**Life narrative in the academy - An invitation to transgression?**

**Abstract**

As teachers in an Israeli university, we have both taken up the challenge of teaching courses focused on life narratives to diverse groups of students including Jewish and Palestinian Israelis from varied backgrounds. In addition to the usual difficulties of dialogue across difference, the intractable political conflict which forms the backdrop of our lives provides an often painful edge to experiences inside the university classroom, making communication tense and unpredictable.

In both cases, our courses put the personal narrative center stage. One course is grounded in an anthropologically informed perspective on the life course; the other in a perspective informed by narrative inquiry and a pedagogy of border-crossing. While one course asks students to tell their own life story using a wide range of media including art, photographs and objects, the other focuses on writing the life story of a significant person. Both courses seek to turn a critical eye on the very practice of telling our life stories, a particularly contemporary form of what Giddens (1991) referred to as “self as reflexive project". Nonetheless, we acknowledge that the courses themselves inevitably engage students in such projects, yet at the same time we seek to foster a critical discourse - what Bakhtin (1981) terms an “internally persuasive discourse” that doesn’t entirely take up the authoritative discourse(s) of the wider society. Both courses at best constitute transgressive acts in the academic setting which typically ignores the personal knowledge of students. Moreover, within the context of the classroom – in which stories are displayed, told and listened to in a collaborative group – such stories may cross the boundaries of the individual storyteller and evoke critical insights into the social worlds and discourses in which they are shaped and where they may resonate.

Our presentation will focus on significant moments in the trajectory of each course, as well as on the written and oral/performance products of both courses. We explore the ways in which students engage in the creative, and ultimately highly personal, efforts required of them to fulfil course requirements. We also draw on our own reflections as teachers, asking: What kind of journey is engaged, and what does this process allow both teachers and students to do, learn and become? What questions can be entertained within the discursive world of the course? What possibilities can be imagined that might not emerge in everyday life or in other academic courses? With Conroy (2004), we ask how and to what extent these courses create a “liminal place” and, as such, what transgressions of the mind and imagination do they allow?

**References**

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Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*, Cambridge: Polity Press.