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Author(s): Vähäsantanen, Katja; Arvaja, Maarit

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The narrative approach to research professional identity: Relational, temporal, and dialogical perspectives¹

Katja Vähäsantanen^{a, b} & Maarit Arvaja^b

^a *Department of Education, University of Jyväskylä, Finland*

^b *Finnish Institute for Educational Research, University of Jyväskylä, Finland*

In this chapter, we present the narrative approach as applied in the field of professional learning. The specific aim is to present the methodological opportunities and concerns it raises in research on professional identity within the sociocultural frames of work environments. We utilise examples from empirical studies that have employed a range of narrative methods to collect and analyse datasets. The datasets include individuals' written and spoken narratives, encompassing the told experiences of their identities, and the meanings underlying these. We illustrate how a particular strength of narrative research lies in its ability to portray temporal pathways through the phenomena under investigation, and the relational and dialogical aspects pertaining to them. We also discuss the main challenges in the approach, and how it may be possible to conduct credible and significant research despite the challenges. We conclude with a discussion on future avenues of narrative research in the field of professional learning.

1. Introduction

Research on professional learning has evolved in different contexts² and in many directions (e.g. Billett et al., 2014). One emergent trend is the investigation of professional learning through the lens of professional identity, as noted by Tynjälä (2013). Professional identity can be understood as individuals' experience-based understanding of their professional interests, goals, ambitions, positions, values, identifications, and future prospects (Arvaja, 2016; Beijaard et al., 2004; Vähäsantanen et al., 2020). Professional identity is largely negotiated in relation to the sociocultural frameworks of work environments; however, it is also based on the agentic activities of individuals, which produce both transformations and continuities in professional identities over time (Beijaard et al., 2004; Kira & Balkin, 2014). In other words, as understood within a sociocultural framework

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² Although professional learning can take place in educational trajectories before entering work contexts, this chapter focuses on persons who are actually employed as professionals in the work context.

(Vähäsantanen, 2022), professional identity is always negotiated and constructed at the temporal and emotional interface of the personal and the social dimension. In efforts to elaborate the relational nature of professional identity, one should consider especially how professional identity can be balanced or tensioned in relation to work contexts, and the kinds of emotions that emerge from professional identity–work relationships (Kira & Balkin, 2014).

Professional identity is undoubtedly at the core of changing working life, but we would argue that insufficient use has been made of *narrative approaches* in explorations of professional learning, including professional identity (for exceptions, see e.g. Goodson et al., 2010; Vähäsantanen, 2022). In this chapter we elaborate the narrative approach as applied to professional identity. We emphasise that the narrative approach refers to a frame of reference, and that within it, different methods can be used to collect and analyse data (Biesta et al., 2008; Caine et al., 2013). The general idea is to investigate individuals' experiences with a view to understanding their (professional) lives, including their identities (Spector-Mersel, 2010). Overall, the narrative approach emphasises that the narratives³ of individuals give insights into how individuals make sense of themselves, and of the experiences, feelings, and events in their lives (Goodson et al., 2010; Riessman, 2008).

The specific aim here is to address the methodological opportunities and concerns associated with the narrative approach in research on professional identity. In the present chapter, a sociocultural framework is applied as a theoretical umbrella for understanding professional identity in narrative research, which is viewed from temporal, relational, and dialogical perspectives. This chapter will first introduce the main theoretical and methodological backbones of narrative identity research. It will then illustrate how one can collect empirical data on professional identity in a variety of ways (including both written and spoken narratives), and how different analytical methods can emphasise different principles in investigating professional identity. Selecting from different methods applicable to the narrative framework, we (i) focus on interviews and diaries as narrative data-collecting methods, and (ii) consider two kinds of narrative thematic analyses and a form of narrative-positioning analysis. For this purpose, we shall utilise methodological and empirical examples drawn from published professional identity studies (Arvaja, 2016, 2018; Ursin et al., 2020), and also apply a novel analytical process. Finally, this chapter will consider the strengths and future avenues of narrative research as applied to professional learning.

2. Theoretical and methodological considerations in narrative identity research

³ Here, we consider narrative as a sequence of events and experiences which is significant for the narrator, and which reveals identity (Bamberg, 2012; Biesta et al., 2008; Moen, 2006). The word 'narrative' is often used in different ways in the literature and also in our chapter: (i) what the subject tells (i.e. the *told* narrative), and (ii) what researchers reconstruct based on told narratives (i.e. the *constructed* narrative). Here, we understand that an interview and diary can include one or several told identity narratives. During the analysis, these told identity narratives can be constructed as a single thematically coherent and/or temporal narrative.

In narrative identity research, the focus is on the actual construction of narratives, and the role they play in the social construction of identity (e.g. Wortham, 2001). Hence, narratives are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; rather – in the words of Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992, p. 1) – they are 'the means by which identities may be fashioned'. In this sense, identity is understood as itself taking the form of a narrative. Viewed in this light, a narrative approach to data collection and analysis is a natural and viable means of understanding professionals' identity.

In the kind of narrative data collection that aims to study professional identity – such as via interviews or a diary – professionals are usually prompted to narrate experiences, and to reflect on their doing, thinking, and feeling as professionals. This telling of the narrative often involves a *temporal* perspective (e.g. Bamberg, 2012; Riessman, 2008), including space-time transitions that connect the here-and-now with previous and anticipated events and experiences (Biesta et al., 2008). Past experiences and understandings are used as a reflective mirror for evaluating the present, or new ones are incorporated for shaping the future self (Lee & Schallert, 2016). Thus, through told narratives, professionals do not just represent a current professional identity; they also construct and negotiate the identity through narrating the self within various time scales (Bamberg, 2012; McAlpine, 2016; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). In this sense, the narrative approach makes it possible to see the construction of professional identity, including *transformation* in the professional identity, via the subject's narrated past, present, and future (Wortham, 2001).

Nevertheless, the mere representational, constructive, and transformative value of a told narrative is one-sided, insofar as narrative includes also a *relational* aspect (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Wortham, 2001). In representing and constructing identity, the narrator simultaneously positions the self in relation to the social and cultural context, which comprises notably other people and institutions, and what these stand for (Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Wortham, 2001). All in all, narrative identity construction can be seen as a negotiation between a person and a sociocultural context; in this sense, it is not purely something that takes place in the mind of an individual (Goodson et al., 2010; Vähäsantanen, 2022).

In this chapter, in line with narrative research, we understand professional identities as constructed by means of narratives resulting from intra/interpersonal dialogues about meaningful experiences (Assen et al., 2018). Such told narratives can be (as in our material) created via interviews and diaries, which may provide a window to understand professional identities (Biesta et al., 2008; Goodson et al., 2010). In this sense, told narratives can be seen as a surface of contact with a lived and experienced life, and with the individual's identity in relation to the sociocultural context.

By means of narrative analysis, researchers interpret and draw conclusions from narratives that are told, written, or visualised (Riessman, 2008). Through analysis, researchers construct an understanding of human actions and experiences, and form meanings regarding the phenomenon under investigation (e.g. Polkinghorne, 1995). In narrative identity research, the analysis can reveal how people at a given moment tell about, represent, and construct their identities (Assen et al., 2018). Narrative analysis can further organise experiences, events, and happenings – and also

identities – into a temporal and/or context-bound whole by means of a ‘plot’ (Biesta et al., 2008; Moen, 2006; Polkinghorne, 1995).

In practice, there are different versions of narrative methods (e.g. Lieblich et al., 1998). In this chapter, we focus on sociocultural and dialogical approaches to narrative identity construction and its analysis. Thus, the analysis of told narratives goes beyond the mere informational value of ‘telling about oneself’; hence, it notably stresses the *constructive, relational, and transformative* nature of narrative (Caine et al., 2013; Hermans, 2001; McAlpine, 2016).

For present purposes, in the case of interview research, Section 3 shows how professional identity can be analysed *thematically* by employing categorical and holistic lenses. *Categorical* analysis focuses on identity themes across told narratives, as recounted by several persons, seeking thus to provide a comprehensive picture of all identifiable kinds of identities across participants at given time. *Holistic* analysis, for its part, focuses on the identity themes of an individual participant to illustrate how, in that person, different identities are connected and overlap over time. Section 4 introduces a *dialogical* approach to study professional identity via learning diaries. Wortham’s (2001) method on narrative positioning is used to illustrate how the professional self is narratively constructed by positioning oneself in relation to others (including both people and institutions) and their voices.

3. A thematic perspective on professional identity

3.1. Telling professional identity narratives in dialogical interviews

In the following sections, we present analytical and empirical examples from studies conducted with professionals working in a university. The participants in total covered 20 academics (males and females) working, for example, as university lecturers and researchers at different stages in their academic careers. The data from these people were all obtained via the same *thematic narrative interview* protocol (for other narrative data collection methods, see e.g. McAlpine, 2016). The narrative interview method was used in order to elicit individuals’ told narratives about their professional identity, viewable from different aspects and temporal perspectives (e.g. Riessman, 2008). Different aspects of professional identity (understood mainly as professionals’ interests, ambitions, and values) emerged as themes in the interviews. In particular, the interviews included the following themes, which could be positioned on a three-dimensional temporal continuum: (i) work history, (ii) current work, identity, and agency, and (iii) future professional prospects.

Following previous narrative procedures (e.g. Riessman, 2008), no rigorous guidelines or strictly formulated questions were applied in the interviews, the aim being to hear as authentic a narration as possible. In relation to each theme, we asked one general (open-ended) question; subsequently we asked more specific questions on themes relating to the interviewees’ narration. For example, in the case of the second theme, the open-ended question was formulated as ‘Would you please describe your experiences of your current work?’ while the more specific questions included: ‘Could you tell us about your main interests and values at work?’ and ‘What possibilities are there to

enact your main interests in your current work?’ This illustrates how the interviews posed questions on the relational dimension of professional identity, covering how professional identity can be constructed, expressed, and realised in relation to the work environment (Kira & Balkin, 2014). In other words, the more specific questions above sought to gain a narration covering the balanced and tensioned relationship between professional identity and the context.

During the interviews, the interviewees were encouraged to freely describe their perceptions, experiences, and thoughts concerning the themes in question. The overall rationale for this was to create a supportive narrative practice for telling about one’s experiences and identities. At the same time, the interviews constituted dialogical situations, such that both the interviewer and interviewee were able to exchange ideas and experiences. All in all, the told narratives should be understood as *relationally* produced through an interpersonal *dialogue* between the researcher and the participant, situated within a specific *context* (McAlpine, 2016; Riessman, 2008; Vähäsantanen & Saarinen, 2013). Narrative interview methods have certain advantages compared to, for example, diaries (Case 3), or the use of an empathy-based story method (e.g. Wallin et al., 2020) that both produce written texts. Narrative interviews support free telling, and allow the interview to ask clarifying questions, with possibilities for gaining profound data and/or opportunities to hear individuals’ own experiences. On the other hand, interview studies are time-consuming, and might tend to produce socially accepted answers in a dialogue.

3.2. *Thematic methods to narrative analysis*

The following two sections (3.3 and 3.4) demonstrate how the interview data described above can be analysed via two *thematic narrative analysis methods*. The methods differ in important respects, but both are thematic. Thus, in the both cases, the main theme (i.e. professional identity) encompassed how people perceive themselves as professionals, and also the relational dimensions of professional identity. The main purpose of analysis processes was to identify what individuals explicitly tell about their (professional) identity (see also Lieblich et al., 1998). To some extent, *thematic narrative analysis* resembles *traditional thematic analysis*, insofar as both methods are interpretative methods and aim to identify themes from datasets (McAllum et al., 2019). However, the methods in question also have significant differences. In segmenting the data into themes across interviews, traditional thematic analysis does not indicate how events are linked together, and does not seek to give a sense of an overall ‘whole’ (McAllum et al., 2019). By contrast, narrative researchers do not divide up the data; rather, they work with contingent sequences within the data, that is, with the temporal and/or sequential linking of events/themes, actions, and actors (McAllum et al., 2019; Riessman, 2008).

The thematic narrative analytical methods described in this chapter were used for different purposes. An important difference lies in the fact that the aim of the *categorical-thematic* analysis (used in Case 1, Section 3.3) was to identify all the various kinds of thematic descriptions of identity relevant to constructing cultural identity narratives at a given time, using data from several participants. In particular, the notion of a *thematic plot* in the constructed narratives refers to how identity descriptions are sequenced with related themes (i.e. agency, emotions, and context). By contrast, the

holistic-thematic analysis (used in Case 2, Section 3.4) aimed to identify and construct holistically an *individual* narrative on professional identity; it was based on a single interview, and created, notably, a *temporal plot* encompassing the evolution of particular professional identity themes (without neglecting emotions and context). In this way, the analysis of Case 2 sought to illustrate the *temporal path* of identity, including transitions in the occurrence of identity themes. It analysed professional identity themes within a case (i.e. one participant), in contrast to Case 1, which analysed professional identity themes across the cases (i.e. participants). Both cases included the aim of presenting the findings as narratives in manner that is fairly typical in (thematic) narrative research (McAlpine, 2016), but not in traditional thematic analysis. A narrative's meaning is derived from its plot, which sequentially and/or temporally orders themes and events, thus constructing a whole in which the parts are contingent upon one another (McAllum et al., 2019).

3.3. A *categorical-thematic* analysis aimed at cultural identity narratives (Case 1)

In this section we demonstrate how a categorical-thematic analysis can be applied to identify different cultural identity narratives, resulting in general statements across a number of academics (for somewhat similar examples see Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013). Our examples and reflections here are based on published research originally conducted to investigate professional identity, agency, and emotions among academics working in a university (Ursin et al., 2020).

In the categorical-thematic analysis, the main focus of the analysis was not on an individual academic; rather it was on a fairly coherent communicative act that appeared to be representative across academics (Lieblich et al., 1998). The total analytical process included the following stages. Firstly, we identified different told narratives of identity within and across eight individual interviews, and identified and categorised three different descriptions of identity, based on the content of the empirical accounts. The labels applied were *teacher*, *researcher*, and *combined researcher-teacher*. Secondly, we identified and categorised (from the empirical accounts) the main *individual* and *sociocultural factors* that constrained or resourced each identity; these included, for example, the work community and the academic position. That is, this analytical stage also aimed to recognise the relational dimension of identity; that is, how professional identity is negotiated in relation to social context, but also to individual backgrounds. Thirdly, we identified how the emotions and/or agency were presented in the case of each different identity description. For example, we identified what kinds emotion emerged when participants told about their identity. Fourthly, we categorised *agency* on the basis of its strength (i.e. as weak, moderate, or strong), and the *emotions* according to their nature (i.e. as negative or positive).

Fifthly, we employed a culturally-based narrative analysis. Such an analysis is based on the notion that there are culturally available narratives which individuals draw on (and modify) to make sense of their experiences, and that an individual may draw on more than one narrative in explaining the experiences (see McAlpine, 2016). The goal of this analysis was to derive coherent narratives based on the told narratives of the interviewees (which had been categorised during previous phases) in order to see the kinds of identities that were constructed in the interviews, and also, the kinds of

emotions and agency related to them. Based on the differences in these themes, five identity narratives were constructed and presented in a thematic narrative form (see Table 1). The narratives thus did not include a temporal 'identity plot' over time, encompassing identity transformations. They could nevertheless be said to embody plots, to the extent that the researchers organised the narratives in a sequentially thematic manner (Polkinghorne, 1995). In this sense, a plot tied together the main theme (i.e. professional identity) and various related themes (e.g. the relationship between identity and sociocultural context, and the emotions emerging from the relationships) in order to demonstrate the sequence of different themes.

Finally, we categorised notably the identity narratives in terms of *balance* (which means in particular an alignment between the identity and the context, in terms of producing positive emotions), and *tension*, which refers in particular to an emotionally unpleasant mismatch between the identity and the context (cf. Gergen and Gergen, 1986). Lying somewhere between these extremes there was also a narrative of *ambivalence*, which combined elements from both views concerning teacher and researcher identities, and which attached to them variable emotions. In other words, the categories of balance, tension, and ambivalence encompass different thematic plots pertaining to identity narratives. Table 1 provides an overview of the five narratives of professional identity among academics. The narratives in the written form are presented in our previous study (Ursin et al., 2020).

Table 1. Cultural narratives of professional identity (modified from Ursin et al., 2020)

	Identity narratives	Relational dimension of identity	Agency	Emotions
Balanced	<i>Confident teacher</i>	Firm and socially constructed together with colleagues and students.	Strong agency promoted by colleagues, superiors, and one's own interests.	Confidence, meaningfulness, satisfaction, enjoyment, happiness.
	<i>Passionate researcher</i>	Channelled by intrinsic motivation, with position permitting full commitment to research.	Strong agency supported by one's own interests and colleagues.	Enthusiasm, enjoyment, satisfaction, meaningfulness, excitement.
Tensioned	<i>Insecure teacher</i>	Lack of competencies to be a knowledgeable teacher; a restrictive working environment.	Weak agency, framed by unsupportive colleagues and lack of one's own resources.	Insecurity, disappointment, exhaustion, non-appreciation.
	<i>Inadequate researcher</i>	Lack of competencies to be a proper researcher with experiences of institutional barriers.	Weak agency, framed by lack of one's own resources.	Inadequacy, exhaustion, insecurity, guilt, anxiety, sense of unfairness, fear.
Combined	<i>Ambivalent academic</i>	Balanced and at times tensed relationship between teacher and researcher identities.	Moderate agency, framed by superiors and individual resources.	Satisfaction, appreciation, meaningfulness, enjoyment, confusion.

3.4. A holistic-thematic analysis: to encompass temporality in identity (Case 2)

Here we move towards a holistic, case-centred strategy that encompassed a temporal dimension in professional identity (e.g. Spector-Mersel, 2010). In theoretical terms, temporality in professional

identity means taking into account answers to the following questions: 'Who was I as a professional in the past?', 'Who am I as a professional at the moment?', 'Who do I want to become as a professional in the future?' (Beijaard et al., 2004; Vähäsantanen, 2022). Working within a socioculturally oriented narrative framework, Sfard and Prusak (2005) emphasise also the temporal dimensions of identity by distinguishing two subsets of significant narratives about the person, namely (i) *actual identity* – which involves factual assertions consisting of narratives about the actual state of affairs, and (ii) *designated identity* – which consists of narratives presenting a state of affairs which is expected, wished for, or obligated in terms of becoming part of the person's identity. We shall take up each of these notions below.

The analysis (as conducted for the purposes of this chapter) aimed to reveal the temporal complexity and uniqueness of a professional identity trajectory via an interview with one academic (pseudonym Leana). To this end, a *holistic-thematic* approach was utilised (Lieblich et al., 1998; for a somewhat similar example see Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011). Thus, the main focus of the analysis was to reveal how the main theme (i.e. professional identity) was told and constructed over time, that is, how it evolved from beginning to end during the interview. The analysis also aimed to encompass the relational and emotional aspects of professional identity.

In practice, the analytical process included the following phases: (i) reading the interview, (ii) searching for told narratives of professional identity and naming such identity expressions according to their nature, paying particular attention to indicators of teacher identity, researcher identity, and combined identity, (iii) focusing on the relational and emotional dimensions of professional identity in the selected told narratives – which in practice meant that we identified how the sociocultural context supported or constrained a specific identity, and the kinds of emotions that emerged from such balanced or tensioned relationships, and (iv) categorising the told narratives according their temporal frame (which could be the past, the present, or the future).

Finally, to illustrate Leana's professional identity trajectory, we developed a narrative with a temporal plot, here synthesising the contents into a coherent developmental account (Polkinghorne, 1995), with temporal descriptions of different kinds of identities, proceeding from the past to the future. The temporal phases of Leana's identity trajectory were named as (i) remembering her previous professional identity, (ii) constructing her current professional identity, and (iii) designating her future professional identity.

In the text below (see also Table 2), the constructed narrative on Leana's professional identity trajectory is presented in such a way as to include these temporal phases. Each phase demonstrates a specifically temporal dimension in the conveying of Leana's professional identity – including its relational and emotional dimensions – within the interview.

Table 2. A temporally organised individual narrative of professional identity

	Description of identity		Relational dimension of identity	Emotional dimension of identity
Remembering a previous identity	<i>Teacher identity</i>	The professional passion had been teaching.	The job description allowed teacher identity to flourish, together with intrinsic motivation.	Enacting the teacher identity created pleasant emotions, such as enjoyment.
	<i>Researcher identity</i>	The researcher identity was not the desired identity.	The job description emphasised teaching.	Reluctance towards the researcher identity.
Constructing a current identity	<i>Combined identity</i>	The teacher and researcher roles were united in practice, but the combined identity was not as desired.	The job description pushed for combining teaching and researching.	The combined identity felt 'insane' and stressful.
	<i>Researcher identity</i>	Professional passions were associated with being a researcher.	The job description did not support fully this identity.	Along with awareness of the research interest, the hope of situational change was present.
Designating a future identity	<i>Researcher identity</i>	The future ideal was to focus on research.	The future job description enabled, and intrinsic motivation boosted this identity.	The researcher identity was mainly associated with excitement.
	<i>Back-up identity</i>	This future identity offered an escape from possible unwanted scenarios that did not support the research identity.	Previous education made this option possible.	The back-up identity emerged from fears concerning the future, and a possible escape from an unwanted scenario.

Remembering a previous professional identity. Related to her past professional identity (Beijaard et al., 2004), Leana remembered clearly 'who she was in the past' (Example 1 below), but she also described her identity in terms of 'who she did not want to be in the past' (Example 2 below). With reference to her career, Leana indicated that teaching had been her main task at the university during the years she had worked there, and that she had taught countless different courses. She emphasised her past identity from the perspective of being a teacher, and she characterised herself as being a teacher who really enjoyed teaching, and the contact with the students:

Example 1. Well, I thought very strongly that I was a teacher, and I enjoyed teaching and being in contact with the students.

Leana's job description was also in line with her intrinsic motivation towards teaching, and it allowed her teacher identity to flourish. In addition, Leana mentioned her past researcher identity in terms of something that she could never have imagined earlier in her career:

Example 2. I even had a feeling that I would never be a researcher because I could not sit on my own in front of a computer.

Constructing a current professional identity. When Leana talked about her current professional identity, her narration revealed a negotiation between the kind of actual identity she had in practice and the kind of identity she wanted to engage in (Sfard & Prusak 2005). At the present moment, Leana had, for the first time, begun her own research as part of her doctoral studies. In her narrative, Leana emphasised that being a teacher and a researcher were strongly combined in her current professional identity, and also in her work in practice. Nevertheless, this kind of combined identity was tensioned, and the combined identity aroused feelings of confusion and stress due to challenges in combining these two sides of her identity.

Example 3. Now it's a kind of crazy combination of research and teaching, so that I do have a bit of like a schizo feeling about this – when am I a researcher, and when am I a teacher? So perhaps I'm now between these two identities as well, so am I a researcher or am I a teacher, or am I now both? So, I am like, having problems in terms of time and at this identity level.⁴

Leana also gave indications of another kind of current identity, that of being purely a researcher. This was now the identity that she wanted to have, and one that she felt excited about; however, her work duties, including a heavy load of teaching, were not really in line with it. Leana felt as if research would be a way to be excited, and to learn and develop (Example 4); however, she lacked the agency to change a situation in which she felt that teaching sometimes got in the way of this desired identity:

Example 4. Now I do find it terribly wonderful that I've got a chance and time to do research, and I'm really excited... it is now proper research [my main interest], as I would want it to be, and I actually find some teaching periods disturbing. Now I just feel these kinds of things, that what I want now, like really want, is to do that research, and to take it further, and to learn with it.

Designating a future professional identity. In talking about her future identity, Leana described both a designated identity and a back-up identity – i.e. one that would come into play if her designated identity could not flourish. Regarding the future, she now had months in which she could mostly do research in her new academic position. Thereafter, the future was still open and uncertain. Thinking about the future evoked dreams and hopes as well as doubts and fears. These feelings, together with relational and individual factors, affected her possible identities. Leana's designated identity seemed to focus notably on researching. Such an outlook seemed to be supported from a relational perspective, and it awakened many positive feelings, including excitement, satisfaction, and the desire to grow both professionally and personally:

Example 5: I am so excited that now, in the autumn, I'll get to – that I'll have time for research and I am looking forward to it so much, it is such an exciting phase at this point of life.

On the other hand, the uncertainty of the researcher–work continuum – together with possible problems related to not having enough time and support on the way – had also led to the construction of a *back-up* identity. Leana's education offered possibilities to work outside the university, so she also pondered the opportunity to move away from the academic world if

⁴ Examples 3 and 4 in this section were originally published in Ursin et al. (2020).

necessary. Nevertheless, with her current interest in research, this possible identity seemed a relatively unlikely option. It was the emotion of fear for the future (with a possible lack of options to realise her research ambitions) that seemed to guide this back-up identity, rather than any desire to change jobs.

To conclude, Leana's professional identity encompassed different forms and transformations over time. Within one form of her identity there were also various viewpoints; these included the relational dimension (that could support or constrain), and emotions (that were not always consistent), together with a range of motives and expectations.

4. A dialogical approach to narrative self-construction

In this section we demonstrate how the *dialogical* approach to narrative self-construction (Wortham, 2001) – interpreted via the framework of *Dialogical Self Theory* (Hermans, 2001) – provides a methodological basis to study the relational and temporal construction of professional identity. In Dialogical Self theory, identity can be seen as consisting of multiple *I-positions* with diverse perspectives (Hermans, 2001). The I-position of a person is 'a particular voice that has been internalised in one's Self-presentation' (Akkerman et al., 2012, p. 230). Building on Bakhtin's ideas (1984), voice, in turn, can be conceptualised as 'a speaking personality bringing forward a particular perspective of the world' (Akkerman et al., 2012, p. 229).

According to Wortham (2001), the self is narratively constructed through positioning different voices from the social world in relation to each other, and by positioning oneself with respect to these voices. We demonstrate how this narrative (or interactional) positioning, and in particular two of its aspects – namely *voicing* and *evaluating* (here building on accounts of voicing and ventriloquation by Bakhtin, 1984) – provide a useful methodological tool for analysing the relational construction and transformation of professional identity.

4.1 Narrative positioning (Case 3)

We use the learning diaries of one academic, Anna (pseudonym), to exemplify the analysis and process of narrative positioning. Most of the learning diary excerpts we present here appeared in a previous study, which dealt with the process of positioning in teacher identity work (see Arvaja, 2016; 2018). Anna wrote in total 18 diaries while participating in a year-long course on pedagogical studies for adult educators (PSAE). She simultaneously worked as a researcher and teacher at the university. For each diary, the teacher of the programme assigned a topic to be written about, such as: 'My own learning history: which experiences would I like to zoom in on?; What do I think about learning?; How do I react to differences in pedagogical situations?'. The students were instructed to reflect freely on the topics assigned (see also Arvaja, 2016; 2018).

In narrative positioning, the narrator (Anna) establishes both her own and other characters' voices (see also Wortham, 2001). The narrated self in a learning diary is *voiced* (i.e. characterised) through the telling of events, characterisations, and experiences related to Anna herself. These can be

identified mostly by the use of first-person singular pronouns (*I, me, my, mine*). The characters articulated (e.g. named) in the narrative can be seen as external *others* whose voices belong to other individuals, groups, or institutions. The voice(s) of a character represent a recognisable social type or a recognisable type of person with their related characteristics, values, or ideologies (Wortham, 2001; Wortham & Gadsden, 2006). Through *evaluation*, the narrator establishes varying degrees of distance from the voices in the narrative via differentiation from or identification with these voices – for example by taking a critical or supportive stance with regard to them (Wortham, 2001; Wortham & Gadsden, 2006). The narrator uses different indexical cues, such as evaluative verbs, adjectives, and nouns to voice and evaluate the self and others (see also Wortham, 2001, 70–75).

The prime focus in the narrative positioning analysis is on the interconnection of the voices and evaluations that seem to be relevant to Anna's professional I-positioning. In tracing interconnections, a particular aim is to identify recurrences and repetitions in characterising (voicing) and in evaluating, since recurring voices and positionings indicate that the narrator wants to *reinforce* a particular sense of self (Wortham 2001). In the present case, a closer focus on Anna's characterisations and evaluations reveals how she positions herself in relation to (and through) her narrated self and different relevant others. It is through the processes of voicing and evaluating different characters and her narrated self that Anna (the narrator) constructs her professional identity.

In demonstrating Anna's narrative positioning, we focus especially on narrative data in which *boundary experiences* (Assen et al., 2018; Henry & Mollstead, 2022; Hermans, 2013) are reflected. In a boundary experience, the uncertainties, challenges, or disappointments faced in one's life (e.g. in one's work) can lead to disruption and reconfiguration within the dialogical self (Henry & Mollstead, 2022). In these situations, the person often experiences tensions between different I-positions (or between internal and external voices) causing feelings of discomfort and helplessness, or a feeling of being unable to cope (Ceijssel & Meijers, 2005; Ligorio & Tateo, 2007). Nevertheless, the effort to overcome a boundary experience can open up a moment for identity negotiation, often leading to a process of re/de-positioning (Assen et al., 2018) aimed at restoring continuity and consistency in the dialogical self (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010).

4.2 An example of narrative positioning

In the following illustration of narrative positioning, we show how pedagogical studies can be regarded as an external other – an entity that provided new perspectives, allowing Anna to confront and identify the tensions underlying her work and professional identity. The pedagogical studies triggered boundary experiences, i.e. situations in which Anna felt tensions between her different I-positions. These led to a re-negotiation of her professional identity and I-positioning.

At the beginning of the studies, Anna characterised herself (in other words, 'voiced' herself; see Wortham, 2001) as a teacher who preferred to enact a particular teacher 'role' in the teacher-student relationship. However, as the studies proceeded Anna re-negotiated this characterisation in her internal dialogue:

Example 1: I myself have found it good, at least earlier, that I have formed a kind of teacher role for myself, since it is handily there in-between the self and the student in case of difficult situations. (Diary 1).

Somehow, I earlier thought that teachers are of a certain type, I mean they have a specific kind of role. [...] But it would not need to be like this, I mean it's absolutely wonderful that bringing out one's own persona seems to be supported in PSAE! In my earlier days when I was shy and timid, I was probably suffering the most from the fact that I was unable to bring out my own self from behind the protective shell in any sphere of life. Now that I have not had such a strong protective shell for years, I'm somehow annoyed with the idea that I should behave against my personality to be a real teacher. So it's good that things don't have to be like this. Adopting a role has always been hard for me anyway, I mean taking on a role that feels artificial. (Diary 10)⁵

Example 1 above illustrates Anna's renegotiation of her I-position as a teacher. This renegotiation appears in Anna's differentiation (i.e. her evaluation, see Wortham, 2001) from the notion of teachers being a certain type of person (i.e. cultural typification, Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). The pedagogical studies, with their idea of 'bringing out one's own persona', represent an external other, with whose voice Anna now identifies herself. This idea triggers a boundary experience, enabling Anna to observe and explore her I-positions from a meta-position (Hermans, 2013), and become aware of the conflicting voices between them. Anna now seems to feel that her previously adopted teacher I-position does not support her personal I-position, insofar as she cannot now fully identify herself with that teacher positioning. The self-dialogue here manifests itself in an internal dialogue between Anna's collective 'teacher' voice and a personal voice representing her true subjective feelings, i.e. the authentic voice (Marková, 2006).

Anna's storytelling self (Wortham, 2001) also brings her past internal voice into the space of the negotiation. Hence, there are two parallel voices that contradict Anna's present I as a person. These are (i) the external voice of 'the teacher' with an (artificial) role, and (ii) the internal voice of a past (yet still acknowledged) shy self bearing a protective shield. Anna positions her present self as distant from both of these voices, since these would hinder the actualisation of her true self. In her narrative she creates new linkages between her (current) personal I-position and the (now properly understood) teacher I-position, and redefines these so that they are more coherent and dialogically integrated (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). This identity re-negotiation is apparent in the expressions of relief and joy in Anna's narrative. At the end of the studies, Anna characterises these harmonised I-positions:

Example 2: As a teacher, I am easy to approach, and I'm genuinely interested in students and their learning and guiding them, and I can be empathetic to students. [...] I think that being one's own personal self makes it easier to interact with students, since then the interaction situations are more genuine. Moreover, acting as oneself is less exhausting in the psychological sense than enacting a given role. (Diary 17)

In the above example Anna explicitly characterises and represents herself as a (now more authentic) teacher. In this self-positioning Anna speaks with a student-centred voice, as a person who is

⁵ All the examples in this section have been published originally in Arvaja 2016 and/or 2018.

genuinely interested in students and their learning, and who values a genuine relationship with the students. Across several instances, Anna repeats – and thus reinforces (Wortham, 2001) – an identity of being oneself as a teacher, as opposed to taking an artificial role (see also Example 1). Through Anna's narrative self-construction (Examples 1–2) we can see how, during the year-long pedagogical studies, Anna's dialogical self (as regards her teacher and personal I-position) has moved from a state of decentring (disharmony) to a state of centring (harmony), resulting in a more coherent sense of self (Hermans, 2013). Anna has come to an understanding of the kind of teacher she wishes to be.

The pedagogical studies seemed to give rise to another boundary experience leading to a reconfiguration within Anna's dialogical self:

Example 3: It's frightening, too, how my enthusiasm for teaching/guidance is increasing along with PSAE, since the shift of my interest increasingly outside my current job description is weakening my motivation to work in my current job [research]. (Diary 8)

For me, the danger of PSAE actually lies in that I think it's one reason why I am now experiencing such a strong work identity crisis. [...] I mean, PSAE is increasingly opening my eyes to the idea that teaching/education is work that I want to do. (Diary 10)

Example 3 above demonstrates how Anna feels distress in her dual-status academic position. Anna's inner tension and confusion are reflected in the emotional tone of her narrative, insofar as she uses strong, emotionally loaded words: 'frightening', 'danger', and 'identity crisis' (e.g. Ligorio & Tateo, 2007). The external other (i.e. pedagogical studies) promotes new awareness ('opening my eyes'), and offers Anna a new frame of reference to assess and critically reflect on her current professional positions from a meta-position. As a response to (the perspective voiced by) this external other, Anna re-defines her professional I-positioning. Anna's I-position as a researcher is weakening, while her I-position as a teacher is strengthening in the course of the pedagogical studies.

Anna takes a critical position towards the university from her teacher I-position – a position which is based on a student-centred perspective (See Example 2). Anna feels that the reformed university curriculum does not enable her to actualise this perspective:

Example 4: The latest curriculum reform and time limits set for students to finish their studies have, in my opinion, driven university education in a direction that resembles mass production. Earlier, students could write a master's thesis for two different subjects, but now this is prevented. Also, the studies must proceed more straightforwardly, which may prevent choosing more unusual subjects as one's minor. We can say, therefore, that academic freedom has also been reduced for students. (Diary 15)

Discovering one's potential, talents, etc. requires time and time for oneself. As efficiency thinking has spread into university as well, it may affect students' possibilities to recognise and apply their strengths. (Diary 16)

In Example 4, Anna's narrative is double-voiced, in the sense that different voices from the social world are positioned in a dialogue at the level of ideologies associated with these voices (Wortham, 2001). Anna voices the university as a managerial institution. This becomes apparent through indexical cues, including the mentions of 'mass production', 'freedom...reduced', 'efficiency thinking', and 'time limits'. As a counterpart to this, Anna sees that traditional academic values and humanistic

ideals, including students' opportunities for time, unique choices, and discovering one's own potential, are deteriorating in the university (hence positioning students as weak in terms of agency). It is important to recognise that in this situation Anna does not *explicitly* represent her voice and I-positioning; it is rather that by speaking through (voicing and evaluating) various 'others' she interactionally positions herself with regard to the characteristics, values, and ideologies these others stand for. Anna identifies with the students' position, while simultaneously reinforcing her own position as critical yet powerless against the university and its managerial power. Anna's redefined professional I-position (identity) leans strongly towards teaching (see Example 3). However, she feels that 'the university world' does not support this I-positioning:

Example 5: Even though I would truly like to help students in their choices and study-related problems, I feel that the university world does not give much of a chance for this. Because lecturers' posts are filled by research merits (and I don't believe this will change), if you would consider a career, then everything 'extra' like giving more time to students should be cut off. This is one reason why I want to leave university, as so many things there seem inhuman. [...] In the university world, self-interest can surpass humanity, and if you want to help students more than you 'must', then at worst it can be 'suicide career-wise' at the university. [...] Because I have actually already decided to try and seek a job elsewhere, I can now also invest more in both teaching and students. (Diary 16)

This narrative further confirms – and makes explicit – an emotionally and morally charged conflict within Anna's professional self (see also Example 4). While Anna, as a teacher, would like to help students and give them time, as an academic she ought to publish as much as possible (thus gaining the associated research merits), which limits the time given to students. These aims and motives are in clear contradiction, causing distress in Anna's professional positioning. Anna voices herself as a caring and empathetic teacher who works for the students, whereas the university is voiced as an indifferent and inhuman community that does not give due credit to a devoted teacher. In her narrative, Anna repeatedly constructs a huge distance between the institutional voice and her personal and professional voice. To maintain her professional identity and to truly enact her re-defined teacher I-position, Anna feels she is internally constrained to leave the university (or to commit 'suicide career-wise'). This shows a progressive movement (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) in Anna's narrative self-construction, insofar as she constructs a more agentic position through a critical stance, and a decision to act upon her own values and sense of self identifying possibilities for the future. Table 3 presents a summary of Anna's narrative positioning within her dialogical self.

Table 3. Anna's narrative positioning in the dialogical self

	Negotiation of teacher and personal I-positions	Voicing and evaluating	Negotiation of researcher and teacher I-positions	Voicing and evaluating
Start of the pedagogical studies	Separation between teacher and personal I-positions	Identifying with the collective 'teacher' voice (different from the authentic, personal voice)	Dual status: academic position, separate teacher and researcher I-positions	Identifying with the assumed collective voice of 'the teacher' (researcher not voiced at this point)
	Disharmony between personal I-positions and presumed teacher I-position	Differentiating the past ('shy') personal voice and the collective 'teacher' voice from (present) authentic, personal voice	Strengthening the teacher I-position, weakening the researcher I-position	Identifying with the voice of the pedagogical studies (being oneself as a teacher), distancing oneself from the managerial and research-centred voice of the university
	Harmony and integration between the personal and the teacher I-position	Identifying the teacher voice with the personal voice (being oneself as a teacher)	Teacher I-position as the core of professional identity	Identifying with the student-centred teacher voice, based on humanistic ideals and traditional academic values
End of the pedagogical studies				

To conclude, the construct of narrative positioning provides conceptual and analytical tools for exploring the irreversible relationship of 'I and the other' in the context of professional identity. Professional identity can be seen as *positioned into being* through positioning one's self with respect to the relevant characters and their respective voices, as presented and evaluated in the narrative.

5. Methodological discussion on narrative professional identity research

Our chapter indicates that both of the research tools applied (interviews and diaries) provide an excellent starting point for exploring the complexity, uniqueness, and different sides of professional identity (itself a socially constructed and experiential phenomenon) through written and spoken narratives. In the diaries and interviews, professional identity is reflected and constructed in relation to the sociocultural context of work. In addition to this relational perspective, the datasets offer a timeline to observe possible transformations in identities: (i) through time layers reflected by the narrator (reflections on the past, present, and future) within one interview/diary, or (ii) across several datasets through long-term data collection. Both methods also serve as a reflective practice by which past experiences are used to reflect and evaluate new ones (e.g. Lee & Schallert, 2016) – a practice which can encompass telling about and reflecting both the current identity and the future-oriented identity (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Thus, the strengths of data collection as presented here include an opportunity to capture individuals' experiences, and to gain information on professional identity, within its context, from different temporal perspectives. For example, the method of empathy-based stories captures comprehensively individuals' future scenarios and social representations regarding a

particular phenomenon, but it is less able to capture individuals' lived experiences (Wallin et al., 2020).

Interviews and diaries have specific strengths and limitations as data collection methods. As compared to interviews (here used in Cases 1 and 2), the learning diary (as used in Case 3) makes it possible to monitor the ongoing process of identity construction in a less retrospective and exhausting manner. However, as compared to interview research, in a diary study the researcher has no opportunity to ask for clarifications via a dialogue that might provide a deeper perspective on professional identity.

The narrative approaches used in the analysis included: *categorical-thematic analysis* (Case 1), *holistic-thematic analysis* (Case 2), and *narrative positioning analysis* (Case 3). All the cases demonstrate how the expressions and construction of professional identity are relational in nature. In/through the narratives, professional identity was negotiated in relation to 'others' (people and institutions with related values, practices, and ideologies), thus reflecting the sociocultural context of the work. In addition, in Case 3 the narrative positioning analysis provided tools to analyse the professional's internal dialogue and to depict diverse voices behind the self- and other positionings, with possibilities to uncover (mis)alignments between the work/educational context and different sub-identities (I-positionings). In Cases 2 and 3, the tensions and misalignments detected through the analysis made it possible to trace the renegotiation or transformation in the identity of the professionals in question. However, whereas in Cases 1 and 2 expressions of identity within the narratives were mostly traced through *explicit representations* of a person's own thinking, doing, and valuing as a professional, in Case 3 the identity expressions could also be traced more implicitly, via the narrator's voicing and evaluating (speaking through) the other characters in the narrative.

Cases 2 and 3 demonstrated in particular how it is possible to trace *temporality* in narratives, through the connections formed by the narrators, linking their past, present, and future. These cases also made it possible to recognise identity *trajectories* – that is, renegotiation and transformation in professional identity – via one interview (Case 2) and via long-term diary research with one participant (Case 3). This illustrates how a *holistic* approach is applicable if we wish to understand the phenomenon under examination over time (see also Biesta et al., 2008; Riessman, 2008), including the changes and trajectories in professional identity observable in our cases. However, a weakness in Cases 2 and 3 was that they utilised data from individual participants. In order to increase the trustworthiness and transferability, the analytical procedures could be continued via an analysis similar to the one presented here, but conducted over several participants. The outcome could be, for example, different individually-based professional identity trajectories (each based on one participant), or different general professional identity trajectories (each based on several participants sharing more or less similar trajectories).

In contrast to the holistic approach, Case 1 used a categorical-thematic analysis to analyse professional identity across several subjects. It produced different identity narratives with a thematic plot rather than a temporal plot. This kind of analysis provides diverse perspectives on professional identity, increasing the credibility and possible transferability of the findings. On the other hand,

although useful for making more general statements based on several subjects, one could say that category-centred approaches may tend to overlook the sequential features that are the hallmarks of narrative (Riessman, 2008; Spector-Mersel, 2010).

The cases indicate ways in which narrative inquiry can reveal unique perspectives and deeper understandings of professional identity, incorporating temporal and relational viewpoints. Different methods have their specific strengths. For example, traditional thematic analysis segments the data (McAllum et al., 2019), while narrative analysis methods reveal how identities are transformed and how different identities are related to each other over time. Narrative methods can also show how identities are sequenced with other themes, such as the sociocultural context. A further advantage of narrative approach is that researchers' constructed narratives are easily accessible to readers, so that the readers can use results practically and pedagogically (McAlpine, 2016) as a tool to reflect their identities. However, as with all methodologies, there are also limitations in the narrative approach. These limitations involve notably the use of subjective and interactional data, and small datasets. We should also be mindful that the told narratives of professionals capture only a limited number of experiences, and give only partial information on identities. Researchers then form interpretations based on the information provided, seeking to construct a coherent narrative (see also McAlpine, 2016).

Insofar as knowledge is taken to be subjective, socially constructed, and partially incomplete (Riessman, 2008), narrative research does not aim to convince the readers that the narratives found by the researcher correspond to reality or to some 'true' state of affairs. Rather, narrative research seeks to convince the reader that certain narratives are believable, and to present narratives that the reader can identify with (Moen, 2006). Since narrative researchers now prefer to use the term 'transferability' (involving findings that can be applicable to other similar settings) instead of 'generalisation' (e.g. Riessman, 2008), our aim here has been to address different ways in which transferability can be recognised and achieved in narrative research. When the narrative findings are compared and confirmed via the findings of other studies, the credibility and transferability of the narrative findings is also enhanced.

6. Conclusions and future avenues: narrative identity and learning research

We conclude that scholars in the field of professional learning could benefit from the use of narrative research in efforts to explore and contribute to theory on professional identity, and in particular, to professional learning. The narrative approach can reveal the complex and temporally unique pathways that are present, while shedding light also on the relevant relational and sociocultural perspectives on the phenomena under investigation (see also Biesta et al., 2008; Goodson et al., 2010).

In the field of professional learning and development, one of the main aims is to develop workplace pedagogy to enhance professional learning. Scholars now see identity work as way of supporting professionals' learning, and have introduced some methods to support professional identity work.

These include in particular narrative arts-based frameworks, including creative writing and visual identity methods (Schellings et al., 2021; Vähäsantanen et al., 2020). Such methods are particularly capable of revealing the emotional, embodied, and tacit (non-linguistic and non-cognitive) aspects of professional identity work.

In future, we will need a more elaborated, research-based understanding of professional identity trajectories, together with narrative pedagogies to support identity work in working life. We believe that these endeavours could have a meaningful impact on individuals and work organisations, and we invite readers to start their own journey in the field of narrative identity and learning research.

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