

Session 3: Working with learner histories

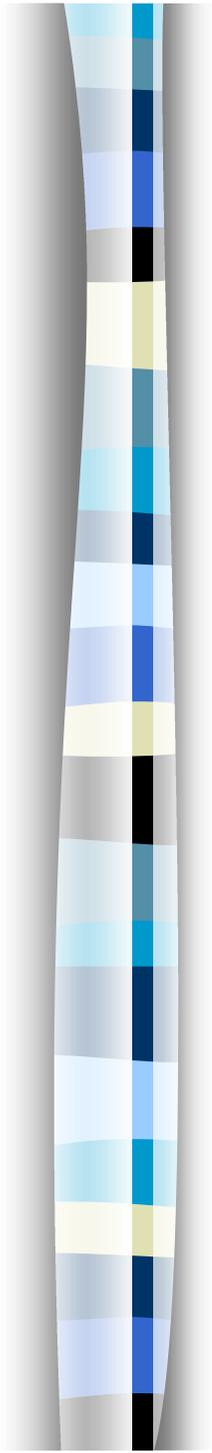
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60-second oral biography

- Tell your partner all about yourself in 60 seconds ... however, one of the things you tell them should be a lie!
- Let's see if your partner can spot your lie!



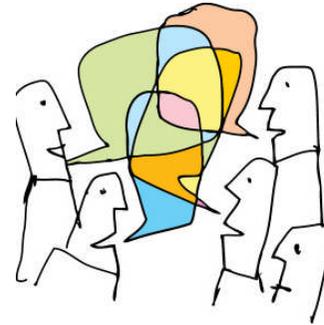


An **IATEFL** autobiography!

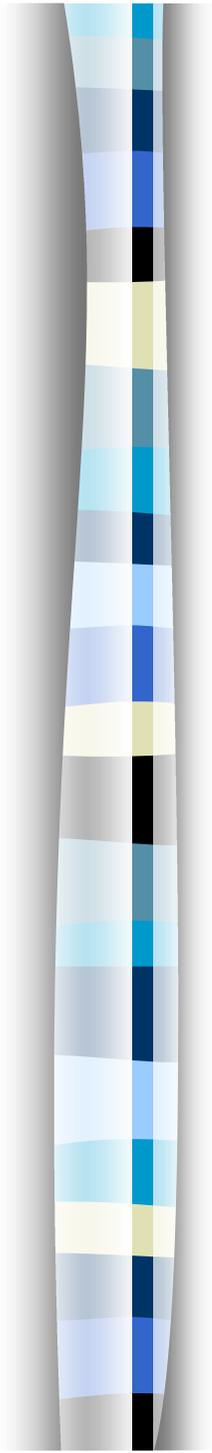
- Tell your *new* partner about yourself using **IATEFL** as a prompt!
- E.g.,
 - **I** for interests – topics you are interested in workwise.
 - **A** for attitude – something you feel strongly about.
 - **T** for time off – what you enjoy doing in your freetime.
 - **E** for education – what you have studied or are now.
 - **F** for future – one of your goals for 2012.
 - **L** for love – what you love most about your work.



Icebreaker tasks



- We have just done 2 quick icebreaker tasks of the kind you are probably familiar with... many of which have narrative and biographical elements.
- What do you feel is the rationale and purpose behind such icebreaker tasks?
 - Getting to know each other (T-S, S-S)
 - Enhancing group dynamics
 - Lowering anxiety
 - Fostering a sense of community
 - Getting people involved in authentic, personally-relevant communication
 - Others



Confessing my personal subjectivities before we start!

- *I believe that it is the learners themselves who are crucial for successful learning*
- *I believe that learners' beliefs, thoughts, emotions, expectations, experiences and personal histories influence their approaches to learning*
- *I hope to respect learners as unique individuals with important lives beyond the language classroom*
- *I wish to engage with learners authentically in real communication between us as real people*
- To appreciate my learners in these ways, I want to view them holistically, listen to what they have to say and respect their beliefs and expectations of the learning process

Learner histories – what are they?

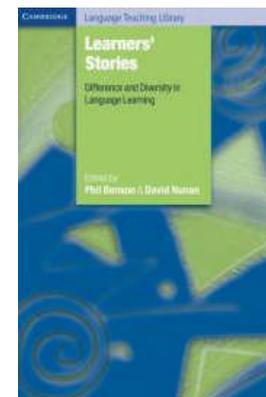
- A range of terms to refer to broadly related approaches:
 - (Auto)biography
 - Learner histories
 - Life writing
 - Life stories
 - Personal narratives
- General *or* focus on language learning or academic life
- Can cover broad timespan or focus on episodic story

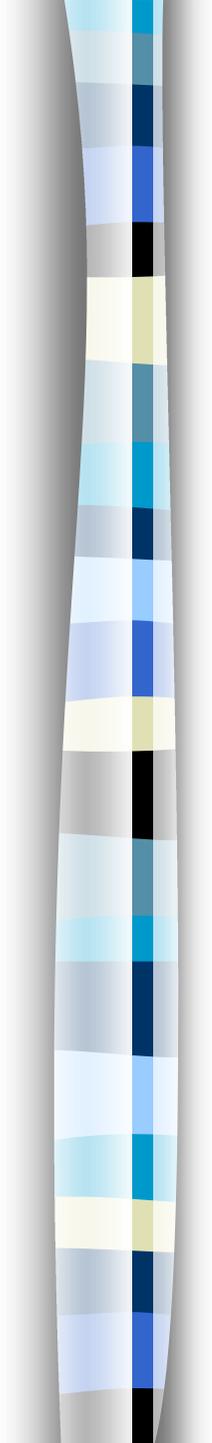


(Auto)biography

- *Refers to a broad approach to research that focuses on the analysis and description of social phenomena as they are experienced within the context of individual lives.*

(Benson, 2005: 4)





Learner histories

- *Self-report-based, introspective research narratives written by students about their own language learning. In language learning histories as a form of research, students thoughtfully take a second look at their own past learning experiences.*

(Oxford, 1996: 582)

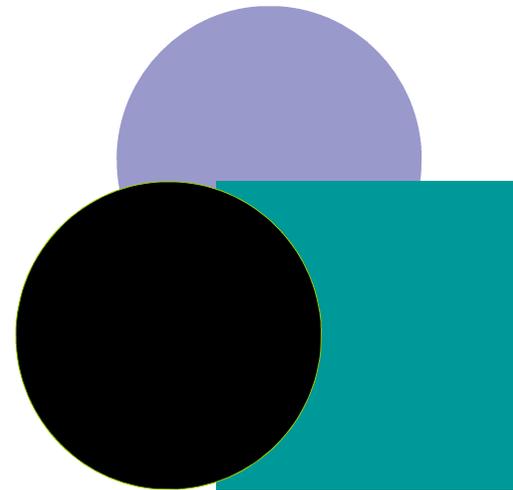
Your experiences

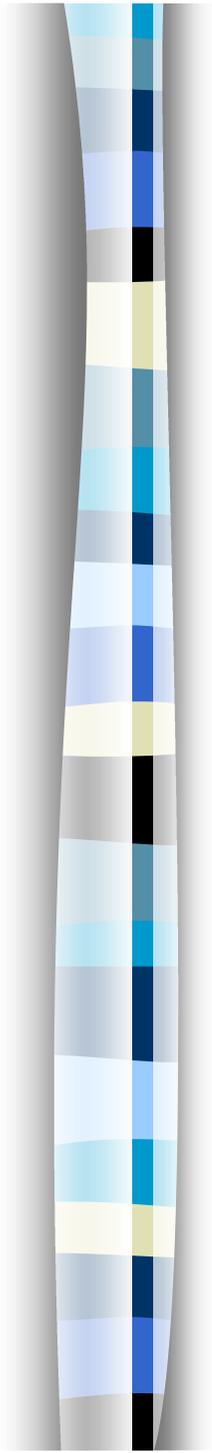
- With a partner, please share your thoughts and experiences of working with various forms of learner histories – maybe as a learner or as a teacher or researcher or teacher trainer or all of these!



Rationale from different perspectives

- Interrelated and complementary perspectives but acknowledge each also has distinct needs and drives:
 - **Teacher**
 - **Researcher**
 - **Learner**

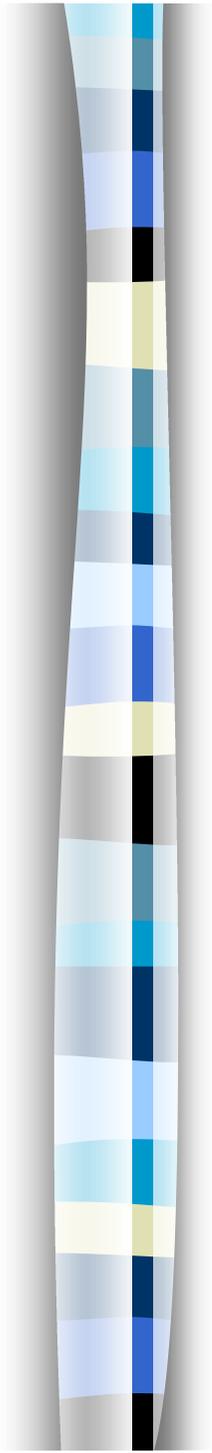




Why?

From the teacher perspective...

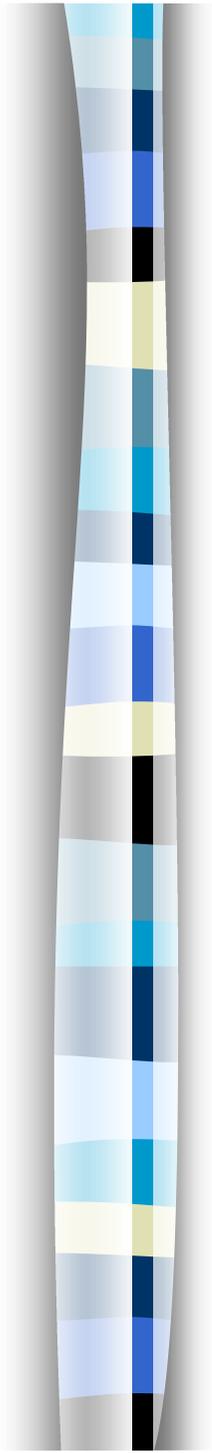
- Way of getting to know learners & appreciate group
- Practise skill of writing as authentic communication
- Using writing as form of thinking – raise learners' metacognitive awareness
- Way of revealing and addressing beliefs, strategies, goals, motivation, autonomy etc
- A motivating form of writing task – for teachers and learners!
- Others _____



Why?

From the researcher perspective

- Way of understanding learning from the learner perspective – giving learners voice
- Way of generating holistic, situated data about learners
- Way of revealing dynamics, complexity and interrelations
- Way of understanding learner uniqueness
- Way of understanding ‘situated’ contexts of learner lives
- Others _____

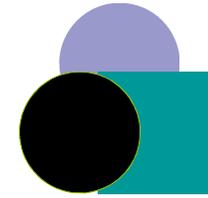


Why?

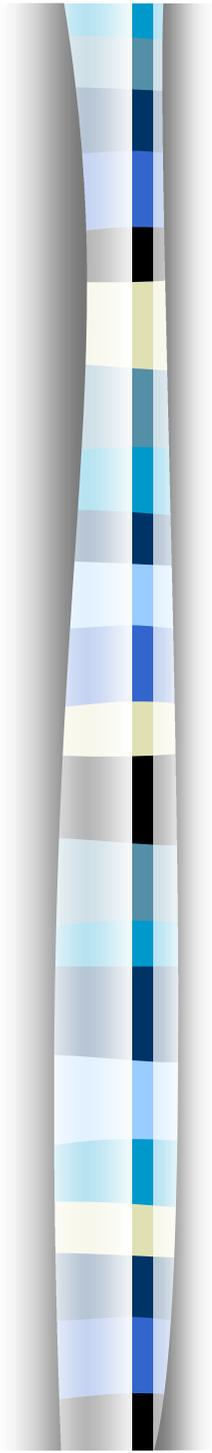
From the learner perspective

- Chance to practise language in authentic communicative task that personally relevant - motivating
- Facilitates reflection which leads to enhanced metacognition – empowering learners to guide own learning and be autonomous
- Helps learners construct their identities as LL
- Raises awareness of sense of progress and growth
- Helps learners contemplate future goals
- Other _____

We all three share...



- *An interest in education*
- *An interest in enhancing the quality of language learning*
- *An interest in working in motivating and personally-relevant ways*
- *An interest in uniqueness, particulars and individuality (well, some researchers do!)*



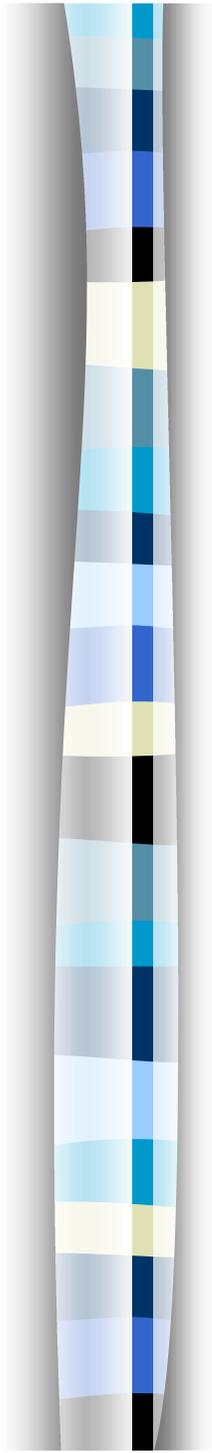
How can we work with them?

- Decisions depend on:
 - *The age/level of proficiency of learners*
 - *Whether you choose short- or long-term histories*
 - *Whether you focus on individual emblematic or episodic stories or chronological overview*
 - *Whether you wish to use guidelines or not*
 - *Whether you use text or visuals or oral or a combination of media (incl. multimedia)*
 - *Whether you incorporate work into classwork or to be done at home or both*
 - *Ethical considerations - audience and use of text*

Some ideas (e.g., Butler, S. & Bentley, R., 1997).



- **Learners write autobiography** - (either general, language learning, academic) – different styles – timeline, CV, questionnaire, narrative text, obituary, letter, visual/oral narrative [See also: European Language Portfolio: Learner Biography]
- **Learners write episodic/emblematic life stories** - my first X, my most memorable X, my worst ever X, me 10 years from now, describing a life-relevant picture/realia
- **Learners compile a portfolio** - narrative texts, pictures, any of the above
- **Learners keep a journal** – ongoing life history (can be across domains, can include concluding reflection, can be oral or online blog)
- **Learner read (auto)biographical texts** - role models (e.g., those who learned languages with hard work!)
- **Other ideas?** _____



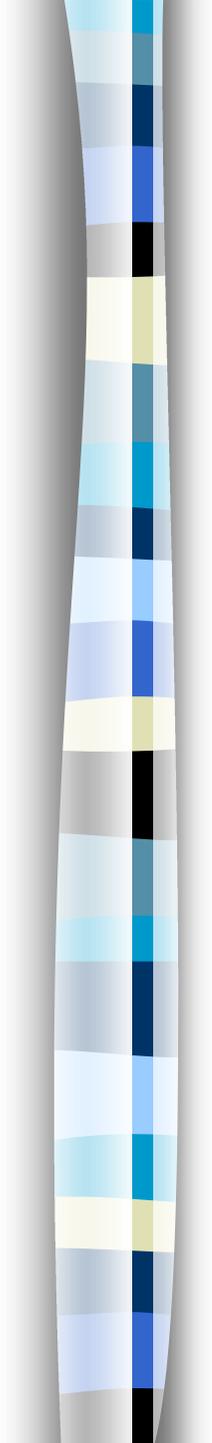
An example from my learners

- **Context:** Students in first-year of English studies at University in Austria
- **Age:** Average 20 years old
- **Level:** Average B2 (CEFR) - First-year at university
- **Guidelines:** See handout
- **Length:** On average 2 pages A4 typed
- **Number:** 56 (48 female, 8 male)

Group work

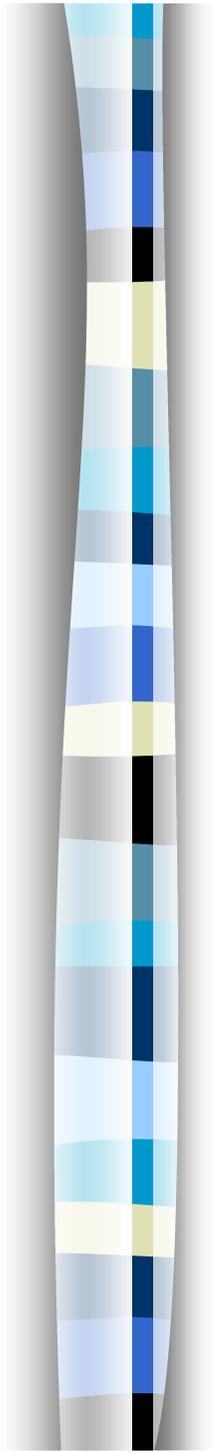


- In groups, please take a look at the two examples from my context:
 1. What do you notice about...
 - a) *salient themes for the individual?*
 - b) *particular themes across both texts, e.g., beliefs about teachers, attributions or strategies?*
 - c) *particular events, time markers or turning points?*
 - d) *a sense of dynamism?*
 - e) *situatedness of the learner?*
 - f) *differences/similarities between the two learners?*
 - g) *other aspects to comment on?*
 2. A holistic view of the individual: Can you write a sentence (or two) that convey a 'condensed narrative' (Nunan, forthcoming) for one or both of the individuals?
 3. Consider how insights such as these can help us to work with our learners.



Some of my interim observations

- Students have own distinct beliefs about LL
- Strong affective nature of texts
- Considerable diversity across learners
- Individuals – key themes
- Lots of dynamism – LL as process with ups & downs, progress, regressions and stability
- All evidence of situated nature – contextually & interpersonally (learners aware of this)
- True value of a holistic perspective



To conclude

- Learner histories and narratives can help :
 - **Teachers** to get to know learners as individuals, enhance group dynamics, foster learner metacognition and practise communicative writing
 - **Researchers** to gain rich, useful data to understand learning processes from the learner perspective in all their complexity, dynamism and diversity – situated, holistic data
 - **Learners** to enjoy authentic, personally-relevant writing practice and to gain valuable metacognitive knowledge to empower them to guide and support their approaches to learning and construct positive learner identities

I hope you give it a go and enjoy working with learner histories as much as me!

Thank you for your time!

Anything to add to the posters?





Research SIG PCE
IATEFL 2012
Working with Learner Histories

1. Learner histories – what are they?
 - Within broad range of (auto)biographical writing and narrative research
2. Why work with them?
 - From the *teacher* perspective – get to know learners, understand group, practise communicative writing, help foster learner metacognition, empowerment, identities
 - From the *researcher* perspective – generate rich, situated, holistic data to understand learning from learner perspective (same for teachers!)
 - From the *learner* perspective - enjoy authentic, personally-relevant writing practice, gain valuable metacognitive knowledge to direct and regulate own learning, help construct positive learner identities, boost motivation
 - We all share an interest in enhancing quality of learning and in uniqueness, particulars & individuality (well, certain kinds of research does!)
3. How can we work with them as a tool?
 - Decisions depend on: age/level of proficiency; short- or long-term perspectives; emblematic/episodic/chronological; text/visuals/oral/combination of media (incl. multimedia); in class/home/combination, with/without guidelines; ethical considerations
 - Writing autobiographies (e.g., timelines, cv, obituary, questionnaire, visual/oral); episodic/emblematic stories (my first X, my most memorable X, my favourite X); portfolio; journal; collage; reading examples of autobiographies
4. Example of language learner histories from students in first-year of university in Austria – gathered using open guidelines (see overleaf) – seem to show diversity, dynamism, situatedness and value of a holistic perspective on learning
5. How can I approach the texts in analytical terms?
 - Can look for salient themes for individuals/across all the texts; specific themes across learners (e.g., learner beliefs about teachers, attributions etc.); critical experiences; chronology/dynamism; holistic views of individuals - ‘condensed narratives’ (Nunan, forthcoming); any unexpected absences; interrelations between themes; commonalities/ diversity; Or in narrative terms: plot, characters, setting, action etc.
6. Learner histories as tool for researching, teaching and learning – rich, interesting insights for all participants in the process

If you have any questions or wish to discuss any aspect of this session, please do feel free to get in touch via email: sarah.mercer@uni-graz.at

Recommended Reading:

Benson, P. & Nunan, D. (Eds.) (2005). *Learners’ Stories: Difference & Diversity in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (An excellent example of the benefits of working with (auto-)biographical materials and the insights that can be generated).

Butler, S. & Bentley, R. (1997). *Lifewriting: Learning through Personal Narrative*. Ontario: Pippin Publishing. (A lovely little book with some useful practical ideas on encouraging this sort of writing in learners of all ages).

Clandinin, D. J. & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. (Probably the key text for this form of research).

Kalaja, P., Menezes, V., & Barcelos, A. M. F. (Eds.) (2008). *Narratives of Learning and Teaching EFL*. Basingstoke: Palgrave. (A rich source of different approaches to narrative research providing a varied range of perspectives).