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## Using Narrative Distance to Create Transformative Learning Experiences

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Using Narrative Distance to Create Transformative Learning Experiences

Stephan D. Taeger

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

### Using Narrative Distance to Create Transformative Learning Experiences

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Doctor of Philosophy

This multi-article dissertation focuses on the role of narrative distance in instructional design. Narrative distance is defined “as the cognitive or emotional space afforded by indirect communication that invites listeners to make sense of content” (Taeger, 2018, p. 6). Whereas fields associated with the arts have long used the indirect nature of story to create powerful experiences, instructional design has not examined how this aspect of narrative might be used in instruction. The first article in this dissertation explores the literature related to narrative distance and how designing for this phenomenon meets many of Wilson and Parrish’s (2011) key indicators for transformative learning experiences. This article also suggests six principles for incorporating narrative distance into instructional design. The second article is a qualitative study of six experts from a variety of fields who design narrative distance into their work. Professionals in film, theatre, writing, art, and homiletics were interviewed three times over a period of several months using Fleming, Gaidys, and Robb’s (2003) Gadamerian-based hermeneutic approach. The findings from this study discuss further principles and practices for integrating narrative distance into instructional design, especially as it relates to facilitating transformative learning experiences. These principles and practices are organized under four themes: cognitive space, emotional space, invite change, and meaningful content. Further research possibilities related to narrative distance are also briefly mentioned. The third article builds on the findings discussed in article two by offering examples of narrative distance in instruction. In addition, specific design steps are presented to help practitioners create narrative distance in a way that can lead to transformative learning experiences.

Keywords: aesthetics, instructional design, design practice, narrative, narrative distance, transformative learning experiences

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## DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH AGENDA AND STRUCTURE OF DISSERTATION

Narrative is widely recognized as being central to how humans interact with the world and understand themselves (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988; Ricoeur, 1984; Schank, 1990; Young & Saver, 2001). Research about narrative has a long history in a variety of fields such as philosophy, theology, education, and the arts. In recent years, instructional design is increasingly offering more on the relationship between narrative and instruction. Narrative, or story, has a unique ability to invite people to reconsider old beliefs and influence change. One of the ways that stories do this is by communicating meaningful material indirectly. Because most stories are told in first or third person, the listener has cognitive or emotional “space” to decide how they will make sense of a story (Craddock, 2002). My research focuses on recreating a similar effect (what I call narrative distance) in instructional design for the purpose of inviting transformative learning experiences.

Concepts related to narrative distance have been explored in a number of different fields and contexts. However, a review of the available literature suggests that instructional design has not discussed this aspect of narrative in any substantial way. Also, Wilson and Parrish (2011) have recently argued that instructional design could benefit from exploring avenues to create instruction that are more transformative. They define these transformative learning experiences as “an *especially meaningful encounter that leaves a lasting impact on a person’s sense of competence or place in the world*” (Wilson & Parrish pp. 11-12). My first article shows how narrative distance can help create many of the aspects of Wilson and Parrish’s (2011) framework for transformative learning experiences and then offers six principles for adding narrative distance to instruction. I am planning on submitting this article to Educational Technology Research & Development as part of their Young Scholars Award competition.

Many experts and professionals regularly design for narrative distance in their respective mediums. My second article is a qualitative study of the design practices and principles that actual designers use when creating narrative distance. The professionals I interviewed came from a variety of fields: film, literature, theatre, preaching, and painting. All of these forms of communication seek to find ways to indirectly create an experience or invite change in others. This article offers further ways to use narrative distance in a way that creates transformative learning experiences. I am planning on submitting this article to Educational Media International.

My third article builds on the second by offering concrete design patterns for creating narrative distance. In this article, I illustrate narrative distance by showing a number of examples of indirect communication in instructional design intended to create transformative learning experiences. I am planning on submitting this article to TechTrends.

Often, instructional design assumes that training which is direct and clear is most effective. However, studying narrative distance may help our field begin to better understand how indirect communication can add unique affordances to instruction. In addition, rather than seeking to offer new ways of enticing learners to engage with instructional content through a variety of learning activities or technologies, designing with narrative distance assumes that the content itself can be arranged or communicated in a way that encourages engagement. Furthermore, the study of narrative distance can offer new ways to think about transformative learning experiences and instruction that invites cognitive, affective and behavioral change

**Article # 1: Using Narrative Distance to Invite Transformative Learning Experiences**

**Using Narrative Distance to Invite Transformative Learning Experiences**

Stephan D. Taeger

Brigham Young University

### **Abstract**

This article introduces narrative distance as a phenomenon that can be used to help create transformative learning experiences. Narrative distance is defined as the cognitive or emotional space afforded by indirect communication that invites listeners to make sense of content. This distance invites participants to draw conclusions about the meaning of the narrative for themselves (Craddock, 2002). After examining how other fields have discussed concepts related to narrative distance and its affordances, this article illustrates how this phenomenon can help satisfy many of Wilson and Parrish's (2011) key indicators for transformative learning experiences. Finally, six principles are offered for incorporating narrative distance into instructional design.

*Keywords:* instructional design, transformative learning experiences, narrative, aesthetics

## Using Narrative Distance to Create Transformative Learning Experiences

Wilson and Parrish (2011) have suggested that instructional designers are not aiming high enough. Instead of creating instruction that is simply “effective or efficient” (p. 11), they envision a time when instructional designers will inspire and transform learners. Without learning how to create these higher impact designs, Wilson, Parrish, and Veletsianos (2008) have proposed that “the reputation of the profession could be at stake” (p. 42). Indeed, even if learning how to create effective instructional design requires years of schooling and experience, unless stakeholders perceive designers as having the tools to create exceptional learning experiences it is difficult to see how our field can maintain relevancy in situations where learning objectives center on transformation.

Using the term differently than others who have emphasized transformative learning (e.g., Mezirow, 1991), Wilson and Parrish (2011) have argued that designers should learn how to create transformative learning experiences (TLEs) or “an *especially meaningful encounter that leaves a lasting impact on a person’s sense of competence or place in the world*” (pp. 11-12). Obviously, not all instruction can be transformative in this sense. Designing for these kinds of learning experiences may or may not be appropriate depending on one’s instructional goals, context, or resources. However, some learning objectives require students to make real changes in their attitudes, behavior, and goals. In this article, I will suggest that the phenomenon I call narrative distance can be incorporated into instruction to create transformative learning experiences. First, I will briefly define and illustrate narrative distance. Second, I will show how concepts related to narrative distance have been discussed in other disciplines, but have not been given much attention in instructional design. Third, I will describe how narrative distance can be implemented into instructional design in order to create TLEs. In so doing, I will illustrate how

narrative distance can satisfy several of Wilson and Parrish's (2011) key indicators for transformative learning experiences and offer six principles for incorporating narrative distance into instruction.

## **Literature Review**

### **Narrative Distance**

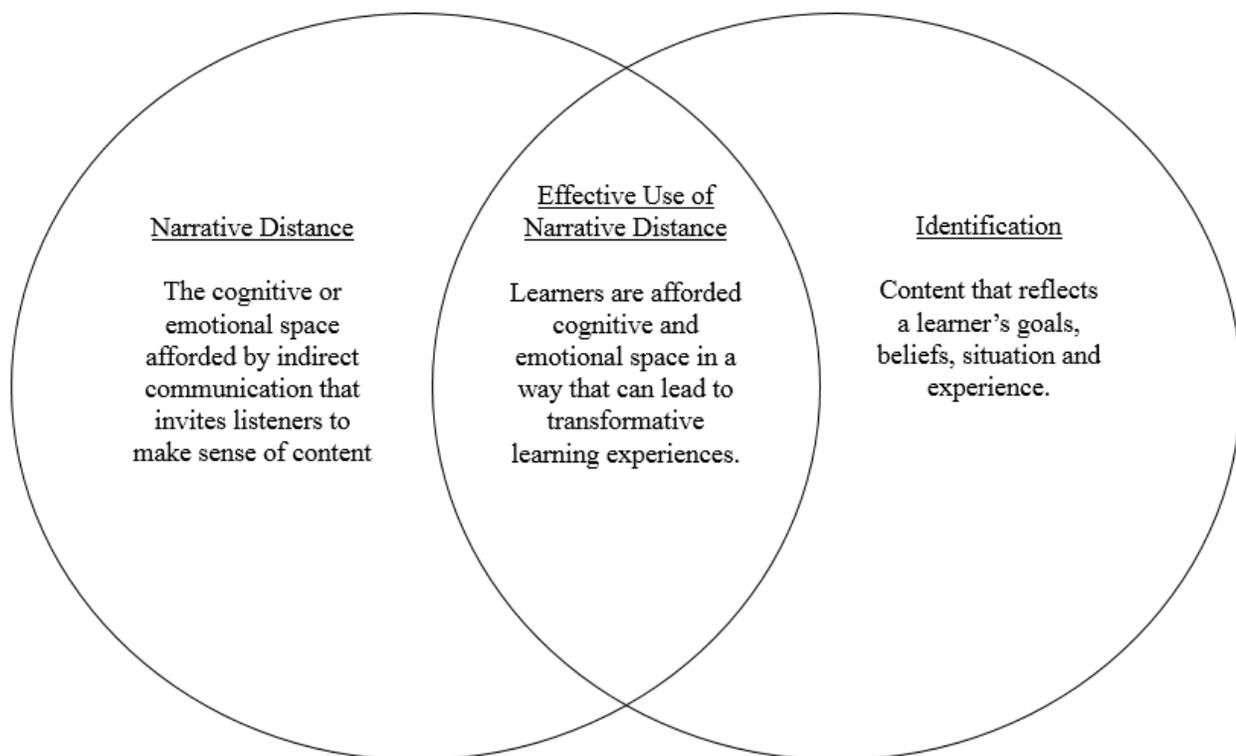
Instructional design and related fields have explored the relationship between narrative and instruction in regard to aesthetics (Parrish, 2007), narrative structure (Hokanson & Fraher, 2008; Kinsey & Moore, 2015), narrative curricula (Conle, 2003), docutainment (Glaser, Garsoffky, & Schwan, 2012), problem solving (Jonassen & Hernandez-Serrano, 2002), design (Parrish, 2006), authentic storytelling (Goldsworthy & Honebein 2010), and narrative explanation (Norris, Guilbert, Smith, Hakimelahi, & Phillips, 2005). Narrative has also been discussed in more instructional technology centered contexts such as gaming (Akkerman, Admiraal, & Huizenga, 2009; Dickey, 2005, 2006; Novak, 2015; Novak, Johnson, Tenenbaum, & Shute, 2016), online learning (Hirumi, Sivo, & Pounds, 2012; Lindgren & McDaniel, 2012), narrative learning environments (Aylett, 2006; Dettori & Paiva, 2009; Rowe, Shores, Mott, & Lester, 2011), audio instruction (Carter, 2012), and interactive storytelling (Baldwin & Ching, 2017).

Despite this emphasis on narrative, little attention has been paid to the indirect nature of story in instruction. Perhaps that is a result of the frequent contention that instruction should be relevant to students and represent real world problems (e.g., Jonassen, 1999; Keller, 2010; Merrill, 2002) and consequently designers often seek to directly show learners how instruction is relevant to their lives. Although education should always be meaningful and applicable, when instruction is perceived as trying too hard to be relevant and engaging, its transformative quality

can be lost (Craddock, 2002). Of course, designers will often want to directly state how learning objectives are relevant to students' lives. However, depending on some desired learning outcomes, creating a strategic distance between the content and the learner through indirect communication can have potentially transformative effects (Craddock, 2002; Taeger, 2015). Theorists and practitioners in other fields have spoken of this principle in a variety of ways and contexts, but for the purposes of this article, narrative distance is defined as the cognitive or emotional space afforded by indirect communication that invites listeners to make sense of content (Brothers, 2003). I emphasize the term *narrative distance* because the experience I am describing is similar to reading a book, listening to a story, or watching a film. Since narratives are most often about other people, at other times, and in other places, listeners must interpret the meaning of the narrative for themselves and this "space" allows this to happen. In other words, those who hear a story (regardless of the media form) are afforded emotional or cognitive distance to decide how they will make sense of the content of the narrative (Brown, Denning, Groh, & Prusak, 2005). As a result, observers are more likely to reflect upon what they are learning and be open to making personal changes (Craddock, 2002).

Incorporating narrative distance into instruction is not meant to eliminate material that is relevant for students. However, rather than directly showing how learning content applies to students, designers can create instruction that helps learners discover their own interests, needs, and goals in the learning material (Craddock, 2002). Although I will argue that narrative distance in instruction can generate TLEs, it is ultimately the *combination* of narrative distance and identification (students recognizing their own goals, situation, and experiences) that can lead to TLEs (Craddock, 2002, see Figure 1). In other words, learners should see enough of themselves

in the learning content to make connections to their own life while feeling sufficient emotional and cognitive space to choose how they will make sense of the content.



*Figure 1.* The combination of narrative distance and identification can lead to transformative learning experiences (Craddock, 2002).

For example, suppose during a six week online introductory training course for new corporate employees, a number of short films depicting current personnel are strategically placed throughout learning modules. Each of these films depict some element of corporate culture that the management is trying to help create in its company, especially for new employees. The films contain first person introductions of people at all levels of the company, describing their backgrounds, responsibilities, and future goals, but they also indirectly depict how these current employees embody the corporation's culture. In one introductory video an employee speaks briefly about the importance of dressing and acting professionally. The employee says, "Because

this company was so open and friendly, I thought it would be ok for me to dress a little more casually. I've learned over time that dressing professionally creates a more respectful environment and invites others to treat me differently.” The new employee watching the video hears his own thoughts echoing in the training (identification), but does not feel singled out because the content is not specifically directed at them (thus creating narrative distance).

Or, a high school history teacher could spend most of a class period talking about *Brown v. Board of Education* as an enormously positive turning point in American race relations. Following this discussion and during the last two minutes of class, the teacher could then put some current statistics relating the number of African Americans in prison, living in poverty, and participating in higher education and then simply end class without further commentary. Given that much narrative distance, students would walk out of class having to reconcile the great progress that was *Brown v. Board of Education* and the current state of racial equality in the United States. On the other hand, had the teacher drawn that conclusion for students, it may have robbed some of them of having to think through this issue for themselves. Of course, sometimes this kind of message should be stated directly, but other times it may be best to let students make their own discovery. In this example, perhaps there was enough identification for the students to see their own life and enough narrative distance to create a potentially transformative experience because the instruction invited students to reconsider fundamental ways they view the world.

### **Narrative Distance in Other Disciplines**

It is difficult to overstate the amount of academic work that has explored the concept of narrative and its role in understanding human experience (e.g., Guignon, 2006; Polkinghorne, 1988; Ricoeur, 1984; Schank 1990). Bruner (1990) suggested that narrative is central to how one constructs meaning. Speaking from a neurological context, Young and Saver (2001) argued that

our brains primarily understand the world through story. Furthermore, beyond simply establishing the centrality of narrative in human experience, stories themselves have been shown to invite changes in beliefs (Green & Brock, 2000), willpower (Ackerman, Goldstein, Shapiro, & Bargh 2009), and identity (Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007).

In the many discussions seeking to understand how narrative or stories invite change, a variety of fields have highlighted concepts associated with narrative distance. As will be shown below, there has been both empirical studies and philosophical arguments in other disciplines positing that (a) inviting cognitive reflection can help listeners organize content and (b) creating emotional space (feeling respected and not manipulated or afraid) can influence listeners affectively or behaviorally. These aspects of narrative distance are dynamic and often overlap one another in the results they produce. Later, I will attempt to demonstrate that inviting cognitive reflection and creating emotional space (two key aspects of narrative distance) can help create transformative learning experiences.

Kaufman and Libby (2012, p. 1) demonstrated how granting emotional space can influence behavior when they performed six studies on a phenomenon they called “experience-taking.” This occurs when someone identifies with a character so strongly that they begin to experience the emotions of the character and also incorporate that character’s behavior into their own lives. This is different than deliberately taking the perspective of a character; experience-taking implies a loss of one’s own conscious awareness and a deep absorption into the world of the story. In trying to measure the degree to which someone experience-takes, Kaufman and Libby (2012) found that if a mirror was placed next to a participant as they were reading a story, they were less likely to experience-take. It appears that if someone is too aware of themselves, it may be difficult for them to get lost in a piece of literature (Kaufman & Libby, 2012). This study

not only demonstrates the influential nature of narrative, it also shows the value of maintaining emotional space since readers who become too aware of themselves are less likely to have a transformational experience. The relevant implication is that content that is directly pressing too hard on the listener to think about themselves or see how content is relevant, might unintentionally inhibit the listener from becoming influenced by the material.

In the field of aesthetics, Bullough (1957) argued that emotional space can help an observer have an aesthetic experience. Although not directly speaking of narrative, Bullough (1957) suggested that this occurs when one maintains “psychical distance” (p. 53) or separates oneself from whatever practical implications are related to an observed object. For example, Bullough argued that psychical distance could help an observer see a potentially dangerous cloud of fog as a beautiful visual experience (Bullough, 1957). In this sense, the emotional space of not worrying about the possible hazardous implications of fog allowed the observer to be influenced aesthetically and see the fog as something beautiful.

Bertolt Brecht, a Marxist playwright, introduced the concept of “*verfremdung*” devices into his plays to create an intense kind of cognitive reflection that would invite his audiences to political action. Often translated as “alienation” devices, these techniques included bright lighting, directly addressing the audience, “visible technology,” only drawing the curtains down half way during set changes, and projecting captions upon a screen on the stage (Mumford, 2009, p. 66). Whereas distance typically invites absorption into a story (e.g., Kaufman & Libby, 2012) Brecht used excessive distancing techniques to *prevent* his audience from becoming captivated by his plays so they would focus on the political implications of his work (Brothers, 2003). For Brecht, this kind of distance would lead the audience to reflect cognitively or think critically about the messages of his work in way that would lead them to action (Brothers, 2003).

Discussions around film have also highlighted inviting cognitive reflection, although in a much more subtle way. McDonald (2009) interviewed filmmakers with the intent of identifying implications for instructional design. One filmmaker said, “We need to put our hammers away and just let some of these stories be told. Just tell the story! And in the film don’t try to say to the viewer, “are you sure you got this point?” (McDonald, 2009, p. 119). One example of a film effectively using narrative distance in this way is Pixar’s *Wall\*E*. At first glance, the film seems to be a slow and strange story about two robots who fall in love. However, as Andrew Stanton (the director) explained, *Wall\*E* contains much deeper themes:

“I realized the point I was trying to push with these two programmed robots was the desire for them to try and figure out what the point of living was,” said Stanton. “It took these really irrational acts of love to sort of discover them against how they were built. I said, ‘That’s it! That’s my theme: Irrational love defeats life’s programming.’”

“I realized that that’s a perfect metaphor for real life. We all fall into our habits, our routines and our ruts, consciously or unconsciously to avoid living. To avoid having to do the messy part. To avoid having relationships with other people. Of dealing with the person next to us. That’s why we can all get on our cell phones and not have to deal with one another. I thought, ‘That’s a perfect amplification of the whole point of the movie.’”

(Fritz, 2008)

Perceptive audiences could have discovered the many clues in *Wall\*E* and found these profound themes running throughout the movie. Since the movie displayed these messages indirectly, audiences were given the space to organize the message cognitively for themselves.

Some researchers in the field of homiletics (the study of preaching) have also argued that inviting cognitive reflection and creating emotional space can have profound influences on

listeners. The use of distance came to the forefront of homiletics in 1978 when Dr. Fred Craddock delivered the Lyman Beecher lecture series at Yale University. Craddock drew upon Soren Kierkegaard's method of indirect communication and based his lectures (which later were formed into a book) on a quote from Kierkegaard: "There is no lack of information in a Christian land; something else is lacking, and this is a something which the one cannot directly communicate to the other" (Craddock, 2002, p. 3). Craddock (2002) defined distance using the example of the parables of Jesus, explaining that they "are told in third person, in past tense, with anonymous characters acting and speaking in life situations distinct from the listener's. This is distance" (p. 106). One benefit Craddock (2002) saw resulting from the proper use of distance is that the listener is given room to "reflect, accept, reject, and decide" (p. 105). In an earlier work, Craddock (2001) explained the danger of the preacher who over explains both content and application saying, "the poor listener, denied any room to say No is thereby denied the room to say Yes" (p. 55).

Listening to Craddock preach is a powerful and unique experience regardless of one's religious inclinations. As the message unfolds, one hears analogies, word images, and stories that are told with little or no explanation. As the sermon concludes, the overall message is stated briefly or not at all, providing listeners the distance to discover how the message relates to their own lives.

As we have seen, a number of fields have argued that inviting cognitive reflection and granting emotional space (two aspects of narrative distance) can invite powerful effects upon listeners. In the next section, I will attempt to show that narrative distance has not been analyzed in any substantial way in instructional design.

## **Narrative Distance and Instructional Design**

Although instructional design has a long history of drawing upon other fields associated with media to inform its own principles of design (Dickey, 2005) and more recently on concepts related to narrative (e.g., Aylett, 2006; Goldsworthy & Honebein, 2010; Hirumi, Sivo, & Pounds, 2012; Hokanson, Clinton, & Kaminski, 2018; Jonassen & Hernandez-Serrano, 2002; Lindgren & McDaniel, 2012; Parrish, 2006, 2007) little has been said about narrative distance. Below, I will show how instructional design and other educational fields have discussed issues related to narrative distance, but have not explored its transformative nature in depth or offered principles for its design.

Eisele (1990) discussed Wittgenstein's use of story in *Philosophical Investigations* in the context of teaching law school students using case law and the Socratic method. He argued that "teaching by telling may convey finished thoughts or ideas explicitly, but its very explicitness and the 'finish' of its ideas may make it too 'clean' an educational process for its own good..." (Eisele 1990, p. 89). Instead, Eisele (1990) argued that some things cannot be understood directly, but can only be understood latently through narrative. Although Eisele (1990) argued for the use of narrative and the necessity of indirect teaching, he did not identify specific or detailed ways to create this kind of teaching experience.

Perkins (1994) drew upon Bertolt Brecht's theory of performance as a way to help students think critically about "the classroom experience itself" (p. 225). In this theory piece, Perkins showed how three of Brecht's dramatic techniques (alienation effect, historicization, and gest) can be incorporated into the classroom by teachers. This approach is similar to the use of narrative distance I am describing because Perkins used Brecht's idea to invoke critical thinking in students. However, the methods described by Perkins differ from what I hope to suggest in

two significant ways. First, Perkins wanted students to awaken to cultural and historical assumptions about education, whereas the use of narrative distance I am arguing for is designed to help students think deeply about instructional content in a way that invites transformative learning experiences. Second, teachers in Perkins' article openly discuss with students issues and thoughts that arise from Brecht's techniques, but I argue that teachers who discuss with students insights that result from distancing techniques can unintentionally inhibit potential benefits. In other words, I am challenging the assumption that discussions which lead to clarity are always beneficial because those discussions may prevent students from making their own discoveries since the teacher or peers would do the cognitive work for other students.

Hokanson and Fraher (2008) suggested that instruction with a narrative structure can help "increase the effectiveness and efficiency of instructional design" (p. 27) as well as lower cognitive load since humans normally process information through narrative. After reviewing the use of narrative in different cultures, Hokanson and Fraher (2008) analyzed Joseph Campbell's Hero Myth with regard to its implications for instructional design. Although this article clearly illustrates the benefits of designing instruction that is informed by narrative *structure*, it does not emphasize the use of narrative distance.

Conle (2003) discussed the different functions narrative can play in curriculum. Narratives can assume a number of roles including generating discussion, helping listeners and narrators make new connections, creating vicarious experience, and moral modeling. Beyond simply showing the affordances that narratives offer, I am suggesting that narrative distance is a key ingredient of a story that can be used to access narrative's unique advantage to invite transformation.

Dickey (2005) argued that engagement strategies used in video and computer games can inform instructional design. One of the challenges that arises when incorporating storylines into video games is allowing players to make choices within the framework of the game while still maintaining a coherent plot structure (Dickey, 2005). Incorporating narrative distance into a game (and by extension instruction) would allow designers to create content that is engaging without having to account for the innumerable ways a player may want to take a storyline. In this scenario, the opportunity to choose is present as participants are invited to bring meaning to the experience. Since narrative distance would create space or vacuums in the game's storyline through indirect communication, participants would be motivated to "complete" the meaning of game for themselves. To understand how this would be possible, consider how people bring personal meaning to movies, literature, and theatre without deciding on the direction of the storyline. Instructional video games could contain narrative distance in between moments of direct play to create this same effect.

Parrish (2007) argued that instructional design can benefit from drawing upon principles of aesthetics and even help designers create transformative learning experiences. Based on the work of Dewey (1934), Parrish (2007) defined "aesthetic experiences" as "heightened, immersive, and particularly meaningful" (p. 513). In order to achieve these kinds of experiences, Parrish outlined five principles that designers can incorporate into their design process. Although Parrish (2007) does not mention distance specifically, he indirectly addresses the concept by arguing that "The ending of a narrative needs to tie up loose ends, not introduce new ones—unless of course the presence of loose ends drives the theme of the work and constitutes the appropriate culmination" (p. 520). Here, Parrish seems aware that the culminating moments of

instruction can contain loose ends, but he does not explore in depth any potential benefits of designing instructional content in this way.

As mentioned before, McDonald (2009) interviewed a variety of filmmakers to see what insights could be gleaned for instructional designers. Three findings were identified: first, designers can adapt storytelling processes to instructional design, second, some key principles from filmmaking can help designers craft better instructional stories, and third, storytelling principles in the abstract can be applied to new situations in a way that leads to innovative instructional ideas. Although McDonald (2009) referred to a concepts directly related to narrative distance, including arguing that “leav[ing] some of a story’s details unstated or unseen, to encourage viewers to think more deeply” (p. 118), he offered no detailed principles for incorporating narrative distance into instructional design.

Jeyaraj (2014) posited that engineering students could only learn certain aspects of their field through indirect communication. While recognizing the importance of direct communication in technical writing, Jeyaraj (2014, p. 209) also suggested that engineering students should be exposed to indirect forms of communication because “indirect communication will not only enable students to think of why they are doing what they are doing but also better prepare them for taking technical writing.” In similar fashion to some of the literature reviewed above, Jeyaraj recognized the value of indirect communication, but did not offer detailed suggestions or examples of the application of this principle into instruction.

### **Narrative Distance and Transformative Learning Experiences**

In order to demonstrate possible applications of narrative distance in instructional design, I will suggest how this phenomenon can satisfy many of Wilson and Parrish’s (2011) “key indicators” (p. 12) for transformative learning experiences. Narrative distance fits well with

Wilson and Parrish's (2011) particular framework for understanding transformative learning experiences because they discuss this transformation from a context of aesthetic experience. In like manner, principles associated with narrative distance are also often discussed from a framework of art, literature, film, theatre, etc.

Wilson and Parrish (2011) underlined that "*we don't know enough about inspiring and transforming students through instructional experiences*" (p. 11). They have, however, identified key indicators for TLEs "under three clusters: personal meaning, competence, and relationships" (Wilson & Parrish, 2011 p. 12). These key indicators clarify for instructional designers what happens as a result of a transformative learning experience. Enumerated with each of Wilson and Parrish's three major indicators are further details on how TLEs are manifested.

The following subsections demonstrate how the use of narrative distance in instructional design can potentially lead to these outcomes. More specifically, each section discusses how (1) inviting cognitive reflection or (2) creating emotion space could help generate a transformative learning experience. In making this argument, a number of fields will be drawn upon.

Wilson and Parrish's (2011) indicators for TLEs can manifest themselves in dynamic and varied ways with different levels of impact. Also, the examples I offer may feel more or less direct. The amount of narrative distance incorporated into instruction will depend on the learner's capacity and familiarity with the subject matter.

The ensuing headings and subheadings are direct quotes from Wilson and Parrish (2011, p. 12). Only relevant subcategories have been selected for analysis from Wilson and Parrish's framework.

**Personal meaning.** Wilson and Parrish (2011) offer four key indicators under the heading of personal meaning: "Lasting impression...Resonance...Part of the person's self-narrative [and]

Mythologized by the learner” (p. 12). Only three of these indicators have a direct relationship to narrative distance.

***Lasting impression.*** The ambiguity created by narrative distance strongly invites listeners to wrestle with an idea cognitively until they come to some sort of conclusion (Lowry, 2001). Craddock (2001) described what can happen after a preacher has used narrative distance in a sermon: “[the] congregation cannot shake off the finished sermon by shaking the minister’s hand. The sermon, not finished yet, lingers beyond the benediction, with conclusions to be reached, decisions made, actions taken” (p. 125). In other words, learning material can be hard to forget when it contains the open-ended nature of narrative distance.

***Part of the person’s self-narrative.*** If an instructional experience contains narrative distance, it can act like an inspirational movie, book, or poem that one always remembers as part of their self-narrative. Since narrative is most often told using concrete examples as opposed to abstract principles, it invites listeners to make conclusions about the material being presented and thus contains narrative distance. When expression is more propositional or abstract in nature, it is difficult to capture complex, deep, and nuanced meanings beyond the presented content (Allen, 2008). However, when one experiences narrative distance, one can experience profound feelings or insights—sometimes acting as a revelation or turning point in one’s life. For example, an educational documentary offers concrete examples of poverty during the great depression. Since the examples depict everyday people with little or no moralizing (narrative distance) learners are left to their own thoughts to draw meaningful conclusions. Perhaps a student who has never really thought about the effects of poverty leaves class a very different person and considers this moment a turning point.

***Mythologized by the learner.*** Wilson and Parrish (2011) describe this as an “experience [that] takes on a meaning beyond itself, relating to the person’s identity or sense of calling or place in the world” (p. 12). Narrative gives listeners emotional space to make these significant decisions (Craddock, 2002). For example, a nurse participates in a training course that effectively uses elements of narrative distance by incorporating the history of nursing in the training and includes accounts that describe nurses helping people in both simple and significant ways. These stories are included in such a way that the narrative distance is not collapsed by phrases like, “now you are a part of this story as well” or “how will you carry on the great tradition you are a part of?” Rather, the instructional designers are helping the nurses identify indirectly with the content in a way that they have a chance to add history, tradition, and richness to their identity as a nurse.

**Competence.** Wilson and Parrish (2011) suggest four indicators related to the category of competence: “Significant restructuring of subject-matter schemas...New generative stance... Agency, efficacy, or empowerment [and] Positive shift in interest, values or attitudes toward the subject matter” (p. 12). Only two are discussed in relationship to narrative distance.

***Significant restructuring of subject-matter schemas.*** Considering the intentional but open-ended nature of narrative distance, a learner must cognitively organize and assimilate the information presented during an instructional experience in order to make sense of the content. As suggested above, in this way material that uses narrative distance acts much like a story—which some have argued is how humans organize information or make meaning of an experience (Aylett, 2006; Bruner, 1990).

Parables illustrate how narrative distance invites learners to organize information. Dodd explained (1958) explained that parables work by “arresting the hearer by its vividness or

strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.” (p. 16). Since the listener is not sure what the meaning of the parable is, they must organize the information themselves. A similar effect is created when students are asked to find a solution to an open-ended problem in the form of a case study (Clark & Rossiter, 2008). Even without creating a specific story or parable, designers can craft instruction to invite cognitive organization. For example, a college philosophy professor spends a class period lecturing on the history, controversies, and complexities of free will. As she unfolds the material, the lecture feels like a story in the sense that a question is introduced, content builds upon itself, complexities are considered, turns are taken, and previous ideas are reconsidered. At the end of class, the professor gives a simple case study that adds a final level of intricacy to the issue of free will. The case study offered is particularly relevant to college students in that it deals with issues such as freedom, identity, and equality. However, this time the professor does not explain or add commentary. Instead, she purposely ends class leaving the students to think about this new angle. Ideally, the students exit having to organize this new information relative to the rest of the lecture. The combination of the case study allowing for identification with the learning content *and* the narrative distance to integrate the new information has the potential to lead to a transformative experience because students are organizing information that connects meaningfully to their own decisions and life.

***Agency, efficacy, or empowerment.*** Long (2005) explained that preachers are attracted to the “open-endedness’ of stories, [because] the fact that the best stories, the ones most faithful to real experience, have enough ambiguity built into them to force the hearer to make a decision about the story’s meaning and application.” (p. 40). A student who is consistently invited to cognitively make sense of portions of instruction will begin to realize “that their efforts and

contributions are needed” (Wilson & Parish, 2011 p. 12). At first, when a teacher or instructional designer uses narrative distance, students may actually be surprised by the amount of trust granted to them because they are expected to finish significant portions of the instruction on their own. They may even feel a bit of frustration, but over time learners will hopefully gain confidence in their ability to piece the content together.

This aspect of narrative distance particularly respects a student’s ability to choose because a learner can finish participating in instruction and decide *not* to make sense out of the experience. Designers will have to decide if the potential benefits are worth taking the risk of incorporating narrative distance. They can also identify parts of their instruction that may require more of a direct approach. However, to truly invite authentic decisions by students, the designer must embrace the possibility that a learner may not choose to become engaged in the way imagined if narrative distance is incorporated. When instruction does not allow for this possibility, it probably has little inherent meaningfulness, “because meaning demands possibility” (Williams, 1992, p. 753). Recognizing this truth about human nature, incorporating narrative distance in instruction seeks to maximize the possibility that learners will authentically choose to think deeply and be influenced by instructional content. Perhaps narrative distance encourages a deeper use of agency because it avoids the faulty assumption that when learners are behaviorally involved in instruction they are acting as agents (Taeger, 2015). Narrative distance primarily invites a cognitive or emotional engagement as opposed to a behavioral one (although, it may lead to behavioral involvement).

**Relationships.** Wilson and Parrish (2011) suggest three sub indicators for relationships: “Strong feelings of connection toward an instructor or learning peers...A call to action [and]

increased capacity to understand alternative points of view” (p. 12). Only two of these are directly related to narrative distance.

***A call to action.*** The Arbinger Institute is a consulting organization that teaches their clients how to recognize and overcome the problem of self-deception. Arbinger’s work is centered on helping individuals and organizations eliminate self-deception in order to invite more unified organizations and peaceful relationships. The way that Arbinger invites people to overcome this problem demonstrates one way that narrative distance can create “a call to action” (Wilson & Parrish, 2011, p. 12). Observing what happens during their consulting seminars, Warner (2001) explained how Arbinger taps into the power of narrative distance by inviting the participants in their meetings to share simple true stories about their own self-deception. He explained that this allows learners “to see their own experiences in a new, truthful light. They realize – usually instantaneously – that a story another has told is their *own* story, only with different details. This realization seems to sneak past their defenses” (Warner, 2001, p. 215). In this example, narrative distance is present because participants share their own stories without directing them toward anyone in particular. Since those listening are less defensive, they have more emotional space and are open to receive “a call to action” (Wilson & Parrish, 2011, p. 12) to be more kind and sensitive to the needs of others.

***Increased capacity to understand alternative points of view.*** As I argued above, when narrative distance is used correctly, individuals are less likely to become defensive because the content is not directed at them. This allows learners the emotional space to better “see alternative points of view and relate to diverse others” (Wilson & Parrish, 2011, p. 12). As one film director said,

[Members of the audience are] exploring, subconsciously or consciously, what they would do if they were in that situation on the screen. And rather than simply reading off a page, “here is what you ought to do in this situation,” audience members, like learners in a classroom, are exploring options of behavior. They’re making decisions and choices vicariously, and extremely vividly, to the point that they’re forgetting they’re sitting in a dark room with 350 strangers, and they’re completely in the world of this theme. And they’re willing to put their prejudices aside, and sometimes are even willing to put their morality aside, and explore that theme fully with the characters in that story. . . . By extension they [vicariously] made those choices by becoming [emotionally] involved in the film. Those choices become part of them. And they walk away changed people.

(McDonald, 2009 p. 117)

For example, a group of middle school students watch a film that contains scenes which cut back and forth between students from America and a third-world country. Although the scenery, language, and clothing, are very different, the director highlights similarities in the sports that are played, artistic interest, extracurricular activities, family settings, and social life. However, in order to maintain narrative distance, there is no narrator who says something obvious such as, “you see, young people are similar all over the world.” Instead, at the end of the film, a scene is depicted of an American middle school-aged student going on vacation with their family in a third world-looking country. After a few short clips of the family sightseeing, the student turns to their parents and says, “Wow, people are so different here.” The film closes and the students watching have to decide if that final statement is true, half true, or completely false. Instead of immediately closing the gap on the narrative distance by having a class discussion, the

instructor invites the students to go home and write a journal entry on their thoughts of the movie.

Or, (in another fictional example) a presentation seeking to inspire people to think about climate change, a series of historical examples are depicted of scientists who were ignored during their lifetime. The end of the presentation then contains vignettes of people expressing their skepticism regarding the reality of climate change. To maintain narrative distance, the presenter could simply (and tactfully) end the presentation, leaving viewers the chance to make the connection for themselves. Without the benefit of narrative distance, it may be too hard for many people to stay open to the possibility of changing their beliefs.

### **Implications for Design**

If adapted and applied to instruction, narrative distance can meet many of Wilson and Parrish's (2011) criteria for creating a transformative learning experience. To better understand how instructional designers can create the effect of narrative distance, I will suggest six principles for implementing this technique into instruction (see Table 1). Although a number of different principles could be suggested, these principles represent particularly helpful suggestions that originate in varying degrees from the literature on narrative distance. The following principles do not represent a step-by-step process. Rather, they are to be employed dynamically and often concurrently. Also, in no way does the following discussion seek to imply that transformative learning experiences can be manufactured. Instead, these principles are offered as way to increase the likelihood that such experiences will occur.

Table 1

*Principles of Designing Narrative Distance*

Principle	Description
<i>Economy</i>	Appropriately limit explanation
<i>Incongruity</i>	Insert content that first appears to be “out of place”
<i>Motif</i>	Create markers that point learners towards conclusions
<i>Inhabitable Contexts</i>	Use imagery, detail, metaphor, and stories
<i>Identification</i>	Include content that reflects a learner’s goals and experience
<i>Effective Endings</i>	Conclude instruction in a way that invites reflection

Additionally, when discussing how to indirectly communicate in a way that invites transformation in others, some may wonder where the line is between helping students discover information for themselves and manipulation. In one sense, manipulation is more related to one’s intentions and motive rather than a particular communication method. It is assumed in this article that those who use narrative distance will use it in a way that is ethical and consistent with the values of learners and stakeholders.

**Economy.** Instruction is often thought to be most valuable if it is straightforward, clear, and direct. Indeed, even when incorporating narrative distance into a design, much of the content should still remain this way. However, when a designer is seeking to use narrative distance, she may want to identify moments to limit explanation or be economical in expression (Craddock, 2001). Concrete examples or illustrations are a particularly effective time to withhold excessive clarification. This principle is especially helpful if instructional content is inviting the listener to improve behaviorally or affectively. Simple illustrations of how the learner is expected to change

without moralizing gives the learner space to make decisions for themselves. For instance, a monthly corporate newsletter could contain success stories that illustrate employees fulfilling the company's mission statement. Instead of soaking the stories in corporate speak like "alignment," "outside the box," and "empowerment," or even excessively praising an employee, these simple descriptions can be written in such a way that they do not tell readers which conclusions to make and therefore leave them a chance to be inspired and notice ways they might improve themselves.

An additional benefit of economy is that learners begin to understand that not everything will be explained, so they will need to begin making connections themselves. Without narrative distance, learners can simply pick up on instructional cues regarding when they should pay attention, take notes, or answer questions. The history teacher who announces at the beginning of the semester that she will only test students on the things she writes on the board may notice her students not paying attention until she uses the board. On the other hand, the history teacher could begin her classes with a firsthand account that is somehow related to a historical event that will be covered in the latter half of the lecture. Since students know that the teacher will not explain how the firsthand account and the historical event are related (and that they will have to comment on a discussion board on how the two events are associated), students might have extra motivation to stay engaged watching for the connection.

Of course, economy should never be incorporated in a way that frustrates learners. Complicated, nuanced, and even simple tasks should be taught clearly. Advanced chemistry concepts or instructions on how to put on a bike tire probably do not require narrative distance. But, when a designer wants learners to ponder an idea or have the emotional space to make a decision, then narrative distance might be appropriate — even when instructional content

requires direct instruction. For example, in an advanced chemistry course, the instructor could regularly finish class with a short story about students who have graduated from her class in order to illustrate the different paths that someone with a chemistry degree can take into the professional world. The instructor does not underestimate the intelligence of students by saying things like “I just want to show you where your hard work can lead.” Rather, she simply shares the stories and ends class. This could allow the students space to be inspired into choosing to think that their diligence will pay off.

At this point, it may be helpful to point out that it can be beneficial to inform learners about the use of narrative distance in instruction. Those who attend a movie know that they will have to do some cognitive work to make sense of the story line, but many have not experienced trying to engage in instructional materials in this same way. At the beginning of an instructional unit, learners can be told there will be some moments that will be purposely left unexplained so that they can make connections for themselves. Some learners may worry how this feature will affect assessment. Designers can assure learners that any assessments based on instruction that incorporates narrative distance will be fair and reasonable. Furthermore, assessments associated with narrative distance should probably be more open ended, such as writing reflections or journals. These types of assessments allow the designer to evaluate whether learners are making the kinds of connections that are intended without being too prescriptive for the learner on what they should be discovering. Obviously, narrative distance should not cause excessive anxiety for learners. There is a significant difference between being given the opportunity to make connections and trying to guess what an instructor is saying.

**Incongruity.** Another aspect of narrative distance that can invite the learners to “complete” instruction is incongruity. When students perceive that an instructor purposely placed

an incongruity in instruction without explaining why, learners are given a chance to reconcile the meaning of the discrepancy. The use of incongruity is not meant to imply that one should randomly insert meaningless images, ideas or concepts throughout the instruction, hoping that learners begin to make connections. Rather, incongruities should be inserted in strategic ways that fit the context of the instruction. For example, in an advanced literature class, a teacher spends an entire period discussing the themes of redemption, kindness, and forgiveness in *Les Misérables*. In the closing moments of the lecture, the teacher begins to describe about how much children look forward to receiving gifts at Christmas or how a surprise bouquet of flowers brings a smile to a spouse's face. In order to set up a sharp incongruity, the teacher then reads the following passage about Jean Val Jean's reaction to the Bishop giving him two silver candlesticks: "He [Jean Val Jean] could not have told whether he were touched or humiliated. There came over him, at times, a strange relenting which he struggled with, and to which he opposed the hardening of his past twenty years" (Hugo, 1862/1992, p. 92). Closing his copy of *Les Misérables*, the professor says, "Sometimes a free gift is actually one of the hardest things to accept." As students leave class, they will have to reconcile the incongruity of this final statement. This could lead to a potentially transformative learning experience for students as they consider why it was so difficult for Jean Val Jean to accept the Bishop's gift.

**Motif.** It may be helpful to prepare learners to fill in the gaps that narrative distance naturally creates. Designers can ask themselves what scaffolding is required for listeners to be able to make the kinds of conclusions and decisions that meet learning objectives. Instructional motifs can act as a way to draw attention to the pieces of information learners will need to later connect at the moment when they are afforded narrative distance. Parrish (2007) argued that "motif ... provides a yardstick to reveal how things are changing or how they are connected:

when a motif recurs in different contexts, we are being asked to compare those contexts” (pp. 519-520). Instruction that incorporates narrative distance will most often contain explanation first with conclusions to be drawn by the learner later. This reflects the natural learning disposition to wrestle with ideas until arriving at a conclusion (Craddock, 2001). Motif acts as a marker that helps point learners in a particular direction during this process. For example, a psychology teacher could begin class by saying, “I’m going to tell you three stories that appear to be unrelated. I want you to find the connection.” As the professor relates the stories, she inserts a verbal refrain during key moments of each story. In this way, the instructor is highlighting significant details for students to notice and thus make connections.

**Inhabitable context.** Parrish (2007 p. 523) said that “a writer honors the setting of a narrative by providing rich details to readers to help create an authentic and, therefore, inhabitable context.” Designers can create instruction that uses imagery, pictures, metaphors, and details in a way that creates a vicarious environment for the learner helping them enter the world of the narrative (e.g., Glaser, Garsoffky, & Schwan, 2012). Creating an inhabitable context does not necessarily mean that instruction must take place “within” one story or environment. Instead, content can contain many images, stories, and descriptive details that take place at different places and times. The main concern is that instruction gives learners opportunities to enter an inhabitable world or worlds wherein the affordances of narrative distance are present. For example, an online training for the sales department of a corporation contains some graphs, PowerPoint-like bullet point screens, and direct instruction, but the training mainly consists of stories, anecdotes, and concrete examples with minimal explanation between each illustration (Craddock, 2001). When instruction consists of this type of material, there is no need to create an entire alternative world, because the advantages of a narrative environment are still preserved

(Craddock, 2002). Context is an important aspect of narrative distance for more affective learning objectives. When an instructional designer wants to avoid becoming overbearing when inviting learners to make affective changes, creating and maintaining rich contexts becomes a helpful way of constructing narrative distance. Rich context draws attention away from the learner, allowing them to enter in the world of the instruction. As we have seen, moving attention away from the listener allows the listener room and can help prevent defensiveness. Using narratives or stories is one particularly effective way that “the real world can be created in the imagination of learners so as to take on a virtual existence in the classroom” (Aylett, 2006, p. 6). Considering the potential benefits of incorporating narratives into instruction, designers may want to begin collecting simple stories related to the subjects they design for. Interviewing stakeholders, reading relevant literature, and learning the history of an organization or learning domain can be effective ways to collect stories. Designers can also write (or employ others) to write realistic fictional stories. Sometimes incorporating stories into instruction might be too time consuming to make a quick instructional point. In this case, a designer can create the experience of an inhabitable context by using pictures, illustrations or simple descriptions (Craddock, 2001).

**Identification.** If listeners fail to see their own world, beliefs, situations, and concerns in instruction, they may gain new insights, but will most likely fail to be transformed by the learning experience. TLEs presuppose that learning content is related to one’s life, otherwise one could not be transformed. On the other hand, if application or identification comes across too strongly, the benefits of narrative distance are lost (Craddock, 2002). Wilson and Parish’s framework indirectly offers an effective way to determine the quality of identification occurring as a result of instruction. They see TLEs as being related to “personal meaning... self-narrative

... sense of calling ... conceptual shifts ... new understandings ... agency ... empowerment ... values ...relationships” (Wilson & Parish, 2011, p. 10). Designers can ask themselves how these issues relate with the instructional content they are constructing. Do learning materials connect to what Yanchar (2011) calls “life’s larger questions and issues” (p. 280) which “provide a background of significance for human action” (p. 280)? This kind of identification goes far beyond pop cultural references, using slang words, or something like a student’s interest in video games. Meaningful identification deals with larger existential concerns such as personal meaning, service, relationships, identity, and morality as opposed to one’s personal interests (i.e., favorite movies, sports teams or musicians). Although it is not hurtful to connect learning material to personal interests, learning content that is primarily designed in this way is probably more likely to be simply relatable and not transformational. On the other hand, even learning material that consists mainly of acquiring new skills can connect to meaningful issues. For example, an online corporate training module, centered on teaching sales techniques, occasionally depicts real life stories of people demonstrating hard work, vision, and service as they learn and incorporate the learning material. These examples link the training to subjects that matter to students on a larger scale. If instruction also cultivates and maintains narrative distance, learners are granted emotional and cognitive space to make new connections in the context of these larger issues.

**Effective use of instructional endings.** The way instruction concludes plays a vital role in creating narrative distance. In fact, the most common way that narrative distance will probably manifest itself is in how instruction comes to a close. A designer can incorporate motif, context, identification, economy, and incongruity throughout instruction, leading to a climactic moment that leaves students a chance to construct meaning for themselves. A single idea, theme, or

overall concept will have to be selected in order to design for these climactic moments of narrative distance (Craddock, 2001). A unit of instruction might still have many sub-points but it should maintain a single message woven throughout. If there are too many convoluted messages given indirectly through narrative distance, a listener might have a difficult time drawing conclusions in the way the designer intended.

There are two unique benefits of incorporating narrative distance into instructional endings. First, learners are given time to ponder information. As shown above, instruction that neatly wraps up provides less incentive to continue to weigh, consider, or assimilate the information just received. A second benefit of incorporating narrative distance into endings occurs only if learners have come to expect this type of conclusion; students know that they will have to make sense of the instructional message, a feeling of anticipation is created. Much like a movie, poem, or play, listeners will be gathering clues in order to prepare for the moment of narrative distance when they will be left to their own thoughts to make sense of the message or theme. Illustrations of these kinds of endings can be seen above in the example of the philosophy teacher or literature class about *Les Miserables*.

### **Conclusion**

Narrative distance is a phenomenon that has been used in a variety of fields in a number of ways to invite introspection and transformation. Although instructional design has talked about narrative in important ways, it still can learn how to incorporate narrative distance in a manner that invites powerful learning experiences. Wilson and Parish (2011) have offered a framework for understanding TLEs and narrative distance meets many of its requirements. In order to design for these kind of experiences, I have offered six principles for incorporating narrative distance into instruction. However, further research is research is needed to discover if

narrative distance is more effective in creating TLEs than more direct methods of instruction, and what principles of narrative distance are most effective in creating these kind of learning experiences. The most profound kinds of learning “are invited and encouraged and facilitated” (Wilson & Parrish, 2011, p. 11). When someone attends a movie, the director does not stand to the side inviting people to engage or be transformed by the film. Neither does an author ask her readers to work in groups, answer questions, or create a portfolio. Rather, the content of the book itself must be crafted and arranged in such a way that readers will choose to engage emotionally and mentally. Narrative distance is a central ingredient of this phenomenon. As designers learn to incorporate narrative distance and its principles articulated in this paper into their instruction, it has the potential to foster transformative learning experiences.

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**Article # 2: Principles and Practices of Designing Narrative Distance for  
Transformative Learning Experiences**

**Principles and Practices of Designing Narrative Distance for Transformative Learning**

**Experiences**

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### **Abstract**

Narratives have a unique ability to grant listeners emotional and cognitive space in a way that encourages them to choose how they will make sense of a story (Craddock, 2002). This effect, called narrative distance, also has the potential to help create what Wilson and Parrish (2011) call transformative learning experiences (Taeger, 2018). This article is a qualitative research study of experts who regularly design for narrative distance. Six experts from a variety of fields were interviewed about the principles and practices of designing for narrative distance with the purpose of discovering ways that instructional designers can better facilitate transformative learning experiences (Wilson & Parrish, 2011). A variety of principles and practices on how to create narrative distance are categorized under four themes: cognitive space, emotional space, invite change and meaningful content. General comments are also given on the application of these insights to instructional design along with further suggestions for research.

*Keywords:* instructional design, transformative learning experiences, narrative, aesthetics, design practice

## **Principles and Practices of Designing Narrative Distance for Transformative Learning Experiences**

In recent years, Instructional Design has increasingly drawn upon the broad subject of narrative to inform its own principles of design. Scholars have explored narrative and its relationship to Instructional Design in areas such as problem solving (Jonassen & Hernandez-Serrano, 2002), aesthetics (Parrish, 2007), reframing students' stories (Goldsworthy & Honebein, 2010), narrative structure (Hokanson & Fraher, 2008), video games (Dickey, 2006), online learning (Lindgren & McDaniel, 2012), and digital learning environments (Aylett, 2006). It is not surprising that Instructional Design has found narrative to be a rich source of insight as it is often recognized as central to understanding human experience (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988; Schank, 1990; Young & Saver, 2001).

One of the potential reasons for drawing upon narrative in Instructional Design is its ability to invite change in how people see themselves and behave (e.g., Ackerman, Goldstein, Shapiro, & Bargh, 2009; Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007; Green & Brock, 2000; Kaufman & Libby, 2012). Among the elements of narrative that invite affective or behavior change in listeners is a phenomenon we call narrative distance. As Brothers (2003) pointed out, this phenomenon is discussed in many ways in a variety of different fields. For the purposes of this paper, based on Brothers' (2003) work, we defined narrative distance "as the cognitive or emotional space afforded by indirect communication that invites listeners to make sense of content" (Taeger, 2018, p. 6). For example, since a reader of a novel is not directly addressed by the author (only indirectly through the world of the narrative), the reader is granted the emotional and cognitive space to choose how they will make sense of the story (Craddock, 2002; Warner, 2001). As opposed to being told which conclusions to make, feelings to experience, or behaviors to adopt,

narrative distance invites listeners to make these decisions for themselves (Craddock, 2002).

Obviously, much of instruction should be direct. But, there are times when instructional designers may find it advantageous to use indirect communication in ways similar to narrative.

For example, suppose a team of corporate trainers were asked to develop online training modules for a human resources department that are intended to help employees remember and implement key aspects of a company's mission and values. Since the employees are already very familiar with the company's stated values, the instructional design team decides to use narrative distance in order to help employees apply the organization's mission and values in new ways. In order to do this, the designers create a monthly movie, animation or short story that depicts a fictional employee improving in one of the company's values. These short stories do not contain narration or moralizing, rather the employees are given an opportunity to discover for themselves how the story demonstrates one of the company's values. Also, before the stories are created, management is asked about the specific ways they would like to see employees improve. These suggestions are incorporated in indirect ways into the stories. Ideally, when employees notice these potential areas of improvement (i.e., social skills, professional dress, time management skills, etc.) in the stories, they will be given an opportunity to improve without feeling defensive towards the instruction.

### **Narrative Distance and Instructional Design**

Rather than generally arguing that instructional design needs to adopt narrative distance, it is important to identify which aspects of instructional design might benefit from exploring the affordances of narrative distance. Wilson and Parrish (2011) have suggested that designers could create instruction that is more than "effective or efficient" (p. 11) and instead learn to design more inspiring and transformational experiences. They described these transformative learning

experiences (TLEs) as “an *especially meaningful encounter that leaves a lasting impact on a person’s sense of competence or place in the world*” (Wilson & Parrish, 2011, pp. 11-12). Thus, unlike some scholars in the subfield of adult education who discuss transformative learning in terms such as emancipation and the restructuring of one’s assumptions (Brookfield, 1987; Mezirow, 1991), Wilson and Parrish (2011) focus primarily focus on “exceptional instructional experiences” (p. 11). Narrative distance may provide one avenue for creating transformative learning experiences (Taeger, 2018). Table 2 shows how narrative distance can meet Wilson and Parrish’s (2011, p. 12) key indicators for TLEs (Taeger, 2018). The table only shows relevant sub-indicators from Wilson and Parrish’s (2011) framework.

Table 2

*How Narrative Distance Can Lead to TLEs (Wilson & Parrish, 2011, p. 12)*

Wilson and Parrish's Key Indicators	Sub Indicators	Narrative Distance	Benefit of Narrative Distance
<i>Personal Meaning</i>	Lasting Impression	Invites a post-instructional wrestle with learning material	Cognitive Space
	Part of the person's self-narrative	Has the same effect of inspirational media that participants can see as a transformational moment	Cognitive Space
	Mythologized by the learner	Allows students to be open to making changes related to their "identity or sense of calling" (Wilson & Parrish, 2011, p. 12)	Emotional Space
<i>Competence</i>	Significant restructuring of subject-matter schemas	Invites students to make sense of content	Cognitive Space
	Agency, efficacy, or empowerment	Since full implications of learning can only be discovered with cognitive effort, students must choose whether to make sense of content or not	Cognitive Space
<i>Relationships</i>	A call to action	Students are open to moral summons that material may make	Emotional Space
	Increased capacity to understand alternative points of view	Prevents defensiveness to opposing points of view	Emotional Space

Since other fields have long recognized the benefits associated with narrative distance, and since this principle can also be applied to creating transformative learning experiences, our research focused on the following questions: (a) What can be learned from practitioners in other fields

about designing for narrative distance? (b) How might insights from other fields inform the process of creating transformative learning experiences?

### **Method**

The purpose of this study was to learn what design principles and practices in other fields can help instructional designers create narrative distance in a way that invites transformative learning experiences. In conducting our research, we drew upon Fleming, Gaidys, and Robb's (2003) Gadamerian-based hermeneutic approach. This method centers around five steps: (1) "Deciding upon a research question;" (2) "Identification of preunderstandings;" (3) "Gaining understanding through dialogue with participants;" (4) "Gaining understanding through dialogue with the text;" (5) "Establishing trustworthiness," (Fleming et al., 2003 pp. 116-119). A central aspect to this method is achieving a "shared understanding...between the researcher and participant" (Fleming et al., 2003 p. 118). This is accomplished in part when a researcher identifies their own preunderstandings and then modifies them as the research process unfolds. We did this by comparing incoming data (both from interviews and artifact analysis) with previous theoretical work (Taeger, 2018) on narrative distance. Another key aspect of Fleming et al.'s (2003) method is the hermeneutic circle. This concept manifests itself throughout the study, including as researchers transcribe interviews before subsequent interviews for the purpose of generating "feedback and further discussion" (Fleming et al., 2003 p. 188). The hermeneutic circle plays a role as the researcher interpret parts of the interviews in light of the whole and the whole in light of the parts. Both of these techniques are described further in our method below.

### **Participants**

We interviewed six professionals who design narrative distance into their own work. These professionals have actual experience with designing products in their fields (see Table 3),

as opposed to having just studied or taught in their respective disciplines. We interviewed professionals from the fields of film, theatre, writing, homiletics (preaching), and painting.

Table 3

*Participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	Professional Titles	Approx. Years' Experience	Highest Degree
Robert	Male	Fiction Author, Professor	34	PhD
Rebecca	Female	Theatre Director, Actress, Playwright	15	Bachelors
Sophia	Female	Painter, Teacher	44	Bachelors
Matthew	Male	Film Director, Producer, Lecturer	43	Bachelors
Michael	Male	Theatre Director, Actor, Playwright	30	Bachelors
Jonathan	Male	Preacher, Professor	30	PhD

The criteria for choosing these fields was that they are historically known to use narrative distance for the purpose of influencing transformation on some level, in ways that seem generally consistent with Wilson and Parrish's (2011) framework. More specifically, we interviewed professionals whose designs might become "part of [a] person's self-narrative...mythologized;" or lead to "significant restructuring ...empowerment...a call to action [or an] increased capacity to understand alternative points of view" (Wilson & Parrish, 2011, p. 12).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In light of Fleming's et al. (2003) description of the hermeneutic circle, we interviewed each participant three times in order to deepen understanding. We also transcribed previous interviews before conducting subsequent interviews. In drawing further upon Fleming's et al. (2003) Gadamerian-based approach, we analyzed the data and adjusted preunderstandings of narrative distance by comparing the interviews with earlier research (Taeger, 2018) on narrative

distance. The three interviews began with more general questions leading to more specific ones (Smith & Osborn, 2003). During the first interview, we asked questions about the background of participants and the experiences they hoped their media creates. After the first interview, we analyzed artifacts that each participant created by looking for examples of narrative distance or other related issues that we could ask the participants to reflect upon. This artifact analysis also assisted in triangulating findings. These artifacts included movies, plays, essays, sermons, and paintings. During the second interview, we mainly focused on questions related to how the participants indirectly invite people to think, feel or act differently using their respective medium. During the third interview, we followed up on issues that we felt needed to be explored in more depth.

Our process for data analysis drew upon Yanchar and Hawkley (2014) and Fleming, et al. (2003) by getting a sense of the whole interview, identifying themes and bringing these into dialogue with preunderstandings, relating themes back to the whole and finding comments that illustrate shared understanding between ourselves and the participant. As Yanchar and Hawkley specify (2014, p. 276):

Overall, this process entailed the following steps: (1) Gaining a sense of the whole by reading the transcripts and identifying preliminary themes; (2) Refining these preliminary themes into more formal themes—merging, splitting, deleting, adding, editing, etc.; (3) Comparing and contrasting themes to look for connections among them, while continuing to refine; (4) Organizing themes according to metathemes and placing them into an overall thematic structure, while continuing to refine themes and metathemes; (5) Selecting illustrative quotes from the transcripts to exemplify themes developed in steps 1–4; (6) Considering each theme and meta-theme in light of the whole, and continuing to

refine; (7) Considering the whole in light of each theme and meta-theme, and continuing to refine; (8) Examining the coherence of the overall thematic interpretation and refining the overall structure.

### **Trustworthiness**

The methods we used to establish trustworthiness were based upon Lincoln and Guba (1985). We invited participants to review our analysis (member checking) in order to ensure accuracy of interpretations by emailing our conclusions to participants. A competent peer reviewed our audit trail and findings in order to ensure appropriate standards have been maintained. We also kept field notes of the interviews, a reflexive journal of major decisions and a record of our evolving preunderstandings. Furthermore, we triangulated our findings by comparing what we found in the interviews with the artifacts to give us multiple perspectives on the phenomenon. Finally, we performed negative case analysis by searching for evidence that ran contrary to our emerging themes or that added important dimension to the results as we formulated them.

### **Findings**

The themes created to organize these data came from an evolving understanding of narrative distance as it relates to TLEs. This evolving understanding of narrative distance came from discussions with a colleague, maintaining a research journal, and reflection upon an author's use of narrative distance from the literature (which are hermeneutic research activities recommend by Fleming et al., 2003). As opposed to simply offering effective storytelling techniques, the four themes identified represent general aspects of narrative distance that facilitate the creation of TLEs. We used these four aspects in order to organize the findings related to our research question (how to create narrative distance) under two metathemes each

containing two themes themselves (see Table 4). All four themes presented must exist together as a whole in order for narrative distance to be used for TLEs.

Table 4

*Narrative Distance for TLEs Metathemes and Themes*

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Metatheme 1: Space

Theme 1: Cognitive Space

Theme 2: Emotional Space

Metatheme 2: Transformation

Theme 3: Invite Change

Theme 4: Meaningful Content

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The quotes included in the following sections were chosen based on their insightfulness and lucidity in describing how to design for TLEs using narrative distance. As opposed to creating learning activities that give students a chance to discover information for themselves, these quotes focus on designing the learning content itself in a way that creates narrative distance. Pseudonyms were used for the participants. Some quotes were modified slightly in order to improve clarity. Despite these changes, the intent of each quote was preserved as manifested by each participant's approval during member checks. Also, some minor changes were by made by omitting part words, repetition, ellipses, etc. after member checks because of requests made by participants.

**Metatheme 1: Space**

**Theme 1: Cognitive space.** This theme emphasizes how a particular medium can allow an audience space to interpret content for themselves. As opposed to directly stating the message

or theme of a narrative, when designers create cognitive space, they find ways to indirectly communicate.

In some way, all the participants mentioned the importance of using concrete material such as stories or imagery in creating cognitive space. Michael, a theatre director, described how abstract moralizing is not necessary when telling stories: “Don’t teach me a lesson. Tell me a story, and if there’s a lesson in it, that’ll seep in.” Rebecca, also a theatre director, explained that effective stories naturally bring out messages: “when you tell a well written story well, the messages and themes are self-evident.” In a similar way, Jonathan, a preacher, shared why he uses stories in his sermons: “that gives them room to evaluate the issue on their own, as opposed to just having to accept my evaluation of the issue.”

In order to highlight a message in a play, Rebecca explained how emphasizing certain aspects of a scene helps convey a message: “you should ... come up with the why of the scene... and choose lines that are more important, and within lines, words that are more important, and you color the words to convey the message behind it.” Not only can highlighting certain lines and words help communicate a message, Matthew, a film director, suggested that film expresses meaning through the behavior of characters: “typically what you’re doing in a given scene is you’re setting the interaction of the characters up in such a way that their behavior communicates the meaning.” Jonathan explained how different kinds of concrete material designed to give cognitive space can be tied together during a sermon:

INTERVIEWER: how do you get people to think without telling them what to think?

JONATHAN: I really do think most of this comes down to imagery... I think of the imagery, the figurative language, the storytelling, the metaphors, etc. as the primary stuff

of the sermon, and then think of the direct discourse as the supporting commentary that helps weave it together.

Beyond concrete content (as opposed to abstract principles) and highlighting parts of a scene, Michael mentioned how the “fourth wall” (the imaginary wall between an audience and the characters on stage) creates cognitive space when he said: “It allows you to think about it in whatever way you want to think about it, because nobody is turning to you and saying, ‘Did you get that?’” Jonathan, on the other hand, described how preachers, who do not have the advantage of the fourth wall, can still help hearers to draw their own conclusions: “I only use stories that I think have a point of identification with my hearers... Now I don’t have to go ‘now pretend you are Jonathan,’ because that just breaks down the walls and lets nobody’s imagination engage.” Likewise, Robert, a fiction author, explained how the use of cognitive space does not necessarily have to imply that the absence of an author who is guiding the reader’s thoughts: “they could be playing with the reader and extrapolating other meanings that the reader might not think of. So I think it’s more complicated than whether the author intervenes or doesn’t intervene.” Although all the participants talk about cognitive space on some level, Sophia, a painter, suggested that viewers also want to be directed to what symbols represent, “a lot of people like to be directed to what it means, they want to know what it means.” In addition, Sophia said

when you open it up to give them freedom on their own, probably less percent will discover it. Less percent of your viewer will discover the symbolisms in it, but there will be some that will do it ... on their own.

When followed up on this point, Sophia said, “It depends on what they are seeking in the visual, how long they spend looking at it too, that is interesting because the longer they look at it the more they are going to see the symbolisms.”

Besides discussing the ways that various storytellers create narrative distance, many of the participants commented on the role of technology in storytelling. Matthew suggested that limiting the use of high fidelity technology may also help create cognitive space. In contrasting a novel with a movie, he said: “if you read a novel ... you’re going to manufacture the images and the meaning of the story.”

Robert offered a particularly poignant way of helping his readers interpret his writing for themselves when he suggested creating stories that contain some sort of moral ambiguity. Describing one of his fictional characters, he said: “I want readers to have empathy for her situation ... but I want her to do enough things that they would think, ‘Oh, that is wrong.’ ... That they can’t just say, ‘Oh, I agree with her completely.’” In the same vein, when discussing how an author can purposely leave some moral ambiguities unanswered, Robert said: “to me, the muscle that solves a moral or ethical dilemma is more important than the cognitive answer you get from it.”

When asking participants about how to invite an audience to think, both Matthew and Michael maintained that emotional experience is what carries thought or meaning. Michael phrased his goal as a theatre artist in the following way: “to make you feel something. And the dichotomy of that is your feelings make you think about stuff.” Matthew similarly explained, “as you work through the film, it’s the emotion that’s carrying the meaning rather than something that’s going on intellectually in your head.”

In addition to using emotion to indirectly invoking thought or creating meaning, Jonathan described how the unique way some sermons end can also allow for cognitive space: “we could start with the particulars, and you move through storytelling ... to a point where you sort of stop and you leave the hearers to decide what to do with it on their own.” In a similar way, Sophia

explained how she also puts responsibility on the viewer of her paintings: “I try to intrigue them by saying, you know, ‘There’s things in these paintings that you can find on your own. Your own symbolisms.’ And then I leave it there, and then they’ll come up with them.”

It should be noted that Rebecca stated multiple times that she valued a certain directness in stories. For example, she said:

...audiences respond to truth. To direct truth. Everyone responds. If you’re just telling the truth, they won’t feel [pause] lectured. It’s when you sidestep around it, and you say, “This is what we’re trying to say, but we’re going to say it in this way that we kind of hope leads to that.” And it’s indirect. If you don’t directly just tell the message, directly tell the truth, you lose it.

Interestingly, Rebecca also affirmed the value of one identifying their own messages or themes in a play.

**Theme 2: Emotional space.** Whereas cognitive space allows a listener to create meaning, emotional space permits the listener to choose how they will experience the material. In other words, the content presented does not seek to manipulate or force the listener to feel something. Instead, when emotional space is present, the listener feels respected, valued, safe, and understood.

In regards to emotional space, one idea that participants talked about repeatedly is authenticity. Michael suggested that material that is inauthentic is manipulative:

INTERVIEWER: What happens for the listener when something appears to be inauthentic? When they’re watching a show and they go, “Oh, that didn’t seem real.”

MICHAEL: Well the word that most people use is “manipulative.” You’re just trying to manipulate me... if we try to take shortcuts ... then it’s the same thing as just using a lot

of violins in a musical soundtrack. Sweeping violins to create an emotion that's not really being represented.

In this sense, emotional space is violated because listeners do not feel valued or respected.

Matthew explained that inauthentic emotion often appears in a film where human conflict is simplified: "...the inauthentic emotion comes largely because human conflict gets... or conflict in the story gets simplified." In the same vein, Matthew identified another way that stories become simplistic: "the expression of emotion comes through dialogue rather than through the construction of behavior and action. And those are films that tend to make emotion and dialogue pretty simplistic."

In order to prevent manipulation, which can infringe on emotional space, Michael suggested that playwrights should put priority on character over the story itself, otherwise you get: "[a] character who has been fleshed out [who] suddenly does something that you don't believe that they would do to serve the story."

Not only will manipulation violate emotional space, Rebecca warned how the excess use of technology can be emotionally repellent. Speaking of one play she observed, Rebecca said: the director didn't trust the show... so they brought in these big screens and gave everybody 3D glasses... And they turned it into ... this technical spectacle because they didn't trust the show. They said, 'Oh, we've got to make this bigger and better, and more interesting, and more exciting.' And ... it cheapened it terribly.

Both Robert and Matthew explained how emotional space can be violated when they spoke of moments in a story or film where the emotion is "unearned." Robert described how some readers reacted to such a moment in one of his own pieces when they said that Robert was making too many judgments through his writing: "I was making judgments that they felt were

excessive... so there was emotion there that I hadn't earned." Also speaking of unearned emotion, Matthew said, "one definition from one film critic I heard ... is that sentimentality is unearned emotion... it comes from a lack of recognition ... of how complex people are." Robert suggested that writers can prevent unearned emotion through the kind of language they use: "You can communicate in a kind of stripped down, denotative... no tricky connotation in your words... if you cloud the writing up with too many adjectives and other things like that, it has unearned emotion." As noted above, Michael emphasized the importance of character over story, Matthew also said that film makers can prevent unearned emotion through the actual structure of the story: "this again comes back to the question of structure. Both individual scenes and how the scenes add up across the whole arc of the film." Speaking of a related topic, Jonathan explained how preachers can use structure to slowly move into a sensitive topic and thus create emotional space:

When Craddock [a homiletician] and others in preaching talk about distance, it is usually around troubling matters and issues that you are afraid that if you draw too close too quickly, people's defenses just go up and they won't listen. So, you got to create distance first and then slowly let them in.

In addition to avoiding unearned emotion, Michael offered another way to create emotional space when he said that characters who are experiencing emotion in a story should appear as if they are trying to control their emotions:

what moves us is when we see someone trying not to be moved. If you lay it all out, there's nothing left for me... something happens to this character, they start to feel it, and then they pull it back; you get to fill in the rest if you empathize.

Sophia described a similar phenomenon (in its opposite form) when she spoke of paintings that are excessively detailed: “You may love every eyelash or love a very tight edge on everything, but ... for me it takes away the emotion. It doesn’t allow that feeling of the personal viewer to come into it. It stops you.”

Sophia also suggested that offensive or degrading content can also infringe on emotional space: “Many people like to have those dramatic things and those horrifying things. That does not uplift me... when something is overdone and they’re there just showing all the garbage and the blood and the horror, that’s just too much.” However, she suggested that difficult topics can still be depicted indirectly through what she called “symbolisms.” She described one painting that portrayed a religious figure who was bleeding: “I put him in a red-type clothing. I did not show dripping blood... but I showed agony, but I didn’t show it in a way that it would hurt someone’s feelings.” It should be noted that Robert and Matthew (as noted below) argued that provoking people on some level can invite participants to reconsider an issue as well.

Using the fourth wall is another way to invite emotional space. Although Matthew explained that there are advantages in sometimes breaking the fourth wall, he also explained how the fourth wall can create a protection for the viewer: “the value of the fourth wall is protective. It allows the viewer to enter without real emotional risk into the experience of the movie.” Michael said the fourth wall allows the viewer to choose how they will react: “It allows you as an audience member to examine it to any extent that you want. And if you’re not embarrassed about demonstrating your emotions, feeling it any way you want.”

## **Metatheme 2: Transformation**

**Theme 3: Invite change.** At the same time that an audience is granted cognitive and emotional space, for narrative distance to be used for TLEs, the audience must also be invited to

change. This theme suggest ways that those involved in the arts invite their audience to think, feel, or behave differently.

Michael suggested that the primary way he invites his audience to change is to help them feel or experience something: “Some people think that people... will be motivated to change based on what they think. I don’t think that’s true. I think people are more motivated to change based on how they feel.” Rebecca had a similar viewpoint: “most of the things that you learn in theater aren’t informational... it changes you and change only really happens on an emotional level. The information by itself doesn’t have the power to change you.” When Michael was asked how a play can help someone to feel or experience something, he responded by saying:

I can’t get you to internalize [an] abstraction to a point where you would turn it into something that you would act upon ... unless you’re invested in some way. And the only way to get you invested with some idea is to see a practical representation of what that idea can do to you as a human being.

Beyond just becoming invested in a concrete example of an idea as a way to create an emotional response (and thus invite change), Rebecca further suggested that the audience must be invested in the characters of a story: “if you care about characters then you will be affected by what they do.”

In addition to creating an emotional response as a way to invite transformation, Robert said a reader changes as a character changes in a story: “in a novel, the character is the one who changes and the reader changes vicariously with that character.” Jonathan explained that a similar kind of shift can also happen as a sermon goes from stating a problem to a solution: “for me, every sermon needs a hinge. Which means you’ve got to give people a chance to turn. And the turn conceptually is from the ... problem to the answer.”

Not only can character change or a shift in the sermon invite transformation, the very content of the narrative itself can also be used to invite people to see differently. When speaking of documentary films that are meant to provoke people, Matthew said, “you specifically build into the film interviews and comments that will provoke people and get them talking.” Similarly, Robert spoke of an author who seeks to disturb his audience: “he’s crossing boundaries in order to disturb someone. And it will either make them mad, or it will make them see the issue in a different way.”

Robert suggested an audience can be invited to think differently when an author uses a story to reveal reality in a certain way. Speaking of another writer who tries to empower young women who read romance novels, Robert said that this author:

lead[s] them through a process of showing what she believes is reality, that people who let their heads get clouded with emotions make more mistakes than people whose heads are not clouded with emotions. And so it feels empirical to her... a truth of the universe.

Not only can the world itself be revealed a certain way, Jonathan suggested that listeners themselves can be defined in a certain way in order to invite transformation. He said,

Being defined a certain way I think inspires action better... instead of saying, “We all could be the kind of church that does so-and-so,” ... instead I say, “We are church, and that means that we do so-and-so.” I name it in a declarative statement instead of an imperative... So it’s indirect.

This method indirectly invites the audience to reconsider their very identity. Sophia explained how paintings connected to one’s heritage can do something similar: “if they look at an image that’s their heritage, what that does they see the identity of that person and also relate with their own identity of who they are.” Robert said that certain characters can be created in a way to help

influence an audience to realize what kind of identity they would *not* like to possess. Referring to Mr. Collins from Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*, Robert said: "he's a laughable character... And I think that's tactically and very intelligently used to help a reader say, 'I don't want to be like that.'" "

**Theme 4: Meaningful content.** Even if all the other aspects of narrative distance for TLEs are present, if the content is not meaningful to a listener there will be no desire to attempt to make sense of the material presented or to make changes. In this section, meaningful content refers to material that audience members care about or identify with.

Rebecca described what happens when an audience member sees themselves in a play: "seeing people in situations that can apply to them, they will say, 'when I saw you do that, it helped me realize what to do.'" Michael said that when we engage with a narrative, we are hoping, whether we realize it or not, to see ourselves in the story: "we're hoping that we are going to be able to liken this thing unto ourselves; that something in there is going to happen, where I can look at these people and go, '...I know exactly how he feels.'" Jonathan suggested that it's important to specifically pinpoint who the audience should identify with and then to maintain that point of view throughout a sermon:

Where are you going to ask them to identify, and then are you going to be able to keep that point of view throughout? So don't flip side and go, "Now some of you are like the dad." You've just lost almost everybody.

Matthew spoke of learning a similar principle that he learned at a film festival, "A good film story is about one person... because if it's only about one person that gets you to identify emotionally, much more intensively."

According to Rebecca, the characters of a story have to be important to the audience: “If the relationship between the character and whom she’s talking to was important to you, what she was saying would be important to you.” One way that Rebecca suggested that an audience can care more about a character is to watch them struggle for an objective: “As they try harder and harder and harder to resolve their whatever problem was you root for them more as they say and do things that make you like them more. Then you care more about what they are doing.” In addition to feeling that a character is important, Sophia discussed the power of a painting that is connected to someone’s heritage: “I take those people and I set them up to represent their heritage, and it changes their lives... the acquaintance to their history changes their lives, because they realize who they are.”

Not only should the characters be important to the audience, according to Jonathan, the preacher should be asking questions in the sermon that the audience will want answered. When speaking of the opposite of being boring, Jonathan said: “The opposite for preaching ... is not entertaining, but being engaging. And that requires you to know where your people are so that they find that you’re asking the questions they ask.”

In a counterintuitive way, Michael emphasized how the specifics of a story help it to be generalized to the audience:

here’s the dichotomy, the paradox of telling stories. The more precise the details, the more universal your audience can be... when you get really, really specific, you talked about a certain place, and weather, and smells, and things like that, even if the people listening have never been to that place, it’s real enough that they can attach something from their life to that.

## Discussion

Borrowing from Fleming et al.'s (2003) hermeneutic approach, this study was designed to see what insights from other fields that use narrative distance could be applied to instructional design for the purposes of creating what Wilson and Parrish (2001) call transformative learning experiences. The participants revealed many methods, techniques and principles for creating narrative distance that have application for instructional design. Table 5 helps summarize key ideas taken from quotes under each theme. These principles and practices, when kept in balance with each other, can be applied to instructional design in order to create narrative distance.

Although discussed somewhat in earlier theoretical work (Taeger, 2018) on narrative distance, the importance of creating “loose edges” (a term Sophia used) was deepened and clarified. By “loose edges” we mean instructional content that avoids abstract moralizing or allows the learner room for interpretation. When trying to create TLEs, it might be tempting to show learners directly how they should be transformed (Craddock, 2002), but participants in this study emphasized the value of presenting concrete examples without overt exhortations. Of course, “loose edges” cannot be an excuse for sloppy design practices. Rather, instructional designers can identify strategic places to invite learners to make their own discoveries using concrete illustrations.

Table 5

*Principles and Practice of Designing for Narrative Distance*

Theme	Design Principle or Practice
Cognitive Space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use concrete material without abstract moralizing</li> <li>Emphasize certain lines or words</li> <li>Use the behavior of characters to communicate meaning</li> <li>Tie concrete material together with supporting commentary</li> <li>Create a “fourth wall”</li> <li>Refrain from directly inviting learners to identify</li> <li>Guide learners’ thoughts with supporting commentary</li> <li>Appropriately limit technology</li> <li>Use moral ambiguity</li> <li>Use emotional experience to convey meaning</li> <li>Conclude in a way that invites learners to make sense of material for themselves</li> </ul>
Emotional space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use authentic material</li> <li>Do not try to create emotion that is not really represented</li> <li>Avoid simplifying human conflict</li> <li>Avoid expressing emotion through dialogue</li> <li>Do not change how a character would act in order to serve the story</li> <li>Avoid using technology in a way that cheapens material</li> <li>Avoid unearned emotion</li> <li>Use denotative words as opposed to connotative</li> <li>Move slowly into sensitive topics</li> <li>Characters should appear as if they are trying to restrain emotions</li> <li>Use symbolism for sensitive topics</li> <li>Create a “fourth wall”</li> </ul>
Invite Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create an emotional experience</li> <li>Create investment in a meaningful representation of an idea or in characters</li> <li>Help learners change vicariously along with characters</li> <li>Move from problem to answer</li> <li>Provoke people in a way that invites them to think or see things differently</li> <li>Use a story to reveal the nature of reality</li> <li>Define the learner in a way that connects them to a larger narrative</li> <li>Connect learner to heritage</li> <li>Use characters to indirectly show learners how they should not behave</li> </ul>
Meaningful Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create Identification</li> <li>Do not change the character with whom learners are intended to identify</li> <li>Help learners care for characters</li> <li>Create characters who struggle for an objective</li> <li>Connect people to their heritage</li> <li>Ask questions that the students are asking</li> <li>Use details</li> </ul>

Going through the process of this study also changed our preunderstandings in realizing which aspects of narrative distance are essential when someone is using narrative distance for transformational purposes. On one hand, instructional content could be shared in a way that allows students to make their own discoveries without that content necessarily inviting those students to make transformational changes. Therefore, when one is using narrative distance to create TLEs, designers should include methods that invite transformation (theme 3) in areas that are meaningful (theme 4) to the learner. In this way, using narrative distance for transformation becomes a balancing act. Without the use of techniques that create space (metatheme 1) learners might become defensive or feel manipulated. Without the use of methods that invite transformation (metatheme 2) learners will not be guided to meet learning objectives related to TLEs.

Compared with previous theoretical work (Taeger, 2018), the issue of authenticity gained importance in regards to creating narrative distance. This finding is in line with McDonald (2009) who interviewed filmmakers looking for applications to instructional design and also emphasized the importance of authentic storytelling. As some of the participants suggested, violations of authenticity (or realism) can lead to listeners feeling manipulated. Therefore, when designers are trying to create TLEs, instructional content should reflect the realities and complexities of life, otherwise it may be hard for learners to open up emotionally in ways that could lead to transformation.

A central aspect spoken of or implied by the participants is the power of vicarious experience. Kaufman and Libby (2012) have shown that when readers begin to experience what characters do in a story, the reader's behavior will begin to reflect that of the characters. This principle has unique application for instructional design intended to create TLEs. After deciding

which cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes are desired, instructional designers can use characters in instructional stories, examples, or anecdotes to indirectly influence learners by having these characters demonstrate the intended changes. By itself, this would not necessarily be a new instructional practice. However, by combining this technique with the principles discussed in this study, designers can access the unique affordances of narrative distance.

Some participants emphasized the importance of context in creating narrative distance. In other words, in order to create impactful moments, listeners need to go through a process that makes enough “deposits” which can lead to an emotional payoff. This is inherent in narrative itself; effective stories invite us to take a journey. Although Hokanson and Fraher (2008) have explored narrative structure and its relationship to instructional design, this study shows how narrative structure also creates narrative distance because learners need time to invest in topics and characters and they need to see the complexity of those topics and characters before they can be invited to change without feeling manipulated.

In light of potential further research avenues, this study focused mainly on what designers can do to create narrative distance for TLEs, but it may be helpful to see which of these methods work most effectively by performing qualitative studies on students who experience narrative distance during instruction. In addition, since the design of narrative distance often implies the creation or collecting of instructional stories and illustrations, practical design suggestions on how to create these in cost effective and time efficient ways may also be useful.

### **Conclusion**

If instructional design is going to take full advantage of the affordances offered by narrative, the indirect nature of story cannot be ignored. This study suggested how professionals in a variety of fields use the indirect nature of narrative to create powerful experiences in a way that

can be applied to TLEs. This effect can be created as designers use these techniques to produce a balance between allowing the learner space to interpret and inviting the student to change in meaningful ways.

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**Article # 3: Applying the Design of Narrative Distance in Instruction**

**Applying the Design of Narrative Distance in Instruction**

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### **Abstract**

The field of instructional design has a history of exploring the possibilities of narrative in instruction. One aspect of narrative that has not received significant attention is the relationship between the indirect nature of narrative (narrative distance) and its power to create powerful transformative experiences. This article builds upon Taeger and Yanchar's (2018) qualitative study of storytelling experts by offering practical applications and examples of how to incorporate the indirect nature of story into instruction. Numerous examples are given in order to illustrate how instructional designers can use the potentially transformative effect of narrative distance.

*Keywords:* instructional design, narrative, transformative learning experiences, design practice

### **Applying the Design of Narrative Distance in Instruction**

Humans are storytelling creatures. Not only do we engage and understand the world through narrative (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988; Young & Saver, 2001), we can be invited to change in significant ways through narrative (Green & Brock, 2000; Kaufman & Libby, 2012).

The effects of incorporating elements of narrative into instructional design have been explored in a number of different ways. The use of narrative or storytelling techniques have been discussed in contexts such as online learning (Hirumi, Sivo, & Pounds, 2012; Lindgren & McDaniel, 2012), storification (Akkerman, Admiraal, & Huizenga, 2009), interactive storytelling (Baldwin & Ching, 2017), creating design stories (Parrish, 2006), audio instruction (Carter, 2012), narrative-centered learning environments (Rowe, Shores, Mott, & Lester, 2011) and problem solving (Dickey, 2006; Jonassen & Hernandez-Serrano, 2002).

One way that narrative may inform instructional design is in helping to create what Wilson and Parrish (2011) called transformative learning experiences. According to Wilson and Parrish (2011, p. 12) a transformative learning experience (TLE) “results from an especially meaningful engagement with the world that leaves a lasting impact on a person’s sense of themselves and their relationship to a subject matter...” In this article, TLEs are understood to occur in varying degrees; they could be as small helping learners become more patient with coworkers or as large as inspiring learners to be more environmental conscious. It has previously been argued that narrative distance or “the cognitive or emotional space afforded by indirect communication” (Taeger, 2018, p. 6) can facilitate transformative learning experiences (Brothers, 2003). This effect can be described as being similar to someone who is challenged by a piece of literature, a movie, or play in such a way that they choose to make changes in their

lives. A central feature of narrative distance is its indirectness; the author (or director, etc.) does not directly ask readers to reconsider their beliefs and behaviors. Rather, the messages and invitations are inherent to the story itself. Since the story is indirect, the listener is less defensive (Warner, 2001) and is free to decide how to incorporate the message of the story into his or her own life (Craddock, 2002).

### **Designing for Narrative Distance**

To better understand the affordances created by narrative distance, I participated in performing a qualitative study (Taeger & Yanchar, 2018) interviewing six storytelling experts in a variety of fields. This study revealed a variety of principles and practices that can help incorporate narrative distance into instruction designed to create transformative learning experiences. In this article, I will expand further on the implementation of narrative distance in instructional design by offering practical design principles and fictional examples based on a previous study (Taeger & Yanchar, 2018). Most of the examples I discuss below illustrate what narrative distance would like look in online learning. These suggestions are meant to help designers better understand ways to use narrative distance in practice. The headings and subheadings below are quoted from the themes and ideas presented in previous research on narrative distance (Taeger & Yanchar, 2018).

#### **Cognitive Space**

Giving a learner cognitive space means allowing them to interpret aspects of the learning material for themselves. As one the participants in my previous qualitative study said, “Don’t teach me a lesson. Tell me a story, and if there’s a lesson in it, that’ll seep in” (Taeger & Yanchar, 2018 p. 53). This, of course, only applies to learning content meant to create TLEs as opposed to material that students need to learn more directly (e.g., how to operate heavy

machinery or formulas for a chemistry exam). It should also be noted that granting cognitive space is not primarily expressed in learning activities, but in the learning content itself. For example, having students write their own thoughts about a case study is not necessarily using cognitive space because the case study may have been written in a way that did not invite much room for interpretation.

**Use concrete material without abstract moralizing.** One of the ways to maintain cognitive space for the learner is to avoid using language that contains abstract morals, values, or principles during the portions of instruction intended to use narrative distance. For example, a corporate sales training would avoid using such phrases as, “working your hardest always brings the best results” or “effective salespeople are organized and diligent.” Although these phrases may be true and helpful on some level, they do not fit well with material designed to create TLEs because the learner is not allowed to decide how they want to interpret the material for themselves. This principle is based in the assumption that to be inspired to change, one must feel some sort of ownership in that process. Simply offering vivid and compelling concrete examples of sales people who are diligent, organized, and hardworking in training material without abstract moralizing allows for more depth in interpretation (Allen, 2008) and the cognitive space for the learner to apply the content to themselves. This does not mean that instruction should contain a series of loosely related anecdotes or images. Rather, concrete material can be strategically placed alongside more traditional instruction.

For example, suppose an online course contains five principles for becoming a leader in the workplace. These five principles are not simply techniques, but they stretch and challenge the learners in potentially transformative ways regarding the way they lead and inspire others. In typical instructional fashion, the course contains definitions, examples, opportunities for practice,

and assessments. However, at the end of the online course, a video appears of actors depicting all five of the principles just discussed in the training. Instead of the online training indicating that the learner should look for the five principles in the video or that the learner will be tested on how the five principles were manifested in the video (assuming that adequate assessment as already occurred), simply presenting the video at the end of the training invites the listener to discover the principles for themselves. A quality feature film does not warn viewers what they should look for in a scene, but assumes that the viewer can make sense of what is currently being depicted. In some sense, because the learner is not told how to make sense of this final scene in the training, they are invited to do so. As Craddock (2002 p. 106) argued, “The hearer is free, and yet the response *permitted* is a response *demande*.”

A design pattern for implementing this aspect of narrative distance is as follows: (a) identify ways learners could change, (b) create or find concrete illustrations of those changes, (c) refrain from including abstract moralizing during this portion of instruction, and (d) insert these concrete illustrations in strategic places where learners will be able to make intended connections without explicit instructions to do so.

**Use the behavior of characters to communicate meaning.** In the last section, I contended that explicitly stating the message of an illustration or concrete example can limit cognitive space. Presumably, this moralizing (or instruction to moralize) would occur before or after an illustration is given in a piece of instruction. Incorporating the technique of using the behavior of characters to communicate meaning helps prevent an instructional designer from creating an illustration that would *inherently* violate a learner’s cognitive space. In other words, some instructional stories or illustrations so obviously contain a message that the learner is not given the opportunity or motivation to interpret the story for themselves.

Suppose a university learning center creates an online training for adjunct professors in order to introduce them to the various responsibilities associated with working in a higher educational setting. Much of the material consists of rather straightforward content such as explaining the university's learning management system, parking instructions, and grading procedures. However, some of the material is designed to be more transformative in its approach because it is intended to train and inspire the adjunct professors to act professionally as they interact with students. In order to reach this learning objective, the instructional designers decide to use narrative distance by inserting two stories using the same fictional characters at both the beginning and end of this section in the online training module. The fictional example consists of a meeting between an adjunct professor (Dr. Thompson) and a student (Ashley) to review a recently administered exam. Both times the example appears on screen, there are no instructions to look for ways that the adjunct professor could have treated the student more professionally (those principles will be covered during the traditional instruction using different examples). Furthermore, cognitive space is also maintained throughout the example because the instructional designers have the characters themselves communicate indirectly through their behavior. In other words, rather than having a narrator say, "As Ashley entered Dr. Thompson's office, he didn't treat her with much respect or kindness." Rather, the narrator says, "As Ashley entered the office, Dr. Thomas said, 'hello, how are you today?' as he continued to type on his computer." Later on in the example, instead of the narrator saying, "Dr. Thompson was obviously not listening very intently" the narrator mentions that Dr. Thompson kept glancing at his computer while Ashley was speaking. Since the message is communicated indirectly by showing how Dr. Thompson was acting, the learners have the cognitive space needed to make sense of this behavior for themselves.

The design pattern for using this aspect of narrative distance consists of (a) asking which attributes, behaviors or values the learner could acquire, (b) identifying the behaviors that someone with those attributes manifests, (c) finding or creating examples where the characters demonstrate or fail to exhibit those behaviors, and (d) refraining from any material (such as narration, description, etc.) that would describe those attributes in any other way besides behaviorally.

**Use moral ambiguity.** When a character or portion of instruction contains a mixture of moral viewpoints it is morally ambiguous. For example, an adjunct professor who welcomes a student with a smile into his office, but also keeps glancing at his computer as they talk depicts a complex human being with both admirable and less than commendable characteristics. The previous section emphasized using behavior to communicate meaning to maintain cognitive space. Without using moral ambiguity, however, the behaviors manifested by the character would appear simplistic and the message would become as obvious as if they narrator said, “consider how Dr. Thompson treats his student unprofessionally.” Moral ambiguity keeps a learner guessing (Lowry, 2001) and invites them to make a potentially transformative decision about their own moral framework.

Suppose an instructional designer creates an online course intended for middle school students. The course includes an immersive narrative learning environment (Dettori & Paiva, 2009) where students can control an avatar through a typical week at school. At various points during the week, the learner encounters students inviting them to participate in undesirable behavior (underage drinking, cheating, bullying, etc.) and then is trained on how to handle such situations. However, throughout the online training module, the fellow students the learner encounters also demonstrate admirable qualities. For example, the peer who invites them to

participate in underage drinking is a good student, a loyal friend and genuinely funny. In this example, not only are the students taught various techniques and principles for handling difficult situations, they also are given enough cognitive space to make a decision about the behaviors they are invited to participate in. The moral ambiguity demonstrated by the characters in the training prevents the learner from easily deciding if that character's behaviors are always acceptable.

The design pattern for using moral ambiguity to create narrative distance could be described as (a) identifying the specific ways that learners could change, (b) finding or creating concrete examples that expose a change that could be made, and (c) highlighting or giving characteristics to these characters that are also admirable in the eyes of the learner.

### **Emotional Space**

Whereas cognitive space allows someone to decide how to make sense of learning material, emotional space is an aspect of narrative distance that gives someone the room to decide how they will experience the material. As opposed to feeling manipulated, the learner feels "respected, valued, safe, and understood" (Taeger & Yanchar, 2018, p. 56). This aspect of narrative distance is important in creating TLEs because learners are less likely to be influenced if they feel emotionally pressed upon to do so (Craddock, 2002). As one of the participants in my previous study explained:

the word that most people use is "manipulative." You're just trying to manipulate me... if we try to take shortcuts ... then it's the same thing as just using a lot of violins in a musical soundtrack. Sweeping violins to create an emotion that's not really being represented. (Taeger & Yanchar, 2018, pp. 56-57)

**Use authentic material.** McDonald (2009 p. 117) said, “Authenticity helps viewers feel empathy for characters, and recognize themselves (their emotions and their reactions) in those characters.” Goldsworthy and Honebein (2010) have argued that learners can only connect with instructional stories that seem authentic. An inauthentic story may not influence learners because it can come across as manipulative. For example, if a character in a safety training movie acts in ways that do not seem authentic, it becomes obvious the creators of the film are trying to get a message across. These kinds of problems are probably more prevalent with instructional narratives because this material is designed to influence students to meet learning objectives.

I identified at least three principles in my previous study on narrative distance that can help instructional designers create authentic learning material: (a) avoid simplifying human conflict, (b) avoid expressing emotion through dialogue, and (c) avoid changing how a character would act in order to serve the story (Taeger & Yanchar, 2018). This section will explore these three principles for the overall purpose of illustrating how to create authentic material that allows for emotional space during instruction.

Suppose the training department for a large organization is assigned the responsibility to implement an online training regarding new environmental regulations. The instructional designers not only want to explain the new environmental policies the company has decided to adopt, they also want to help create a culture of environmental responsibility and thus they need to construct a training that is transformative on some level. In order to take advantage of the affordances of narrative distance, they decide to weave a continual story consisting of still photos and narration throughout the more traditional instructional portions of the online training. The story is designed to both illustrate the material that is being taught and inspire the employees to

become more environmentally conscious. As the story unfolds, learners are never instructed to make connections instead they are simply allowed to do so.

*Avoid simplifying human conflict.* In order to maintain narrative distance so that the learners are not emotionally “taken out” of the story by the obviousness of the message, the designers seek to use principles of authentic storytelling. One of the scenes depicts two employees standing by a copy machine. The narrator says that one of the employees has noticed over a period of time that the other employee is wasteful in the amount of copies they produce. The instructional designers avoid simplifying the conflict in the story by depicting the nuances involved in asking a coworker to abide by certain work policies. The designers do not have the narrator say something like, “although it was hard for Jessica to ask Miranda to stop making so many copies, she worked up the courage and asked her.” Instead, the narrators describe how Jessica does not want to appear demanding or how she unsuccessfully tries to hint her concern to Miranda. Perhaps the instructional designers could even have Miranda verbally agree to change, but then fail to reflect that change in her behavior. Regardless of how the designers eventually show the resolution to this encounter, they should first show the many facets to human conflict in order for learners to feel that the story is authentic. As mentioned above, without that authenticity, it is difficult for learners to be emotionally open enough to be influenced by a story.

*Avoid expressing emotion through dialogue.* Continuing with the previous example, it probably would have been hard for learners to consider the story authentic if Jessica had said, “it upsets me when you make so many copies.” Or if Miranda had responded by saying, “I’m so angry because you are telling me what to do.” As argued in a previous section, meaning is often communicated most effectively through the behaviors of the characters in a story.

*Do not change how a character would act in order to serve the story.* When stories are used to teach, instructors can feel a need to have the characters act in ways that express the message of the story. This can lead to characters behaving in ways that do not seem consistent with how they should act and thus the story appears inauthentic. Parrish (2007 p. 521) argued that “while plot is primary, plot must arise *from* character and not merely be imposed on characters.” If the scene with Jessica and Miranda ended with Miranda saying something like, “Ok, I’ve learned my lesson. I’ll try to be more environmentally conscious,” the learner probably would not have considered the dialogue very realistic. Instead, perhaps Miranda would have complied with Jessica’s suggestion, but only reluctantly after administrative pressure. Of course, characters in instructional stories often need to learn lessons, but it should happen in ways that reflect how the character in the story would authentically change.

A simple design formula for this kind of authentic character change is to (a) identify which lessons a character needs to learn that reflect learning objectives, (b) consider which types of factors (logic, experience, social influence, authority, etc.) would invite that kind of character to change, and (c) finding ways to naturally include those changes in the story.

**Avoid unearned emotion.** In previous research on narrative distance, some participants spoke of emotional experience in a story as having to be “earned” (Taeger & Yanchar, 2018, p. 58). Occasionally, stories attempt to create an emotional experience without enough context for the experience to feel natural. Instructional designers can avoid this problem by giving learners enough time and background to invest in a character and their associated struggles (Rollings & Adams, 2003). When attempting to design an instructional story in this way, it is helpful to remember to keep the other aspects of narrative distance central to the design process because context itself will not be enough to prevent a potential moment of unearned emotion.

Suppose instructional designers for a government agency are developing an online training that instructs new employees regarding their responsibilities in helping those in lower socioeconomic situations apply for and receive government housing. The designers want the training to cover more than just teaching the new employees the process of obtaining the right information and documents from those needing government assistance, they want the training to be a transformative learning experience. In order to do this, they strategically place documentary style video clips throughout the training of an immigrant family who first struggle to find employment and then eventually receive assistance for government housing. The clips follow the same family throughout the module so that learners have time to invest in the struggles and complexities of coming to a new country, seeking employment, learning a new language, and so forth. When the training is completed, the learners watch a clip of the family entering into their new housing. Since the learners know how meaningful this would have been to this particular family, they have the emotional space to experience this powerfully event as they watch the family gratefully occupy their new residence for the first time.

To design for this kind of experience, instructional designers can (a) identify moments during instruction that are intended to create a powerful emotional effect, (b) identify what necessary background information learners need to know in order to become invested in the story or topic, and (c) locate strategic places where to include this kind of information in earlier portions of the instruction.

### **Invite Change**

For narrative distance to help create transformative learning experiences, cognitive and emotional space should be blended with aspects of instruction that also invite the learner to make

changes. In this section, I will offer three ways to invite learners to change that align with the indirect nature of narrative distance.

**Help learners change vicariously along with characters.** Kaufman and Libby (2012) demonstrated how people can change their behavior to match that of a character in a story after the reader has had a vicarious experience with that character. As one of the participants said “in a novel, the character is the one who changes and the reader changes vicariously with that character” (Taeger & Yanchar, 2018 p. 60). Instructional designers can tap into this transformative aspect of narrative distance by creating or using stories in which characters move from one set of beliefs and values to new ones. When learners are invited to transform in this way, two aspects of narrative distance are manifested alongside the invitation to change. First, learners are given the cognitive space to decide how they will identify with characters. Second, learners are granted emotional space because the characters (real or fiction) first manifest the beliefs or values of the learner and then come to new discoveries or insights. In other words, learners feel understood as they encounter characters who hold their same beliefs, but then the learners are invited to change as that character shifts in their beliefs or values. For example, suppose a consulting company asks a group of instructional designers to help update an online time management seminar. In order to invite their learners to change in ways that align with narrative distance, the instructional designers interview a former student of the time management seminar and include the video in the new online module. The instructional designers ask the former student to emphasize how poorly they managed their time before they were introduced to the online time management seminar. Rather than just briefly stating how hard it was manage their time in the past, the participant takes a few minutes to explain the many different attempts they made to improve their time management skills and the negative effects that were associated

with always feeling that they were behind in their work, could not keep track of all their tasks, and feeling that they were spending a lot of time on things that were not valuable. The instructional designers also ask the former participant to emphasize the details of any reservations that they may have when they began to consider planning on a regular basis. These reservations could include believing that beginning to plan regularly would stifle individual freedom or that planning would waste valuable time that could be used working. As the former participant describes these previous views, however, they also begin to describe the process of coming to believe that planning regularly has positive benefits that outweigh any negatives. As future learners listen to this first person narrative they are invited to vicariously join the interviewee in shifting their own views on the subject.

A simple design pattern for creating vicarious change is to (a) identify what learners currently believe about a given issue, (b) identify what new beliefs or values the learners could adopt, and (c) create or identify an instructional story where a character shifts from the old viewpoints to the new ones.

**Define the learner in a way that connects them to a larger narrative.** Besides using a specific story to invite change in learners, another indirect way to invite change that corresponds with narrative distance is by naming or defining learners within a larger narrative. By larger narrative I mean a series of connected stories, events, rituals, or myths that grow out of past historical events that can inform someone's identity. For example, someone indirectly connects themselves to a larger narrative when they say "I am American" or "I am an impressionist painter" or even "I am a Boston Red Sox fan." Each of these terms can imply a larger set of historical cultural practices, stories, and values. Instructional designers can indirectly invite learners to change by naming learners members of these larger narratives.

For example, suppose a corporation asks their training department to create a small online training explaining how members of the company can donate to a local charity. After demonstrating the procedures for donating, the online training includes a section that explains how the company has had a long and unique history of donating to charitable causes in ways that go above the norm. The online training could then depict someone describing why they are personally grateful to be a member of a corporation that gives back to the community by saying something like, “In company x, we do things differently. One of our first priorities is to use our resources to help those who need it most.” Notice how the employee in the training used a declarative statement as opposed to an imperative one (Taeger & Yanchar, 2018). She did not say, “you should give to this charity because you are a member of this company.” Instead, she simply described what members of that company have had a history of doing. This is an indirect way of inviting the learner to see themselves as someone who participates in this corporation’s larger narrative. The learner is given the opportunity to identify themselves more deeply with the company culture and history by being told how a member of that larger narrative behaves.

It should be noted that learners should want to be identified with whatever larger narrative the designers are seeking to connect the learners with. This technique will most likely work when the history and tradition of larger narratives matter in meaningful ways to the learner. For example, it may or may not mean very much to a professor to be identified with the history and culture of the university where she works.

A design pattern for using this aspect of narrative distance is to (a) identify which larger narrative learners could be given a chance to identify with; (b) decide if that larger narrative is already meaningful to learners; (c) if it is not meaningful, seek to find ways to help the larger

narrative become meaningful and attractive to learners; and (d) use declarative statements as opposed to imperative ones in giving learners a chance to identify with a larger narrative.

### **Meaningful Content**

Meaningful content is learning material that matters significantly to the student. Without this, narrative distance will not lead to a TLE because learners will not see the indirect invitations to change contained in the instruction as something that is connected to their world.

**Create identification.** Identification means that learners see their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors reflected in the learning material. Identification is also connected to the “emotional proximity” one feels towards characters (Dickey, 2006 p. 251). When combined with narrative distance (emotional and cognitive space), identification can occur indirectly (Craddock, 2002). Warner (1999 p. 1) used the following example in a book about self-deception. This illustration demonstrates how a story can contain poignant moments of identification that invite learners to see themselves in the learning material. The illustration describes the true story of a husband awakened in the middle of the night by his crying baby:

At that moment, I had a fleeting feeling, a feeling that if I got up quickly I might be able to see what was wrong before my wife would have to wake up. I don't think it was even a thought because it went too fast for me to say it out in my mind. It was a feeling that this was something I really ought to do. But I didn't do it. I didn't go right back to sleep either. It bugged me that my wife wasn't waking up. I kept thinking it was her job. She has her work and I have mine. Mine starts early. She can sleep in. Besides, I was exhausted. Besides that, I never really know how to handle the baby. Maybe she was lying there waiting for me to get up. Why did I have to feel guilty when I'm only trying

to get some sleep so I can do well on the job? She was the one who wanted to have this kid in the first place.

When an illustration like this genuinely reflects the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the learner, there is no need to point out ways that the learner should connect with the learning material. In order to be able to better echo the thoughts and feelings of the learner, designers will have to use methods of learner analysis that increase their ability to empathize with the learner (for more on these methods, see Parrish, 2006).

A simple design pattern for creating identification that also uses narrative distance is to (a) empathize with learners in ways that give access into how they genuinely think, feel, and act; and (b) find ways to indirectly reflect these thoughts, feelings and behaviors through stories, anecdotes, characters, etc.

**Do not change the character with whom learners are intended to identify.** If it is intended that learners indirectly identify with learning content, it can be helpful to have them identify with just one character. Of course, it may be effective to use a story that contains multiple lessons to be learned from various characters in the same story. However, focusing mainly on just one character or view point, allows the learner to become fully invested in that character and thus can produce a more meaningful emotional or experiential pay off later in instruction. As one participant said “A good film story is about one person... because if it’s only about one person that gets you to identify emotionally, much more intensively” (Taeger & Yanchar, 2018, p. 62).

For example, suppose administrators at a hospital hire an instructional design team to create an online training about hospital security. Beyond describing basic security procedures, the instructional designers also want to create a transformative learning experience that will

inspire the employees to catch the vision of the importance of hospital security. In order to this, the instructional designers decide to interview different exemplary employees about their security practices. However, in order to make the instruction more meaningful, they decide to follow one employee closely over a period of time in order to get many interviews and shots of this particular employee at work. Although the training will ultimately contain many different video clips from a variety of employees, the training focuses on weaving one central employee throughout the online learning modules. Ideally, this invites learners to be more connected to one central character and thus creates a more meaningful experience.

A simple design pattern to create this effect is to (a) identify characters or people that are compelling enough to be a central focus of instruction, and (b) seek to use this one character to illustrate as many as the learning objectives as possible.

### **Conclusion**

This paper sought to build upon previous inquiry (Taeger & Yanchar, 2018) on designing for narrative distance by further illustrating the use of these principles in instructional design practice. When narrative distance is used for the purpose of creating TLEs, it can mimic the experience of a profound film or inspiring piece of literature (Taeger, 2018). These principles were discussed in order to illustrate how one can better create transformative learning experiences (Wilson & Parrish, 2011). The ideas offered represent a limited number of ways to design for create narrative distance; there are many more potential avenues for creating this effect in instruction. Not all instruction can be transformative, but when learning objectives call for that purpose these principles can help instructional designers move towards that direction.

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## DISSERTATION CONCLUSION

This dissertation explored the relationship between narrative distance and transformative learning experiences (Wilson & Parrish, 2011). In article one, I sought to demonstrate how narrative distance can fulfill many of Wilson and Parrish's (2011) key indicators for transformative learning experiences. I also discussed six principles for creating narrative distance. Article two consisted of a qualitative study where I interviewed six experts for the purpose of seeking to discover further potential design practices for creating TLEs. In article three, I demonstrated a variety of practical ways that narrative distance could be utilized in instructional design. I also suggested a series of different design patterns for creating this effect in instructional design.

The incorporation of narrative distance into instructional design runs against the assumption that educators must always be explicit in their instruction. Although that may be true in some cases, using indirect story and narrative distance can also allow instructional designers to create educational experiences that have a potentially transformative influence. Instructional designers can learn much by drawing upon professional fields associated with aesthetics and storytelling in order to create instructional experiences that have depth and meaning.

This dissertation sought to show how to create this effect by suggesting ways instructional designers can allow students cognitive and emotional space to interpret how they will make sense of learning material without feeling manipulated or pressured. These two elements (cognitive and emotional space) can also be mixed with elements of instruction that invite learners to change in meaningful ways in order to create a potentially transformative effect. Rather than being told directly how to make sense of learning content, students are challenged simply by engaging with the instruction itself.

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