

Writing Our Life: Adult Learning and Teaching Through Autobiography

Irene Karpiak, The University of Oklahoma

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the use of autobiography as a tool for teaching and learning in continuing education. In a recent continuing education course on adult learning and development, students took on the project of writing five chapters of their life story. Subsequent interviews with the writers explored the process and effects of writing. The findings suggest that when adult learners undertake autobiographical writing in the context of adult education, they embark on a process of self-exploration and meaning making that, in turn, can promote the development of an enlarged view of themselves and the world around them. Based upon these findings, a proposition is made for the transformative power of putting pen to paper.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article étudie à fond l'utilisation de l'autobiographie comme outil d'enseignement et d'apprentissage en éducation permanente. Dans un cours récent en éducation permanente sur l'apprentissage et le développement des adultes, les étudiants ont entrepris un projet où ils ont rédigé cinq chapitres de l'histoire de leur vie. Dans des entrevues postérieures avec les écrivains, on a étudié à fond le processus et les effets de cette rédaction. Les conclusions suggèrent qu'un apprenant adulte entreprenant la rédaction autobiographique, dans le contexte de l'éducation permanente, embarque sur un processus d'autorévélation et de signification qui, à leur tour, peuvent promouvoir le développement

d'une vue agrandie de soi-même et du monde nous entourant. Basée sur ces conclusions, une proposition se fait pour le pouvoir transformatif de mettre les choses à l'écrit.

LOOKING BACK TO FIND THE PATTERN

Everyone has a story to tell. Each recounting of an episode in our life becomes a story in which each of us and others play a part (Randall, 1995). An event on the way home from work is detailed; a betrayal of a friend is described. In our story, characters emerge as if on a stage, each carrying his or her own part: "She turned me down; hope was gone, and so I left." But when we begin the task of transcribing our life into text—of writing our story—we move beyond the set stage and bear witness to the wider theatre of our life. We begin to view these scenes differently, and to discern the pattern that connects them. We look back and then we look ahead, and in this sense, we become both actor and director of the part that is the rest of our life.

Autobiography is most recognized and researched as a literary rather than an educational tool. It emerged at the end of the 18th century from a tradition that has variously been called a "memoir" or "confession" (the most notable being the religious *Confessions* of St. Augustine). Later, it developed among writers into a self-analysis, less related to sin and transgression and more to intimacy, emotion, and self-understanding (Feski, 1998). In the past quarter century it has commanded even greater attention, through the psychoanalytic and philosophical analysis in James Olney's (1980) edited writings, and in feminist literary analysis, as in Smith and Watson's (1996, 1998) edited collections. Howarth (1980) described autobiography as a "self-portrait"—a work of art that resembles the life that itself continues to take shape. Following from Howarth's definition, one could surmise that adult learners (like their literary counterparts) who reflect on their lives in this manner embark also on a process of recollection, distillation, and analysis that can yield both insight into life's meaning and purpose and understanding of self and others.

Learning in the service of self-awareness and self-understanding

involves deeper levels of the person; it entails the processes of critical reflection, self-awareness, meaning making, and perspective change (Mezirow, 1991; Tennant & Pogson, 1995). Educators whose goal is the growth of awareness and understanding have incorporated experiential methods such as small-group process and journal writing to aid the process of self-reflection that is integral to this purpose. Teachers of writing skills also have caught on to autobiographical writing as a tool that permits students to write in their own voice with perhaps less sense of intimidation than is engendered through the more traditional methods. However, autobiography as a tool for self-reflection and self-knowledge in adult education has had little attention, and its potential is the subject of this paper. In it I describe my use of autobiography with adult learners who have been “writing their life” in a continuing education course. I outline the autobiographical method, examine the content of students’ writing, and relate subsequent research undertaken with those who have written.

WHERE PATHS OF DEVELOPMENT, LEARNING, AND STORY CONVERGE

Certain theoretical propositions concerning adult development and adult learning underlie my work on autobiography as an educational tool. To begin with, adult development theory maintains that learning and development continue throughout life. A person never is but is always becoming his or her self (Jung, 1954; Kegan, 1982). Development is directed towards greater inclusiveness, complexity, and coherence of personality (Kegan, 1982; Labouvie-Vief, 1994; Mezirow, 1991). Jung (1954) described this process as “individuation”—becoming all that one is capable of becoming; Erikson (1980) called it “integrity”—coming to terms with our life, a task that entails encompassing into our perspective more than just our own histories.

Recent adult learning theory posits that, whereas much of adult learning parallels that of the younger school-aged population, adults (as well as many adolescents) have the capacity for transformative learning. It is learning that permits a more inclusive, differentiated, and integrated view of themselves and the world (Mezirow, 1991; Tennant & Pogson, 1995). A central feature of transformative learning is critical self-reflection, a process whereby adults examine the cultural and individual assumptions and meanings that underlie and shape their view of life (Brookfield, 1986;

Mezirow, 1991). Whereas critical reflection calls largely upon the learner's rational processes (Mezirow, 1991), it includes both intuitive and emotional dimensions as well (Dewey, 1964; Schon, 1983).

It appears, however, that attention to the personal aspects of the learner is central not only to transformative learning but also to learning in general. For instance, writing in the context of common education, Elizabeth Vallance (1986) built on the earlier work of art educator Elliot Eisner, and argued that effective education should incorporate both the discipline-related (objective) approaches and the personal-relevance (subjective) approaches. Similarly, Maxine Greene (1978) suggested that learning should incorporate the learner's personal "landscapes." And John Dewey (1964) emphasized that learning ought to be "an experience" for the individual, which then remains as an enduring memory that is both valued and significant. In sum, curriculum theorists have acknowledged the importance of addressing the personal dimensions of the learner and of encompassing into the educational process both their "outside" and their "inside" worlds.

In autobiography we transform our life into a story. As Gusdorf (1980) explained: "The author of an autobiography gives himself the job of narrating his own history; what he sets out to do is to reassemble the scattered elements of his individual life and to regroup them in a comprehensive sketch (p. 35). Autobiography differs from a private journal that records the writer's experiences, impressions, and mental states. Rather, it requires one to take a distance with regard to oneself, to draw the meaning from one's life (Gusdorf, 1980), to reconstruct "the unity of a life across time" (Gusdorf, 1980, p. 37), and to find the "larger story" that distinguishes one's life from that of another (Houston, 1987). Learning in these contexts results from finding patterns and meaning in our life, perhaps even building a theory of our life, or of life in general. Having stepped back and reflected, we know something now that we did not know before. Our knowledge has been extended (Olney, 1980).

In sum, these theoretical propositions hold that learning and development continue throughout life, and that both may be enhanced by activities such as autobiographical writing. Because autobiography involves not only recounting memories and expressions but also finding their larger meaning, and to the extent that the activity expands the individual's knowledge of self and the world, it constitutes learning.

AN ACCIDENTAL TOURIST COMES UPON A TREASURE TROVE

I had not envisioned the power of autobiography until I stumbled across it in Keen and Fox's (1974) work on personal writing, and began to contemplate its possibilities for adult learning. The authors urged readers to imagine that a publisher has asked them to write the titles of five chapters of their life story. I mentioned this suggestion of writing five chapter titles to my graduate seminar on adult learning and development. One student took the challenge, and in his class journal, jotted down his chapter titles, among which he included "Before P. O. W." and "After P. O. W." Reading this was both a shock and a revelation, as images of prisoners of war flashed in my mind. Immediately, now knowing this about him, I viewed him differently. My thoughts then turned to the other members of the class; what might their chapter headings, their life experiences be? Moreover, how could their life experiences—their life stories—relate to and be fruitfully integrated with the issues of adult learning and development in this course?

At the next meeting of the class, I offered the students the option of writing five chapters of their life story as an alternative final assignment. Nearly all elected to do this. Their work was so rich with artistry, reflection, and story that later that year I resolved to introduce this project again to students in a continuing education course at the University of Manitoba. Again, my reward came in the form of five chapters of nearly every student's life. In this manner, autobiography and its imagined possibilities took shape.

A Sampling of Students' Autobiographical Themes

At the University of Manitoba, students taking the Adult Learning and Development course, in the Certificate in Adult and Continuing Education program, were given simple guidelines for writing their stories. They were asked to write five chapters of their life (several pages for each chapter). Based upon my first experience with autobiography, I encouraged them to avoid organizing their work as a simple chronology of events, and instead, to pay attention to any metaphors or patterns that emerged as they reflected upon each successive chapter. The following are examples of the many titles around which the stories took shape, each revealing an underlying metaphor:

- Decade by Decade: Learning to be in Charge of My Own Plot

- Moments of Loss: A Lifetime of Change
- Fitting In: Becoming Who I Want to Be
- Painting the Adult Canvas
- Friends: The Thread of Life
- From the Himalayas to Halifax . . . and Beyond
- What Was the Question? (My Life So Far)
- And there's a chance of . . . Blue Skies, Cloudbursts, Sunshine & Shadows, Shifting Winds, New Horizons

Features of Students' Writing

Their stories drew and compelled me, no less than characters in novels might do. I had not expected such an expressive and reflective effort, this willingness to invest themselves so deeply, or their disposition to disclose the personal and often painful details of their life. Pain, joy, adversity, humour—all were contained in those pages. Below is but one illustration of the evocative images in so many of the pieces:

Plank sidewalks where I could sometimes find money that had fallen through the cracks, a well that grew such a thick layer of ice in the winter that the bucket would barely fit through the opening, snow melting in the barrel that stood behind the black, iron cookstove in the kitchen, three jelly beans for a penny, spring floods, when, if I was lucky, I'd be able to raft from our back step across the gardens and right up to my best friend's back step, milk delivered from a horse drawn wagon, the winter laundry, brought in off the line while still frozen, then thawed and dried on clothes horses, books received once a month from a library in Regina, bath time in the small, round tub that was brought inside every Saturday night, placed in front of the stove where three clothes horses draped with sheets provided some privacy—these are a few of the things I remember about the small, Saskatchewan village where I lived for the first seventeen and a half years of my life.

It was difficult to imagine that this group of individuals, who appeared on the surface to be so stable, so unassuming, could have led such varied, turbulent, self-creative, and multi-faceted lives. As an educator of adults, I wondered to what extent I and perhaps other educators were omitting this more personal and historical aspect of students' lives, and to what extent we were missing the opportunity to include students' relevant experiences

into the learning context.

Most began their stories with their childhood. Not a few had harsh beginnings of loss and rejection. I detected the remarkable resilience in those who had survived various crises and abuses. I came to understand also that a happy, contented childhood could not inoculate against the losses that would come later, and conversely, a disruptive, painful beginning did not prevent a calm, content mid-life. One writer's "serenity" (as was attributed to her by many in the class) belied the trauma of her earlier years:

I longed to have a "real" family. Six children was my dream, and they would have two parents. With this goal in mind, I married—a month before my 18th birthday. I had no insight as to what kind of man he was or wasn't. He was in jail when our son was born, and in jail once again when that son was killed in an accident at the age of two. By now I was 20 years old.

Through my reading came the realization that *every* person had a story, not only those rare exemplary figures prominently portrayed in literature and popular media, but also those individuals we encounter daily. I began to look at students, and people in general, in a different light—as individuals with a story. I now could appreciate Sissela Bok's (1984) insight that when an individual dies, a piece of a library burns down.

It became apparent early that those students who were able to uncover an underlying metaphor in their story, rather than simply recounting events, ultimately presented a more coherent and integrated image of themselves. An African American student in my earlier graduate class beautifully illustrated this feature and alerted me to the power of metaphor. She had described the various periods of her life through the metaphor of "crossing over." Beginning with her childhood, she recounted the time of "crossing over" from home to kindergarten, then of "crossing over" into an "integrated" neighbourhood, and finally of "crossing over" to become an educator and trainer of adults. Through her example, she demonstrated metaphor's capacity to draw meaning and patterns from our life. In this regard, Olney (1980) similarly affirmed this capacity of metaphor in the service of learning and self-understanding:

Metaphor says very little about what the world is, or is like, but a great deal about what I am, or am like, and about what I am becoming; and in the end it connects me more nearly with the deep reaches of myself than with an objective universe. (pp. 31–32)

One writer chose to print her chapters on sheets of different colour, graphically illustrating the diverse periods of her life. She introduced and outlined them in this fashion:

When I look back on the significant events of my life—those that have led to real learning—I see colour. For example, images of my childhood are surrounded by a soft shade of rose, much like the colour of a pale, sparkling blush wine. For that reason, the theme, or through line, connecting my five chapters is colour.

Chapter One: (Rose) There's a smudge on my role-coloured glasses.

Chapter Two: (Gray) The best of intentions (if only the damn fog would lift).

Chapter Three: (Black) The night that lasted 4 1/2 years. (Hell is not orange.)

Chapter Four: (Yellow) Let the sun shine in.

Chapter Five: (Purple) Everything's coming up violets. (Death and Life)

Finding Meaning in Their Life

The task of writing prompted students to recall events of their life, to relive the feelings and experiences of these events, and to try to make sense of these in relation to the whole of their life. They wrote about significant emotional events and their importance in shaping their life. One woman wrote about the death of her child and her process of coming to terms with this immense loss. Others acknowledged their accountability for certain happenings and for the choices made. Several identified the patterns of behaviour that had burdened their lives, while others identified various addictions that controlled theirs. Whereas initially they may have thought of their life as a series of historical events, my urging that they find a common thread to tie the events of their life together was likely helpful in searching out a possible larger meaning, a larger story in their life. One writer described her heightened understanding of the mystery of life:

I am coming to think that this process of growing and of growing older and of living well is a mystery or maze set before us [in order] to discover that treasure—the name we are ultimately known by—our Real selves. I think [that] on this treasure hunt there are signs and clues along the way: in events of our lives, and [in] scraps of ancient maps, in the books and traditions of the communities where we live;

and sometimes [there are] pirate dangers and unexpected battles. And if we are lucky, there will be good companions and fellow travelers for parts of the journey.

This tendency to find meaning and purpose in their life appeared so frequently and spontaneously that it suggested it might even have been their unconscious motive for writing. I wondered to what extent was this search for understanding and meaning a natural inclination and a motive in pursuing further education. I wondered also about the effect of writing their stories—what had they learned? On the basis of these questions, I designed a study to follow up with this group of continuing education students.

A Return Visit With the Students

Six months following the above-mentioned Adult Learning and Development course at the University of Manitoba, I invited the students to re-submit their stories and to participate in the study. Fifteen were able to be part of this study. My purpose was to investigate the value of autobiographical writing as an educational tool, and further, to define those features of their writing that were most significant to the writers. From my perspective, having read their stories, this sort of writing project had educational merit. But would the writers agree?

Through the course of individual interviews with each participant, I administered a questionnaire that I had designed to probe both the process and the effects of autobiographical writing. Each interview was taped and then transcribed. The following are some of the questions that were included: What, if anything, did you learn from the autobiography? For whom was your autobiography written? Did anything in the writing surprise you? What were the most enjoyable parts of the process? What were the most difficult? Following the interviews I analyzed the data from each writer's autobiography and each writer's corresponding interview. Each emergent theme was subsequently identified and described.

"Dissecting My Life"

"I never dreamed that I would be thanking an instructor for allowing me to do an assignment," was one student's comment, echoed by others. Most acknowledged that the process was much more difficult than they had originally envisioned. They knew that they had a choice to conceal or reveal even painful events—most, it would seem, chose the latter. They described the sense of accomplishment and relief that came from their writing, and

from later reading it. "There is a difference between thinking about [my life] and writing it," one observed. For another, the benefit came from reading the completed paper. And still another valued the process of "coming clean with some of the stuff that I had been going through, or had in the past dealt with, and putting it to paper."

The unique features of autobiography and the process it entails were apparent to many of the students. Several of them echoed Gusdorf's (1980) earlier assertion that autobiography is distinct from journal writing, in that the former does more than record events and impressions; it also requires one to distance oneself from the events that a journal merely records. One student explained,

When you do an autobiography it is like you have to take a step back and look at your life, and that is a different process [from journal writing]. It is like a more integrating process of stepping back and saying: what was this life, what was I doing, what was happening to me?

Similarly, another observed that doing the autobiography "was actually going back and dissecting my life; and taking it apart into little compartments, and analyzing it. And it is like going back in time." Yet another recalled, "It made me reflect on the things that I went through, the life experiences that I went through, over about a 35-year period of time, and how I have developed over that period." And finally, one woman made a discovery about an emerging aspect of herself:

[The class] forced me to take my life and put it to pen. And it encouraged me now to sort of take it a little bit further. I heard [a renowned author] the other day. And she talked about a woman's voice. And I thought, "that is exactly what I was experiencing—this inner voice—my coming out."

Something to Share or a "One-Night Stand?"

They wrote their stories for various audiences. "I wrote it for myself," one person offered, "I needed to know what and who I was." Another recalled that she wrote her story as "a statement about what's happened to this point of my life, and what I've learned from that." Several intended to save the record for their children and families, to share it either now or at some time in the future. One planned to give hers to her daughter on her wedding. One had already read his story to his sons; another read it to her former mother-in-law. For some, it provided an opportunity for intimate

discussion. One woman read her story to her mother, revealing its secret for the first time. Not all invested themselves so personally. One woman acknowledged that she “wrote [the autobiography] for the course.” Further, she doubted that she learned much that was new, and suggested “it was just reinforcing what I knew, but maybe sharpening the edges a bit. If there was something new to learn from it I missed it.”

Several recalled their decision to withhold writing about certain highly charged and personal matters. Still, they observed that even in the withholding, they had another opportunity to reflect upon that event or experience, knowing that it had not yet been resolved. One student explained,

It seems to me that even if you didn't write [a part], it became part of the story. It became part of the story that wasn't written. And even though it wasn't written, it still was something that you were able to think about and make some decisions [concerning] what its importance was in your life.

Finally, and with refreshing candour, one woman expressed her ambivalence in wanting to write honestly, knowing that there could be unforeseen consequences associated with writing for an audience. Writing one's story is like having a “one-night stand,” she said. On the one hand, it is an occasion at which “you just let it all hang out and you live out your entire fantasies and you say and do whatever you want.” On the other hand, there is the chance you might run into these people again, and would be uneasy about having exposed so much. “Will they value you afterwards? What might they think?”

“Storying” in the Context of the Class

Some students found it fortuitous to be writing their stories in a course on adult learning and development; it helped to make the course “real.” As one observed, “Autobiography helps an individual find how the course material fits into their life, as opposed to having the instructor do it for you.” Another explained how he was able to integrate his story with relevant aspects of the theory:

It was a real opportunity to practically apply what we talked about in the course. In the course, in particular, we dealt with a lot of theory and a lot of beliefs and writings of other people and their “take” on adult development and that sort of thing. . . . It was really by doing the autobiography that I was able to . . . truly pull from the course and from the writings on adult development what has impacted me.

For others, the course provided a motive and a context for doing autobiography. It offered a developmental rationale for engaging in the sort of self-reflection that autobiography demands. For instance, they had studied theories of mid-life adulthood that advanced the importance of taking stock of one's life and of distinguishing our "false wrappings" from our "real" or authentic self. Several consciously integrated theoretical material on learning and development into their stories, and in the course of doing so, discovered that the course material offered a broader social perspective on what they had initially assumed to be only their personal situation. One student remarked that through writing and reflecting on her life, she realized that lifelong learning was more than a "a text-book notion":

I work in an environment where lifelong learning is what our business is all about. And I never really kind of understood that whole concept—lifelong learning. But now, . . . I see that in one's life each moment is a learning experience. . . . The actual living was a learning. For quite a while, lifelong learning was a "buzz word," a term that was important to my work. So I would use it in my presentations, or use it however I needed to use it. . . . I knew by definition what it meant, but I never felt it. I never felt it.

"I Have Lived a Lot of Life"

Reflecting back on their lives was an opportunity for validation and self-acceptance. They were better able to put things in perspective, to balance their positive and negative experiences. One student recalled how she had always seen her life more in terms of the negative experiences, and although she had tried to put these out of her mind, she was still burdened with negative memories. Since writing, she offered, "I learned about myself—that I have a very rich life, which I never ever realized . . . an interesting life . . . that my life was quite fulfilling." Another writer better appreciated some truly unique aspects of her life:

I guess you never look at your entire life at once unless you go through an exercise like that. And then when I did it, I went, "Wow! I have lived a lot of life in my time." And other people may or may not have done the things that I have done. And I always like to do everything backwards in my life. So it is kind of when you look at it, and go, "Yeah, yeah. I am pretty strong. I am OK." That was one of the good things about it.

For some, reflecting on their accomplishments was a confidence-building

experience. It led one student to resolve to move forward and get started on graduate work. And another, in going over life's more painful moments, observed, "Where I have had the most difficult times is where I've grown."

"What I Know Now"

Louise Erdrich (1988) once observed, "Only looking back is there a pattern" (p. 33). So it was with the students, as patterns emerged in their autobiographies, often expressed through metaphors, such as "the colours of my life," or "the knots of my life" or "moving from puppet to dancer." Olney (1980) similarly emphasized pattern finding, which he likened to the process of extending knowledge "to include the new, connected item or experience and the relation between old and new" (p. 31). Several students commented that they could now see the roles they had unwittingly played, and acknowledged the choices they had made. One summed up, "In retrospect, I played the role of the innocent. I believed tomorrow would always be there. The lessons I learned were through pain or loss—very much like life." Sometimes they recognized a pattern of behaviour or attitude that created problems. It seems that some became more aware of elements of their personality and accepted more responsibility for the course of their lives, as is illustrated below:

The title of [my story] was "Guilty, Until Proven Innocent." I always tried to please everyone in my life; I felt guilty when I didn't. Part of what I am realizing is that I was trying to please everyone else, but really a lot of times I set my own standards, and I disappointed myself more than I disappointed the other people, even though I said I was trying to please everyone else. There was some of that [pleasing], but some of it was [that] I really never gave myself permission to live my life how I wanted to live it.

Writers further expressed what they had learned about life through the process of writing. One discovered, "Nothing is for certain." As she looked back, she could see that her life took curves at every stage. Now she could see that one had to be prepared for the unexpected. Another woman described her awareness of life's continuing mystery:

I think [life] is almost a book without end, because it is constantly being written. When you turn the page, you don't know quite what's going to happen. What is the next chapter heading? Where is the story going to go?

“I Had Gotten Through All of This”

Perhaps the most dramatic illustrations of the consequences of having written were noted in those students who described the process of resolution or integration of painful events in their lives. In this regard, Jean Houston (1987) observed that crisis events are experienced as “wounding” or betrayal. These, in turn, require “healing”—a process of integrating a situation, experience, or event into our larger story, or alternatively, finding a larger story or larger meaning that encompasses that experience or event. Curiously, both seemingly positive and negative events carry a demand to be worked through and integrated. Through the process of integration, individuals gain clarity into events; they begin to appreciate the meaning of that event and of its place within the larger context of their life. The significance of this process of connecting with our lived past and integrating it into our autobiographical self is detailed in a recent book by professor of neurology, Antonio Damasio, 1999. On the basis of clinical research, he demonstrates how this process of connecting and integrating our autobiographical self features in the development of the individual’s “extended consciousness,” with its attendant capacity to enlarge the individual’s sense of perspective and autonomy.

Writing prompted students to look at their life through a rear view mirror, to reckon with their past. One student recalled, “For me it was enriching because I was at a point in my life [when] I needed to take a step back; I needed to look at my life in order to move forward.” Another described the writing as, “A process of unraveling, pulling [my life] in a bunch of pieces and then putting it back together.” For several others, writing permitted them to relive and re-feel previous events, and even to bring closure to unhappy or painful episodes. Most illustrative of this latter situation was that of a young mother, who devoted a chapter to the short life and sudden death of her infant son. For nine years she had observed the anniversary of his death by writing a poem dedicated to his memory. Now, after writing her story, she was able to bring an end to this ritual:

And this year, for the first time I didn’t [write the poem]. I felt that I had reached a point where I didn’t have to do that. And when I was writing this [life story], [my son] was just a big part of it, and I really felt that this was kind of for him. And in some crazy way it was my way of showing him that I was OK now, and that I had gotten through all of this.

THE POWER OF PUTTING PEN TO PAPER

The autobiography project—both in its expression in the students' writing and in the follow-up interviews—upholds the power of autobiography as a tool and opportunity for learning and development. Most of the students demonstrated that in the course of writing, they momentarily stepped outside

their normal self, taking the role of critic, reviewer, and thoughtful self. They described having engaged in self-reflection, even deep critical appraisal of themselves and their lives. They highlighted those events that had shaped their lives, as well as those deliberate decisions and unconscious motives that had affected the course of their lives. These actions are essential features of both autobiography and transformative learning, and are consistent with Gusdorf's (1980) observation that "autobiography is a second reading of experience, and it is truer than the first because it adds to experience itself consciousness of it" (p. 38). And Culley (1998) further affirmed:

The act of autobiographical writing . . . involves the writer in complex literary as well as psychological processes. It is a paradox that the process whose frequent goal is to establish self-continuity involves at its heart a dislocation from the self, or a turning of subject into object. (p. 217)

As a final illustration, one woman commented on her growth of self-understanding, although still hinting in her closing sentence that she knows that some personal work lies ahead:

I think people have to take the time to reflect. If you just live your life and never reflect on events or feelings, you'll never learn anything from it. By writing this story, it . . . encourages you to look back and make sense out of your life; and you grow from doing that . . . It helps me to see, having it all written down there in a story, that I've gone through a lot and I've grown. But that same child is still there.

It must be acknowledged that throughout this paper, I purposefully selected examples that would illustrate the positive attributes of autobiography as both a learning and a teaching tool. I have touched less upon those instances where this assignment represented simply a writing exercise to fulfil the requirements of the course. In these situations (albeit there were few), much more of the students' attention went into producing a paper that would meet the course requirements and that would, in the

words of one writer, “make sense of the English language.” To be sure, these students would invest less into the self-reflective processes and therefore reap less of its benefits. Yet, perhaps as much of a strength as a weakness of the autobiographical tool is its licence to write at the level of one’s own consciousness, curiosity, and comfort.

Notwithstanding the above, most of the students showed increased self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and appreciation of their uniqueness—of a life that was *their own*. Several showed some evidence of having progressed in their task of integrity as Erikson (1980) defined it—the sense of coming to terms with some painful aspects of their life. A number expressed greater appreciation of how those various episodes and events of their life fit together, permitting greater personal coherence and integration. In sum, these individuals demonstrated that through the course of writing their stories, they had deepened and enlarged their view of themselves and the world around them.

Drawing from the data of the study, certain conditions of autobiographical writing appear to promote more learning of the personal, developmental sort than do others. To begin with, writers avoid self-indulgence and self-justification as well as the simple recording of experiences, and rather “search out the story in their experiences” (Clarke, 1999, B9). It would appear that the search for metaphor and pattern finding, as illustrated in the study, contributes to this process. As well, writers should be willing to move out of the frame of the experience itself, and be it in a serious, humorous, or tongue-in-cheek manner, address and critically reflect upon these experiences. Further, the action of contemplating an alternative story and imagined new possibilities and new roles for one’s life may lead to self-development. And finally, although more rare, when writers discover the larger story that can contain life’s painful, even tragic events, or when they find the means for integrating these events into a new-found understanding, then their act of putting pen to paper can lead to personal transformation. The young mother who wrote about the death of her son and her process of coming to terms with it offered the clearest instance of this singular potential.

OTHER AVENUES, OTHER POSSIBLE PATHS

In the opening of this paper I observed that everyone has a story to tell. Some people do it naturally and easily. More and more people are doing this sort of writing in order to justify themselves or to gain public sympathy

and support (Clarke, 1999). Sometimes autobiography is utilized for therapeutic purposes, or to stimulate creative writing. However, autobiography has not yet realized itself as an established method for teaching or learning. Its power as a tool for self-knowledge and self-development has not been recognized, nor has its potential for enlarging our understanding of adult learners and thereby drawing out from them those experiences and valued qualities that can contribute so potently to the learning environment.

Autobiography need not be limited to courses related to adult development. If it is true that “every theory is an autobiography,” then an experience that encourages people to reflect upon and articulate their personal theories of life (which surely guide them) can constitute valued learning. I have since my earlier experiments introduced autobiography as an option in another graduate course that explores the major orientations to adult and higher education. Students write five chapters of their life “as learners” or alternatively, “as teachers.” For many, writing about themselves in this way is their first opportunity to recollect and recount the signal events and turning points that led them to their study or their vocation. In this same fashion, courses related to leadership and administration, human services, or even biology could help students to uncover those signal events that shaped their vocational choices and scholarly perspectives.

A GUIDE MAP FOR AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The following guidelines may be useful for anyone wanting to utilize autobiographical writing with their students. (Students are generally asked to submit an outline of the chapters, for my review, before proceeding.)

- a) A publisher has given you the option of writing five chapters of your life story.
- b) Prepare an outline that includes the chapter titles; consider a title for your story.
- c) Write two pages for each chapter. Try to move beyond a simple chronology of events.
- d) Pay attention to any metaphor, thread, pattern, or story that emerges from the events of your life, like “crossing over” or “Still Me” (as in Christopher Reeve’s autobiography).

THIS JOURNEY'S END

... the time has come for the individual to begin his true adult education, to discover who he is and what life is all about. What is the secret of the "I" with which he has been on such intimate terms all these years yet which remains a stranger? (Smith, 1958, p. 64)

Religious historian Huston Smith is commenting upon the life transitions that adults face as they move through the various phases and stages of life. Student autobiography offers one opportunity for learners to look into and around the "I" and to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and of their relationship with others and the world. Although this learning may not offer them specific technical skills or discipline-related knowledge, it does permit a deeper personal knowing that may even be transformative. The act of self-observation and critical reflection can enlarge their understanding of the community in which their life unfolded, the people and events that have moulded their identities, and their own patterns and responses that have shaped their life. It may even precipitate a change in their story, should they attempt to "escape from older narratives to a new beginning" (Smith & Watson, 1996, p. 16). Autobiography, to the extent that it furthers this process, becomes a valued tool. In closing, I offer the last word to one writer and her musing: "When you gave us this assignment I thought, 'Boy, how progressive!' . . . And then when you think about it, storytelling is the oldest form of education there is."

REFERENCES

- Bok, S. (1984). *Secrets: On the ethics of concealment and revelation*. New York: Vintage.
- Brookfield, S. D. (1986). *Understanding and facilitating adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Clarke, B. (1999) October. Why memoir isn't. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, XLVI (10), B9.
- Culley, M. (1998). Introduction to A Day at a Time: Diary literature of American women, from 1764–1985. In S. Smith & J. Watson (Eds.), *Women, autobiography, theory: A reader* (pp. 217-221). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Damasio, A. (1999). *The feeling of what happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company.

- Dewey, J. (1964). Having an experience. In A. Hofstadter & R. Kuhns (Eds.), *Philosophies of art and beauty* (pp. 577-646). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Erdrich, L. (1988). *Tracks*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Erikson, E. H. (1980). Themes of adulthood in the Freud-Jung correspondence. In N. J. Smelser & E. Erikson (Eds.), *Themes of work and love in adulthood*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Feski, R. (1998). On confession. In S. Smith & J. Watson (Eds.), *Women, autobiography, theory: A reader* (pp. 83-95). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Greene, M. (1978). *Landscapes of learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gusdorf, G. (1980). Conditions and limits of autobiography (J. Olney, Trans.). In J. Olney (Ed.), *Autobiography: Essays theoretical and critical* (pp. 28-48). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Houston, J. (1987). *The search for the beloved: Journey in sacred psychology*. Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, Inc.
- Howarth, W. L. (1980). Some principles of autobiography. In J. Olney (Ed.), *Autobiography: Essays theoretical and critical* (pp. 84-114). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Jung, C. G. (1954). The development of personality (R.F.C. Hull, Trans.). In CW 17, *The development of personality* (pp. 167-186). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Keen, S. & Fox, A. V. (1974). *Telling your story: A guide to who you are and who you can be*. Toronto: New American Library.
- Kegan, R. (1982). *The evolving self: Problem and process in human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Labouvie-Vief, G. (1994). *Psyche & eros: Mind and gender in the life course*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Olney, J. (1980). Autobiography and the cultural moment: A thematic, historical and bibliographical introduction. In J. Olney (Ed.), *Autobiography: Essays theoretical and critical* (pp. 3-27). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Randall, W. (1995). *The stories we are: An essay on self-creation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

- Schon, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.
- Smith, H. (1958). *The religions of man*. New York: Mentor Books.
- Smith, S. & Watson, J. (1996). Introduction. In S. Smith & J. Watson (Eds.), *Getting a life: Everyday uses of autobiography* (pp. 3–52). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Smith, S. & Watson, J. (1998). Introduction: Situating subjectivity in women's autobiographical practices. In S. Smith & J. Watson (Eds.), *Women, autobiography, theory: A reader*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Tennant, M. & Pogson, P. (1995). *Learning and change in the adult years*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Vallance, E. (1986). A second look at "Conflicting conceptions of curriculum." *Theory into Practice*, 25 (1), 24–30.

BIOGRAPHY

Irene E. Karpiak, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor of Adult & Higher Education, a graduate program in the Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Studies, The University of Oklahoma. She teaches courses on adult learning and development and continuing higher education, and pursues research in these areas. For many years she developed a wide range of personal and professional development programs in the Continuing Education Division, The University of Manitoba. She continues to return to Manitoba as an occasional instructor in the Certificate in Adult & Continuing Education (CACE).

Irene E. Karpiak, Ph.D. est professeur adjoint en éducation supérieure et aux adultes, un programme d'étude gradué dans le Département de leadership en éducation et d'études des principes directeurs à The University of Oklahoma. Elle enseigne des cours et fait de la recherche sur l'apprentissage et le développement des adultes ainsi que sur l'éducation permanente. Pendant plusieurs années elle a développé une diversité de programmes en développement personnel et professionnel dans la Division de l'éducation permanente à The University of Manitoba. Elle retourne souvent au Manitoba pour assurer un poste de chargée de cours dans le programme du Certificat en éducation permanente (CACE).