

Chapter 11:

The Role of Narrative within the Stoneleigh Project

Introduction

In Chapter 10 I concluded that a useful way to understand the experience the participants had of the retreat programme was through developing and exercising the ability to narrate their life stories. Labov (1972) claims that it is the ‘complicating factors’ that define events as a narrative. By this he meant the out of the ordinary events that happen to people and that cause them to make choices. It is this ‘evaluation’ of events through exploring and making choices that Labov suggests is at the core of a narrative. I have argued in Chapter 10 that the young people attracted to the Stoneleigh Project were already marginalised to a point where they were uncomfortable with their identities. I suggested that, by joining voluntary youth organisations, they were seeking different pathways or choices in life, of which the Stoneleigh Project was an extension or a new chapter in their narrative.

I also suggest that the Stoneleigh Group partners can be understood as setting out to provide an opportunity through the Stoneleigh Project for the young participants to evaluate their past lives. The retreats in particular were intended as events on which the young people could reconsider their old identities and make choices about new ones before developing the skills, knowledge and networks that would support them.

Additionally, I have argued in Chapter 10 that the young people used the experiential and social opportunities on the retreats to offer reconstructed narratives of their past lives and to tell new narratives of their current and potential lives. The approach taken by the Stoneleigh Project facilitators created a space on the retreats in which these narratives found voice, in which alternative narratives were available in the lifestyles of the host communities and accompanying mentors, and where the young people could develop the skills to explore new narratives of themselves. This chapter analyses the retreats from this perspective in order to develop a deeper understanding of the pedagogic processes that supported this experience.

Recruitment

Bernstein (1996) suggested that what he called the recognition code of an educational programme played a major role in whether a student thought that the experience was relevant to or achievable by them. For example some students, he claimed, had the social background to value the abstract knowledge offered by schools whilst others felt excluded from these forms of knowledge whatever their educational potential. As a result, as I have discussed in Chapter 8, some young people he claimed were marginalised or alienated from education and developed a defensive stance towards any educational initiatives intended to support them. Young people affected in this way then seek alternative ways to construct an identity that may either fall short of their potential as citizens or become marginalised or deviant.

Whilst some of the young people introduced in Chapter 10 can be understood in this way (Brad for example), others, such as Steve, considered themselves marginalised by what they considered to be inappropriate pathways for their particular interests within education or employment. Family and social attitudes to personal aspects of their lives marginalised others, such as Gordon. Rather than being excluded by abstract knowledge from a conventional path to adulthood they were challenging or challenged by the established routes provided by established bodies of knowledge and opportunities for work that society offered. In any case, all these young people felt let down and acted defensively, to the point of marginalisation, towards education and work as a means of identity construction. Extending Bernstein's concept of recognition codes to the social and public world outside the realm of education it could be said that, for many of the young participants, this world lacked the recognition codes relevant to their emerging identities.

However, in every case, the young people of the Stoneleigh Project had already become involved in the informal educational work of the voluntary organisations in membership of the Stoneleigh Group. They had found within this approach recognition codes that had re-engaged them with adults, learning, and work as ways of constructing their adult identities. I suggest that this step helped the young people to restore their trust in adult educators who held the values of informal education. This enabled them to view the offer of the retreat programme, usually made as a personal invitation from a trusted adult youth worker, as an

intriguing rather than alienating prospect. Later in the programme, recruitment was further enhanced by the stories of young people who had previously been on retreat. These factors, internal to the relationships within the youth work organisations rather than external to the personal, social and public worlds of the young participants, would appear to have determined who came forward as recruits.

Whilst no one ever returned home before the end of a retreat the evidence indicates that, during the first day or two, attendance was sometimes precarious. In the early stages of several retreats incidents such as those described in Chapter 10 concerning the Celtic cross and the room of the nets led to a few participants temporarily reducing their levels of participation. However, no one ever raised the possibility of leaving. I have already identified in Chapter 10 some of the factors that encouraged the young people to engage with the retreat experiences. These were the volunteer nature of the mentors and host community which enhanced feelings of trust, the positive regard in which the young people were held by these people, the equitable approach of the retreat facilitators to developing the experience, and the particular style of the community to resolving conflicts.

To this I would add that the diverse forms of informal education available were a significant factor that provided a range of recognition codes for what I have already shown to be a diverse group of people. By understanding action within the community (such as bread making), action in the landscape (such as camping), reflection time (informal and formal), and conversation (formal and informal), as pedagogic opportunities I would argue that most young people were able to recognise something within the experience as of value to them and from which they could learn. In addition they could come to this realisation in their own time. These are indicators of what Bernstein would have termed a highly integrated approach. The weak classification and framing of the negotiated curriculum and the equitable distribution of power amongst the community, residents and visitors alike, made it possible for those challenged by the unusual nature of the retreat community to stay.

Creating Discourse

By disembedding a wide range of elements of the social world in an integrated type of educational programme called a retreat, the Stoneleigh Group, in partnership with Camas, created what Bernstein (1996, p. 47) would have termed a site of discourse that was centrally about power and knowledge in that world. A range of possibilities was created where previously the young people, and perhaps the older participants too, thought that no possibilities lay. The contrasting and mutual power relations practiced within the community offered everyone a different knowledge of themselves and their own power in relation to others. Camas lived intentionally and explicitly by these values embracing justice as a central theme. This, in turn, created a radically different lifestyle that was offered to visitors in ways that allowed them to engage with it holistically. There was much to talk about on such an unusual experience and the immediacy and authenticity of this lifestyle provided a rapid way into a discourse between the residents and visitors. Importantly, the co-construction of a programme for each retreat meant that the educational discourse was maintained on each retreat and the young people experienced being participants in this discourse.

From the perspective of the Stoneleigh Group, what worked so well was that so much of this was relevant to their aims. There were a wide range of activities with which to engage including cooking, growing and eating food, decision making, composting toilets, swimming in the sea to wash, the lack of electricity, making their own entertainment, and the unusual belief systems of the hosts. The necessity of working to achieve the basics, and of working collectively, provided the means by which the community demonstrated some of their core values and drew the visitors into their world. The politics of community life arising out of how work was shared and rewarded, and how issues were resolved, provided opportunities for the visitors to discover that previously taken for granted views about the world around them and their relationships with it were, as Mac described it, 'not written in tablets of stone' [FN-C05(0600)].

Importantly, the evidence indicates that the diversity of things to which to respond and ways in which to do it, in action and in conversation, were critical for engaging so many disparate individuals with widely different developmental needs. In Bernstein's terms, I

would suggest that this can be understood as providing for a range of recognition codes in the backgrounds and circumstances of the young people. I would argue that the rapid development of trust and the space made available for reflection facilitated this aspect of the experience. As Rose stated

The experience of just having time to think about yourself I found to be really useful and positive. I am normally rushing around and I am too busy to spare time for me so being on the residential showed me a new way of living. The community feeling at Cae Mabon really helped me to settle in and I felt more comfortable and relaxed around the dinner table there then I do with my own family.

[E-M-R03(7604)]

The contrasting lifestyle of the community, then, engaged the young people visiting the retreats in exploring new perspectives on their identities. The mutual power relations and the role everyone took in constructing the programme on each retreat offered an experience to the young people of themselves that was not only different but valued them and encouraged them to voice their experiences.

Constructing and Reconstructing Identity

Many young people used the retreat experience as an opportunity to give an account of their lives, as they understood them, before the Stoneleigh Project began. This covered a wide range of aspects from the personal, social, and public domains of their lives. The facilitators and mentors describe in the course reports how one to one conversations concerning personal issues were major aspects of their work during the retreats. The young people initially treated these stories as though they were historical and had no current significance on their lives. Typically, however, matters would emerge later in the narration that were still problematic and, up until that point, perceived as not open to influence through the actions of the young person. One young person, Beth, described how a walk over the moor with the facilitator gave her the chance to discuss for the first time with anyone other than a doctor her recent discovery that, at 14, she was pregnant. She described how she had to decide whether or not to have an abortion and how talking it over, being listened to, and sharing it with a group she now trusted, was helping her.

These were not passive retellings of their life stories. The retreat was experienced as a space in which what Labov (1972) would term ‘complicating factors’ in the lives of the young people were evaluated. All three domains, private, social and public, were significant to the young people in reviewing old identities. Attention was often placed on the elements in their stories that they considered negative, for instance Beth’s unexpected underage pregnancy. Others topics included issues with parents, addictive behaviours, educational failures, and painful personal relationships. Rose used her retreat to reflect on her relationship with her family:

Cae Mabon really helped me to see things in my life that I had been blocking out. It gave me the courage to be me and to see who I really am, I may not of faced up to who I am but at least I am half way there. ... This made me realise that I had to make more of an effort with my family and get them to make more of an effort with each other.

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Narratives often concerned matters that were intensely personal and were considered by the young people and their mentors as highly significant in the young person’s transition to adulthood. In some cases they might be thought of as, using Furlong and Cartmel’s (1997) metaphor discussed in Chapter 4, a stalled car journey. Others could be described, using the same metaphor, as cul de sacs or drivers without knowledge of a reverse gear. Yet others, such as the one above, described major forks in the road. Extending Furlong and Cartmel’s metaphor, some young participants could also be understood as inexperienced drivers or simply lacking some or all of the map for the journey.

However, the participants claimed that the process of telling the story to an individual or group on the retreat made a difference. The interpretation of events would sometimes reconstruct the experience, as Rose recounts above, in a way that made the storyteller feel better, or with a new ending that allowed for some action to be taken in the future. As with Rose and Beth above, many of these conversations were thought by the young people to lead to a transformation of the problem from a position of denial or impotence to one of acknowledgement and empowerment. They were also thought to have the potential to

reconstruct the meaning and the trajectory of the stories. As Taniguchi, Freeman and LeGrand-Richards (2005) claim, what they would term fractional sublimation brought about by the circumstances of the young person prior to the retreat, led on to reconstruction of identity and growth, with the right support.

It was not only the retreat community and its way of life that empowered the young people to reflect on their life stories. As Taniguchi *et al.* (2005) suggest, the physical landscape played a role in the participants becoming ‘authors’ of the experiences they were having. In most cases this involved personal moments of meaning-making projected on to the landscape as the following example illustrates.

Justin had taken an interest in Staffa and Fingal’s Cave from his first arrival at Camas. The island lies five miles to the north and a boat trip with a local fisherman from Iona, Max, had been offered weather-permitting. The trip took place in exciting sailing conditions and a group were able to land on Staffa and walk into the sea cave. Justin was overwhelmed by a coincidence. The day of his landing was the first anniversary of a commitment he had made and maintained to be drug-free. That commitment had been made on the Giant’s Causeway in Northern Ireland; a headland with the same hexagonal basalt columns as Fingal’s Cave. That evening one of the resident community told the story of Fingal, the giant emphasising the link between the two features in Justin’s mind. He recounted the effect on him at the meeting in the room of the nets the following evening. He then made a new commitment to work with the voluntary organisation he was with to find and bring into rehabilitation other drug users.

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Other techniques that supported these accounts included the reflection times in which, like Rose described in the extract above, young people could gather their thoughts. The creative activities were also widely used in this context. They were offered as ways to express in sculpture, or another art form, significant events in the lives of the young people. These

would then be used as a visual aid with which to tell a life story. For example, Paul created his own ritual (below) that he invited others to witness and then to join in.

Paul had become very quiet since a session run by a Mull resident artist Emma. During this “mandala exercise” participants had been invited to use the results of beach combing to create below the high tide mark a design that represented who they were and where they were going. Many took part and the session lasted several hours, finishing with a gallery. However Paul did not show his work. That evening in the meeting in the room of the nets he was animated, asking if anyone wanted to join him in lighting a fire on the shore and throwing into it scraps of paper on which they were invited to write all the things about who they wanted to leave behind. Everyone liked the idea. The fire was lit and, as people threw their papers in, they started to name the things written on them. No one left until the rising tide put out the fire and washed everything away.

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The retreat community and the spaces they inhabited became storied landscapes. They offered places where the young people claimed to come to perceive their personal and social worlds as mutable rather than fixed. They could define or ‘story’ it rather than be defined or ‘storied’ by it. The young people could perceive themselves as agents within and not determined by their situations. Narrative was being used as a form of evaluation. Past experiences were judged as were past responses. At a deeper level the values that underpinned these interpretations of events in their lives were also being explored and evaluated through the process of narration. New values were being tested with which to reconsider old meanings. Narration of past events, current experiences and future intentions were the most significant pedagogic processes at work during the retreats. The neutral but inspiring landscape, the culture of respect, the contrasting community values, and the unplanned programme all supported these essential conversations.

I would argue that narrative also had a significant part to play in the emergence of new aspects of the young people’s identities during the retreats. The diversity of recognition

codes available through the retreat programme was matched I would claim by a range of ways to express new self-knowledge. The weakly framed and classified programme provided significant and varied opportunities for the young people to find what Bernstein would term an 'expression code' to suit them. This led to what Bernstein would understand as the conditions in which the young people felt able to use the realisation rules available to them on the retreats. By this Bernstein meant that the student would find within the educational programme forms of knowledge that suited an identity with which they felt comfortable.

The evidence from Brad and Rose illustrates how young people used the retreats as opportunities for realisation. Both young people used the retreat and the trusting relationships within the retreat communities to tell their life stories as did others reported in Chapter 10. Despite some of these stories containing significant personal distress, the effect on the young person was typically one of excitement. Rose described how this was because she felt she had been listened to and that somehow this made her earlier experiences feel like they had become a part of her past. The retreat and the story telling were acting symbolically as a step away from earlier problems.

Once a step had been taken away from elements of their lives that were perceived as restraining them, I described in Chapter 10 how Brad and Rose used the retreats to develop and express a new sense of themselves. They were both able to do this in physical and social forms of expression. Rose also made extensive use of metaphors drawn from the natural setting of the retreat to express her developing narrative. This phenomenon Taniguchi *et al.* (2005) claim is important in the process of fractional sublimation. They describe it as the process of shedding facades that have been adopted by the individual on the basis of what they believe society expects them to be like.

I would argue that, in the case of the young people involved in the Stoneleigh Project the evidence would suggest that 'society' was represented in some form by social and family networks and that the young people were attempting to resist reproducing the expectations of those networks. Brad was attempting to escape the identity he held as a member of a gang. Rose was trying to move beyond what she perceived as her family's limited

expectations of her. Justin's account above provides another example of this process, in his case using the landscape of the retreat symbolically to represent personal transformation. In that case, Fingal's Cave became a landmark in his process of drug rehabilitation.

The young people used the retreats to evaluate their life stories. This often resulted in situations in which the young people expressed the story in ways that repositioned themselves as actors with more power. They would frequently suggest resolutions to the elements in their stories that they understood as problematic or restraining. The narrative process was a central pedagogic aspect of these developments. Further, the young people also used narrative to express new identities within the experiential and social world of the retreat.

Experiencing Agency

As the young people took more powerful roles in their narratives of their lives I would argue that they were experiencing, within the world of the retreat, an enhanced sense of agency in relation to their own identities. I have described it above by suggesting that the young people felt like actors in their life stories, or, more accurately for the current metaphor, authors of aspects of their narratives. I have suggested that much of this sense of power came from evaluating in their own terms what they thought about aspects of their life stories and being amongst a group of people who, by listening affirmatively, provided some authority for their views.

From the participants' point of view this authoring was a significant aspect of the retreat programme that gave them a sense of power and agency in their lives concerning how they were understood both by themselves and by others. I would argue that the construction and reconstruction of narratives in embodied and oral forms and within the social learning context of the retreats was the most significant way in which old knowledge of the self was reworked and new knowledge was integrated into the identity of a young person.

The abseil incident described in Chapter 10 provides an illustration of how vigorous some of the young people were at expressing a new sense of themselves and their power to

define their own identities. It also illustrates the role of experiential action mediated by social interaction in the construction of the meaning of the events.

From the theoretical point of view of Bernstein (1996) the narrative process gave voice to the meaning that each participant was making of their own particular experiences and its effect on their identities. This learner-centred construction and application of knowledge was, I would claim, the central pillar of the weakly framed pedagogy of the retreats.

Recounting personal narratives was an effective method for helping young people gain a sense of agency. They recounted their stories in ways that evaluated them from their own perspective, gave the events significance in a way that meant something to them, and repositioned themselves in the narratives as actors and authors. In some cases, new identities were tried out in action within the retreat community. The positive regard that was a feature of the retreats, in other words an approach that gave value to the self-knowledge of the young person, endorsed these emerging identities.

Learning Narrative Skills

The evidence that was reported in Chapter 10 provides a rich picture of a curriculum that was developed by each young person for his or her own purposes. Whilst the core curriculum was described by the Stoneleigh Group as an opportunity to develop your identity, each individual had a unique history, trajectory, and learning needs in relation to this. For example, some, such as Gordon, found the experience of the alternative lifestyle and values of the community created new possibilities of relationships that were both accepting of his sexuality and not experienced by him as oppressive or abusive. For others, such as Rose or Steve, developing new social networks and learning new skills for relating to old networks was transformative. This gave them a new knowledge of more adult and empowered selves. For others, like Brad and Clive (see Chapter 12), new knowledge of themselves was gained in an embodied way through the community and outdoor activities. In addition they gained new knowledge of themselves through the regard of and feedback from others. In many cases a mixture of these elements was significant. Such diversity of knowledge uniquely acquired and made meaningful by each individual is at the heart of Bernstein's concept of a weakly classified curriculum.

From the perspective of narrative, one set of skills stood out from the data for this research. This was the ability to critically review and reconstruct life stories and to develop and articulate new ones. This, of all the curriculum areas, supported the transformative potential of the experience by helping many of the young people articulate, either through action or in conversation, the unfolding narratives of their lives.

Learning how to recount these stories and how to value the telling of them was an important skill that many learned on retreat. Listening to the stories of others was a key pedagogic device to teach these skills. The young people then experimented with a variety of ways to express their stories. The accounts were given in a wide range of contexts. They included informal and spontaneous one to one conversations with a person of their choice, such as the moorland walk for Beth recounted above, and rituals, such as that constructed by Paul especially for the purpose and with an invited audience. I would argue that a sense of agency was a significant outcome at the heart of the narrative experience. Narrative provided a way for the young people to understand their life stories as unfolding and mutable. They learned to think that the meaning of past experiences could change and the narrator could retell old stories and develop new ones as guides and aspirations for the future.

Transformation

This research is interested in considering whether or not these experiences and their impacts on the identities of the young people, can be understood as transformative. As has been discussed in Chapters 8 and 9, transformation is contextual. It matters what is transformed and from whose perspective.

I have argued in this and the last chapter that the retreats were radical in their educational provision in that they did offer an educational programme that, in Bernstein's terms, created new possibilities for identity construction. The evidence suggests that this can have an effect on both the young people's understanding of the past as well as their hopes for the future.

In relation to their pasts I would claim that many young people, including all those presented as part of the evidence in this thesis, experienced transformations in relation to their understanding of, and power in relation to, their personal and social histories. The focuses of these transformations were many and varied and particular to each young person. The impact of the experiences were inspiring for the young people and contributed significantly to feelings of being released from or escaping key aspects of their lives that were responsible for keeping them in marginalised positions.

In many cases the retreat experience also contributed to a transformation of their expectations of themselves in relation to the personal, social, and public domains of their future lives. From the point of view of the Stoneleigh Group's aspirations for the development of agents of social change the outcomes at this stage were more mixed. Some, such as Gordon, imagined reproducing the social norms of the worlds they had lived in through their choices in education and work. Others, such as Justin and Rose, wanted to contribute to professional endeavours to support other marginalised young people.

At this stage none declared an interest in tackling social issues by addressing what were perceived as the causes of the problems within society itself. This was perceived as disappointing by the partners as this was a central aim of the Stoneleigh Group. Some young people, with the support of their mentors, identified that they needed further support to continue the work on their identities that they had begun. The most common version of this was the take up of the opportunity to return to the Stoneleigh Project retreats in a new role. Several young participants returned as mentors or, in the Cae Mabon and Ennerdale retreats, as host community members. Two later returned for a third and, in one case, fourth time as facilitators. A number of the young people aspiring to be youth workers chose this option including Rose and Steve. This had a radical element to it that I would argue could be considered socially transformative. In these instances the nature of power in relationships between adults and young people was being modelled differently to that which the young people reported experiencing in their childhood relations with adults. In this way the mentors could claim that they were breaking the potential reproduction of hierarchical power relations between these emerging young adults and other young people

by providing learning experiences and professional development that modelled equitable relations of power.

Conclusion

The young people became involved in the construction and re-construction of their self-knowledge that was the central purpose for the retreats. First of all, the embodied and experiential way of offering the curriculum to the visitors through an authentic lifestyle connected with the recognition codes valued by the young people. This meant that the young people were able to engage educationally with the retreat experience. The social context for explaining and exploring community lifestyle provided a weak framing that gave the visitors considerable opportunities to take responsibility for becoming involved in the lifestyle and especially the meaning it might hold for them. This included the opportunity to express new possibilities for themselves in embodied and experiential ways as well as through discussion. This range of expression codes added to the potential for the approach to work well for a wide range of learners.

Significantly, this research has identified that narrative, in both embodied and oral forms, was critical to the pedagogic approach of the retreats. Learning to tell and retell narratives of life stories was an important skill learned by the young people on the retreats. Telling these narratives had an impact on the sense of agency the young people felt they had in relation to their transitions. Narrative, I claim, gave their identities voice and power giving them the potential to support transformative trajectories in their future life paths.

The evidence also supports the Stoneleigh Group's claims for creating a programme with a learner-centred approach that produces an enhanced sense of agency, and, for many young people experiences of personal and social transformation. It has yet to be seen whether this effect transfers into the programme after the retreat and the everyday lives of the young people as they negotiate their transitions to adulthood. This is the subject of Chapter 12.