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## Using Narrative To Improve Reflection In Technical Communication

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USING NARRATIVE TO IMPROVE REFLECTION IN  
TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida; 2001

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores why instructors should use narrative intentionally and effectively with reflection to better understand adult students' perceptions of experiential learning activities in technical communication. The frequent use of narrative in technical discourse reminds us that the tone of technical texts is often appropriately informal, personable, and reflective. A closer analysis of narratives provides instructors with valuable opportunities to learn more about the motivations for and barriers to learning for adult students and to better understand how these students situate themselves in larger social and cultural narratives.

Narrative serves many purposes in technical communication. Not only does narrative add a human element to technical discourse, but it also invites interrogation and inquiry into the technical communicator's decision-making process. For these reasons, narrative is commonly paired with reflection exercises in experiential learning programs as a way for students to make sense of their learning experiences. If instructors can capture the essence of how adult students make sense of their learning experiences, they can determine if experiential learning is an effective pedagogical approach to teaching technical communication to adult students. Using examples of ongoing, initial and summative, and alternative reflection exercises, I illustrate how narrative can be used to facilitate the learning process in adult students and gain access to these students' perceptions of experiential learning activities in technical communication.

In loving memory of my grandmother Darinka Brkich... Volim te.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Humans tell stories for a variety of reasons. We tell stories to remember the past, to argue a point, to persuade, to entertain, to share our perspective, to motivate others into action, and to survive as human beings. By telling stories, we bring some kind of coherence to the chaos of our experiences. Narration, then, is a sense-making act. It is a practice we engage in as individuals, but, importantly, as individuals situated within various social contexts amid much larger cultural narratives.

Narratives are culturally bound; therefore, no commonly shared definition of narrative exists across cultures. However, there is an everyday understanding of the term. In *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, Catherine Kohler Riessman uses the terms *narrative* and *story* interchangeably to arrive at a comprehensive, although not exhaustive, definition:

... in every day oral storytelling, a speaker connects events into a sequence that is consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners to take away from the story. Events perceived by the speaker as important are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience. (3)

Riessman's definition of narrative is noteworthy because it highlights the social nature of narrative by addressing the need for an audience and suggesting that the audience determines the purpose of the narrative.



Narrative is a commonly used rhetorical mode of discourse. The functions of narrative are overlapping: “a teller must engage an audience in order to argue, persuade, mobilize others to action, and the like” (Riessman 10). The term narrative comes from the Latin verb *narrare*, which means “to recount.” In technical communication, narrative persuades, entertains, motivates, and informs. One example of a narrative paragraph in technical communication is a chronological paragraph, which may be used to discuss various steps in a procedure or the time during which certain events occurred. Furthermore, narrative is often associated with an author’s establishment of formality levels and tone.

In *Technical Writing Style*, Dan Jones defines tone as “your attitude toward your subject, your audience, and yourself” (188) and distinguishes between four style elements that are commonly used as synonyms for tone: *persona*, *person*, *point of view*, and *voice*. Specifically, Jones examines the relationship between *persona* and *person* by explaining how *person*, “the personal pronouns you use in your writing to refer to yourself, your readers, and the people you write about” (189), aids in establishing a writer’s *persona*, “the role constructed by the narrator of a text” (189). Continuing, Jones defines *point of view* as “your relationship to the information you are writing about in terms of your use of person” (189), reminding us that “point of view may also be defined as it relates to the larger discourse situation of narrator-text-reader” (189), or audience. Finally, Jones pinpoints the function of *voice* when he describes it as “the relationship of subject and object in a sentence” and provides examples of active voice, passive voice, and narrative voice – “a term in literary criticism for the person who tells the story” (190).

In technical discourse, the tone is often impersonal. The narrators create a distance or formality between themselves, the subject, and their audience in order to project ethos, or “the authentic self” (Jones 199), thus, inventing their style. However, Jones reserves a place for informal and personable prose in technical communication, claiming that there are appropriate situations when “the writer may project a strong presence in the prose” (190). Carolyn Rude asserts this claim in *Technical Editing* when she classifies tone as a component of *style* and compares writing style to one’s personal style of dress, suggesting that style is a matter of substance rather than merely just decoration. She attributes effective writing style to the narrator’s knowledge of the components and options for arrangement, and the appropriate application of those elements to a particular rhetorical context. Therefore, narrative can be further described as not the story itself but the act of telling the story. For these reasons, narrative can be analyzed using four canons of rhetoric: *invention*, *arrangement*, *style*, and *delivery*. However, in narrative study “attention shifts to the details – how and why a particular event is storied, perhaps, or what a narrator accomplishes by developing the story *that* way, and effects on the reader or listener” (Riessman 13). Such analysis of particulars and context allows for human agency and the narrator’s imagination (or *invention*) to be interrogated. Riessman explains, “A good narrative analysis prompts the reader to think beyond the surface of a text, and there is a move toward a broader commentary” (13).

The traditional approach to narrative analysis, which focuses on general aspects of social organization, offers a great deal to disciplines and professions that want to see how knowledge is constructed in the everyday world through an ordinary act of communication – storytelling

(Riessman 13). In technical communication courses, narrative is commonly used for a variety of reflective assignments that prompt students to make sense of their learning experiences.

Riessman suggests that narrative is effective in this sense because it accomplishes what other modes of communication do not. She explains, “Most obviously, individuals and groups construct identities through storytelling” (8). Therefore, when applied intentionally and effectively to reflective assignments, a narrative provides a window of greater understanding into the lives and identities of its author, its readers, and its innate culture.

In “Narrative Learning in Adulthood,” M. Carolyn Clark and Marsha Rossiter examine how narrative is a method for fostering learning and also a way to conceptualize the learning process. Specifically, the authors describe the essential features of narrative learning and discuss why narrative is an effective way to teach adults and to learn more about adult students. The use of stories has always been a pedagogical method employed in adult education, but more recently, narrative learning has been unequivocally linked to *adult learning theory* and *experiential learning theory*. The authors explain this connection: “... the process of narrating is always prelinguistic; it is ‘languaged’ after the fact, and the process of narrating is how learners give meaning to experience” (62). Clark and Rossiter advocate for adult education structured around “the life world of the adult learner,” claiming, “this is the source of the adult’s motivation to learn” (64). For this reason, analyzing adult student narratives will provide a better understanding of how these students learn and how they perceive their learning experiences.

Learning through experience is not a new concept. The process of making meaning from direct experience is called experiential learning. Simply put, experiential learning is learning

through reflection on doing. Experiential learning engages students at a more personal level by addressing their needs and wants, and by requiring students to be self-initiated learners who learn through the process of self-evaluation. Service-learning is one pedagogical method related to, but not synonymous with, experiential learning. Service-learning dates back to 1862, although the revival of this pedagogical method occurred throughout the 1980s and 90s. Since then, service-learning has gained popularity as a viable pedagogical method capable of enhancing community participation, altruism, academic performance, skill development, personal growth, and leadership ability on the part of children, teenagers, and traditional-age college students (Smith 5). However, very few investigations have been performed to determine if service-learning affords any benefits to nontraditional college students. In “Our changing students and their impacts on colleges: Prospects for a true learning society,” K. Patricia Cross defines *nontraditional students* as adults who return to school full- or part-time while maintaining responsibilities such as employment, family, and other obligations of adult life (630). Over the last 20 years, the percentage of older students on campuses has increased dramatically. According to a research report published by the Council of Graduate Schools, 3.4 million students age 35 and older will be enrolled in higher education in 2018, up from 3.0 million in 2007. Because developmental needs, issues, and stressors for adults differ considerably from those faced by younger, traditional college students, all aspects of the college environment must be reconsidered, and often reconfigured, to respond to this growing student population.

Traditional and nontraditional students are typically integrated in the college classroom, and as service-learning and other experiential learning methods become more widely accepted

and practiced, instructors must better understand how nontraditional students perceive these learning activities. Service-learning has many models, but the Stanford model in which students write as their community service is prevalent in technical communication courses. In *Service-learning in Technical and Professional Communication*, Melody Bowdon and Blake Scott identify four specific attributes of service-learning that follow the Stanford model: it relates to the course goals; it addresses a need in the community; it develops a reciprocal relationship between academe and the community; and it requires critical reflection from the student (5). The advanced writing courses offered in technical communication provide valuable opportunities for instructors to implement service-learning activities that not only approximate writing done in the workplace but that fulfill a need in the community. Then, by incorporating narrative modes into reflection exercises, instructors will encourage students to practice more informal and personable styles of prose as well. Additionally, these student narratives will serve as one source of data for the investigation into whether service-learning and other experiential learning activities afford any benefits to nontraditional students by revealing these students' perception of their learning experiences.

### Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how and why instructors should use narrative in experiential learning technical communication courses to improve reflection exercises and to learn more about adult student perceptions of experiential learning. The frequent use of narrative in technical discourse reminds us that the tone of technical texts is often appropriately informal,

personable, and even reflective. By employing a narrative voice, authors establish, and candidly reveal, their relationship to the subject matter and to the audience. Careful analysis of narratives provides instructors with valuable opportunities to learn more about the motivations for and barriers to learning for adult students and to better understand how these students situate themselves within larger social and cultural narratives.

In this study, I aim to pinpoint how narrative functions in technical communication and how the device can be applied most effectively to access the learning of adult students engaged in experiential learning. Since technical communication experiential learning courses require reflection exercises, instructors must better understand how particular narrative modes might help to facilitate the meaning-making process in adult students. If instructors can capture the essence of how adult students make sense of their learning experiences, they can determine if experiential learning is an effective pedagogical approach to teaching technical communication to adult students.

### Scope

This thesis explores information from a range of scholarly literature discussing narrative within the field of technical communication. I examine articles focusing on whether and why narrative is relevant in the field of technical communication, as well as the use and implementation of the device in service-learning reflection assignments. Specifically, I consider how narrative facilitates learning for adult students and how narrative analysis can be applied to better understand how adult students perceive experiential learning activities.

The scope of this thesis is limited to considerations of narrative in technical communication with regard to theories of meaning making, the role of reflection, and applications of narrative. Theory of meaning making encompasses many scholars' studies of how and where meaning making occurs in technical communication. This discussion includes technical communicators as agents for change, organizational contexts, the critical perspective, and narrative learning. To supplement and support these scholarly theories, I then review reflection exercises commonly used in experiential learning courses and discuss how narrative can be applied to improve these exercises. These examples of narrative modes in experiential learning include the genres of learning journals, reflective reports, concept-focused autobiographies, and digital storytelling, as well as other variations of narrative.

### Significance and Rationale

An analysis of narrative as it functions today in technical communication pedagogy cannot be properly conducted without first considering how the field was established and how it has evolved. A number of watershed articles illustrate how scholars in the field laid the foundation for the strategic use and continued development of narrative in technical texts by arguing for and encouraging the connection of technical communication to the humanities, social sciences, and liberal studies. These articles are essential to understanding the significance of narrative within technical communication and how narrative contributes to adult learning development.

Historically, technical communicators have struggled to establish and maintain their identity within any one specific discipline or field of study. In “The Rise of Technical Writing Instruction in America,” Robert Connors used narrative to recount the events, social movements, and influential “characters” that situated technical writing within a much larger cultural narrative, and ultimately, shaped the future of the discipline. Specifically, Connors documents the “expansion of technical writing into fields other than engineering” (14) saying “... departments of agriculture, architecture, chemistry, pharmacy, even home economics” (14) began educating students about technical writing.

In “History, Rhetoric, and Humanism,” Russell Rutter elaborates on the expansion of technical writing into other fields and argues for the priority of imagination in science and technology to link technical writing to the rhetorical tradition and liberal education. Throughout the article Rutter discounts the positivist assumptions that long gripped the discipline, making the authors of technical texts practically invisible to their readers. He states, “many of our cherished myths about style and the proper approach to technical and scientific communication reflect ideas about language that were originally floated when science was in its infancy” (27). Rutter argues for a rhetorical approach to technical writing that reserves a place for the authors’ invention and relationship to their readers. He says:

That is, writing must be conceptualized as an activity that by its selection and organization of information and its assessment of audience creates its own version of reality and then strives to win the consensus of its readers that this version is valid. If technical communicators actively create versions of reality instead of



serving merely as windows through which reality in all of its pre-existent configurations may be seen, then technical communication must be fundamentally rhetorical: it builds a case that reality is one way and not another. (28)

Furthermore, Rutter calls for the re-placement of people in technical prose claiming that technical writing style has been simplified to meet the needs of a community, “but it hasn’t addressed the development of these people as people. In fact, it doesn’t place people first at all” (31).

Carolyn Miller also argues for a rhetorical and humanistic approach to technical writing in her article, “A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing.” Miller rejects the positivist views of the past and explains four features of technical writing pedagogy that have been wrongly influenced by “this positivist legacy” (50). Under positivist assumptions, Miller claims “our definitions of technical writing leak badly” (50) and that “the whole idea of invention is heresy” because “science does not invent it discovers” (50). She goes on to name a third problematic feature of our teaching as an “insistence on certain characteristics of tone: be objective, be unemotional, be impersonal” (51) and says “scientists have adopted as conventions the obvious stylistic means for staying out of the way of the subject matter – third person constructions, personifications, passive voice” (51). Finally, Miller identifies audience analysis as another problematic feature and requests “broader and more flexible methods, which will permit analysis of the relationship between the writer and the reader” (51).

Like Rutter, Miller calls for a closer look at the writer-reader relationship, but she goes even farther to ask for an analysis of the reasons writers say anything about a subject matter in

the first place. Miller's proposed question about *why* writers write about a particular subject matter prompts the critical analysis of content required for narrative analysis, which interrogates the writer's invention. Miller says, "We teach writing as the ex post facto expression of a scientific idea or a technical effort, not as part of that idea or that effort" (51). She cites a new epistemology based on modern developments in cultural anthropology, cognitive psychology, and sociology that claims human knowledge is relative and science is rhetorical. She explains:

... it holds that whatever we know of reality is created by individual action and by communal assent. Reality cannot be separated from our knowledge of it; knowledge cannot be separated from the knower; the knower cannot be separated from a community. Facts do not exist independently, waiting to be found and collected and systematized; facts are human constructions which presuppose theories. We bring to the world a set of innate and learned concepts which help us select, organize, and understand what we encounter. (51)

Building upon this epistemological view, Miller suggests that good technical writing becomes a persuasive version of experience rather than the revelation of an absolute reality (52).

Furthermore, she identifies how one's experience and the writing of one's experience fits into the larger community narrative when she describes writing, and any communicative act, as participation within a community. She says, "to write well is to understand the conditions of one's own participation – the concepts, values, traditions, and style which permit identification with that community and determine the success or failure of communication" (52).

Miller's theories are noteworthy because she advocates for a new approach in technical communication that focuses on understanding rather than just skills. She maintains that technical writing courses could be based upon "this kind of self-examination and self-consciousness" (53) and claims that, "the rhetorical approach demands such a basis" (53). Likewise, in "The Report for Decision Making," Carolyn Rude suggests that the act of writing serves as a form of self-reflection and informs the technical communicators decision-making process. She says simply, "[w]riting enables good decision making" (70) and suggests that reports are rhetorical because they require a method of inquiry in order to come to the best decision. Rude posits, "the essence of rhetoric is its ability to make sense out of uncertain situations" (83) and links the genre of reports for decision-making to writing, thinking, and social agency.

In "Political-Ethical Implications of Defining Technical Communication As a Practice," Dale Sullivan questions the role of technical communicators and speaks in depth about political and ethical concerns regarding the decisions technical communicators face. Specifically, he recognizes that technical communication instructors are in position to be powerful agents for social change and goes on to define technical communication as a practice and virtuous act – meaning that "it must be used for good" (214). In the context of political discourse, Sullivan claims that we need to build on the ideal that all citizens are responsible political agents and suggests teaching technical communication as "a critical perspective and to supplement it with discourse that is appropriate for social action" (216). To illustrate his claim, Sullivan discusses a proposal assignment where students write *about* professional texts using a more personable style to humanize technical discourse. Writing *about* professional texts demands a method of inquiry,

which makes the process rhetorical. Likewise, rhetoric helps students to make sense of their writing process and their rhetorical situations. In “Writing in an Emerging Organization,” Stephen Doheny-Farina states, “Thus, writing serves an organizing function” (328).

The discussion of the function and value of narrative in technical communication is significant and essential. It contributes to a rich and accomplished history of the discussion of technical communication as it relates to the humanities, the human sciences, and liberal education. Additionally, it provides educators with valuable opportunities to conceptualize the learning processes of students, offering one source of data for continued study within the field. The more this topic is explored and analyzed, the more effective and purposeful technical communication pedagogy will become as we learn about the rhetorical decisions students make and understand how larger social and cultural narratives influence those decisions.

Narrative serves many purposes in technical communication. Not only does narrative add a human element to technical discourse, but it also invites interrogation and inquiry into the technical communicator’s decision-making process. For these reasons, narrative is commonly paired with reflection exercises in experiential learning as a way for students to make sense of their learning experiences. However, the educator’s analysis of student narratives is equally important because it reveals how knowledge is constructed through an ordinary act of communication – storytelling. Therefore, the question becomes not *whether* technical communicators will strive to effect social change but rather *how* and *why*.

## Organization

This thesis is organized in the following manner:

Chapter One, the Introduction, provides an overview of the use and value of narrative as a rhetorical tool and a strategy for collecting data on students' learning experiences, specifically within experiential learning assignments in technical communication courses. Narrative is described as a rhetorical mode of discourse that authors use to remember the past, to argue a point, to persuade, to entertain, to share a perspective, to motivate others into action, and to add a human element to technical discourse. The significance of the topic is substantiated through a historical approach that recounts some of the evolution of the field of technical communication as it relates to humanism and adult learning development, laying the foundation for the use of narrative in experiential learning reflection assignments. The extent of the relationship between narrative and adult learning theory and experiential learning reflection is established as the scope of study, and an outline of the sections and order of how this thesis is constructed.

Chapter Two, Theory of Meaning Making, reviews relevant literature that explores meaning making in technical communication. The research I discuss defines technical communication as a social practice and technical communicators as agents for social change. I incorporate a wide range of scholarly opinions and viewpoints to develop a well-rounded and thorough study of how the use of narrative in technical communication is not only a method for fostering learning but also a way to conceptualize the learning process. This chapter includes a discussion of meaning making theory with regard to technical communicators as agents for change, organizational contexts, the critical perspective, and narrative learning.

Chapter Three, *The Role of Reflection*, identifies reflection in both experiential learning and adult education as the process of constructing knowledge through reflecting on experiences. I examine the role of reflection in adult learning, experiential learning, and narrative learning to explain how narrative may improve reflection for adult experiential learning students by facilitating and conceptualizing the learning process.

Chapter Four, *Using Narrative to Improve Reflection*, identifies methodologies of intentionally and effectively incorporating narrative with reflection assignments into technical communication courses in an effort to help students make sense of their learning experiences. I examine ongoing, initial and summative, and alternative uses of narrative. Examples of narrative reflective exercises in this chapter include learning concept-focused autobiographies, reflective reports, learning journals, and digital storytelling, as well as other variations of narrative.

Chapter Five, the *Conclusion*, summarizes the most important information and key points from the previous chapters and discusses opportunities for further research.

## CHAPTER TWO: THEORY OF MEANING MAKING

In order to determine the role and relevance of *narrative in technical communication*, definitions of both terms within the scope of this study must first be established. Narrative is a rhetorical mode of discourse commonly used to recount and make sense of our experiences. In technical communication, narrative may be used to establish a less formal and more personable style of prose, one that candidly reveals the author's relationship to the subject matter and audience of a particular text. However, the construction of a narrative is not solely a personal process; in fact, it is social in nature.

To understand how narratives are socially constructed in technical communication, it is necessary to accept technical communication as a social practice and technical communicators as authors. Technical communication can be described in general as the practice of informing others through an act of communication. The term "technical" comes from the Greek word *techne*, meaning "art and skill," and implies that the practice of technical communication is artful and skillful. However, in "What's Practical about Technical Writing," Carolyn R. Miller argues for a definition of technical communication based on the concept of *praxis* rather than *techne* because *praxis* "concerns human conduct in those activities that maintain the life of the community" (155). Miller's definition of technical communication is fundamental because it identifies the social responsibility associated with informing others.

Technical communicators become capable of influencing social action by accepting Miller's definition of technical communication as a practice concerned with informing others.

Social action can be defined as “the political-ethical act of someone functioning in the citizen’s role rather than in the worker’s role” (Sullivan 214). However, Aristotle proposed that the ability to take social action requires virtue and prudence, or *phronesis*. Phronesis is the classical term for “practical wisdom,” which involves one’s ability to decide how to achieve a certain end, and also the ability to reflect upon that end. Aristotle believed that gaining phronesis required maturity and experience of the world because phronesis is concerned with the particulars – with how to act and respond in particular situations. Furthermore, Aristotle maintained that phronesis is necessary for being virtuous, or of good moral character.

Many rhetoricians have connected phronesis to rhetoric, claiming that when rhetoric is defined as a practice, it is linked with virtue (Sullivan 214), meaning that rhetoric must be used to achieve “good” ends. In Aristotle’s view of good, the community defines what is good, and the individual is good when he or she performs well within the community – that is, the person is a good and responsible citizen (Sullivan 215). However, Alasdair MacIntyre modernized the meaning of virtue in *After Virtue* by embedding the concept of virtue in three contexts. The first context describes virtue as a human quality that enables an individual’s ability to practice with distinction (191). The second context identifies that quality as being part of a person’s life and character, which is made visible through a socially sanctioned narrative (144). The third context suggests that socially sanctioned narratives are actually situated within a much larger cultural narrative (258). Essentially, this modern meaning of virtue suggests that rhetorical activity creates social knowledge.



Technical communicators gain power and authority by engaging in rhetorical activity that results in knowledge construction and meaning making. Technical communicators' critical analysis of context informs their decisions regarding the most appropriate and effective rhetorical strategies for a particular situation. In "The Technical Communicator as Author," Jennifer Daryl Slack, David James Miller, and Jeffery Doak suggest that the transition from technical *writer* to technical *communicator* occurs when the communicator is recognized for adding greater meaning to the message, rather than serving as a mere transmitter or an encoder of the information (167). Importantly, Slack, Miller, and Doak remind us that with this authorship comes power (or empowerment) and social responsibility. They posit, "there is power in the practice of making meaning" (167).

The construction of narratives is a rhetorical activity that facilitates meaning making. Narrative also humanizes technical discourse by revealing an author's relationship to the subject matter and audience of a text. If narrative invites the interrogation and inquiry of an author's decision-making method, the intentional and effective use of narrative has even greater potential for improving reflection exercises in experiential learning technical communication courses. However, instructors must critically analyze student narratives in order to understand students' perceptions of experiential learning and determine whether experiential learning is an effective pedagogical method for teaching technical communication to adults.

Narrative reflection exercises encourage students to make meaning of their experiential learning experiences in a familiar manner - storytelling. By telling stories, students connect their life experiences to their learning experiences and form a new frame of reference. Such exercises

challenge students to consider the implications of technical communication as a social practice by allowing them to establish their identities in relation to the various social contexts in which they live. The purpose of this chapter is to define technical communication as a social practice that benefits from effectively and purposefully using narrative. Additionally, this chapter explores scholarly theories regarding the social and organizational influences of meaning making in technical communication. These meaning-making theories establish a framework by which narrative is presented as a device that facilitates knowledge construction and informs the decision-making processes of technical communicators, as authors, in positions to effect social change. Furthermore, meaning-making theories establish a methodology by which instructors can apply narrative to improve experiential learning reflection exercises and learn more about how adult students perceive experiential learning assignments in technical communication courses.

### Technical Communicators as Agents for Change

In “Political-Ethical Implications of Defining Technical Communication as a Practice,” Dale Sullivan builds on the theory of teaching technical communication as a social practice and suggests that by doing so students come to understand how to belong to a community. Importantly, Sullivan associates technical communication with community service rather than with technological and military societies (215). He says that alternative social groups share a common value “that human beings should not be subordinate to the technology imperative” (215).

Sullivan goes on to include political discourse within the boundaries of technical communication and laments the “marriage between private enterprise and government bureaucracy” calling it a system that prevents citizens from participating in the decision-making authority of predetermined ends (216). This acknowledgement of technical communication as more than “rhetoric appropriate for slaves – those barred from making decisions about the ends” (216) elevates technical communication, and technical communicators, to a position of authorship, influence, and agency.

Furthermore, Sullivan suggests using more personal styles of prose in technical discourse to bring back the human element and to include the public as an audience – encouraging transparency of the author’s relationship to the subject matter and the audience. He attests to the author’s influence and power of self-projection in technical communication when he says, “It is at the point where we break with present reality, where we pretend that we live in an idealized society, that we begin to create a new social order” (217).

Although Sullivan advocates for a commitment to technical communication as a social practice, he also recognizes the challenges faced by instructors who teach such courses. He refers to Miller’s claim that “teaching the course means enculturating students” (217), and says that technical communication is still often taught as a skills-based course rather than a social act. In addition to calling for more transparency in the authorship of technical texts, Sullivan also requests a lesser distance between instructor and student (217). He proposes an “apprenticeship model of teaching” that initiates students into a social structure and “places ethical and political

responsibility” (218) upon students, and instructors. He says, “If we continue to teach the course in traditional ways, we perpetuate a form of discourse that blocks social action... and fail to give our students the power they need to enter the dominant culture” (218).

### Organizational Contexts

The recognition of technical communication as a social practice and technical communicators as authors is certainly significant to the discussion of narrative, in that it acknowledges the social aspect of technical communication as an author’s act of making meaning within particular contexts. In fact, in “Framework for the Study of Writing in Organizational Contexts,” Teresa M. Harrison claims that modern rhetorical theory has broadened to “encompass the social communities that are formed through rhetorical activity and through which rhetorical activity becomes meaningful” (257). She laments that a central problem of research and theory has been explaining the interrelationships between composing and the social world in which composition takes place (257). Narrative can amend this disconnect by revealing the author’s relationship to the subject matter and audience.

What is most significant for the purposes of the current analysis, however, is the need for a stronger emphasis on the contexts where meaning making occurs in technical communication, and the acknowledgement that the author’s relationship with the audience and the subject matter of a text invites inquiry into the technical communicator’s decision-making process. In order to understand how narrative helps to reveal the decision-making process of technical communicators, it is imperative that technical communication be considered a social practice –

one that is grounded in social life, yet simultaneously shapes social life (Harrison 257).

Furthermore, technical communication has expanded into organizational life, and most technical communicators write for and within organizations. Therefore, we must investigate how these organizations present specialized contexts for writing.

Technical communicators are situated within a variety of social and organizational contexts such as history, politics, and culture. Identifying and responding to the audiences of these contexts is somewhat problematic for technical communicators because the perspectives and assumptions of the audiences within each context are fluid and change easily. However, when context is considered a rhetorical activity requiring the technical communicator's analysis, two rhetorical views emerge: context as situation and context as community.

When discussing context as situation, Harrison outlines three elements of situations – audience, exigence, and constraints – claiming that together these elements “create an event calling for a rhetorical response that ‘fits’ the demands of the situation” (257). In general, exigence can be explained as the issue at hand, and the audience as the persons capable of being influenced by the response. Constraints are considered the factors that shape the rhetorical response and influence its success. Constraints affect the depth and form of the information that is given to the audience. In this first view, she says rhetorical situations are objective and that technical communicators act within the framework of objective constraints, maintaining that technical communicators' success depends on their ability to accurately assess and respond to the demands of the situation (257). However, Harrison points out that although audience, exigence,

and constraints may arise within organizations, “the idea of organizations as social units forming a broader context for rhetoric cannot be accommodated to this approach” (258).

The second view of rhetorical context, context as community, suggests that knowledge is created through rhetorical activity. Although there are different positions of this view, each shares a common claim that some of what is designated as “knowledge” is produced through the interaction between the environment, or context, and its knower (Harrison 258). Importantly, Harrison recognizes that knowers do not exist in isolation, but instead produce knowledge within the context in which it arises. She claims that context combines with rhetorical activity and that “it embodies a particular way of seeing those elements and the rest of the world – a set of assumptions that give meaning to stimuli and enable individuals to define experience” (258). In this view of social knowledge construction, technical communicators define their positions as members or outsiders of the emerging community by comparing their personal knowledge to the sentiments of others (259).

As established earlier in this chapter, the construction of narratives is a social and rhetorical activity. Narratives not only reveal the technical communicator’s relationship to the subject matter and audience of a text, but also conceptualize the learning process by providing a mode for technical communicators to make meaning of their experiences and construct knowledge. The use of narrative in experiential learning assignments in technical communication courses creates opportunities for students to situate themselves within various social contexts and explore the larger cultural narratives that influence their decision-making methods. This approach to teaching technical communication requires students to reflect on, interpret, share,

and apply to their coursework the social and political dimensions that shape their engagement as responsible citizens. By engaging in this rhetorical activity, students develop a more critical perspective of society and learn how to position themselves within the narrative to effect change.

### The Critical Perspective

Accepting technical communication as a social practice and technical communicators as authors who make meaning in social and organizational contexts requires the inclusion of politics in technical discourse and a more critical examination of *what* technical communication instructors teach and *why*. In “Taking a Political Turn: The Critical Perspective and Research in Professional Communication,” Nancy Roundy Blyler explores the implications of more politically informed instruction in technical communication pedagogy and claims that the traditional skills-based approach ignores the political dimension and the roles students play as responsible citizens engaged in social action (269). Blyler suggests that this critical, politically informed, method of instruction provides students with the means to interpret and share assumptions and values within a particular community and then apply them to solve social problems that serve the public needs. She calls for a pedagogy that raises awareness among students and empowers them to a level of “cultural self-consciousness in which they neither accommodate nor merely oppose the social order” but instead “actively reposition themselves within it” (269).

Furthermore, Blyler claims that the work done in professional communication has been heavily influenced by a functionalist ideology – one that values the “investigation, prediction,

and control of reality seen as existing external to the self” (269). The undertaking of politically oriented work in professional communication would require a break from this ideology, and a departure from the descriptive and explanatory logical results that it renders. Importantly, Blyler acknowledges that an alternative approach to teaching workplace- and education-oriented disciplines may make research access and funding considerably more difficult, however, she presents the critical perspective as that alternative method.

The critical perspective is “meaning-centered” interpretive research concerned with the discovery of what reality means to individuals within social systems, rather than simply a description and explanation of the aspects of reality (Blyler 270). The critical perspective to research focuses on social action and the self-conscious recognition of the relationship between the knower, knowledge, and politics. By examining this relationship, the researcher exposes the arguments, motives, and barriers that guide our actions as individuals within a variety of social and organizational contexts.

As established, narrative reveals the relationship among an author, the audience, and the subject matter of a text, and it facilitates the learning process of those who employ it by providing opportunities for knowledge construction and the inquiry of ideologies. Critical researchers define ideology as “the medium through which social reality, consciousness, and meaningfulness are constructed” (Blyler 272). Ideology, then, is the interpretive frame within which individuals make sense of the practices they engage in through social interactions with others. Therefore, narrative can be used in technical communication as a mode for exploring and discovering the ideology of its users.



## Narrative Learning

The appropriateness and value of pairing narrative with reflection exercises to better understand adult student perceptions of experiential learning activities in technical communication can be argued by examining recent observations in adult learning theory. Throughout the last decade, adult learning theory has expanded to include embodied learning, spirituality and learning, and narrative learning. Even more recently, adult learning theory has been attending to the various contexts where learning takes place and to its multidimensional nature. These latest theoretical constructions concerning learning context are relevant to technical communication pedagogy because they identify the workplace as a location where learning occurs, and learning as a narrative process. Experiential learning assignments in technical communication courses offer students an opportunity to explore and reflect upon learning, and writing, in a variety of organizational contexts other than their typical environment or workplace. By pairing narrative with reflection, instructors can gain insight as to how adult students learn across various organizational contexts and make meaning of their learning experiences.

Meaning making is a narrative process. The use of narrative to facilitate learning has always been a practice of adult educators. On a very basic level, as human beings, we make sense of our experiences by constructing narratives that cohere. These narratives create coherence by establishing connections between and among our experiences. In “Narrative Learning in Adulthood,” M. Carolyn Clark and Marsha Rossiter suggest that the recognition of these connections makes the critical inquiry of our narratives possible and offers “the possibility

for development of a counter narrative” (62). The critical analysis of narratives and the development of counter narratives are essential to learning in adulthood because these acts challenge and often contradict our current ways of understanding ourselves, others, and situations.

Furthermore, as humans who use narratives to make sense of our experiences, we also use narratives to craft our sense of self, our identity. Often we craft stories and identities in multiple and sometimes even contradictory ways. These multiple narratives constitute our identity within a variety of contexts and help us to manage the complexities of our being (62). Clark and Rossiter call this “a narrative approach to learning” – one that attempts to describe development from the inside as it is experienced, rather than from the outside as it is observed. With this approach, the focus is on the “subjective meaning: how people make sense of their experiences over the life course” (Clark and Rossiter 62). However, in this view, the narrative is continuously revised and revisited throughout our lives to accommodate new perspectives. Thus, we rewrite our personal narrative to fit the rhetorical context of particular situations.

One of the key features of narrative learning theory is that it defines development from the critical perspective of the developing person; however, it is important to remember that narrative is not purely a personal process. In fact, narrative is social in nature because it draws on a continuous supply of cultural norms that confirm the legitimacy of our narratives. Additionally, narratives require an audience, either real or imagined, that will in some way respond to the narrative. Therefore, narratives involve rhetorical analysis and careful attention to the context in which they are created.

The concept of narrative learning falls under the larger category of constructivist learning theory, which understands learning as construction of meaning from experience (Clark and Rossiter 63). Constructivist learning informs narrative because the learning is constructed narratively. Furthermore, experiential learning theory also informs narrative learning because experience is the object of meaning making in our narratives. These theories are critical to adult development, where experience plays a central role, in that they underlie the conceptualizations of where learning is located. In constructivist learning theory, learners connect to their experiences through reflection on that experience, so learning is considered to be located in reflection. However, although narrative learning is constructivist in nature, “construction of the narrative is necessary” in order to “make the experience accessible, and how it is constructed determines what meaning it has for the person” (Clark and Rossiter 64).

With a variety of relevant theories established, an analysis of experiential learning in technical communication and narrative modes in reflection exercises can be thoughtfully conducted. The next chapter explores not only how experiential learning fits into technical communication pedagogy, but how to apply theories of meaning making to use narrative effectively and intentionally to better understand adult students perceptions of experiential learning activities in technical communication. The analysis serves as the next phase of the consideration of narrative in technical communication, in which a more complex understanding of how narrative functions in experiential learning assignments in technical communication courses is achieved through examples and discussion of guiding principles for the use of narrative in technical discourse.

## CHAPTER THREE: THE ROLE OF REFLECTION

Reflection plays a vital role in both adult learning and experiential learning as the rhetorical activity necessary for students to construct knowledge and make meaning of their experiences. Reflection facilitates learning. The use of reflection can also provide insight for instructors regarding how and why incorporating narrative into experiential learning reflection assignments may benefit adult students. Through thoughtful analysis of reflection's role in both adult education and experiential learning, instructors can identify successful methodologies of pairing narrative with reflection in order to improve reflective exercises. The purpose of this chapter is to apply the scholarly theories of meaning making explored in the previous chapter to explain how knowledge is constructed through the process of reflection. Furthermore, this chapter explores how narrative can improve reflection by facilitating and conceptualizing the learning processes of adult students in experiential learning assignments in technical communication courses.

### Significance to Adult Learning

The role of reflection in adult learning theory has evolved congruently over time with developments in experiential learning theory. In the early decades of the twentieth century, John Dewey and Eduard Lindeman linked learning in adulthood to the lived experience, claiming that experience is “the source of the adult’s motivation to learn” (Clark and Rossiter 64). For years following the first developments in experiential learning theory, adult education in North America focused on the individual learner, how that individual processed information, and how

learning enabled the individual to become more empowered and independent (Merriam 94). In the 1970s and 80s, the focus remained on the individual learner, but theorists further linked learning in adulthood to students' critical self-evaluation, or reflection, which in turn, demanded that instructors consider a new, and unique, approach to teaching adults.

Malcolm Knowles' conception of andragogy describes adults as self-directed learners and consists of learning strategies in which experience has a prominent role. In general, andragogy posits that adult education needs to focus more on the process of learning and less on the content that is being taught. Andragogy makes six assumptions related to adults' motivation for learning and to designing adult learning programs:

1. Need to Know: Adults need to know why they need to learn something.
2. Foundation: Adults need to learn experientially.
3. Self-concept: Adults need to be responsible for their decisions.
4. Relevance: Adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value.
5. Orientation: Adults approach learning as problem-solving.
6. Motivation: Adults respond better to internal rather than external motivators (Knowles 57-63).

Valuable teaching strategies that developed out of andragogy were case studies, role-playing, simulation, and self-evaluation. By adopting the concept of andragogy, adult educators have become more like facilitators of learning rather than mere lecturers. Andragogy is an important contribution to adult learning theory in part because it calls for participatory teaching methods

that require adult learners to reflect on their life experiences in order to make meaning of their educational experiences.

The concept of reflecting upon prior experiences in order to make meaning of educational experiences serves as the basis for Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory.

Transformative learning theory requires students to reflect upon their prior experiences in order to develop a new or revised meaning of their experiences that will guide their future action.

Reflection is emphasized in transformative learning theory as the rhetorical process that helps students make meaning of their experiences, develop a critical consciousness, and transform their perspective. Ultimately, this perspective transformation – or paradigm shift – results in a more fully developed and functional frame of reference for students, one that guides their future decision-making methods. Like andragogy, transformative learning is considered unique to adults because it requires a frame of reference from prior experiences, “structures of assumptions and expectations that frame an individual's tacit points of view and influence their thinking, beliefs, and actions” (Taylor 5). Simply put, adults have lived longer and therefore have a longer history of experiences that shape their frame of reference and influence their perspectives.

Transformative learning is equally concerned with both the individual and society because social change occurs through the process of transforming one mind at a time.

Social change begins with individual transformation. In “Transformative Learning Theory,” Edward W. Taylor uses three alternative transformative learning perspectives to explain how individuals transform through reflection and how individual transformation influences social change: psychoanalytic, psychodevelopmental, and social emancipatory (7).

The psychoanalytic perspective views learning as a process of coming to understand oneself throughout life by reflecting on the psychic structures such as ego and persona that make up an individual's identity, while the psychodevelopmental view emphasizes reflection as a continuous and incremental practice necessary for progressive growth and epistemological change. Importantly, Taylor notes that although both of these perspectives emphasize reflection, they also consider the individual learner as the unit of analysis (7). However, the third perspective, social emancipatory transformation, marks a change in the focus from analyzing individuals to analyzing how context and society influence the individual's transformative process. Central to this view is "the goal of social transformation by demythicizing reality, where the oppressed develop a critical consciousness" (Taylor 8). In this perspective, people are viewed as subjects, rather than objects, who constantly reflect upon their experiences with the intention of effecting social change through personal transformation.

The most recent discoveries in adult learning theory attend even more closely to the various social contexts where learning takes place, and to its multidimensional nature. As empirical research has improved, diverse perspectives in adult education have confirmed that learning in adulthood is context-based, and that critical reflection is the process, and practice, necessary for adult students to link learning with context (Merriam 95). Because learning is recognized today as firmly embedded in the lived experiences of adults, reflecting upon the connections between life and educational experiences makes for a more holistic understanding of adult learning (Merriam 95). The most familiar use of narrative is to remember the past. However, narrative embodies the past at the same time it provides ways for students to make

sense of their prior experiences (Riessman 8) by making the past relevant to the present. Therefore, by pairing narrative with reflection, educators can encourage students to make informal attempts at connecting their life experiences to their learning. Furthermore, the critical analysis of student narratives provides instructors with a better understanding of how adults connect their life experiences to their learning experiences in various contexts such as the workplace and the classroom.

### Significance to Experiential Learning

Experiential learning theory directly links learning to the lived experience. It informs pedagogical methods such as service-learning and client-based projects, which provide students with a setting for meaningful learning through curriculum-based service and ongoing reflection. Transformative learning theory, specifically social emancipatory learning theory, also informs experiential learning because reflection involves the critical analysis of oneself in relation to social contexts with the intention of effecting change through action. Reflection is fundamental to these theories and teaching methods because it has been identified as the location where meaning making and learning occurs. Through ongoing and relevant reflection in experiential learning, students make connections among their life experiences, their learning experiences, and their service. Therefore, reflection is a necessary practice for student and pedagogical success.

In technical communication, the Stanford model for service-learning in which students write as their community service, is prevalent. The Stanford model identifies four specific attributes of curriculum design: it relates directly to the course goals, it addresses a need in the



community, it involves developing reciprocal relationships between academe and the community, and it involves critical reflection from the student (Bowdon and Scott 5-6). Adhering to this model, students write as a real, rather than perceived, social service, and produce formal technical documents such as reports and proposals for actual community agencies. When students are responsible for organizing and managing their experiential learning assignment, they also have opportunities to write less formal technical documents such as correspondence and progress reports. However, in addition to the curriculum-based writing assignments, students are often expected to write as a means of reflecting upon and exploring the context of their learning experiences. Typically, reflective writing is more informal and personable, but it still requires a considerable amount of time for students to write and for instructors to analyze. As with the experiential learning theories discussed in the previous section, instructors using service-learning and client-based assignments become more like facilitators of learning rather than mere lecturers.

Two distinguishing features of experiential learning methods are their emphasis on continuous student reflection and their requisite for constructive and consistent feedback from the instructor. In “Helping Nontraditional Students be Successful in College,” Laura Rendon asserts that instructor feedback, or validation, is vital to student success. She states, “The more validations students experience, the richer their academic and social experiences will be” (3). Although reflection’s role in experiential learning activities is substantiated by, and undoubtedly, important to students’ success, it’s often an organizational afterthought for instructors already bogged down by an overwhelming curriculum. In “Basic Writers and Service Learning,” Don J.

Kraemer says “too little time” (103), and the logistical burden imposed upon instructors, shifts attention away from the role of reflection (104).

Instructors face logistical challenges with regard to finding time for meaningful reflection exercises in higher education experiential learning programs where the curriculum is already demanding and the semesters are limited to 15 weeks, or sometimes less. In many cases, instructors serve as the liaison between the students and the organizations, which takes away valuable time from the instructor’s ability to design and then critically analyze students’ reflective writing assignments. However, in “Real Clients, Real Management, Real Failure: The Risks and Rewards of Service Learning,” Dale Cyphert suggests that students be responsible for the organization, commitment, alliance-building, motivation, and curricular connections required for service-learning (186). He says that a student’s personal investment in the outcome of his/her communication efforts is what creates the authentic learning experience.

Likewise, in “Nonprofit Communications from a Corporate Communications Viewpoint,” Ava Cross explains that experiential learning projects are more successful when students have a higher level of buy-in, and also recommends putting the organizational responsibilities on the students (320). A greater commitment, a wider variety of opportunities, and the direct communication with clients all contribute to an authentic learning experience by exposing students to the actual risks and rewards of providing a social service in the professional sector. In addition, Cross claims that students benefit from selecting the organization they serve because their interest in that particular organization sustains their work (320). She says that the students’ identification with, and selection of, a particular agency fosters civic responsibility

among students and raises the students' awareness of their ability to effect social change within that discourse community. However, the students' critical reflection upon the combination of these elements is essential to the authenticity of the learning experience because reflection allows students to "come to understand *if*, and if so, *how* their service activities are helping them to apply the course goals" (Dubinsky 307).

The most valuable element of experiential learning assignments is the authentic learning experience it provides students. In "Service Learning on Campus," Therese M. Judge states, "without this facet, the assignment is just another made-up scenario for students to practice writing" (192). Judge maintains that purposeful writing practice prepares students for the writing they will do in their chosen careers (189), and for this reason, suggests that the advanced technical communication writing courses such as business writing, technical writing, and proposal and grant writing, provide valuable opportunities for instructors to integrate experiential learning activities such as client-based projects, case studies, and service-learning assignments, and incorporate reflective exercises that approximate writing in the workplace (189).

### Significance to Narrative Learning

The vital role of reflection as the location where meaning making occurs in adult learning and experiential learning presents practically limitless possibilities for applying narrative to improve reflection. Narrative learning theory defines development from the critical perspective of the developing person and emphasizes the construction of a narrative as necessary to making sense of one's experiences. Individuals use narrative to remember, argue, justify, persuade,

engage, entertain, and sometimes even to mislead an audience, but most obviously, to construct identities (Riessman 8). In “Narrative Learning: Its Contours and Its Possibilities,” M. Carolyn Clark says, “If we make sense of our experience through storying it, it follows that we construct our understanding of ourselves narratively” (4). However, the concept of identity is fluid and changes in relation to the combined processes of learning throughout one’s lifespan, which is why we are always writing and rewriting our narratives.

Essentially, narrative learning occurs at three levels. First, we learn from hearing narratives such as moral tales and personal stories. At this level, the most riveting and compelling stories are those that bring us into the experience (Clark 6), those that invite us to reflect on the narrator’s story and make connections to our own experiences. Second, we learn from telling our own narratives. Clark explains, “When we hear, we are the receiver; when we tell, we are the actor, the one putting all the details together and making the experience coherent for ourselves and for others” (Clark 6). Life-changing experiences such as illness, job loss, or the birth of a child are profound examples of narratives we construct throughout our lifespan to make sense of our experiences. The third way we learn from narrative is by recognizing the narratives in which we are positioned (Clark 6). This type of learning is critical because it “presumes that our thinking is shaped by sociocultural forces,” and that “recognizing our narrative situatedness enables us to identify and critique how that shaping takes place” (Clark 6). To illustrate, Clark uses the example of Americans traveling or living in a non-Western culture and being able to recognize their own positioning within a Western narrative that privileges the individual over the community, and rights over responsibilities (6). Awareness of such

sociocultural narratives enable people to examine and critique the narrative, inquire about its underlying assumptions and the audience it serves, and thus learn how their identity relates to the narrative, but also how their identity may be different. This process of narrating and reflecting throughout our lives is how we come to understand ourselves and how we make our learning visible to ourselves and to others.

Understanding the self as narratively constructed opens new possibilities for learning theory that emphasizes reflection. In the narrative perspective, meaning is both constructed and mediated by narrative (Clark 7). In general, the narrative approach to analysis focuses on common aspects of social organization, and offers a great deal to disciplines and professions that want to see how knowledge is constructed through narrative (Riessman 13). When applied intentionally and effectively with reflective assignments, narrative provides instructors with an inside-out view of the learner. In “Summoning the Past: Autobiography as a ‘Movement Toward Possibility,’” Irene E. Karpiak claims that instructors rarely glimpse into the life of students as learners “and the ways in which learning, change, and education at times coexist and at other times collide in the course of development” (13). Karpiak says that there are educational benefits for students who use narrative modes to “write their life,” and pedagogical benefits for the instructors who respond to them. Through reflecting on their lives, students come to better understand their life experiences in relation to their academic experiences. With regard to the workplace and the educational settings as contexts, narratives allow students to make connections between their lives and their learning experiences. This process of reflection reveals

students' motivations for and barriers to learning, as well as informing their future decision-making methods.

## CHAPTER FOUR: USING NARRATIVE TO IMPROVE REFLECTION

Narrative is used frequently in technical communication as a rhetorical activity to make meaning of and reflect upon one's experiences. In both adult education and experiential learning, reflection is considered the location where knowledge is constructed through the process of connecting experiences to learning objectives (Dubinsky 307). Narrative facilitates and conceptualizes the learning process by prompting students to make meaning of their experiences in a familiar rhetorical mode – storytelling. By pairing narrative with reflection, instructors provide students with three ways of learning: hearing, telling, and recognizing (Clark 6), which increases adult students' opportunities to connect their life experiences to their learning experiences.

In experiential learning assignments in technical communication courses, narrative reflection assignments provide students with a means for engaging in meaningful rhetorical activities that encourage them to project their presence and reveal their relationship to the subject matter and audience. Because reflection is critical to the success of adult education and experiential learning, adult students may benefit from participating in experiential learning programs where they are required to reflect on their experiences. Furthermore, instructors can learn more about adult perceptions of experiential learning through critically analyzing adult student narratives.

The more instructors know about how adults learn the better they are able to structure learning activities that resonate with adult students. Adult learners tend to be achievement

oriented, highly motivated, and relatively independent with special needs for flexible schedules and instruction appropriate to their developmental needs (Cross 631). In “Nontraditional College Students: A Developmental Look at the Needs of Women and Men Returning to School,” James M. Benshoff states that adult learners generally prefer more active approaches to learning and value opportunities to integrate academic learning with their lives and work experiences. Therefore, adult students may benefit from experiential learning because it allows them to connect their lives and learning experiences through reflection and function as self-directed learners.

Connecting new learning with a learner’s previous experience is a longstanding strategy promoted by adult educators. In “Does Service-Learning Promote Adult Development? Theoretical Perspectives and Directions for Research,” M. Cecil Smith identifies six domains considered significant to adult development that have also been linked to service-learning benefits:

- *Cognitive* – processing information, acquiring knowledge, and growing intellectually
- *Moral, ethical, spiritual* – reasoning about issues, developing respect and tolerance, and considering deeper meanings and purposes
- *Social-emotional* – developing autonomy, coping skills, and generativity
- *Physical* – maintaining general health and well-being
- *Cultural and civic* – understanding social norms
- *Vocational* – exploring occupations and building skills (6)



Of these domains, Smith focuses on cognitive growth, moral development, and psychosocial development (or social-emotional development) to suggest four dimensions of experiential learning courses and activities that are likely to have some bearing on adult development: duration, scope, intensity, and reflection (7-8). With regard to reflection, Smith claims that some experiential learning courses only require a superficial level of reflection on the part of students rather than the systematic and meaningful reflection that helps students to identify, frame, and resolve social issues through critical thinking and problem-solving (12).

The manner and mode in which adult students reflect on their experiential learning experiences is as important to their development as it is essential to understanding their perceptions of experiential learning. In “Context and Identity: Exploring Adult Learners’ Experiences of Higher Education,” Phil Askham identifies context and identity as two elements shaping the nature of adult learning, and concludes that learning in adulthood is emotional and fundamentally linked to context (94). In order for reflection to be effective for adult students, reflection exercises must tend to the adult student’s context and emotion. In “Adults in Programs for the ‘Academically Underprepared,’” Janet Isserlis says instructors should pay closer attention to the affective, or social-emotional, development domain of adult learners, and she calls for a shift in pedagogical practice that encourages adult students to reflect on their experiences emotionally and in a personable way. She says, “Adult learners are among the most valuable resources for learning more about learning” (25).

The role of reflection in adult education and experiential learning needs to be an ongoing process of reflecting on lives and learning experiences both emotionally and with regard to

context. Context needs to include the various contexts adult students exist and function in such as the workplace, the family, and the community. In “Community Colleges and Adult Service Learners: Evaluating a First-Year Program to Improve Implementation,” Liz Largent and Jon Horinek suggest that “because all students bring prior experience to reflection, it is likely that adults will find the process of identifying their preconceptions particularly meaningful” (38). With regard to pedagogy, the authors advise making reflection in experiential learning an ongoing and relevant practice that is amendable to the curriculum goals, rather than a summative afterthought (42). In fact, reflection must be done before, during, and after the experiential learning assignment in order to aid students in making connections to their life experience and the course content. The range of possible narrative applications, implications, and perspectives in adult learning theory are practically limitless, however, the scope of this study focuses specifically on using narrative with reflection exercises in experiential learning technical communication courses to facilitate and conceptualize the learning processes of adult students.

To make experiential learning meaningful in technical communication, students need to practice writing in a variety of modes within diverse contexts. Students also need to engage in less formal and more personal writing practices through reflection that encourages them to make connections among their experiences in a familiar mode such as storytelling. By doing so, students participate in a rhetorical activities that make meaning of their experiences and allow them to candidly reveal their relationship to the subject matter and audience. Applying narrative to reflection exercises improves the quality of reflective writing students produce because it allows them to immediately and continuously connect learning with their life experiences.

Additionally, by applying narrative to commonly used reflection exercises, instructors can modify these exercises to create alternative exercises such as project displays, video productions, and presentations that make reflection a valuable method for exploring a variety of technical communication genres.

### Ongoing Uses of Narrative with Reflection

The ongoing and continuous practice of reflection in experiential learning is critical in order for students to make meaning of their learning experiences. Learning journals are among the most popular and widely emphasized reflective exercises used in service-learning and other experiential learning programs. In general, learning journals invite students to make connections continually between the coursework and their service-learning assignment. However, when paired with narrative, journal writing becomes an opportunity for students to draw on prior experiences that have shaped, and possibly, still influence their learning experience. In “The Role of Reflection,” James Dubinsky calls journals a “valuable springboard for reflection” (308). Importantly, he claims that for journals to be effective for reflection purposes, instructors must use prompts to initiate the reflective writing assignments and guide the students’ writing efforts. He provides instructors with examples of leading questions that invite students to explore the emotional quality of their work and how it relates to their prior experiences: (a) “What is the situation that is causing me to feel this way?” and (b) “What actually happened?” (308). These questions focus on the affective learning element and the use of chronological storytelling to facilitate reflection among students. Both goals can be achieved through the use of narrative.

The application of narrative to learning journals is obvious as learning journals are a personal account of the students' experiences. Personal accounts are most commonly told in the first person, or narrative voice. Additionally, learning journals are typically written in an informal and personable tone. By prompting students with specific questions about their experiences, instructors facilitate the learning processes of adult students by requiring them to examine and interrogate their personal relationships to the subject matter and audience. Likewise, and as a result, the students are encouraged to make relevant connections between their life experiences and experiential learning assignment.

#### Initial and Summative Uses of Narrative with Reflection

Although the ongoing and continuous practice of reflection is critical in order for students to make meaning of their experiential learning experiences, the initial and summative uses of narrative with reflection frame the students' learning experiences. The combination of initial and summative narrative reflection assignments allow students to see how their perspective has changed throughout the course. Concept-focused autobiographies offer students an opportunity to write about their lives and explore the multitude of experiences that led them to where they are now in life and in their academic career. In "Summoning the Past: Autobiography as a 'Movement Toward Possibility,'" Irene E. Karpiak claims that instructors are rarely privileged to learn about their students through less formal and more personable prose. She suggests that this "inside" view of a student's life provides an opportunity for the student to become known to themselves and to others. Importantly, Karpiak highlights how autobiographical writing has the

potential to “extend windows of understanding into the lives of student writers in ways that other methods cannot, and also to further self-knowledge in those writers, as well as in the readers” (14).

Considering the time constraints imposed upon instructors implementing experiential learning assignments in technical communication, a concept-focused autobiographical writing assignment would be most effective as an initial reflective writing assignment. Because the assignment is concept-focused and autobiographical, the instructors would need to set parameters for the writing assignment such as page length and purpose. One purpose of an autobiographical reflection assignment might be for adult students to write about the experiences in their lives that brought them to back to school. Autobiographical writing would allow students to explore in narratives the identity issues they have experienced within various contexts and diverse situations throughout their lives. Importantly, concept-focused autobiographical writing can yield narrative data that reveals students “histories, struggles, and singular or shared concerns” (Karpiak 15). Employing this type of reflective assignment early in an experiential learning project would allow students to better identify an organization they want to serve through the critical examination of themselves. Furthermore, autobiographies could serve as a data-gathering tool for instructors who want to learn more about how adult learning and development (Karpiak 15).

Summative reflection exercises in experiential learning projects are equally important in order for students to reflect upon and make meaning of their learning experiences. Instructors often use reflective reports to provide students with opportunities to reflect upon and summarize

their experiences, and to make connections between the coursework and their learning experience. In “Incorporating Reflection into Business Communication Service-Learning Courses,” Robert McEachern suggests using end-of-semester reflective reports to complement the ongoing reflective learning journals. He says, “students can keep track of experiences and make initial, informal attempts at connections and then bring all of their reflections together to show the instructor and themselves what they learned over the course of the semester” (312). Likewise, reflective reports also complement the use of concept-focused autobiographies because the students can refer to the initial reflective writing assignment to make comparisons about their development throughout the course. Pairing narrative with these reflective assignments allows the students to situate themselves within the greater contexts that have influenced their decision-making processes, therefore, revealing their relationship to the subject matter and audience.

#### Alternative Uses of Narrative with Reflection

A variety of alternative uses of narrative with reflection are available for instructors faced with the challenge of fitting reflective exercises into an already demanding curriculum. As discussed earlier, Largent and Horinek suggested project displays, presentations, skits, art projects, and video productions (43) as alternative reflection assignments that save time because they can be created individually or as a group. All of these alternatives are applicable to narrative analysis because they require students’ consideration of context and audience. However, in addition to saving time, another specific benefit to alternative reflection assignments such as

these is that they require students to work with different mediums for the creation of their narrative.

In “Digital Storytelling: A New Player on the Narrative Field,” Marsha Rossiter and Penny A. Garcia call the combination of technology with storytelling “a dynamic and beautiful marriage” that “is proving to be a potent force in educational practice” (37). The authors define digital stories as short vignettes that combine the art of storytelling, or narrative, with multimedia objects such as images, audio, and video. Importantly, the authors suggest the use of digital storytelling as an alternative to traditional reflective reports, claiming that digital stories are vehicles for cultural analysis and identity formation. Furthermore, Rossiter and Garcia recommend pairing digital storytelling methods with other narrative learning methods such as autobiographical writing, maintaining that student-produced digital stories involve personal narratives and require the students to make connections with the coursework and their life experiences.

The use of digital storytelling is not a new concept in experiential learning assignments in technical communication courses, although significant technological advancements have made producing and accessing digital stories easier. In “Video Storytelling in a Transient, Volunteer Organization,” Cecilia Katzeff and Vanessa Ware outline the use of a video booth as a digital tool that enhanced the meaning making and knowledge construction of festival workers who wanted to document their workplace procedures. Because workplace learning typically occurs in practice, the authors used an information and communication technology (ICT), the video booth,

to initiate the emotional quality of the festival workers' narratives and create opportunities for reflection that were also well suited for technology-based learning (382).

Three key dimensions of digital storytelling that help define the unique contribution of this alternative narrative reflection exercise are: voice, creativity, and self-direction (Rossiter and Garcia 42). In technical communication, voice falls under the larger category of tone as an element of style. Rossiter and Garcia posit that experience-based narrative offers opportunities for adult students to find their voice at multiple levels through their learning stories. However, voice, in all its complexities, is deeply rooted in relation to voice as talk, voice as identity, and voice as power (Rossiter and Garcia 42). With regard to digital storytelling, this application of narrative to reflection assignments in experiential learning allows students not only to invent their narrative, story it, and tell it, but it allows them to also hear their story in their own physical voice. Rossiter and Garcia explain the power and benefits of this type of reflective exercise: "When we hear our voices coming from outside ourselves, we have a moment of seeing ourselves as someone other than our Self. In that moment, we can experience the kind of empathy and compassion for ourselves that we would feel for another person who might be telling this story" (43).

The use of narrative to improve reflection assignments in experiential learning assignments in technical communication courses is quintessential to understanding how adult students perceive experiential learning. By applying narrative to reflection exercises, instructors can provide students with an intentional and effective means of exploring their motivations for and barriers to learning. Additionally, narrative helps to facilitate and conceptualize the learning



processes of adult students; therefore providing one form of data for further research into whether experiential learning provides any benefits to adult students studying technical communication.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Narrative has been used frequently and purposefully throughout the history of technical communication to inform, persuade, and mobilize others into action. Narrative not only lends itself naturally to reflective writing in experiential learning programs in technical communication, but the construction of narratives facilitates the learning processes of adult experiential learning students. When used intentionally and effectively, narrative can enhance reflection for adult experiential learning students by encouraging them to write about their life and learning experiences in a familiar manner that reflects their relationship to the subject matter and audience.

Students of all ages are typically integrated in the college classroom, but the percentage of older adult students on campuses is increasing dramatically (Council of Graduate Schools). Therefore, technical communication instructors should adapt their teaching methods to fulfill the developmental needs of adult students. As experiential learning becomes a more widely practiced pedagogical method, instructors must better understand how adult students perceive experiential learning activities. Narrative is a versatile rhetorical mode of discourse that offers instructors a variety of options for reflection exercises that are relevant to the coursework and appropriate to both older and younger adult student development. Furthermore, instructors' critical analysis of adult student narratives will provide more information as to how and why adult students benefit from experiential learning.

### Implications for Adult Learning

Adult students' motivations for and barriers to learning differ considerably from those of younger college students. In general, older adult students maintain responsibilities such as employment, family and other tasks associated with adult life in addition to managing school (Cross 630). Reflection allows adult students to make connections between their life experiences and their learning experiences, which is essential to experiential learning and adult development. Therefore, experiential learning reflection assignments may provide opportunities for adult students to connect their prior experiences to the curriculum, and construct a new frame of reference that guides their future action. By using narrative, adult students create cohesive and coherent stories about their learning experiences, which better inform technical communication pedagogy.

As an older adult student studying narrative in technical communication, I find it fitting to share an example of how using narrative has impacted my learning experience: I am a distance-learning student who lives in a rural community in Georgia. I work full-time as a newspaper reporter and listen to other people's narratives on a daily basis before spending hours writing their stories in my own words. Through the process of listening to others and retelling their stories, I have discovered how I relate to people in this community and how I am different.

About midway through this semester, I felt completely disconnected from the academic community. When I told my thesis advisor, she put me in touch with another distance-learning student who was also completing her thesis. Immediately, this student and I connected. Initially, we emailed each other the who, what, when, where and why questions and answers, but

eventually, we started writing more affectively about our hopes, frustrations, motivations, and progress. Using narrative came naturally as a way to communicate about our experiences. In fact, sharing stories with another student sustained my work efforts because it helped me develop a new frame of reference that connected me to the academic community again.

### Implications for Technical Communication Pedagogy

The more instructors know about how adults learn the better they are able to structure learning activities that resonate with adult students. In technical communication pedagogy, narrative not only serves rhetorical purposes, but also humanizes technical discourse by revealing the student's relationship to the subject matter and audience. By incorporating narrative into reflection assignments, instructors create opportunities for students to make meaning of their experiences through an ordinary communicative act. Narrative improves reflection by making knowledge construction familiar and fluid for students instead of burdensome, formal, and impersonal. Furthermore, instructors can learn more about their students' perceptions of experiential learning, and motivations for and barriers to learning through the critical analysis of these student narratives. The information gained by the instructors' analysis of narratives can be used to improve technical communication pedagogy.

The application and use of narrative in technical communication pedagogy is practically limitless; however, it is commonly reserved for reflective writing assignments or studied as a style element rather than a rhetorical mode. However, students need practice using narrative purposefully and explicitly in technical discourse, and effectively as a means for developing a

personal writing style that establishes their tone and credibility as authors. Digital images, audio, and video offer valuable mediums for instructors to incorporate technology into their teaching methods and provide students with relevant and practical technical communication skills that explore the rhetorical benefits of narrative. For example, online instructional videos use narrative to discuss various steps in a procedure, and news media use narrative to recount events that occur. Both examples demand knowledge and understanding of how spoken, written, and visual materials effect, and potentially improve, the rhetorical ability of narrative in technical communication.

#### Extension of Research

Technical communication pedagogy might benefit from further practical study on the use of narrative to improve reflection for adult experiential learning students – for example, concept-focused autobiographies as an initial reflective writing assignment that prompts students to reflect on the prior life and learning experiences that motivated them to return to school. A closer look at the motivations for and barriers to learning for adult students would be helpful in determining if experiential learning projects such as service-learning, client-based, and case studies are effective methods for teaching technical communication to adults. Furthermore, a concept-focused autobiography would serve as a sustaining motivational force for adult students by empowering them to frame their education in a way that guides their future actions. The use of multimedia elements such as digital images, audio, and video to construct visual autobiographies, among other types of narrative, would improve the efficiency of reflection and

relieve instructors of organizational challenges associated with not having enough time in the semester for lengthy reflective writing assignments.

Theorists that address the use of narrative to improve reflection, including the sources cited in this thesis, discuss personal writing assignments for students. Perhaps the best way, initially, to explore the use and function of narrative in technical communication would be for students to analyze existing sociocultural narratives. Song lyrics about social issues such as poverty, discrimination, or freedom are just a few of the sociocultural narratives for students to explore through music. Essentially, students would select song lyrics that they identify with or that they feel relate to the topic of their experiential learning assignment. Students would analyze the lyrics and discuss how the lyrics fit into a larger sociocultural narrative. For example, a service-learning student writing policies for a youth and family services agency may select lyrics from a rap song about growing up in poverty and resorting to a life of crime. Through this rhetorical analysis, students will come to better understand how they relate to the issue in the song lyrics, and how the issue expressed in the song lyrics is actually situated within much larger social and cultural narratives. Such a reflective assignment would educate students on the duality of narrative as a rhetorical mode that simultaneously shapes individuals and society.

Technical communication pedagogy is ever evolving as technology advances, rhetoric expands into other disciplines, and the student body changes. Using narrative to facilitate learning in technical communication makes it possible for instructors to conceptualize the learning processes of adult experiential learning students. This application is arguably a positive benefit to pedagogy, as it will improve the efficiency and quality of reflection assignments by

encouraging adult students to connect their learning and life experiences using a variety, and often a combination, of spoken, written, and visual forms of communication.

Narratives are a way of understanding the world around us, ourselves, our communities. Globalization and communication technology have made adult educators more aware of the diverse world views regarding learning and knowing. In this study, narrative is examined from the Western perspective of individual learning; however, future research regarding the use of narrative in technical communication should include the communal orientation of many non-Western epistemologies where learning is viewed as holistic, lifelong, and community-based. Such research would be invaluable to technical communication given the extensive and purposeful role of narrative as a bridge of understanding between the author and the audience.

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