

“Determined women at work”

Group construction of narrative meaning

Trena M. Paulus, Marianne Woodside and Mary Ziegler

University of Tennessee

Although interest in narrative research is increasing, little attention has been paid to how individual stories become a group narrative. An online environment provides a rich opportunity to capture asynchronous group storytelling as it occurs in a formal class environment. This study focused on how a group story is created. Data included individual stories of four graduate student participants and the threads from their three-week, online discussion. Data analysis was collaborative among three researchers. The four participants used the online discussion to continue developing their own individual stories and to develop a group story. The women used temporality, shared themes, and epiphany to construct a story together. They extended a sense of agency to each other and to the group, using this aspect of their dialogue to reframe and recast individual stories and the group story. Implications for teaching and learning environments are discussed.

Keywords: Higher education, Blended learning, Online learning, Online discussion, Group meaning-making, Group story, Dialogue, Adult education

Introduction

Although interest in narrative is gaining momentum in social science research, less attention has been paid to the role that narrative plays in a higher education learning environment. Narrative can be powerful when applied in a learning context. “Through narrative we construct, reconstruct, and in some ways reinvent yesterday and tomorrow” (Bruner, 2002, p. 93). People live storied lives and telling and retelling one’s story is a fundamental way that an individual makes sense of

Request for further information should be directed to Trena Paulus, 515 Bailey Education Complex, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996–3452, E-Mail: tpaulus@utk.edu

her experiences. "The meaning of life cannot be understood outside the narrative process" (Jarvinen, 2004, p. 57). Few formal face-to-face learning environments allow sufficient time for learners to exchange their individual stories or collaborate in making sense of them, even though Connelly and Clandinin (1990) say, "education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories" (p. 2). An online environment overcomes time constraints and allows for asynchronous storytelling by individuals and interpretation by small groups. This paper describes how a small group of graduate students shared their individual life stories and constructed meaning together through online discussions.

Review of the literature

There is a human yearning to make sense of experience through narrative and not only through empirical fact (Bruner, 2002). Rather than a report of an event, narrative is a specific mode of constructing and constituting reality that gives meaning to the experience of a fundamentally unstable human condition (Brockmeier & Harre, 1997). Because life events do not have a meaning inherently assigned, narrative concerns itself with past actions and how individuals make meaning of those actions. Polkinghorne (1988) defines narrative as "the primary scheme by means of which human existence is rendered meaningful" (p. 11) and "linking individual human actions and events into interrelated aspects of an understandable composite" (p. 13). Weaving a succession of incidents into a unified whole is what makes narrative different from other types of texts, for example argument (Polkinghorne, 1995). Focused on human action, stories have characters and a plot that evolves over time (Brockmeier & Harre, 1997).

Just as a story makes an individual life coherent, shared stories, and a shared way of telling a story, make groups coherent (Johnstone, 1990). Less attention has been paid to how shared stories are created by groups. As individuals become members of groups, two categories of stories emerge, the telling of the individual story and the story that is "co-produced" by the group (Housley, 2000; Jones, 2004; Racine & Sevigny, 2001). The individual story provides an opportunity for the teller to construct, describe and understand life experiences. Self-expression and self-representation, validated by others, affirms the teller and encourages the development of new meanings and insights (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; Dean, 1995; Jones, 2004). Within the group context, sharing stories reduces story tellers' isolation and allows them to receive empathy and sympathy (Jones, 2004; Racine & Sevigny, 2001).

Group stories emerge as individuals story their life experiences together. Participants of the group co-construct knowledge and "co-produce" stories (Housley, 2000), which are expanded beyond the story teller/listener paradigm (Bavelas,

Coates, & Johnson, 2000). Group stories can create new information on specific topics (Housley, 2000), empower members of a group to re-story cultural myths or norms (Jones, 2004), produce collective stories that extend the “isolated individual experience” (Racine & Sevigny, 2001), and articulate the moral issues that emerge from violent or war torn environments (Jackson, 2005). The group story results in a shared cultural understanding that reinforces the positive elements of the stories of individual members (Rappaport, 1995). To understand group meaning-making through story, we identified characteristics that form the foundation for understanding the distinctiveness of narrative as a form of discourse. These characteristics are plot, temporality, epiphany, and agency/communion.

Plot

A distinctive feature of narrative is its focus on a unified whole; individual events cannot be understood in isolation but are connected to other events in an individual’s life. In addition to temporal order, stories must have a point (Bruner, 2002). Mishler (1999) distinguishes between the order of the told and the order of the telling. The order of the told refers to an assumed sequence of actual events. The order of the telling depends on the context and audience and may or may not correspond to the actual sequence of events. For example, in telling about attending a sports event, a person might begin a narrative by starting at the ending with telling which team won. Similarly, when individuals tell about their life experiences, they may also be different from the “told.” A plot is the way that a person organizes episodes in her life into a meaningful story. Incidents get their meaning because of their relationship to the overall plot. “The plot mediates between the shattered and chaotic elements of lived experience and the history taken as a whole” (Jarvinen, 2004, p. 48).

Temporality

A story happens in time and its meaning changes as time passes. “Narrative is always controlled by the concept of time, and by the recognition that temporality is the primary dimension of human existence” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 20). The events of a story that occurred in the past are reconstructed in the present. Meaning is continually subjected to reconstruction over time. “Narratives allow storytellers to construct a continuous self whose past is logically related to its present” (Jarvinen, 2004, p. 57). Plots of life stories have a chronological sequence (Labov & Waletzky, 1967), but the sequence may be recognizable only after the events have occurred when, as Polkinghorne (1988) claims, we join everyday actions and events into episodic units. The present is the holding together of the past and the future as possibilities — the past is as subject to revision as is the future.

Epiphany

Epiphany describes the shift into a state of new perception, described popularly as an “a-ha moment” or turning point (Denzin, 2001). A characteristic of being human is having expectations about how nature works and how others will respond (Bruner, 2002). The disruptions of these expectations by something unforeseen are foundational to narrative. “Narrative is a recounting of human plans gone off the track, expectations gone awry” (Bruner, 2002, p. 31). The disruption of the expected, or a crisis, has the potential to expand or create new perceptions that can be epiphanic or transformational (Kegan, 1994; Mezirow, 2000). According to Denzin (2001) a major epiphany takes place as a singular shattering event that alters every aspect of a person’s life; one becomes aware that life is irrevocably changed. A minor epiphany is an accumulation of small events that build up over time leading to an awareness that slowly comes into focus (Denzin, 2001). These turning points and discontinuities constitute a part of self-story (Mishler, 1999) that, according to Bruner (2002), are at the heart of narrative because they disrupt the expected turn of events.

Agency/communion

According to Bruner (1991), agency, which presupposes choice and some element of freedom, is always present in narrative and is an inherent part of adult development (Kegan, 1994). McAdams (1991, 1993) extends the understanding of agency by positioning it in contrast to its counterpart, communion. Agency refers to an individual’s need for autonomy, control, achievement or status, while communion refers to the individual’s desire to participate in something that is larger than the self and includes relating to others in caring ways, dialogue, and helping. Individuals who are agentic describe themselves as self-advocates, active on their own behalf, and motivated by power and achievement. Agentic beliefs value individual rights over social responsibilities. Communion, in contrast, describes the magnetic pull toward community and belonging, even in a society that values agency. Love and compassion are prized as the ultimate human virtues and human interdependence is more valued than individual freedom. Communal beliefs value interpersonal relationships more than individual freedom. “Agency and communion are the central thematic lines in the self-defining stories that adults construct to provide their lives with unity and purpose” (McAdams, 1996, p 341).

How do these four aspects of narrative apply when individuals are part of a group and co-construct a story? The authors who focus on narrative and constructing meaning at the group level (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; Dean, 1995; Jones, 2004; Racine & Sevigny, 2001) are not explicit about how plot and temporality

contribute to the group story. Even though they discuss the fact that insights occur within the group context, they leave questions about how these aspects play a role in how groups co-construct narrative.

Although group stories are described in the literature, rarely do the descriptions refer to an educational context. It is important for educational researchers to better understand what happens in teaching and learning environments, as these are authentic sites of human interaction and can inform our practice as educators. Online discussions are increasingly integrated into both formal and informal adult learning environments (King, 2002). Asynchronous online discussion makes it possible for learners to talk together without the constraints of space and time. Blended learning environments include both face-to-face and online elements (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003). Online discussion is persistent and can be reviewed multiple times by students, instructors and researchers. It provides a transcript of the discussions that took place among the group and provides a novel context of narrative analysis. Little research has been done from a narrative inquiry perspective as to how individuals share their stories online in educational contexts.

Although the literature examines the process of constructing the individual story (Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 1993) and the outcomes of the group story (Rappaport, 1995), research on the construction of meaning of a group story is underrepresented in the literature. Group narrative has received little attention despite increasing emphasis on social theories of learning and epistemologies such as social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) in social science research. Illuminating this often unacknowledged aspect of narrative has the potential to extend our understanding of teaching and learning contexts. The following research question guided the study: How does a group construct a joint narrative through online discussion?

Method

Most narrative analysis data comes from interviews and this presents challenges for researchers (Lieblich et al. 1998.) In this study we analyze the online discussion of a small group of four female graduate students completing a group assignment on life stories for their adult development course. We look at the online discussion as an example of authentic group storytelling in an educational context. Riessman (1993) outlines five levels of representation of narrative in the research process: *attending*, *telling*, *transcribing*, *analyzing* and *reading*. Because we are not analyzing interview data, these first three levels are condensed. The participants told their stories verbally in class and then talked together online, coming up with

new meanings, in a visible, written form archived in the discussion transcript. It is this conversation we are interested in. The issue of *telling* remains — the intended reader/audience of the narrative impacts what is being shared and how the narrative is constructed. As researchers, we re-interpreted the participants' interpretations, providing an alternative reading and meaning. Our analysis became a "hybrid story," giving form to what began as fragments of lives revealed in the telling (Riessman, 1993, p. 13) and concluding with a telling of the group story. We next describe the context for the study, the participants, our data collection and data analysis methods.

Context

In many graduate courses in the social sciences, instructors focus on relaying theoretical content, and in some cases include ways that this content applies in a real-world setting. This structure allows little time for an instructor to understand how students make sense of course content in relation to their own life experience or the experience of others in any depth. A graduate course on adult development that had an online component provided the opportunity to invert the structure of the course. Instead of beginning with theory and ending with application of theory, the course began with the life stories of each member of the class. Over the course of several assignments, concrete life experiences were connected to theory. In addition to changing the structure, another aspect of the course was to foster story telling among small groups of students in contrast to the more typical classroom exchanges that occur primarily between individual students and the instructor.

The graduate course was offered at a large university in the southeastern part of the United States. Eighteen students were enrolled in the course, 16 were female and two were men. In addition to a typical textbook, course readings included a compilation of stories written by authors from a number of different cultural contexts. Stories, including the life stories of the individual class members, provided the foundation for understanding not only the theoretical content but the deeper issues regarding how adults change over their lifespan and how they make meaning of these changes. The class met for 15 weeks with 11 face-to-face meetings. Additionally, the class met online using the university's course management system, Blackboard™.

At the beginning of the semester, the instructor explained that she was conducting research to better understand how small groups interacted online. Students were invited to participate by signing the university's accepted form for participation in a research study. All but one of the fifteen enrolled students agreed to participate. During the first meeting, students provided information about their age, academic program, degree sought, and prior knowledge about adult

development. The basis for creating small groups was to have diverse perspectives on the life course among the group members based on age and academic program type. From an alphabetical list of those enrolled, the instructor placed each student in an age group and a group based on academic program and degree. The instructor formed each group by going down the list of students and selecting different age groups. The goal was to have each member be in a different age group if possible, and if this was not possible, the widest age ranges within a particular group. Students were then assigned to a second group based on their academic program and degree sought. Using this as a criterion for assigning students to a particular group contributed to diversity because students had different theoretical orientations. Because the group was predominantly female, not all groups had both genders. The online groups, created with the widest age range and program type possible, remained the same throughout the semester.

In order for individuals in the groups to get to know one another, they completed an assignment after the first class that asked them to reflect on the key transitions in their life and plot these on a graph that indicated time on one axis and positive/negative on the other axis. In the second class, the small groups met for the first time face-to-face and each person told the story behind the events on his or her graph for approximately 20 to 30 minutes. Others in the group were asked to listen to each of the stories and only ask questions if they needed clarifying information. This face-to-face class was not documented for this study.

After the telling of the story was the writing of the story. Each person wrote a four to six page paper that put a written structure to the oral stories they told in class. Each of these individual life stories were posted in Blackboard™ for the others in the small group to read. From these individual stories, the instructor asked the group to talk about their lives in the online forum, identifying common themes contributing to their adult development. The summary of themes was posted in Blackboard™ for the other groups to read. This first assignment is the focus of our research study. The other course assignments followed a similar pattern in that one included conducting an interview of an older adult, posting the interview for the small group to read, and then identifying themes about the adult's development in the online forum. The final assignment was to identify themes from several fictional stories about individuals from different cultures.

The first assignment was chosen as the focus for this study because the group had not yet been introduced to the theoretical literature, and the themes were drawn from the concrete experiences of the learners' lives. Although this was a course assignment, the grade for this portion of the course was based on whether an individual participated in the discussion, not on the quality of the posts. The instructor wanted to influence how the discussion occurred as little as possible in this type of an academic environment. Therefore, the instructor provided

information about the technical aspects of the online forum but intentionally did not participate, in order to see how the group made meaning on its own.

Participants

We selected the group that was most active during the first assignment. All four members of this group (given the pseudonyms Sally, Millie, Ada and Pearl) had agreed to participate in the research, these four members exchanged more messages than any other group (61 messages in three weeks), and their discussion was the most interactive (with the deepest threads.) The instructor noticed that the level of dialogue occurring among this group was unusual not only as compared to other online groups but also quite different from face to face discussions she had experienced during her years of teaching. Thus we decided to examine systematically what was happening in this online group.

The four participants were Caucasian, their ages range from 24 to 56. They were enrolled in four different academic programs and had not known each other prior to this course. Two were master's students, one was a doctoral student, and one was a non-degree licensure-seeking student.

Appendix A shows the outline of their discussion. Sally posted 16 times, Millie and Ada each posted 15 times, and Pearl posted 12 times. The instructor contributed 3 posts, all related to questions from the group about beginning the task. There were twelve threads total, five of which were begun by Pearl and five by Millie. The longest threads were on the topics of "Relationships" (13 messages, #30–42) and "Questions" (15 messages, #47–61). Each of these threads were eight messages deep, meaning the conversation went back and forth eight times.

Data collection

Data included the individual life stories written by each of the four students, all discussion forum messages exchanged by the group during the three-week assignment period, and the life story summary submitted to the instructor (included in Appendix B). We downloaded the transcripts and organized them by thread for coherence. We replaced real names with pseudonyms and changed details of their stories that would compromise our agreement with the participants to pseudonymize the data.

Data analysis

Researchers bring "theoretical sensitivity" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to data analysis which can be attributed to personal and professional experiences related to the

topic under investigation. We are faculty in the same university department and conducted the study as a team. Although we represent three theoretical perspectives (collaborative online learning, counselor education, and adult education) our common interest is meaning-making and group dialogue.

Riessman (1993, p. 25) suggests researchers ask three questions when representing experience: (a) how is talk transformed into text and how are narrative segments determined, (b) what aspects of the narrative constitute the basis for interpretation, (c) who determines what the narrative means and whether alternative readings are possible. We focused on how the group narrative was constructed through the dialogue. This differs from other forms of narrative analyses that focus primarily on the individual story.

Although the focus of our research was a narrative analysis of the online group dialogue, the life stories represent the foundation or content from which the group initiated the dialogue. We first analyzed each individual's life story to holistically understand the experiences they chose to share with the group. We then used this description as the starting point for analyzing the online discussions.

We then analyzed the online discussion in terms of plot, temporality, epiphany, and agency/communion. We used an iterative process to develop an understanding of the group narrative, working from a research perspective as individuals and as a group negotiating the meanings of the online group dialogue. We met as a team regularly to discuss the findings; between meetings we revised and refined the analysis via email. The revisions in this manuscript also reflect feedback from the refereed review process.

Riessman (1993) suggests four ways of approaching validation in narrative analysis: persuasiveness, correspondence, coherence and pragmatic use. As Riessman has noted, persuasiveness "is greatest when theoretical claims are supported with evidence from informants' accounts and when alternative interpretations of the data are considered" (p. 65). We have attempted to adhere to this criterion for persuasiveness. Correspondence can be achieved through checking the findings with the four participants. We sent the manuscript to three of the four participants (those for whom we had contact information) and asked whether the findings seemed to describe their experiences. Two participants responded, saying "The findings absolutely describe my experiences" and "I would say that this is an accurate representation of our time together as a group."

Our iterative process of data analysis and working as a research team lent coherence to our work. Finally, we have provided a detailed description of our method in hope that others will find our work of pragmatic use.

Findings

Findings are presented in two parts. First, we introduce the four participants by writing a representation of their individual life stories. We have tried to capture the salient individual experiences, which were re-storied throughout the online discussion. We then focus on the heart of the study, the group story that emerged during the online discussion.

Individual narratives

The individual life stories created a springboard for the online discussion that began after each woman had read the stories of the others. The following excerpts from the individual stories provide a window into the contexts and life events that stood out for each woman.

Ada. Ada divided her life into six stages beginning at birth. She names each stage according to the developmental stage it described. In the introductory paragraph of her life story, Ada indicated that relationships form a center point.

Parents, friends, guys, teachers, husbands, kids,... I have tended to identify my learning in terms of the things or people with whom I was hanging around at a particular stage in my life. It has only been recently (the past 6 years or so) that I have come to see my learning as a deep process rooted in *me as an unfolding person* and not necessarily dependent on my proximity with other things/people. Let me explain.

Ada related how individuals provided the context for her emerging sense of self throughout her life. During her early years she recounted the family environment.

I was able to walk inconspicuously in and out of rooms and anywhere I wanted to outside because my dad was always working and my mom was usually on Librium lying down to get away from the ruckus. Don't get me wrong; it was actually a *great* childhood. We had a big family; five kids (I remember three of them being stoned and hilarious much of the time); the overbearing, stressed, alcoholic dad who meant well but blew his fuse way too often to trust; the devoted codependent mom who also tended ballistic, and the typical string of dysfunctional dramas inherent to the sixties and early seventies in the [metropolis on the Eastern seaboard] area.

She described a move to a small southern town during her early teen years as “culture shock” which caused “an introspective funk” that endured until high school. For Ada, “This was the, ‘Oh My God, I Am Unpopular, Ugly, and Have a Funny Accent Stage.’” She described how she retreated into herself to escape how others

made fun of her, talked with an imaginary friend, and confessed to an Episcopal priest who laughed at her predicament.

For each stage of her life, Ada described the relationships or lack thereof that were salient and concluded the description of the stage with the lessons that she learned about herself and the strengths and skills she developed. For example, concluding her early childhood, she wrote, “I learned who was who in this time: the sometimes-bizarre characters that made up my family, the friends that were nice and the others who weren’t. I remember...having the clear realization that I was *separate* from everyone I knew.” From her early teen years, Ada concluded, “This period was pretty awful. Now that I think back on it, it was probably the time I built my work ethic.” Relationships with others are a key aspect of Ada’s story.

Sally. Sally began her life story at age eighteen. Sally described her efforts to please her parents that began early in her life and continued through her adult years. She articulated the ways in which her parents were emotionally abusive, a sharp contrast to the emotional support they gave to her brothers.

I was angry that the principles and values of Christianity and what I was told to be in church, was inconsistent with what I experienced at home. My parents did not practice what they preached. They exemplified behaviors that were emotionally abusive, and therefore I never felt a sense of belonging or love within my family. I experienced emotional distancing at home, and superficial affection during times in public. Thus there was emotional superficiality coupled with a vast resource of family money. For the first time in my life I realized that I could buy anything I wanted, except for what I needed. I needed emotional safety, security, belonging, and love. I was eighteen years old and had no recollection of these needs ever being addressed by my parents.

Sally explained that her brothers received her parents’ attention while she was ignored. She reported how she struggled to understand their treatment of her.

Basically, my brothers lives superseded everything else. I was largely ignored. I decided to talk to my mother about my hurt. Her only response was that she never wanted me, and she was not going to waste her time talking to me about it. I told my grandmother about what my mother had said. She told me that I “really don’t belong to them”. She told me I was adopted. My parents denied this, but I know my father had clout, and birth records could have been changed. The question of adoption is still something that lingers in my mind.

Sally was proud of her educational achievement but continued to puzzle over her parents’ behavior as she recounted that they did not come to her graduation from high school, college, or the granting of her professional degree. She interpreted their behavior as “still another exemplification of my unimportance.” She married a man of whom her parents disapproved and the relationship ended in betrayal.

She countered the cycle of emotional abuse by relating to her three daughters in a different way. “Their existence was the absolute highlight of my life.” They also fostered her “resiliency and purpose in life.”

Family and its influence on her life are key aspects of Sally’s story. She viewed her parents’ treatment of her as one of the “roller coaster rides” she experienced and classified this relationship as one of her “disappointments and betrayals.”

Millie. Millie was the youngest member of this group. She began her life story during her middle teen years and ends with her current experience of her early twenties. She used “events” and “major changes” as categories to describe her life story. These included her parents’ divorce, attending a local community college and “becoming a Christian.” She indicated that her religious belief had a profound influence on her ability to attain stability and purpose.

I commuted my first year, lost my scholarship, and decided that I needed to move on campus if I was going to make it through college. I was placed on a floor with 5 women who were involved in a campus group called SEARCH — Seeking Every Answer & Response Christ Has. I started hanging out with these women and at the end of my sophomore year I committed my life to following Christ. After that point, life really seemed like I was actually living it, not just muddling through with everyone else.

What she describes as her conversion experience supported her through a very difficult time and transformed her relationship with others.

Last summer I realized that I was overreacting to situations. Someone would say two words to me and I would break down. I finally got to a point when I did not know how to react to everyday situations. I ended up finding Isaiah 61:1-3 ... I spent some time praying over these verses and I felt an overwhelming healing power which has truly changed the way I view relationships with others. I am much more comfortable being open with others and doing things such as praying in public.

Millie’s faith in a spiritual being was a prominent aspect of her life story; she attributed relief of her suffering to her faith.

Pearl. Pearl used the decades of her life as an organizing framework for her story. Her career provided a positive anchor for her description of the “good times... and tough ones.” Education and career created a path of positive experience and advancement for her and countered the many struggles she experienced.

At age 20, I married my boyfriend without any understanding of the dire consequences that would probably follow due to his violent temper and arrogance... moved to [another state], where my husband earned a Ph.D. at [university] in engineering, and I earned a Masters of Arts in [humanities]...After that we headed

to [another state] for my husband’s employment, and I began my teaching career as an aid at [local high school]. The culmination of this decade was the joyful birth of my first son.

According to Pearl, “The thirties brought more involvement in family life and career.” Pearl described the decade as a time of “considerable stress.” She related having financial difficulties, the brain-damage of her sibling, and trying to care for her sibling’s children long-distance. The positive activity in her life at this point surrounded her job as “an instructor/counselor for two wonderful federal programs.” In her personal life, however, she wrote that “the forties brought major domestic violence, illness, loss, and divorce.” She described events of domestic abuse, her own clinical depression, her child’s clinical depression, her failed attempt to be a caregiver to a family member, and her sibling’s death.

Pearl noted the absence of career in her early life, contrasting it with the return to career in her fifties. She describes career as a prominent force in her life now.

During this decade of my fifties I have expanded my career, developed strong friendships, assumed responsibility for my parent, and tried to help my children to become healthy, loving future spouses and parents. After a year teaching school, I returned to federal programs to help low-education/income adults enter and succeed in post-secondary education. This career blesses me daily as I meet hundreds of individuals overcoming enormous hardships. An added bonus has been co-workers who are best friends, and a supervisor who has been my greatest spiritual mentor... My next direction for this decade is to continue my career growth [she is enrolled in a doctoral program], continue to be a good daughter and mother, and hopefully find some time for my interests.

Pearl describes a series of challenges that life placed before her, and she makes connections between these and how they ultimately made a positive contribution to her career.

These individual life stories, represented here by our summaries of a prevalent theme, provided the starting point for the group’s online discussion.

Group narrative

Each of the women entered the small group with her individual story. We describe the emergence of the group story in three ways. First, *Epiphanies: Past, Present, and Future* describes the temporal quality of their online discussion and the epiphanies they had while writing about the plot twists of their lives in the past. It explores the influence these epiphanies had on the present and future. Next, *Agency and Communion* outlines the way the women extended a sense of power or agency to each other as an aspect of the group story. Finally, *Becoming a Group*

and *Telling the Group Story* captures the shift from being four individuals to being a single group and the telling of the group story. The quotes are reprinted here as the participants wrote them, without grammatical or typographical editing by the authors. Details in some quotations had to be changed to protect confidentiality; however, the context was preserved.

Epiphanies: past, present, and future. The group story emerged temporally with distinct references to the past, present, and future. It evolved as the individual participants told, heard, responded to, and reinterpreted the similar plot events of their lives. As the women identified common themes from the plots of their life stories, they shared experiences that included histories of tragedy and abuse, difficulty with relationships, and moving to new locations. Through the online discussions the women had epiphanies or insights into their life stories that contributed to a shared understanding of their experiences. This shared understanding evolved as they identified common themes in their stories and explored the themes by commenting on and inquiring into one another's experiences and elaborating on their own experiences.

Millie identified "moving" to another location as an experience all the women share. In message 7 she says, "... moving could be one of our big themes. I know it caused alot of changes in my life, what do you guys think?" Then she describes her moves (beyond what she had written about in her life story) and draws conclusions about how the meaning of "moving" has changed for her over time from one of "having no choice" to it being her "show." She concludes the message by inquiring into the moves made by others in the group.

#11, Millie, Subject: moving ¹

Anyway, moving was a big deal in my life. it completely destroyed the relationship between my Mom & I for 2 years. Her moving back to a city was also the beginning of the repair of our relationship. Moving on campus at a different city was how I started to follow Christ, which has had a HUGE impact on my life. However, I really didn't have a choice in any of those moves. When I decided to come here, it was my choice, my show. I didn't have a system to meet people through. I knew of a ministry I wanted to get involved in and had act like an extrovert for the first time in my life & get to know people on my own. It's been a good 4 years here. I proved (mainly to myself) that I could do it & am really looking forward to the next big move. I plan on looking for work out west when I get back from being in another country in May. So, what do you guys think? Pearl, I know you had a few big moves, how did you adjust? Sally, I don't think you've moved large distances, but do you think the small (mileage) moves (like out of your parents house) made a big difference in your life. Ada, how do you think you adjusted your thinking after moving?

1. Quotes are referenced by message number, author, and subject line.

Pearl responded to Millie’s inquiry. She tells about her moves and an epiphany she had about the connection between her moves and her reluctance to speak in class.

#15, Pearl, Subject Re: moving

Two of my moves (from two states) were great, as I stated. I was starting a new life that I wanted to start. However, when I moved to a Northeast state from a Southern state at the age of 11, I hated it for two reasons. First, my parents had to move to get work (my Dad was a coal miner and many of the mines were closing) so I was worried about how we were going to make it as a family. Second, I found the Northeast emotionally cold and hurtful. For example, most families would keep me waiting outside in the cold until their children joined me outside. I found that inhospitable and rude. Also, classmates made fun of my Southern accent — that was hard. I became very conscious of that and developed a reluctance to read/speak aloud in class.

Ada picks up the theme of moving. She responds to Millie’s inquiry and also responds to the first part of Pearl’s message by providing her interpretation of the meaning of their stories. She then described an epiphany about her own moves, an insight she had not had prior to the dialogue.

#16, Ada, Subject Re: moving

Moving — Pearl, it *really* sounds like your moves were a blessing. It’s lovely that you can see the beauty in them and truly appreciate the areas you have experienced. Millie — you really rebounded remarkably from the early move that damaged the relationship with your mom only to progress into a deep appreciation for the next big move for you — well, a mini-move, really, overseas. It sounds like you have made your life independent enough to welcome these “chance” cards. I respect that. I’ve never thought about it before, but the moves I have made have always been predicated upon *other* people’s decisions. Huh — how about that?! You know, judging from how I feel about the house I am in right now — *the only one I personally have bought* — I don’t want to leave. I’ve probably felt that way all along — that I didn’t want my physical environment to change — but instead, I guess I had to bury all that.

Three members of the group explored moves they had made in the past and their exchanges about moving deepened the meaning that moving had to them as a group beyond simply relocating from one place to another.

Other themes showed how the participants created a shared meaning of the way past events shaped them. In message 18 Pearl explored the themes “Early relationships with parents (as children) and Achievers (students)” through describing emotional distancing and abuse, wanting to belong, and making efforts to win love and approval. She connected her experiences with the others. She also introduced the subject of alcoholism, revealing that her father too had an alcohol problem.

#18, Pearl, Subject: Early relationships with parents (as children) and Achievers (students)

I looked at these two roles/relationships first. Sally and Ada, I wonder what it was like to come from a wealthy background... Always worrying about what others thought would be a drag. I noticed considerable emotional abuse in most of our families — and emotional distance. The superficial affection in public made me think of my husband (or x-husband) — I will explain later under the relationship of marriage/romance. Sally, my heart goes out to you for having to wonder if you were adopted. I do not understand that. I also have no recollection of emotional safety, security, belonging — perhaps love, but not the way I define it. However, I am quite understanding about my parents because of their low education — my Mom completed eight years of school and my Dad only five. They had no concept of self-esteem, quality time, or such matters and were immigrants from another country with very different views than Americans. Sally, your efforts to win your parents' love by working toward a career in the helping professions was so poignant. That was the one way I got recognition from my Father — by my grades but interesting enough, he did not want me to attend college. Ada, that must have been tough with your mom not being there emotionally, and your dad having an alcohol problem. My Dad also had an alcohol problem, but drank to excess only at home. Interesting, I think. Ada, my heart just broke when you write that you tried to commit suicide at an early age — how do these things happen?

As Pearl shifts from commenting about events in her past to events in others' past lives, she concludes by acknowledging the emotional distance and abuse of Sally and Ada's parents. Although numerous messages refer to the past, other messages refer primarily to the present.

When the participants talked about their present lives, they often related how their spiritual beliefs have helped them cope with past tragedy and move into the future. The women linked the aspect of spirituality to overcoming the tragic events that they described in their life stories, recounting how "God," faith, or spiritual influences "saved" or sustained each of them. Each woman talked about "blessings" in life, indicating that faith (in differing forms) provided resilience to move beyond the challenges they faced. Ada develops the idea in message 20.

#20, Ada, Subject Re: Early relationships with parents (as children) and Achievers (students)

Millie, it really sounds like your qualitative relationship with Christ has transformed any residual anger that could have lingered. I am most respectful of this. Pearl, you seem to have this remarkable love principle working in you that sees clearly and with great compassion where your parents came from and what they had to work with. You are beautifully patient and kind. Sally, I *completely* identify with what I perceive as anger and frustration coming from your story. Your story, in particular, has hit me *hard* — it is a huge lesson in realizing that the stuff that I

think is earth-shaking for *me* is mere child’s play to the bigger, more tragic things that can happen. At the same time, I am wondering what happens to our sense of love, compassion, trust in the face of self-doubt, betrayal, and heartbreak... What do we turn to in such times? Over the years, although I am decidedly Christian, I have come to respect interpretations of Christian doctrine that are rather unorthodox... I have come to believe over the years, moreso over the past 7, that the soul chooses successive incarnations to experience the full breadth of human experience and eventually come to know and practice complete compassion for others... Millie, like you, perhaps, I am *deeply grateful* for a sense of sensing myself as connected to something that has the power to put my life story into a saner perspective. I don’t think I would be here if this realization had not settled into me.

Ada acknowledged their common struggles and how Millie and Pearl have used religious principles to meet their challenges. Ada identified with the anger and frustration she perceived Sally to have and from this she questioned how to retain “trust in the face of self-doubt, betrayal, and heartbreak.” In response to her questions about what to turn to in times of tragedy and abuse, she described her understanding of a spiritual “power.”

Continuing the dialogue about faith, Pearl starts a new thread titled “Relationships with God” in message 45.

#45, Pearl, Subject: Relationships with God

For me, this is the most important one — even more so than motherhood — because I think it would be the only thing that would enable me to survive the loss of one of my sons...

Sally, I was thinking about the faith that you said your children have been developing to cope with the loss of their sister. Who knows what strength that faith will bring them later in life. And, Ada, what you have endured due to clinical depression and the suicide attempts! Yes, we do need to forgive ourselves. I can relate because I finally forgave myself for not being able to rescue a family member. Paradoxically, my depression was one of the best things that ever happened to me. Without it, I would not be able to help my clients as well as I do and I would not have been able to help a family member battle his clinical depression... Ada, I loved your dream — “We all have to help each other.” Yes — I think that is the meaning of life — in addition to helping ourselves and loving God. Finally, Millie — I think what a remarkable young woman you are to have formed such a relationship with God at such a young age. And your courage — to pray in public — way to go, young lady!

Pearl wove Sally, Ada, and Millie’s experiences into her message as she talked about her religious convictions and how she overcame depression. Seeing people and events from the past as blessings in the present was a way that Pearl recast the

meaning of past tragedy and abuse into something positive. Sally summed up the group emphasis on spirituality in message 46 when she said: “God brings things into our lives so that we better understand others and minister to them.”

Unlike the present story, with its emphasis on spirituality, the future story focused on careers. The group discussed the future in relation to their educational endeavors and their careers. Each woman was currently pursuing a degree in the helping professions, and viewed her growing trust, education and future career as transformative.

#22, Pearl, Subject: Achievers (career) & Girlfriends or Wives

Another role/relationship I noticed in our papers was achiever in terms of careers. Sally, I find your resilience & focus extraordinary considering your recent, profound losses. And Ada, a career in the helping professions! I would love to find out how you got interested in that, where you were trained, and how you like this career.

Pearl refers specifically to Ada's current career. Ada responds to Pearl and immediately begins retelling Sally's story. She sees in Sally's story a link between pain from the past to the choice of a future career.

#26, Ada, Subject: Re: Achievers (career) & Girlfriends or Wives

Again, Pearl, you have stirred the stew. *Great* ideas! You are really keeping us rolling. Let's see...careers. Yes. Sally, in the face of everything you are working on this wholeheartedly. I glanced at you in class the other night wondering how you were doing. I saw this very committed, caring, striving, beautiful person trying to figure out all this incomprehensible stuff that has happened to her yet being brave enough to come to class and be a student. I thought about your career in the helping professions. This is a career that is *committed* to helping others by its very nature. What incredible, poetic justice that, despite all the reversals that you have experienced, you would devote yourself to this field. I hope you realize that this orientation is no accident. Your story (you know, I really dislike referring to what has happened to any of us as our 'story.' That word makes these events sound like fiction, or something. Let's call it our "life" story because that's what's going on here, right?). Okay — your LIFE story is one that tells of incredible loss and hurt. *You are in a career that can channel those experiences into something edifying for other human beings.* Already, and I hardly know you, you have touched something deep within me. In the heart-centered field where you practice, you have an amazing opportunity to transform your hurt through establishing love and trust of others. compassion for others. It's almost as if what is highest and most good and faithful in you had directed you to this career path. You have been in my thoughts so much lately. I just wanted you to know how I feel and hope I haven't taken too much liberty in expressing it. What do you all think about the idea of being drawn to careers ... that help us *transform* our pain?

Ada links pain from the past to future careers. In contrast, Millie addresses Pearl and links past relationships with parents to participants' choice of future careers.

#30, Millie, Subject: Relationships

Pearl, you brought up the careers thing, how do you all think the relationships with our parents have affected what careers we have chosen? I know that, if nothing else, watching my Mom struggle with finding work that paid well enough to support us (Dad was allergic to work at the time) was enough to convince me that college was a fact of life, not an option. How did parents expectations & lives affect you all?

Ada responded to Millie's comment about the pain resulting from the physical and emotional abuse from her parents and how her choice of a career gives her the opportunity to "heal her pain." She then asks the others in the group about their "situations."

#31, Ada, Subject: Re: Relationships

Millie — another big topic! Our parents and how they help shape (consciously or unconsciously) our future careers...I tend to think that the lack of attention and physical/emotional abuse I have experienced (for whatever reason) has led me to search out a career to heal my pain through learning to love others without bias. This, at core, is what I sense allows me to enjoy being a health care practitioner who takes in complete strangers and pays undivided attention to them. It's really about learning how to love. I can't quite put my finger on it, but I think something deep within me is trying to heal itself. Kudos, Millie, for bringing up this provocative question. It's a good one. What do the rest of you think about your own situations?

Ada refers to the way her choice of a career in the present and future heals her pain from the past. Participants respond to each other's inquiries about their careers, those that they are currently practicing or will practice in the future.

The group story had a temporal quality shown in the way the group talked about the past, present, and future. Epiphanies or insights described in the messages show how the events from the individual lives contributed to a group story, one that was constructed over time as the group created a shared meaning of their common experiences. Another aspect of the group story was agency and communion.

Agency and communion. As participants listened to other's stories, they began to reveal more and to reinterpret their lives in light of the group story. We were struck by the few references to events or interpretations of events that depicted personal agency in their individual stories. We define agency as the capacity to determine one's own life trajectory. Communion is a pull toward community and belonging, even in a society that values agency. Instead of describing their own

sense of personal agency, they ascribed agency to one another. This occurred in conjunction with the trust that came as their discussions progressed.

They ascribed agency by praising the “other” for overcoming difficulties characterized as being more difficult than “mine”; surviving and, in some cases, thriving despite dire circumstances; and acknowledging a job well done. One example occurred early in the online discussion when Millie told Sally, “I am so impressed with you” (#32). She was referring to how Sally handled her mother’s rejection. Millie stated “I am just so impressed by all of your abilities to come back from situations that you would not have picked to be in” (#17), attributing personal agency to Sally.

In message 32 we see Sally’s evolution of thought. She responds to several different messages at once. She uses the ellipsis possibly indicating that she is transitioning subjects or would say more if she had time. Sally empathized with Ada about a childhood suicide attempt and tied this to “finality of life on earth” and her current thinking about life and death. She wove together the four women’s experiences with words such as “verbal abuse,” “drinking to excess,” suicide as “a reflection of emotional discord” rather than mental illness, and being “very in touch with unhappiness.”

#32, Sally, Subject: Re: Relationships

I am at home this a.m., so i am confident that i’ll be able to send this today... one thing that i left out of my life history was that my dad was an alcoholic .i find it interesting that Ada and Pearl have the same history with their fathers...even today, drinking turns me off...i despise it and i know my dad’s drinking is why... Pearl, the thing about growing up wealthy...it taught me what money is not, i know that VERY well. and that theme continues throughout my life...i still can’t buy what i want and what i’ve always needed and looked for...i wonder if love, belonging, and security really exists outside of our relationship with God. i know my children love me, and most important with having them was that they would always know that they are loved. i’ve done everything to try to give them emotional and spiritual stability...i know what that lacking is. also, i think having money has driven me to try to become something/someone on my own...so i have been driven to accomplish on my own, both for external approval and internal validity. Ada...i am so sorry about the suicide attempt...but i think that people who commit suicide are very in touch with reality and want out...suicide is a reflection of emotional discord, not necessarily mental illness...i know you were young, but i think you were very in touch with unhappiness, but probably out of touch with the finality of life on this earth as a consequence of suicide. nonetheless, look at where you are now!... Pearl...i am from the same religious tradition, but i do not have the same take about the marriage issue...i understand where you’re coming from...the thing about guys and girlfriends...i’ve always had alot of friends, my best friends have always been guys...i can talk to them...girls have always been

friends to do things with, and do things together with our children when they were young...Millie, i am impressed with you...you are wise beyond your years... your exemplification of spirituality will always speak to others...your ministry is just beginning!...i'll write more later today...Sally

Agency, rather than being claimed by a particular individual, was claimed by members of the group. Over the course of the online discussion, the group claimed a sense of personal agency for each of the individual members. They ascribe agency to each other when they have not been able to ascribe agency to themselves. As a result, Millie labels them “determined women at work”, which we use as the title of our paper.

#28, Millie, Subject: Re: Achievers (career) & Girlfriends or Wives

I am just so encouraged by all of you. I was kind of intimidated at first because after hearing your lives, I wasn't sure I could relate all that well, but it's been such an awesome blessing to see such determined women at work!

This group of women seems determined to overcome their past, with the help of their spiritual beliefs, in order to thrive in their future work. The group's sense of communion is shown in the way they support one another and share events in their lives that are deeply personal.

Becoming a group and telling the group story. The women identify themselves as a group, one that goes beyond the boundary of the class assignment. Pearl says to Sally, “It is so good that we can come to know each other so well via these messages” (#59). Each participant was initially wary of others based on their painful histories, but together shared personal events from their lives and recognized some type of connection. We see this in Sally's message:

#27, Sally, Subject: Re: Achievers (career) & Girlfriends or Wives

thanks Ada...you made me cry! but it is good...you are so on target...very perceptive...i think you are saying what i feel but can't seem to express...your support and compassion are so meaningful...and i hardly know you...i think our group is together for a bigger reason than our class assignments...you all have influenced my life in a positive way...all of you are blessings...i am so grateful... Sally

Millie affirmed this understanding in message 28 when she says she did not think she would be able to relate to the others but has come to see them as “an awesome blessing.” Pearl agrees when she says, “I think our group is together for far more than just this class (#29).

The final stage of the group dialogue consisted of the group writing up the identified themes of their discussion, and in the process they summarize their group story. In messages 35 (Ada), 36 (Sally), and 38 (Millie) the group began

noting common themes. Ada listed five themes: moving and how it affected relationships with self and parents; trust issues based on early treatment in relationships; parental alcoholism; career choices; relationships with God and spirituality. Her list is succinct until she arrives at theme number six where she reengages in dialogue raising new topics.

#35, Ada, Subject: Re: Relationships

6. Should we discuss relationships with husbands (*sorry*, Millie, I don't mean to leave you out, but this seemed like a common thread with the rest of us) and how they could have reflected some deficits we experienced as children? I mention this because a long time ago in therapy, it occurred to me that since I was basically *lied to* by my parents (they gave me lip service about love but it was/still is clearly an *ultra*-conditional love based on my level of cooperation/devotion to their politics, behavior expectations, etc. They have already cut out both my sisters from their will because they don't "approve" of their lives.) As a result of seeing love as a hoop to jump through, I came out of childhood without a fully functioning "bullshit meter" to sense if men were being honest with me. And, I have had a great deal of trouble finding a man who I could experience as *authentic*. By the way, I think that this "meter issue" has also affected my willingness to start friendships with other women. My sense of vulnerability has caused me to be extremely wary about trusting women. So, here was another personal mountain to climb. Anyone want to expand upon this theme from their own experience?

In message 36 Sally remarked, "Ada, I feel as though I'm reading my life story!... and include how husbands have influence us..." She tells the group that she is "wary of trusting women." Although she does not refer specifically to the group, the group is made up of all women who are talking personally about events in their lives, implicitly trusting one another with the information. Millie agreed, adding new information about her father's drinking, making the connection that all four women had fathers who abused alcohol.

#38, Millie, Subject: Re: Relationships

The themes sound right on. Not sure if I mentioned this in my paper, but Dad was also pretty much an drunk for awhile. It was part of the reason Mom divorced him (but then moved in with a violent drunk, which I never figured out). When I moved in with him, he drank every night. I only remember him being "drunk" once, but he always had a beer, and I always thought it was a weakness. Definitely include the husband theme, it's been a key moment for all your lifes!

Ada's initial message provides what one might see as a simple "list." But, Ada ventures back into the more conversational mode in theme six. She poses a question about relationships with husbands which triggers a more lengthy discussion of her parents and trusting men, ending with an invitation from the group to extend

the conversation. Sally concurs with the themes, indicating they are representative of her experience. Millie adds more information about her life as she reflects on the summary. The communal insights continue, even in this final phase of the dialogue.

The group tells its own story as the women identify common themes from their lives and their shared understanding of what the themes mean. Sally begins by writing a summary based on what the group has identified. She shifts from the singular "I" to the plural "we" as she tells about the experiences the group has in common. The use of "we" and "us" continues. Ada points out the collaboration in message #54.

#54, Ada, Subject: Re: Questions

Sally — you have done a *fantastic* job here. I really mean it. You have compiled and reflected upon all we have labored over together and have emerged with a succinct and accurate synthesis of our ideas. We have taken a little journey together here, too; this seems significant to me. Through our efforts here we have a continuation of the "relationships" theme; however, to do so, we have collaborated — a big step for many of us... Thank you so much.

The participants shared their experiences, elaborated on or reinterpreted them, and created shared meaning as a group story. We see one group member utilize another member's understanding to gain clarity about her own situation. Furthermore, the group began to describe individual experiences as an experience in common, then as a common story.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how a group story is created as individuals talk about their life stories online in an educational context. The foundation for the group story was an individual narrative written by each of the four members of the group. Stories were told temporally and included aspects of relationships, the influence of parents and family, the role of faith, and struggles and challenges. The four participants used the online discussion to continue developing their own individual stories and to develop a group story. The women used temporality, shared themes, and epiphany to construct a story together. They extended a sense of agency to each other and to the group, using this aspect of their dialogue to reframe and recast individual stories and the group story.

Our interpretation of the data, represented by our findings, illustrates the power of narrative, described by Bruner (2002), as the participants indicated either explicitly or implicitly that they were creating a new reality or meaning of the

past, present, and future. The “understandable composite” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 13) adds insight to this type of story. Through the online discussion the individuals reframed their own life stories, considering an alternative way of evaluating what had happened to them. In addition, the participants provided new information about themselves that helped them integrate their individual stories into a broader context.

New to our understanding of how a group may create narrative, the four participants also extended or reframed one another’s stories, making new meaning for each other, as well as providing a new understanding of the other for the group. The participants were able to move beyond the pedagogical goals of individual storytelling which presents individuals with “an opportunity to tell, deconstruct, and learn from their own personal stories,” (Coulter, Michael, & Poynor, 2007, p. 106) to creating a different story as a group.

While the literature emphasizes the outcomes of group stories (Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson; Housely, 2000; Jones, 2004; Racine & Sevigny, 2001), there is little attention to what happens as a group constructs its story. We found that the group employed some of the traditional processes that individuals use in storying their lives or specific events, such as the process of “reflection, making connections between past and present events and speculating about future implications” (Coulter et al., 2007, p. 107) leading to new ways of telling the story and the development of epiphanies. When considering a group narrative the epiphanies become multilayered. The individual epiphanies, whether shattering or cumulative (Denzin, 2001), formed the foundation for group epiphanies. They enabled the women to find commonalities among their experiences, and as a group expand on the epiphanies they had in the past. The group epiphanies were a surprise to the women because they contradicted their previously held assumptions about relating to others. They had not expected to get along so well or to have any shared epiphanies. This itself was an epiphany of sorts. These shared epiphanies make the group story distinct from the individual story because it is dialogic in contrast to most individual narrative, which is monologic (Riessman, 1993).

This group used plot to identify what happened that was worth telling (McAdams, 1991). Plot, for the group, revolved around themes that were relevant for all group members, rather than issues that were salient for one or two of them. Common experiences were the entry way into the online discussion. In the final summary, the group members used the identified themes to organize elements of the lived experience into a holistic meaning.

The current literature about group stories addresses the temporal nature of stories in tangential ways. New to our understanding of group co-construction is the re-telling of the past individual stories in the present with a discussion of the future, as well as a creation of a group story in the present. Temporality played

an important role as the plot unfolded when the participants referred to specific experiences that occurred in the past and made interpretive comments that helped explain a particular event in the present. These comments were often epiphanies because they described the teller's shift to a new perception about the life event and highlighted the dynamic meaning-making process. The women talked about the influence the group story will have on them in the future and acknowledged that it was their shared past commonalities that allowed them to create a story in the present.

As the women made comments in the present about their own and each other's lives, they began spontaneously reconstructing their individual stories into a group story of courage and resiliency. "Genuine self-disclosures create an emotionally riveting bond between listener and teller" (McAdams, 1993, p. 252). The group was able to ascribe to each individual woman the agency that she had been unable to see in her own life. They did this by establishing trust and acknowledging to one another that they had done so. The trust resulted in new epiphanies about themselves as a group of "determined women at work."

The individual life stories of the women focus on the tragic events that occurred in their lives, and, as Ochs (2004) suggests, most personal narratives focus on experiences that upset the teller's life expectations. These tragedies were transformed in the group story as the women found commonalities with one another. Spirituality mediated the pain of the tragedies for each of the women in different ways. Since their orientations to the spiritual were different, they constructed meanings that transcended, for the most part, their differences and the human condition (Fowler, 1981).

The interplay between the individual and group epiphanies encouraged the development of trust, one aspect of communion (McAdams, 1993). McAdams states that his research underscores the importance of interpersonal dialogue in understanding the self-story. The dynamic interplay between epiphany and trust in a temporal context are at the heart of this joint narrative. The women not only narrated their lives to one another and in the process affirmed their past experiences, they gave new meaning to their past experiences and explored future actions (Stroobants, 2005). They also created a new joint narrative that provided hope for the future. Ochs (2004) explains that narratives are oriented either to certainty and constancy or uncertainty and fluidity. The uncertainty and fluidity of the women in this study afforded a heightened self-awareness that served as a type of springboard to self-transformation.

One of the most surprising findings of the group story was the transformation of the concept of agency by the group. Although the women did not feel agentic in their own lives, they readily saw the agentic behavior in the lives of each other. This recognition of agency by others is explained in part by McAdams (1996). "Indeed,

for some of us, the desire for love and intimacy is even grander and more compelling than our wishes for success, fame, and influence” (p. 72). In the group story, agency was transformed by communion.

Conclusion and implications for practice

There is rarely time in face-to-face courses for the depth of conversation on intimate topics such as those shared by this group of graduate students. The on-line discussion component of the course provided both the space and the time for individuals to discuss their life stories with others, to extend these stories in light of others’ responses and connections, and to create a new group story. Findings from the study are suggestive of these aspects of the group story, but further research with other types of groups is needed to broaden our understanding of group story.

Narrative and its ubiquitous presence in meaning making could transform the conception of the educational process. According to Bruner (1986), the focus of education must change to acknowledge that “many worlds are possible, that meaning and reality are created and not discovered, that negotiation is the art of constructing new meanings by which individuals can regulate their relations with each other” (p. 149). Rather than being passive consumers of knowledge, learners can become more aware of how they are actively constructing and co-constructing not only a sense of self, but the culture in which they live. As researchers, we are indebted to the resilient women in this study and their courage in facing and coping with tragedy and the affirmation they gave one another for a better future.

References

- Anderson, H., & Goolishian, H. (1992). The client is the expert: A not-knowing approach to therapy. In S. McNamee & K. Gergen (Eds.), *Therapy as social construction* (pp. 25–39). London: Sage.
- Bavelas, J. B., Coates, L., & Johnson, T. (2000). Listeners as co-narrators. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(6), 941–952.
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. New York: Doubleday.
- Brockmeier, J., & Harre, R. (1997). Narrative: Problems and promises of an alternative paradigm. *Research on Language and Social Instruction*, 30(4), 263–283.
- Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 18(1), 1–21.
- Bruner, J. (2002). *Making stories: Law, literature, life*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 5(19), 2–14.
- Coulter, C., Michael, C., & Poynor, L. (2007). Storytelling as pedagogy: An unexpected outcome of narrative inquiry. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 37(2), 103–122.
- Dean, R. (1995). Stories of AIDS: The use of narrative as an approach to understanding in an AIDS support group. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 23, 23–37.
- Denzin, N. K. (2001). *Interpretive interactionism*. (Applied Social Research Methods Series, Vol. 16.) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fowler, J. (1981). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Housley, W. (2000). Story, narrative, and teamwork. *The Sociological Review*, 48(3), 425–443.
- Jackson, M. (2005). West-African warscapes: Storytelling events, violence, and the appearance of the past. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 78(2). Retrieved April 13, 2006, from http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/anthropological_quarterly/toc/anq78.2.html
- Jarvinen, M. (2004). Life histories and the perspective of the present. *Narrative Inquiry*, 14(1), 45–68.
- Johnstone, B. (1990). *Stories, community and place: Narratives from Middle America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Jones, A. C. (2004, Jan-March). Transforming the story: Narrative applications to a stepmother support group. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*. Retrieved April 13, 2006, from <http://www.familiesinsociety.org>
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- King, K. P. (2002). Educational technology: Professional development as transformational learning opportunities. *Computers and Education: An International Journal*, 39(3), 283–297.
- Labov, W., & Waletzky, J. (1967). Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience. In J. Helm (Ed.), *Essays on the verbal and visual arts* (pp. 12–44). Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research: Reading, analysis, and interpretation*. (Applied Social Research Methods Series, Vol. 47.) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McAdams, D. P. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 18(1), 1–21.
- McAdams, D. P. (1993). *The stories we live by: Personal myths and the making of the self*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- McAdams, D. P. (1996). Themes of agency and communion in significant autobiographical scenes. *Journal of Personality*, 64(2), 339–377.
- Mezirow, J., & Associates. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mishler, E. G. (1999). *Storylines: Craftartists' narratives of identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ochs, E. (2004) Narrative lessons. In A. Duranti (Ed.), *A companion to linguistic anthropology* (pp. 269–287.) Oxford: Blackwell.
- Osguthorpe, R. T., & Graham, C. R. (2003.) Blended learning systems: Definitions and directions. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 4(3), 227–234.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8(1), 5–23.

Racine, G., & Seigny, O. (2001). Changing the rules: A board game lets homeless women tell their stories. *Social Work with Groups*, 23(4), 25–38.

Rappaport, J. (1995). Empowerment meets narrative: Listening to stories and creating settings. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(5), 795–807.

Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research. Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.) Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Stroobants, V. (2005). Stories about learning in narrative biographical research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 18(1), 47–61.

Appendix A. Discussion Forum Threads

1	Let's start talking	Ada	09-05 17:22
2	Re: Let's start talking	Ziegler, Mary F.	09-05 19:43
3	Re: Let's start talking	Millie	09-06 15:30
4	Millie's Life History	Millie	09-06 15:25
5	Sally's Life History	Sally	09-06 23:23
6	Re: Sally's Life History	Millie	09-07 15:28
7	Hey Group!	Millie	09-08 12:38
8	Is anyone out there?	Pearl	09-08 18:45
9	Re: Is anyone out there?	Ada	09-08 21:53
10	Re: Is anyone out there?	Ziegler, Mary F.	09-10 13:36
11	moving	Millie	09-09 13:19
12	Re: moving	Pearl	09-09 16:24
13	Re: moving	Ziegler, Mary F.	09-10 13:38
14	Re: moving	Millie	09-10 13:55
15	Re: moving	Pearl	09-10 16:34
16	Re: moving	Ada	09-10 17:36
17	Re: moving	Millie	09-11 21:08
18	Early relationships with parents (a...	Pearl	09-09 16:43
19	Re: Early relationships with par...	Millie	09-09 16:58
20	Re: Early relationships with par...	Ada	09-10 18:23
21	Re: Early relationships with ...	Sally	09-11 09:47
22	Achievers (career) & Girlfriends or...	Pearl	09-10 13:07
23	Re: Achievers (career) & Girlfri...	Millie	09-10 14:08
24	Re: Achievers (career) & Girl...	Pearl	09-10 16:20
25	Re: Achievers (career) & G...	Millie	09-11 21:23

26	[-]Re: Achievers (career) & Girlfri...	Ada	09-10 18:41
27	[-]Re: Achievers (career) & Girl...	Sally	09-11 09:52
28	Re: Achievers (career) & G...	Millie	09-11 21:29
29	Re: Achievers (career) & G...	Pearl	09-12 16:34
30	[-]Relationships	Millie	09-10 14:10
31	[-]Re: Relationships	Ada	09-10 18:47
32	[-]Re: Relationships	Sally	09-11 09:33
33	Re: Relationships	Pearl	09-12 16:43
34	[-]Re: Relationships	Sally	09-11 09:54
35	[-]Re: Relationships	Ada	09-11 15:12
36	[-]Re: Relationships	Sally	09-11 18:37
37	[-]Re: Relationships	Ada	09-11 19:30
38	[-]Re: Relationships	Millie	09-11 21:43
39	[-]Re: Relationships	Ada	09-12 08:53
40	Re: Relationsh...	Ada	09-12 14:40
41	[-]Re: Relationsh...	Sally	09-14 13:41
42	Re: Relatio...	Ada	09-14 15:50
43	[-]Roles as adult children and moms	Pearl	09-12 17:29
44	Re: Roles as adult children and ...	Sally	09-13 23:03
45	[-]Relationships with God	Pearl	09-12 17:58
46	Re: Relationships with God	Sally	09-13 23:05
47	[-]Questions	Millie	09-13 19:58
48	[-]Re: Questions	Ada	09-13 20:16
49	Re: Questions	Sally	09-13 23:16
50	[-]Re: Questions	Sally	09-13 23:13
51	[-]Re: Questions	Ada	09-14 08:01
52	[-]Re: Questions	Sally	09-14 19:34
53	[-]Re: Questions 	Sally	09-14 19:37
54	[-]Re: Questions	Ada	09-14 21:04
55	[-]Re: Questions	Sally	09-15 08:06
56	Re: Questions	Ada	09-15 10:00
57	[-]Re: Questions	Millie	09-16 08:45
58	[-]Re: Questions	Sally	09-17 12:46
59	[-]Re: Questions	Pearl	09-18 15:33
60	Re: Questions	Sally	09-19 21:29
61	Re: Questions	Pearl	09-18 15:22

Appendix B. Life History Submitted By the Group

Relationships contribute to defining who we are as we interact with people, time, place, and spirit. As women, we have been influenced by a multiplicity of roles; wife, mother, sibling, daughter, caregiver, student, and teacher. Discord and tragedy in our lives have led us to find a spiritual place; a relationship with God. Hope and faith have sustained and guided us, and given us a purpose for living. Several themes have emerged while sharing our life stories. The purpose of this text is to summarize what we have learned about roles and relationships as we reflected on our lives.

Moving was a major theme for our group. The moves that had negative connotations were moves that had been forced; predicated by other people's decisions. Because of the social dynamics involved with being new to any situation, a sense of belonging and becoming established was difficult. In fact, developing new relationships seemed impossible. Isolation became familiar.

Unfortunately, we had feelings of isolation from our parents as well. Paternal alcoholism was a commonality in our group. In addition, we were lied to by our parents and received love only on a conditional basis. These events have caused us to struggle to find authenticity in other relationships. Our needs for emotional safety, security, love, and belonging were largely void in our relationships with our parents. We believe that the lack of parental attention and the experience of emotional abuse predisposed us to search for careers that would help heal our pain through learning to love and serve others.

The emotional distancing from parents influenced our need to be loved and seek intimacy with men. Unfortunately, our experiences with men brought betrayal and additional emotional abuse into our lives. As one group member stated, "As a result of seeing love as a hoop to jump through, I came out of childhood without a fully functioning 'bull____' meter to sense if men were being honest with me." Subsequently, our sense of vulnerability has caused us to be weary about trusting people. Therefore, establishing relationships continues to be challenging, but intimacy is highly valued.

A fourth theme, depression, has struck each of us. Whether brought on by life's events or pathology, depression has led us to question what happens to our sense of love, compassion, and trust in the face of self-doubt, betrayal, and heartbreak.

Another commonality in our group is the relationships we have with Christ. This orientation fosters our resiliency and keeps us evolving as spiritual beings so we can minister to others. Even though other relationships have not provided stability or meet expectations, our relationships with God have held true.