



Re-authoring Confinement: Enduring Covid-19 and Creating a Collaboratory

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“We found on Re-authoring Teaching a common house, a watering hole where everyone can come to drink and quench their thirst for discussion and exchange.”
 Pierre Blanc-Sahnoun, Bordeaux France: On Behalf of the Galactic Federation of Narrative Planets¹

Around the world, we face the Covid-19 crisis. While not in the same boat, we are in the same storm as each community - local and global - strives to come together to harness its unique skills, knowledge and experiences. This paper explores how Re-authoring Teaching – a global learning community of narrative therapy practitioners, teachers and enthusiasts - is drawing from experiences as narrative practitioners in the digital age to create a watering hole congruent with the sensibilities, ethics and practices that guide a narrative approach. We explore communal practices that create audiences, link lives and reclaim community out of catastrophe, as expressed through our online Re-authoring Confinement project. We hope these endeavors illustrate our shared commitment to embody the spirit of collaboration and community by being such a community.

Why Narrative Therapy?

For over 25 years, the ideas, practices and ethics of narrative therapy have highly influenced my practices as a family therapist and teacher. Narrative therapy pays

attention to how people make sense of their experiences and assists in changing their relationship with problems affecting their lives, focusing not only on a given problem, but on what stands outside of the problem. Co-founders David Epston and Michael White characterize this approach with particular philosophical foundations, interviewing practices and a range of playful possibilities (White & Epston 1990). In addition to guiding counseling conversations, these principles and ways of working offer tremendous possibilities in community, organizational and coaching contexts. For this reason, the term "Narrative Practice" is sometimes used instead of "narrative therapy."

Rather than thinking of human difficulties as manifestations of deep or underlying structures, narrative therapy seeks to separate the person from the problem and explores how stories shape people's identities and the development of a storyline. Narrative practitioners are always double listening: listening to the problem and also to accounts of what lies outside the problem. Through our questions, we invite people to notice and explore initiatives or events – otherwise known as "sparkling moments" or unique outcomes—that would not be predicted by problematic stories and thereby offer different meanings and possibilities for people's lives. (Carey & Russell, 2003). In recent years, David Epston and his close colleagues are identifying specific practices that contribute to the art of counter-storying (Ingamells, 2016).

Built on folk psychology traditions, narrative practice privileges experience-knowledge over expert vocabularies. Significant care is taken to ensure that language conveys people's actual experiences, rather than others' interpretations of these experiences (White, 2004). In narrative practice, "co-research" refers to the process by which people inquire together to create original research about insider knowledge – to learn from people's direct experiences about what is most meaningful to them from life situations and relationships (Epston, 1999).

Several important ethical considerations inform narrative conceptions and practices. Envisioning training as collaborative research, Michael White often reflected on the ethic of collaboration and of de-centered practice as assisting practitioners to break from despair and reinvigorate their work and lives (White, 1997a). An ethic of hospitality refers to the consideration and practices given to

meeting with families as though they are “guests” in the practitioner’s “home” (Hancock & Epston 2005). Often, this approach attracts people intrigued by Foucault’s notion of “modern power”, and committed to social justice (Combs & Freedman, 2012).

Creating audiences, linking lives and reclaiming community out of catastrophe

If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. African Proverb.

As a postmodern therapy, narrative practice rests on the belief that our identities are socially constructed. This signifies a shift from centering individuals and their actions to centering processes of relating, and from “aboutness” thinking to witness” (Hoffman, 2007). In addition to impacting our ethical considerations, this difference in approach influences how we envision contexts for healing practice (McNamee, 2007) and legitimizes communal practices as an alternative to traditional clinical practice (Hoffman, 2011). A growing literature on resiliency and posttraumatic growth explores alternative accounts of surviving traumatic events such as solidarity, joy, friendship, love, generosity, spontaneous acts of courage, resourcefulness and resiliency. (Solnit, 2009).

Rather than centering individuals and their actions, narrative approaches views strengthening webs of connection, and community supports as an integral part of the therapeutic work.

Often, narrative practitioners seek to incorporate audiences in efforts such as letter-writing campaigns, outsider witness practices, reflecting teamwork, Tree of Life gatherings, ‘reclaiming community’, and other community rituals. In the article, (Sax 2013) I explore ideas, practices and teaching stories that support the deep healing and satisfaction that can come from ally to ally relationships, getting involved with local/community resources, giving back to others and making meaningful contributions to others’ lives (Sax, 2013).

Narrative Therapy in the Digital Age

Narrative approaches build on creating audiences, linking lives and reclaiming community out of catastrophe. Having embraced Postmodern pedagogy, I have been exploring since 2000 how similar principles can guide narrative pedagogy in the classroom, trainings and online. Over the past decade, these interests in teaching narrative therapy online have concentrated on building the Re-authoring Teaching virtual community. How can we apply similar practices to help us as individuals and communities as we endure the current pandemic in the digital age?

Teaching Narrative Therapy Online

I first experienced the possibilities and limitations of distance learning narrative therapy while teaching graduate students twenty years ago in the rural state of Vermont USA. In those days, teacher and students traveled to various local computer labs, to meet up at specific times. Akin to reserving the room-sized calculator for statistical analysis as a graduate student in the 1970s, big technical machines dominated distance learning labs. It was both awesome and overwhelming to gather in high tech rooms, facing the challenge of overcoming the prevailing bankers' approach to adult education (Freire, 1970), positioning the teacher as the epistemological authority, and students to receive, file and store deposits of knowledge.

Since then, online education has developed a number of technological tools conducive to collaboration, rich conversation and co-sparking ideas around shared materials. While asynchronous tools allow people to exchange from a "different time-different place" mode at each person's own convenience and own schedule, synchronous methods offer opportunities to meet up in real time through Zoom, Skype, Google Hangouts, Microsoft teams and/or other synchronous methods. It is now possible for a non-Geek to construct one's own website using Wordpress and other open source website creation platforms.

Re-authoring Teaching: Creating a Collaboratory

In 2008, I wrote the book *Re-authoring Teaching: Creating a Collaboratory*, based on nearly a decade of experiences using the online medium to supplement teaching narrative approaches to graduate and undergraduate students (Sax, 2008). The term, “Re-authoring Teaching” is a play on the term “Re-authoring Conversations” that Michael White and David Epston, coined in their original description of narrative therapy. I was compelled to write this book having experienced vast online possibilities for students and teacher meeting across geographic distances, to interact between classes, and to learn not from the teacher but from each other and guest visitors. The book wove together my voice alongside students’ reflections, shifting the position of teacher as expert to more of a reciprocal two-way process, congruent with the focus and values of narrative therapy (White, 1997). Having carefully constructed a central meeting place with discussion forums, I became the facilitator for exchanges of ideas with students participating at their own convenience and own schedule from asynchronous “different time-different place” mode.

Michael White died unexpectedly in 2008 at the age of 59. Shortly after his death, I started the digital version of Re-authoring Teaching as an online study group to share the commitment to honor Michael’s legacy. Bonded by our grief over losing such an important mentor, we co-created an island of belonging where people, drawn to narrative practice and other collaborative approaches, could continue our narrative studies together across geographic distance. Over the next decade, we rebuilt the Re-authoring Teaching website through several reiterations, to become the hub for a range of narrative therapy offerings and resources.

Having become a nonprofit organization, our board shares the commitment to build a global learning community – both synchronous and asynchronous – that transcends geography, professional status, and other differences. As a collaborative venture, our mission is to share expertise through training opportunities and online learning resources designed for practice, reflection, replenishment and community building. Throughout all our endeavors, we seek to embody that spirit of collaboration and community by being such a community,

and invite our participants to join us in preserving, developing and extending the legacy of narrative therapy.

Guiding Learning Principles

Five learning principles guide Re-authoring Teaching's growth as a learning community where participants can at times meet in person and otherwise use computing and communication technologies to connect and co-spark online.

Collaboratory blends the two words collaboration and laboratory to convey an environment without walls where participants use computing and communication technologies to connect with a sense of discovery over a shared project. All of our online features – The Collab Salon, Online courses and webinars– build on this principle.

Tewhakaakona: This New Zealand Māori word includes the concepts of teaching and learning, which traditionally in Western ways of thinking are viewed as different processes involving different positions for the participants (Lewis & Cheshire, 2009).

Making space for multiple voices: Our participants come from throughout the world with different cultural and racial identities, professional backgrounds, levels of experience and access to resources. We strive to be aware of structural inequalities and to act according to our belief in social justice and human kindness.

Flipping the Classroom: We deliver content through a variety of forms such as sharing online videos, Powerpoint slides and readings. Whenever possible, we deliver content outside of the real-time meetings, thereby preserving time to engage each other to explore topics in greater depth and to facilitate meaningful exchanges. We encourage our facilitators and faculty to guide and support rather than didactically 'teach' and encourage peer-to-peer interaction and learning.

Build dialogue, create bridges: Our narrative training aims to create space where people can meet under the banner of curiosity and collaboration to learn from each other, build bridges, and engage in conversations about how we, as practitioners, can be most effective in the work that we do. As practitioners we all come from different theoretical, geographical and ideological backgrounds. These backgrounds define where we come from as professionals but do not limit where we are going. In the work that we do, we believe it is hugely important that we remain curious and open to learning from others both within and outside our theoretical framework(s).

Building a Hub for Narrative Therapy Training and Resources

Re-authoring Teaching Inc., strives to bring together the best of teaching experiences and everyday practices from narrative practitioners around the world, with a focus on skill-building and application in a range of contexts. As an introductory online course, [Narrative Therapy: Foundations & Key Concepts](#) identified three key ideas influencing narrative therapy: 1) narrative inquiry guided by poststructuralist philosophy; 2) the narrative metaphor and how stories are shaping identity; and 3) intentional understandings of identity that connect us with our values and commitments. Since then, we have been developing additional online courses as well as the monthly Collab Salon, Faculty Consultation Groups, Workshops and materials for Higher Education.

In addition to narrative training opportunities, we continually update resources on the Re-authoring Teaching website. Drawing from our sensibilities and skill set as narrative practitioners as well as belief in multimedia, we created a [YouTube Channel](#) where we continually add new free videos, organized in playlists. Each video gives glimpses of rich online content from Narrative Camp, workshops, glimpses into our online courses, and presentations recorded by our partners.

Most recently we created Twelve Hot Topics for The New Decade. Each theme brings together a range of multi-media materials and is curated by a small

group and coordinator: 1) Building on Michael White's Legacy; 2) David Epston: Innovations & Collaborations; 3) Emerging Voices Across narrative generations; 4) The Affective Turn; 5) Cultivating diversity & Accountability; 6) Narrative Skill Development; 7) Narrative Practices around the World; 8) Sustaining our spirit in the work; 9) Earth's Environmental Crisis and Opportunity; 10) Narrative Applications; 11) Teaching & Supervision; 12) Using Technology Constructively. At the bottom of each topic, we encourage our readers to contribute materials of their own.

Double-listening to the Pandemic

Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Do not become bitter or hostile. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble. We will find a way to make a way out of no way. – John Lewis

Covid-19 is fraught with very real challenges in everyday life. Facing the unimaginable, many of us are dealing with worrisome, terrifying and heartbreaking crises or worrying about the future for ourselves and our loved ones. As narrative practitioners, we are also drawn to initiatives and events that might not be predicted by the problematic stories generated by the pandemic. What are we discovering as we endure this pandemic together? What are some of the sparkling moments where the dominance of the pandemic problem disappears?

Dickerson (2020) describes a post-structural approach of responding to the pandemic by flipping the usual ways of responding. Rather than getting captured by the current problem, we look for openings or gaps that build on what already works. In her article, "The Flip" – Sustaining Complexity and Multiplicity Post-Quarantine", she highlights Re-authoring Teaching as one of three programs that employs a practice of "disciplined improvisation" to flip more traditional ways of responding. *"Each program has a built-in structure that depends on technology to make it work; each has a disciplined approach that allows the helpers to improvise to meet the needs of the receivers. It is this "flip", this way of thinking,*

that can sustain us and our work in times of great complexity and multiplicity.”
Abstract, (Dickerson, in press).

The remainder of this paper will explore how we are now building on our mission, guiding learning principles, themes and resources. Re-authoring Teaching is crafting online responses to the pandemic. Regularly updating our website we created two community pages: 1) Together Enduring Covid-19: Resources and Events; 2) Re-authoring Confinement: Inspirational moments in everyday life. Throughout, we aspired to create a central place for remembering our commitment to walk the talk of collaboration and community.

Together Enduring Covid-19



Planetary problem, galactic solidarity

Today, in the face of an unprecedented, traumatic situation, we wish to welcome all our colleagues who love narrative ideas in this undertaking of common construction of meaning and connection. We welcome you to share your ideas, your feelings, your indignations, your unique outcomes, your magic spells, your moments of poetry, your wonderfulnesses... and everything that is important to you in this very particular - and tragic but not only - moment of our lives.
 Pierre Blanc-Sahnoun, Bordeaux France: On Behalf of the Galactic Federation of Narrative Planets.

Wherever in the world, our members face real effects of the pandemic on their lives, relationships and work. With help from our “Narrative Practices Around the World” team, we constructed the Enduring Covid-19: Events and Resources page for people to share favorite resources as well as a discussion forum. As Covid-19 impacted some of us sooner, we did our best throughout to highlight “voices from the future” to give tips learned along the way. In addition, we reviewed our monthly Collab Salon to highlight the effects of the Pandemic on their particular topic. First, we offered a special Enduring Covid Collab, which we made freely available to everyone, regardless of Collab membership. We also conversed with presenters to think together how best to bring forward this theme into their upcoming presentations.

Re-authoring Confinement: Inspirational Sparkling Moments in Everyday Life



(illustration by Ananya Broker Parekh)

In response to Covid-19, most of us worldwide have been experiencing new realities as we shelter at home, sometimes experiencing lockdown in cramped quarters. While fraught with challenges, this period of confinement is also fertile ground for the emergence of many creative projects and collaborations. What might Re-authoring Teaching contribute? The offerings on this website draw from our sensibilities and skill set as narrative practitioners, as well as our experiences in online learning, community building and neighborly ways of being. Please

think of this endeavor as in progress as we aspire to bring together special events and offerings. There is an easy to use contribution form at the bottom of the page. Please join us!

Re-authoring Confinement: Inspirational sparkling moments in everyday life

Our Re-authoring Confinement resource brings together contributions from members of our community: a YouTube playlist with video reflections from around the world, Covid inspired music, Fundraisers, Communities collecting wisdoms, Children and Family projects, Animal companions, Arts & Crafts, Gardens & Nature, Performances, poetry & prose and a Discussion Forum. By making it easy for people to send in contributions from around the world, we are together aspiring to “create a collaboratory” together. We chose the following illustrations: 1) Making music; 2) Communities collecting wisdoms; 3) Poetry.

Making Music

Thank you for encouraging people to be their preferred and amazing selves!
Elena Baskina

During home confinement, many people are not only making music but creating original songs. Current collaborations take advantage of technological advances that bring together musicians across geographic distances. Abuzar Akhtar, Hemant Tiwari & music video director, Shamin Mehrotra contributed a special lockdown musical made in Mumbai to our Youtube playlist.

Our audio musical playlist brings together beautiful collaborations from across the world: *My Forecast* is an original song with lyrics by Maria Tiunova (Moscow, Russia), music by Dean Lobovits (El Cerrito, California USA) and vocals by Elena Baskina (New York, Miami and Moscow). *Covid* is an original song by Pierre Blanc-Sahnoun (France), sung by Charlie Crettenand (Sion Switzerland) and produced

by Dean Lobovits (Berkeley California). Stephen by Will Sherwin (Michael Castelli on Slide Guitar, Gene Combs on Guitar) is another cherished contribution. Michael Castelli (Middlebury Vermont) contributed *Redrocks* along with his friend, Tim Joy who laid down the piano and organ tracks; having played this song at live gigs, he started recording it about a year ago; “*It only took a global pandemic for me to finish it.*”



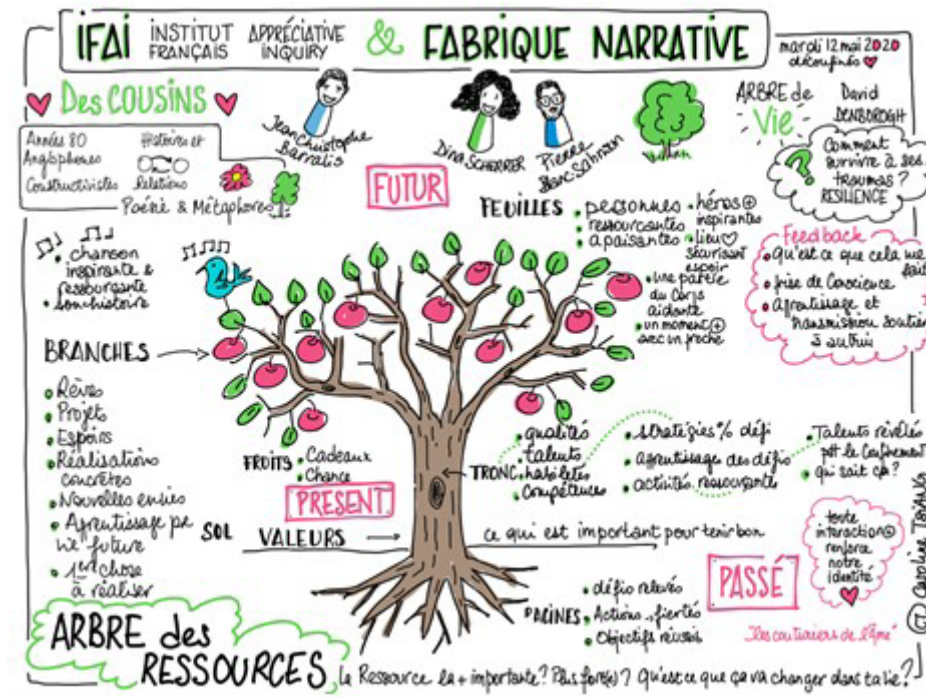
Communities Collecting Wisdoms

Over conversations, reflections and silences, the participants located hope in its little-big acts of resistance, in metaphors of nature and in acts of solidarity, in picture-books and poetry verses, in music and acts of care. These conversations of hope were coming alive in parallel, through illustrations and each of them sought to weave in their hope into the collective. The collective document is a testimony to people's acts of response and resistance to the current distress, their acts of collective care and continuing to access hope for the coming days.

Narrative Practices India and The Mental Health Team, Ummeed Child Development Center, Mumbai

A number of communities have been getting together for special lockdown gatherings to share their wisdoms and create collective documents with each

other. France, Turkey, India each adapted The Tree of Life in a community context to support each other, create collective documents and generate hope. The Narrative Group Project: Exploring Different Responses to Covid-19 from Turkey – as further featured in this journal – explores skills, ‘knowledges’ and values that help endure such effects as uncertainty of the future, anxiety of losing loved ones and feelings of loneliness with links to enduring values, hopes, dreams, skills and knowledges. By posting their project on our Re-authoring Teaching page, they hope to inspire others to respond to their questions, by sharing their own ideas and feelings.



This sketch noting graphic by Caroline Tsiang (Ville d'Avray, France) illustrates a special Lockdown Tree of Life for children and family collected by narrative practitioner Dina Scherrer (Paris, France) for people who live and/or work with children and teenagers.

Poetry

For some of us, sheltering at home can offer contemplative writing time. Pam Burr Smith (Maine, USA) shared this poem:

Poem from the Early Pandemic

All of a sudden
all of us have been tossed
with exquisite aim
into a new world.

Busyness which has demanded
such loyalty in our recent lives
lies useless in empty streets.

And quiet at home,
we face a simple truth
that we need each other.

We need each other
like the teenage boy and his mother
who stand at sundown on a small balcony
and raise trumpet and violin
in the soft fog of a night that grows.

Together they begin Beethoven's Ninth.
Soon through the mist, distant piano joins
then vivid, close, a neighbor's cello.

The hesitance of beginning
drops away
replaced by the wakened air of music.

Windows open to the surprising joy
of gorgeous sound.

A new song of hope flows into motion
and fills the world anew.

Conclusion

Whatever emerges on the other side of our current mega-crisis, community will be key in turning it toward the good. Gene Combs, Evanston Family Therapy Center

This pandemic will have a beginning, middle and end. While sheltering at home, there are enormous differences in contexts and privileges. As we face challenges in enduring Covid-19, Re-authoring Teaching hopes our initiatives will strengthen a global learning community reflective of our values, commitments and preferences.

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¹ Pierre Blanc-Sahnoun, Bordeaux France On Behalf of the Galactic Federation of Narrative Planets <https://reauthoringteaching.com/resources/together-enduring-covid-19-events-and-resources/>