

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Towards a Narrative Method: Using Life-Writing in Military Education

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This article begins by considering current English as second language (EL2) teaching in Norwegian professional military education (PME) and reflecting on how reading narrative life-writing texts written by former military personnel supports interdisciplinary learning and contributes to the development of English language skills. It then shows how, by building on this current practice, narrative may be developed into a method of critical reading and communication for junior officers. Situating the use of life-writing texts in the context of military interest in narrative in the twenty-first century, and building on insights from life-writing and literacy research, the article argues that the reading of life-writing texts in military EL2 classes should be accompanied by teaching material and reading approaches designed to develop knowledge of narrative structures and techniques and awareness of how the text seeks to affect the reader. It further argues that this knowledge is a transferable skill of use to the military as a flexible communication tool: a narrative method.

**Keywords:** Life-writing; narrative; English; ESL; war stories; pedagogies of reading

## Personal narratives of war in professional military education

Professional military education programmes (PME) have a long history of using military life-writing such as officers' memoirs in teaching. For the purposes of this article, military life-writing is understood as narrative accounts of the personal experience of armed conflict produced by formerly or currently serving members of the armed forces. Historically, 'war stories', both fictional and non-fictional, have been a powerful influence on how civilians and soldiers alike have imagined war and military identity (see, for example, Bourke 2000; Hynes 1997). Military life-writing articulates and challenges what Phil Klay, a former US Marine and award-winning author of a collection of short stories inspired by his military service in Iraq, has called 'the gap between public mythology and lived experience' (2014a: para. 7) of combat, military life and contemporary and past conflicts by giving voice to the soldiers' own perceptions. In this way, they give cadets vicarious acquaintance with military realities and command as lived experience, which is an essential component of officer training. However, as this article will argue, life-writing's presentation of lived experience in narrative form also supports PME in a broader capacity: life-writing texts are a particularly suitable vehicle for building on the current military interest in narrative and developing narrative as a communication tool.

Narrative has become of increasing interest to many Western militaries in the 2000s due to its perceived utilitarian value as a tool of communication. This increased interest stems from an understanding of narrative as a universal sense-making method (Barthes 1975; Bruner 1991; MacIntyre 2013; Polkinghorne 1988). Phrases such as 'winning the battle of narratives' or the 'strategic narrative' have become commonplace; it is therefore desirable that officers become familiar with this concept. However, narrative's full potential as a flexible tool of communication in a military context is arguably not realised because it is often rigidly contained within handbooks and manuals (Kaurin 2016; Sookermary 2017). Remaining misconceptions about definitions may also be preventing narrative from being effectively employed in a military context.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Zweibelson (2011) on the uncertainty within the military as to the definition of 'narrative'. See Colley (2017) for an assessment of the use of 'narrative' in military science studies which criticises the understanding of this term in the military.

Colley, T. (2017). Is Britain a force for good? Investigating British citizens' narrative understanding of war. *Defence studies* 17(1), 1–22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2016.1256209>.

Mindful of these concerns, this article suggests that narrative can be developed as a method by building on the established use of life-writing texts in the context of second language (L2) classes in PME programmes at the pre-commissioned level.

First, the article shows how current use of military life-writing in L2 classes has interdisciplinary benefits in PME: it enhances L2 learning, and through illustrating key professional issues it supports the core subjects. This dual benefit and the text- and language-focussed environment make L2 classrooms a logical setting for developing narrative as a method of communication and reflection in PME. The teaching examples, analyses and suggestions in this article draw on the author's experience with teaching English as a second language (ESL) in the Bachelor of Military Science programme at the Norwegian Military Academy. Second, the article presents an overview of current military understanding and applications of 'narrative'. Finally, in parallel with the previous two objectives, the article offers a literature review of theories of narrative, life-writing and reading to illustrate the benefits of narrative in a military context, suggesting that these theories would be a useful foundation for creating teaching units on narrative. Together these overviews form an argument for the utility of developing teaching on narrative to train cadets in critical reading skills which enhance the effects of narrative texts that are observable in current teaching: effectively this constitutes a narrative method of communication that supports the military's ambitions for narrative.

### **Interdisciplinary and subject-specific benefits of life-writing narratives**

Military life-writing brings several benefits in terms of developing professional language competence. Its topics and themes are relevant to military professions, and it consequently aligns with the approach to English at the Norwegian Military Academy (NMA), which is influenced by the principles of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), an umbrella term for approaches where non-language subjects are taught in a foreign language. Integrated courses of this type have proved to be beneficial for Norwegian ESL learners, in part due to the extensive reading experience in the target language that this approach entails (Hellekjær 2005). Building on research on communicative competence and the grammatical and sociolinguistic competence indicated in the NATO STANAG 6001 scale of language proficiency, reading professionally relevant texts is considered an effective way for military ESL students who already possess a certain level of knowledge of English to develop the communicative proficiency necessary to function in a professional military capacity (Enstad 2013: 4–6). Using language to promote content and employing the content to teach language places focus on nuances and variations; this includes awareness of how language choices are integral in constructing content (Schleppegrell & de Oliveira 2006: 255), and it highlights the sociocultural contexts of language use. Military life-writing has obvious interdisciplinary pedagogical utility in programmes organised according to this principle.

First, there are linguistic benefits. As Natalie Edwards and Christopher Hogarth have recently demonstrated (2017), the cultural encounter that life-writing texts represent for L2 students allows them to read in a culturally authentic linguistic context. Their findings dovetail with the CLIL approach to L2 at the NMA, in which life-writing texts are selected for their ability to provide professionally relevant examples of the authentic target language. Military life-writing prose offers a variety of grammatical structures as well as modern vernacular in dialogue and narration, ranging from slang and military shorthand to more literary and formal styles.

Yet works of life-writing are more than the sum of authentic English syntax and idiomatic expressions; they are particularly suitable for practising the sociolinguistic competence embedded in the descriptions of the 'Professional' competence level on the NATO language proficiency scale STANAG 6001 (edition 4) that is required for many military positions.<sup>2</sup> This level is characterised by the ability to use complex language correctly and in a situation-appropriate manner, to convey meaning accurately, effectively and in detail (category: 'speaking proficiency') and to understand argumentation, abstract concepts on complex topics and implicit information (category: 'reading proficiency') (Enstad 2013). These skills are considered crucial in military professional settings, where a high degree of precision and nuance is required to avoid potentially fatal miscommunication. The UK, for example, considers level 3 to be the lowest level at which accuracy can reasonably be expected (Lewis 2012: 62). Current NMA teaching stresses sociolinguistic competence – understood to be the intersection of practising the language and the sociocultural contexts in which it is practised – through tasks based on life-writing texts designed to draw the cadets' attention to general

<sup>2</sup> The STANAG 6001 scale runs from 0 (No practical proficiency) to 5 (Excellent (Native/bilingual)), and the descriptors denote proficiency in the categories Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. 'Proficiency' denotes unrehearsed ability to communicate (Enstad 2013: 6).

and profession-specific vocabulary as well as to the communication contexts in these texts. Learning the language and the cultures of the language are parallel processes (see also Edwards & Hogarth 2017).

Sociolinguistic competence is also strengthened by reading life-writing because of the works' narrative form. As they embody a narrative structure, which is conducive to understanding how language is used in real life, stories of all types play an important part in language learning (Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, & Lowrance 2004; Schleppegrell 2013; Schleppegrell & de Oliveira 2006). Narratives are omnipresent in human societies and through their familiarity embody a structure that scaffolds language learning and literacy more generally. Effects of narrative in language learning include developing a more complex and sophisticated language (Isbell et al. 2004), with studies of L2 learning reporting effects such as improved awareness of syntax and vocabulary usage (Schleppegrell 2013). These effects correspond to the distinction STANAG 6001 makes between functional (level 2) and professional (level 3) proficiency. A person with level 2 proficiency will avoid using complex structures and vocabulary and make errors when avoidance is not possible (Enstad 2013); they will not have the linguistic repertoire required to communicate correctly, precisely and with nuance, which is necessary in a military working environment. Using narrative texts in military ESL classes thus contributes to the development of professionally relevant language skills.

The second benefit is interdisciplinarity. Military life-writing facilitates integration of knowledge and transfer of skills, as cadets can draw on knowledge from other subjects in their discussions in a manner similar to how life-writing is used in other non-traditional settings across the humanities, social sciences and sciences. In these settings life-writing in the form of fiction, autobiography, interviews, diaries and case studies is approached not as literary texts, but for the wide range of 'cultural work' (McNeill & Douglas 2017: 3) the texts can support, and the diverse perspectives and experiences they bring into the classroom (Brown 2010; Fuchs & Howes 2008; Parker 2017). Utility rests on the life-writing narrative's capacity to generate critical reflection on the realities, qualities and characteristics of being a military professional. Texts written by recently deployed former officers may therefore be expected to be relevant for cadets; the proximity of the author in rank, age and experience to these readers may be an additional benefit, as the following analysis of teaching examples suggests.<sup>3</sup>

Authored by junior officers, the currently taught *Outlaw Platoon* and *Redeployment* are particularly valuable as they offer perspectives that are relevant and accessible considering the cadets' career stage.<sup>4</sup> *Outlaw Platoon* is a memoir by former US Army Ranger Sean Parnell (2012/2013) and describes Parnell's experience of combat as a platoon leader in Afghanistan in 2006–2007. The second example is a work of fiction, the short story collection *Redeployment* for which its author, Phil Klay (2014/2015), found inspiration during his deployment as a US Marine in Iraq in 2007–2008. Although *Redeployment* is told via a range of characters, none of whom corresponds to the real-life author, and the book therefore is not based on lived experience in the same way as a memoir, this article considers both works to be life-writing. This is in line with how, over the past two decades, 'life-writing' has been adopted as an umbrella term encompassing an increasing number of genres and media (Smith & Watson 2010), but it does not imply that a work of fiction should be interpreted as an accurate reflection of the author's experience. I will return to the question of genre in more detail later, as it has implications for developing narrative as a method. Another point to consider is that while the works may be *written* after the authors have ceased being members of the armed forces, the conflicts described are on-going. The authors' career level and experience of recent conflicts give contemporary life-writing a topicality that stimulates debate about the role and character of the officer and the military profession.

Rooted in real-life experiences, life-writing often presents a complex picture of the military that engages students and is usefully seized upon in teaching, as the following examples illustrate. Memoirs generally present military personnel in a favourable light, yet life-writing also contemplates the limits of military intervention and the frustration felt regarding the perceived absence of command and civilian support, thus acting as a stimulus for discussion. The works revere achievements and action, but rarely refrain from describing individual and collective costs such as physical and mental trauma, breakdown of family relationships and disillusionment with the military's role in current conflicts.

<sup>3</sup> The classroom activities relating to *Outlaw Platoon* refer to teaching material created by Merete Ruud at the NMA (2016), while the teaching material on 'Redeployment' was created by Anne Marie Hagen and Merete Ruud (2017) and the material on 'Prayer in the Furnace' by Merete Ruud (2016). I am grateful to Merete Ruud for permission to reference this teaching material and for our conversations about these works.

<sup>4</sup> Much contemporary military life-writing is authored by lower- and mid-rank officers (and senior enlisted personnel), making it different from the finite perspective of the senior officer reflecting on a lifetime military career in an autobiography.

Sean Parnell's *Outlaw Platoon* details the fight against Pakistan-based insurgents in the Hindu Kush in 2006–2007. Parnell describes interacting with the local population and working with translators and the Afghan National Army (ANA); there are detailed accounts of battles and expositions of the larger geopolitical and cultural context. Added to that is the myriad of reflections, decisions and considerations Parnell had to make on a daily basis concerning the wellbeing of his platoon and their optimal functioning as a group and as individuals. These deliberations permeate the memoir and are of primary concern to cadets, who in L2 teaching tasks are asked to evaluate and debate scenarios from the text and to propose alternative courses of action.

The chaplain's predicament in Phil Klay's short story 'Prayer in the Furnace' likewise offers opportunity for reflection, primarily on lawful and unlawful command influence. It depicts the chaplain trying to navigate the bureaucratic command structure and the informal social norms of the military in order to deal with a company commander whose leadership puts the company at risk, endangers the larger mission and is detrimental to the psychological health and moral character of the individual soldiers under his command. In the case of 'Prayer in the Furnace', teaching materials prompt cadets to examine the situation from the perspective of the different characters involved and to reflect on how these characters may understand the situation based on their positions within the military hierarchy, thus teasing out the values, ways of thinking, systems of accountability and other elements that constitute military identities.

A final teaching example is a task where the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) advice (2014) to family members of returning military personnel is placed alongside the titular short story in *Redeployment*. The cadets are asked to compare the VA's straightforward list of common reactions to trauma with the confusion exhibited by that story's narrator upon his return to the USA, which is illustrated by the jumbled reasoning and the staccato sentences in which he attempts to communicate his thoughts. The cadets use the incongruity of the manual and the depiction of lived experience to articulate ideas about strategies for post-deployment procedures. Life-writing thus offers the opportunity to discuss a large number of professionally relevant topics.

This first part of the article has described the linguistic and interdisciplinary benefits of life-writing texts as they are currently used in military ESL classes and intimated that the narrative form of these texts is essential for achieving these benefits. Thus, life-writing is linked to the military interest in narrative more broadly as a tool of communication. The next sections will present a suggestion for how L2 classes may aid in developing narrative as a method that supports this. I argue that the benefits of narrative as envisioned by the military are unlocked by teaching approaches that accentuate narrative structures and techniques.

## The military interest in narrative

The L2 subject-specific and interdisciplinary benefits of life-writing works described thus far indicate that the narrative form of life-writing texts has pedagogical benefits that can be productively developed in PME. There is historical evidence of the military exploiting storytelling as a way of improving learning and communicating ideas. *The Defence of Duffer's Drift* is a classic example. Written in 1904 by the British Major-General Sir Ernest Dunlop Swinton, this book on infantry tactics set during the Second Boer War quickly became a staple in PME, and its narrative structure has been adapted into the twenty-first century.<sup>5</sup> *Duffer's Drift* features a sequence of six dreams in which 'Lt. Backsight Forethought' defends the eponymous crossing against a superior force of Boers. Failing in his first five attempts, but remembering the tactical lesson learned each time, the lieutenant eventually succeeds.

A more recent influential example is how US Marine Corps General Charles C. Krulak (1999) introduced the concept of the 'Strategic Corporal' via a narrative describing the leadership and decision-making skills the fictional Corporal Hernandez would need to display in asymmetric conflicts. But what, precisely, are the characteristics of narrative that these examples seek to capitalise on pedagogically by presenting information in the form of a story, and what are the current ambitions for narrative in PME and the armed forces in general? To outline how L2 may develop teaching that sustains and reinforces military goals in this regard, these questions must first be answered.

Narrative's roots in linguistics and literary criticism shed light on the communicative potential of narrative, which is the key characteristic that has brought the concept to the attention of a wide number of sectors, including the military. The fundamental principle of narratology describes narrative as consisting of

<sup>5</sup> See Godefroy (2005) for the influence of *The Defence of Duffer's Drift* on military education.

Godefroy, A. (2005). Fictional writing and the Canadian army of the future. *Canadian Army Journal*, 8(1), 93–94. Retrieved from: <http://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.505131/publication.html>.

the 'story', which indicates 'an event or a sequence of events' (Abbott 2011: 13) that are internally connected – the *what* that is told – and 'discourse', which refers to *how* the story is presented in a medium by an author (Chatman 1978: 9). In other words, the narrative is the story presented in a certain way. Narratives can thus be conceived as communicative events in which the author addresses an audience for a particular purpose, and to achieve this purpose the author draws on elements such as language, events, characterisation and structure (Phelan 2011: 56). Consequently, in a definition that also serves to illustrate the increased *military* interest in narrative, Terry Eagleton proposes that '[i]t may be helpful [...] to think of narrative as a kind of strategy. Like any strategy, it mobilises certain resources and deploys certain techniques to achieve specific goals' (2014: 105). By organising separate elements into a unified and cohesive framework, narratives help us comprehend and communicate context, purpose, motivations and causality.

Conceptions of narrative as a framework for the construction of meaning and interpretation have from the late twentieth century onwards given rise to the widespread interest in narrative methods in fields as diverse as business, healthcare and the military, both as a way of communicating intent and of extracting and analysing information. This interest is rooted in the understanding of narrative as a sense-making method common to all humans and societies (Bruner 1991; MacIntyre 2013; Polkinghorne 1988) and the recognition that narrativisation (plot construction) features in non-literary as well as literary texts. Hayden White (1973) demonstrated that historiography has narrative aspects; legends, literature, news, conversation and films are other common examples (Barthes 1975: 237). Following from this, a broader appreciation has also developed of how people marshal narratives to make sense of events and their own experiences, always constructing, communicating and revising their narratives (Bruner 1991). For example, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre argues that human lives can be understood as unified, historically and socioculturally situated narratives that intersect with the narratives of other people: 'The story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity' (2013: 256). An individual's understanding of his or her own identity is consequently influenced by these pre-existing narratives. As illustrated by this brief survey, the connective qualities of narratives and the degree of construction and interpretation involved in all forms of narrative representation and reception give narrative its utilitarian value as a tool of communication. Current military interest therefore envisions a wide number of applications for narrative.

Seen as a method of communication and sense-making that can be used to elicit information, to understand causes and motivations and as a way of communicating intent in a uniform and persuasive manner to both internal and external audiences, narrative is considered to be advantageous for Operational Design, Strategic Communication, Psychological Operations and Information Operations (Culkin 2013; Finlayson & Corman 2013; Fleischaker 2015; Mitchell & Egudo 2003; Nissen 2012, 2013; Shortland & Alison 2015; Soucie 2015; Zweibelson 2011, 2013). It is seen as particularly relevant in the context of asymmetric warfare, where having the capability of recognising narratives and applying counter-narratives is regarded as vital. Narrative has also been hailed as useful for analysing the military's own practices and procedures. For example, in 2003 the Australian Department of Defence reviewed narrative methodology as a potential 'research tool for enhancing [the] Army's understanding of knowledge acquisition in the context of Battle Command Training', concluding that implementing narrative methods was 'a natural progression' (Mitchell & Egudo 2003: 'Executive Summary', para. 2), particularly for the purpose of recording personal experiences and implicit knowledge, which may otherwise be difficult to document (Mitchell & Egudo 2003: 39). Similarly, psychologists have assessed the serviceability of using narrative approaches as an addition to the military decision-making process 'to understand *why* things happened in a given situation, rather than merely *what* happened' (Shortland & Alison 2015: 7, my emphases). These investigations seize upon the common tendency for sense-making to take narrative form, for example via explanation, justification, rationalisation, persuasion or obfuscation.

Significantly, narrative is seen as relevant for both the tactical and strategic levels, where it is presented as an effective way to communicate intent and 'minimize the so called "say-do gap"' (Nissen 2012: para. 4), to understand the operational environment and to plan operations. The concept is likely to become further embedded in discussions on these topics, given that in the 2000s thus far the term 'narrative' has become institutionalised in, for example, NATO's policy for Information Operations, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Planner's Handbook for Operational Design, the US Army War College's Campaign Planning Handbook and the UK Joint Doctrine publications on strategic communication and operational planning (Nissen 2012, 2013). It is frequently discussed in publications such as *Critical Studies on Security*, the *Marine Corps Gazette*, the *Small Wars Journal* and *Militært Tidsskrift*. Already there is a burgeoning call for the role of narrative to be further expanded at the strategy and policy levels (Culkin 2013; Nissen 2012; Roselle, Miskimmon, & O'Loughlin 2014; Simpson 2012). The terms 'narrative led operations' and 'strategic narrative' used in these

contexts embody an even bolder and more encompassing use of narrative in designing military strategy and operations (Culkin 2013; Nissen 2012). Given this pervasive use, I suggest that military personnel should be introduced to narrative methods and concepts at an early stage in their careers. This would furthermore be in line with the objectives and aspirations of the Norwegian Armed Forces and Norwegian PME for the twenty-first century, which envision an independent, critically thinking officer with a strong sense of professional military identity.

The Norwegian Armed Forces Joint Operational Doctrine of 2007 substantiates the necessity of developing a method for achieving this goal in its conclusion that '[t]oday's complex operations can never be fully covered by manuals and rules of engagement. Our ability to fulfil our tasks depends rather on individuals whose judgment is well developed and mature' (NDCSC 2007: para. 0614). The military education reform that was implemented in Norway in August 2018 is consequently concerned with cultivating this capability: the preliminary learning goals of this reform emphasise that officers should independently be able to identify, formulate and solve problems in a military professional context.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, officers must identify with the military profession (NMA 2017). In this respect, the new reform marks the continuation of traditional PME, which in Norway and elsewhere places great importance on uniformity and fostering a sense of shared identity. There is a recognised need for PME to establish a learning environment that promotes the development of a professional identity and a community of practice that conserves traditional collective approaches and mechanisms whilst also stimulating adaptability, critical thinking and decision-making skills; narrative is at the intersection of these objectives.

Military educationists view narrative as a promising method that should be incorporated to provide officers with a tool for critical thinking and reflection and to create a professional identity (Finlayson & Corman 2013; Kaurin 2007, 2016; Sookermany 2017). Narrative can cultivate judgement in officers by creating a community of practice through reflection on own practice (the telling of stories) (Sookermany 2017) and by consideration of several points of view via case studies (which can be both stories and the telling of these stories) (Kaurin 2016). Significantly, the conclusions Pauline Kaurin and Anders Sookermany reach highlight that attempts to codify the use of narrative in field manuals and other military procedures and strategies – illustrated in the outline of military views on uses of 'narrative' above – are at variance with the goal of applying narrative as a corrective to more traditional and mechanistic methods of communication. Officers of today and tomorrow need to 'navigate complexities' 'within a manageable framework', as Kaurin has argued (2016: 115), without this framework simply becoming subsumed by the 'scenario-based pre-planned drills' of traditional military education that Sookermany cautions against, as they in his view do not adequately prepare cadets for today's conflicts (2017: 311). For narrative to be the kind of tool the military wants, it cannot be reduced to a template.

Cognisant of these tensions, I suggest that the key is for cadets to develop knowledge of narrative structures and techniques, not as a formula, but as awareness of the positions the text would like the reader to assume. This is to prevent truncation of the narrative framework to stock phrases and formulae such as 'intentions', which military historian John Keegan has suggested is a risk inherent in 'military writing' classes (2004: 20–21; see also Kaurin 2016: 115).

The next section will outline, first, how reading life-writing narratives may buttress the development of a professional identity and, second, how the cultural work of life-writing may be used to develop an awareness of multiple positions within a text, and how critical thinking skills may be cultivated as a result. Drawing on theories and pedagogies of life-writing, literacy and the history of reading, I will then suggest that incorporating metaknowledge of narrative structures and techniques in classroom tasks will maintain the necessary balance between standardised method and flexible tool, and contribute to realising the varied military ambitions for narrative by giving cadets awareness of how narratives work: a first step towards dismantling, constructing and applying narratives themselves.

## Developing narrative as a method

As well as being a vehicle for reflection and analysis, narratives can contribute to stability and uniformity. Narratives play a significant role in forming, shaping and sustaining a collective identity as well as the group identity of its individual members. As Benedict Anderson (1983/2001) argues, group identities are socially constructed or, in Anderson's term, 'imagined communities'. Communities develop a set of values,

<sup>6</sup> The education reform documents referenced are internal NMA memos from the academy's work on designing the new curriculum that came into effect in August 2018. These work-in-progress documents neither represent the outcome of the reform process nor the official goals or opinions of the NMA, the Norwegian Armed Forces or the Norwegian Ministry of Defence.

institutions, procedures and symbols – in short, a social imaginary. In a military context, this encompasses the internalisation of military values such as valour and honesty. Kaurin remarks on the ubiquitous military practice of sharing ‘war stories’ as a way of internalising institutional values (2016: 115); military life-writing works like Parnell’s and Klay’s are such stories in published form. Anderson (1983/2001) argues that the ‘imagined community’ of the ‘nation’ was made possible by the narrative of its cohesion or unity circulating amongst the members of the group in written form; a collective identity coalesced through their awareness of and access to this story. Arguably, specific genres can have similar functions, making the use of life-writing narratives by soldier authors doubly relevant in PME.

As the section on current L2 teaching noted, illustration of professional realities through embodied experience is one of the advantages of narrative. Narratives have the potential to foster empathy and identification, as literary scholar David Herman explains: ‘Rather than focusing on general, abstract situations or trends, stories are accounts of what happened to particular people – and of what it was like for them to experience what happened – in particular circumstances and with specific consequences’ (2010: 3). Life-writing can be used to prompt reflection on professional identity amongst cadets, who, in my experience, value the authors’ professional background and become more engaged with the text as a result. In several professions, including teaching and medicine, reflection on one’s own practice via narrative is used as a method for creating a professional identity (see, for example, Clandinin & Connelly 2000). Via the texts and examples of teaching materials like those described in the first part of this article, current teaching on this topic includes questions about values, leadership and what it means to be an officer and belong to a military organisation. Returning to *Outlaw Platoon* and *Redeployment* will illustrate how life-writing supports identity work of this type.

Self-life-writing is associated with the literary tradition of the Bildungsroman, in that it deals with the moral and psychological development of the narrator towards an understanding and idea of themselves and their place in the world. The memoirs of authors who position themselves within a community with a strong collective identity, such as the military, are personal narratives of a ‘plural self’ (Sommer, as cited in Warner 2012: 8): the author understands their personal identity as part of the collective’s. The contemporary modern military memoir can in some cases therefore also be a form of *testimony*, in which the author portrays their experience as a representative of the collective, moved by a perceived need to raise public awareness about this group (other group identities in testimonies are typically based on class, ethnicity, race and gender).<sup>7</sup> *Outlaw Platoon* is one such work. Sean Parnell’s use of a quotation from Horace as rationale in his second epigraph illustrates the commanding officer’s solicitous relationship with his unit: he writes to prevent his men from becoming ‘unknown and unwept, extinguished in everlasting night’ (2012/2013: n.p.). Thus explicitly assuming the position of chronicler, Parnell describes in his main narrative how he experienced being a part of ‘one of the most valorously decorated conventional combat units in the history of Operation Enduring Freedom’ (2012/2013: ix) and how he, as commanding officer, actively cultivated a collective identity to support unit cohesion. Teaching examples in the first part of this article have illustrated how this can be used to promote uniformity and identity, but critical reflection is necessary to avoid this becoming ‘mechanistic’ adoption.

A related concern raised by practitioners of narrative approaches in military education (see, for example, Kaurin 2016: 119) is that within a community or profession uncritical adoption of narratives may contribute to complacency and the kind of rationalisation of actions and solidifying of existing procedures that the adoption of narrative is intended to counter. This is particularly relevant in contexts where narratives are connected to professional identity and rationales for decision-making. To increase the benefit of narrative for the military, it is important that life-writing texts are not reduced to a single, stable meaning or, as Jakob Lothe (2013) has argued regarding narrative presentation of ethics, reduced to relatively stable carriers of ideological positions. Theories and pedagogies of life-writing provide useful strategies for creating teaching materials with this goal in mind.

Pedagogies of life-writing suggest that the ability to function as a ‘provocation for thinking critically about cultural definitions of selfhood and authenticity’ (Brown 2010: 123) is a key feature of the life-writing

<sup>7</sup> I agree here with Woodward and Jenkins’ nuanced use of *testimonio* in the case of military memoirs (2012: 505–7); while the social situation of military authors cannot be equated with the marginal and marginalised situation of *testimonio* writers, the presentation of lived experience to explain the working realities of a profession quite alien to the civilian public and to invite empathy and understanding with this group displays aspects of what characterises ‘testimony’.

Woodward, R. & Jenkins, K. (2012). ‘This place isn’t worth the left boot of one of our boys’: Geopolitics, militarism and memoirs of the Afghanistan war. *Political Geography*, 31(8), 495–508. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2012.10.006>.

text's pedagogical value; this is a primary reason why they are included on so many university curricula.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, rather than thinking about life-writing works as presenting exemplary models of behaviour for cadets to emulate, they can be usefully envisioned as cultural 'contact zones', as conceptualised by Mary Louise Pratt, in which unfamiliar perspectives and subject positions meet and 'grapple' with each other (1991: 34). This theoretical concept has been adopted in second language teaching pedagogy to explain how readers place themselves in the position of the other and how life-writing can be used to cultivate a space for this meeting (see, for example, Edwards & Hogarth (2017)). It follows that the contact zone is particularly interesting in the context of PME for its foregrounding of the tension between uniform responses and individual reactions. Contrasting her term with the unity implied in Anderson's 'imagined community', Pratt suggests that reading a text does not necessarily bring consensus and uniformity.<sup>9</sup> To discourage automatic adoption or identification, it would therefore be useful for the teacher to build on this tension by facilitating the students' understanding of the works as sites for exploring different examples of subjectivity, agency, experiences and identity (individual and collective, relating to organisations, nations and cultures). Current L2 teaching at the NMA already encourages cadets to reflect on their own professional and cultural contexts by comparison and contrast with those presented in the texts. In *Redeployment* and *Outlaw Platoon*, the primary cultures in question are both the authors' and characters' USA and the culture of the US Armed Forces. The descriptions of the local populations are naturally also relevant for intercultural understanding and cooperation. In the L2 classroom these are confronted by the culture of the Norwegian Armed Forces and the individual cadets' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This critical awareness of different positions within a text, and of their own positions as readers, is relevant in the context of developing narrative as a method, as I will shortly show.

Another way of modifying potential tendencies towards automatic response is offered by Kaurin (2007, 2016), who illustrates how narrative methods can be used to train cadets to read context and environment. Refining traditional military training exercises such as case studies and war games by adopting a narrative approach in the learning activities, Kaurin has been able to slow down the process of decision-making as cadets are required to first examine an event in context and compare narratives told from the perspectives of the different people involved before selecting and applying solutions. This stimulates critical thinking. Yet what is missing from this description is an element that highlights the framework: it is application of a method without making the method an explicit part of the learning goal. Theories and pedagogies of reading and life-writing indicate that creating awareness of a method and providing the vocabulary or tools for discussing it gives students an edge in applying the method or concept themselves – and this should be consistently developed in the case of narrative too.

Research on life-writing has shown that both structures and theories of narrative should be highlighted when teaching life-writing texts in order to stimulate critical reflection on the values, opinions and identities expressed in the texts (Drake 2017; Fuchs & Howes 2008; McNeill & Douglas 2017; Smith & Watson 2010). These findings are supported by critical literacy research, which centres on the recognition that no text is neutral, but always embedded in various everyday power contexts, and which consequently advocates awareness of contexts and structures as a requisite for critical reading (Luke 2012). These insights suggest that the effectiveness of narrative as an approach is contingent upon the reader's knowledge of its structures and techniques and of the choices made regarding structures and techniques in the telling of a specific story.

The relevance of such metaknowledge for PME can be illustrated by returning to *Outlaw Platoon* and *Redeployment* and reflection on how identifying whether a work of life-writing is non-fiction or fiction sometimes poses a challenge for cadets; such misidentification is typically caused by unawareness of the narrative structures and techniques and of how the work presents the author. Generally, autobiography and biography claim to describe a truth which is verifiable outside the text (Lejeune 1989: 22), which fiction generally does not. However, while genre gives the reader certain expectations as to a work's content, reader response is not wholly guided by this. While the characters in a work of fiction are invented – the 'synthetic component' (Phelan 2005: 20) of narrative – ethnographic studies of reading groups indicate that readers become invested in the mimetic aspect of narrative (Peplow 2016: 140) and tend to regard the characters in fictional narratives 'as possible people and the narrative world as like our own' (Phelan 2005: 20). This is particularly

<sup>8</sup> This point is consistently emphasised by academics writing on the pedagogy of teaching life-writing. See, for example, Brown (2010), Smith & Watson (2010), Edwards & Hogarth (2017), McNeill & Douglas (2017), Fuchs & Howes (2008).

<sup>9</sup> Pratt brings the perspective of the teaching practitioner to this complex debate and nuances the range of reader types proposed by theorists and historians of reading. For a useful introduction to this topic, see, for example, Towheed, Crone, & Halsey (2011). Towheed, S., Crone, R. & Halsey, K. (Eds.) (2011). *The history of reading: A reader*. Abingdon: Routledge.



accurate where the author's life is the inspiration for a work of fiction, as in the case of *Redeployment*, also because of the information the book gives the reader about this background.

Military memoirs present claims to authority and unique insight into the events they describe on the basis of the author being a 'flesh-witness', to use the by now famous expression coined by Yuval Noah Harari (2009): the author has first-person, embodied experience of armed conflict. Philippe Lejeune has influentially argued that the author's name corresponding with that of the narrator assures the accuracy and authenticity of the lived experience depicted in the non-fiction autobiographical narrative (1989: 22). In addition to the main narrative, this experience is communicated to the reader in a number of paratextual ways. As Gérard Genette (1997) formulated it, the paratext consists of framing elements both inside and outside a book that do not belong to the main text, but which influence the reading of it. Included in what amounts to a complex system of mediation between publisher, author and reader are elements such as authorial prefaces, illustrations, editorial apparatuses and the publisher's information on the cover as well as other publicity material associated with the work.<sup>10</sup> In military non-fiction life-writing, the author's name on the cover is often prefaced with their military rank or followed by a listing of medals received, both of which are signals of authenticity and authority.<sup>11</sup> Photographs like those in *Outlaw Platoon*, which depict real people engaged in various tasks, further signal that this is a work of non-fiction based on the author's deployment in Afghanistan. However, in the case of soldier authors writing fiction inspired by their military service, the paratexts often blur the line between fiction and non-fiction. Although a work of fiction, *Redeployment* paratextually communicates Klay's connection with the military. For example, Klay's author biography specifies his military service.<sup>12</sup>

Sometimes, therefore, both expectations about the 'factual basis' and 'truthfulness' of life-writing narratives and the sometimes indistinct line of demarcation between life-writing fiction and non-fiction cause cadets to misinterpret the author's 'generic intention' (Vernon 2006: 31) when reading works by soldier authors, and they, for example, assume that *Redeployment* is non-fiction.<sup>13</sup> When this happens, the ensuing classroom discussions productively highlight the cadets' assumptions about distinctions between fiction and non-fiction; it would be feasible and desirable to systematically exploit this to develop their metaknowledge of narrative features. This can be done by building on current learning materials on *Redeployment*. For example, the cadets are asked to use *The Paris Review's* interview with Phil Klay (2014b), in which he discusses what good war journalism is and can do, to debate how journalism and fiction differ in their portrayal of combat and the realities of military life. This could be expanded beyond a thematic discussion, which is the current learning goal, and be used to facilitate the cadets' articulation of issues relating to genre, narrative construction and the rhetorical and figurative language used in this construction. Raising awareness about why a story is written in a specific way will provide critical distance to the text and thus constitute a mechanism to counter the potential for narrative to be reduced to a template. At the same time, it will contribute to developing an understanding of the building blocks of narrative – a step towards awareness of how a narrative is constructed with a view to eliciting particular responses from the reader.

These examples illustrate the importance for teaching to highlight the reader's relationship to the text, and looking to pedagogies of reading may supply further useful frameworks that can be used to create teaching materials to enhance cadets' critical awareness of how narrative texts are constructed and how they address readers and work to affect them. 'Surface reading', as coined by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus (2009), has been applied to the reading of life-writing for this reason (see, for example, Drake 2017). This

<sup>10</sup> Genette uses the term 'zone of transaction' to describe the spaces of the paratext and the mediation that takes place in and across them (1997: 1).

<sup>11</sup> Stressing the author's military background in this manner is naturally a deliberate marketing strategy. For an analysis of how recent British military memoirs have been marketed through their covers, see Kleinreesink, Jenkins & Woodward (2015).

Kleinreesink, L.H.E., Jenkins, N. & Woodward, R. (2015). How (not) to sell a military memoir in Britain. *Political and Military Sociology: An Annual Review*, 43, 1–26. Retrieved from: [https://works.bepress.com/esmeralda\\_kleinreesink/19/](https://works.bepress.com/esmeralda_kleinreesink/19/).

<sup>12</sup> It is, admittedly, tucked away on the inside of the back cover, whereas the back cover of *Outlaw Platoon* more prominently outlines Parnell's career achievements. These descriptions refer to the 2015 Canongate paperback edition of *Redeployment* and the 2013 William Morris paperback edition of *Outlaw Platoon*.

<sup>13</sup> Regarding war narratives, there is even 'something of a tradition' of presenting memoirs as fiction (Vernon 2006: 31), which makes it particularly difficult to draw genre lines. The relationship between the world of the text and the verifiable outside world is much debated in life-writing studies. However, there is no scope to examine this in this article, which of necessity limits itself to a brief comment on audience expectations and reactions. Rak (2013) offers a valuable analysis of genre and post-millennial audiences' expectations of truth in memoirs, and the editor's introduction to Vernon (2006) outlines the problem of genre as it relates to military life-writing.

Rak, J. (2013). *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*. Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

approach to reading focusses on 'what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts' (Best & Marcus 2009: 9); it does not look for symbolic meanings and would therefore be useful in non-traditional education programmes like PME.

Recent life-writing scholarship has focussed on the affective and ethical aspects enumerated within the concept 'surface reading'. However, with a view to developing narrative as a tool of communication and critical thinking, I would instead highlight two other aspects of this term, namely surface as materiality and surface as the 'patterns that exist within and across texts' (Best & Marcus 2009: 11). The first denotes the material aspects of the texts such as the paratexts, and the latter includes narrative structures and discourse analysis; both are methods for creating awareness of the techniques authors and publishers use and, concomitantly, the positions the texts ask the reader to take. In a profession where they are likely to be frequently confronted with multiple narratives and required to assess and evaluate these, and to use narratives to communicate effectively, it is indispensable for officers to develop an understanding of the techniques involved in narrative construction.

This article has described a set of interconnected benefits of the current use of narrative life-writing texts in military ESL classes: as a vehicle for increasing the cadets' L2 competence and for exploring professional identity and realities. These outcomes would not be lost in the development of the teaching of life-writing to also create awareness of the narrative structures and techniques of these texts. This article has gestured towards how, by systematically encouraging cadets to engage in critical thinking about how stories are told, reading life-writing may provide an instrument for developing narrative as a tool of communication and analysis in a way that supports military ambitions for narrative and for PME in the twenty-first century. Based on insights from the fields of life-writing and reading research, this article has argued that creating meta-knowledge of narrative structures and techniques should be an explicit learning goal and an integral part of teaching units on military life-writing. This will give cadets the tools to assess, dismantle, construct and apply narratives in the course of duty; whether or not the 'text' they encounter is verbal, visual or textual, critical reading skills are paramount for military professionals. More research is needed to optimise how these teaching materials should be crafted, but the findings from teaching life-writing inside and outside a PME setting suggest that by familiarising cadets with narrative concepts, using life-writing texts by soldier authors in PME can contribute to the development of narrative as a useful method for junior officers.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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