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**Journeys of Transition:  
The Role of Narrative within the Stoneleigh Project**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the role of narrative in the Stoneleigh Project, an outdoor retreat approach to supporting marginalised young people in becoming agents of personal and social change. The metaphor of a journey, developed by sociological writers, is applied to the transition of young people to adulthood. Undertaken as a narrative inquiry, the programme is analysed in the context of educational theory especially Bernstein's theory of recognition codes (Bernstein, 1996). The way in which this unusual programme encourages the development of new personal narratives both verbally and in embodied forms is explored. Examples illustrate how young people applied their narratives to the reconstruction of their personal histories in ways that empowered them to begin journeys of transformation of their identities. Further examples examine how these journeys led, in many cases, to significant life changes brought about by the actions of the young people. A retreat style of programme and an understanding of narrative are suggested as strategies for those assisting the personal development of young people. Narrative inquiry is suggested as an approach to understanding experiential education programmes.

**Keywords:** Outdoor learning, narrative, retreat, youth development.

## **Introduction**

This paper focuses upon research undertaken with a network of voluntary youth agencies called the Stoneleigh Group and an informal outdoor education project called the Stoneleigh Project that they developed. The Stoneleigh Project ran for five years from 2000 to 2004. The network set out to explore whether a retreat-based approach to the outdoors could help with the journeys of transition of young people into adulthood and, in particular, if it could ‘support marginalised and at risk young people in becoming agents of personal and social change’ (Loynes, 2004).

The research took a critical ethnographic perspective on the evidence that was collected through a process of collaborative inquiry that encouraged the participants to develop and tell their own narratives over the lifetime of their involvement with the project. This was placed within a sociological framework of youth and youth work in society in order to understand the Stoneleigh Project’s role in helping young people find an identity in the adult world that may be transforming of the young person and of the communities to which they belonged (Loynes, 2008). The theories of Bernstein (1996) were used to help in the analysis of the educational experience offered by the retreats.

### **The Stoneleigh Project.**

The Stoneleigh Group consisted of voluntary youth organisations that were working with young people together with other groups involved in funding and advocacy roles for this project. The Stoneleigh partners make claims for their youth work that Ord (2007) identifies as conservative or liberal in intent, for example they make statements such as ‘realising potential’ and ‘transforming their lives’ (Prince's Trust, 2006) in order to become ‘active participants in their communities’ (Mobex, 2006).

In their early documents the Stoneleigh Group defined their core beliefs as:

*Participants can, with help, become agents of change in themselves and their communities. In order to achieve this each person must be internally motivated and have a sense of his or her values, purpose and direction.*

The Stoneleigh Project was developed for marginalised young people aged 18 to 25 who were potential leaders and volunteers within the network of voluntary organisations that were believed to fit this description (Loynes, 2004). It began with a preparation phase arranged between the young people and their mentors and held within the host organisation. This was followed by a collectively arranged, seven day long outdoor retreat, a follow up weekend and a mentored project back with the host. Each participant could follow the programme for as long as they were interested. This ranged from six months to four years.

The Stoneleigh Group intended the programme to stretch their own idea of transformation from a conservative or liberal position (Ord, 2007) to one that was radical in Ord's terms. According to Loynes (2004), their notion of transformation embraced several ideas. To begin with the Stoneleigh Group understood it as the process of addressing, through one's own efforts, personal issues such as an unhealthy self-concept, lack of confidence, weak family and social networks, or poor educational outcomes. They also understood transformation to be about finding new purposeful and fulfilling pathways forward. Lastly, the Stoneleigh Group hoped it would also concern the young people in the work of transforming social issues in the wider community through their personal, social or working lives. The expectations of the members of the Stoneleigh Group were that, from what were perceived as stalled transitions to adulthood, the young people would take the risks involved to become agents of not just their own personal change but of structural changes in the social world they were in.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe the larger stories of our culture, such as that of youth in society, as 'grand social narratives' (p. 19). Aspirations, such as those summarised above by Loynes (2008), indicate that the individual organisations that came together to form the Stoneleigh Group typically reproduce the 'grand narrative' of the experience of youth and the role of youth work

in society. However, the Stoneleigh Group claimed to be critical of this narrative. They set out to explore whether young people could not only question the adult destinations they were expected to head for but could construct and live out new narratives in what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) call 'living and telling, reliving and retelling the stories of (their) experiences' (p. 20). This raises the question of the relationship between narrative, structure and agency in charting a transformative transition to adulthood. This relationship, as Clandinin and Connelly make clear, is lived out in the participants' relationships as the different narratives or 'nested set of stories' (p. 63) about youth, youth work and the experiences of the young people are told and retold by the youth workers, community members and young people in various contexts over time.

### **Transition and Risk, Structure and Agency**

Rapport and Overing (2000) define agency as '...the capability, the power, to be the source and originator of acts; agents are the subjects of action'. This definition fits well with the claims made for more liberal and radical approaches to youth development (Ord, 2007). These approaches claim to support young people through related ideas such as empowerment from, for example, outdoor development (Hopkins & Putnam, 1993) and informal education (Jeffs & Smith, 1999).

Furlong and Cartmel (1997) discuss a long-standing philosophical debate between those that claim people have a degree of agency and those that believe life is largely determined by structural factors such as class, race, and gender. They conclude that, whilst class and gender especially can still be determinants of the path taken by youth to adult transitions, in the last 20 years young people have experienced more social mobility and have the opportunity to make more choices as they grow up. They suggest two central ideas as useful ways to understand this. The first is Giddens' (1991) idea of 'structuration' that offers a model that provides for a degree of agency within structural constraints. The second is Beck's (1992) notion of a risk society in which the risks of modern life have increased and are understood to be beyond the influence of the individual and yet the individual is the locus of response to these risks, a process he termed 'individualisation'. Arnett (2004) claims that the extended period of youth is a response to this changing context calling the life stage 'emerging adulthood'.

Elder (1998) describes the navigation of this phase as ‘pathways’ whilst Roberts and Parsell (1989) discuss this process as a series of ‘trajectories’ involving individuals in a series of choices leading to adult identities. They all hold that young people experience considerably more agency and social mobility in this process than previously.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) claim that narrative is not only an effective way to describe and understand experience but an integral part of the experience. What is more, narrative changes with context and over time. The meaning of past experiences, the significance of current experiences and the possibilities of future experiences are all told and retold, lived and relived. This suggests that the narrator not only has agency over the meaning of the past but also has influence over imagined future trajectories, i.e. that these imaginations can steer the events as well as the meanings of future experiences. In other words, narrative can transform lives. Clandinin and Connelly endorse what experiential educators have claimed elsewhere (Allison, 2000), that narrative is a central part of experiential learning as well as the best way to study how experience is understood.

This paper takes the journey metaphor and explores how the relationship between the biographical narrative of transition and the accompanying narratives that charts, re-charts and anticipates the story of the young peoples’ ‘journeys’ interacted. I argue that, for many of the participants, the contribution of the outdoor retreat programme to the process of constructing their narratives affected their capacity to engage and be part of social networks, their social mobility and their sense of agency in ways that they and their mentors understood as transformative.

### **Methods of Inquiry**

I followed the Stoneleigh Project as a researcher from its first pilot in 2000 (Loynes, 2004) through to the advocacy work conducted in 2006 after the Stoneleigh Project ended (Loynes, 2008). Methodologically, the research study was a hermeneutic inquiry focussed on education and power. I adopted an ethnographic approach to the Stoneleigh Group. I took the stance of Squire (2000) and Clandinin and Connelly (2000) that experience can best be described and understood by engaging with

the narratives that the participants told of the Stoneleigh Project and of their lives. A range of techniques were used in order to generate and document narratives. These included participant observation, collaborative inquiry, focus groups, interviews and case studies. Working collaboratively and focussing on narrative enabled the researcher to use the research inquiry in a way that integrated with the developmental programme of the Stoneleigh Project. A critical stance, using the tools of Bernstein's (1996) educational theories of recognition and expression codes and Labov's (1972) structural analysis method of narrative, enabled me to analyse this evidence in the context of the claims made by the Stoneleigh Group for radical social outcomes.

Narrative inquiry was therefore central to both the pedagogic and the research processes. Bruner (2004) summarises the widely held view that the self can be understood as constructed through a constantly evolving narrative of the self. He writes

*A self-making narrative is something of a balancing act. It must, on the one hand, create a conviction of autonomy, that one has a will of one's own, a certain freedom of choice, a degree of possibility. But it must also relate the self to a world of others – to friends and family, to institutions, to the past, to reference groups. (p. 10).*

Labov (1972) claims that it is the 'complicating factors' of events that define a story as a narrative. By 'events' he meant the out of the ordinary events that happen to people and that cause them to make choices. Patterson (2000) points out that Labov's focus on events treats the narrative as a fixed understanding. Whilst she recognises that this can be helpful, she claims that taking this approach discounts many narratives that do not have 'complicating factors'. Additionally, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) point out that Labov's approach ignores the way that narratives change as contexts change and time unfolds. This analysis follows the recommendation of Paterson to treat Labov's structural analysis as a useful method in some situations whilst adopting the more inclusive view of narrative as having a range of structures. I also treat narrative as mutable.



By taking this approach the young people can be understood as using the experiential opportunities on the retreats to offer personally reconstructed narratives of their past lives. They also can be thought of as telling new narratives of their current and potential lives and these can be understood to continue to change over time. The approach taken by the facilitators can be thought of as creating a space on the retreats in which these narratives found voice, in which alternative narratives were available in the lifestyles of the host communities and accompanying mentors, and where the young people could develop the skills to explore new narratives of themselves.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) highlight the distinction between personal and social narratives. Personal narratives of experience can be told and retold in a social space in which a social narrative of the participants, their contexts and their journeys, then emerges. In this setting power comes into play overtly influencing the dominant discourse about the experience. From a pedagogic point of view the Stoneleigh Project understood this social narrative in two ways. First, they understood that it could sustain or confound the emerging personal narratives of the young participants. Secondly, they imagined that it could adopt or challenge the ‘grand social narratives’ of youth transition adopted by the youth work organisations or the wider social world. The declared intention of the Project was to favour the narratives of the young people and encourage their voices to be heard. The purpose of the Stoneleigh Group was partly that the developing personal narratives of the young people be heard in ways that it was thought would influence their potential trajectories into adulthood. It was also hoped that they would influence the wider social narratives of the youth work organisations and their home communities.

As such the research explored the various ‘nested stories’ (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of the young participants, the youth workers, the youth work organisations and the policy frameworks in which they operated (Loynes, 2008). This paper analyses the narratives of the retreats from the perspective of the young participants in order to develop a deeper understanding of the pedagogic processes that supported the programme.

## **The Young Participants.**

After the initial data collection, sixteen participants were identified as case studies for detailed evidence collection. They were chosen on two criteria. Firstly, they represented the pathways taken by all the young people concerned. These pathways are identified in a model developed by the author (Diagram 1) from categories that emerged from the initial data. It compared the young participants' capacity for forming social networks with the impact on their social mobility over the lifetime of their involvement in the project. This model will be discussed in another paper. The second criteria was the quality and quantity of evidence available from each participant. The study was longitudinal and, for some young people, the data spanned four years. This was from up to six months prior to the retreat to several years afterwards.

Table 1 summarises seven young participants that have been chosen for the purposes of this paper to represent the different narrative 'journeys' taken. Their names are shown on Diagram 1 in order to indicate the path that each one took. In Table 1 the young people are introduced in relation to how they narrated their backgrounds in relation to family, education, work and social networks, and how they described their identities.

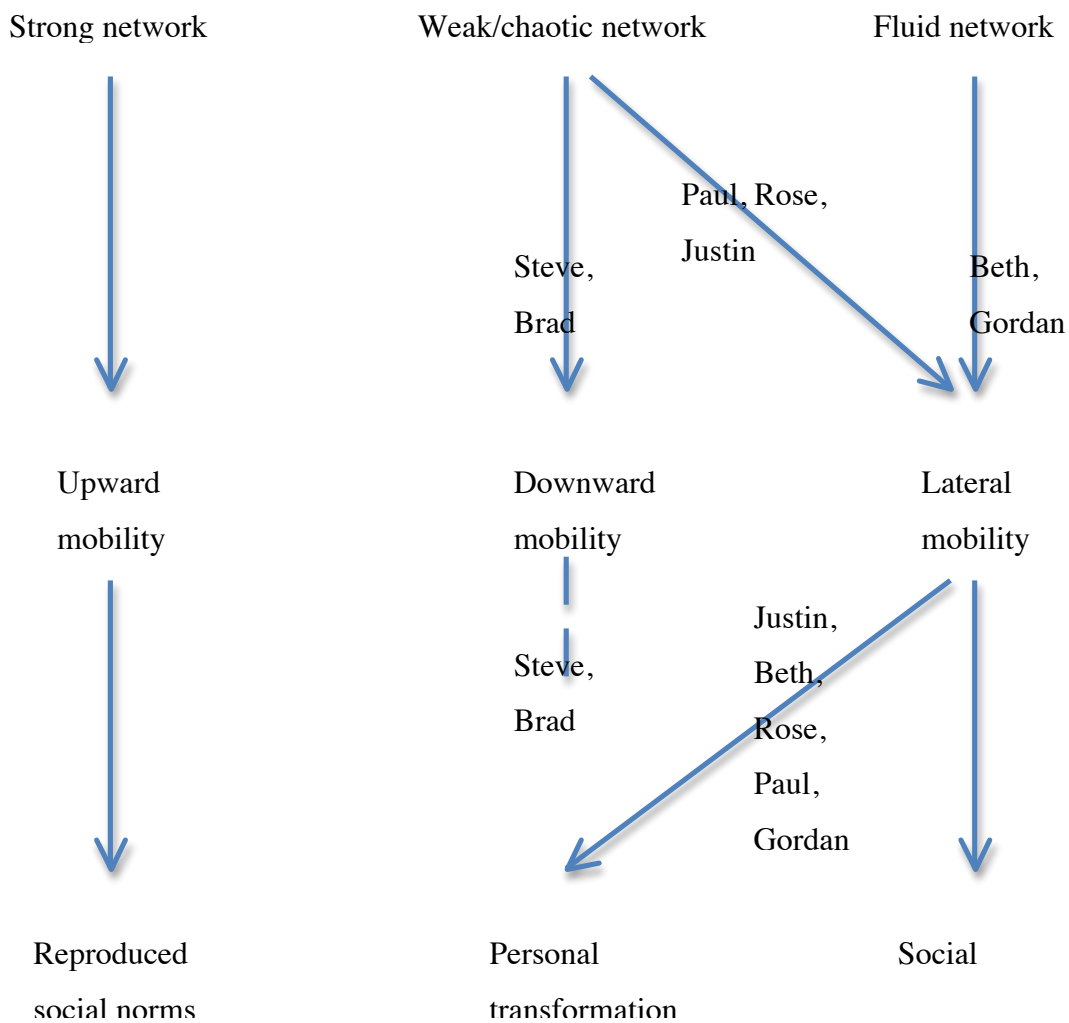
In this paper the term 'participants' refers to all the people involved in the Stoneleigh Project including mentors, young people, facilitators and community members. All names are pseudonyms.

Many of the young people attracted to the Stoneleigh Project by the description of the retreat experience thought of themselves as different from 'successful' young people in transition to the adult world. They thought that this difference had marginalised them in various ways. They were already the focus of youth work interventions by the Stoneleigh Group member organisations (Loynes, 2004).

Some of the young participants (Brad, Gordon, Paul, Justin) can readily be recognised as young people in circumstances that could lead them to be understood as marginalised; a combination of problematic family relationships, poor educational attainment and poor or dysfunctional social

networks. Beth, as the result of an unexpected situation, is at risk of becoming marginalised and on the brink of running away from home. Steve and Rose do not so obviously fit this category although they identify themselves in this way as do the voluntary organisations of which they are members.

**Diagram 1: Trajectories of the Young Participants in the Stoneleigh Project Showing the Representative Pathways of 7 Participants.**



**Table 1: Summary of the Perceived Situations of 7 Young Participants Before the Stoneleigh Project**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Family, education, work and social situation.</b>	<b>Perceived identity.</b>
Brad (M)	Intermittent family support. Excluded from home by father. Truanting from school. Intermittent social networks including adult contact (local foresters).	Homeless. Gang member. Drug user and dealer. 'Nature boy'.
Beth (F)	Single parent family with good relationships with both parents. Left school. No plans. Recently excluded from friendship groups due to pregnancy.	Possible single parent. Unemployed.
Gordon (M)	No family links. Exploited as male lap dancer in partner's club. Poor educational results. No social networks outside of gay sub-culture. Deserted sub-culture to join Camas community.	Gay. Lap dancer. Camas Community member.
Justin (M)	Largely unknown.	Truant. Unemployed. Drug user.
Paul (M)	Largely unknown but no educational outcomes.	Truant. Unemployed.
Rose (F)	Disagreement with foster parents about knowing identity of biological father. Limited parental aspirations. Moderate educational outcomes. Good social networks including adults.	Unemployed. Volunteer youth leader.
Steve (M)	Weak family support. Good school results. University place but dropped out. Poor social networks.	Drop out. Volunteer youth leader. Casual worker.

### **The Outdoor Retreats.**

The retreats are an unusual approach to outdoor learning. They were developed in collaboration with Camas, a residential retreat on the island of Mull, an island off the west coast of Scotland. Camas is one of several residential retreat centres of the Iona Community (Iona Community, 2003). It was chosen by members of the Stoneleigh Group because of its claims to work in an egalitarian style and because of its concerns with issues of environmental and social justice (Loynes, 2004). This offered a contrasting experience of adult youth power relations and a set of values that contrasted with the social norms of the young participants. Being at Camas involves joining a group of young adult volunteers already in residence for the summer as an intentional reflective community. The first four retreats were held at Camas between 2000 and 2002. Later, the Stoneleigh Group developed the retreat approach at other locations, one in North Wales and one in North West England. These later communities were made up of Stoneleigh Group members and provided many participants with a second or third opportunity for retreat in a different role.

In their literature (Iona Community, 2003) the content of the retreats was described as the possibility, among other things, of:

- outdoor activities including camping, walking, sailing, canoeing and coastal exploration;
- drama, writing, art and music;
- free time for being as energetic or as lazy as is appropriate;
- visits to places of local interest including Iona;
- the necessary responsibilities of a shared lifestyle (everything from bread making and chopping wood to washing dishes and composting waste);
- conversation, games, singing and ceilidhs (Gaelic for a community gathering);
- spiritual reflection and exploration of personal journeys.

The retreat experience is subtler than this implies. A young participant described his retreat venue.

*It is a row of remote ex-fishing cottages with no electricity, central heating or running hot water in fact... if I were to say an open fire and a cold tap you'd have a better understanding of Camas, oh yeah...almost forgot no flushing toilets! I think you get the picture.*

The participants understood the remoteness in two ways. They thought of it as providing a separation from the events and relationships of everyday life that defined them in particular ways. Rose writes:

*The first morning at Cae Mabon I woke up with an overwhelming sense of joy. I could hear the stream in the background, the natural noises from outside and the daylight flooding in on me and I felt so happy to be there.*

At the same time they thought of the place as a contrast, providing new perspectives and possibilities. This, the evidence suggests, created a space in which new ways of being could be experienced and rehearsed as Rose indicates:

*At Cae Mabon I found myself with a lot of time to relax and to think and reflect on what direction my life is going in and to put it all back into perspective. Whilst sitting with a mind empty of thoughts, desires and emotions I realised that some of the answers were staring me right in the face and I just hadn't had the courage to look at them. On my solo in the woods I attained a stillness of the mind and I became more aware of my own thoughts. I could no longer block my thoughts out because I had no pressures or demands being thrown at me so I had nothing else to think about.*

Separation was important. It is frequently mentioned as significant in many forms of outdoor practice (Baer & Gesler, 2004; Taniguchi, Freeman, & LeGrand Richards, 2005). In this case it can be

understood as the removal of the social and spatial references defining the young people in their everyday worlds. This, it is thought, creates the possibility for different personal narratives to develop.

Within a busy and emergent programme arising from the physical and social demands of community and recreational life there was considerable emphasis placed on group building, shared responsibility, decision-making, and conflict management. The process of living at Camas for a week was described as complex. The co-ordinator of the community understood it to:

*... involve the visitors coming to terms with the possibly contrasting values and lifestyle of the community in residence; realising and appreciating the way in which the visitors were, as she saw it, differently valued as equal members of the community; learning to exercise what she understood to be an enhancement of their power and creativity; working with the community to live together and develop a programme for each day, realising they had choice in what to do or in whether to do nothing and realising that their experiences were understood to be meaningful and were valued for the meaning they had for the individual rather than any particular course aim or adult view.*

She describes how the challenges that life at Camas presents are taken head on through the gatherings at which conflicts between people were addressed and possibilities for each day explored. This, she thought, enabled participants to exercise power within a group and for a purpose. She placed the individuals at the centre of the process of making meaning of their experiences and of the process of deciding what to value.

However, the key concept of the Camas approach, as the coordinator understood it, was not to promote an alternative set of values. Her intention was, by living overtly a contrasting set of values, to offer a way for visitors to see the values they already held. This, she claimed, then created an opportunity to explore the worth of these and other values and to suggest that they had choice in the values by which they lived. Pedagogically, this can be understood as a Labovian approach in which the ‘complicating factors’ of the retreat and the various events on the retreat provided opportunities for

revealing, exploring and discussing different values. However, it was more than this as it also created the opportunities to retell narratives of the past, to tell new narratives and to imagine new narratives of the future.

### **Creating Discourse**

By taking a wide range of activities from the social world and placing them in an informal educational programme called a retreat, the Stoneleigh Group, in partnership with Camas, created what Bernstein (1996, p. 47) would have termed a 'site of discourse' that focuses on the power and knowledge normally associated with these activities. Bernstein argued that a range of new possibilities for understanding are created when activities or subjects are transferred from the everyday world into an educational context. He applied the term 'recognition code' to the linguistic ability of a student to recognise the discourse developed through educational experiences in the social world they were moving into. Potentially transformative recognition codes could, Bernstein claimed, be developed at these sites if they were sites of 'new possibilities' that students could recognise.

For example the young participants' narratives indicated that the mutual power relations experienced by them within the community offered everyone a contrasting experience of participation and so a different knowledge of themselves and their own power in relation to others. The Camas community lived intentionally and explicitly by these values embracing justice as a central theme. This, in turn, created a radically different lifestyle that was offered to the visitors in ways that allowed them to engage with it practically. There was much to talk about on such an unusual experience and the immediacy of the lifestyle provided a rapid way into a discourse between the residents and visitors. Importantly, the co-construction of a programme for each retreat meant that the 'site of discourse' was largely novel for each retreat and all young people experienced being participants in this discourse. As a result every retreat was different.

The necessity of working to achieve the basics, and of working collectively, provided the means by which the community demonstrated some of their core values and drew the visitors into



their world. The politics of community life, arising out of how work was shared and rewarded and how issues were resolved, provided opportunities for the young participants to discover that previously taken for granted views about the world around them and their relationships with it were, as one participant described it, 'not written in tablets of stone'. In Bernstein's (1996) words they had acquired new recognition codes with the potential to create new possibilities in their everyday worlds after the retreat.

Importantly, the evidence from the collaborative inquiry indicates that the diversity of things to which to respond and ways in which to do it, in action and in conversation, were critical for engaging so many disparate individuals with widely different developmental needs. Critical events, as reported by the young people, ranged from challenging incidents such as being confronted with the Christian beliefs of retreat community members; personal challenges such as abseiling; amazement at feeling trusted and not controlled by adults in timekeeping or participation; being listened to, for example by a vegetarian adult cook who bought meat for two young people; getting up early to bake bread; and so on. In Bernstein's terms this can be understood as providing for a range of recognition codes appropriate to the backgrounds and circumstances of the young people. The evidence suggests that the rapid development of trust and the space made available for reflection facilitated this aspect of the experience. As Rose stated

*The experience of just having time to think about yourself I found to be really useful and positive. I am normally rushing around and I am too busy to spare time for me so being on the residential showed me a new way of living. The community feeling at Cae Mabon really helped me to settle in and I felt more comfortable and relaxed around the dinner table there than I do with my own family.*

The contrasting lifestyle of the community, then, engaged the young people visiting the retreats in the exploration of new perspectives on their identities. The mutual power relations and the role everyone took in constructing the programme on each retreat offered an experience to the young

people of themselves that was not only different from their everyday sense of themselves but valued them and encouraged them to ‘voice’ their experiences.

### **Retelling Past Journeys: constructing and reconstructing identity**

Many young people used the retreat experience as an opportunity to give an account of their lives, as they understood them, before the Stoneleigh Project began. This covered a wide range of aspects from the personal, social, and public domains of their lives. The facilitators and mentors describe how one to one conversations concerning personal issues were major aspects of their work during the retreats. The young people initially treated these stories as though they were historical and had no current significance on their lives. Typically, however, matters would emerge later in the narration that were still problematic and, up until that point, perceived as not open to influence through the actions of the young person. For example, one young person, Beth, described how a walk over the moor with the facilitator gave her the chance to discuss for the first time with anyone other than a doctor her recent discovery that she was pregnant. She described how she had to decide whether or not to have an abortion and how talking it over, being listened to, and sharing it with a group she now trusted, was helping her.

These were not passive retellings of earlier life journeys. The retreat was experienced as a space in which ‘complicating factors’ (Labov, 1972) in the lives of the young people were evaluated. All three domains, private, social and public, were significant to the young people in reviewing old identities. Attention was often placed on the elements in their stories that they considered negative, for instance Beth’s unexpected pregnancy. Other topics included issues with parents, addictive behaviours, educational failures, and painful personal relationships. Rose used her retreat to reflect on her relationship with her family:

*Cae Mabon really helped me to see things in my life that I had been blocking out. It gave me the courage to be me and to see who I really am, I may not of faced up to who*

*I am but at least I am half way there. ... This made me realise that I had to make more of an effort with my family and get them to make more of an effort with each other.*

Narratives often concerned matters that were intensely personal and were considered by the young people and their mentors as highly significant in the young person's stalled transition to adulthood. However, the participants claimed that the process of telling the story to an individual or group on the retreat made a difference. The interpretation of events would sometimes reconstruct the experience, as Rose recounts above, in a way that made the narrator feel better, or with a new ending that allowed for some action to be taken in the future. As with Rose and Beth above, many of these conversations were thought by the young people to lead to a transformation of the problem from a position of denial or impotence to one of acknowledgement and empowerment. This, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) highlight, created the possibility that the young participants could then reconstruct the meanings and the trajectories of their stories.

Taniguchi, Freeman and LeGrand-Richards (2005) use the term fractional sublimation to describe the process during an outdoor personal development experience in which new experiences challenge and partially break down elements of a participant's identity creating opportunities for partial reconstruction. As Taniguchi *et al* claim, fractional sublimation, in this case brought about by the circumstances of the young person prior to as well as during the retreat, could, with the right support, lead to the reconstruction of identity and growth during and after the retreat.

It was not only the retreat community and its way of life that empowered the young people to reflect on their life stories. As Taniguchi *et al.* (2005) suggest, the physical landscape played a role in the participants becoming 'authors' of the experiences they were having. The context for the narrative was significant. In most cases this involved personal moments of meaning making projected on to the landscape as the following example illustrates.

*Justin had taken an interest in Staffa and Fingal's Cave from his first arrival at Camas. The island lies five miles to the north and a boat trip with a local fisherman from Iona had been offered weather-permitting. The trip took place in exciting sailing conditions and a group were able to land on Staffa and walk into the sea cave. Justin was overwhelmed by a coincidence. The day of his landing was the first anniversary of a commitment he had made and maintained to be drug-free. That commitment had been made on the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland; a headland with the same hexagonal basalt columns as Fingal's Cave. That evening one of the resident community told the story of Fingal, the giant emphasising the link between the two features in Justin's mind. He recounted the effect on him at the meeting in the room of the nets the following evening. He then made a new commitment to work with the voluntary organisation he was with to find and bring into rehabilitation other drug users.*

*Other aspects of the context that encouraged the retelling of personal narratives included the reflection times in which, as Rose described in the extract above, young people could gather their thoughts. Creative activities were also widely used in this way. They were offered as ways to express in sculpture, or another art form, significant events in the lives of the young people. These would then be used as a visual aid with which to tell a life story. For example, Paul created his own ritual that he invited others to witness and then to join in.*

*Paul had become very quiet since a session run by a Mull resident artist Emma. During this "mandala exercise" participants had been invited to use the results of beach combing to create below the high tide mark a design that represented who they were and where they were going. Many took part and the session lasted several hours, finishing with a gallery. However Paul did not show his work. That evening in the meeting in the room of the nets he was animated, asking if anyone wanted to join him in lighting a fire on the shore and throwing into it scraps of paper on which they were invited to write all the things about who they wanted to leave behind. Everyone liked*

*the idea. The fire was lit and, as people threw their papers in, they started to name the things written on them. No one left until the rising tide put out the fire and washed everything away.*

The retreat community and the spaces they inhabited became storied landscapes. They offered places where the young people claimed to come to perceive their personal and social worlds as mutable rather than fixed. They could define or ‘story’ it rather than be defined or ‘storied’ by it. The young people could perceive themselves as agents within and not determined by their situations. Narrative was being used as a form of evaluation. Past experiences were judged as were past responses. At a deeper level the values that underpinned these interpretations of events in their lives were being explored and evaluated through the process of narration.

As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest, narrative played a significant part in the emergence of new aspects of the young people’s identities during the retreats. The community of the retreat both endorsed and provided opportunities to live out these emerging selves. Returning to Bernstein’s recognition code theory as one way to approach the evidence, the diversity of codes present on the retreat programme was matched by a range of ways to express new self-knowledge. The learner centred programme provided significant and varied opportunities for the young people to find what Bernstein (1996) would term an ‘expression code’ to suit them. By this Bernstein meant that the student would find within the educational programme forms of knowledge that suited an identity with which they felt comfortable.

### **Imagining New Journeys: retelling the future**

The retreats led to more than new narratives of past events. It also led to new stories of future paths. Gordon, the gay male lap dancer, told the story of how he ran away from his abusive partner to join the retreat. His story continues with how he began to imagine becoming a member of the Camas Community for a while. Once this was realised his story moved on to imagining and then applying for and getting a place at university to study history. In each telling and retelling of his story as it unfolded

his understanding of the power he had in relation to his previous partner, the Camas community members and the wider social world steadily moved enabling him to take two transformative steps away from his previous aspiration as a manager of a sex shop. He not only retold his story he relived it. Other young participants illustrate this process further.

The evidence from Brad and Rose illustrates how young people used the retreats as opportunities for disclosure. Both young people used the retreat and the trusting relationships within the retreat communities to tell their life stories. Despite some of these stories containing significant personal distress, the effect on the young person was typically one of excitement. Rose described how this was because she felt she had been listened to and that, somehow, this made her earlier experiences feel like they had become a part of her past. The retreat and the story telling were helping her to take a step away from earlier problems.

Once a step had been taken away from the elements of their lives that were perceived as restraining them, Brad and Rose used the retreats to develop and express a new sense of themselves. For Brad an important aspect of the activities on retreat was the novel opportunities that they provided for him to narrate his identity in an embodied way as described here by a community member.

*Brad did not speak, did not make eye contact, and did not join in throughout the first three days of the retreat. He was a 'hoody' ... making it hard to see his face at all. On the fourth day Brad joined a group for a hill walk. It was hard to keep him with the rest as he surged ahead up the steep slope. On the top of the ridge he threw back his hood, raised his arms in the air and shouted into the strong wind, and then ran into the wind and back several times. His descent was as fast as his ascent and he had the tea on for the others when they got back. His hood was off and he made brief and then increasingly steady eye contact. That evening she described how he spoke for the first time about how he felt on the hill and then, 'as if a dam had burst', went on to tell*

*everyone of his problems with being kicked out by his Dad, being mixed up in drugs, and how he got his nickname.*

For Brad there was a link between the new physical self, ‘the mountains are where I feel myself’, and his opening up to the possibility of new knowledge of himself in a social context, ‘I feel like somebody ...’ and ‘this is what I want to be like’. The mountains gave him an awareness of what made him feel good, feel valued, and feel liked or loved, as well as an implicit critical assessment of what he did not like. It was also the knowledge that he was respected, listened to, trusted to take responsibility, and that there were places and people who could make him feel like that.

Rose made extensive use of metaphors drawn from the natural setting of the retreat to express her developing narrative. This phenomenon Taniguchi *et al.* (2005) claim is important in the process of fractional sublimation. They describe it as the process of shedding facades that have been adopted by the individual on the basis of what they believe society expects them to be like.

In the case of Brad and Rose they can be understood as attempting to resist reproducing the narratives of themselves as told by others. Brad was attempting to escape his identity as a member of a gang. Rose was trying to move beyond what she perceived as her family’s limited expectations of her. Justin’s account above provides another example of this process, in his case using the landscape of the retreat symbolically to represent personal transformation. In that case, Fingal’s Cave became a landmark in his process of drug rehabilitation.

The young people used the retreats to evaluate their life stories. This often resulted in situations in which the young people retold their stories in ways that repositioned themselves as actors with more power to relive their trajectories. They would frequently suggest resolutions to the elements in their stories that they understood as problematic or restraining.

### **Living Out New Pathways: narrative into agency**

The young people used narrative to express new identities within the experiential and social world of the retreat. In most cases, these new narratives had direct impacts on the pathways that their transitions to adulthood then took. A sense of agency, as Bruner (2004) and Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state, was a significant outcome of the narrated experiences. As Bruner states, narrative provided a way for the young people to understand their life stories as unfolding and mutable. Critical events, as Labov (1972) highlights, provided the possibility of major retellings with new plots, characters, abilities and aspirations. They learned to think that the meaning of past experiences could change and the narrator could retell old stories and develop new ones as guides and aspirations for the future.

As the young people took more powerful roles in their narratives of their lives they described how their sense of agency was enhanced. I have described it above by suggesting that the young people felt like actors in their life stories, or, more appropriately for the current metaphor, navigators of their own worlds. The young people reported that much of this sense of power came from evaluating in their own terms what they thought about aspects of their life stories and being amongst a group of people who, by listening affirmatively, provided some authority for their views. In their view, the unfolding narratives that they told of their lives during and, importantly, after the retreats led to many changes in their actual lives. Significantly, in their narratives, it was the transformational changes that took place that are most often ascribed to the retreat experiences.

From the participants' point of view, then, authoring was significant. The telling and retelling of narratives in embodied and oral forms and within the social learning context of the retreats, such as those described above for Brad and Rose, was the most significant way in which old knowledge of the self was reworked and new knowledge was integrated into the identity of the young people. The process of narrating their experiences led, in the view of the participants, directly to personal transformational experiences that they regarded as positive steps in their transitions to adulthood.



From the theoretical point of view of Bernstein (1996) the narrative process, illustrated by the case studies above, gave voice to the meaning that each participant was making of their own particular experiences and its effect on their identities. The ability to critically review and reconstruct life stories and to develop and articulate new ones supported the transformative potential of the experience by helping many of the young people articulate, in action and in conversation, the unfolding narratives of their lives.

### **Transformation**

This paper is concerned with whether or not the retreat experiences and their impacts on the identities of the young people can be understood as transformative. Transformation, like narrative, is contextual. It matters what is transformed and from whose perspective. For the purpose of this paper it is the young participants' perspectives that are most important.

In relation to their pasts many young people, including all those presented as part of the evidence in this paper, claimed to have experienced transformations in relation to their understanding of, and power in relation to, their personal and social histories. The focuses of these transformations were many and varied and particular to each young person. The impact of the experiences were, the young people made clear, inspiring for them and contributed significantly to feelings of being released from or escaping key aspects of their lives that were responsible for keeping them in marginalised positions.

In many cases the retreat experience also contributed to a transformation of their expectations of themselves in relation to the personal, social, and public domains of their future lives. Interviews, journals and correspondence maintained the evidence from some participants for up to four years. Beth resolved her abortion dilemma although this led to complications with her parents. She became a nanny working for a family in Iceland, perhaps a legitimate way to run away from home. Gordon was never found by his exploitative partner, completed his university degree and never went back. Rose confronted her stepparents about the identity of her real father and met with him. She qualified as a

youth worker and found a full time post in another town. She maintains good but very different relations with her stepparents. All of these participants use their experiences on retreat to explain the critical moment of transformation that led their life stories down new paths.

Steve, on the other hand, remained 'stuck' with part time work, no new friends and a continued dependence on the voluntary youth organisation that he belonged to. Nevertheless, he describes the retreats as pivotal in giving him the aspirations he still holds for his future. Brad, after several months of working in the forest and stopping drug taking and dealing, was allowed back home by his father. He then disappeared again. His youth worker is optimistic suggesting that it will take several oscillations before he finally finds his way forward.

Whether it can be claimed that the outdoor retreats helped all the young participants is therefore a mixed story. On its own terms of supporting young people into finding social mobility and positive pathways into adulthood the Stoneleigh Project was successful with some groups more than others. Those with fluid or weak or chaotic social networks were more readily supported than those with strong ones. This compares with findings for other youth work interventions with similar groups (Williamson & Taylor, 2005).

Despite the consistent evidence reported by the participants, it can be claimed that there is no direct evidence that the outcomes of the retreat can be attributed to the actions to which it is linked by the narratives of the young people. I believe this misses a significant point. Like Clandinin and Connelly (2000), I have argued that the evidence suggests that the development of a new identity is supported by narratives, whether this is physical or verbal, and that this needs tangible experiences to build on. Indeed, Clandinin and Connelly argue that narrative is an essential aspect of experience. In this case it does not matter whether the new self can actually be attributed to the experience that is claimed for it or not. What matters is that the young person thinks that it does and can use the event to construct their ongoing narrative. There is an essential and ongoing relationship between identity,

experience and the narrative of the experience. The life stories above suggest that this may be especially significant when the narrative is describing a critical personal transformation.

Brookes (2003) challenges the claims made by the field that learning from outdoor experiences transfers to everyday life. This study illustrates that stories can be retold and journeys beyond the programme are affected as new narratives influence new lives. A critical aspect of this programme was the possibility for the young people to develop the narrative not only during but also well beyond the outdoor retreat. The focus on narrative rather than on behaviour as an evaluative and a pedagogic tool may also be significant.

## **Conclusion**

The young people became involved in the telling and retelling of their personal stories through a process initiated by the Stoneleigh Project and significantly supported by the retreats. First of all, the embodied and experiential way of offering the curriculum to the young participants through the retreats connected with the recognition codes valued by the young people. This meant that the young people were able to engage educationally with the retreat experience. The social context for explaining and exploring community lifestyle provided a learner centred approach that gave the young people considerable opportunities to take responsibility for becoming involved in the community and, especially, the meaning it might hold for them. This included the opportunity to express new possibilities for themselves in embodied and experiential ways, as well as through their verbal narratives. The range of expression codes added to the potential for the approach to work well for a wide range of learners.

Significantly, this research has identified that narrative, in both embodied and oral forms, was critical to the pedagogic approach of the retreats. Learning to tell and retell narratives of life stories was an important skill developed by the young people. Telling these narratives had an impact on the sense of agency the young people felt they had in relation to their transitions. The evidence strongly

supports the suggestion that narrative gave their identities voice and power giving them the potential to support transformative trajectories in their future life paths.

It is interesting to note that, whilst many outdoor programmes for young people provide moments of novelty and challenge in which choices have to be made in order to help them construct their emerging identities, 'crises', as Becker (2008) would term them, the Stoneleigh Project retreats created a different kind of experience in order for young people to reflect on crises that had already occurred in their everyday lives. Reflection is sometimes better than action. I recommend practitioners to consider the possibilities of this alternative approach to outdoor learning for their participants. Likewise the wider use of narrative might usefully be incorporated into other types of personal development programmes. The evidence suggests that, in this study, it is an important means by which changes in emerging identities are constructed and then applied by young people after the educational intervention. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) point out, narrative inquiry helps educators to understand the particular meaning of experiences to individuals, something Rickinson, M., Dillon, J., Teamey, K., Morris, M., Choi, M. Y. and Sanders, D. (2004) identify as a blind spot in the outdoor education profession.

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