

## The Rise of the Life Narrative

By Ivor Goodson

When we go on about the big things, the political situation, global warming, world poverty, it all looks really terrible, with nothing getting better, nothing to look forward to. But when I think small, closer inóyou know a girl Iíve just met, or this song weíre going to do with Chas, or snowboarding next month, then it looks great. So this is going to be my mottoóthink small.

óIan McEwan, *Saturday*, Penguin, London, 2005, (pp. 34-35)

There is a kind of popular consensus at the moment that we live in ìan age of narrativeíóthe truth is rather more complex, for although it is true that narratives and stories are part of the common currency of the day, the scale of those narratives, their scope and aspiration, has dramatically changed.

In fact we are entering a period for particular kinds of narratives: life narratives and small-scale narratives.

In past periods there have been ìgrand narrativesí of human intention and progress. Hywell Williams in his recent chronological history of the world argues that the link between human history and progress in grand narrative grew exponentially in the mid nineteenth century. He says the progress narratives that emerged at this time were often ìbrash and naïveí.

It was certainly founded on the fact of material advanceóthe sudden and greater ease of travel, improve-

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### *The Rise of the Life Narrative*

---

ments in sanitation and the reduction in disease, which so impressed contemporaries in the advanced West. These victories also seemed to signify a real moral progress. Nobody supposed that humanity was getting better at producing saints and geniuses, but there was a new confidence in the possibility of a well-ordered society. The intellectual advances that were once the preserve of an educated elite had spread further. (Williams, 2005, p. 18)

Commenting on the public life associated with these changes he says: 'Once, the sceptical courtiers of the eighteenth century had sneered at superstition in gossipy little groups a century later greater masses of people debated great issues of religion and science, political reform and freedom of trade in public meetings' (Ibid).

In the last sentence we can see how far public engagement has fallen – the idea of great masses of people debating great issues is inconceivable in a present world. In part this is closely related to the decline of narrative scope and aspiration.

We have witnessed in the twentieth century the collapse of grand narratives. Again Williams provides a valuable summary:

The idea of the grand narrative in the human sciences has fallen out of fashion. Christian providence, Freudian psychology, positivist sciences, Marxist class-consciousness, nationalist autonomy, fascist will: all have attempted to supply narratives that shape the past. When it comes to practical politics, some of these narratives proved to involve repression and death.

The history of the twentieth century dissolved the connection between material and scientific progress and a better moral order. Technological advance was twice turned to the business of mass slaughter in global war, as well as genocide and ethnic cleansing. Material progress was seen to mingle with moral regress. The model T Ford and the gas chamber were the inventions that defined the century. (Williams, 2005, p. 18)

We can then begin to see how grand narratives fell from grace, losing not only scope and aspiration but also our underpinning faith in their general capacity to guide or shape our destiny. Into the vortex left after the collapse of the grand narratives we see the emergence of another kind of narrative, infinitely smaller in scope, often individualised – the personal life story. It reflects a dramatic change in the scale of human belief and aspiration. Alongside these small narratives we also see a return to older, more fundamentalist precepts.

How has this transformation of the role and scope of narrative been worked? How is the new genre socially constructed? Writing in 1996, I argued that literature and art are normally ahead of other cultural carriers of ideology in providing us with new scripts, and define our personal narratives and life politics. 'I said we should locate our scrutiny of stories to show that the general forms, skeletons, and ideologies that we employ in structuring the way we tell our individual tales come from a wider culture' (Goodson, 2005, p. 215).

Following this scrutiny I think we can see in contemporary cultural activity how the move to smaller, more individual life narratives is emerging. Interestingly this is often referred to as the 'age of narrative': of narrative politics, of narrative

story telling, of narrative identity. Put in historical perspective against the last centuries following the Age of Enlightenment, we should see this as the beginning, not of the 'age of narratives,' but of the 'age of small narratives.' In our current individualized society, our art, culture and politics increasingly reflect a move to highly-individualized or special-interest narratives, which often draw on the literature of therapy and personal and self-development.

Perhaps a few examples from the work of some of our cultural icons will illustrate the point. Bruce Springsteen, the American rock star, has I think always been one of the best and most perceptive story tellers. He writes his songs very carefully and works on quite large canvases of human aspiration at times, such as his album *The River*. In this album he reflects, in line with Bob Dylan, who recently wrote that he 'hadn't got a dream that hadn't been repossessed,' on the limiting of human dreams. Springsteen wrote, 'Is a dream a lie if it don't come true, or is it something worse?' These reflections on the capacity of larger human aspirations to direct our life narratives have recently driven him in a more specific, individual direction. His album *The Ghost of Tom Joad* profoundly reflects in its title, as well as in substance, awareness of a massive shift in narrative scope. Tom Joad, of course, the figure in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, carries a storyline linked to mass movements at the time, which aimed to provide social justice at a time of global business depression. Once this link between individual storylines and collective aspirations is broken, we enter the epoch of small narratives, the world of individualised 'life politics.'

In a sense Springsteen's latest work, such as *Devils and Dust*, reflects the move we are describing: the move from grand narratives linked to political engagement towards individual life narratives and more specifically focussed life politics. We can see how this seismic shift in narrative capacity is explored and scripted in the work of our creative artists. Returning to the focus of Springsteen's *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, we see a retrospective look at narrative linked to social and political purpose; but his new album moves off into an individual life-narrative focus. Sean O'Hagan writes: 'Unlike *The Ghost of Tom Joad* it possesses none of that album's pointed social awareness. Instead we get a set of intimate and often fragmentary glimpses of ordinary people's lives in trouble' (O'Hagan, 2005, p. 7). 'What I have done on this record,' elaborates Springsteen on the DVD, 'is to write specific narrative stories about people whose souls are in danger or are at risk from where they are in the world or what the world is bringing to them' (Ibid., 24 April 2005).

Once again then, Springsteen tries to link his narratives to a broader tradition, but this time the link is largely rhetorical, for the stories now are fragmentary and individualised without reference to broader social movements (beyond the nebulous 'folk tradition'). As he says, he now writes 'specific narrative stories' about people and the passivity of the response is reflected in his phrase that these people are 'at risk from where they are in the world or what the world is bringing to them.' The scope and aspiration of narratives is finely elaborated in this quote, and it illustrates the seismic shift in the narrative capacity that has happened over the past two centuries.

### *The Rise of the Life Narrative*

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The same redefinition of narrative capacity can be seen in filmmaking. Many filmmakers articulate their use of specific life narratives in contemporary filmmaking. Jorge Semprun, for example, who has made some of the most resonant political films, said recently in an interview that "the atmosphere in May 1968 and its aftermath created an appetite for political films." But today the mood is different. If you are to make a political film now you have to approach it not from the point of a nation or national struggle, but one of individual choice" (interview with Jorge Semprun, 2004, p. 4). Gil Troy (1999), a history professor writing in *The New York Times*, put it the same way when contemplating the possibilities of action in the contemporary world: "Our challenge today is to find meaning not in a national crises, but in an individual's daily life" (September 24, p. A27).

Reviewing new books on Derrida and Marx, Dolon Cummings (2006) recently reflected on these changes in the reach of theoretical narrative in looking at the differences between the two writers:

For theory to grip the masses, as Marx puts it, there has to be at least the foundation of a mass movement for it to address. Without such a movement, theory lacks direction, discipline even. Consequently the obscurity of contemporary philosophy as exemplified by Derrida and his followers is not a purely intellectual phenomenon. Disconnected from political engagement reading lacks urgency and how we read and what becomes almost arbitrary. (p. 39)

Cummings adds a very significant last sentence: "But the question of how to read any author cannot be entirely separated from the question of how to live, and that is a question that never really goes away" (p. 39).

We see here the changing canvas for narrative construction and the dramatic change in scope and aspiration and we can see this reflected in our social and political life. The change can be seen in the political adviser on network TV who recently put it this way: "No it's not that we see the need to change the policy in response to public opposition . . . no not at all. . . . Our conclusion is that we need to change the story we tell about the policy."

This is a perfect redefinition of the new genre of "narrative politics." New in one sense, but in fact dating back some way in time—most significantly to the public relations guru, Edward Bernays. Bernays believed we could manipulate people's unconscious desires and by appealing to them you could sell anything—from soap powder to political policies. It was a matter of crafting the right kind of story. Hence: "You didn't vote for a political party out of duty, or because you believed it had the best policies to advance the common good; you did so because of a secret feeling that it offered you the most likely opportunity to promote your self" (Adams, 2002, p. 5). As Christopher Caldwell has noted as a result of the triumph of narrative politics: "Politics has gone from largely being about capital and labour to being largely about identity and sovereignty" (Caldwell, 2005). Politicians appear to understand this need for narrative fine-tuning as they hone their policies. The

narrative matters more than the substance, as this quote from the late lamented Charles Kennedy makes clear: 'Whilst we had good and quite popular policies [pause] we have got to find and fashion a narrative' (as quoted in Branigan, 2005, p. 8).

Nothing illustrates the shift from old hierarchies of cultural and symbolic capital towards something we might call 'narrative capital' better than the case of David Cameron, the new leader of the Tory party in Britain (see Goodson, 2005). In previous generations his Old Etonian and Oxford connections would have provided an authoritative narrative through which to promote his political ambitions. The cultural and symbolic capital of such an education would then have come with an implicit and very powerful storyline. These places traditionally produced those who govern us whilst the symbolic and social capital is still largely intact. Cameron has predictably worried about constructing an acceptable life narrative. The dilemma is outlined in this interview with Martin Bentham (2005), undertaken before he became leader:

But as Cameron insists, it is not just his preference for racy television programmes that calls into question the stereotyped image that others have placed upon him. He cites his liking for the 'gloomy left-wing' music of bands such as the Smiths, Radiohead, and Snow Patrol, which brings ribbing from his friends, as a further example of his divergence from the traditional Tory image, and also, perhaps rather rashly for a newly appointed shadow Education Secretary, admits to regularly misbehaving 'in all sorts of ways' while at school.

Most importantly, however, he says that what keeps him connected very firmly in ordinary life is the job of representing his constituents in Witney, Oxfordshire, and life at home with his wife, Samantha, and their two children, three-year-old Ivan, who suffers from cerebral palsy and epilepsy, and Nancy, who is aged 14 months.

'Am I too posh to push?' he quips, before determinedly explaining why he rejects the criticism of his background. 'In the sort of politics I believe in it shouldn't matter what you've had in the past, it's what you are going to contribute in the future, and I think that should be true of everybody, from all parts of society, all colours and ages and races, and I hope that goes for Old Etonians too.' (p.10)

What I think Cameron has noted is that if he re-crafts his life narrative 'it shouldn't matter what you've had in the past.' In other words he is worried that his life experience of sustained systematic privilege will interfere with the narrative he is trying to create for himself and his party where there is a 'genuine care and compassion for those who fall behind' and where what 'people really want (is) a practical down-to-earth alternative to Labour.' He ends, 'Am I too posh? It shouldn't really matter where you come from—even if it's Eton.' While Eton then may have massive historical claims to cultural and symbolic capital, the narrative capital it provides is clearly a little more difficult to present and cash in. Cameron's honest appraisal of the dilemma elegantly illustrates the seismic shift towards narrative politics and how this is likely to feed through into new educational modes for acquiring narrative capital (see Goodson, 2004).

### *The Rise of the Life Narrative*

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The same importance of narrative capital can be seen working its way into the literature on business management and leadership. Peter Senge's (2005) work on the discipline of business leaders points to the salience of what he calls the 'principle story' in the motivation and direction of business leaders.

To forge the link between the multinational and the personal, we need to grasp each person's life-theme. Senge says this about purpose stories:

The interviews that I conducted as background for this chapter led to what was, for me, a surprising discovery. Although the three leaders with whom I talked operate in completely different industries—a traditional service business, a traditional manufacturing business, and a high-tech manufacturing business—and although the specifics of their views differed substantially, they each appeared to draw their own inspiration from the same source. Each perceived a deep story and a sense of purpose that lay behind his vision, what we have come to call the purpose story—a larger pattern of becoming that gives meaning to his personal aspirations and his hopes for their organization. For O'Brien the story has to do with 'the ascent of man.' For Simon, it has to do with 'living in a more creative orientation.' For Ray Stat, it has to do 'with integrating thinking and doing.'

This realization came late one evening, after a very long day with the tape and transcript of one of the interviews. I began to see that these leaders were doing something different from just 'story telling,' in the sense of using stories to teach lessons or transmit bits of wisdom. They were relating the story—the overarching explanation of why they do what they do, how their organizations need to evolve, and how this evolution is part of something larger. As I reflected back on gifted leaders whom I have known, I realized that this 'larger story' was common to them all, and conversely that many otherwise competent managers in leadership positions were not leaders of the same ilk precisely because they saw no larger story.

The leader's purpose story is both personal and universal. It defines her or his life's work. It ennobles his efforts, yet leaves an abiding humility that keeps him from taking his own successes and failures too seriously. It brings a unique depth to meaning to his vision, a larger landscape upon which his personal dreams and goals stand out as landmarks on a longer journey. But what is important, this story is central to his ability to lead. It places his organization's purpose, its reason for being within a context of 'where we've come from and where we're headed,' where the 'we' goes beyond the organization itself to humankind more broadly. In this sense, they naturally see their organization as a vehicle for bringing learning and change into society. This is the power of the purpose story—it provides a single integrating set of ideas that give meaning to all aspects of a leader's work. (p. 346)

The pattern of narrative construction can be discerned at work now in the advertising industry. In previous times advertising was a mass movement which meant it targeted large segments of the population and addressed them through the mass media of television, radio, and the press. Whilst this was not a process free of narrative construction, and was indeed deeply impregnated in this way, it was the narrative construction of collective identities and collective desires that could be reached through the mass media. These were not grand narratives, but they are

certainly large narratives aimed at significant sections of the population. This collective narrative advertising is beginning to break down in the face of the rise of the small narrative and the individualised society. The evidence is everywhere. To give one piece of evidence: in the last year advertising revenues are down 3.5 percent for the national press, 4.5 percent for commercial radio, and 3.3 percent for the main commercial television stations (ITV1). These are very significant reductions over a one-year period and indicate the beginnings of a sharp decline of mass-narrative advertising. In its place, according to the National Consumer Council, is a wholly different pattern of advertising. In contrast to the figures above advertising on the Internet rose 70 percent last year. This is a seismic shift in the size and aspiration of advertising. A spokesman for the National Consumer Council said:

The point about the Internet is that people can be told individually tailored stories which fit their own prejudices and predilections. The advertiser can access all this niche information and can tailor individual and personalised narratives for each individual taste. This is likely to be much more successful than the hit and miss mass advertising of the past. (Interview on BBC News, 23 March 2006)

We can see then how the *l*age of small narratives, *l* of life narratives, has been expressed in emerging patterns of art, of politics, of business. In this sense the problematics of studying people's lives are part of a wider context of social relations, proprieties and provisions. Lasch, for instance, has scrutinised the historical trajectory of private lives in *Haven in a Heartless World* (Lasch, 1977). In his history of modern society he discerns two distinct phases. In the first phase he argues that the division of labor which accompanied the development of individual capitalism deprived ordinary people of control over their work, making that work alienating and unfulfilling. In the second phase Lasch argues that liberalism promoted a view that, while work might be alienated under capital, all could be restored in the private domain. *l*It was agreed that people would be freed to pursue happiness and virtue in their private lives in whatever manner they chose.*l* The work place was this severed form; the home and the family became the *l*haven in the heartless world*l* (Menaud, 1991). No sooner was this equation established, Lasch argues, than liberalism reneged.

Private life was opening up to the *l*helping*l* professions: doctors, teachers, psychologist, child guidance experts, juvenile court officers, and the like. The private domain was immediately made prey to these quasi-official *l*forces of organized virtue*l* and *l*the hope that private transactions could make up for the collapse of communal traditions and civic order*l* was smothered by the helping professions. (Lasch, 1977, p.168)

Interestingly, Denzin (1991) has recently argued that ethnographers and biographers represent the latest wave in this *l*penetration*l* of private lives, and that this is to be expected at a time when we see *l*the emergence of a new conservative politics of health and morality, centring on sexuality, the family and the individual*l* (p. 2). Hence he argues:



### *The Rise of the Life Narrative*

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The biography and the autobiography are among Reagan's legacy to American society. In these writing forms the liberal and left American academic scholarly community reasserts a commitment to the value of individual lives and their accurate representation in the life story document. The story thus becomes the left's answer to the repressive conservative politics of the last two decades of American history. With this method the sorrowful tales of America's underclass can be told. In such tellings a romantic and political identification with the downtrodden will be produced. From this identification will come a new politics of protest; a politics grounded in the harsh and raw economics, racial, and sexual edges of contemporary life. This method will reveal how large social groupings are unable to either live out their ideological versions of the American dream, or to experience personal happiness. (p. 2)

And further:

In re-inscribing the real life, with all its nuances, innuendoes and terrors, in the life story, researchers perpetuate a commitment to the production of realist, melodramatic social problems texts which create an identification with the downtrodden in American society. These works of realism reproduce and mirror the social structures that need to be changed. They valorise the subjectivity of the powerless individual. They make a hero of the interactionist-ethnographer voyeur who comes back from the field with moving tales of the dispossessed. They work from an ideological bias that emphasizes the situational, adjustive, and normative approach to social problems and their resolutions, whether this be in the classroom and their resolutions, whether this be in the classroom, the street, or the home. (ibid, pp. 2-3)

The rise of the life narrative clearly comes with a range of problems and also possibilities for the social scientist. By scrutinising the wider social context of life narratives, we can begin to appreciate the dilemmas of qualitative work, which focuses on personal narratives and life stories.

The version of 'personal' that has been constructed and worked for in some Western countries is a particular version, an individualistic version, of being a person. It is unrecognizable to much of the rest of the world. But so many of the stories and narratives we have of teachers work unproblematically and without comment with this version of personal being and personal knowledge. Masking the limits of individualism, such accounts often present 'isolation, estrangement, and loneliness . . . as autonomy, independence and self-reliance' (Andrews, 1991, p.13). Andrews concludes that if we ignore social context, we deprive ourselves and our collaborators of meaning and understanding. She says, 'It would seem apparent that the context in which human lives are lived is central to the core of meaning in those lives' and argues 'researchers should not, therefore, feel at liberty to discuss or analyse how individuals perceive meaning in their lives and in the world around them, while ignoring the content and context of that meaning' (p.13).

The truth is that many times a life storyteller will neglect the structural context of their lives or interpret such contextual forces from a biased point of view. As Denzin (1989) says, 'Many times a person will act as if he or she made his or her own



history when, in fact, he or she was forced to make the history he or she lived (p. 74). He gives an example from the 1986 study of alcoholics: 'You know I made the last four months, by myself. I haven't used or drunk. I'm really proud of myself. I did it' (pp. 74-75). A friend, listening to this account commented:

You know you were under a court order all last year. You know you didn't do this on your own. You were forced to, whether you want to accept this fact or not. You also went to AA and NA. Listen Buster you did what you did because you had help and because you were afraid, and thought you had no other choice. Don't give me this, 'I did it on my own crap.'

The speaker replies, 'I know. I just don't like to admit it.' Denzin concludes:

This listener invokes two structural forces, the state and AA, which accounted in part for this speaker's experience. To have secured only the speaker's account, without a knowledge of his biography and personal history, would have produced a biased interpretation of his situation. (pp. 74-75)

The story, then, provides a starting point for developing further understandings of the social construction of subjectivity, if the stories stay at the level of the personal and practical, we forego that opportunity. Speaking of the narrative method focusing on personal and practical teachers' knowledge, Willinsky (1989) writes: 'I am concerned that a research process [that] intends to recover the personal and experiential would pave over this construction site in its search for an overarching unity in the individual's narrative' (p. 259).

These then are the issues that begin to confront us as the age of the life narrative gathers pace. Let us then review some of the problems that working with individual life narratives face. First the personal life story is an *individualizing* device if divorced from context. It focuses on the uniqueness of individual personality and circumstance and in doing so may well obscure or ignore collective circumstances and historical movements. Life stories are only constructed in specific historical circumstance and cultural conditions—these have to be brought into our methodological grasp.

Second then, the individual life story far from being personally constructed is itself *scripted*. The social scripts people employ in telling their life story are derived from a small number of acceptable archetypes available in the wider society. The life story script, far from being autonomous, is highly dependent on wider social scripts. In a sense what we get when we listen to a life story is a combination of archetypal stories derived from wider social forces and the personal characterizations the life storyteller invokes. The life story therefore has to be culturally located as we pursue our understandings.

In general, life stories themselves do not acknowledge this cultural location explicitly; neither do they reflect explicitly on their historical location in a particular time and place. The life story as data, therefore, faces a third dilemma in that it can be a *de-contextualizing* device, or at the very least an under-contextualizing device. This means that the historical context of life stories needs to be further

### *The Rise of the Life Narrative*

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elucidated and they need to be understood in relationship to time and periodization. We can think of time, as the French Annalists do, as existing at a number of levels. First there is broad historical time—the large sweeps and periods of human history, what the Annalists called the *longue durée*. Then there is generational or cohort time—the specific experiences of particular generations, say the *‘baby-boomers’* born after the Second World War. Then there is cyclical time—the stages of the life cycle from birth through to work and child-rearing (for some) through to retirement and death. Finally there is the personal time—the way each person develops phases and patterns according to personal dreams, objectives, or imperatives across the life-course.

These historical factors associated with time and period have to be addressed as we develop our understandings of life story data. This scrutiny of historical context, more broadly conceived, will also allow us to interrogate the issue of individualizing and scripting mentioned earlier. The aim is to provide a story of individual action within a theory of context. This aim is served when we make the transition from life story studies to life histories.

### **Learning Lives: An Example**

In this section I give an example of a research project I am currently involved with that seeks to address some of the dilemmas present in life history work—the language of individualizing, scripting and de-contextualizing inherent in the rise of the life narrative. The Learning Lives project is a large interdisciplinary project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in Britain from 2004-2008. What is developed in this project is a range of strategies that provides an historical and cultural context for understanding lives. We require a range of approaches to capture the complexities of time mentioned earlier—the broad, historical, the generational, the cyclical and the personal dimensions of lives situated in time.

Learning Lives is a longitudinal study that aims to deepen understanding of the meaning and significance of informal learning in the lives of adults, and aims to identify ways in which the learning of adults can be supported and enhanced. As well as informal learning, the project has begun to focus on what we have called *‘primal learning’*. Primal learning is the kind of learning that goes on in the elaboration and ongoing maintenance of a life narrative or identity project. The kind of motifs that emerge in primal learning are those such as the quest, the journey, the dream—all of them central motifs for the ongoing elaboration of a life mission. We have come to see this kind of narrative learning as central in the way that people learn throughout the life-course and to see that it requires a different form of research and elaboration to understand than the more traditional kinds of formal and informal learning. It is at this point in investigating primal learning that we begin to develop the concepts of narrative capital and narrative learning, which were mentioned earlier.

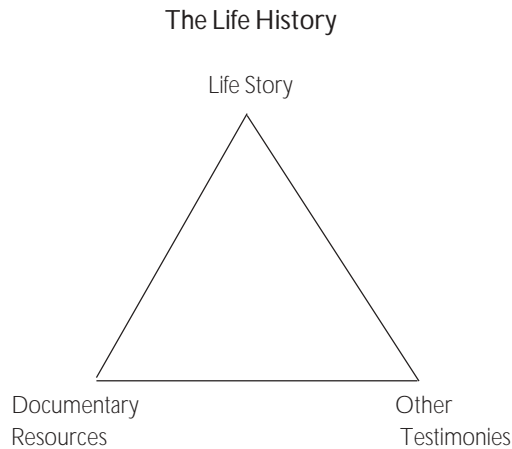
In the Learning Lives project collaboration between the universities of

Brighton, Exeter, Leeds and Stirling, we are also focussing as well on different genres of learning on the relationships between mobility, migration and learning, work employment and learning, and learning in the family and the community. We are also beginning to develop a strong theme around the learning of older people and how that links with new forms of primal learning at later ages.

Currently we are almost half way through the project, and a little over half way through data collection. Respondents have mainly been interviewed three or four times in this period and most will be interviewed a further two to four times before the close of the project. Interviews begin as unstructured, but as the project progresses and initial analysis is undertaken, so progressive focussing takes place and some degree of structure begins to emerge in the questions asked. Nevertheless, it is the intent of the interviewers to keep open as many avenues as possible for as long as possible to ensure that early closure of important narratives does not ensue. The extent of focus and structure is dependent on the individual interviewer and each interviewee.

The desire to keep interviews unstructured at the beginning comes from a desire to get the life storytellers to rehearse their story with us, with as little intervention as possible. The role of the interviewer is one of listener, and we try, at least in the first interview, to keep as close as we can to our *ivow* of silence.<sup>1</sup>

As the next interviews progress this means our interview questions grow from the original, largely unmediated, life story. As the interviewer begins to cross-question the life storyteller using the data sources, such as documentary data and other testimonies, we move from life story to life history. The process of triangulation represents this move to life history.



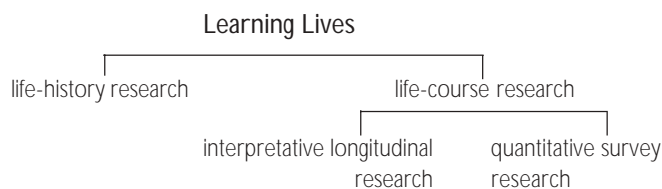
From initial analysis of the texts a number of broad themes have emerged. In this case the theme was around the importance placed on early childhood experiences to explain later life events and choices. The respondent whose stories we use

### *The Rise of the Life Narrative*

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in this paper is one of the respondents who fit into this themed group. The stories have been selected to provide an overview of the range of experiences in childhood and adolescence that may be seen as important for identity formation in later life, and for the quests that have developed from these experiences.

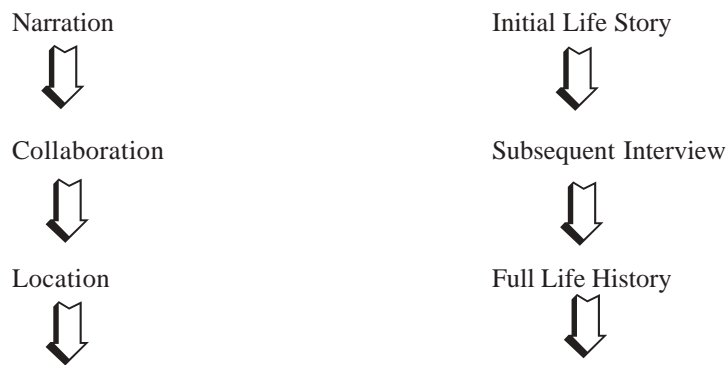
What makes the project relatively unique is not only its length (a data-collection period of almost three years) and size (about 750 in-depth interviews with 150 adults aged 25 and older, plus a longitudinal questionnaire study with 1,200 participants), but also the fact that it combines two distinct research approaches, life history research and life-course research, and that within the latter approach, it utilises a combination of interpretative longitudinal research and quantitative survey research.



In the Learning Lives project we have the chance to see how life history can elucidate learning responses. What we do in the project is to deal with learning as one of the strategies people employ as the response to events in their lives. The great virtue of this situation regarding our understanding of learning within the whole life context is that we get some sense of the issue of engagement in learning as it relates to people living their lives. When we see learning as a response to actual events, then the issue of engagement can be taken for granted. So much of the literature on learning fails to address this crucial question of *engagement*, and as a result learning is seen as some formal task that is unrelated to the needs and interests of the learner. Hence so much of curriculum planning is based on prescriptive definitions of what is to be learnt without any understanding of the situation within the learners' lives. As a result a vast amount of curriculum planning is abortive because the learner simply does not engage. To see learning as located within a life history is to understand that learning is contextually situated and that it also has a history, in terms of (a) the individual's life story, (b) the history and trajectories of the institutions that offer formal learning opportunities, and (c) the histories of the communities and locations in which informal learning takes place. In terms of transitional spaces we can see learning as a response to incidental transitions, such as: events related to illness, unemployment and domestic dysfunction, as well as the more structured transitions related to credentialing or retirement. Hence, these transitional events create encounters with formal, informal and primal learning opportunities.

How then do we organize our work to make sure that our collection of life narratives and learning narratives does not fall into the traps of individualization, scripting, and de-contextualization? The answer is we try to build in an ongoing

concern with time and historical period, and context and historical location. In studying learning, like any social practice, we need to build in an understanding of the context, historical and social, in which that learning takes place. This means that our initial collection of life stories as narrated moves on into a collaboration with our life storytellers about the historical and social context of their life. By the end we hope the life story becomes the life history because it is located in historical time and context. Our sequence then moves in this way:



Let me give one concrete example of how location might work in studying teachers' lives. In the life stories of teachers nowadays the normal storyline is one of technicians who follow government guidelines and teach a curriculum which is prescribed by governments or departments of education. The storyline therefore reflects a particular historical moment where the teachers' work is constructed in a particular way. If, however, one compares current teacher storylines in England with the storylines collected 30 or 40 years ago, those stories would be of professionals who have autonomy and the capacity to decide what curriculum to teach and what content is organized to carry that curriculum. In seeking to locate the life story of current teachers, we would have to talk about the ongoing construction of the teachers' work in a particular way. In coming to understand how contemporary teachers' work provides a particular work context, we would get some sense of the historical context of teachers' work and how this is subject to change and transition as the historical circumstances of schooling changes. Hence in moving from narration through to location a historical understanding of the teachers work might emerge.

So this is how time and context might emerge within life history research. To make sure that this temporal aspect is fully engaged within the project, we have divided our research between life history research and life-course research. In this way the historical context of learning can be examined either retrospectively or in contemporary 'real time'.<sup>1</sup> The retrospective understanding of the learning biography can be explored in life history research while the real time understanding of the ways in which learning biographies are lived can be understood through longitu-

### *The Rise of the Life Narrative*

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dinal life-course research. In this way we set retrospective life history research against contemporary longitudinal life-course research.

We have summarized the rationale for combining these two approaches in this way:

The reason for combining the two approaches is not only that it increases the time-span available for investigation (albeit that the retrospective study of the learning biography can only be done through the accounts and recollections of participants). It is also because we believe that the combination of the two approaches allows us to see more and gain a better understanding than if we would only use one of them. To put it simply: life-history research can add depth to the interpretation of the outcomes of longitudinal life-course research, while life-course research can help to unravel the complexities of life-history research. Each, in other words, is a potential source for contextualizing and interpreting the findings of the other. (Biesta, G., Hodkinson, P., & Goodson, I, 2004)

By moving from life stories towards full life histories and by building in life course analysis, we maximize the potential for understanding how time and context impinge on peoples' learning lives. Such work then tries to put the individual life narrative back together with the collective context. In doing so it seeks to heal the rupture between the individual life narrative and the collective and historical experience.

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