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Lifelong Learning Goes to the Movies: Autobiographical Narratives as Media Production

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Abstract (Pitch 1): *A blockbuster of a paper (nominated for Best Foreign Contribution) in which the heroine describes a perilous path through the territory of narrative theory and text construction. She encounters the threshold guardians of writer's block and self-doubt, wrestles with shapeshifters, tricksters and shadows, rallies after encounters with mentors and allies and returns to the ordinary world with the elixir of lifelong learning (or, at least, a completed conference paper).*

A Rational, Modernist Beginning (Pitch 2)

Autobiographical research has developed into a significant strand in the literature of adult education over the last ten years. Researchers have drawn on their own life histories in order to enhance understanding of personal development, identity construction and lifelong learning; feminist and postmodernist approaches, which emphasise the need to understand personal experience and to analyse subjectivities and identities, have informed this work. At the same time, autobiographical reflection has increasingly come to feature in the practice of adult educators with the growth in the use of mechanisms to document and accredit life experience and prior learning, and in the use of learning diaries and portfolios.

Despite the proliferation of autobiographical explorations in adult education, there have been few attempts in this field to provide frameworks for analysing such texts. This paper sets out a model to assist in the construction and analysis of autobiographical texts of lifelong learning. The model is developed from a metaphor of media production according to which a lifelong learning biography may be constructed in terms of the following stages in the production of a media artefact such as a movie, sitcom or soap opera: pitching, scripting, casting, shooting, editing and screening.

In earlier work (see, for example, Miller, 1999) I have attempted to analyse the intersection of my personal experience with cultural artefacts such as television series and popular songs and to deconstruct the way in which I draw on images and sensations from popular culture in making sense of the everyday. I have also argued that the increasing use of electronic media in learning makes it important

for educators to engage with the processes by which media texts are produced and disseminated and to understand the ways in which media images and representations pervade all our lives. I believe adult educators' theory and practice can be enhanced by taking seriously the texts and pleasures of popular culture. This paper takes my analysis further and suggests a systematic approach to the examination of autobiographical narratives.

The model described in this paper draws upon Goffman's concept of the impression-managing dramaturgical self (1959) and Berne's unravelling of the rich tapestry of life scripts (1973) as well as upon narrative theory. Writers such as Propp (1968) and Campbell (1973) have demonstrated how myths and stories across the ages may be seen to feature common characters, themes and structures, often built around the ordeals and lessons of a heroic journey. Despite Lyotard's definition of postmodernity as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (1984), it seems that mythic structures are remarkably enduring. Berger (1997) shows how contemporary texts from comic books to spaghetti Westerns can be shown to fit a classic pattern. Vogler (1996) demonstrates that even a film like Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, often celebrated as a prime example of a postmodern text, can be seen to contain standard mythic elements, although not necessarily in the usual order. But let's begin this text at the beginning. Once upon a time

Unrolling The Pitch

Pitching involves selling the idea for a media product; it may be equated with establishing a rationale and standpoint. Since Hollywood moguls have exceptionally crowded diaries and limited attention

spans, the sellers of concepts for films and television series have to develop skills in presenting their script ideas in the most compressed way possible, establishing genre, plot and treatment in a few words.

The two introductions which I offer at the beginning of this paper are constructed in different discourses and employ contrasting conventions, but they are both attempts on my part to sell my text to my audience. The first owes more to journalism than to social scientific literature and the second employs my straighter academic voice. In the first there is explicit reference to mythic archetypes and narrative structures, and the need for hyperbole is assumed. I establish myself as the central subject in the drama to be unfolded, and suggest a story with a conventional beginning, middle and end. The outcome follows the classic story-telling pattern in the return to the ordinary world with a reward. In the second pitch my selling is more muted. My imagined audience is narrower than that for Pitch 1, and I assume the need to support my statements with the reassuring parentheses of bibliographical reference. But it would be a mistake to see this text as “truer” or more authentic than the first version. It, too, contains impression management and self-construction, this time of an experienced writer as located in dominant paradigms and research traditions, with a history (“In earlier work”) as well as a trajectory.

An example from my back catalogue of autobiographical narratives illustrates further some features of the filmic opening gambit, and underlines the potential connections between stories of the self and media production. It is a pitch for the film version of a chapter for an academic book about women’s experience of technology in everyday life:

This Saturday Night Life: A red open-top MG disturbs the somnolence of a West Midlands mill town one Sunday morning. Nod has been drawn inescapably back to her home town to search out the mysterious connection in her life with the shadowy figure of C. Wright Mills. As she drives past the scenes of her childhood, we see in flashback some of the formative incidents in her life, including the strange case of next door’s outside toilet, the big black telephone, the BBC’s construction of the Coronation and the Drop Forgings From Hell. As Nod pieces together the puzzle that connects her life and bookshelves, we

begin to understand the difference between animation and facilitation. In this Boulting Brothers production, the contemporary Nod is played by Marianne Faithfull; the younger Nods are played by Meg Ryan and Alicia Silverstone. Peggy Ashcroft and John Mills star as her parents and her brother is played by Sting. Donald Sutherland appears as her ex-husband. C. Wright Mills is played by Eddie Izzard.

The chapter deals with my early encounters with domestic and industrial technology as I grew up in a 1950s working-class community, and my attempts to grapple with issues of relative deprivation, social mobility and gender relations. In this metanarrative (written for a seminar discussion about “truth” and fantasy in autobiography) I frame the chapter as a gritty rags-to-riches drama (filmed partly in black and white) featuring menacing objects and secrets from the past. My theoretical exploration of the formation of the sociological imagination and the intersection of biography and history in society (Mills, 1970) is embodied in the shapeshifting figure of C. Wright Mills. As is often the case, I move to the casting stage from the pitch without troubling to write a detailed script. Getting to grips with the script takes us to the second stage of the autobiographer/media producer’s journey.

Churning Out the Script

Scripting is the process of plotting a story, writing dialogue, setting the scenes and identifying significant events and themes. It sounds easy enough if you say it fast, but, at least in my experience, it is an immensely testing business and drives me to considerations of an alternative career. As ever, *Seinfeld* encapsulates the point well. In Episode 48 (*The Cheever Letters*), Jerry and George procrastinate over starting the script for their sitcom pilot, going out for a protracted breakfast, taking hours to compose two lines of dialogue, falling asleep on the job and abandoning work for the day with relief when Kramer makes an entrance.

Having sold my script successfully to the AERC selectors via my impossible-to-resist promise of a new theoretical model, I forgot all about having to write the paper for several months. By the time I geared myself up for serious scripting, the deadline was looming and I was drowning in administrative

tasks and adrift in managerial anxieties. In mid-February I finally cleared a day to begin some dedicated academic endeavour. This was how it went.

Scene 1: Interior, day. An untidy study in a terraced house in the East End of London. February, 2000. Our heroine sits frowning at the screen of her iMac. She types a sentence and deletes it. She pushes a pile of email printouts and committee minutes to one side and pulls *The Writer's Journey* out of a jumbled heap of large fat books on the floor. She flicks idly through the index and returns glumly to the text on the screen. She opens another Word file and cuts and pastes a paragraph. The background music (Van Morrison's *Brown-eyed girl*) fades out and she crosses the room to find another CD. She inserts *Prince: The Hits 1* in the CD player. Humming absently to *I could never take the place of your man*, she returns to the computer and begins to type in time with the music.

Getting started with the plot means crossing a threshold which often seems fraught with danger. I turned for clues to theorists of the storyline. Christopher Vogler, a former story analyst for Disney, demonstrates how the rules of story-telling which shaped classical myths and folktales still underpin most successful artefacts of the movie industry. He suggests that stories are made up of stages along the hero's – or indeed heroine's – journey, including: a call to adventure; threshold crossing; meetings with mentors, allies and enemies; ordeals; rewards, redemption and return. This is how he describes the starting point for myths (and many movies):

Most stories take the hero out of the ordinary, mundane world and into a Special World, new and alien. This is the familiar “fish out of water” idea which has spawned countless films and TV shows (*The Fugitive*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Witness*, *48 Hours*, *Trading Places*, *Beverly Hills Cop* etc.). If you're going to show a fish out of his customary element, you first have to show him in that Ordinary World to create a vivid contrast with the strange new

world he is about to enter (Vogler, 1996, p.19).

Once I had conceptualised this text as yet another story, and my starting point as myself in my “ordinary world,” I was well on the way to composing Scene 1 above.

A new insight into the way in which narrative structures are embedded in my life and shape my understandings of experience came about last year, when my father went into a coma after what was supposed to be a routine operation. He spent two months, unconscious and full of tubes, in an intensive care ward before he died. After several weeks during which members of my extended family returned nightly and sadly from the hospital to debate about what was happening, it began to dawn on me that the itchy discomfort of these events stemmed in part from their lack of congruence with the expected sequence of television hospital dramas. In such shows as *ER* (Fox) and *Casualty* (BBC), the journeys between health and illness and life and death are as frequent as the Underground service from Bow Road to Whitechapel. However, the pattern in such shows whereby protagonists move from the ordinary world to the special world of illness, undergo a crisis and then quickly return to health or die was not mirrored by the pace of real life. The script of a 50-minute show like *ER* does not allow for hovering on the verge of life and death (between crisis and resolution) for what seems like an interminable period.

Casting Around for Mentors, Allies and Enemies

Casting involves processes of identity construction, development of character and recognition of significant others. In casting the characters in my autobiographical drama I situate myself in a set of social relations and explore questions of self-image and subcultural affinity. In the typical mythic story, the cast of characters includes:

questing heroes, heralds who call them to adventure, wise old men and women who give them magical gifts, threshold guardians who seem to block their way, shapeshifting villains who try to destroy them, tricksters who upset the status quo and provide comic relief (Vogler, 1996, p.33).

It is important to note that writing autobiography almost always involves writing the lives of others as well as oneself: hence the slash in the term auto/biography. My preference is almost always for ensemble playing; my own heroic journey throngs with fellow-travellers, comrades and co-authors who are on my side in the battles with shadows and shapeshifters. The genre of many of my favourite internal dramas is to be found in the texts of peer-group friendship from *The Young Ones* (the Cliff Richard version) through *Grease*, *The Big Chill*, *thirtysomething*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* to *Friends* and *Seinfeld*.

The inspiration for some creative casting in my life drama came out of a conference experience a couple of years ago. I was presenting a conference paper I had written with a colleague in which we described a collaborative experiment involving the analysis of our own autobiographical narratives using interpretative frameworks derived from psychoanalysis, sociology, feminism and anthropology (Miller & West, 1998). The time available for introducing papers was severely constrained so that my co-presenter and I had just seven and a half minutes each. I elected to use my time for a performance entitled *Deconstructing Nod*, in which I located myself in a network of relationships represented in the conference, and situated my professional practices and identities in relation to elements of personal experience and to a range of theoretical paradigms. I concluded with a pitch for the movie of my life so far (*This Saturday Night Life*), describing its genre, cast and soundtrack. Some conference participants joined in the game of choosing performers to play themselves in the movie of the conference, and later that day, another scene wrote itself:

Scene 2: Interior, night. A bar in a university hall of residence. Flashback, July 1998. The camera moves in on an animated group of academics (played by Nicolas Cage, Jerry Seinfeld, Whoopi Goldberg, Robbie Coltrane, John Goodman, Susan Sarandon, Cameron Diaz, Tom Hanks, Julia Roberts, Mel Brooks, Tim Robbins, Meg Ryan and k.d.lang) dressed predominantly in black leather, who sit round a table full of empty lager glasses. Tim Robbins is telling the story of an encounter with a distinguished professor at another conference, which revolves around the identity of this character (cameo part here for

Eric Clapton) as “master of his domain.” There are cries of “Let’s all give Eric a big hand,” “I hope he’s coming next year” and “I shall never be able to look at his seminal text in the same way again.” The soundtrack features Hootie and the Blowfish (*I go blind*).

Camera! Action! Take! Retake!

The next stages in the production of movies and autobiographical texts are shooting and editing, which constitute the selection, framing and interpretation of events. I suspect that when I first began to use autobiography as a research method I retained some ideas about uncovering “truth” through my explorations. Certainly when in 1989 I put together an account of my learning experience to date, I searched obsessively for documentary evidence in the form of letters, photographs and old essays to support my memories (Miller, 1989). But of course autobiography always involves artful construction. In putting together an autobiographical account of my experience, I draw on years of raw material and select elements which fit the particular story I am telling on this occasion. In the case of this paper, much text which I was rather pleased ended up being deleted in order to keep to the required six pages, consigned to the hard disk equivalent of the cutting-room floor.

These days I recognise the process of autobiographical writing as an active construction of myself for a particular audience and purpose. I construct myself through writing about myself, as, indeed, I do through my everyday conversations. I tell stories to my friends of what has recently happened to me; often the narratives are tried out with one friend and then honed or edited with another. Over time the issue becomes not so much whether the story is “true” or “exaggerated,” but rather whether its timing is appropriate and whether its elements are arranged in such a way to maximise drama or ironic effect. In writing the process is more clearly open to scrutiny. I type one version of the story of an event and then read and reread and tinker with the words, consult the thesaurus, insert synonyms, change the order of phrases to enhance the rhythms and flow of sentences, cut, paste and chop out unnecessary sections. What ends up in the final version is more to do with what fits the criterion of what works on

the page than with what might be more or less “true.”

The soundtrack of a movie or television show represents a powerful framing device which impacts on ambience and dramatic pace. In a recent paper, a colleague and I made fleeting reference to the importance of popular music in the “soundtracks of our lives” through the device of using song titles as sub-headings (Edwards and Miller, 2000). My personal soundtrack is drawn from an extensive catalogue of (mostly) pop songs recorded over the last 40 years and stored on vinyl, audio cassette, CD and my brain cells. I wrote this paper, as I write all my texts, to the accompaniment of such allies, shape-shifters and mentors as Marvin Gaye, Jimmy Buffet, Fleetwood Mac, They Might Be Giants, Van Morrison and the Grateful Dead. Music gives helpful inspiration to autobiographical re/construction by providing access to earlier selves and sensations.

A telling representation of the place of pop music in the construction of narratives of selves may be found in David E. Kelley’s television series *Ally McBeal*, whose characters regularly slide from case conference or bathroom visit into languorous dance routine or spirited musical production. Such is the pleasure in the way that the power of pop songs in the head is manifest in *McBeal* that I am prepared to forgive the writer/producer his soggy storylines and to follow the show’s predictable journey through the territory of romantic love unfulfilled. Even Barry White turns out to have heroic dimensions.

Waiting for the Ratings

The final stage on this autobiographical journey is screening, which represents dissemination or publication (although of course that’s just another beginning). Here is a clip which illustrates some of the issues:

Scene 3: Interior, night. The AERC movie theatre. Flash forward: June 2000. Cast and crew assemble to view the director’s cut of *This Saturday Night Life*. What began as a home movie has turned into a major international co-production, so that there is a global array of talent in the house. Al Pacino, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Robert de Niro, Kris Kristoferson and Paul Hogan greet one another. Waves and smiles are exchanged. The lights dim, a hush falls and the opening credits

flicker. The camera moves in on the writer. She glances round at allies, mentors and shadows in the audience. Will they cheer? Hoot with derision? Ask for their money back?

The issue for an academic autobiographer is less that of box office returns and more that of peer acclaim, as measured in citations, reviews and RAE points.

Returning to the Ordinary World of Lifelong Learning

In this paper I have set out a metaphor for understanding and analysing autobiographical texts, and I have tried to illustrate the lessons and pleasures of intertextuality and popular culture. As an adult education researcher, I am particularly concerned with accounts of learning and change. The stages of the heroic journey of myth and legend would seem to fit well with descriptions of lifelong learning, which frequently feature elements such as encounters with mentors, obstacles to be overcome, ordeals to be endured and prizes to be won. It occurred to me as I was writing this paper that my own learning story (as told in Miller, 1989, for example) in which a dominant motif is that of social mobility through education (the heroine as working-class kid made good) has strong overtones of *Cinderella*.

Much of my learning these days comes about through reflection in the course of producing written texts, and I have tried to capture here some aspects of another journey: the hazardous trek from abstract to publication. While the practice of writing is more sedentary than killing dragons, setting off on the composition of a text seems not so different from climbing a beanstalk. There are some risky monsters which are particular to the autobiographer’s journey. Two with which I have skirmished (not unscathed) in the course of the present journey are gratuitous self-exposure and narcissism.

In the original pitch for this paper, I suggested that I would offer a model for the construction and analysis of autobiographical narratives. As I read through rough cuts of this piece, I realised that my analysis was almost entirely confined to the construction of my own texts, and an account of my own journey through this particular piece of writing. The application of this model to the texts and stories of others awaits the sequel to this production.

Thanks to executive producer Rod Allen, on whose knowledge of international co-production I regularly rely.

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