

Reading

Authoring Identity

Directions: As you read the text, make the following annotations in the margin to record your thinking about the relationship between identity and storytelling:

- A heart (♥) by ideas that make you think or that you can relate to
- A question mark (?) where you feel confused or want to pose a question
- An exclamation point (!) by “ah-ha” moments that teach you something about yourself, others, or the world

Connecting Identity and Storytelling

Answering the question, “Who am I?” is an important part of growing up. This question may seem simple and straightforward, but the concept of identity is complex, multidimensional, and fluid. For all human beings, a key part of identity development is *storytelling*. As we grow up, we meet new people and have new experiences, and our brains help us make sense of it all through stories. The stories that we tell ourselves help shape our identities. They influence how we answer the question, “Who am I?” Author and journalist Emily Esfahani Smith explains it this way:

We are all storytellers . . . Yet unlike most stories we’ve heard, our lives don’t follow a predefined arc. Our identities and experiences are constantly shifting, and storytelling is how we make sense of it. By taking the disparate pieces of our lives and placing them together into a narrative, we create a unified whole that allows us to understand our lives as coherent [in a clear and logical order]—and coherence, psychologists say, is a key source of meaning.¹

Defining Narrative Identity

The stories we tell ourselves about what we see, hear, and experience help us to construct our own unique identities. These stories also allow us to communicate who we are to other people. They form what psychologist Daniel McAdams calls a *narrative identity*. Narrative identity is an individual’s life story. It combines memories from the past with our stories about the present and our imagined future.

McAdams describes narrative identity as an internalized story you create about yourself—your own personal myth. He writes:

Like myths, our narrative identity contains heroes and villains that help us or hold us back, major events that determine the plot, challenges overcome and suffering we have endured. When we want people to understand us, we share our story or parts of it with them; when we want to know who another person is, we ask them to share part of their story.²

¹ Emily Esfahani Smith, “The Two Kinds of Stories We Tell about Ourselves,” TED website (IDEAS.TED.com), January 12, 2017.

² Ibid.

Authoring Our Identities

Just like the books we read, the stories we tell about our lives have characters, settings, plots, and themes.¹ And just like an author, we make *narrative choices*. We decide what parts of our identities we want to share with others and what parts we want to keep private. This is an *active process*. Our narrative choices are influenced by our interactions with other individuals, especially with the people who are important in our lives, like family and friends. Our narrative choices are also influenced by our experiences in the world. Psychologist and adolescent development expert Michael J. Nakkula explains:

We do not construct our life stories on our own. We are, rather, in a constant state of co-creating who we are with the people whom we are in closest connection and within those contexts that hold most meaning for our day-to-day existence.²

During adolescence, young people explore their identities by engaging with peers, forming friendships, trying out new activities and interests, testing boundaries, and taking risks. They make sense of all these new encounters and experiences through storytelling. Psychologists Mike Nakkula and Eric Toshalis suggest that young people build self-understanding through narrating and interpreting their own stories. *Atlantic* editor Julie Beck summarizes this idea:

This narrative becomes a form of identity, in which the things someone chooses to include in the story, and the way she tells it, can both reflect and shape who she is. A life story doesn't just say what happened, it says why it was important, what it means for who the person is, for who they'll become, and for what happens next.³

TQE Time!⁴

Directions: Before discussing the reading with your peers, review your annotations and use them to help you record your thoughts, questions, and epiphanies in the space provided.

What are your thoughts (♥ annotations) about what you read?	What questions (? annotations) does this reading raise for you?	What epiphanies (! annotations) does this reading raise for you?

1 Dan P. McAdams, "Identity and the Life Story," in *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative Self*, ed. Robyn Fivush and Catherine A. Haden (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2003), 187.

2 Michael J. Nakkula and Eric Toshalis, *Understanding Youth: Adolescent Development for Educators* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2008), 6.

3 Julie Beck, "Life's Stories," *The Atlantic*, August 10, 2015.

4 Adapted from Marisa Thompson, "TQE: Thoughts, Questions, and Epiphanies," *Unlimited Teacher*, accessed October 23, 2023.

Connection Questions

Directions: Discuss the questions with your group. Assign the following roles: *facilitator*, *note-taker*, and *summarizer*. The facilitator will keep time and lead the discussion. The note-taker will record the group members' ideas on this handout. The summarizer will report out to the class.

1. Share your TQEs and try to answer the questions your group members raise.

2. When explaining the concept of “narrative identity,” Dr. McAdams writes, “When we want people to understand us, we share our story or parts of it with them.”

What kinds of stories do we tell? What kinds of stories do we keep private?

3. What are the risks and the rewards of sharing some or all of our stories in person or on social media? What makes you say that?

4. How can sharing personal stories help someone feel heard and recognized?

5. To help explain the concept of *narrative identity*, McAdams describes it as “an internalized story you create about yourself—your own personal myth.”

How can thinking about narrative identity as an “internalized story” and a “personal myth” help us understand the relationship between identity (who we are) and storytelling (the real and imagined stories we tell about ourselves, other people, and our experiences in the world)?

How can these stories shape who we are now and who we become in the future?