

Using narrative distance to invite transformative learning experiences

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to introduce narrative distance as a phenomenon that can help create transformative learning experiences (TLEs). Narrative distance is defined as the cognitive or emotional space afforded by indirect communication that invites listeners to make sense of content. In ways similar to a book, movie or play, narrative distance invites participants to draw conclusions for themselves (Craddock, 2002).

Design/methodology/approach – After examining how other fields have discussed concepts related to narrative distance and its affordances, this paper illustrates how this phenomenon can satisfy many of Wilson and Parrish's (2011) key indicators for TLEs.

Findings – Six principles are offered for incorporating narrative distance into instructional design.

Originality/value – Instructional design has not explored indirect communication that is similar to narrative in any significant way.

Keywords Instructional design, Aesthetics, Transformative learning experiences, Narrative

Paper type Conceptual paper

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 *et al.* (2008) have proposed that “the reputation of the profession could be at stake” (p. 42). Indeed, even if instructional designers acquire years of schooling and experience, it is difficult to see how our field can maintain relevancy unless stakeholders perceive that designers can create transformative experiences, especially when learning objectives require that outcome.

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 significant changes in their beliefs, attitudes and behavior.

In this paper, I will suggest that the phenomenon I call narrative distance can be incorporated into instruction in a way that helps facilitates TLEs. In so doing, I will briefly define and illustrate narrative distance. I will also show how concepts related to narrative distance have been discussed in other disciplines, but have not been given much attention in



instructional design. I will then discuss how narrative distance can satisfy several of Wilson and Parrish's (2011) key indicators for transformative learning experiences. Finally, I will suggest 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 and Fraher, 2008; Kinsey and Moore, 2015), narrative curricula (Conle, 2003), docutainment (Glaser *et al.*, 2012), problem solving (Jonassen and Hernandez-Serrano, 2002), design (Parrish, 2006), authentic storytelling (Goldsworthy and Honebein, 2010) and narrative explanation (Norris *et al.*, 2005). Narrative has also been discussed in more instructional technology centered contexts such as gaming (Akkerman *et al.*, 2009; Dickey, 2005, 2006; Novak, 2015; Novak *et al.*, 2016), online learning (Hirumi *et al.*, 2012; Lindgren and McDaniel, 2012), narrative learning environments (Aylett, 2006; Dettori and Paiva, 2009; Rowe *et al.*, 2011), audio instruction (Carter, 2012) and interactive storytelling (Baldwin and Ching, 2017).

Despite this emphasis on narrative, little attention has been paid to the indirect nature of story. 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. In other words, those who hear a story (regardless of the media form) are afforded an emotional or cognitive distance to decide how they will make sense of the content of the narrative (Brown *et al.*, 2005). As a result, observers are more likely to reflect upon what they are learning and be open to making personal changes (Craddock, 2002). Theorists and practitioners in other fields have spoken of this principle in a variety of ways and contexts, but for the purposes of this paper, 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.

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).

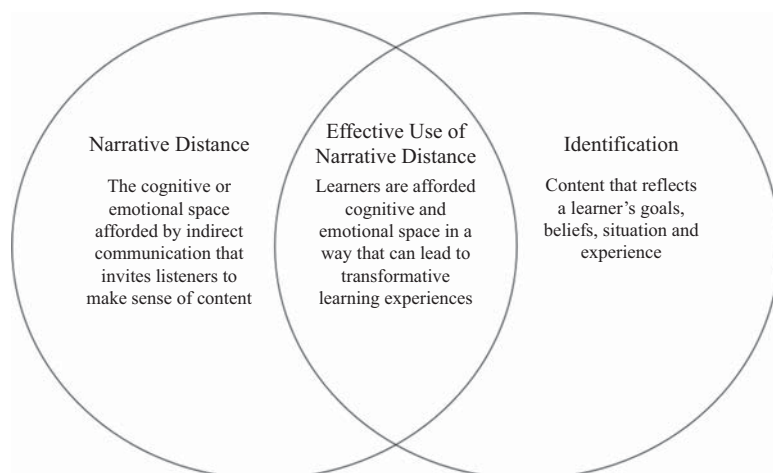


Figure 1.
The combination of narrative distance and identification can lead to transformative learning experiences (Craddock, 2002)

In other words, learners should see enough of themselves in instruction to make connections to their own life while feeling sufficient emotional and cognitive space to choose how they will make sense of the content.

For example, suppose during an online introductory training course for corporate employees, a number of short films depicting current personnel are strategically placed throughout learning modules. Each of these films display 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 show how these current employees embody the corporation's culture. For instance, in one introductory video an employee speaks briefly about the importance of dressing professionally by saying, "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, in another fictional example, 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 display 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 have to reconcile *Brown v. Board of Education* and the current state of racial equality in the USA. Had the teacher drawn any conclusions for students, it may have prevented learners from thinking through this issue for themselves. Of course, many messages should be stated directly, but sometimes 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 world and enough narrative distance to invite students to form their own opinions about racial equality in America.

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, stories themselves have been shown to invite changes in beliefs (Green and Brock, 2000), willpower (Ackerman *et al.*, 2009) and identity (Goldstein and Cialdini, 2007).

In the many discussions seeking to understand how 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 creating cognitive space (allowing one to draw their own conclusions) or emotional space (respecting and not manipulating others emotionally) can help influence listener's 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 or emotional space can help create TLEs.

In the field of social psychology, 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 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 and Libby, 2012). This study 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 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 one maintains "psychical distance" (p. 53) when one separates oneself from whatever practical implications are related to an observed object. For example, Bullough (1957) argued that psychical distance could help an observer see a potentially dangerous cloud of fog as a beautiful visual experience. 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 space 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 and 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 creating cognitive space, 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). The same filmmaker also said:

I do feel it weakens the power of the story and possibly of the teaching as soon as a viewer realizes that the reason they're watching something is to learn. They may get the points, but do the points get into their hearts or even deep enough in their minds? (McDonald, 2009, p. 199).

Pixar's *Wall*E* is one example of a film effectively using narrative distance in this way. 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 cognitive space to organize the message for themselves.

Some researchers in the field of homiletics (the study of preaching) have also argued that creating cognitive and emotional space can have a profound influence on the listener. 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 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) illustrated and defined distance using 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 creating cognitive and 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 or applied in any substantial way to instructional design.

Narrative distance and instructional design

Although scholars in instructional design have a long history of drawing upon other fields to inform their own principles of design (Dickey, 2005) and more recently on concepts related to narrative (e.g. Aylett, 2006; Goldsworthy and Honebein, 2010; Hirumi *et al.*, 2012; Hokanson *et al.*, 2018; Jonassen and Hernandez-Serrano, 2002; Lindgren and McDaniel, 2012; Parrish, 2006, 2007) little has been said about the indirect nature of story (what I call narrative distance). Below, I will show how some in the field of 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. 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 discussed 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 ideas 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 TLEs. Second, teachers in Perkins' paper 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.

Hokanson and Fraher (2008) suggested that instruction that follows 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 and its potential implications for instructional design. Although this paper 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. However, beyond simply showing the affordances that narratives offer, I am specifically suggesting that narrative distance is a key ingredient of story that instructional designers can use to invite transformation in learners.

Dickey (2005) argued that engagement strategies used in video and computer games can inform instructional design. One of the challenges that arise 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 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 TLEs. 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) did not mention distance specifically, he indirectly addressed 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 argued that the culminating moments of instruction can contain loose ends, but he did not explore 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 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 to instructional design, I will suggest how this phenomenon can satisfy many of Wilson and Parrish’s (2011) “key indicators” (p. 12) for TLEs. Narrative distance fits well with Wilson and Parrish’s (2011) particular framework for understanding TLEs 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 and Parrish, 2011, p. 12). These key indicators clarify for instructional designers what happens as a result of a TLE. 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 creating cognitive or emotional space can help generate a TLE. 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 until they come to a 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. On the other hand, when expression is more propositional or abstract in nature, it is difficult to capture complex, deep, and nuanced meanings (Allen, 2008). However, when one encounters 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 could offer 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 conclusions. Perhaps a student who has never thought about the effects of poverty could leave class a different person and consider 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 kinds of significant decisions (Craddock, 2002). For example, a nurse could participate in a training course that effectively uses elements of narrative distance by incorporating the history of nursing and modern stories describing 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 could help the nurses identify indirectly with the content in a way that allows them 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 is how humans organize information or make meaning of an experience (Aylett, 2006; Bruner, 1990).

Parables illustrate how narrative distance grants learners the cognitive space to organize information. Dodd (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 exactly 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 and Rossiter, 2008). Even without creating a specific story or parable, designers can craft instruction to create cognitive space that invites the learner to organize the material presented. For example, a college philosophy professor could spend 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 the classroom and organize this new information relative to the rest of the lecture. The combination of the case study allowing for meaningful identification with the learning content and the narrative distance to invite students to integrate the new information has the potential to lead to a transformative experience.

Agency, efficacy or empowerment. Long (2005) explained that preachers are attracted to the “open-endedness’ of stories, [because] [...] 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 granted cognitive space will realize "that their efforts and contributions are needed" (Wilson and Parrish, 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 since 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 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 of narrative distance are worth the risk. 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 probability that learners will authentically choose to think deeply about learning 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 and 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 and 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 and 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 and 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 could 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 makes obvious connections 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 could invite 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 could show a series of historical examples depicting scientists who were ignored during their lifetime. The end of the presentation might then show 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 TLE. To better understand how instructional designers can create narrative distance, I will suggest six principles for implementing this technique into instruction (see Table I). Although a number of different principles could be suggested, these principles represent suggestions that originate in varying degrees from the literature on narrative distance. The following principles are not 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 TLEs can be manufactured. Instead, these principles are offered as way to increase the likelihood that such experiences will occur.

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

Table I.
Principles of
designing narrative
distance

Principle	Description
Economy	Appropriately limit explanation
Incongruity	Insert content that first appears to be "out of place"
Motif	Create markers that point learners towards conclusions
Inhabitable contexts	Use imagery, detail, metaphor and stories
Identification	Include content that reflects a learner's goals and experience
Effective endings	Conclude instruction in a way that invites reflection

expression (Craddock, 2001). 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," or "empowerment," these simple descriptions could 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.

An additional benefit of economy is that learners realize that they will need to make connections themselves. Without narrative distance, learners can simply pick up on instructional cues that indicate when they should pay attention, take notes, or answer questions. For instance, 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 only paying attention when 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 they may have extra motivation to watch for the connection.

Of course, the principle of economy should never be used in a way that frustrates learners. Complicated, nuanced, and even simple tasks should be taught clearly. Advanced chemistry concepts or instructions for attaching a bike tire probably do not require narrative distance. But, when a designer wants to grant learners cognitive and 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. She might share these stories to illustrate the different paths that someone with a chemistry degree can take into the professional world. Instead of underestimating the intelligence of students by saying, "I just want to show you where your hard work can lead," the instructor could simply share the stories and end class. In this manner, students would have the cognitive and emotional space to decide how they might apply the stories to their own lives.

It may be helpful to inform learners about the use of narrative distance before the instruction begins. Those who attend a movie know that they will have to do some cognitive work to make sense of the storyline, but many have not experienced trying to engage in instructional materials in this same way. At the beginning of an instructional unit, designers can communicate to students that some things will be 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 that incorporate narrative distance will be fair and reasonable. Furthermore, assessments associated with narrative distance should probably be based on assignments that are more open ended, such as writing reflections or journals. These types of assignments allow the designer to assess whether learners are making the kinds of connections that are intended without being too prescriptive. Obviously, narrative distance should not cause excessive anxiety for learners. There is a significant difference between giving students the opportunity to make connections and having them guess what an instructor is trying to say.

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, they 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. Rather, incongruities should be inserted in strategic ways that fit the context of the instruction. For example, in an advanced literature class, a teacher could spend an entire period discussing the themes of redemption, kindness, and forgiveness in *Les Misérables*. In the closing moments of the lecture, the teacher might begin to describe 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 could then read the following passage regarding 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 might say, "Sometimes a free gift is actually hard to accept." As students leave class, they would have to reconcile the incongruity of this final statement.

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 make the kinds of conclusions and decisions that meet the intended learning objectives. Instructional motifs can act as a way to draw attention to the pieces of information learners should connect. 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 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 tells the stories, she might insert a verbal refrain during key moments of each story. In this way, the instructor is highlighting significant details for students to notice and connect together.

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 *et al.*, 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 could contain graphs, PowerPoint-like bullet point screens, and direct instruction, but the training might mainly consist of stories, anecdotes, and concrete examples with minimal explanation between each illustration (Craddock, 2001).

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 affords the listener space 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 associated with the designs they create.

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.

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 (Craddock, 2002). TLEs presuppose that learning content is related to one's life, otherwise one could not be transformed. Wilson and Parish's framework indirectly offers an effective way to determine the quality of identification in instruction. They argued that TLEs are related to "personal meaning [...] self-narrative [...] sense of calling [...] conceptual shifts [...] new understandings [...] agency [...] empowerment [...] values [...] relationships" (Wilson and Parrish, 2011, p. 10). In like manner, designers might ask themselves if learning materials connect to what Yanchar (2011) called "life's larger questions and issues" (p. 280) which "provide a background of significance for human action" (p. 280)? In this sense, 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). Even learning material that consists mainly of acquiring new skills can connect to larger issues. For example, an online corporate training module, centered on teaching sales techniques, might occasionally depict real life stories of people demonstrating hard work, vision, and service as they learn and incorporate the learning content. These examples would be intended to link the training to subjects that matter to students on a larger scale. If instruction also cultivates and maintains narrative distance, learners are granted the emotional and cognitive space to make new connections to life's 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. Second, since students know that they will have to make sense of the instructional message, a feeling of anticipation is created (Craddock, 2001). 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 instructional endings can be seen above in the fictional examples 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 to invite introspection and transformation. Although scholars in instructional design have talked

about narrative in important ways, we can still learn how to incorporate the indirect nature of narrative into instruction for the purpose of inviting powerful learning experiences. Wilson and Parrish (2011) have offered a framework for understanding TLEs and narrative distance meets many of its requirements. In order to design for these kinds of experiences, I have offered six principles for incorporating narrative distance into instruction. However, further 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 and Parrish, 2011, p. 11). When one attends a movie, there is no director standing to the side inviting people to 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 (or film) itself must be crafted and arranged in such a way that readers will choose to engage cognitively and emotionally. As designers learn to incorporate narrative distance into instruction, they have the potential to foster TLEs in the same way as a powerful film, inspiring play or life-changing book.

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