

Composing Lives Alongside: Narrative Meaning Making and Life Making in Relation

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a broader narrative inquiry into the curriculum making of participants who compose identities dissonant with dominant stories of gender and sexuality, this article explores the shaping influence of the social (relationships, communities, and contexts) in one participant's life story around sexuality from a curricular perspective. The term curriculum making represents an ongoing process through which individuals make sense and meaning of experience, position curriculum broadly as a course of life, and shift notions of curriculum and curriculum making beyond the bounds of school. Individuals engage in identity making as they make sense of themselves in relation to their curriculum making, narratively understood as the composition of stories to live by. This inquiry highlights the ways that life stories are composed alongside, connected to, and shaped by other people and draws the attention of educators to the complex lives unfolding in schools.

KEYWORDS

Curriculum Making, Identity, Knowledge Landscapes, Narrative Inquiry, Sexuality

INTRODUCTION

This paper is part of a more expansive narrative inquiry into the curriculum making¹ of individuals who compose identities dissonant with dominant stories of gender and sexuality. The term curriculum making refers to the ongoing process through which individuals make sense and meaning of experience. We (the researchers) thought about normalized notions of gender and sexuality as a dominant story—a socially constructed account of experience, perspective, or way of being that represents a majority or dominant group of people within a society. As such, we focused on the ways participants make sense of their lives through lived experience when the dominant storylines of gender and sexuality “that form the context of their lives...don't seem to fit” (Andrews, 2002, p. 1). Here we focus on the experiences of one participant, Jamie², in order to consider and describe the complexity involved in negotiating an identity shaped by dominant societal narratives of sexuality, narratives that often tell us *how* to be. In this paper we seek to address the question of how an individual's sense making about self is shaped by other people—the relationships, communities, and contexts that shape the stories people know and live.

Narrative notions of curriculum making are rooted in a Deweyan ontological and epistemological framework (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007) that recognizes “one permanent frame of reference: namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience” (Dewey, 1938/1997, p. 25). Clandinin and Connelly (1992) drew on the work of Dewey and Schwab (1973) to describe curriculum

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making as “a curricular process...in which teacher, learners, subject matter, and milieu are in dynamic interaction” (p. 392). Thinking about meaning making in this way, as situated in the life of and from the perspective of the learner, allowed us (the inquirers) to attend to the narrative quality of knowing. An individual’s stories of knowing and meaning are shaped by personal experience, relationships, and social context(s).

From this perspective, we understand curriculum as “a course of life” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992, p. 393), which shifts understandings of curriculum beyond the context of school and schooling. The study of education is about life and attention to lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Our attention toward the lives of participants in the larger study, and in this inquiry particularly, does *not* center, but is inclusive of, school experience. At the same time, we maintain that an inquiry into curriculum making has theoretical and practical implications for educators. More specifically, this inquiry highlights the ways that life stories are composed alongside, connected to and shaped by other people, and draws the attention of educators to the complex lives unfolding in schools.

Individuals engage in identity making as they make sense of themselves in relation to their stories of knowing; they are learners of their own lives (Clandinin et al., 2006, p. 13). As such, we think about identity making as the composition of *stories to live by*³ (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), where identity is understood narratively as life stories lived and told. As the participants were in the midst of their lives, of engaging in a curriculum making tied to identity making, they were in the process of life writing (Heilbrun, 1988). We take up this metaphor in order to think about identity as situated in and shaped by the complexities of lived experience. Life stories are composed through life experience—stories shift as experience adds nuance to knowing. As Clandinin et al. (2006) explained, “As they gain a deeper awareness of their story to live by, they begin to shift those stories as they continue to go about their days” (p.10).

As the inquiry unfolded with the participants and as we began to pay particular attention to Jamie, we noted the ways he composed life stories contingent on the curriculum he was living. We positioned Jamie as curriculum maker, making meaning of his life stories around gender and sexuality as subject matter. It was evident, as the participants in the larger study, and particularly Jamie in this paper, told about their living, that they engaged in actively writing their lives alongside, connected to and shaped by stories of the individuals and communities in their respective milieus. Thus, this paper attends to the interdependence of people as they make sense of themselves—the reverberations of *the social* that shape the contours of identity in lives of the participants.

This research troubles what Coleman-Fountain (2014a) referred to as “the stasis of modernity, where identity...is understood as ‘solid and stable’” (p. 13). In our research together, for both inquirers and participants, language and conceptual understandings were sometimes limited by gender and sexual categories. As one participant in the larger inquiry described, “It’s like not having any language and asking for...something and you can’t tell them what you want” (Calle, research conversation, December 15, 2015). Categories of identity can obscure lived experience as they invoke familiar tropes to make meaning about people; identity categories, like gender and sexuality, prescribe “how we *should* be rather than recognizing how we are” (Adichie, 2014, p. 34, emphasis in original). These socially constructed distinctions began to blur as we paid attention to the particularities of the participants’ lives.

The ideas raised by the participants in the larger inquiry emerged as a common theme in the current literature around gender and sexual identity. Increasingly, youth and adults with non-dominant identities around gender and sexuality are recognizing the limited and limiting nature of these categories. Cohler and Hammack (2007) described the ways that youth with same-sex attraction position themselves as normal within a society through resistance to sexual categories as the *narrative of emancipation*; sexual attraction does not need to be the “anchor of personal narrative” (p. 54). Rather, the narrative of emancipation calls for the seeing same-sex attraction as part of life, “in which concerns such as finding a good relationship and a satisfying job possess more primacy” (p. 55) than same-sex attraction.

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