritising of events. On another level, there are indications that narrative can assist one's personal journey by: providing metaphorical and biographical models; fostering self-discovery by forging connections between varied interests and concerns; and enhancing problem solving skills and adaptation to cultural change. Finally, there is some indication that narrative can be viewed in a transformational sense — effecting psychological change and spiritual development. (Refer to Chapters VI and VII).

Why, then, is story not universally recognised and utilised as a critical educational tool? Why are the extraordinary properties of this ancient form of discourse only now being rediscovered? The answer lies in a view of cognition that demanded the civilised worldview story as being unscientific (Bruner, 1990). It is only in recent decades, with the acceptance of qualitative research, that the richness and variability of thought process that narrative entails has re-emerged in educated culture (Robinson and Hawpe, 1986, p. 111). In a postmodern world, with an interest in the individual voice and a place for the coexistence of varied interpretations, constructivist

educational ideas promoted in pockets early in the 20th century have now begun to dominate the educational scene (Larouchelle and Bednarz, 1998). Narrative has an essential place in constructivism and hence in contemporary education. By interviewing teachers from varied educational backgrounds, I wanted to determine the ways narrative is being used in classrooms to promote cognitive, cultural and self-understanding. I wanted to gather stories about using story.