

## Working with life stories in health promotion education: A contextual reflexivity framework

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### Abstract

*The use of life stories as a methodology within a critical reflexive framework for working with relational reflexivity in health promotion education is explored. At the heart of the process is the dialogical space where relational reflexivity is facilitated, and around which the narrative story is developed. Examples from tertiary education will be given to illustrate how working reflexively with life stories increases a sense of identity and agency. In the context of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, it allows a holistic approach based on a social constructionist worldview using a narrative lens that acknowledges that our knowledge is continuously constructed in context and in interaction with others. One way to understand ourselves and others is to understand our own and each other's stories. The framework which facilitates this process involves four iterative loops: deconstructing power in the collective; determining values and identity; negotiating agency and responsibility; and accountable performance.*

**Key words:** Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Sharing Stories, Narrative Paradigm, Power, Values and Identity

### Introduction

This paper explores the value of working from a narrative reflexive perspective in health promotion education and more widely to bridge the gaps in education between theory and practice, academics and community involvement. A critical reflexivity framework is interrogated as a methodology and tool for connecting students to their lived experience and tapping into the

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value of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). In this sense the importance of context and relevance is highlighted together with the value of indigenous knowledge (IK) as a dynamic form of knowledge that has grown in response to community needs (Kaya, 2009). This is done through using life stories to connect personal discourses to dominant societal discourses and to better understand the power at play in our society. Telling and deconstructing our stories leads us to a better understanding of how we position ourselves in society in terms of our values and identity. It also facilitates a process of reflexivity that enables agency and individual action. Witnessing the stories of others leads us to a better understanding of the relational ties that bind us together. In this way collective agency and social performativity are enabled.

### *Life stories and critical reflexivity*

How we interpret our lives is important. Narratives help us to find meaning in our lives and through a reflexive process that is relational we are able to move towards not only a story about the self that allows increased self-awareness and agency but towards a collectively coherent story (Sliep & Norton, 2016). A narrative theory approach based on social constructionist principles helps us understand our cultural heritage and our context, they shape us and how we understand ourselves and others. Recognising that knowledge is constructed communally opens a space for understanding our lives and those of others through examining our lived experiences and connecting these to the complexities of our society (Sliep & Kotze, 2007). Telling stories and witnessing those of others around us enables us to look more widely, to see and experience multiple viewpoints. Deconstructing our own stories helps us to understand the lens through which we view the world and opens us to a better understanding of how other viewpoints are constructed through different story lines. We are then in a better position to understand and value others.

The characteristics and benefits of a life-history/narrative investigation have been summed up by Suarez-Orega (2013) and include the following:

- Priority is given to participants subjective consciousness, emphasizing meaning that is constructed and can be re-structured;
- Spaces are created for voice;

- Culture and context are important in the acquisition of meaning highlighting the collective nature of story-telling;
- Both micro aspects which are directly a part of participants' lives and macro aspects involving the larger cultural, social, political and economic context come into play;
- Participants are involved in a reflexive process and develop reflexive knowledge.

This highlights the holistic nature of an approach that involves a connection between lived experience not only in regard to the individual in isolation but also in regard to community and larger societal and historical aspects. *“The moral genius of storytelling is that each, teller and listener, enters the space of story for the other. Telling stories in postmodern times, and perhaps in all times, attempts to change one’s own life by affecting the lives of others”* (Frank, 1995). We need to listen to and understand each other’s’ stories, to understand that we operate from different realities but that it is still possible to shape new stories collectively (Sliep & Norton, 2016). Creating shared meaning collectively can lead to positive social outcomes. This does not, however, happen on its own but requires both self and relational reflexivity and nuanced social understanding, as part of the storied process (Sliep & Norton, 2016).

Although the terms “reflective” and “reflexive” are used in various ways throughout the literature and across various disciplines (and sometimes interchangeably) (Gilbert & Sliep, 2009); this paper intends to define the terms for the purpose of providing a working definition for use as a basis of a conceptual framework aimed at developing critical reflexivity. Reflectivity is generally viewed as a process in terms of which a researcher pays attention to the self as a constructed object, taking into account their social context and their effect on their research (Gilbert & Sliep, 2009). Reflexivity, however, goes further than reflectivity in the sense that it is both an approach to research and a way in which one can learn from practice – an educational tool that aids in critical knowledge production (Fook et al, 2006). While reflection on its own aids recognition and awareness, this is not viewed as sufficient, we need further to take into account our embodied transactions, do our beliefs match our actions, and our actions our beliefs? (Door, 2014). A reflective researcher may become aware of their positioning but still act through that same lens or specific logic. The reflexive practitioner becomes able to move beyond their own philosophical positioning and becomes open to multiple standpoints (Gergen, 1999; Gilbert

& Sliep, 2009). Door (2014) argues that our actions and responses to others should be in alignment with our advocated ethical stance. Reflexivity then extends reflection and “includes the embodied self and its response to the other selves with whom that self-interacts, and incorporates thoughtful action in the moment.

Of significance to this paper then is a definition of reflexivity as an ongoing critical appraisal of self and others in action; understanding how our actions are formed by our context and our relationships to others (Gilbert & Sliep, 2009). In relation to self-reflexivity this involves understanding how we position ourselves and how our positioning is affected by dominant discourses. In acknowledging reflexivity as a relational process it is viewed as occurring in context, as dynamic and iterative, influenced by our past and present social interaction with others and how we position ourselves in relationship.

It is imperative to recognise the influence of discourses in our lives, to understand the role of power that these discourses are embedded in, and how we position ourselves within the dominant story. We also need to become aware of and acknowledge the norms and values that we ascribe to so that we can be in a better position to start living our preferred story, to have a strong voice and move towards action that is individually, collectively and socially beneficial. This requires an ongoing process of critical reflexivity that recognises the importance of both relationship and context. Fook et al. (2006) argue that “a reflexive ability is central to critical reflection, in that an awareness of the influence of self and subjectivity is vital to an appreciation of how we construct and participate in constructing our world and our knowledge about the world”. Reflexivity then can be viewed as an interactive and empowering process that facilitates an understanding of how we can better live together, communally, in our world.

Individual, collective and social action all involve a complex network of interlinking relationships that need to be understood in context and in terms of both space and time. We are who we are because of our social interactions over time with others in our past and present. Understanding who we are and how we view our world and are shaped by the world around us is part of a reflexive process. Such a process demands an examination of our own and others historical, political and cultural assumptions and intentions so that we may better understand both ourselves and each other (Gilbert & Sliep, 2009; Sliep & Norton, 2016). Gergen (1999) sees

this as the capacity to look beyond our own “obvious” realities so that we are able to listen to alternative representations held by others.

*reflexivity*

*is the ability*

*to question yourself*

*as you question others*

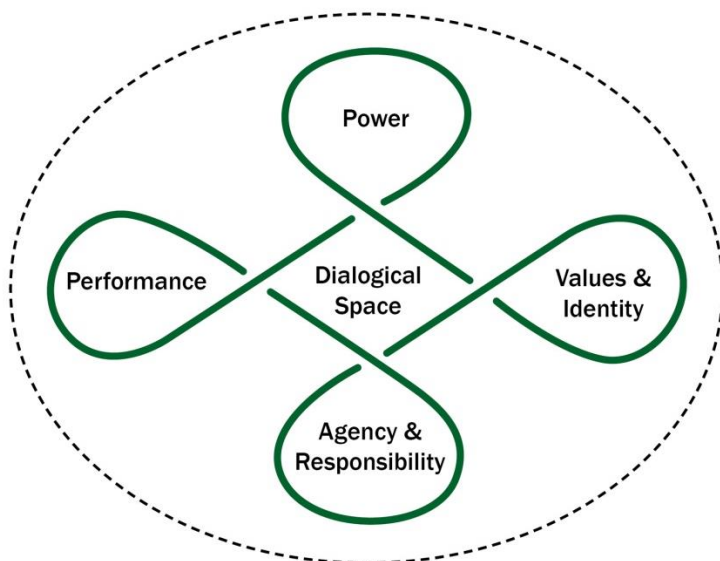
*to see multi-dimensionally*

*to become we*

*[Poem extract: Sliep & Norton, 2016]*

### ***The process of reflexivity: Development of a conceptual framework***

The process of reflexivity as described above was initially conceptualised by Sliep and Gilbert (2006) and has been refined over time resulting in the development of a critical reflexivity framework (Sliep, 2016; Sliep & Norton, 2016). The framework has evolved to take into account multi-disciplinary and multi-level applications where context is of paramount importance. It is based on social constructionist principles in terms of which “reality” as we know it is constructed or brought into being through social action (Holstein & Gubruim, 2011). As stated above, reflexivity is viewed as a process that is both dynamic and iterative, an ongoing practice of testing our assumptions and intentions that takes into account how our actions are influenced by our context and how our context is, in turn, influenced by our actions (Gilbert & Sliep, 2009). This process involves moving back and forward through four loops as part of a process of generating critical reflexivity and social and relational understanding as illustrated in Figure 1 below.



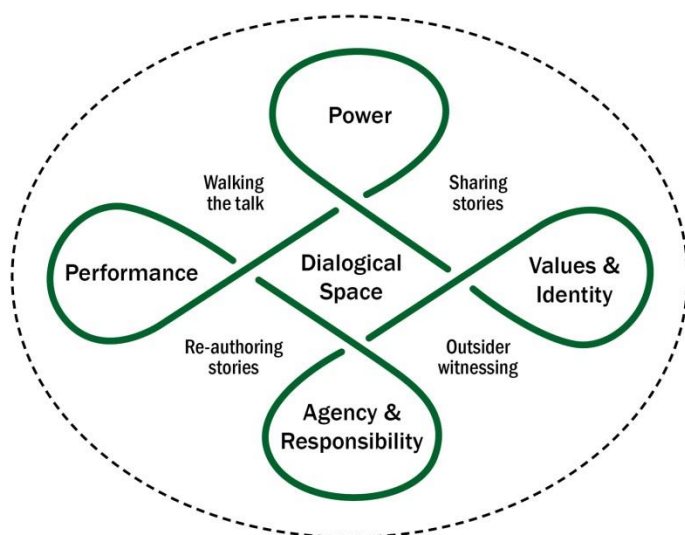
**Figure 1: Critical Reflexivity Framework** (Sliep & Gilbert, 2009; Sliep, 2016; Sliep & Norton, 2016)

Moving through the loops involves deconstructing discourses on a societal level as well as exploring the mechanisms of power in your personal life; an awareness of your values and identity leading to an interrogation of responsibility and agency which, in turn, engenders social performativity. At the centre of the loops and the heart of the process is a dialogical space that facilitates a process of dialogue that enables one to understand, in terms of a social constructionist view, that there are many truths and that what one person perceives as reality may not be so for another (Bohm, 1996). A safe space is created to support such understandings and the dialogue that is facilitated is one that is “a socially situated practice that is linked to a transformative agenda,” and that encourages a commitment to engage with and learn from each other (Rule, 2004).

### *Sharing stories: Using Narrative to facilitate reflexivity*

When used in conjunction with a narrative methodology the process of reflexivity is enhanced through the telling and witnessing of life stories. Telling and deconstructing your story enables you to recognise and breakdown the influence of dominant discourses in your life. Examining your values and identity through your own story allows you to then position yourself in your

story which, in turn, moves you to a place of agency and responsibility. In the fourth loop, you move towards living your preferred story. When this takes place with others, it is in witnessing their stories that you are better able to understand their realities and move together towards a preferred collective story in which everyone is important; rather than being limited by individualistic outcomes that are not necessarily relationally or socially positive. This process is illustrated in Figure 2 below.



**Figure 2: Narrative paradigm in reflexivity framework** (Sliep, 2016; Sliep & Norton, 2016)

A narrative life story approach that is reflexive in nature takes place in an interpretive framework and is grounded in principles of Critical Communicative Methodology (CCM) (Suarez-Ortega, 2013). CCM stems from a belief that all people have the ability to analyse their own reality and the right to offer arguments and to do so using their own language (Suarez-Ortega, 2013). When stories are explored within a reflexive framework participants are invited through examining their own story to recognise the power at play within dominant discourses that can then be challenged. This opens the way for the structuring of a new story and the development of both agency and a critical consciousness.

Although there are debates around life history or autobiographical methodology and challenges to its legitimacy, this methodology has become increasingly popular (Dhunpath, 2000). Dhunpath (2000) further suggests that such an approach is “probably the only authentic means of understanding how motives and practices reflect the intimate intersection of institutional and individual experience in the postmodern world” and coins the term “Narradigm” to support the reality that our lives and the way we experience our world are narrative in quality. Dhunpath (2000) further highlights the five general features that Kelchterman (1993) assigns to a biographic perspective: narrative, constructivistic, contextualistic, interactionistic, and dynamic. It is these features that underlie the model described above which views narrative theory within a reflexive framework for a holistic exploration essential for transformative outcomes.

The reflexive framework has been usefully applied in various contexts including higher education qualitative research (Naidu & Sliep, 2011); school projects; and a variety of community projects (Sliep, 2003; Sliep & Gilbert, 2006). The model can be applied in different circumstances to increase self and other awareness, improve social understanding and contextual perception through a better understanding of the power dynamics at play, more attentiveness to values and identity, linking agency to moral responsibility, and social rather than more limited individual transformative performance. The framework can be used as both an approach towards research and practice, a way of viewing the issues at play; and as a tool for engendering reflexive skills in individuals or groups. By applying a narrative approach to the framework a clear link is made to the importance of context, culture and community. Our stories reveal not only who we are but where we come from, what we are a part of, and what we want to grow into.

### ***Contextual reflexivity: Connecting to indigenous knowledge***

Using life stories connects the self, students, or participants in research to their lived experience and embraces their context as integral to learning and development. It is through stories that one is able to look closely at how participants make sense of their personal experience and identity in relation to the cultural discourses they grow up in (Chase, 2011). Our personal stories are embedded in cultural narratives and therefore reveal how we learn through others in our “common” or “cultural spaces” (Horsdal, 2012; Loc, 2011). It is in these spaces that we can and do connect to our indigenous knowledge (IK) and the collective knowledge of those that



surround us. Such a connection is considered important for a holistic understanding of the construction of our realities.

Despite an increasing recognition of the importance of IK there appears still to be a lack of legislative and policy frameworks that are able to fully promote IK systems so that the full benefit of this knowledge is widely accessible (Kaya, 2009). There are also numerous ways to talk and about and define IK, but generally it “refers to the age-old, long-standing traditions and practices of certain regional, indigenous, or local communities” (Kaya, 2009). Defining features include that the knowledge is usually held collectively; it is mainly undocumented and passed orally through generations; and is a form of knowledge that is able to evolve and grow in response to community needs and context (Kaya, 2009). Adjectives that can be used to describe IK and which intimate its inherent value include that it is a “distinctive” body of knowledge (Mascarenhas, 2004); and it is “unique” to particular cultures (Lukaba, 2007). Of particular importance as well is the value of IK as a tool or skill for knowledge creation. Flavier et al, (1995) describe it as, “the information base for a society, which facilitates communication and decision-making. Indigenous information systems are dynamic, and are continually influenced by internal creativity and experimentation as well as be contact with external systems”. Kaya (2013) expands on this by emphasizing the importance of IK in decision-making, leadership, governance, conflict-resolution and various community livelihood activities. Claiming back IKS therefore is an important part of our transformation process.

Despite the clear benefits of incorporating IK into a variety of community development aspects including health, food production, environmental conservation, natural resource management, education and governance IK remains underemphasized in the modern world (Kaya, 2013; Kaya & Seleti, 2014). In large part the lack of awareness surrounding the importance of IKS and particularly African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) stems from challenges in this field relating to a limited dissemination of IK and limited encouragement over its use in various fields. While sharing of knowledge within a particular community is commonplace, it is limited in relation to spreading it more widely across other communities. As IK is “predominantly tacit or embedded in practices and experiences” it is largely exchanged through personal one-on-one communication (Kaya, 2009). As such this limits the potential

benefits of IK reaching a wider audience and its value is not always widely recognised or embraced in outside settings.

Increasingly therefore it is recognised that it is important to integrate IKS, and in this case AIKS, into formal education. This would have a two-fold benefit of ensuring that the value of AIK is appreciated and understood by learners and researchers (Kaya, 2009); and to make education more relevant to the African context and African knowledge systems rather than using the Eurocentric approach that is followed in many disciplines (Kaya, 2013). This would also enhance our sense of identity about being African.

The current focus of higher education in Africa on predominantly Western theoretical frameworks and models results in producing students, researchers and research that are well described as “distant” from the developmental challenges and concerns of local communities (Kaya, 2013; Kaya & Seleti, 2014, Seleti, 2014). Privileging Western knowledge has resulted in what has been referred to as “cognitive injustice” in higher education where other ways of knowing have been silenced (Seleti, 2014). Forwarding an agenda that is “objective” and “rational” based on a Eurocentric social construction of truth has marginalised IK to the extent that it is not valued as a part of formal education (Goduka, 2011). How then do we attempt to narrow this gap and create a better alignment between formal education and community needs? How do we bring in the silenced voices? This is especially important in areas such as public health, for example, where the majority of people in Africa depend on IK for their basic health care needs.

Where AIKS has been promoted in South African universities it has been welcomed but has also revealed ongoing challenges among which is the lack of a clear conceptual or theoretical framework outlining an African indigenous perspective and African knowledge production. This in turn has resulted in a lack of direction for developing methodologies that will incorporate African knowledge systems (Kaya, 2013; Kaya & Seleti, 2014). Seleti (2014) also points out that universities have not yet recognised and fully acknowledged the value of IKS, citing one of the major reasons for this as lack of relevance in higher education to the concerns and needs of African communities. Seleti (2014) poses a valid question: “What then is the relevance of these institutions if they cannot even indulge in finding solutions to local problems? He calls for a shift of focus from external knowledge to a focus on the production of knowledge that is

contextually relevant – for a holistic approach. This is not a call for division, one or the other, but a call for the recognition of how IKS can enrich and benefit both African and Western knowledge systems. A call “to position IKS as a knowledge domain that can help bring into academia pluralistic approaches, evolving in multiple directions, a juxtaposition of the local and the global, or tradition and innovation” (Seleti, 2014). The students in our universities also bring with them a wealth of IK, how best to ensure that this knowledge is not wasted?

The challenge then is to bring the educational system into alignment with the above perspective and with local community needs and context. This involves closing the gap between theory and practice and acknowledging the relevance of lived experience in knowledge creation and the importance of understanding context. Similarly, in relation to qualitative research in an African context, Naidu and Sliep (2011), also point to the importance of an Afrocentric approach that embraces a more collectivist culture that focuses more on context and an African viewpoint. They do, however, much in the same vain as Kaya (2013) and Kaya & Seleti (2014) above in respect of problems involving connecting to IK, raise questions of pragmatic application and question what tools are available to facilitate a proper understanding of context in the research process. They propose a process of methodological reflexivity as a way of moving towards contextually relevant research and social action. ‘Contextual reflexivity’ is described as a process that produces “an iterative-reflective-generative process, consistent with an Afrocentric view of research” (Naidu & Sliep, 2011). Since such a process is one that embraces the value of understanding lived experience and of all voices being heard, one that encourages dialogue at all levels, and one that keeps context salient (Naidu & Sliep, 2011); it is suggested that it would apply well as a process or tool for connecting to IK.

Reflective practice has been described by Ghaye and Lillyman (2000) in terms of the following principles which show a clear link to its ability to facilitate IK production. They state that reflective practice:

- does not separate practice and theory;
- emphasizes the links between values and actions; and
- generates locally owned knowledge (p. 120).

Further, characteristics of reflexivity, both generally and from a narrative perspective, and IK systems as described above share common ground – they are dynamic, adaptive and relevant to context, linked to lived experience, and are interwoven with collective and community needs and social transformation. This is highlighted below in Figure 3:

**Figure 3: Linking inter-relational reflexivity, biography and indigenous knowledge**

	<b>INTER-RELATIONAL REFLEXIVITY</b>	<b>LIFE STORY / NARRATIVE MEHOD</b>	<b>INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE</b>
Definition:	Understanding how meaning is shaped and actions formed by and from the world	Telling, re-telling and sharing stories with dynamic meaning making	Age-old, long-standing traditions and practices of indigenous, or local communities
CONTEXTUAL	Tied to context, continually constructed through others, time and space	Life stories span the concept of space and time over generations and help people to understand the role of context	IK is a form of knowledge that is able to evolve and grow in response to community needs and context
RELATIONAL	Formed from and through social interactions with others	Exploration of past and current social interaction with others	Knowledge is usually held collectively and passed orally through generations



“collective interrogation” and “a sustained reflection on whose and what knowledge is devalued and lost, and whose and what knowledge is embraced and legitimized in a single-minded pursuit”. Based on an indigenous Nguni framework (*Eziko Sipheka Sisophula*), Goduka (2011) stresses the importance of following methodologies that emerge from indigenous contexts and worldviews; based on the standpoint that reality is constructed and that there are no superior perspectives or realities. At the least, the reflexive process offers a tool of interrogation, a challenge to dominant knowledge systems and taken for granted assumptions regarding knowledge production. At most the process offers a way to continually deconstruct and construct our realities:

- **Dialogical space:** Facilitating a community perspective to social transformation that acknowledges that knowledge is “evolving and that it is socially constructed by people to address livelihood needs and challenges” (Kaya & Seleti, 2014). The approach of IKS followed by Seleti (2014) involves the promotion of “multiple alternative interpretations” and “interconnectedness”. This requires reflexive dialogue and communication, a space to “re-think”.
- **Power:** Deconstructing and dismantling dominant Eurocentric discourse
- **Values and Identity:** Connecting to African values, identity and ways of knowing.
- **Agency and responsibility:** An agentic stance: Acknowledging context and relevance of indigenous concepts, theories and methods and facilitating voice for marginalised and underprivileged social groups. Local solutions to local problems.
- **Accountable social performativity:** Integration of AIKS into all community development aspects in line with a view of AIK as “an enabling cultural process” that is “contextually and historically grounded amongst local peoples” (Kaya and Seleti, 2014).

It is suggested then that the critical reflexive framework as described can be adapted both as a conceptual framework for interrogating issues surrounding the value and adoption on AIKS on a much wider scale; and as a method or tool for increasing awareness of IK and the value of lived experience in education. As a methodology and tool the framework is a process that facilitates the capacity of learners, students or professionals to connect to their African context and IK, and to understand how their personal discourses are a part of their professional lives. In connecting

to context one connects to IK and it is through connecting to IK that existing knowledge systems are enriched and become more relevant (Seleti, 2014). This means that practices within IKS can also be critically explored and challenged, but more important bringing to the fore the notion of IK as dynamic, changing and relevant to current society rather than a system of static unchanging traditions and customs. Linking lived experience to new knowledge enhances overall critical knowledge development. Facilitating this capacity at an educational level enables a critical consciousness that opens the door to embracing IK both in practice and as a worldview. It then becomes part of our knowledge source and experience that enriches new knowledge rather than something that should not be considered relevant. That it is relevant and valuable is, in fact, what now comes to the fore.

The relational focus of the reflexive framework and the telling and witnessing of stories within a shared community can be likened to the concept of *Ubuntu* which in African societies places emphasis on relationships and the interconnectedness between people. In line with accountable social performativity and a preferred shared story, Seleti (2014) links Ubuntu to knowledge generation stressing that the outcome of knowledge production “seeks harmony, consensus and dignity for all”. In terms of higher education an appeal is made to move towards a curriculum that is committed to community engagement and community service (Seleti, 2014). In this sense the framework offered has also proved its use in community, education and research projects.

### ***Life stories as a tool for reflexive dialogue in education: Connecting to lived experience and IK***

Prior research indicates that transformation in education is considered as more than just adding to learner’s skills and knowledge base. It is rather viewed as an “ongoing change in the way educators and students approach the acquisition of knowledge and skills and relate them to a broader context” (Waghid, 2002). Such transformative teaching and learning is considered to connect “new knowledge with lived experience, resulting in an on-going construction and reconstruction of personal, professional and contextual narratives” (Sliep, 2010). Since knowledge is co-constructed (Gergen, 2009) participating students play an active role in shaping their own contexts in which they live, study and ultimately work.

The benefits of transformative teaching and learning based on ideas of critical reflexivity and experiential sharing of life stories are based on several submissions which are especially important in cultures that embrace a collective worldview. Such an approach means that:

- There is a privileging of context and community rather than the more individualistic approaches of Western society;
- Creative methods of facilitation in the production of knowledge and skills are developed to assist with the challenges faced by our education system which are often not attended to because of a lack of resources, funds and support;
- The voices of marginalised people become part of the co-construction of knowledge and contribute towards preferred outcomes for a more just society;
- learners develop a deeper insight into their own learning processes and goals;
- more attention is paid to the rich contributions of our indigenous knowledge systems; and
- learners are developed into reflexive professionals who can provide tailored services and support to other individuals and communities and so contribute more meaningfully to a healthier society (Sliep, 2010).

In relation to teaching and learning, “[r]aising critical consciousness involves a significant learning experience with a real world context” (Mangadu, 2014); and it is believed that learning experiences only reach significance when they go beyond obtaining foundational knowledge or subject content and allow for the application of knowledge in real world contexts. Critical thinking and consciousness, through reflexive learning are therefore the corners stones for becoming independent and active learners (Mangadu, 2014). Furthermore, Gergen (2009) stresses the importance of viewing education not as a process of individual success or failure but believes its overall aim should be to increase individual and group potentials for participating in both local and global relational processes. Effective education should then consider the productive participation of individuals in family, community and other social and political structures, and thereby foster “processes that indefinitely extend the potentials of relationship” (p. 243). This can only be achieved through participatory forms of inclusion, taking into account the lived-in contexts of learners in order to “bring multiple worlds into coordination, and to

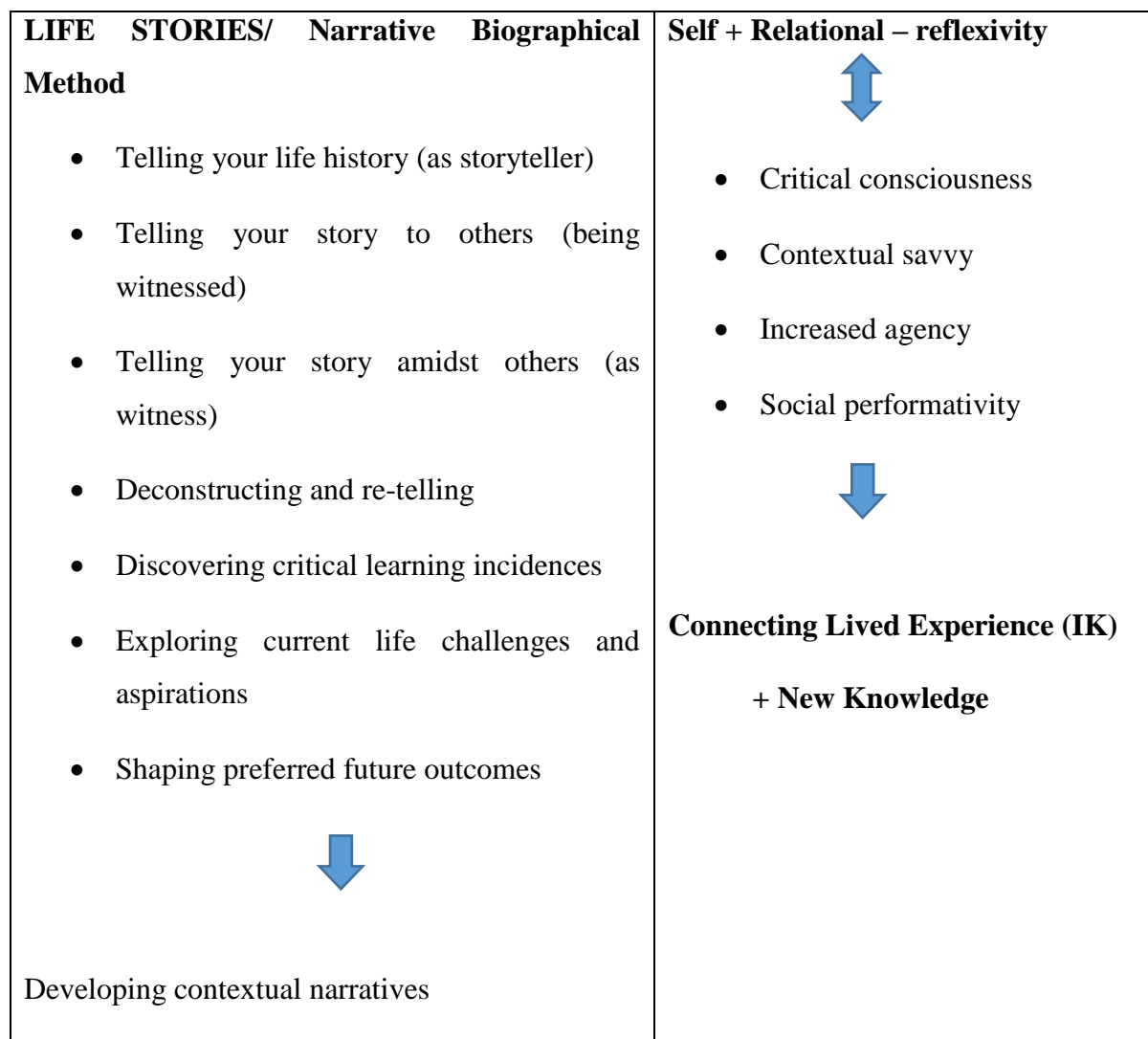


replace divisive hierarchies with mutual appreciation. As such, education requires that we favour a dialogical and reflexive practice.

Reflexivity (both self and relational) is made possible through the working with individual and group personal experiences, life stories and through dialogue. In an educational setting, it is in the telling of personal life stories that educators and learners being to work with the “lived experiences” of learners, contextualizing them and thereby enabling an exploration of the complexities of society. In this way personal discourses of learners are linked to their professional lives (Sliep & Kotze, 2007). Life stories are used to enable learners to learn through their own experience which connects new knowledge to their own context and through this to increase their understanding of the learning process which then works as a guide for future learning (Sliep, 2010). A clear reflexive framework enables learners to critically reflect on meaning in both their own lives and the lives of others, and thus provides a “map to show where agency is played out” as learning and application are integrated.

More generally, stories are viewed as tools for living that enable one to reflect and therefore to better understand, negotiate and create; leading to potential transformation on both a personal and social level (Suarez-Ortega, 2013).

Life-narratives are believed to be an important vehicle for the realization of agency in one’s life in terms of an ecological view of agency as something that is not merely possessed but achieved “through the active engagement of individuals with aspects of their contexts-for-action” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). In the construction of meaning within a life context there is an acknowledgement of voice, and the right to be heard, which is especially important for those who have been or are socially excluded (Suarez-Ortega, 2013).



**Textbox 1:** Adapted from Sliep (2010)

Additionally, the impact of sharing life stories following a reflexive process means that:

- People get a stronger sense of who they are by looking more closely at their life’s journey – their history, discoveries and current life circumstances.
- People get a sense of validation - their stories do matter, where they come from and what they have lived through all matter and make them who they are today.

- People are better able to value the knowledge that they have developed over time through life experience.
- People start to understand that their voice is important, that they have something to offer and that their opinions matter.
- There is a shared sense of value in relation to knowledge that has been developed over time through life experience.

Through sharing and speaking out the value of your own knowledge and experience is anchored. In narrative theory outsider witnessing leads to your position being affirmed by others. When your voice is heard you are no longer invisible, but “seen” for who you are. In turn you are able to “see” yourself and embrace your culture and who you are, without having to hold onto negative aspects that have challenged you. During this process your identity is affirmed and so is the way in which your identity has been developed. In this way there is an honouring of IK, your roots and your background.

### ***Dialoguing with theory and method: Student experiences of narrative reflexivity***

We now explore the framework in action, following a participative and reflexive approach with Health Promotion and Communication Master’s students from the UKZN. These students have been involved in the Personal is the Professional module developed by the first author specifically to create a learning space for students to collectively construct and deconstruct their social and educational worlds through the sharing of life stories. Participants are invited to undertake a reflexive exploration of their histories (through life stories), lived experience (critical learning incidents), current life challenges, and aspirations.

Working with life stories and related experiential learning activities involves a critical examination of intersectionality and the positioning of individuals both physically and through discourse. Participants are helped to explore issues of relational power where power is considered both positively and negatively in the Foucauldian sense. Further they are encouraged to increase their understanding of how they are positioned within discourses so that they may, in turn, develop the ability to critique the status quo and to play a more active role to position

themselves more favourably. Through this the identity of both the individual and the group is explored and development and agency is augmented. The telling, re-telling and deconstruction of stories, when done within a group or “witnessing community” means that, through dialogue and experience, meaning is created which adds to the common body of knowledge of the group.

A series of experiential exercises are used to facilitate the experience of deconstructing their life stories as the students move back and forth through the loops of the framework. They are encouraged to move from theory to practice and back from practice to theory. Using the words of students, we now construct an illustrative overview of their experience of critical reflexivity.

*Hearing other people’s experience made me realise and appreciate how unique everybody is but at the same time how some things or experiences are common across different cultures, origins and people.*

### ***Dialogical space***

At the core of reflexivity is the dialogical space, a safe place that is created to make it possible to tell your story and undertake the reflexive exploration that is asked of the students. It is a facilitated space of trust that encourages dialogical interaction and an examination of our pictures of reality, to understand, by listening to others, that these pictures are constructed truths and may not hold true for everyone. Although also a physical space, when it is filled with stories told within a trusting environment it becomes possible to open up to multiple alternative viewpoints. Such a space requires certain conditions to be in place for the process of reflexivity to “work.” A culture of “critical acceptance” is considered essential in the creation of a climate of respect where it is safe to question old viewpoints and to try new ideas (Fook et al, 2006). People are encouraged to be open, non-judgemental and dialogue is stimulated. Communal dialogue of itself is viewed as having the potential to “create a space for cultural exchange that draws on language and social representations” (Skovdal & Abebe, 2012). In such a space researchers and participants or teachers and students come together as equals and are valued not in terms of their positions of power (although power inequalities and tensions are not ignored) but rather for their

intrinsic relevance and value (Skovdal & Abede, 2012). This student's reflection reveals her experience of the space created:

*I feel so safe and secure and I can safely say I have found a home away from home. I can safely share my experiences and it's so amazing how I managed to speak about some personal stuff that I had never find the space and courage to talk about.*

Using words taken directly from the life story and reflections of one of the students the following poem was created to illustrate the response of the student to being in a safe dialogical space that allows someone to be heard in their "wholeness," to bring all of him and his experiences into the space:

*Finding dialogical space corridors of gray closed doors, uninviting clinical disarray functional space, sensible and academic. I am shy and nervous, sitting upright and exposed; I will only say what I think they want to hear. I used to sit in back rows , uncertain alien and uninvited; no one knows where I came from; no one knows my family, my history; the mountains where I herded goats; no one knows of the time I spent hiding in the forest because I couldn't pay for my school uniform; no one knows where my strength comes from; of the mountains where I prayed; no one knows; no one asked; until today, in this small gray room with broken air-conditioners, I'm sitting now, bent forward, in a tight-knit group; we build a nest for an unexpected egg bought in from home; collect pieces of nature from the world outside; this never happened before in this institution; a banking system; now I am touching life for the first time since I walked down these corridors of gray closed doors; today I was asked to tell my story; bring in my past; to bring the mountains and the goats; my father's early death into this room; I have been asked to bring myself into this room; at the end of the corridor of closed gray doors; I am invited to speak and I will tell you the truth.*

## **Power**

Students here are involved in a critical examination of power – personal, structural and political (Sliep & Kotze, 2007). They are required to look at their own story within the dominant story and to see who holds power and why, and to attempt to make sense of how current dominant discourses impact how they position themselves. This is more about understanding power than trying to dismantle it; and through understanding, to shift and move their own perspectives around power (Sliep & Norton, 2016). Recognising the constraints and in some cases the advantages of personal, social and political power, students highlight examples from their life stories:

*Personal: It is my personal power in self-belief that has kept me up to this far...to my postgraduate studies. This has happened despite my poor family background which did not deter my ambitions or goals of furthering my studies.*

*Family: In my culture power resides with one's parents.... "you are always a child in the eyes of your parents", this phrase has been used by my parents especially my mother who believes that the parent is always right because of her age and years of experience. This more especially when it came to her abuse, she felt that she was right and that what she did was a corrective strategy....Because of the power she had over me (financial, emotional and social) I could not do anything to stop the abuse.*

*Social: My culture dictates that Indian women have to fulfil multiple roles such as wife, daughter, chef, maid, student, daughter-in-law and mother. These roles take priority over my education...those multiple roles that have to be fulfilled to be considered a good Indian woman. The inability to meet these requirements results in your family name being lowered or losing value and power in society. This suggests that although I have the power to make choices, my choices are limited by my family, cultural and societal context.*

*Political: Because I am a Zimbabwean staying in South Africa, there is level of power that the government of South Africa has over me....I was the right candidate for the job and was even more qualified than the rest. I had to leave because I did not have power over them. Somehow the government sets boundaries on how I can live my life here in South Africa as a foreigner.*

Deconstructing the webs of power surrounding the self and community leads to a questioning of identity and values. Who am I within this context? Who are we within this context?

### *Values and Identity*

In telling their stories individual students are invited to examine their own values and identity and where these stem from. Values are not based on or examined in terms of some universal principal but rather in terms of collective negotiation and communal participation. In relation to the group, social thinking is facilitated to work towards recognition of different views and interaction between each other that is for the collective benefit. Using an experiential poetry exercise for students to reveal their values amidst their life stories, one student wrote the following poem which she said she “*didn’t know*” she was going to write. Reading the poem aloud to her fellow students was a very moving experience, creating space for her own and others further reflection. The poem reveals a core value relating to forgiveness in the life story of the student and aligning with the role forgiveness has played in South Africa through the Truth and Reconciliation process started 20 years ago:

*My father was killed*

*Why my father?*

*Nobody was arrested*

*Lack of knowledge*

*Why my father?*

*Nobody was willing to help my parents*

*Lack of knowledge of my parents*

*I forgive those who killed my father*

*Nobody was willing to help my parents*

*I have forgiven them already*

*I forgive those who killed my father*

*I want to be a good example to my siblings*

*I have forgiven them already*

*Nobody was arrested*

*I want to be a good example*

*My father was killed*

*[Thuli Shange]*

Further examples and close scrutiny of students' values also revealed that there is not always an alignment between individual and cultural values and this can create a discord which requires some negotiation. For example, a student from Zimbabwe says:

*Wearing of trousers is considered to be inappropriate and an insult to the Shona cultural values...but....*

*The way I dress does not define my character...but...*

*I would prefer to align to the cultural values around dressing whenever I visit my rural home as a way of respecting my elders.*

This example shows the need for a nuanced understanding of agency, moral responsibility and the need to negotiate your position within a community or societal context.

### ***Agency and responsibility***

Opening a space for students to tell their stories, to be self-reflective and to become more self-aware increases agency (Sliep & Norton, 2016). Bandura (2001) views agency as emergent and people as having the ability to make choices and to take action. He stresses the importance of efficacy beliefs and a sense of control as foundations to personal agency and a major influence on personal development. Storytelling encourages coherence, sense of control and meaning, and in this way stimulates a sense of positive agency. Where this is done within a safe, dialogic space all views are heard, including marginalised voices. Further, different modes of agency are recognised including individual, proxy and collective agency (Bandura, 2011), all of which may



be encouraged as different forms may be more supportive depending on the relevant circumstances. A student from Burundi highlights understandings that lead her towards agency:

*There are many intersecting or interlocking dominant discourses that are prevalent in my life that resulted in the oppression and discrimination of myself, my parents and foreign nationals such as age, nationality, class, gender and religion. These intersecting categories have all collectively helped me shape and understand my personal as well as collective agency.*

### ***Accountable performance***

Performance requires living the preferred story, putting words into an accountable action, or *walking the talk* (Sliep & Norton, 2016). Students need to consider the issues that have arisen and work out how they can be dealt with in alignment to their values, identity, and in terms of moral and collective responsibility. Performativity in relation to inter-relational reflexivity means that people need to examine the way they speak and act in relation to others; to understand and acknowledge how they and others are positioned in terms of dominant discourses; to be transparent about their positioning; and to advance social action that is beneficial to all involved. Performing reflexively therefore requires action that is accountable and informed by the bigger picture, one that takes both context and the overall reflexive process in account. What is required is a “pulling together” of all the loops which results in actions and decisions which are based on:

- an understanding of context and culture;
- an awareness of power – personal, social and political – in respect of all stakeholders;
- consideration of own and others values and identity;
- moral agency for positive performativity; and
- a commitment to dialogue, negotiated positions and actions.

(Sliep & Gilbert, 2006; Gilbert & Sliep, 2009)

Further, it is important that this moves from a merely academic exercise into external practice (Gilbert & Sliep). Social and power differences should be made visible, marginalised voices

should be heard, oppressive discourses should be challenged and care should be taken with how language is used. It is only in this way that it becomes possible to move towards just and equitable practices or positive social performativity.

*I am becoming more accommodating of opposing views, different religions, and cultural practices. Personally I have become more interested in people and believe everyone has a story and has enriching experiences that have shaped them. My way of life or faith is not the only absolute way.*

*This is what I believe is the concept of “walking the talk”, where I am actively doing something (studying health promotion) to help me in my future goals of becoming an advocate for marginalised women, children and victims of conflict situations.*

### ***Transforming Perspectives: From reflexive students to reflexive professionals***

What is important in terms of reflexivity and accountable performativity in education is to equip students for their future professional lives with the capability of being reflexive – facilitating the development of a skill that supports critical thinking and reflexive decision-making. What is required is an overall shift in perspective, a new way of thinking that is emancipatory and transformative. Mezirow (1981) refers to perspective transformation as the “*emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings*”. There are various terms used for this change in perspective. Habermas refers to this as “emancipatory action” and Freire as “conscientization” or critical consciousness (Mezirow, 1981). Critical consciousness has been described as a process involving continual reflection on and examination of our own assumptions, biases, and the way we perceive our worlds (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005); and *conscientization* in this sense involving both an increasing awareness of the socio-cultural world and developing a potential to bring about transformation (Door, 2014). That critical consciousness is “embedded in action” signifies a shift or movement, a change in the *status quo* (Gilbert & Slied, 2009: 473). Further Fook et al., (2006) list a number of learning traditions

associated with reflective practice including Mezirow's transformational learning, Freire's critical pedagogy, action learning and experiential learning to name but a few. This paper does not attempt to explore these concepts in any detail but highlights their importance in providing a new way of seeing through critical examination in order to emphasise the vital role played by reflexivity as an enabling process and tool for interrogation, opening the self to the possibility of multiple perspectives, change and transformation.

In terms of IKS what is required is a paradigm shift, which can be enabled through life stories, as often the emphasis is placed on practices as opposed to an understanding of the world which underpins our praxis, and through which we often evaluate ourselves. Reflexivity used alongside story telling means that these shifts take place within a particular context, culture and community. These shifts are grounded in lived experience and can take root precisely for this reason. Our culture, history and community are acknowledged as part of our world view. Their role is not diminished but rather scrutinized, enabling the development of a more authentic but critical lens through which to interpret our world, make decisions and take action. The reflexive process that begins with the narration of your life story can be viewed as a journey, one that is not always easy; a road not straight, but crooked and rutted. You find yourself going back and forth from the personal to the theoretical and back to the personal, seeking connections and asking questions. The process is both challenging and uncomfortable. At times you become lost and experience a sense of disorientation – you continually question your position, and this is part of the process. It is only once you have gone full circle, reflected on all aspects (power, values and identity, agency and responsibility, and accountable performance) that the dots become visible and you start to join them together. In this way it becomes possible to link your own life experience to theory and begin to understand theory in terms of your own context.

Hence, the theoretical understanding becomes grounded through this process and only then does it become possible for you to tie the fragments together and see the bigger picture. This journey or process is not automatic and although there may be various ways to travel, working with an established methodological framework can aid and quicken the process. It is through this exploration that essential connections are made between: self and other; theory and practice; the personal and the professional. Journeying with others means that not only do individual stories start taking shape, but social identities can be reinforced and re-created.

The reflexive process is beneficial in steering a person forward towards accountable performativity. Once someone has “found” their voice, it is often the case that they feel very proud of where they have come from and having come through the many struggles that they have endured. Instead of seeing these struggles as negatives, on reflection they are able to see their own strengths in having come through their challenges “against all odds.” Their own indigenous knowledge and experience becomes a point of reference, something to be valued and built upon. *I am who I am because of my past experience with others....*

*I had to drop out of school due to my family/parent’s financial obstacles...my brother and I spent the year looking after the home cattle and we used to leave home early in the morning to spend the entire day on the mountains with the cattle...this became our daily bread...I started developing a strong relation with God in the mountain as I used to pray a lot whenever I was in the field. This is the strength I still have now which keeps me connected to God.*

*I am determined to go for things that I have failed to achieve before because of the experiences I have shared this past week (during the module). I realized that all the challenges I have faced, someone has experienced them and passed through them. I was so much challenged and encouraged by other people who have made it against all odds.*

Having experienced this process in a directed manner and in a safe dialogical space, students are able to move from their own personal understanding to a position in their professional lives where they are able to work effectively and in partnership with others. A reflexive professional approach views others as experts in their own lives but in so doing acknowledges the complexities of this and understands that being your own expert has its own responsibility. Working in partnership entails acknowledging that person’s context and background, that person’s story and also facilitates space for a dialogue that supports informed decision-making. Once the student understands the reflexive process and its components (the importance of deconstructing power, understanding values and identity in terms of moral responsibility and how these tie to performativity) in terms of their own lives; this can be used as an instrument for working with social issues and clients. This means showing an understanding that the same components are present in the life of the client and all need to be responded to in a holistic manner. For example, working with a mother of an undernourished child would require a stance

that understands the context and poverty perspective in situations where there is a lack of access to food and resources rather than taking a blaming or expert stance.

*Having to listen to some people's sensitive stories has taught me to be sensitive and very attentive when dealing with people.*

Once these shifts have been made, it is no longer possible to go back, you see differently. We may well need reminding, and it is important for reflexive practice to become a part of who we are. However, it is hoped that reflexive students would then take a different view, one that involves looking at the bigger picture, prioritising the relevance of context and acknowledging the value of connecting to live experience. We need to know that each person has a story and that each story is important and relevant. As stated by Kaya & Seleti (2014), "research in Africa can no longer be conducted with local communities and people as if their views and personal experiences are of no significance". It is hoped then that reflexive students and practitioners will take community views and experience into account as a part of their overall research or in their professional lives; and that this will be done based on a full recognition of all people's rights to analyse their own reality. It is further hoped then that there is an overall move away from expert-participant relationships towards more holistic and participatory partnerships.

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