European Journal of Geography Volume 5, Number1:70- 80 March 2014

NARRATING SPACES.INNOVATIVE ENTRIES TO (SCHOOL) GEOGRAPHY

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Abstract

Narratives are part of our daily practices; we attempt to understand our world based on different "stories". Referring to the concept of homo narrans (Fisher 1984), every human being can tell stories and holds the ability of narrative rationality. In today's world we cannot know everything nor precisely quantify the world by mere numbers. Narratives thus play a vital role in the production and transmission of plausible knowledge. As patterns of explanation, narratives go far beyond told or written accounts. For geographical prospects, conceiving spaces as narratives helps recognising one's own bondage and making sense of complex natural and social processes (Daniels & Lorimer 2012). Narrating spaces means authenticating objective facts into subjectively experienced, multiply lived places (Rhode-Jüchtern 2012). Although narrative knowledge (vs. scientific knowledge) (Lyotard 1986 [1979]) does not need formal legitimation it does not lack reliability. The concept of narrative geography is thus further delved into in order to appraise its application for geography education.

Keywords:*EUROGEO 2013, narrative geography, geography education, Thirdspace, deconstruction*

1. KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION – PURSUIT OF AUTHENTICITY

Talking about narratives, everybody seems to know what is meant. In our commonplace understanding it stands for a story or fairy tale that is nice for children. Narratives often lack truth, which is compensated by amazing figures and fabulous actions. Besides, we tell stories about daily occurrences that happened to us; having missed the bus or pleasant experiences from our last holiday trip. What we, however, *sincerely* believe in are hard facts and clear dates that can convince us. Knowledge must be credible, calculable and predictable to make us capable of decisions and take actions. At the same time, we recognise distinct ways of knowledge production, which means that information in general is available faster and easier, often as a consequence of new media that facilitate their uncomplicated distribution. If we have a look at Internet blogs for example, we see that people resort to these sources of knowledge and trust in them as reliable resources in terms of everyday decision-making. What bloggers do there, is nothing different than telling stories, narrating and producing knowledge to trust in.

Geographical knowledge production, in particular, changed significantly since the affirmation of a *cultural turn*, wherein concepts and definitions are no longer fixed but rather given distinct meanings in processes of discursive negotiation. Besides, its double character as being a (nomothetic and) idiographic science stresses the role of smaller stories and incidents to be relevant in the production of geographic knowledge. In the course of poststructuralist movements, for example, spaces and the world in general can be read as texts – a notion that can be reasonably integrated into the concept of narrative geography.

1.1 Lyotard – knowledge from a postmodern perspective

We can distinguish different kinds of knowledge and dimensions of credibility. French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard recognises scientific versus narrative knowledge. According to him, scientific knowledge is becoming more vital nowadays. Science aims meticulously at gaining and distributing knowledge. As being denotative, it distinguishes between right or wrong statements. "Knowing" then means being able to produce true evidence (Lyotard 1986, 80f). Important to mention that scientists are constantly confronted with the question to what extent the methods they use are "true", since they in turn are used to produce "true" statements (Geiger 2006, 171). In other words, scientific knowledge must always prove its legitimacy but in doing so is trapped in a "vicious circle" because every proof will have to be proved again. It cannot legitimate itself by its own means. Accordingly, scientific knowledge is rather forced to resort to another kind of knowledge. Narrative knowledge will fill this gap because it provides those criteria for evaluating its own and other stories (see fig. 1).

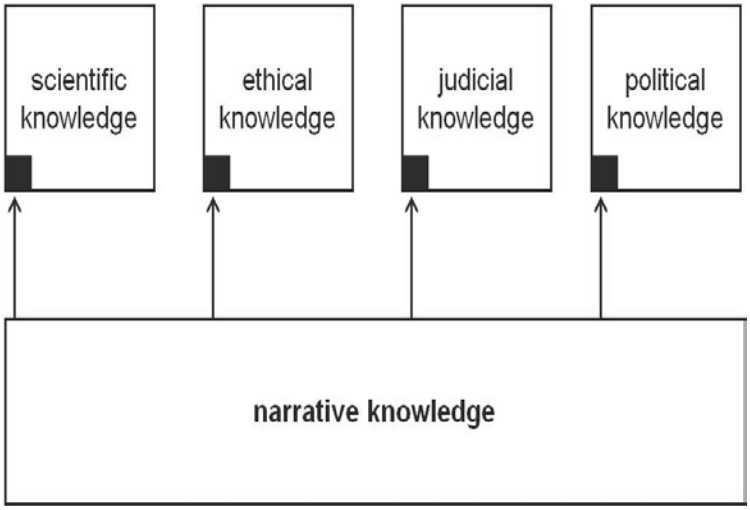

Figure. 1: Narrative knowledge as part of other kinds of knowledge to cover the "blind spot" of legitimation; own illustration, on the basis of Geiger 2006, 183.

As the name implies, narrative knowledge is knowledge that is passed on by stories; stories that deal with success or failure, luck or disaster, beauty and justice. At the same time, those stories provide the criteria to identify achievements as good or bad within the story itself, as well as those criteria what a good or bad performance stands for (ibid., 173). They do not need external proof. Whereas scientific knowledge is restricted to denotative statements, narrative knowledge is able to combine different kinds of discourse – named "language games" ("Sprachspiele") by Wittgenstein – for different aims (describe, prescribe, evaluate, question ...). In this respect, recognising the plurality of possible narrations, Lyotard justifiably speaks about their ability to enable their audience to develop different

competences, "extensive education" indeed (Lyotard 1986, 65). Another particularity is that the narrator owes his permission to narrate a story only to the fact that he himself has been its "listener" before – he has participated in it. As the sender, one is estimated to tell a credible story; one's authenticity won't be questioned (ibid., 70f).

Nevertheless, narrative knowledge stands as the "included excluded" (Geiger 2006, 177) because of its negative subjective notion. Scientific knowledge would charge narrative knowledge of not reflecting on the legitimation of knowledge. On the other hand, narrative knowledge is able to legitimate and thus stabilise scientific knowledge, making it partly "included".

In the words of Rhode-Jüchtern (2004, 50), scientific knowledge comprises things to agree upon, whereas narrative knowledge comprises things that mean something to us.

1.2 Language and knowledge – linguistic turn

Narrative cannot be conceived of without recognising the importance of language. In the words of Gadamer (1976, 19 cit. in Geiger 2006, 106), "[h]uman experience is essentially linguistic". Proceeding from linguistic-philosophical considerations, the proclamation of a *linguistic turn* in the middle of the 20th century set out the constructivist belief that there is no world beyond language. Language produces realities. Through language, people give things names, make them visible and fix meanings. At the moment one linguistically names an elevation of the ground as being a hill, he makes that natural phenomenon meaningful. As long as one does not see objects and verbalise them, they will not become "real" or meaningful for others neither. Even more, for some people, the Himalayas are not more than a huge elevation of rocks, whereas others connote the mountains as "gods' souls" or "axis of the world". Language is a potent means to assign meaning to things and events. It implies that language is by no means a neutral medium to simply transmit messages. Words have the power to persuade, especially when listeners or readers cannot resort to already experienced own mental images. Travel reports, be it from the times of Columbus' discoveries or current travel guides, are just one example to show how geographical knowledge is produced and believed in – by narratives. Concurrently, language plays a vital role in geopolitical issues, for example the mere naming of places, and can become a highly emotional subject. When former Mexican president Calderón announced the planned re-naming of the "United States of Mexico" into "Mexico", he wanted to express his negative attitude towards their neighbours in the North not being worth of appearing in the Mexican state's name.

2. NARRATIVES – APPROACHING A DEFINITION

Before laying down the basic understanding of "narrative", it should be stated that the noun is used as generic term; "narration" will be used to speak about specialised ideas of narrative. In our daily lives we all tell stories, we use narratives in order to understand the world surrounding us. Through narratives, people make sense of their lives and build their identities. Often, daily experiences or processes are intuitively used for understanding difficult matters because they can be described more colourfully, bestowing human qualities and abilities on abstract developments (Ohly 2002, 51ff cit. in Rhode-Jüchtern 2004, 51). Departing from the concept of homo narrans (Fisher 1984), every human being holds the ability of narrative rationality, more or less pronounced, but it can be broadened.

This means that we all have and shape general views on life, death, freedom, happiness and so on that guide our lives. Furthermore, it is our narrative (vs. paradigmatic) mode of knowing (Bruner 1986) that helps organising and remembering experience. Although we are

and will always be story-tellers (Viehöver 2012, 72) there are rather good and less convincing stories. A good narration, following Fisher's (1984, 10) idea of rationality, depends on two factors: *narrative probability* comprises formal aspects to build a coherent story with consistent actors. *Narrative fidelity*, as the substantive component, stands for the story's credibility and truth, the facts that we adhere to.
"Narrative" is still experiencing significant attention, not just within the realms of narratology or linguistics. With Fisher and Bruner, narrative became prominent in political science and psychology.

Moreover, it "is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting […], stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation" (Barthes 1977, 79). In this sense, it comprises forms of communicative acts in the broadest sense. It is therefore justifiable to speak of a "narrative turn" as appreciating narration not merely as a form of artistic production but to acknowledge it as a mode of giving sense to one's being in the world by embedding events in temporal and causal relation and thus generating coherence (Heinen 2007). "The notion of narrative creation of place has by now become a widespread approach in both literary and cultural studies as well as in geography and sociology" (Boonyaprasop 2012, 80). Geography, for her part, can benefit from linking with this concept.

2.1 Conceptions of narrative

Before identifying the potentials of this liaison, this chapter intends to distinguish three different approaches of "narrative" in order to make them workable for geography classes (see chapter 3). On the one hand, "narrative" can be conceived of as complex texts whose inner logic can be deciphered, whereas "text" can comprise pictures, maps or music and others as well. The narrative content (German: Geschichte) (Genette 2007, 117ff) is often linked to a medium. The second concept conceives "narrative" as an arrangement of written, told or visually represented statements that are structured following certain relations. It is the subject of the discourse that stands out in this concept (German: Erzählung). For geography contexts, these might be architecture, festivals or city tours, stressing their performative character. The last concept of "narrative" focuses the actual act of narrating, stressing the active moment of narrative production (German: Narration).

It should become clear that narratives are not just being written or told, they are lived. For reasons of rigour, the semiotic concept of "space as text" will not be further delved into here. As will be shown later, this article does not reject the importance of physical-material space in favour of semiotic text that is comprised of mere cultural or social signifiers. Rather, spaces are conceived as narratives, where events and actions cannot be thought of without reference to the actual physical space. A certain moment of unsteadiness, however, remains: spaces are assigned various meanings by the people, thus producing contingent spatial realities.

Far from being just a "subject of critical analysis" (Daniels & Lorimer 2012, 4), narrative at the same time is "a creative method" (ibid.). This second understanding of narrative rather puts an emphasis on the process of narrativising, the act of bringing events, people and actions together to form a meaningful plot. In order to read spaces, make them understandable and meanings visible, geography resorts to methods that follow different steps in their narrative analysis (see examples in chapters 3.1.1 and 3.1.2).

2.2 Spatial narratives – or: who is narrating? | Edward Soja and Thirdspace

This analytical mask of "narrative" does not yet allow fruitful examination of geographical subjects, though. If we accept that imagination is impossible without spatialisation (see Friedman 1993; Herman 2002), then understanding linguistic expressions is impossible without having a certain spatialised conception of the thing heard or read. Here, space appears appropriate to be used as a theoretical lens for narrative geography: narratives must be analysed against the background of their spatial dimensions or rather with regard to the meaning spaces take on through them.

In order to make clear the notion of (narrative) spaces in this context we could ask the question of who is narrating at all? Space itself does not narrate in the narrow sense; spaces have no voice to express themselves. Rather, it is we as people, as inhabitants, as tourists, as students who narrate spaces and let them speak indirectly. Narrating then means performing spaces, we act in and with them and transform spaces into places because of our respective mode of looking and perceiving. This is how rather neutral, objective space is turning into meaningful, subjective place. In a kind of dialogic communicative act, the meaning or sense of the place is produced by us. Narrative, following Rath (2011), is no characteristic of texts or images – nor spaces – but a way of how we understand and conceive them.

Edward Soja, US-American postmodern political geographer, offers one way that can help connecting spaces and narratives, using his concept of Thirdspace (1996) (fig. 2) as theoretical lens. He believes that there is no dualistic concept of space, either subjective or objective. Soja, referring to Henri Lefèbvre, distinguishes three different notions that all require the other ones in order to exist and to speak of meaningful places.

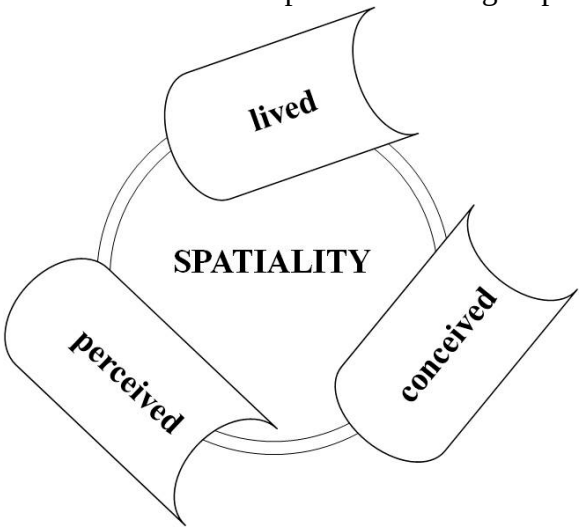

Figure. 2: Edward Soja – The Trialectics of Spatiality found in his concept of thirdspace; own illustration.

Firstspace – conceived space – encompasses the world of direct spatial conception of empirically measurable and cartographically identifiable phenomena, finding them in maps or statistics. These are data we suppose to be "real", objective and hard facts. Secondspace – perceived space – describes the mental space of spatial images and representations, things we have heard or read of, in newspapers or on television, and base our mental spatial image on. Finally, thirdspace – lived space – holds all those hidden secrets of the lived places that have to be explored by us. Thirdspace cannot exist without the other two concepts, as the actions taken and meanings assigned only result from the physical-material space as well as the things that are said or heard about it. One example may illustrate this: Their school building

is an object that students are able to locate on a map. They know how to get there, the teachers working there, maybe the date when the building was constructed (firstspace).

In addition, one will read news about the school, the festivities or improvements taking place there that make people think positively about it. Students may feel secure at school but dislike the toilets because they are dirty (secondspace). Finally, students share those unforgettable moments in the gymnasium, for example, when they once had a picnic there with their best friends. At that moment, they could forget about the exhausting classes with their severe teacher. Firstspace (the gym as "objective location") and secondspace ("bad experiences there") amount to thirdspace, the space of lived experience.

3. NARRATIVES AT SCHOOL

Application of narratives in school in general is not an entirely new field of study, rather challenging to transfer, however. Because of the dichotomous conception of natural sciences versus the arts, these two kinds of knowledge (chap. 1.1) are hardly thought together. School subjects such as physics, chemistry and biology are therefore welcome arenas to prove the applicability of narrative approaches. In physical education, "narrative didactics" have been taken up either (Schierz 1997). Kasper (2011, 161ff) sets up the idea of "staged controversy" wherein students are confronted with scientific problems encountered in the history of physics (may be broadened to other contexts) and which they have to narratively understand. This might be done by presenting a controversy (for example Humboldt's first discovery journey, when he suddenly encountered an aberration of his compass needle – due to the phenomenon of declination), enriching it with different views on the subject (magnetism) and initiating a change of perceptions. Speaking about school then, there is no getting around the notion of learning and education. As a basic understanding, learning requires experience. We structure and weigh them in the process of narrating; in turn, through narrations we are able to make experiences accessible both to ourselves and others (Hartung, Steininger & Fuchs 2011, 11). Nevertheless, there is no consensus on how to learn from narratives. Admitting the massive amount of information amidst the ever increasing influx of data, we have to take care that knowledge is and remains meaningful and learning processes make sense to students (Rhode-Jüchtern 2004, 59). This means we have to go beyond merely recognising facts, but to make these data applicable und worth knowing.

3.1 Narrative Geography

A narrative approach to geography education requires a different look at the topics, methods and media that are applied – according to the first concept of narrative (chapter 2.1). This, in turn, is closely linked to the understanding of narrative and scientific knowledge. Didactic narratives must be theory-driven, reasonably rich narrations that initiate reflexion (Schierz 1997, 15 cit. in Rhode-Jüchtern 2004, 54). They are neither simple anecdotes about holiday trips nor pleasant wrappings to make geographical subjects more interesting. Narrative entries can take on different forms but always constitute rich accounts that are sensitive to the greater context. As such, narratives all represent one plot, one point of view or one explanation of the world as it *can* be. Acknowledging that there is more than one point of view on one issue is likewise crucial for students to realise. With this, we want to stimulate conceptions of space that inherently carry the notion of multiple perspectives. At the same time, it must be appreciated that those ideas need not be the core of geography lessons. Narrative entries are just one option to be exercised.

In order to penetrate spaces, to understand how and why they take on certain meanings and which consequences they have on the physical space – which means make them legible – we have to resort to different methods and media, some of them not being traditionally geographic. Here, narrative acts as creative method. For this, working with discourse analysis, dual narrative, oral history as well as analysing photos, pictures, maps or travel writings, prove adequate approaches. In fieldtrips, the use or production of audiowalks would be another implementation of narrative and come up with the concept of narration as symbolically positioning oneself (see for example Janet Cardiff, in Popplow & Scherffig 2013, 285).

Following Creswell (2007, 54) narrative research comprises two ways of conduct: analysis of narratives is understood as thematic analysis where the researcher carries out "descriptions of themes" (ibid.). In narrative analysis, on the contrary, "researchers collect descriptions of events or happenings and then configure them into a story using a plot line" (ibid.). The following examples show two possible translations of the concept of narrative geography, focussing the second aspect.

3.1.1 **Example 1 | Photograph from Nigeria** (idea taken from Rhode-Jüchtern 2004, 55ff):

Pictures, not only in schoolbooks, are welcome means to communicate messages and work out topics. Giving this method a narrative focus, one could start by a description of the photograph showing a boy running away from the fire (fig. 3).

Figure 3: Exemplary photograph. Boy running away from fire.

Original title: Disasters in Nigeria's oil operations are common. 200 villagers died in this pipeline explosion a year ago. AP/Clement Ntaye. Reference: Olukoya, S. 2001. Environmental Justice from the Niger Delta to the World Conference Against Racism. Corp Watch. URL: http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=18 (accessed: 24 June 2013).

Discovering different ways of how students might read it serves to confront them with differing imaginations referring to the same picture. In a second step it will be necessary to line it with some extra background information that the teacher provides. This can be statistics, a newspaper article or a sequence from a documentary. It is important to have data that is rich in perspectives in order to guarantee worthy assessment. In a final phase students would then, not by chance but with the help of the information, imagine a narrative, finding their standing point on this issue. In other words, narrativising means extending the supposedly real image, or objective firstspace, by recognising distinctive opinions and enriching it to be one narration well elaborated.

3.1.2 Example 2 | Narrative interview – Inhabitants narrate their district:

The conduction of narrative interviews is preferably done on field trips or smaller school projects since it is a little bit time-consuming. Its aim is not exclusively to give the deprived or discriminated a voice but to gain valuable insights into spaces (thirdspace) while generating a counterbalance to the mass-mediated and "prominent" information that students normally hear from other parts of the world. By interviewing local people, students are able to obtain memories that are narrated directly and thus can look into places and times from another perspective. After all, they are striving for "authentic" knowledge from the people in order to make up places in their minds. The person narrating is actually confronted with herself, ordering and thus co-construction past events and actions, while implicitly evaluating or justifying them.

As Polkinghorne (2007, 227ff) puts it, every narrator is doing "narrative structuring" in his or her narration. It is comparable to a second lecture; individual memory is a reconstruction itself. Likewise, the narrator is "smoothing" parts of the story due to the structuring of memories. Yet corresponding Horsdal's (2013, 112) conception of narrative interviews, the centre of attention is less the person itself in this special moment of narration than how he or she is trying to make sense of a lived narration when narrating it. We want to become aware of the contexts of the narration.

In order to use narrative interviews as creative method, students should be introduced a prolific controversy. Appropriate topics revolve around questions of images of a city district, the individual perception of changes within certain spaces or conflicting uses of spaces. The focus might also be on the daily accomplishments or encounters (people from a home for the elderly report on different events). They prove to be a rich source to get to know the hidden secrets of thirdspace. The selection of narrators should be well considered in advance.

In addition, the students must be given an introduction how to carefully interact with the people since narrative interviews is a method where the researcher must be absolutely sensible to the situation, acknowledging the narrator's autonomy. Narrative interviews should be conducted with one person each, but collecting a variety of narrators. In addition to the story being told, the people can show extra material such as photographs, letters or objects from other family members or friends. This depends on where and when the interview is being conducted; students might be given some hours time to roam the streets and find people or there are already dates prearranged with the interviewees. After an open question to initiate the narration ("Please tell me about the journey you have done in order to stand where you are now", "What were your experiences during the times of…", "What does this place mean for you?", …), the interviewer will carefully listen and avoid questioning in the early stages.

Depending on the accuracy of the research and the narrator's disposition, the students might record the interview or/and take detailed notes. Towards the end, they will ask questions about the things that remained unclear or that are of interest for the students. The students should gather more information about the context of the story. "Narrative researchers situate individual stories within participants' personal experiences (their jobs, their homes), their culture (racial or ethnic), and their historical contexts (time and place)" (Creswell 2007, 56). If necessary, they will investigate more about special facts. Context knowledge is important since this situation of narrative interview is a situated one, and the situation heavily depends on the narrator's feelings and thoughts that might result from some events he or she takes for granted but does not explicitly mention. With this substantiated background, the students go on to analyse the stories. By re-storying them they will link different ideas, as well as finding dichotomies, "examining silences, and attending to disruptions and contradictions" (ibid.). This step of deconstruction helps students to balance ideas and thoughts and to recognise other points of view. The students sum up their stories

and see that all contribute to the mosaic of spatial narratives. In a phase of reflection, based on the different stories it will be necessary to question how information about these spaces is produced, distributed and used, as well as for and by whom. Since it is impossible for a single person to ever act as unique author of one narrative, we have to unfold this net of power and negotiation. Normally, the last step of this research process includes the active collaboration with and involvement of the participants again. Both parties are to learn from each other; to "negotiate the meaning of the stories, adding a validation check to the analysis" (ibid., 57). For geography classes, it will be adequate to stop at this point.

4. PROSPECT | POTENTIALS AND RISKS (CONCLUSION)

As has been shown, the application of "narrative" to fields like geography can contribute to another look at spatial issues, without being able to foresee its deeper advantages already. Following this line of argumentation, one has to be aware of not losing its analytical focus (Daniels & Lorimer 2012, 7) and thus broadening geography to an all-encompassing discipline. On the other hand, there are remarkable benefits. To sum them up briefly: The concept of "narrating spaces" helps (not only) students to avoid accumulating "dead" knowledge – they make data meaningful by linking it with own feelings and beliefs in order to produce rich narratives.

Consequently, this reduction and re-ordering of complex information will enable actions. As such, narrative geography shows its pragmatic dimension; students can actually do and learn something with and from it. Furthermore, they will experience a counter balance to media information as well as adding another facet and thus avoiding dualisms. After all, issues are never too plain to just call them good or bad, "boon and bane".

A narrative approach should prevent students from basing their actions just on similarly experienced encounters and things they already know. They need to integrate differing views into own reflections and dare to deliver own judgements. On the other hand, there is potential to further delve into questions of "narrative empathy" (Breithaupt 2009), a concept that combines insights from cognitive science as well as literature and philosophy. It is appropriate because narrative geography does not seek detailed formal descriptions of narratives but hidden meanings and schemes in different contexts (Steininger & Basseler 2011, 109), which can be traced only from a third – here: student's – perspective. Again, we recognise that critical handling of data is as crucial as understanding how processes of knowledge construction influence own thinking and acting. These considerations should encourage new paths in teaching and learning geography.

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