Narrative Studies In Bildung Didactics: An Outline

Ruhi Tyson, PhD student
Stockholm University, Department of Education

1. Introduction
In research on education the field roughly covered by the concept of Bildung has seen a wide-ranging discussion philosophically but less has been said and done from an empirical and teacher-vocational perspective (Rittelmeyer 2012, Tyson 2015a, 2015b). Bildung includes matters such as: formation of character, ethical and aesthetic knowledge/capability, capacity for wise deliberation and reflection as well as the development of personal autonomy (Klafki 2000, Rittelmeyer 2012) and is defined here in close connection with the Aristotelian phronesis or practical wisdom (Tyson 2015b) in the sense that to afford Bildung in education, from a practical standpoint, is, to a large degree, about a teacher’s phronesis. The theoretical framework for this is phronetic social science as articulated by Flyvbjerg (2001) and Schram (2012).

The aim in this paper is to present an outline of narratively articulated cases in Bildung didactics, a field of research closely related to both Bildungsgangdidaktik (Gessler 1988, Terhart 2009, Trautmann 2004) and reflective practice (Schön 1983, 1987). It can be understood as building on Schön’s work at the point where he explicitly states that his aim has not been to explore “wisdom in response to the ethical dilemmas of practice” (1987:xiii). It can also be understood as continuing the impulse advocated for by Shulman in 1987 (2004, p. 232):

One of the frustrations of teaching as an occupation and profession is its extensive individual and collective amnesia, the consistency with which the best creations of its practitioners are lost to both contemporary and future peers. Unlike fields such as architecture (which preserves its creations in both plans and edifices), law (which builds a case literature of opinions and interpretations), medicine (with its records and case studies), and even unlike chess, bridge, or ballet (with their traditions of preserving both memorable games and choreographed performances through inventive forms of notation and recording), teaching is conducted without an audience of peers. It is devoid of a history of practice.

… We have concluded from our research with teachers … that the potentially codifiable knowledge that can be gleaned from the wisdom of practice is extensive. … A major portion of the research agenda for the next decade will be to collect, collate, and interpret the practical knowledge of teachers for the purpose of establishing a case literature …

In the outline a conceptual framework for narratively articulated Bildung didactics will be briefly presented consisting of the techne/phronesis distinction (Biesta 2013, Dunne 1993, Kinsella & Pitmann 2012), narratives as articulated practice (Clandinin & Connelly 1995, Gallagher 2010, McDruy & Alterio 2002, McEwan & Egan 1995, Moon 2010, Tyson 2015a), didactics (Uljens 1997) as an entwined practice of techne (craft-like practical knowledge) and phronesis (prudence/practical wisdom), and finally, pedagogical imagination as the central concept in mediating between general ideas and particular practice, drawing on Schön’s (1987) idea that skilled practitioners have a repertoire of previous experiences that they reinterpret to enrich their confrontation with new situations.

The empirical basis for this draws on five recent studies. One is the biography of craftmaster Wolfgang B. (Tyson 2015a, b, 2016d) and his paradigmatic narratives of Bildung didactics as experienced over the course of his vocational education. One is a report on an enacted curriculum of social development and the pattern it affords for creative curriculum work in school based vocational education (Tyson 2016c). Three are studies that in different
ways have tried to scale the initial results from the biographical study by introducing more specific Bildung didactical question in various teacher education contexts as tasks for the teacher students. One is a study first reported at ECER 2015 (Pedagogical imagination and practical wisdom: the role of good narratives in teacher education and professional development, subsequently becoming an article Tyson (2016a)) concerned with narratives of successful conflict resolution among after-school care teachers. The second is a study with vocational teacher students and their stories of vocational Bildung experiences during their own vocational training (Tyson 2016e). The third is a study with students at a nursing teacher program and their stories of existential Bildung didactical events in their experience and handling of patients’ suffering and similar matters (one case discussed in Tyson 2016b).

It will be argued that there are a number of Bildung-related educational matters, not least in teacher education and teacher professional development, where a narrative articulation can contribute. These can be differentiated in at least five groups: enriching knowledge of vocational and subject-related tasks; conceptual development and critical reflection; advancement of practice; development of ‘practice fields’ and the articulation of patterns of Bildung affordances. In distinguishing these different ways in which Bildung as a form of practical knowledge can be enriched through narrative studies the presentation contributes to our capacity for doing systematic research in the subject area.

2. Bildung didactics, a conceptual outline

Briefly put Bildung encompasses those aspects of an education that go beyond the more craft-like combination of skills and knowledge to encompass matters such as character development, ethics, aesthetic sensibilities and more. Practical wisdom focuses specifically on ethical action and deliberation on how to promote human flourishing through such action. Didactics as practical knowledge is a way of considering those parts of teaching that are enacted, that require practice for proficiency and thus the focus of Bildung didactical research is on how Bildung and phronesis can become part of a practical didactical knowledge. This is done through case narratives because narratives can function as articulations of actions making them open to public discussion. Finally, pedagogical imagination is the capacity with which we formulate such narratives as well as make sense of them and (potentially) reinterpret them into further action and research.

In order to illustrate this conceptual framework, before expanding on its elements, here is a brief case narrative from one of the studies conducted (previously published in Tyson 2016a). Because the case studies have all been done within the context of vocational education and training (VET) the case is not from an ordinary school context but from a vocational. However, there is nothing preventing similar studies to be made in ordinary teacher education and at schools (I will discuss this briefly at the end of the paper). The narrative was written as part of an assignment given to students at an in-service after-school care teacher education program in Sweden. The assignment was to write a case narrative of successful non-violent conflict resolution based on the ideas of Marshall Rosenberg (2003).

The Pocket Mirror

At our fritids we have a boy we can call Olle. He’s in third grade. He’s the kind of boy that one knows is at fritids when he’s there. Both teachers and children find him disturbing (he yells and makes a lot of sound) and he often disrupts activities and play through his way of being and acting. This time he had taken a small pocket mirror from a girl and refused to return it. The girl herself did not come to get me but sent another one who complained that Olle had taken the other girls pocket mirror and asked me to come help get it back. I went into the room close by where Olle sat followed by a tail of children who were keen on seeing what was going to happen. There was considerable tension in the air since this wasn’t a unique occurrence and it’s always exiting to see how we in the staff deal with such situations. I sat down next to Olle, breathed out and said: Hi Olle! Do you like mirrors?

Olle: Yes I do.

Me: Do you have any mirrors of your own?
Olle: Yes, but it’s huge. (He gets up and measures with his hands and judging by the size it must be a wall mirror)
Me: Wow, that’s a large mirror!
Olle: Yes.
Me: Yes, it would look pretty funny if you came to school on your bike with that under your arm (laughing kindly).
Olle looks happy, then he gets up and gives the girl back her pocket mirror on his own accord without my saying anything more. All the children looking on seem satisfied and after that things return to normal. At the end of the day I notice that Olle once again has the girl’s mirror and he notices me noticing. I don’t say anything but he understands anyway that I am curious about the mirror. He says that he got it from the girl and she confirms it. She thought he could have it since he didn’t have one and she had several at home.

This is an example of what a case narrative can be. Other forms of case narratives are reports (cf. Tyson 2016c), biographical cases, descriptions of longer processes and, potentially, focus group interviews. The main factor that needs to be adhered to is that the case is a description of actions and/or contexts for actions (ie. for the most part enacted and experienced curricula). It is a case of unusual success (at least in the context of non-violent communication) in that the conflict was resolved without moralizing, judgment or orders. It is a didactical case because it gives access to the actions of the participants thus making it a potential case of practical knowledge, which other practitioners can use in order to inform their own actions and reflections about potential action. As part of multiple case studies on similar matters it also provides a point of entry for inquiry into what can be termed practice-fields, ie. parts of a practice such as after-school care that are concerned with conflict resolution. Although the narrative is concerned with a very particular subject, wise communicative action, this falls squarely within the context of both Bildung and phronesis as concepts. However, other cases from the various studies conducted are more immediately connected to Bildung-experiences and are relayed through biographical accounts. One needs to bear in mind that case narratives such as the above, that fall within the conceptual sphere of practical wisdom, are not themselves about education but about ethical action in an educational context. The didactical perspective makes them educationally relevant. Case narratives that focus more on Bildung carry this educational aspect with them and concern themselves with situations of learning (formal or informal).

Human flourishing is defined through the case narratives, flourishing in the above narrative being the mutual enrichment that the participants can be assumed to experience. The concept of pedagogical imagination is introduced in order to clarify that the case narrative is not unambiguously useful to scholars and practitioners but that it requires interpretation, perception and aesthetic judgment in order to create it, recognize it, relate it to other situations, relate it to the general ideas or concepts that are enacted in it and to reframe it in other similar situations. Pedagogical imagination is a central component of the conceptual framework that is Bildung didactics because it makes explicit the kind of activity that practitioners and scholars have to engage in when dealing with ambiguous or open-ended kinds of practical knowledge, ie. those kinds that do not have one single correct answer and where applied theory is able to offer a simple solution. It is also a direct continuation of the suggestions made by Martha Nussbaum (1990) and others (Gallagher 2013, Noel 1999a, b, Wall 2003) for an education of the moral imagination. Nussbaum bases her line of reasoning on works of fiction and relates these to a more general and existential education of moral imagination. The perspective advanced here uses actual cases from vocational contexts (education mostly) and is oriented more towards the education of a moral-pedagogical imagination that is intimately entwined with a teacher’s craft-like (Aristotle’s techne) practical knowledge, eg. her pedagogical content knowledge.

Having outlined the conceptual framework I can go on to say a few words about the methods and research design employed in this kind of inquiry.
3. Considerations on method and research design

The research design consists of single and multiple case studies where each narrative or even parts of a longer narrative (as in the biography of Mr. B.) can be viewed as a case. Each case can contribute to several different viewpoints. As argued by Flyvbjerg (2001), Larsson (2009) and Thomas (2010) there are black swan cases, paradigmatic cases, critical cases, cases that reveal patterns and information gathering cases that all hold relevance in the present context in relation to the five contributions enumerated initially. In the context of narratively articulated practical knowledge relating to the value-laden concept of Bildung, the central condition is that the narratives be of unusual success or richness (cf. eg. Kelchtermans 2015). This is in line with a phronetic perspective where social science research should contribute to the development of practice (Schram 2012), but also a matter of ensuring that the narratives can function as the case forms listed above. All of them share the common attribute of being more likely to yield new and interesting knowledge/perspectives to the extent that they deviate from the norm and the expected.

The methods for documenting such cases are, for the most part, interviewing and written assignments within an educational program or professional development course. The conceptual framework has proven to be intuitively accessible to practitioners, meaning that a brief introduction (30-45 min) together with a written summary and some examples of cases is sufficient for most participants in a didactics course to be able to write case narratives such as the one presented (although many are not close to as spectacular).1

The ethical ramifications of such narratives are comparatively limited given that they focus on situations of human flourishing. To the extent that they risk exposing someone to harm they need to be adequately anonymized and care still must be taken when deciding if a narrative should be published or not.

Interpretation of the narratives does not follow a specific analytical method but depends on the case perspective taken (if it is viewed as a black swan or a paradigmatic narrative for example) and on familiarity with the conceptual framework. The framework is the tool or lens through which the narratives can be understood as Bildung didactical narratives in the various ways outlined.

4. Conclusion

The narrative approach to Bildung didactics from the perspective of practical knowledge (both as techne and phronesis) affords a tentative conclusion that there are at least five different areas of research and practice where such studies can contribute (this is extensively discussed in Tyson 2016b):

- Enriching knowledge of vocational and subject-related tasks refers to the articulation of Bildung-experiences as part of working with specific tasks in school and elsewhere that are otherwise difficult to understand and evaluate beyond their techne-aspects.
- Conceptual development and critical reflection is a matter of enriching Bildung-philosophy through empirical research and promoting critical reflection among scholars and practitioners in relation to Bildung didactics.
- The advancement of practice is related to the enrichment of practitioners’ pedagogical imagination through an enlarged repertoire of Bildung didactical narratives.
- The development of ‘practice fields’ is the accumulation of Bildung didactical narratives in a specific field of practice such as conflict resolution in primary school settings where this accumulation reaches a point at which the cases are not just single examples but taken together represent a dynamic articulation of such practice as a whole, to the extent that it is unusually wise.

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1 These handouts are available from the author upon request.
• Finally the articulation of patterns of Bildung affordances is a way through which empirical case studies can surface curriculum patterns that are valuable as tools for creating and modifying other curricula.

All this, in turn, suggests that the approach is a valuable part of educational research and especially teacher education and professional development. Although at the present only a small number of studies have been conducted, they suggest that this is a way of surfacing practitioner wisdom, bringing the academic field of research into closer proximity with that of educational practice and contributing to a reflective practice that is more systematically driven towards advancing practice. The general evaluations made after the courses in which these tasks were given indicate that practitioners also found this to be a particularly rewarding way of working and that it provided them with a framework of concepts through which they were able to see and reflect on important aspects of their hitherto tacit knowledge.

References


