

## Stories of Identity

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**Attribution:** The assignment is an adaptation of the "personal Micro map" exercise that Betsy Buckley and Phil Decter (Simmons College of Social Work) adapted from the work of Michael White's adaptation of Jerome Bruner's work on the Landscape of Action and The Landscape of Meaning. Sarah, a Simmons social work student also provided the first computerized version of a personal micro map. Since then, many students have personalized their own versions.

**References:** Cited references are listed at the end of the book, *Re-authoring Teaching: Creating a Collaboratory*.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	xi
Foreword by David Epston	xix
Section One: Re-authoring Teaching	1
1. Introduction	3
2. Opening the Online Lens	23
3. Teaching Congruently	47
4. Reckoning with Power	67
5. When Nice is Not Enough	85
Section Two: Multiple Voices	105
6. Peopling the Course	107
7. Stories of Identity	125
8. Teaching Stories	143
9. Public Practices	163
10. The Power of Intentional Witnessing	177
Section Three: Practice, Practice, Practice	195
11. Letter-Writing	197
12. Remember to Ask	215
13. Apprenticing to a Craft	231
14. Practice, Practice, Practice	251
Notes	271
References	275

## PREFERRED STORIES OF IDENTITY AS REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONERS<sup>22</sup>

### Posting by Ali

*I really appreciate the preferred identity assignment for the way that it allows me to relate narrative ideas to my own life and to begin to see my life as many stories that can be read, written, spoken, shared many times with new meanings emerging each time.*

As an educator of therapists and human service providers, I have discovered that students often better understand and integrate a concept when they apply it to the living of their own lives. Students become "reflective practitioners" (Schon, 1983) by learning specific practices through which to think in action and put espoused theory into practice (Argyris & Schon, 1974). This chapter describes a four-part assignment through which students apply narrative ideas and practices to their own lives and identities<sup>23</sup>. Through mapping and expressing their personal values and perspectives, students directly experience the practices they are studying. Rather than studying in isolation, students develop a sense of community as they share their commitments and offer each other reflections. The stories generated by this exercise are so compelling as to demand to be shared (Sax, 2006, 2007a).

By publishing this piece, I receive credit for a collaborative creation<sup>24</sup>. This assignment reflects what is possible when teaching colleagues share their material with each other. We are committed to a generosity of spirit in which we freely share our teaching practices with each other, and build on each others ideas. Geographically dispersed, we exchange ideas and practices through email and occasional meetings.

My hope is that I can contribute to a growing body of literature on teaching practices that afford students that all too rare space to make real connections between classroom teachings and their own lives and relationships (Epston, Rennie et al., 2004). Through the "Preferred Stories of Identity" assignment, social work, counseling, psychology, and family therapy students directly experience the narrative practices they are studying. I offer the "Preferred Identity" assignment as a vehicle through which to teach five aspects of narrative practice: (1) Re-authoring conversations; (2) intentional understandings of identity; (3) double listening; (4) re-membering practices; (5) outsider witness practices and definitional ceremonies. Throughout the chapter, excerpts of students' work

illustrate the capacity of this assignment in aiding reflective practitioners to become clearer about their own personal values and perspectives, and about the applicability of narrative practices within the teaching process.

While this assignment is designed for masters of social work students, I have adapted a version, "How Do I Want to be in the World?" for undergraduate psychology students<sup>25</sup>. I introduce it approximately halfway through the course, by which time students have already been given a grounding in the theory and practice of narrative practice, and have generally developed into a supportive, collaborative group. This exercise further connects them to their own personal values, beliefs, passions, commitments and ethics, and encourages them to imagine the effects of these preferred ways of working on (near) future directions as a social worker, psychologist and/or family therapist<sup>26</sup>.

The assignment has four parts. Briefly, they are as follows:

- Participation in an in-class four-part interview;
- Developing a personal micro-map of preferred identity as a reflective practitioner;
- A letter of commitment; and
- Online posting of assignments in small cyber-groups of three to four students who also reflect on each others' work.

### PREFERRED IDENTITY ASSIGNMENT

#### Part One: In-class Interview

Prior to applying the assignment to themselves, students participate in an in-class four-part narrative interview with outsider witness practices. The exercise, adapted from the work of Michael White (1992), helps students to experience the themes of their lives linked together (White, 1995b). The steps are as follows:

With the rest of the class as audience, I interview a student volunteer about turning points in her career as a reflective practitioner, the realizations that have emerged over time, and the subsequent effects of these understandings on the evolution of her career. Guided by White's map for outsider witness responses (White, 2003), the students then reflect aloud on and actively interview each other about ideas and questions sparked by the first interview. I then interview the initial volunteer about her experiences of hearing the reflections, while her fellow students again take up the audience position. Finally, everyone debriefs their experiences of all parts of this interview.

After the interview, I draw two horizontal lines on the blackboard. With the interviewee's permission, I invite students to help me plot present, past, and future events on the bottom line, and meaning-making on the top line. This is how I introduce students to the "re-authoring conversations" map (White, 2007e) (see Figure 1).

conclusions. In the re-authoring conversations map, both types of questions inform the individual's exploration.

It took me some time to grasp the re-authoring conversations map based on Michael White's creative adaptation of Jerome Bruner's ideas about the dual landscapes of action and consciousness (Bruner, 1990). I have been amazed at how readily these theoretical constructs come alive when students use this map to contemplate turning points in their own development on a timeline stretching from the past to the present as well as their preferred near future.

The assignment requires each student to conduct a self-interview based on the classroom experience. I encourage them to create a comfortable milieu for personal reflection by taking a long walk, soaking in a hot bath, or conversing with a good friend. Some students arrange to interview each other outside of classroom time. Other students ask for help from a family member or a friend.

#### Part Two: Personal Micro-map of Preferred Identity

I give students an electronic template of a micro-map that applies the "re-authoring conversations" map to their own personal stories of identity as reflective practitioners (see Figure 2). At their computers, students use this template to construct their unique development as reflective practitioners in training. Over the years, I have collected over 100 individualized micro-maps. Some computer-savvy students create their own versions of the original template, adding personal touches such as color coding and sophisticated formatting. With their permission, I provide several illustrations created by past students, some of whom created their own versions of the original template. Students less comfortable with technology can choose to use paper and colored pencils.

Olivia's micro-map illustrates her preferred identity as a social worker. (see Figure 3).

C.J. created her own version that some later students have used as their template. (see Figure 4).

Each student maps a recent time in which her<sup>27</sup> actions resonated with how she aspires to perform her work, traces a brief history of her commitment to helping others, and thereby explores her preferred identity as a reflective practitioner. For example, by situating influential events in their identity as social workers and unique realizations that emerged from these experiences on a timeline, social work students learn how the storyline of their own lives can be "re-authored" according to their preferred ways of being as a social worker. I tell students that there is no right way and it is up to them to decide what they wish to share. I share some of what prior students have told me about the personal memories that this assignment brings forth, and their expressions of enthusiasm despite the challenges their disclosures posed. I try to assuage students' fears and arrange to communicate privately with students who express concerns.

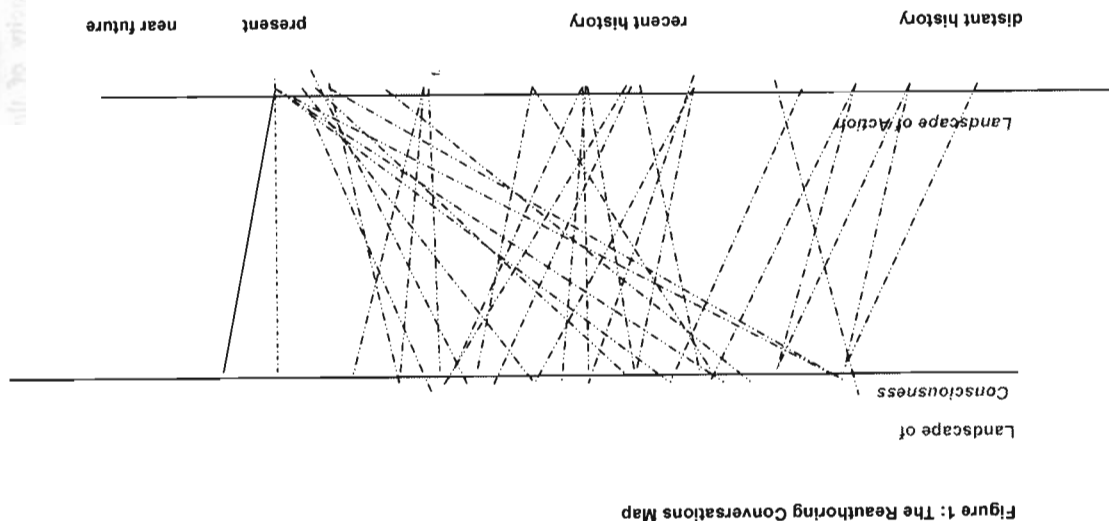


Figure 1: The Reauthoring Conversations Map

#### Figure 1: The Re-authoring Conversations Map

Re-authoring conversations is a key concept in narrative practice, which I address in detail further on. "Landscape of action" questions encourage people to situate influential events within the past, present, and future. "Landscape of consciousness" questions inquire into the *meaning* of developments that occur in actions, which can include perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, speculations, realizations, and

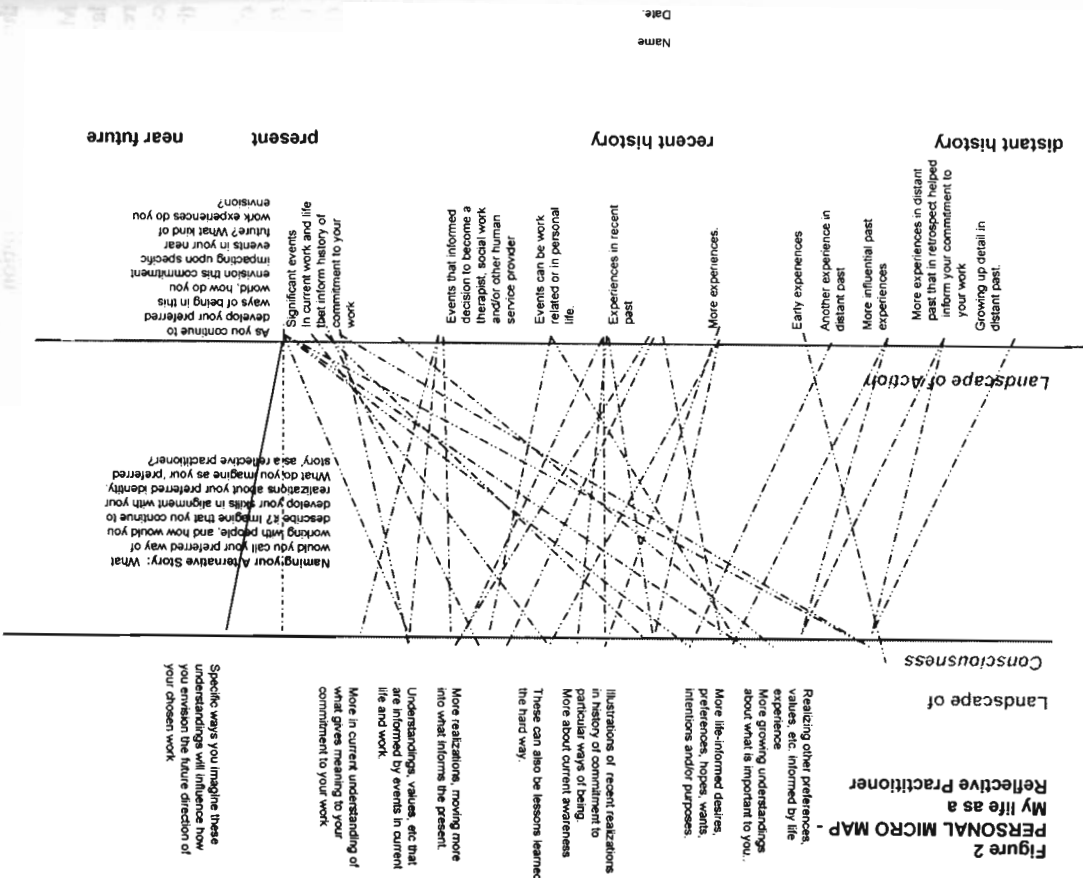


Figure 2: Micro-map Template (see attachment)

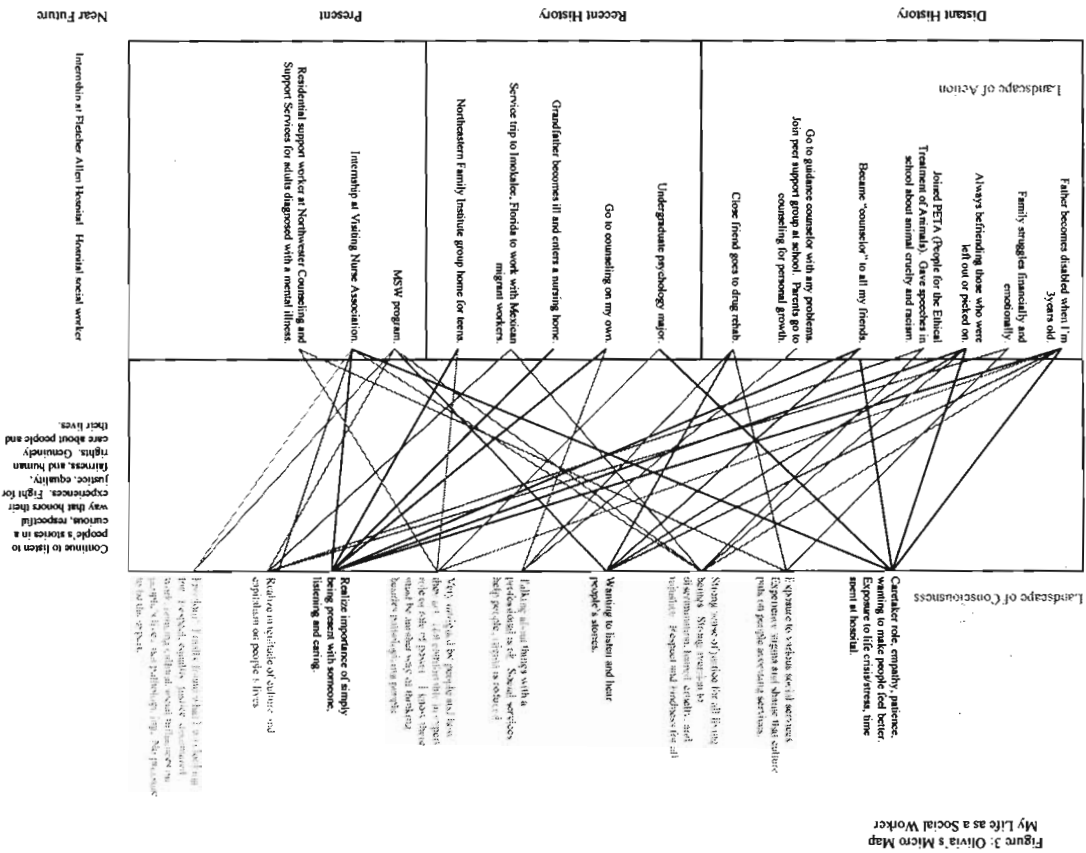


Figure 3: Olivia's Micro-map (see attachment)

Figure 4: C.J.'s Micromap

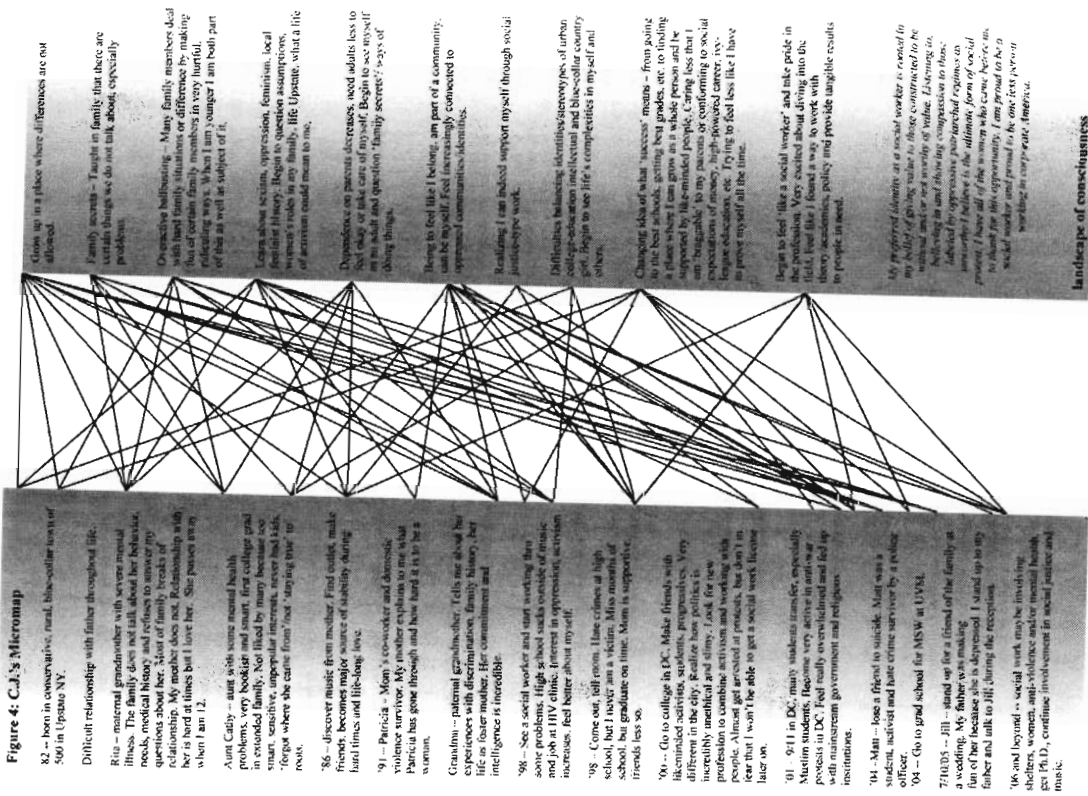


Figure 4: C.J.'s Micro-map (see attachment)

Part Three: Letters of Commitment

After completing their personal micro maps, students post a letter of commitment online, addressed to whomever they select to witness their written statement. In preparation for writing this letter, I give them a series of questions, originally constructed by Betsy Buckley and Phil Decker:

- What did you learn about yourself and your commitment to the work through this assignment?
- How did these learnings relate to aspects of your own experiences?
- What does this reflect about yourself as a practitioner and about future directions in your work?
- Who and what stood by you in working this way?
- What kind of effects do you envision this way of working will have on the people who consult you in the future?
- Who and what will help you feel supported in the future, and continue to 'thicken' your alternative story?
- I ask students to close with a personal statement of their ethics and commitments, describing how these ethics are connected with past experiences, and how they imagine they will be carried into the future.

The letter of commitment provides students' firsthand experience with performing an alternative story based on their cherished values for an audience of their choice. Students write letters of commitment to a wide array of people who are uncovered through their micro-mapping process: parents, family members, classmates, colleagues, mentors, teachers, friends, clients, and spiritual guides. Some students write to themselves and to their future selves. Wendy provides a good illustration of the power of this experience in a letter to her parents:

*I had no idea that this path as a social worker started early in life. Did you? I realize that I started caring for other people and being concerned about their wellbeing in grade school. I was always looking for the person who was down and out. Once I found them I would try to comfort them. As an adult, I had always believed that my work in this field was just that, my work. I now realize that this "social work" is something that I bring into almost everything that I do.*

Part Four: Reflecting in Small Cyber-Groups

Students are assigned to small groups in which they become "outsider witnesses" to each others' assignments. Students post their work and share their reflections on each group's online forum. Some small groups choose to meet in person in addition to or instead of meeting electronically. Reading each others' work sparks new ideas and questions. Through responding online to each others' work, they learn from each other, and their reflections convey accounts of "two-way effects" (White, 1997). Students often comment on the personal meaning of discovering similar themes when they read fellow students' micro maps and letters of commitment. Students acknowledge relief in hearing words put to shared experiences, as illustrated in this online reflection from Jen to Lisa: