

“Oh, I get it now!” – Autobiographical writing as fostering understanding of gender and leisure interactions

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Abstract

The value of stories as a learning tool has received increased attention in the adult education literature. Narratives provide opportunity for learners to use their lived experiences to make sense of new information or knowledge. Students in an upper level Gender and Leisure course engaged in autobiographical writing as a means of exploring and understanding how gender interacted with their leisure behaviors throughout their lives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 students after the assignment had been completed. The purpose of this study was to understand students' experiences with writing narratives and how this contributed to their learning both related to and beyond the course content. Discussion relates to the identified roles that story construction played in enhancing students' understanding of key concepts as well as helping them make connections between the concepts and their future roles as practitioners.

Keywords: autobiographical writing, gender, learning tools, evaluation

Introduction

The use of narrative and stories in adult education has been receiving increased attention in recent years (Carter, 1993; Rossiter, 1999). Greater understanding has been developed in terms of how a narrative orientation to teaching and learning can assist students in achieving their educational goals (Karpiak, 2000). As a result, educators in a variety of disciplines are incorporating narrative approaches into both delivery of course content and assessment of student understanding (MacLeod & Cowieson, 2001).

A narrative orientation to education is grounded in an understanding of storytelling as a fundamental structure of how we, as humans, make meaning (Bruner, 2002). “Stories consist of events, characters, and settings arranged in a temporal sequence implying both causality and significance” (Carter, 1993, p. 6). Stories involve readers in the actions and intentions of the characters and invite active meaning making. Telling or creating stories to teach students or facilitate their development of mean-

ing in relation to the content is one use of narrative. Having students tell or create stories – develop characters, events, and settings – is another approach to helping students understand or make meaning of the content (Doyle & Carter, 2003; Leitch, 1986).

Autobiographical writing is a strategy for having students tell their own stories. This valuable learning tool can help students think critically about course material while at the same time encouraging them to recall, organize, and integrate prior knowledge and their own life experiences with new concepts (Karpiak, 2000). Such writing also allows learners to gain insight into their personal development as they connect new knowledge with lived experience and weave it into existing narratives of meaning (Albert, 1996; Graham, 1991; Hunt & Sampson, 1998; Rico, 1991). As students become more insistent that what they are learning is relevant and meaningful to them (Sylvester, 2002), the use of this form of narrative as a means of fostering student learning is particularly appealing.

This article describes an autobiographical writing assignment that I have used on four occasions in one of my courses. I sought students' feedback in evaluating the process of writing an autobiography and identifying the outcomes that resulted from their engagement in the process.

Gender and Leisure Self-Study

I adopted an autobiographical writing assignment in an upper level Gender and Leisure course that I teach. The main objective of the course is for students to gain a broad understanding of the inter-relationships between gender and leisure. This includes being able to identify, describe, and assess the ways in which gender issues influence and shape individuals' lives including their leisure behaviors. It also involves developing an appreciation for how leisure participation can influence one's perception and understanding of what it is to be male or female.

All university students have experiences with leisure as well as those associated with being either male or female. Often, however, students have not had an opportunity to reflect on how gender and leisure have interacted to influence their leisure decision-making, their leisure behaviors, or their gender identity development. In the first opportunity I had to teach this course, I developed the "Gender and Leisure Self-study" assignment. The project encouraged students to explore their leisure behaviors from childhood to present day, and to consider the various ways that gender played a role in their leisure choices and experiences with those choices Table 1 provides a detailed description of the assignment.

TABLE 1

Gender and Leisure Self-Study Assignment Description

The purpose of this assignment is to provide an opportunity for you to examine and reflect on your personal experiences related to gender and leisure. Papers must include a personal exploration of the ways gender has influenced your leisure behaviors throughout your life and be supported by evidence of the contributing factors that have influenced that effect on behavior. Also, consideration should be given to how your leisure and sport behaviors have shaped your understanding of male and female roles.

This process will involve an in-depth investigation and analysis of key factors (i.e., people, events, circumstances) that have impacted on your leisure. Data collection could involve the following:

- informal conversations with significant others such as partners, parents, other family members, childhood peers, coaches, youth leaders;
- a review of documents such as personal diaries or journals, letters, school papers, or assignments;
- an examination of pictures;
- and simply recollecting personal life events.

Students in the past have found information collected from parents to be especially useful. You may want to ask, for example, what types of games or sports you played as a young child, what type of toys you played with, what types of stories were read to you, what your "roles" or "chores" were in the household, etc. This data from your early childhood may provide a foundation for understanding the leisure attitudes and beliefs that you hold today, and may give insight into your activity patterns.

The information you collect from the various sources must be organized and presented in a logical fashion (i.e., chronologically or by theme). Suggested areas of analysis include the following:

- early childhood play experiences,
- involvement in school and other extracurricular sport and recreation activities and academic programs such as art, drama, home economics, or industrial arts,
- leisure-related relationships with family, friends, and coaches/leaders,
- favorite childhood games and toys,
- church/religious-related activities,
- involvement with organized clubs such as Scouts or Guides, sports clubs, 4H, etc.,
- participation in instructional sessions such as piano lessons, dance classes, art, etc.,
- influence of television, radio, or books,
- involvement in special events and festivals, and,
- trips and vacations

This is meant only as a partial list to guide your thinking. Life events that are not directly leisure related, but which affected your understanding of male or female roles in our society could also be included. Such events might include moving into a coed residence, getting married, or entering the work force to name but a few.

I viewed the self-study assignment as an opportunity for students to engage in self-directed learning whereby they could determine how the concepts they were learning in the course (e.g., constraints to leisure participation, the role of leisure in reproducing gender, the role of leisure in resisting gender stereotypes, the influence of social structures such as schools and family on leisure opportunities and choices) fit with their own experiences. It was my hope that by understanding the way in which gender and leisure had interacted in their own lives, students would be in a better position to understand how gender and leisure interact in the lives of others.

In addition to providing a detailed description of the assignment, to help students prepare to write and tell their stories, I wrote my own autobiography highlighting my experiences with gender and leisure interactions and shared the product with the class. This effort on my part was important in building trust with the students because they were going to be taking risks by writing about themselves, their families, and their experiences. After sharing my autobiography, explanations were provided as to how I gathered the information and decided what to include. We also discussed, as a class, how their autobiographies could be and would be different from mine. This discussion was intended to avoid stifling student creativity or having students structure their autobiographies completely based on mine. This was an important step since one of the goals of the assignment was for students to include the things that were relevant to them and in ways that would be meaningful. For example, one female student pointed out that while my mother did not work when I was growing up, hers did. She planned to talk about her experiences with day care and her mother working. A male student explained that he thought growing up in a rural community was different than growing up in a city. He felt this was important and something about which he would write in his autobiography.

After receiving the assignment and spending a class discussing my autobiography and variations in the approaches that could be taken, students completed their autobiographies. Through the Student Opinion Surveys carried out at the end of the course, I have received positive feedback from students related to the autobiographical writing assignment. Students have indicated that they "learned a lot," that the assignment got them "thinking," and that it was "fun." Certainly, these comments have been useful in prompting me to continue to include the assignment as part of my evaluation of learning in the course, but I became interested in developing a clearer understanding of how students experienced the autobiographical writing process and how they perceived the process of writing the narrative contributed to their learning about gender and leisure interactions. This knowledge, I believed, would allow me to enhance the structure of the assignment and to better support students throughout the process of writing the self-study.

The purpose of the study, then, was to evaluate the role of the Gender and Leisure Self-study assignment in facilitating student learning. Central to this investigation was determining first, the outcomes that result from engaging in this autobio-

graphical writing assignment, and second, how the outcomes contribute to students' learning of the course content.

Methodology

Once the students had completed the gender self-study assignment and they had been graded and returned, each student was invited to participate in the study. A bonus grade on the assignment of 1% was offered as an incentive for participating in the research study. Complying with the university research ethics board, students who did not wish to participate in the study, but who wanted to secure the 1% bonus, were provided with the option of writing a short, half-page reflective piece on why studying gender and leisure is relevant to them either personally or professionally. In the class of 24 students, 20 students signed up to participate in the interview. Of those students who did not sign up to be interviewed, none exercised their option of writing the short reflective piece.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted one-on-one with students who agreed to participate in the study. The interviews were conducted in a seminar room on the university campus and lasted between 25 and 60 minutes. Ten male and ten female students were interviewed. Seven of the students were fourth year graduating students and the remaining 13 were in their third year.

All of the interviews were audiotaped using a standard tape recorder and were later transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then coded and patterns of meaning were sought. The students' descriptions of the outcomes from their engaging in the process of autobiographical writing were grouped into themes and three themes were developed.

Results

The first theme is related to the role of the self-study in deepening student understanding of the course content. The second theme is one of self-awareness and the personal journey of students as they developed their autobiographical piece. The final theme is related to how the process of reflection and self-understanding will benefit them outside of the learning objectives of the course. Each of these themes is discussed in detail.

Reinforcing Course Content

The process of writing the autobiography required students to first collect information. Some students spoke with their parents, grandparents, and siblings. Others spoke with their significant others (i.e., boyfriend, girlfriend, spouse) or their friends. This process of collecting information from various individuals not only enabled the students to write their autobiographical account, but also helped the issues that were

being discussed become “more real”. Noah describes what he learned from talking to his parents and his sister about their leisure involvement when he was a child.

We were both friends with boys and girls, but when it came to sports there was a bit of a separation between what was expected... not from [my parents], but what was expected by some of my sister's friends. Like, my sister remembers... whenever she started to play hockey, she said she remembers her friends being like, “Why are you going to play hockey? It's a boy's sport.” That was what she dealt with and I would have never known that when she started to play hockey that she had to deal with that, so she kind of explained that to me.

[And when we discussed barriers for women in terms of non-traditional leisure pursuits, you were not thinking of your sister?]

No. Honestly, I... it wasn't real. It was real after I talked to her and heard that she had to put up with that when I was playing and feeling, ah... normal. It was normal for me to play hockey and baseball. (Noah)

The discovery that a family member or friend had experiences that represented concepts we had discussed in class was very common. Even though students had read research articles about various issues, not all students had located themselves or others they knew in that research. Also, some of the class discussions became more meaningful to the students once they had an opportunity to more carefully consider their own experiences.

We talked about the school system and the different ways that boys and girls are treated in gym class. I said in class that I disagreed with that.

[I remember.]

I was thinking of particular sports and how we had an even number of boys and girls on the team. No one could convince me that there was a problem. But when I was writing the project, I was thinking more about it and how we never used to pass the ball to the girls. They were on the court, but they did not get to play much. I don't remember any Phys. Ed teacher telling us we had to pass to the girls. Sometimes we did because there were some really good girls who could play, but I would say that mostly we just took over. I remember writing my assignment up and going, “Oh, I get it now!” (Bill)

Mothers were repeatedly mentioned when participants discussed being able to put a name and face to some of the issues and concepts that they had been learning. Both male and female participants described developing a new appreciation for their mothers after talking to them and realizing some of the leisure constraints their mothers faced and the sacrifices that were made. The ethic of care and lack of entitlement to leisure were among two of the concepts that students described having a greater understanding of following collecting information for their autobiography.

I saw my mother differently after this assignment.

[In what way?]

I kind of appreciate her more. Like, when we talked about mothers sacrificing their own leisure for their kids, you know, the ethic of care, and feeling guilty if they take time for themselves and the stuff like that, I wasn't thinking about my mother at all. But when I started to think about who influenced my activities, I realized that I didn't see my mother doing any leisure really. I didn't get my leisure interests from seeing her do the activities. And when I phoned her about this project and asked her about it, she said it was a money thing. There are things... activities she'd love to do, but there was only so much money and she wanted my sisters and I to be in things. Her leisure was watching us play our sports and stuff.

[That's quite a realization.]

Yeah. I actually felt sad. Like one night when I got off the phone with her, I cried. I hadn't realized what she had done for us.
(Alison)

Not all students had as powerful an experience as Alison described. However, many students indicated that some of the reading they had been doing about women's leisure as part of the course had greater credibility and more meaning for them once they could relate to individuals they knew within that research.

Self-Awareness and Insight

During the interviews, students were asked to recall their first impressions of the gender and leisure self-study. Three students explained that they did not think they were going to be able to write the suggested 10-15 pages. Many others explained that initially they believed gender had no influence on their leisure activities, nor did they feel that the leisure activities in which they engaged influenced their understanding of what it is to be male or female. However, once these students began the process of writing their narratives and contemplated various aspects of their lives, they developed a greater understanding of the influences in their lives and how those affected them.

Many of the students indicated that they had never reflected on their lives. The opportunity to narrate the evolution of their lives was viewed as an enjoyable process and one that helped these students have a sense of how they had become the individuals they were.

This was my first time where I really thought about my life and how I got to be who I am. When I was ten, I had to choose between soccer or gymnastics and I hadn't thought about how come I ended up with soccer. My parents said they didn't push me one way or another and I would have... if I hadn't talked to them, I would have guessed that they pushed for soccer because both my brother and I were playing that and my brother wasn't in gymnastics. But they said I liked my friends in soccer more.

[So this assignment helped you learn...]

My friends dictate a lot... I'm a bit of a tomboy and I didn't do so well with the all-girl clusters or whatever. I always knew that but I had not thought about how that might influence me in my leisure. (Monica)

Other students described an awareness of self that extended beyond issues related to gender and leisure. A few students explained to me in the interviews that initially they did not think their lives were very interesting or that they did not believe they had done anything worth writing about. This impression of themselves and their lives seemed to change after completing the self-study.

Like, when you said we should keep it to between 10 and 15 pages, I thought... holy crap, I'll be lucky to write 2 pages. Kind of like... I learned to swim. I played basketball in high school. I used to read Sweet Valley High books. Big deal. I'm boring.

[But you wrote at least 12 pages I seem to recall.]

Fourteen. Yeah, I know. Each thing I have done has an interesting story. I found it interesting to write about what I thought of my family vacations – like how my dad always decided when we went and where we would go and my mom did all the packing. And then the culture within basketball... I learned a lot about myself by writing about that and what I thought. Maybe what I do isn't very exciting, but what I think about what happens around me is what makes me interesting I think.

[So you think of yourself and your life as more interesting now?]

Definitely. And those experiences make me interesting in ways other than just knowing how to swim or set up a tent, you know. (Danielle)

For some students, they were able to develop a better understanding of themselves in relation to the concepts they were learning. Bob was a homosexual male. In his self-study, he spoke about the constraints associated with being male (e.g., feeling pressured to engage in activities that demonstrate and/or express masculinity) and that he believed that as a gay male, he did not experience as many constraints as heterosexual men.

I realized that even though I'm gay, I'm more free in my leisure than either men or women. That's something that I thought of when I was doing the study. Things like that were... like growing up... once you realize your gay it's like... oh wow, oops. And if someone calls you a fruitcake, it's like, "Yeah, I know." Like... it doesn't really work because it's true. No wonder I didn't mind making flower arrangements in my spare time because I didn't have to worry about that... about being accused of something I wasn't because I was. So, it was kind of a realization that I chose these things. Actually, the big thing I realized was... I always worry that I am the way I am because I'm gay, and I don't like that stereotype. But ah, it kind of made me think that it's not that way, but the other way around.

[What do you mean?]

Because I'm gay I can bake and do flower arrangements activities that are traditionally done by women, but I can also be a ski buff and a long distance runner – the traditionally male activities. (Bob)

Clarifying one's own leisure experiences, both positive and negative, with being male or female was described by a number of students as comforting. Similar to Bob, who wondered about how his sexuality influenced his leisure, other students wondered why they had more friends of the opposite sex than they did same-sex friendships; why they were drawn to non-traditional leisure activities or sports; or why they held particular attitudes about male and female social roles. The process of writing their autobiographies helped some students to answer the various questions that they had raised related to gender and leisure.

Understanding Potential Influence on Others

The students in this course were preparing to enter careers and professions in which they will have an opportunity to shape the lives of other individuals. They intended to become, among other things, teachers, coaches, managers, personal trainers, and recreation service providers working with various populations including

youth, older adults, and individuals with disabilities. Students identified one significant outcome of the assignment as gaining clarification about the ways in which their attitudes and values related to gender and leisure can influence others. Aside from learning about themselves, the autobiographical writing assignment prompted many students to consider the roles that they had in the lives of others and how their behavior and treatment of those individuals might serve to influence.

My volleyball coach from high school was a big influence for me and I wrote a big section about that, and I'm a volleyball coach for the girls at [a local middle school] so it made me think that maybe... if they were in your course in six or seven years, what would they say about me? I mean, we learned that girls drop out of sport in high school a lot and I thought about if I am doing anything to add to that statistic. I wonder now if I have been thinking enough about what girls like about sport – like the social part. That's not really a big thing for guys and I kind of frown on it and so maybe one of these girls would write that she liked playing volleyball, but the coach took all the fun out of it so she dropped out and then she started hanging out with the wrong crowd and drinking... you know... there is a whole scenario that could play out and I think about that now. Like, what would my life be if my coach had been a jerk? (Jack)

Four of the female students recalled various role models – their own mothers, coaches, or teachers – who had helped them to overcome barriers to participating in non-traditional pursuits. They saw themselves as being able to counter some of the gender stereotypes that existed.

When I wanted to play floor hockey at lunch when I was in Grade 7, my mom said no and then the teacher at my school who was supervising talked to her about how it was great exercise and that hockey wasn't just for boys. I couldn't change my mother's mind, but she did and now I think maybe I can be an adult who helps a kid do something that they really want but their parents don't think is right for their child because of their sex. (Sara)

In addition to considering occupational and leadership roles, a number of students, both male and female, explained the role of the autobiographical writing assignment in having them consider future familial roles as partners or spouses, as aunts or uncles, and even as parents.

I see how my mother influenced me. It makes me see that I will have an influence as a parent, you know? How would I feel about my son doing ballet? That's hard, but at the same time, I play hockey and my mother is pretty traditional, but she let me play. What if my

mother had not supported me? There is a whole aspect of my life that would be different. I'm not saying my life would have been bad or anything like that. But when I was writing this I realized how much I was influenced by my parents and what do I want my kids to see? It's like a huge responsibility. I mean you think... sport, big deal... we'll worry about school and learning good manners. But hockey is the center of my life. How will I feel if my daughter wants to figure skate? That's so traditional and I'm so not. But what if her friends do it and she wants to try it and loves it?

[So you're trying to answer these questions now?]

Well not answer them, but I know I will be an influence and I'm thinking about what my inclinations might be and whether that would be more about me than about my child. (Emma)

Through reflecting on how various individuals had influenced their attitudes, values, and behaviors related to leisure, many students realized that they too hold or will hold similar influential positions. This realization began a process of considering how they might perform their various roles in order to ensure that they influence individuals in a manner they deemed to be positive. Seven of the male students spoke specifically about being fathers and wanting to be better role models for their sons than their own fathers had been for them in terms of division of household labor.

My dad didn't give anything up. My mother was the sacrificer. I am slow in kind of seeing that that was not fair and I've had a hard time with some girlfriends because I come from that attitude. My father didn't teach me how to be an equal or really how to respect women's doing... sports or activities. I want to show my son something different. I'm going to have to sacrifice too and teach my son that men do housework and take care of the kids. They don't just play sports and drink beer [laughs]. (Rob)

While male students perceived they would need to give something up some of the leisure time that their fathers had in order to be a positive influence on their children, most of the female students spoke about claiming leisure and teaching their children (both sons and daughters) that mothers have leisure and that fathers share domestic roles.

Whether I have boys or girls, it doesn't matter, they are going to learn that their mother is more than the chef, maid, and nanny... you know? I'm going to do these things, but so will my husband. I want my children to see their parents are equals. I realized when I was writing my project that I didn't have that example, but I want to... you know, show my kids.. I want to set that example for them

to grow up seeing their dad can cook dinner while their mom is coaching hockey. (Christine)

The autobiographical writing assignment appeared to encourage students to consider how the theoretical concepts they were learning might be applicable to them as practitioners. They began to think about how they could bring about changes – in their own lives, in their families (both present and future), and in their communities as practitioners.

Discussion

Consistent with the literature on the outcomes of autobiographical writing, it was evident that the students who participated in this study experienced the process as fostering greater self-awareness and understanding (Hunt & Sampson, 1998). This self-awareness and understanding led to a greater appreciation of the experiences of others and prompted students to contemplate future roles, including those as practitioners. In addition, the autobiographical writing assignment contributed to the achievement of the course objectives. Students were able to identify, describe, and assess the ways in which gender issues influenced and shaped both their leisure behavior and that of others in their lives. Most also described ways in which leisure participation could influence one's perception and understanding of what it is to be male or female. In terms of this objective, students were even able to connect the ways in which they, as practitioners and parents, would and could play a role in gender identity development. It was also significant that the students themselves believed that writing their autobiographies facilitated their learning.

Many of the students, through the self-study, engaged in a process of self-reflection that contributed to the examination of the assumptions they had made and the ways in which they viewed the world. A few of the students in this study were skeptical of some of the information they were presented within their text and through class lectures. In facilitating learning, educators challenge their students to think critically, and therefore can appreciate and even welcome such skepticism. On the other hand, we do not want students to dismiss information that reflects the reality of many simply because it does not reflect the students' own experiences. The autobiographical writing assignment appeared to be an opportunity for students to investigate for themselves the extent to which some of the concepts or issues they had been learning about existed within their various social worlds. In most cases, students found, within their own lives or the lives of family members, constraints to leisure such as the ethic of care, women's lack of entitlement to leisure, and the unequal distribution of household labor between men and women. They also developed an awareness of how their activities, toys, interactions with family and friends, and the media had contributed to their gender identity development.

Another important discovery was that for many of the students, the most significant learning and reflection occurred through the process of collecting information

for the self-study, not through the writing of their gender and leisure autobiography. Talking to parents, present and former coaches, and friends; looking through photo albums and old toys; and thinking about the television shows that were watch(ed) and games that were played as children really stimulated the students' thinking about the course content. More focus on this aspect of the assignment would be beneficial and students should be encouraged to engage in these processes. Assigning a grade value for the methods students employ in gathering their information would elevate the importance of this part of the autobiographical writing assignment.

The timing of this autobiographical assignment in terms of students' progression in their degree program appeared to be particularly good. Many students in third and fourth year are beginning to consider their lives beyond graduation. Stimulating a process of self-reflection could be particularly valuable at this point in their education. For a number of students, their thinking extended beyond learning how their parents influenced their understanding of gender roles, how participation in a particular activity influenced how they understand being male or female, or how gender interacts with leisure. They demonstrated critical thinking about other roles that they would be taking on in the future – familial and occupational roles in particular. During the interviews, it was evident that students were making decisions or plans, prior to taking on these roles, about how they wanted to handle situations. Regardless of whether these plans are carried out, there is value in having students envision their future roles. It demonstrates that students are able to connect the course content with their roles as professionals. It may be useful to encourage students to do this as part of their assignment. Students could be asked, at the end of their autobiographies, to reflect on how they perceive their “story” may influence them in their role as practitioners. What challenges/gender issues do they anticipate facing? How might they respond to these challenges? This addition to the assignment would allow students to begin anticipating challenges, and make links between the knowledge they are acquiring related to gender and leisure and how that knowledge can be used in their roles as professionals.

The insights from the evaluation of this autobiographical writing assignment may be useful for other educators in the field of recreation and leisure studies who teach courses in which student reflection on his/her own life or experiences may foster greater understanding of concepts in the course, the populations with which they may be working, and the settings in which they may be delivering programs or services. For example, a course in the social psychology of leisure might involve students tracing the factors (e.g., needs, values, people, environments) that have influenced their personal leisure behaviors that could translate into an appreciation for how they, as professionals, might be able to influence the leisure choices/behaviors of other individuals. In a leisure education course, having students contemplate from whom (e.g., teachers, coaches, parents, friends, siblings) or from what (e.g., television, experiences) they learned about leisure could be valuable in helping them to understand how leisure education can occur.

Autobiographical writing is a valuable learning tool that can facilitate learning for students in recreation and leisure studies programs. The outcomes of the assignment extend beyond having students reflect on the gender and leisure interactions in their own lives and understand the theory and concepts being presented. The learning tool encourages meaning making and also has the potential, if structured properly, to promote the linking of theory and practice.

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