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Listening to their Lives: Learning through Narrative in an Undergraduate Practicum Course

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Abstract

Experiential community-based learning is used for academic purposes, as well as to promote students' civic education, moral development, and the development of identity. Recent advancements in narrative identity theory may have important implications for enriching our understanding of how learning occurs in the context of community-based learning. In this study we examine students' learning in a third year undergraduate practicum course in the human services through the lens of narrative identity theory. Nine students (ages 20-26) who had recently completed the practicum course completed a semi-structured interview focusing on the story of their practicum experience and their changing conceptions of self and others. Results of thematic analyses suggest that students experienced important shifts in their understanding of self and others and their learning occurred through engagement with others' stories. Students who worked with vulnerable populations reflected on the biases and stereotypes they held prior to their practicum experience and described developing new insights into the experiences and social realities of marginalized others. Experiences of discomfort/disorientation and active-engagement in reflective meaning-making were critical to students' learning. We discuss implications for incorporating narrative in teaching and learning.

On a recours à l'apprentissage par l'expérience en milieu communautaire à des fins académiques, ainsi que pour encourager l'éducation civique, le développement moral et le développement de l'identité des étudiants. Les récents développements dans la théorie de l'identité narrative pourraient avoir des implications importantes pour enrichir notre compréhension de la manière dont l'apprentissage se réalise dans le contexte de l'apprentissage en milieu communautaire. Dans cette étude, nous examinons l'apprentissage des étudiants dans un stage pratique de troisième année au premier cycle dans le domaine des ressources humaines à travers la loupe de la théorie de l'identité narrative. Neuf étudiants (âgés de 20 à 26 ans) qui avaient récemment terminé le stage ont complété une entrevue semi-structurée concentrée sur leur expérience au cours du stage et sur les changements survenus dans leurs conceptions de soi et d'autrui. Les résultats des analyses thématiques suggèrent que les étudiants ont fait l'expérience de changements importants dans leur compréhension de soi et d'autrui et que leur apprentissage s'est réalisé grâce à leur engagement dans les histoires d'autrui. Les étudiants qui ont travaillé avec des populations vulnérables ont réfléchi à propos des préjugés et des stéréotypes auxquels ils adhéraient avant le stage et ils ont décrit comment ils avaient développé de nouvelles perspectives sur les expériences et les réalités sociales des personnes marginalisées. Les expériences d'inconfort et de désorientation ainsi que l'engagement actif dans la recherche de la signification ont constitué des éléments essentiels dans l'apprentissage des étudiants. Nous discutons les implications qu'il y aurait à incorporer les récits descriptifs dans l'enseignement et l'apprentissage.

Keywords

narrative identity, community-based learning, identity development, social development

Cover Page Footnote

We would like to thank Amy Fang for her helpful feedback on an early version of this manuscript.

Service learning, practicum experiences, and other experiential community-based learning opportunities have burgeoned on college and university campuses in recent years. The research literature provides convincing evidence of the value of these kinds of learning opportunities, not only for students' academic learning, but also for civic education, moral development, and the development of identity (e.g. Batchelder & Root, 1994; Dvir & Avissar, 2013; Jones & Abes, 2004; Youniss & Yates, 1997). Recent advancements in narrative identity theory may have important implications for enriching our understanding of *how* learning occurs in the context of experiential community-based learning opportunities. This theoretical grounding may help to more fully address the question: What are the processes by which experiential community-based learning impacts on the development of students' awareness of self and others?

In this study, we examined students' learning in a third-year undergraduate practicum course in The Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition at the University of Guelph. We served as the Instructor and Graduate Teaching Assistant for this course and, after teaching several sections of it (both together and separately), we were initially motivated to conduct exploratory research that would help us understand how students in our practicum courses perceive their learning. We wanted to know: What do our students feel they learned in the practicum course? And how did this learning occur? Our aims in answering these questions were as follows: First, we sought to develop a general understanding of students' learning in order to inform curriculum development for this specific course. We wanted to know which aspects of the course contributed to meaningful learning experiences and where we might want to focus our attention on revising and redeveloping the course. We expected that the insights we generated would also be relevant to others who are developing and/or instructing undergraduate practicum courses and other experiential learning experiences. We also wanted to examine student learning within the explicit theoretical frame of narrative identity development. In recent years, narrative approaches have emerged as an influential subfield in the study of the development of self and identity in adolescence and emerging adulthood (McLean, 2015; McLean & Syed, 2015).

Identity Development: A Narrative Approach

The field of identity studies is a broad field, with a wide range of foci. "Self" and "identity" can be defined in many different ways. Some theoretical approaches to identity focus on social and relational identities (e.g., religious affiliations, ethnic or sexual identifications), while others emphasize different psychological aspects of individual personhood (e.g., traits, values, beliefs, commitments). Within developmental psychology, the diverse approaches to identity tend to share common roots in Erik Erikson's theory of identity development. Erikson (1968) famously wrote about the adolescent "identity crisis," a period when a young person seeks to define answers to the question "Who am I?" While the development of self and identity are life-long processes, they are especially salient in adolescence and emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; McLean & Breen, 2015). In many cultural contexts adolescence and emerging adulthood are seen as the developmental periods in which young people define their group membership, values, beliefs, and personal commitments. For emerging adults in Western societies, identification of career aspirations, and commitment to these tend to be especially salient developmental tasks (Arnett, 2000). The importance of identity in this developmental stage has to do both with social demands, which prompt and prod young people to "discover"

who they are, and changing neurobiology, which gives rise to new capacities for abstract thought. Cognitive developments in emerging adulthood have important implications for critical and reflective thinking capacities, including those that are required for deriving meaning of one's experiences and constructing a mature identity that bridges together the remembered past and imagined future self into an integrated and coherent experience of the self (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Habermas & deSilveira, 2008).

One of the ways in which identity is developed is through constructing and telling stories about the self. The process of developing identity requires us to make meaning of our experiences and to string them together in ways that create a coherent sense of self (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003; Habermas & deSilveira, 2008). Identity development is a continuous process of creation; new experiences lead to new interpretations of the past and, at the same time, the emergence of new goals, relationship, and commitments in the present prompt us to create new stories about who we want to become (e.g., Breen, 2014; Ricoeur, 1992). From a narrative perspective on identity, the stories we tell about ourselves reveal the state and contents of our current self-identity while also being constitutive in the ongoing construction of identity; in other words, they are both a portrait of the self in the present moment and a tool for constructing the self that one is becoming (e.g., Fivush, Reese, & Haden, 2006; McLean, 2015; Ricoeur, 1992).

Although most identity research focuses on the individual, the development of identity is a social and relational enterprise. We develop identity by interacting with other people (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Mead, 1928; Nelson, 2010) and, especially, by engaging with others' stories (e.g., Breen, McLean, Cairney, & McAdams, 2016; McLean, 2015; McLean & Breen, 2015). Young children first begin to develop a sense of identity through stories told about them by their parents. As children grow older they encounter more people and more stories; their interaction with what Breen and McLean call the *narrative ecology* expands to encompass interactions with the stories of friends, peers, teachers, others, and those encountered through the media (Breen et al., 2016; McLean, 2015; McLean & Breen, 2015). The stories that others tell us expose us to events and ideas that occur beyond the limit of our own experiences and introduce new possibilities for who we might become and the kind of life we wish to lead (Breen et al., 2016; McLean & Breen, 2015). From this perspective, our identities are developed through making meaning of our own experiences and those we encounter vicariously through others' stories. Interacting with new stories has the potential to transform our understanding of ourselves as well as others.

This theoretical approach to identity informs both our research and our approach to teaching. With very few exceptions, the students in our practicum courses are "emerging adults": young people in their early- to mid-twenties who are in an active stage of meaning-making and identity construction. Our understanding of the importance of this stage for identity development has motivated us to develop a course that provides opportunities for meaning-making in the service of developing the self. Our awareness of the importance of narrative—both opportunities to construct and tell one's own story and the learning that occurs through interaction with others' stories within a narrative ecology—has led to an emphasis within the course on developing and sharing stories.

The Context: Third-Year Practicum

The present study was conducted within the Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition at the University of Guelph. All students in our Child Youth and Family and Adult Development programs are required to complete a relatively intensive practicum experience in their third year of study. There are typically four sections of the third-year practicum course offered each year and 3-4 different instructors typically teach the course. Our department is interdisciplinary, and students pursue careers in a variety of fields, including (but not limited to) child and youth work, social work, teaching, occupational therapy, child life, speech and language pathology, and gerontology. In the third-year practicum course, students are placed in community agencies, schools, retirement homes, shelters, and other agencies that provide services to children, youth, adults and/or families. They are matched to specific placements by area of interest and spend a total of 144 hours over the course of a semester working (unpaid) in these placements. The practicum experience is intended as an introduction to working in the human services and for many students it is a first experience “trying on” a professional role. The course also aims to deepen students’ understandings of the connections between research, theory, and practice. While there are no course readings specifically assigned in this course, it is expected that students will attempt to apply material learned from other courses. We note that average performance in the practicum course tends to be significantly higher than it is for other courses. Students tend to be very highly engaged in their practicum learning experience and most students achieve a grade of 80% or higher.

Students participate in weekly one-hour small-group seminars, during which they share experiences of their individual practicum experiences with a group. These seminars are facilitated by the Instructor and/or Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) and the aim is for students to share their stories, support each others’ learning, engage in collaborative problem-solving, and to work together to draw connections between the theory presented in their program and their applied experiences. We have taught this course together twice as the Instructor (Andrea Breen) and GTA (Kristen Cairney). In addition, Andrea Breen has taught the course several times with other teaching assistants and Kristen Cairney has been the GTA for sections of this course led by other instructors.

Teaching Self-Awareness

Through course assignments and seminar discussions, students are encouraged to reflect on their own values, beliefs, attitudes, and the life histories that have shaped these. It is important to note that we encourage students to maintain their own privacy and comfort; students are encouraged to disclose only that with which they are comfortable disclosing. The orientation to critical self-reflection is common to service learning approaches, and is especially prominent in the fields of social work (e.g., Fook, 1999; Heron, 2005; Lam, Wong & Leung, 2007) and education (e.g., Calderhead, 1989; Freire, 1973; Fox, White & Kidd, 2011; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; hooks, 2010; Kyles & Olafson, 2008; Smyth, 1989). Self-reflection encourages the kind of thinking that is necessary to make creative and sound judgments in challenging situations (Lam, Wong, & Leung, 2007) and it is also an important tool for developing the emotional resilience necessary to work with vulnerable people (Grant, Kinman, & Alexander, 2014).

We approach self-reflection as a kind of active and personal theoretical engagement: we understand that theories are implicit in the actions we take and our interpretations of our

interactions with others. The way that we understand the behaviour, motivations, values, and beliefs of others is shaped by our own personal stories and “social location,” which is informed by a variety of intersecting factors, including gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, social class, age, ability, and geographic location. The aim of self-reflection is to become aware of our implicit theories—the assumptions, biases, beliefs, and values that inform our actions and interpretations—so that they may be examined, questioned, and possibly even changed. We see the intentional cultivation of self-awareness as essential in being able to work effectively with others across boundaries of culture, class, religion, ethnicity, and other aspects of social location.

Engagement in reflective thinking is also identity work. Narrative researchers have highlighted that one of the ways that identity is constructed is by reflecting on one’s experiences and drawing specific lessons and insights about their meaning and importance to the self (McLean & Breen; 2009; McLean, Breen, & Fournier, 2010; McLean & Pratt, 2006). The kind of critical self-reflection that we aim for students to develop in our course is slightly different from other forms of meaning-making that narrative researchers have examined in that it focuses explicitly on drawing lessons and insights about the self in the context of relationships and with critical consideration of social location(s) and societal structures of power and vulnerability.

Our approach to teaching self-reflection is as follows: we invite students to assume the position of “self-researcher” throughout the course and assignments are designed to facilitate students’ learning about themselves. Students take field notes throughout their practicum placement in order to keep a daily record of their observations, feelings, thoughts, and reactions. We ask them to pay attention to experiences that do not fit their expectations, to surprise, discomfort and other experiences of disorientation (Mezirow, 2003), and we invite them to “follow their feelings”; that is, to notice experiences that make them think and feel something. Field notes are not viewed by others and students are free to record their experiences in whatever form they choose (e.g., point form, narrative, etc.). These field notes serve as the basic “data” that students use to reflect on their experiences in formal critical self-reflection assignments, which are graded.

Students complete two to three critical self-reflection assignments that ask them to review and analyze their field notes to explore the themes that have emerged in their practicum experiences. Students are expected to quote directly from their field notes and to follow a specific reflective process that is based on Kiser’s (1998) 4-step approach: gather data, reflect on one or more concrete and specific experiences, examine dissonance, and articulate specific learning. The aim of these assignments is to scaffold students’ reflective thinking in order to encourage deepening awareness of the self and others.

Research Questions

After teaching this course several times, we were motivated to explore our students’ learning in the course in a systematic way. The questions guiding our investigation included: How do students understand their learning throughout the practicum experience? What do they report learning in practicum and what do they see as the sources of this learning?

Method

Recruitment

All procedures were approved by our institutional Research Ethics Board. Participants were recruited via a targeted email, which was directed to all 148 students who had taken the practicum course in the past four semesters and did not have Andrea Breen as an instructor or Kristen Cairney as a GTA in the current semester. The participants were required to have completed the course and their final grades had to have been submitted so as to ensure that participating in the study did not affect their grades. All participants who replied to the email were provided with an opportunity to participate in the study.

Participants

Interviews were conducted with nine participants who ranged in age from 20 to 26. One participant was male and the rest were female. One participant self-identified as a member of a minority ethnic group. These demographics are consistent with the typical composition for this course at our University. At the time of the interviews, seven out of nine participants were enrolled as students, while two had graduated prior to the interview. Participants had completed placements in a wide range of settings, including a retirement home, a women's shelter, a residential program for individuals with mental health issues, a crisis phone line for individuals with mental health issues, a resource classroom for youth with developmental differences and behaviour concerns, a mainstream school where the student worked with youth with disabilities in different classrooms, an alternative school for at-risk youth, a volunteer mentoring agency, and a volunteer recruitment centre.

Procedures

Participants were interviewed by the first author, Kristen Cairney. At the beginning of the interview participants were invited to "tell the story" of their practicum experience. They were invited to speak "in as much detail as possible" about the setting, the other people involved, and the "most important experiences" that occurred during practicum. Participants were then prompted to describe specific experiences around the following themes: positive experiences, negative experiences, challenges, and personal success (e.g., "Can you describe a challenge that occurred for you in your practicum?"). Participants were also asked to describe what self-reflection means to them and changes to their understanding of self-reflection over time ("What does self-reflection mean to you? Does it mean something different now that it did before you began practicum?"). They were also asked to describe whether practicum had influenced their values and beliefs ("Did practicum influence your understanding of yourself in terms of your values and beliefs?") and their conceptions of their future professional identity ("Did practicum influence your understanding of your future self, who you are going to be in the future?"). The final section of the interview focused on participants' conceptions of the population they worked with, including turning points in their understanding of this population or the larger systems in which they worked, tailored to the particular "systems" associated with their placement such as child welfare, mental health or education (e.g., "Can you tell me about a specific turning point that occurred in your understanding of larger systems, such as the education system?"). The

interview concluded by asking participants how they would summarize their experience in practicum.

Data analysis was guided by Braun & Clarke's (2006) semantic approach to thematic analysis and conducted by Kristen Cairney. Andrea Breen also read the transcripts closely. We had multiple conversations about the interpretations as we strived for trustworthiness. It is important to note that we are not unbiased, distant observers. Every step of this research—from course development and teaching to the design of the research study and the interpretation of participants' responses is influenced by our own experiences and identities. Along with the narrative lens with which we approach our work, our work is also strongly informed by our past work with vulnerable populations and a shared belief that appropriate understanding and use of self is essential to effective work in the human services. It is from this perspective that we approach our analyses and interpretations.

Results

Moving Beyond Stereotypes

A dominant theme in our analysis was that students learned from interacting with others whose experiences and stories differed significantly from their own. The participants in our sample spoke of learning experiences that allowed them to move beyond stereotyping marginalized groups to understand that the “clients,” “students,” and “residents” they encountered in their practicum settings were human beings with their own unique experiences and complex lives. Participant 4 describes his service learning experience as a process of overcoming “ignorance” that stemmed, in part, from traditional classroom-based approaches to teaching about mental health:

...I learned about it in psychology and stuff but you learn about the mental illness not the person and that is huge. So I think that even fed me more of my ignorance when I learned about the mental illness because you learn about the side effects, you learn about the medication, you don't learn about the person and I think that's what's really missing. Umm and I think that needs to be put in the educational system at an earlier umm time...

Later in the interview this same participant expands on the idea of learning to see people with mental health issues *as people*:

...you can have normal conversations with them which, to be honest I didn't think that in the beginning. When I thought mental illness I thought wow these people are...not “bat shit crazy” but they have they are not capable of having normal interactions. So that is something that I also learned while being there and I had a lot of good conversations with residents, there was laughs, some of them opened up to me and that was fantastic and I began to see them more as people rather than sick people I guess is how you'd say it. (Participant 4)

This theme of coming to see others as whole persons was prevalent in our interviews. Some participants expressed surprise and even embarrassment when they recalled how they viewed

others prior to their practicum experience. An example is provided by the interview with Participant 3, who also worked within a mental health context:

There could be two callers that could be diagnosed with the same mental illness and they are different. Which it's like obviously! It's just one of those moments where you are like obviously! They are two different people! (Participant 3)

By speaking with individuals with similar diagnoses who were very different people, this participant gained new insight into the diversity within subpopulations of individuals with various mental health diagnoses. She came to a fuller recognition of the humanity of people who are living with mental illness, recognizing that they are *people* and not merely labels.

Recognition of the diversity of experience that is subsumed under a label such as “mentally ill” or “at risk” allows for fuller appreciation of others’ needs, as well as recognition of their strengths and resilience. This idea is clearly exemplified in a participant’s description of a shifting orientation to recognizing the resilience of women living in a women’s shelter:

...being in a shelter for abused women like before I didn't have much knowledge on exactly what that meant and you know I just was very naïve about it. And then like being in like that environment like I don't...like I don't necessarily have like the sympathy that I would have had before. Like you think of those stories and you think oh my gosh that's terrible but like these women are so strong the strongest women I've ever met and my views have completely changed and like wanting to make a change and understanding like the feminist theory better and stuff. And you know seeing like their power to change and want to change is really inspiring so... (Participant 6)

This participant describes experiencing a shift from simply feeling sorry for people who have experienced abuse to realizing how strong one must be to survive and to leave an abusive situation. This participant also noted important connections between her experiences and learning in an applied setting and her understanding of theory. These examples of learning to more fully understand others, to recognize the diversity of experiences, and the humanity of “the other” resonate with findings from other studies of service learning, which have emphasized the importance of these experiences for civic education, moral development, and social understanding (Dvir & Avissar, 2013; Jones & Abes, 2004; Youniss & Yates, 1997).

Learning Through Stories

Participants were asked to describe where and how learning happened for them. The most common response to this question was that they learned through hearing the stories of those with whom they worked. For example, Participant 9 described learning what might lead to issues with school attendance by hearing client stories in an alternative school setting. When asked how her learning about others occurred she stated:

I think just listening to their lives. Like there was one student who I was technically assigned to but I think I only worked with her a couple times because she just never came to school. And I think she was maybe 18 and only had a few high school

credits. And you know I could hear the teachers talk about her like “Oh this is an extreme situation she really needs to graduate high school” so just talking to her about her anxiety problems and what’s stopping her from coming to school, what she’s experienced in the past...So yeah just hearing about another student’s relationship with their mom, or hearing about another student’s drug problem. Or hearing about where they’ve come from or where they want to go sort of thing. (Participant 9)

For this participant “listening to their lives” was significant to her learning. A similar idea was expressed by Participant 3, who described how the stories told to her by individuals living with mental illness provided insights into their lived experiences:

..if we were talking to someone and to us it could sound like delusional thinking and things that are not present for us, but for that person it is something real. So they could be talking about...you know...having monsters under their bed but being able to talk with them about how they are feeling in that position right now and letting them know that you’re listening and coming to know that for them it is real. So coming to that understanding was an important thing for me to gain. (Participant 3)

For this participant, hearing stories of experiences with monsters lurking under beds led to new insights about others’ lived experiences as well as empathy for them. To paraphrase Participant 9 (quoted above), “listening to their lives” helped this participant to gain insight and sensitivity to the realities that existed for those living with mental illness.

The stories participants encountered in their practicum experiences exposed them to new ideas that illuminated the errors or inadequacies in the ways they had understood the world and prompted shifts in their understanding of others. Interacting with clients, residents, and students in practicum placements enriched participants’ narrative ecologies. In many cases, participants were exposed to new stories that were quite different from those they had experienced themselves. From a narrative perspective, interaction with others’ stories can foster understanding and empathy for others, as well as shifts in one’s understanding of the traits, values, beliefs, and storylines that define the self (Breen et al., 2016).

Disorienting Dilemmas

We were not surprised to find that disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 2003) figured prominently in participants’ descriptions of their learning in their practicum experiences given that this had been an important framework for the course assignments and we asked about these in the interview. Participants described experiences of discomfort and uncertainty related to their professional roles, as in the following excerpt in which a participant describes discomfort with the power dynamics she perceived working on a mental health phone line:

I don’t know how I feel about this but it does make me uncomfortable...it was just an “uncomfortableness” where I think...because it is confidential the caller has the chance to say their name but I don’t. So it kind of put me at odds with how I felt about it. (Participant 3)

Another participant described an uncomfortable conflict between her own beliefs and her desire to be a positive role model for students at her practicum placement in a Catholic secondary school:

...It was just like standing there for like the morning prayers like I didn't know like the cross over the heart and I felt like maybe the teachers might judge me for not knowing or should I be doing it to be a good role model for the students? Or is it good for them to see me not do it? I didn't know how to navigate that situation. (Participant 8)

Alongside these kinds of conflicts with values, beliefs, and roles in a professional context, participants also described experiencing disorienting dilemmas that focused on their personal lives. One participant experienced a profound disorienting dilemma when his own mental health concerns collided with the mental health issues experienced by clients at his practicum site:

Midway through the practicum I had a bunch of other things going on and I was...I had some family issues and I had...I was going through umm my own kind of like diagnosis so I had issues going on as well umm so that was tough on me personally and then coming...going back to [Mental Health Agency] and then struggling with their kind of issues. (Participant 4)

Another participant described grappling with a deep personal conflict related to her desires to be both a mother and a professional. This participant described using the reflective practices associated with this course to develop a deeper understanding of her self in the context of this conflict:

I think I learned where some of my biases lie-that I think had about 8 employees that were all working mothers I think I learned a lot kind of about that environment because I want kids and I want to work so how does that kind of go together? But I also had kind of a very traditional sense of how the workforce should be but I think for me those two ideas were kind of challenged because they don't always mesh together. So I think for me I learned a lot about what I want to value in myself as a family and also as a professional and a working woman. And then seeing it in action with like 8 or 9 women and they all handled it differently. (Participant 1)

For this participant, the practicum experience provided insights into her own values and she gained a new appreciation for a struggle she anticipated experiencing when and if she has children of her own. In this case, as well as the others described above, disorienting dilemmas do not resolve themselves in easy answers. Rather, the experiences seem to be ones of "opening a door" to uncertainty and discovery. Disorienting dilemmas present opportunities for meaning-making; for developing new lessons and insights about the self and, in so doing, ongoing developments in the construction of personal and professional identity.

Self-Reflection

Most participants described the structured process of self-reflection as important to their learning. For example, in the following excerpt Participant 7 explains the value of critical self-reflection for developing a deeper understanding of her self:

Self-reflection for me means understanding my own feelings around a situation. Like you know your own personality traits and you know what you like and what you don't like. And so when an adverse situation happens that you don't like. It is helpful to know what was it about that situation that bothers you and to get in deeper to the real reason because often times it's not the surface reason that you're actually upset about. And so I think...yeah that's kind of what it means. Just like digging deeper below the surface problem. (Participant 7)

This process of “digging deeper” was described as important for helping participants to understand themselves and their own development as professionals:

I guess it means understanding where you are...like where your thoughts and feelings are in relation to your experiences and how you're taking those experiences and applying them to your personal development and your relational development and your career and how you're integrating those things into your everyday experiences and if you can find relations between like your reactions and your feelings umm like the way that you react and your biases and where you're coming from and how your experiences have opened up like the window like you see how you need to change and how you are now compared to where you thought you were. (Participant 8)

The idea that self-reflection can show “how you are now compared to how you thought you were” and “how you need to change” suggests that the reflective processes that were encouraged as part of this course influenced the development of participants' self and identity. This is as we would expect given research on narrative processing, which suggests that self-reflection and drawing meaning from one's experiences are processes by which narrative identity is constructed (e.g., Breen, 2014; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McLean, 2015; McLean & Breen, 2009; McLean, Breen, & Fournier, 2010; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Situations in which one discovers a gap between the self as expected and the self as expressed are the kinds of experiences that create a demand for narrative processing (Breen, 2014; Bruner, 1990; Chandler et al., 2003) as one is compelled to create explanatory narratives that bridge the gaps to create a coherent whole.

As course instructors, our hope is that the reflective processes that we introduce in this course will be useful to students beyond completion of the course and we were pleased to see that this seemed to be the case for some of our participants. Participant 1 describes her conception of reflective practice as follows:

I think self-reflection for me I view it very much as a stepping stone. It's not something you can just do once because like you need to continually be reflecting and you're always changing and things are always happening that are new or exciting or not exciting and that are going to impact you in some way. So self-reflecting for me is kind of that opportunity to learn more about yourself and about an opportunity or an event that's happened to you. (Participant 1)

While we saw evidence that students were engaging in reflective processing in the ways in which we hoped they would, it is important to note that participants also raised some concerns about the Critical Self Reflection assignments that were required for the course, as evidenced in the following description of students' "rolling their eyes" over these assignments:

...I think that self-reflection is one of those things that everyone kind of rolls their eyes at but I think that when you actually do it is extremely useful. So it is one of those things that I knew I should have been doing anyway and it was nice to have that outlet in the actual course outline to actually force you to do it. Because there are things that you don't realize you're learning so even for instance I was saying the work environment umm that's something that I would have complained about but not reflected about. So I think it takes a lot of your comments or observations and allows you to turn it into something useful. So to be forced to articulate it makes you realize, oh that's what I thought...reflecting on it I better understood my values and beliefs... (Participant 1)

While this participant expressed the value of having self-reflection assignments as a required component of the course, some participants questioned whether these assignments should be graded and suggested that the practice of grading reflection assignments places limits on students' engagement with self-reflection and may be too prescriptive; rather than engaging meaningfully with self-reflection for its own sake, some participants suggested that they tailor their responses to fit the specific steps outlined in the assignment as well as the perceived preferences of the teaching assistant or instructor. This raises an important pedagogical question: How can we effectively facilitate meaning-making in a way that is meaningful for students? We do not yet have an ideal solution to this question but our students' insights are encouraging us to work towards finding the right balance between a prescriptive approach that is connected to course requirements and providing sufficient freedom for students to engage in reflective processes that are meaningful to them.

Discussion

Our analyses suggest that participants learned a great deal in the practicum course. The findings that participants learned to see others as more fully human provide further support to a growing body of research demonstrating the importance of experiential community-based learning experiences for identity development, moral development, and civic education (Dvir & Avissar, 2013; Jones & Abes, 2004; Youniss & Yates, 1997). In our view, learning to see other people from vulnerable and marginalized groups as fully human is critically important—not only for students who are pursuing careers in the social and human services but for everyone. Postsecondary institutions might strive to ensure that this kind of learning occurs for all of their

students in order to support the development of anti-oppressive, person-first attitudes in all students.

We were somewhat surprised that students reported that they had not learned to see marginalized others as “fully human” in their coursework prior to their third-year practicum. As described above, one participant (Participant 4) even suggested that course-based learning “fed ignorance” by focusing on mental health disorders and not people. These findings suggest the critical importance of giving students structured opportunities to interact with people whose experiences are different from their own. Students need to be introduced to stories about the diverse lived experiences of people and not just descriptions of disorders. Our recommendations for our own program are to introduce stories of diverse lived experiences throughout the curriculum and to explore opportunities to deepen this essential learning about self and others, perhaps through the introduction of an introductory service learning experience earlier in students’ program. While our third-year practicum is a 12 hour/week placement over the course of a semester, prior research has demonstrated that even less intensive service learning experiences can lead to significant changes in students’ understanding of others and themselves. For example, Jones and Abes (2004) and Dvir and Avissar (2013) both found that service learning experiences that were three hours per week impacted on students’ perceptions of others and facilitated identity development. While we do not yet understand what an optimal “dose” of community-engaged experiential learning would be, an introductory service learning experience earlier in students’ program would likely be an important step for deepening students’ critical awareness of others and fostering development of self and identity.

While previous research has demonstrated the value of community-based experiential learning for students’ identity development, our narrative approach adds new insights to this body of work. Our findings suggest that deep, transformative learning about others and the self occurs through “listening to others’ lives”. This highlights that stories are critical components of learning in our interactions with others and suggests that narrative approaches may be valuable components of experiential learning courses.

Since conducting this research, we have placed a greater emphasis on narrative in coursework for our practicum classes. We have now introduced a new final assignment that asks participants to “tell the story” of their practicum experience to an audience of their peers. We have found that our students have embraced this assignment with enthusiasm and creativity. Students have submitted an exceptionally diverse range of poems, stories, plays, and songs. Many students have also experimented with telling the story of their practicum experience through different characters’ points of views, including clients’ and students’ voices alongside their own. Our impressions so far are that students learn a great deal from constructing and telling their stories and also from engaging with classmates’ stories about their practicum experiences. Having students share stories with each other is an easy, and, we suspect, an effective way to expand students’ narrative ecologies (Breen et al., 2016) and, in so doing, their opportunities for learning.

Our research also has implications for narrative theory. To date, psychologists have emphasized the role of family and friends in fostering identity development and suggested that family stories are the most influential kind of “other people’s story” in the development of identity (McLean, 2015). The present study suggests that other kinds of stories we encounter in our narrative ecology including—or perhaps especially—stories told by those who may seem to be quite different from ourselves can also exert a profound influence on our identity. Encounters with stories told by people with lived experiences that are different from our own may provide

opportunities for experiencing “disorienting dilemmas” (Mezirow, 2003) that can lead to new insights about the self and the social world. Narrative theorists are in the early stages of examining narrative ecologies as contexts for identity development (Breen et al., 2016) and more research is needed. For example, understanding more about the kinds of stories and storytellers that influence students’ learning at different stages of development would be helpful for designing more effective learning experiences in and outside of the classroom/lecture hall.

We acknowledge that there are important limitations to this research, including a small number of interviews that are not likely to represent the full range of student experience in our practicum courses. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that our narrative lens shaped every aspect of this research; we were expecting to find that narrative was important and so should not be surprised that it was. Despite these limitations, this research has important implications for our course and implications for other community-based experiential service learning opportunities and it underscores the importance of interactions and story-sharing in students’ academic, professional, and personal development.

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