Narrative Mediation Path - An Innovative Tool for Developing the Reflective Function of Non-Traditional Students

Dan Florin STĂNESCU

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.18662/rrem/2017.0901.04

Covered in:
EBSCO, ERIH PLUS, CEEOL, Ulrich Pro Quest, Cabell, Index Copernicus, Ideas RePeC, EconPapers, Socionet, Journalseek, Scipio
Narrative Mediation Path - An Innovative Tool for Developing the Reflective Function of Non-Traditional Students

Dan Florin STĂNESCU

Abstract: Within the European funded project Innovative Solutions to Acquire Learning to Learn a qualitative methodology - Narrative Mediation Path (NMP) consisting in a group training process targeted to nontraditional students was developed. Based on the psychological concept of mentalization, this type of intervention combines into one methodology, four discursive modules (metaphoric, iconographic, written and bodily) in order to increase the understanding of the meaning of the university experience and foster the different levels of the reflective process. The use of a “multidimensional” narrative promotes a progressive cognitive and emotional involvement of the student; a gradual evolution from a reconstructive function of the formative experience to a planning function that allows students to act in an effective way in academic settings. The current study aimed at gathering first-hand information related to the lived experience of students involved in this formative experience using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The emerging themes refer to the relational context of the training (common/shared experiences with other colleagues), the change as such (awareness about changes) and the impact of the NMP both in terms of academic and personal life (post training/secondary effects). The results suggest that the use of different discursive modules supports the students in developing their reflexive competence during a formative experience that enables them to better adjust to the university context.

Keywords: narrative mediation path, nontraditional students, reflexivity, IPA.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, due to an explosion of information available and constant advances in science and technology, students have to face a series of new challenges, such as: greater competitiveness, more difficult employability, demographic changes, and bigger pressures. Therefore,

1 Associate Professor, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania, dan.stanescu@comunicare.ro.
following those changes in the society as a whole, the profile of the students entering higher education has also changed, as their characteristics, their motives, their expectations and demands. One specific category of students started to grow in numbers worldwide – the so-called non-traditional students. This particular group of students cannot be seen as homogeneous, since the criteria used in defining or describing them are various. For instance, to Correia and Mesquita (2006), non-traditional students are adult people who: dropped out school, may not have academic qualifications, have been apart from the formal academic system for quite a while, do not have previous experience in higher education, and have a low economic and social background. Other studies portray adult learners as having several responsibilities and commitments at work and at home. Therefore, many of them enroll in low frequency courses, due to factors related to limited time for study or lack of flexibility concerning schedules. They are commonly financially independent (Chao, DeRocco & Flynn, 2007; Conrad, 1993; Crawford, 2004; Rogers, 2002; Shankar, 2004).

Other authors (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011), referred to them as re-entry students, returning students or mature-aged students. Thus, whereas a traditional student is defined as one that enrolls immediately after graduating from high school and completes the degree by the age of 24 (Kimbrough & Weaver, 1999; Philibert, Allen, & Elleven, 2008), the non-traditional one is an individual over the age of 24/25 (Ely 1997; Kenner & Weinerman 2011; Powell 2009). Adult learners are also identified by a number of specific characteristics, some of which include: age, employment, family (parents and/or caregivers), and financial responsibilities associated with it (Kimbrough & Weaver, 1999).

In present paper we have adopted the definition offered by Johnston et al. (2011), whereby by ‘non-traditional’, we mean students who are under-represented in higher education and whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors. This would include, for example, students whose family has not been to university before, students from low-income families, students from minority ethnic groups, living in what have traditionally been ‘low participation areas’, as well as mature age students and students with disabilities“ (Johnston et al., 2011).

Despite the fact that the number of non-traditional students significantly increased during the last decade, higher education institutions are yet to accept the challenge of thinking beyond the traditional ways of teaching and developing educational programs (Blair, 2010).

Previous empirical studies showed that nontraditional-age students are less confident in the effectiveness of their study strategies and their
abilities to succeed in college than traditional-age students (Klein, 1990) and that they may need assistance to accurately assess their cognitive and management abilities.

In this context, the INSTALL (Innovative Solutions to Acquire Learning to Learn) project promoted inclusive education, equity and social cohesion while preventing university dropout of non-traditional students caused by personal, social, cultural or economic circumstances, who need support to fulfill their educational potential.

INSTALL project promoted the acquisition of the key competence of Learning to Learn (L2L) at university level, by developing and implementing an innovative methodology - the Narrative Mediation Path (NMP), targeted at the disadvantaged group of students. The Narrative Mediation Path is based on the psychological concept of mentalization (as the ability to understand oneself or someone else’s mental state) to develop and enhance L2L. Mentalization enables individuals to become aware of theirs and others’, mental states (thoughts, beliefs, emotions, wishes and motivations) and recognize, elaborate and modulate emotions throughout the learning process.

Research so far aimed first of all at conceptualizing the term mentalization, also known as mentalizing (which explicitly refers to the action as such) or reflective function, since there are a series of other constructs that it overlaps with. Thus, Allen (2003) distinguishes between mentalization and empathy, in that empathy is but one facet of mentalizing. As pointed out by Gallese (2001), empathic responses, originated in the mirror neurons system, imply simulating not only actions, but also others' emotions and sensations. However, mentalizing also involves being “conscious of one’s affects, while remaining in the affective state” (Fonagy et al., 2002, p. 96) while perceiving them as meaningful, being therefore broader than empathy.

Similarly, mentalization was associated with psychological mindedness defined by Farber as “a trait, which has as its core the disposition to reflect upon the meaning and motivation of behavior, thoughts, and feelings in oneself and others” (1985, p. 170). But mentalization highlights the process as such, by focusing on mental activity. Hence, the emphasis is on process rather than on content, as the goal is to foster the skill in mentalizing and not particularly minding the mental content that results from exercising the skill explicitly (Allen, 2003).

By implying attentiveness to mental states in particular mentalization is similar to mindfulness, a quality of consciousness. However, while one can equally mentalize about past and future, mindfulness is strictly present-
centered. Further, whereas mentalizing is a reflective process, mindfulness remains pre-reflective, in so far as it refers to experiencing reality in a perceptual and non-evaluative way (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

Finally, mentalizing is a form of imaginative activity, since the mind is in itself imaginative (McGinn, 2004; Sartre, 2004). Mentalizing, either implicitly or explicitly involves not simply seeing, but seeing as, that is making sense of behavior by begetting explanations within creative stories. As stressed by Heal (2003), mentalizing creatively does not express itself exclusively linguistically, as long as while trying to be aware of others’ mental states, one imaginatively recalls visual and other sensory images as one strives to see, feel, and think from others’ perspectives. Nevertheless, effective mentalization requires a grounded imagination, that is being imaginative without actually entering the imaginary, that is neither stimulus bond, nor completely losing touch with reality (Allen, 2003).

Moving further, Fonagy and colleagues (Fonagy, 1995; Fonagy et al., 2002) define mentalizing taking into account two modes of experiencing. On the one hand, there is the psychic equivalence mode which highlights the distinction between inner and outer, fantasy and reality, symbol and symbolized, broadly speaking between the mind and the world. On the other hand, there is the pretend mode, which cuts loose from reality. On the contrary, the mentalizing mode is situated in between these two modes. It implicitly or explicitly entails awareness of the mind’s intentionality or aboutness, since a mental state is a particular perspective or takes on a given reality. Shortly, while mentalizing the mind is decoupled from reality while remaining anchored to it (Leslie, 1987).

The most recurrent definition of mentalization has its roots in the philosophy of mind (Dennett, 1987) and sees it as a form of mostly preconscious imaginative mental activity, namely, perceiving and interpreting human behaviour in terms of intentional mental states (e.g., needs, desires, feelings, beliefs, goals, purposes, and reasons) (Fonagy & Bateman, 2006). Likewise, mentalization involves both a self-reflective and an interpersonal component, as it implies “seeing yourself from the outside and others from the inside” (Allen, Fonagy & Bateman, 2008, p.313).

The assumption that the mind governs actions and the possibility of interpreting and anticipating behaviour enables cooperation, offers competitive advantage, and contributes to higher levels of social interpretive capacity. However, in order to consider others as mental agents, adopting the intentional stance (Dennett, 1987) or the interpersonal interpretative function, in Fonagy’s terms (2006) is not sufficient. There is also required a specific set of cognitive skills that convey the ability to accurately and
efficiently attribute mental states to others, such as: including attending, perceiving, recognizing, describing, interpreting, inferring, imagining, simulating, remembering, reflecting, and anticipating (Allen & Fonagy, 2006).

Mentalization was conceptualized as essential to empowering individuals to strategically use cognitive actions related to mental states (interpret, reason, anticipate, remember, codify etc.), effectively communicate and interact with others. Prior research has already linked metacognition, which involves the ability to monitor and regulate the use of cognitive activities to academic performance (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Hofer, Yu & Pintrich, 1998). The reflexive process has the effect of suspending part of the actions of the person, to rethink the direction of the actions in contextual terms and change perspective through repositioning. Similarly, INSTALL aims at opening “the prison” of continuity of experience, providing participants with the opportunity to look at themselves in the group through a mirror and a prism, so that they can reconstruct their identity as students. It offers a setting to suspend actions and to rethink one’s positioning in the context, activating in such a way a reflexive process (Freda & De Luca Picione, 2012).

2. Purpose of the study

INSTALL aimed to developing/enhancing a transversal competence of learning to learn to allow students to build resources in their own environment and turn capacities, knowledge and skills into competences to self-empowerment. That is because, as previous research shows, “during their university career non-traditional students learn to develop and (re/) construct a learning identity in a learning environment, culture and structure which is largely geared towards meeting the needs of younger, ‘traditional’ undergraduates” (Merill & González – Monteagudo, 2010, p. 1).

The current study aimed at gathering first-hand information related to the lived experience of students involved in a specific formative experience within the NMP – Narrative Mediation Path that employed different discursive modules to support them in developing their reflexive competence in order to better adjust to the academic life.

The Narrative Mediation Path (NMP) consists in a group training process targeted to disadvantaged students, based on the psychological concept of mentalization, also known as reflexive competence. NMP combines into one methodology four discursive modules or codes: Metaphoric, Iconographic, Written and Bodily. The four codes are
implemented in a cycle of six meetings conducted by Narrative Group Trainers (NGTs) who were trained to use this methodology with disadvantaged students.

Through the four codes, the students are presented with the possibility of mentalizing their own personal way of participating in university education and developing a reflexive competence that allows them to learn to learn in a way which is strategic and adaptive within the university context. Although the mentalisation/reflexive competence is the final outcome of the training, in each code a reflexive register is activated about the educational experience of the student at different levels of analysis, in relation to different educational situations and according to the different narrative inputs presented to the group as part of the training.

Predominantly, the training is conceptualized as a circular, reflexive process of mentalization about one’s own educational experience, starting from an initial synchronic representation of the educational experience (proposed in the first code), passing through a diachronic analysis of a specific university situation, and finally, returning to the synchronic level in which the same experience is reinvestigated in light of the reflexive and meta-reflexive processes previously activated.

3. Research methods

The data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is designed to enable the understanding of the lived experience of the participant, while providing a systematic approach to conducting qualitative research (Smith & Osborn, 2003) that is committed to idiographic inquiry (Lamiell, 1987; Smith et al., 1995). Each case is examined in great detail as an entity before moving to more general claims that are translated into a narrative account that includes detailed extracts from the participants’ accounts.

IPA it is concerned with the meaning of such experiences for those participants (Larkin, Watts şi Clifton, 2006) and it is particularly useful where the topic under study is multidimensional, dynamic, contextual and subjective, relatively novel and where issues relating to identity, the self and sense-making are important (Smith, 2004).

Data were collected through five semi-structured interviews, comprising 11 open questions (Table 01). The interviews were semi-structured, but participants were encouraged to talk in detail about their particular concerns and experiences. The interviews were audio recorded and verbatim transcripts served as raw data for the subsequent analysis,
which followed in detail the four-stage process proposed by Smith and Osborn (2003). The analysis began with a close interpretative reading of the first case, where initial responses to the text were annotated in one margin. These initial notes were converted into emergent themes at one higher level of abstraction and recorded in the other margin (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The researchers then interrogated the themes to make connections between them, which resulted in a table of super-ordinate themes for the first case, including as well the subordinate themes with identifying information. The process was replicated for each of the five cases. Next, patterns were established cross case and documented in a master table of themes. Finally, the themes were transformed into a narrative account, while the analytic account was supported by verbatim extracts from each participant.

**Table 1.** Semi-structured interview schedule

- How would you describe/comment on the Install training experience?
- In your opinion which are the strengths and weaknesses of this experience?
- Which modules have been of most use to you? Why?
- Has your participation in the Install course had any specific (+/-) effect?
- Do you think that your university performance has been affected by your participation in the Install course? How?
- Please tell us about an episode relating to your university life, which has occurred recently, when your behaviour, in your opinion, was influenced by what you have learnt during the Install training course.
- How did you feel in that situation?
- What do you think that the other people present thought and felt in that situation?
- How did you face that situation?
- Why did you face it in that way?
- Do you think that your thoughts and emotions relating to those situations have changed? Why?
The participants – five female students enrolled in the INSTALL Narrative Mediation Path training constituted a reasonably homogenous, purposive sample (Smith & Osborn, 2003), sufficient to depict a perspective, rather than represent a population. Participants were encouraged to talk as widely as possible about their experience during the NMP training program delivered within the INSTALL project.

4. Findings

The emerging themes, as identified through the IPA analysis, refer to the following areas: relational context of the training (common/shared experiences with other colleagues), the change as such (awareness about changes) and the impact of the NMP both in terms of academic and personal life (post training/secondary effects).

Concerning the common/shared experiences theme, participants relate about becoming aware of the fact that their stories are not isolated cases:

...we have realized that we have common experiences, common feelings and it was nice to talk about various issues related to school, to understand that it is not only me going through such issues... (An, 21); ...I have found out a bunch of new and interesting things about my colleagues... some things that we have in common and we did not know before... (Al, 21).

Similarly, this discovery is associated with a feeling of alleviation:

...colleagues were in the room and they have written about the same experience... and for me, to see that someone shares the same feelings about something we did together and further shares it at group level was... very pleasant... (C, 21); ...in addition, I have seen my colleagues like that... I see that they have passed through the same situations as I did; therefore I am not a freak... as I used to see myself until then... (L, 21).

Among the changes most frequently described by participants (the second emergent theme), there was the management of exam pressure and a better organization of the learning process:

...management of emotions at exams. I don’t know, suddenly I’ve become more relaxed... (An, 21); ...I knew how to distribute my learning time, how to learn. I’ve realized that if I don’t like a matter a marking of 8 will suffice... (An, 21); ...I’ve organized a bit my learning style, but not
only this, the life style itself... I've come to trust myself more in doing that... (L, 21).

As opposed to those who could not specifically name the shifts taken, finding it difficult to put a finger on what actually changed, some went even further and talked about higher order changes, taking into account the general functioning, irrespective of the context under discussion:

...it helped me to open myself more... even to organize things... now I don't stress myself that much... (Al, 21); ...I've realized that life is beautiful and not so stressful... it helped me see that I am a normal person and I don't need to worry for everything... (Al, 21); ...we were able to share our feelings without being ashamed or afraid... I found myself making plans, setting objectives for the next week, next month, even for the next year... (L, 21); ...it helped me see myself in another way... to realize what I am doing and how I am doing it... (Lo, 21).

Finally, when it came to listing the effects of the NMP training, accounts suggest that the intervention met its main goal, since improvements in academic results were reported:

...this is the first year without any reexamination (C, 21); this time I didn't have problems with exams (L, 21); this semester I managed to get higher marks than before, especially for interim projects... I become keener to take part in those projects (La, 21).

Further, the NMP meetings seem to have impacted the attending students on a more general level, improving their availability to take part of activities other than university related, doubled by a boost in motivation and self-confidence:

...this year I was involved in a lot of activities... until the third year is like I did not exist at all, and now I realize that I want to do a lot of things (C, 21); now I am involved in much more activities...I bring new ideas; I get involved in the decision making process (An, 21); ...it helped me find my intrinsic motivation... a wish to do things (L, 21); ...I feel more self-confident... that I can do things... that's all about... doing stuff (L, 21).

Conclusion

It is clear that the participants’ accounts described a beneficial change due to a relatively simple and gradually intrusive intervention (NMP).
Although this kind of qualitative results cannot always be supported with specific behaviors, all participants reported feeling different. The change in the meanings attached to their university life involved a closer sense of social connectedness and a reduced sense of an alienated, isolated, and vulnerable self in the face of the academic challenges faced. Both the participants’ sense of self and sense of others were central to their accounts of the experience within the NMP training, as the discursive modules used during the meetings seemed to have touched deeper psychic energies:

    after an INSTALL meeting you arrive at home and you say to yourself - I have to think now...I have to reflect. Why am I here? What did I do with my life?... It makes you think at certain things related to your life, your decisions (An, 21).

Starting from this, one can assume that learning to learn, defined as the ability to pursue and persist in learning, to organize one’s own learning, including the effective management of time and information, both individually and in groups, is crucial in facilitating adaptation to new contexts and promoting inclusion in the world of education and work. This competence includes awareness of one’s learning processes and needs, identifying available opportunities, and the ability to overcome obstacles in order to learn successfully.

The proposed methodology (NMP) assumes that in order to develop such a competence in studying it is necessary for students to activate a process of mentalization of their own educative path (Fonagy & Target, 1997; Fonagy, et al. 2002; Allen & Fonagy, 2006), that is, a process aimed at understanding the reasons for one’s own and others’ behaviours in order to act in the university context in a way which is instrumental to achieving academic success. In other words, the mentalization/reflective function allows the learning individual to see and recognise him or herself while acting, and it combines the emotional, cognitive and social dimensions which go across the educational experience, in order to give them a strategically direction (Esposito & Freda, 2014). Furthermore, mentalization allows a person to recognise, elaborate on, and regulate their mental states (e.g., emotions, intentions, desires, beliefs etc.), which underlie the learning process (Fonagy & Target, 1997; Allen & Fonagy, 2006). In this sense, the student can activate a reflective process of mentalization about what and why he or she learns so that the student can gain a new and more functional direction to their academic performance.

Given the fact that the segment of disadvantaged non-traditional students is increasing, the NMP might represent a valuable method for...
developing the L2L competence by increasing the reflective function, although it is not suitable to reach larger segments of student cohort (the maximum number of students recommended for the NMP training is 20). This information could also serve as a framework for enriching the knowledge of those who are engaging in social inclusion and students' integration program development.

References


