

## Storytelling

### How to Become Who You Are Through Problem-based Learning

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#### Abstract

This article discusses how problem-based learning combines with what I from Nietzsche call “becoming who you are”. It argues against thinking of problem-based learning merely as a method that integrates theory and practice. Using Foucault’s genealogy and Arendt’s notion of storytelling as theoretical anchor points, I suggest that problem-based learning is a personal process of self-formation with important political and ethical implications. Through Foucault and Arendt, I argue that problem-based learning is helpful in teaching people how to think. Problem-based learning provides an occasion for self-overcoming through understanding and working creatively with the world’s multiplicity. I discuss concrete implications of using history and storytelling in problem-based learning in my field, organization studies. In the last part, I discuss how storytelling can inspire writing differently about organizations.

**Keywords:** Problem-based learning; Storytelling; Becoming who you are; Arendt; Foucault

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## Introduction

My contribution to this special issue is how problem-based learning (PBL) helped me to become who I am. “Becoming who I am” is inspired from Friedrich Nietzsche. In the book considered his autobiography, *Ecce Homo* (2007), he does not deal with the question of how history has influenced how he became who he became. His gaze is turned inwards. He uses history to interrogate *how he became who he was*. It is in other words a personal search process, which has the purpose of overcoming oneself. In this article, I will account for how Foucault and Arendt were helpful to frame an approach that simultaneously interrogates the problems of the world as well as who one is.

When I reflect on my journey with PBL, it provided a space to express myself through and think with the societal phenomena that I engaged with. It gave me what Arendt calls *space of appearance* (Arendt, 1998, pp. 198–199)—a space where I could step forward as an actor who was allowed to think and engage with a problem in my own way. This involves theorizing, problematizing, experimenting, failing, and succeeding. Today, I am a professor of organization studies at Malmö University. PBL is an old friend that I think with when organizing education.

In education, we think with the practical world through thinking with the world of ideas. Arendt argued that true thinking is a dialogue, a two-in-one conversation with oneself (1978, 2003). This two-in-one reduces into a duality while still being multiple. It is furthermore founded in a curiosity towards the world. Thinking through the problems of the world is therefore not a method but a way of being that entails curiosity and compassion in how one approaches the world. PBL therefore also evades precise definition. A loose conceptualization of it is that it is associated with self-directed learning and are organized around practical problems (Kolmos & Fink, 2004). From this starting point, it is however approached differently and can also be quite instrumental and technical.

I believe thinking is critical for PBL to become true. My own take can be clarified through distinguishing between John Dewey’s and Paolo Freire’s pedagogical philosophies. They both argued that education should be concerned with the practical problems of the world. A difference is however that Dewey theorizes how to integrate theories into practice by continuously exploring what works in practice. This also includes an understanding of why these theories work (Dewey, 1938, 2004; Thomassen & Jørgensen, 2021). For example, Dewey’s concept of thinking depicts how expertise evolves through the inscription of theories in practice, even if one’s practice over time becomes intuitive and tacit (Polanyi, 2009; Schön, 1983).

Freire is critical about established conceptual frameworks. The accumulation of scientific knowledge serves the establishments and reinforces dominant narratives that marginalize and exclude (Freire, 2017). Dewey's philosophy is abductive and is embedded in an enlightenment tradition (Frega, 2010). For Freire, education is political and must be understood from the power relations it serves. For me, Freire's philosophy is inspiring because it challenges us to go beyond the boundaries of what we know in a way that breaks with knowledge accumulation. We must move from the ground-up.

Following Foucault, understanding emerges through performing an *ascending analysis* (Foucault, 1984; Jørgensen, 2002), where we follow histories to understand them on their own terms. What helps us in this respect are not theories but concepts that help organize our thinking. Thus, the research agenda in this understanding is not to confirm or validate theories or models. Concepts instead define a particular take on a multiple world, from which we look, understand, arrange and engage in dialogue with the world (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994).

Because we leave our disinterested position in the world, Freire's approach entails engagement with ethics and justice. Problem-based learning therefore implies self-formation. Foucault and Arendt have helped to think of problem-based learning in this manner. Next, I will engage with my story with PBL, and how I make sense of this story through Arendt and Foucault. I furthermore discuss, how problems are understood using Arendt and Foucault as inspiration. In the final part, I discuss how thinking and writing can become one in storytelling.

## Becoming who you are

Who am I then? This question can never be answered. Life is a process, and becoming who you are involves recognizing that this question must remain unanswered but is subjected to continuous thinking. Thinking is an ongoing endeavour to find and define one's own point of view, to think again, modify and nuance the viewpoints according to the problems that we are dealing with. Thinking is for Arendt closely associated with storytelling. She defined a true story as where life and thought become one (Kristeva, 2001). This also implies that a true story is grounded in conscience, the inner compass that tells you what is right and what is wrong (Arendt, 1978).

PBL can lead towards becoming a storyteller. As noted by Arendt, storytelling implies making an ethical stance (Arendt, 1968). It entails love and curiosity for a multiple world. Therefore, teaching is one of sharing experiences and of telling stories of how we can approach and understand theories, concepts and

practical problems. In my latest book (Jørgensen, 2024), I have described it as *living life as a story*. Not everyone has a story or lives life as a story. Living life as a story contains an acceptance of and responsibility for the conditions of life, which Arendt (2006b) describes as the multiple world into which we are born.

When I claim that not everyone has a story, it is because not everyone thinks. And even if people think, not everyone has space to express their stories. Without deep thinking, learning becomes mechanical. PBL is one of the phenomena that distinguishes a good university from a bad one because it invites a space for thinking. One of its qualities is the freedom it provides to play with theories, concepts and stories from practices. A PBL scholar cannot accept the standardization of curricula that we are experiencing in education. Accreditation, bench marking and performance metrics are reforming academic storytelling into story selling (Jørgensen & Valero, 2023). It implies that students should write papers instead of projects. The journal article, which Mills (2000) referred to as a memo, has replaced the book.

Storytelling suffocates, and a corporate logic is steadily demolishing the idea of academia as a public library made for the people (Jørgensen & Ingman, 2023). The corporate logic instead entails that our students should be socialized into being *functional idiots* (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016) instead of thinkers. Without thinking, PBL can be used to turn people into obedient subjects. We need storytelling in PBL. A counterwave of storytellers always find ways to make their appearance. PBL has that quality that allows new stories to emerge.

My own political awakening started as a student. I remember all the projects we did. I often say that I got an academic career because of PBL. However, it was not until I became an academic that I got a language to express my own take on problem-based learning. Because life is a process, this language is still evolving. But the passion, love and curiosity have always been there. One of the inspirations that helped me was Michel Foucault's (1984) concepts of genealogy and power. They changed my view on organizations and how they should be studied. Genealogy is about writing history as a means of breaking with dominant narratives.

Writing the history of one event in the bank allowed me to understand the political landscape of small stories that exist in an organization and through which organizations are created and changed (Jørgensen, 2002). The vibrant story nets (Ingman, 2024) provide a diverse and living image of organizations. Genealogy is critical for opening history in that it allows for thinking differently about the present. Genealogy had the side effect that I began to think about my own history and how this had influenced my own moral concepts, understandings and choices throughout my life. One side effect was in this

context to engage with Foucault's practices of caring for the self (Foucault, 1997).

Foucault is often discarded because he is writing critical history. But this is rooted in a misunderstanding of critique. Deleuze (1986, pp. 2–3) points out how genealogies write history in a way that embraces the noble and vulgar, the honorable and lowly and so on. Recognizing multiplicity is the foundation of genealogy. Therefore, its criticism is the most positive. It should be used to examine, reconcile with and open history for other interpretations. Criticism is an action that makes a difference. The historical sense emerging from genealogy is crucial for visualizing the diversity of the world that is necessary for judgement (Arendt, 2003). Thinking needs to find its own roots and is never strong when it is based on resentment.

## Storytelling

Foucault's historical sense was later combined with storytelling as a way of understanding how the subject actualizes power relations but also paved an entry into understanding how to work with practices of self-formation within power relations. This requires thinking about the stories created through thinking in action, which I perceive as containing the possibilities of new beginnings. It is here that Arendt's storytelling is important because she believes storytelling is a new beginning (Arendt, 1996, 2006a; Jørgensen, 2022). She pointed out that beginning again is an existential condition. The reason we make stories is simply because of life itself. For me, Arendt's concepts of thinking and storytelling open the mind to engaging differently with the world's problems.

Storytelling implies the trick of turning my research field, organizations, into an everyday theatre of life that unfolds differently in the different spaces that make up organizations (Boje, 1995). There are also official narratives and stories that are performed for the public and then there are many back-stage stories that align with or contrast dominant stories. We also call these dominant stories for institutionalized narratives (Jørgensen & Boje, 2010), which have the purpose of maintaining and controlling the multitude of lived stories in organizations. To understand organizations in this way is also to understand how stories are made in a material and embodied way (Bager & McClellan, 2024; Strand, 2024).

In this everyday theatre of life, people have different things at stake. There are engineers, economists, lawyers, teachers, accountants, blue-collar workers, cleaners and all kinds of different professions and vocations. The problematic

relations between personal and collective interests run through all these different stories in different ways. The mapping of what is at stake for these people is to map how this landscape of different and entangled stories works in relation to organizational problems. We want to understand who did what and why.

Who killed ARAMIS, a technology project in France (Latour, 1996). Who committed the strategic management decisions in a bank (Jørgensen, 2007). How do architects work to create urban landscapes (Askehave, 2024). How do ecological farmers organize their life with the mountain in Puerto Rico (Trägårdh, 2022). How do immigrants think of their work and why do they become entrepreneurs (Hassin Pritha, 2022). How do doctors work to create their understandings of diseases (Mol, 2002).

To use storytelling to inquire into organizational problems is to inquire into the politics of everyday life (Jackson, 2013). It requires treating the people as “strange” in the positive way that all of them are unique and therefore invites curiosity. Understanding the games that people can play in organizations, also turns these sites into strange places. What takes place there is hard to imagine at a distance. Storytelling therefore resists normalization. Using Arendt’s storytelling furthermore moves us beyond disinterested mapping and documentation. The landscape we depict requires our thinking and judgement. Storytelling does not just depict landscapes but intends to open them for questioning and imagination of how things can be otherwise.

Genealogy (Foucault, 1984), deconstruction (Derrida, 2004) or developing new concepts to understand organizations (St. Pierre, 2018) are ways that rearrange how an organized field appears at first sight and allow us to tell different stories of what we encounter in organizations. Through understanding the complexities of lives lived in organizations and through being open and curious, we can also begin to understand and work with who we are. We can combine such inquiries with experimenting and co-creating new worlds through the ongoing encounters, we have with people in organizations. The world of today needs our attention and care. We are responsible for this world. This changes PBL towards a position of political engagement.

## Writing stories

PBL allows for self-formation through providing a space for people to appear and take control over their own learning process. PBL has nothing to do with case-based methods. And I am not suggesting using stories to communicate scientific knowledge in a more exciting way. Storytelling is exciting because the

student through using storytelling engages differently with problems as well as with oneself. Writing is for me an intense way of thinking in the act (Manning & Massumi, 2014). When teachers and students think of writing as a mere means of representation, they misunderstand how writing and thinking are one. Writing is storytelling done for a particular purpose. Academic storytelling engages the person, who becomes a mouthpiece for collecting and relating the world of ideas (theories and concepts) with the practical complex world. Such personal storytelling therefore ideally mobilizes a richness of perspectives in a dialogue with the multiplicity that is the world. Everything recurs in everything—but in different shapes and forms (Deleuze, 1994; Latour, 2007).

This is why, it makes sense to follow groups or people, interesting events or decisions, or specific “things” like diseases or the birth of a bus terminal in the old historical places of a city (Flyvbjerg, 1998). Such cases contain the complexities of the world—politics, ethics, identity, beauty, ugliness, money, class, gender, sexuality and so on). This is also why the case study is so good at creating general knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Writing about people and phenomena is to travel with them and see how these people and phenomena change over time (Certeau, 1984).

Writing is therefore a way of thinking with these people and phenomena, which inevitably also leads to a re-storying of these events. Writing therefore requires mobilizing the voice of conscience (Eco, 2001). Engaging the writer in thinking with and through the problems of the world is also how PBL combines with self-formation. Kirin Narayan (2012, p. 3) argues that when words come together with energy, other places and other people in a parallel life, the storyteller can feel more alive, aware and connected to an inner force that flows outwards towards other people and the world. Storytelling is creative writing where the author’s personal stories begin to tangle with the world of ideas and the practical and material world (Trägårdh & Jørgensen, 2024). Writing never reflects the world but creates it.

Storytelling is integral to PBL in connecting personal stories with practical new worlds and new concepts. We can redo two of our Arendt’s (1968) phrases of what storytelling does to illustrate how. *Repeating life in imagination* is how the person recurs and changes through engaging her past with contemporary problems. It requires personalizing concepts and being able to think freely with these concepts in regard to what they can and should do. In contrast, true thinking vanishes if the person only repeats discourse and takes herself out of the equation. To become a person is to engage critically with both concepts and the practical world. There is no alibi in theories and concepts (Bakhtin, 1993).

*Allowing the imagination to go visiting* (Haraway, 2016; Wilkinson, 2004) is to use new concepts, new images and metaphors to break up established stories in order to see something new. Such storytelling uses unusual learning methods, metaphors or writing styles to produce something unexpected. This new is already there but is hidden or suppressed and cannot be actualized through conventional means. This involves using fiction, artefacts, movies and pictures to tell new stories. It involves exploring the margins of a field. Storytelling requires a lot of reading and imagination and is a kind of engaged and slow thinking that is different from simply reviewing literature.

## Conclusions

Self-formation is critical if PBL should enable managing ecological and social injustice. Self-formation implies spirituality, but this should not be understood as dogmatic religious belief or a belief in higher powers. Storytelling is to extend oneself in time and space and think about how one connects and relates to others, human as well as nonhuman. We all need stories to be in this world. We make them because of life itself. Nietzsche (2006) was horrified by the emergence of a modern world without moral or value anchors. Michel Foucault (1997, 2005) argued for the need to balance between knowledge and spirituality. From his work, we can deduce that management training began in the ancient Greek academies. The focus here was on looking inward at the soul and working with ethics and values. Using PBL in organization studies can be a way of rebalancing knowledge and spirituality. This requires an emphasis on thinking actualized in the personal engagement in storytelling and writing.

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