Master's Thesis Writing from a Narrative Approach

OILI-HELENA YLIJOKI

University of Tampere, Finland

ABSTRACT   *Thesis writing as the final phase in achieving the master's degree has been identified both as a culmination of university studies, providing students with a bridge from the world of study to the world of scholarship, and as a severe problem associated with drop-out, lengthening of the duration of studies and personal anxiety of students. In this article, thesis writing and the problems involved in it are approached from a narrative perspective. The study is based on focused interviews with 72 students from four disciplines at one Finnish university. From students' accounts of their study experiences, four cultural core narratives are constructed: the heroic, tragic, businesslike and penal stories. In each type of story the meaning of thesis writing, the relationship between student and supervisor, and study problems are experienced in an essentially different manner. It is suggested that, in order to improve academic teaching and thesis supervision, it is important to analyse and critically reflect on the kinds of stories students are living by, and how these narratives are sustained in the disciplinary cultures into which they are socialised during their studies.*

Introduction

Thesis writing, the final phase in achieving the master's degree, can be viewed from two conflicting perspectives. On the one hand, the academic nature of study is crystallised when working on the thesis. This point of view emphasises the high ideals and objectives of thesis writing: it constitutes a bridge from the world of study to the world of science, scholarship and research. Thesis writing offers students a taste of real research, 'the first golden journey to Samarkand' (Jones *et al.*, 1994), on the basis of which some students will continue in the academic world as doctoral students and future academics. Accordingly, thesis writing is regarded as an inherent and necessary part of university studies that guarantees the academic qualifications and status of graduates.

On the other hand, thesis writing is considered as a source of some of the most severe problems in university studies, both at the individual and the departmental level. Many students face a special kind of paradox while beginning to work on their theses: whereas before they were mainly required to recall basic knowledge and facts from textbooks and lectures, now, often for the first time, they are expected to work independently, to be able to discover essentials and to engage in critical thinking (Gröhn *et al.*, 1993, pp. 46–47). In other words, students are required to change from consumers of knowledge to producers of knowledge (Aittola & Aittola, 1988, pp. 58–60). This shift results in many kinds of study problems, which may lead to the prolongation of study times and drop-out. These are problems not only for individual students but also for departments, since the number of graduates has become an essential performance indicator which can be used as a criterion in

funding decisions. Therefore, it is of vital importance from the departmental perspective to try to get students to graduate and to shorten the duration of their studies.

When considering thesis writing, it has to be taken into account that students' experiences and expectations of university studies vary greatly. Many studies have shown that students have differing approaches to learning and different study orientations, and that differences in study environments are associated with students' approaches to learning and learning outcomes (e.g. Entwistle & Tait, 1990; Sheppard & Gilbert, 1991; Willis, 1993; Trigwell *et al.*, 1999). With regard to graduate thesis writing, the following three study orientations have been discerned: academic orientation (aiming at the development of critical thinking), professional orientation (aiming at the improvement of professional qualifications) and instrumental orientation (aiming at getting the degree done) (Sarja, 1991). The wider disciplinary context, 'the departmental ethos' (Sheppard & Gilbert, 1991, p. 235), also has an impact on students' study orientations and experiences, since the aims and practices of teaching and learning vary between different disciplinary cultures (Becher & Kogan, 1992; Kolb, 1985; Boys *et al.*, 1988; Traweek, 1988; Thomas, 1990; Ylijoki, 2000). Consequently, thesis writing, including the aim of the thesis, the relationship between a student and a supervisor, and the problems encountered, may be understood and interpreted differently by different students.

Research into thesis writing refers mostly to the doctoral thesis. Although it is reasonable to assume that there are common characteristics and problems in working on theses at all levels, there are also obvious differences. For instance, the doctoral thesis concerns only those who have chosen to continue in an academic career, and are most motivated to do research, but the graduate thesis is obligatory for all students irrespective of their orientation and interests. Arguably, then, the problems and experiences of master's thesis writing have specific characteristics that need to be examined in their own right.

In this article, thesis writing is explored in the Finnish higher education context. In Finland, a thesis is required of all university students completing the Master's degree (the basic academic degree in Finland, incorporating the equivalent of the British bachelor's degree). The nature of the thesis varies across study fields to some extent, but as a norm, it is defined as a small piece of research demonstrating a good command of the theme of the thesis, mastery of the research methods utilised and capability for academic writing. Typically, the thesis writing process involves a 1-year seminar, during which time students make research plans and get the work started, and then individual research work, which is officially scheduled to take about 20 study weeks. In practice, the time spent on thesis writing is usually much longer. Many students struggle for years with their theses in a kind of transitional stage, with all the other study requirements complete. Due to external pressures to shorten the duration of studies and increase the number of degrees produced, much emphasis has recently been placed in Finland on how to facilitate the thesis writing process and improve supervision practices.

A Narrative Approach

In this article, thesis writing is examined from a narrative approach. The narrative approach has attracted growing interest in recent years in the human and the social sciences (e.g. Bruner, 1986; Sarbin, 1986; MacIntyre, 1987; Polkinghorne, 1988; Taylor, 1992; Gergen, 1994). It claims that narratives constitute a fundamental form of human understanding, through which individuals make sense of themselves and of their lives. In other words, narratives impart meaning to experiences by integrating them into a temporal and coherent whole with a specific plot structure. Therefore, it is of vital importance what kinds of stories

and 'organizational sagas' (Clark, 1986) are available in the culture, because these narratives provide individuals with the resources to orient in the world and to get some firm hold in it.

The narrative construction of experience can be elaborated further by applying Harré's (1983, pp. 256–259) conception of psychological space (see Murray, 1989). Following this conception, it can be maintained that individuals appropriate prevailing cultural narratives, thus becoming socialised into the culture in question. But individuals do not only appropriate collectively shared narratives but, due to each individual's unique life history and specific perspective, they also transform them into their own personal narratives. Then, in their everyday practices, individuals make their idiosyncratic personal narratives public, which may lead to conventionalisation as some transformations are incorporated into the cultural stock of narratives, thus enriching the overall resources of the culture. This guarantees the continuous interplay between the personal and the cultural elements in the narrative construction of life.

With regard to thesis writing, the suggested type of narrative approach implies that students make sense of working on a thesis by appropriating and transforming collectively shared narratives, 'academic legends', about the nature of thesis writing and the many joys and sorrows related to it, which have accumulated in the student culture over many student generations (Ylijoki & Ahrio, 1995). Socialisation into this cultural heritage helps students to understand what thesis writing is all about, what expectations they may hold, what the relationship is between a student and a supervisor, and what kinds of emotions belong to the process. On the other hand, students construct their own personal relation to the cultural stock of narratives, which resonates with their unique life history and study situation. Through these personal narratives, students make sense of their own thesis writing process and of themselves as principal actors in that process. However, the roots of these personal stories stem from socially shared and sustained cultural narratives. Finally, after the public display of the personal story, this or some elements of it may be incorporated into the collective stock of narratives, thus bringing new components to the student culture as a whole.

From this perspective, the key question is, what kinds of collective narratives are there in the student culture? It is crucial to ask about how working on a thesis is described, what aims, problems and joys are associated with it, what the role of the supervisor is in the process, and what the ultimate fate of the student as the protagonist of these narratives is. The rationale behind this kind of approach is to understand better the different ways in which thesis writing is interpreted, so that more effective ways to help students to complete their theses can be considered and implemented. Through an increased understanding of the taken-for-granted assumptions attached to thesis writing, we reach a better position to engage in self-reflexive activity, and to critically re-examine and improve prevailing teaching and supervision practices. This, in turn, can be beneficial both for individual students with problems in their thesis writing, and for the overall functioning of the department.

Method

The methodological implication of narrative research is that the data do not need to be narratives—the aim is not to analyse all sorts of narratives and stories, but to examine various kinds of materials from the narrative perspective (see Mishler, 1995). Relying on Bruner's (1986) notion of paradigmatic and narrative mode of thought, Polkinghorne (1995) clarifies this point by making a distinction between analysis of narratives and narrative analysis. In the former type, researchers gather stories as data and analyse them according to paradigmatic reasoning: they classify particulars as instances of general concepts and identify the relation-

ships that hold between the established categories. The aim is to describe common themes or taxonomies of types of stories, characters, or settings found in the database. In contrast to this, narrative analysis follows the logic of narrative mode of thought. Researchers collect descriptions of events and happenings, and configure them into a story or stories. In other words, the aim is to discern a plot that unites and gives meaning to the elements in the data as contributions to a specific goal or purpose. As Polkinghorne (1995, p. 12) indicates, 'analysis of narratives moves from stories to common elements, and narrative analysis moves from common elements to stories'.

This research follows the logic of narrative analysis. The empirical grounding of the analysis is based on students' accounts of their experiences in thesis writing. The data were gathered by interviewing students in various disciplines and at different stages of studying. The overall data consist of focused interviews with 72 students—45 women and 27 men—at the University of Tampere in Finland. The students interviewed came from four different study fields: computer science, information studies, public administration and sociology and social psychology. The students, moreover, represented three different phases in the thesis writing process: firstly, 32 beginners who were about to finish a 1-year seminar and to start to write their theses; secondly, 20 newly graduated students who just had completed their theses; and thirdly, 20 'perpetual students' who had stayed at the university for an average of 10 years and who had been working on their theses for years without reaching completion.

The beginners were interviewed in small groups, typically three students, whereas the graduates and the 'perpetual students' were interviewed individually. The interviews lasted about 1 hour, and they were tape-recorded and transcribed. The themes of the focused interviews covered a wide range of questions concerning students' experiences: the expectations, fears, problems, joys and insights they had encountered during the different stages of the working process. Furthermore, students' conceptions of the necessity of thesis writing, as well as their suggestions for the improvement of the working process, were dealt with.

Students' accounts do not have temporal order or coherence in content, but move back and forth in time and in themes. Thus, it is the researcher's task to 'reconstruct order of the told' (Mishler, 1995, p. 95), to trace the chronological sequence of the thesis writing process, and to discern the plot that integrates the diverse elements of the accounts into a story with a specific denouement. As Polkinghorne (1995) stresses, this kind of plot construction involves recursive movement from the data to an emerging thematic plot. Following a kind of hermeneutic circle, the emerging plot ideas were tested against the data and changed when needed. In accordance with Polkinghorne, the aim was to reach a point where the final stories would fit the data, while at the same time bringing an order and meaningfulness that is not apparent in the data themselves. All this means that the researcher, too, is a storyteller who constructs a story from the database. As Mishler (1995, p. 117) points out, 'It is clear that we do not "find" stories; we "make" stories'.

Results

Using students' interviews, this study explores the cultural core narratives of thesis writing. The aim of the analysis is to discern temporally ordered descriptions of thesis writing, with a beginning, a middle and an ending, which have a specific plot attributing a meaning and a thematically integrated coherence. Thus, the results are constructed narratives with no direct empirical referent. Instead, they are ideal types which represent typical plot-structures constructed from the students' interviews. It follows that the analysis does not deal with the personal narratives individual students are living by, but, instead, focuses on the sociocultural

TABLE I. Types of core narratives concerning thesis writing

| Plot of story | Nature of thesis | |
	Mythical	Not mythical
Positive	Heroic	Businesslike
Negative	Tragic	Penal

level through examining the core narratives appearing across the data, thus reflecting different students' collective beliefs, expectations and aspirations regarding the thesis writing process.

Four core narratives of thesis writing are identified: heroic, tragic, businesslike and penal stories. The narratives differ along two dimensions (see Table I). The first dimension concerns the student's experience of the nature of thesis writing: the thesis is regarded either as a mythical entity or as a straightforward part of the curriculum. In the former case, thesis writing acquires an almost supernatural aura which makes it something totally distinct from the rest of the curriculum, whereas in the latter case, there is nothing mysterious in the process, and, accordingly, no gap between earlier studies and thesis writing. The other dimension concerns the plot of the narrative, which is either positive or negative: if the narrative tone is positive, the student succeeds in their pursuits and the story has a happy ending, whereas, in the negative narratives, the ending is unhappy as the student's experiences of the thesis writing process are unfavourable.

The four core narratives will now be described in more detail. They are presented as three-act temporal stories, with a beginning—the beginning of the thesis writing process—a middle, consisting of the process itself, and an end, the final outcome of the process. The characteristics of the plot-structure of each narrative are illuminated by quotations from the students' interviews.

Heroic Story: 'Doing the real thing'

A mythical thesis.   The thesis has lived a mythical life in the student's mind from almost the first day at the university, when they confronted the rich academic folklore—of both success stories, of students who had succeeded in accomplishing something exceptionally good, and horror stories, of students for whom the thesis had become an overwhelming obstacle that they have not been able to pass in spite of great efforts. The student has become convinced that the thesis is not a normal part of the curriculum, but a kind of moment of truth where academic abilities are put to a severe test, in which some will succeed and others will fail: 'I do remember when I first heard about it, I thought that it is something totally extraordinary and that a kind of accumulation of wisdom will then appear in it'. For this reason the student has devoted years to their studies, and gathered knowledge and competences, in order to prepare themself for the future confrontation with the thesis.

However, the student is eager to start writing the thesis and to put themself to the test: 'I like the idea that I really have to test myself, to see what I can accomplish'. The student is theoretically oriented and wants to write as excellent a thesis as possible: 'I'm rather ambitious, I mean I do want to get a good grade'. Thus, the student's objectives and aspirations are very high, and they dream of an academic career at the university. In fact, the student has never considered themself as an ordinary student, rather as a researcher for whom

the thesis is not a matter of collecting study credits but an opportunity to 'do the real thing': 'I had a phase when I wanted to explain the whole world. In a way sociology gives such good stuff, and then you get a feeling that also you should be able to do something really hard yourself'. In this way, thesis writing offers the student an opportunity to show their capabilities, not only to themself but also to professors and peers.

Struggle.   The writing process itself consists of constant struggles full of deep emotions. Sometimes the student feels that they are doing something special and highly original: 'One day I felt that this is proceeding very well and that there is a good point in it'. In such moments the student experiences euphoria: 'It was like looking at everything through new glasses. It was extremely nice. I felt that at that very moment I could write ten thousand pages more and rewrite the whole theory'. But then the student is driven to despair and loses confidence in the project: 'I have had really infernal feelings of uncertainty. And then a delete-key starts going on, you know, long pages are thrown away, no, no, no. Sometimes self-criticism rises beyond all measure'. The period of despair may last a long time and prevent the student from working: 'Then one year passed and I just lay in bed totally depressed and I detested studying and myself and everything. And I read fiction like a madman, all rubbish, and I didn't do anything on the thesis'. By trying hard the student can get themself going again, and the same swing of emotions proceeds: 'Sometimes I thought that I wrote really good text, and then I liked it. But sometimes it was really awful, I totally lost my confidence. I thought that it is so stupid that I will never dare to show it to anybody, because they will laugh at me. And then at another moment I felt that it was really fine. It changed a lot'.

The trials of the student are further increased because they are working alone: 'In such a situation and phase simply nobody can supervise you. Somehow you have specialised in your own track and you work on your own project'. In accordance with an individualistic ideal of academic research, the student is a lonely hero who has to face all the trials without guidance or support—otherwise the student would not be a hero: 'There is nobody who could give me a ready-made model to follow. With my project I really jump into something a little bit unknown and in this sense I like it enormously'. It follows that seeking help from a supervisor in problematic situations is not a possible option for the hero-student. The only form of supervision the student can accept is having discussion: 'I am in a dialogue with my supervisor so that I can see my own thoughts, I can reflect on what I am thinking about … It does not mean that the supervisor has to say to me what I have to do'. In this context the supervisor can be seen not as a teacher but as a colleague or even a friend.

Victory.   After long and painful devotion to research the student gradually becomes convinced that the story will have a happy ending. This belief gives them almost inhuman powers and they start working with furious force. Thus, in the final phase of the working process, the student lives only for the thesis, writing it day and night and forgetting all other things in life. Finally, in spite of all the sufferings, the student succeeds in reaching the goal victorious. The thesis is assessed as excellent, and the student feels that they have really achieved what they had hoped for: 'I felt damned good. Incredible'. The student thinks that they have lived through something exceptional during the thesis writing process, and that this experience has changed them as a whole person: 'When I now think of it I must say that it is a totally different thing if you have almost graduated, but without a thesis, than if you have done the thesis … You are a completely different person if you have gone through that process as compared to a person who has not done that'. Now the student knows what it takes to be a

researcher and they are ready to start another research project, and to meet whatever challenges there are waiting for them in the future.

Tragedy: 'Worst fears came true'

A mythical thesis. As with the hero story, the student views the thesis in a mythical light. It is like a final judgement where their academic merits are weighed. Although the student has succeeded well in their studies so far, they have suffered from thesis-horror for years, as they anticipate that thesis writing is nothing comparable to previous studies: 'It was like a wall ahead of me'. The thesis-horror leads to feelings of inferiority: 'I thought that somehow I can't manage to do it, or that I should have better theoretical knowledge and I should better master the research methods or something … It is difficult to get rid of the idea that you are not good enough'. The fear of failure is even more painful, because the student actually has high hopes and aspirations. They are ambitious and want to do excellent work.

Struggle. The student begins to work in earnest, proceeds well, but then there emerge obstacles in their path. There appears one specific problem—concerning, for instance, methods, theory, finding data or using a statistical programme—that gets the student bogged down. Even if the problem at first seems quite small, it gets bigger and bigger, and in the end the student does not have any idea how to proceed: 'I have been harping on the same crap in different ways. It always gets jammed at the same point, when I have reached a specific phase. Every time I have started to work, I feel good, but then I feel bad when it gets jammed again'.

Although the student appreciates the ideal of individualistic working, this difficult situation makes them ready to look for guidance from a supervisor. But the result is a bitter disappointment, as the supervisor does not understand the student's problem, and is not capable of providing help in such a manner that the student could benefit from it: 'I got feedback that this thing is not working, but I didn't get any clues how to proceed, what I should do about it. I became entirely paralysed for 2 weeks, I didn't realise at all what I should do with it'. After this experience, the student becomes more insecure and feels that they are not even able to ask for help in the right way. Besides, as the work is not proceeding, it becomes all the more difficult to make contact with the supervisor: 'Since I couldn't make any progress in my work, I didn't know what I could ask about. As I didn't know even that, I could not go there. Somehow I felt I should be able to show something and when I did not manage to accomplish anything, I did not dare to go there'. As a consequence, the student gets depressed and is left totally on their own: 'I was in a way left hanging rather loose and it was completely up to me'. In this way, thesis writing becomes 'not only independent but also lonely' working.

In this desperate situation, the student begins to avoid the thesis and tries to forget it. But, even if the thesis is out of sight, it is not out of mind: 'The first 5 years it was in my mind perhaps every day and then it began to decrease. The last 2 years, well, I don't believe there has been a single month when I haven't thought about it, but it is no longer an everyday companion'. Besides, it is difficult to forget the thesis, since relatives and acquaintances keep on wondering when the student will graduate. This causes heavy social pressure on the student. As time goes on, it is all the more difficult to return to the thesis, but the student cannot give up: 'I shall press on at it even to the grave'. Thus, the student promises that they will begin working on the thesis tomorrow—or perhaps next week. But, due to the student's current life situation, even the thought of starting to work on the thesis is painful and full of problems: 'It's difficult. I do have a family, two kids and then I have got a job, actually two

jobs … Then I have my desk in a sitting room and there is a television beside it, for which reason it is rather difficult to work on the thesis. It would be necessary to get the computer to some other place since there is no room for books now'.

Defeat.   Finally, the student has to admit defeat. The hopes and the dreams did not come true, only the worst fears did. Even if the student manages to get the thesis done by lowering their standards, thesis writing has been a tragedy for them. Thus, the long process ends with disappointments and feelings of anxiety: 'It really resulted in awful pressure. I was somehow disappointed with myself, certainly there were disappointments since it did not work out as I thought'. Likewise, the student blames themself and feels like a loser: 'I believe that many others also experience it as strong mental pressure if they have not graduated. At least I feel that it is one of my big mistakes as I have not finished it'.

All the student can do is to try to cope with these feelings of guilt and inferiority. They convince themself that there are many other more important things in life than the master's thesis, and that the failure in thesis writing is no reason to lose all one's self-respect and positive attitude towards life in general: 'I think it is too much that people lose their mental health because of the thesis. In my opinion things have gone wrong, badly wrong in such a case. A person writes a thesis for 3 years, changes the topic a couple of times and becomes soon, or has already been, a patient in a mental health clinic. It is a little bit too much for only one thesis'.

Businesslike Story: The thesis is done by doing it'

Objective.   The student has always considered the thesis to be an integral part of the curriculum. In contrast to many other students, for them the thesis has no mythical dimension. Instead, it is a job to be done, just like any other course in the study programme: 'People say that it is something magical, extremely demanding. However, it is not. People are a little bit afraid of it'. The student has never understood why some students regard it as such an extraordinary job and try to behave like little researchers: 'Some students like to talk about research and about themselves as researchers when writing the thesis. But I have avoided it carefully. It is a study requirement or a thesis'. It follows that there is no gap between the thesis and the previous studies: 'I didn't have any special threshold. It was one study requirement among others'. Likewise, the student has no special aspirations with regard to the final outcome: 'For me it was not a situation to prove my abilities, no final culmination of studies but a component among others'.

The student's attitude towards thesis writing is, however, absolutely positive. The student is professionally oriented and believes that the thesis provides useful skills for future working life: 'The thesis is the only or the first thing where you can go into some topic in greater detail and from which you can benefit then in practice'. Besides, the thesis guarantees the academic status of the degree and the high prestige associated with it. In addition, through social comparison, the student is able to assure themself of having the required competence: 'I always think that because others have been able to do it, then so will I'. Thus, the student looks forward to working on the thesis with self-confidence: 'When you start to write a thesis, to a large extent it is a question of your character, how you can pull yourself together and take up the same attitude as towards some other task when you begin to explain some questions'.

Hard work.   The student plans the working process very well: they make a timetable, set a clear target and divide it into subtargets. Then the student begins to carry out the plan with

determination. Their motto is: 'The thesis is done by doing it, there is nothing miraculous in it'. Thesis writing is not an easy job, but, with persistence and precision, the process proceeds steadily: 'I had a rather good image of what it will be like, what thesis writing will be. I was not terrified at any phase. It requires hard work'. The student emphasises the virtue of realism: 'I didn't have any dreams, anything of the sort that it would be magnificent, that you can play a little researcher in it … It is pure work. Sitting and writing'. Thus, due to the perseverance of the student, the working process gets going at a good speed: 'I got such a rhythm that I always started to work early in the morning … I started straight after 7 o'clock and finished then at 3. In that way I got a good rhythm and I didn't need to work in the evenings'.

The working process is facilitated by a continuous and close relationship with a supervisor. If the student meets difficulties, they have no inhibitions about contacting the supervisor: 'When I had that one threshold I learned that you should not in any case be left alone. You have always to contact somebody, in that way the problem will be solved and you can go on'. The supervisor is like a counsellor or a trainer to whom the student can turn, not only in the face of problems, but also in order to get other advice: 'It was mostly a question of acceptance, if the work that I had done so far was satisfactory. In order to get approval, to know if I can continue in the same way'. Sometimes the student has hesitated about whether it is appropriate to disturb the busy supervisor, but has concluded that it is the supervisor's duty to be always available for help. Besides, the student often also looks for guidance from other teachers in order to get the best possible expertise: 'In that sense I did not hesitate. If I needed comments, I always rang or went to see them, to ask. I made an appointment so that I could come to discuss the matter. I used both supervisors, perhaps about 20 times at least I saw them'.

Accomplishment.   In due time the thesis is finished. The student is very pleased and happy as the demanding job comes to an end: 'It was a relief. Nothing of the sort that I have created a masterpiece. It was just so good that I managed to do it, that it was not left incomplete. It would have been horrible if it had been left unfinished'. Although the student has not got any great moments or enormous difficulties in working on the thesis, they have proved to be capable of carrying out a long-term job in a reliable manner. This, in itself, is a satisfying experience, and the student has good memories of the working process as a whole.

The student believes that going through the thesis writing process is also of significant value with respect to working life: 'I mean writing itself, the production of text. When you have to write something in working life, thesis writing lowers the threshold in that respect a lot, as you know that you are capable of expressing yourself in writing'. The student is proud of themselves and knows that relatives and friends also respect the accomplishment. Now the student feels ready to enter real life outside the walls of the university.

Penal Story: 'Why the hell must it be done?'

Punishment.   The student has never understood why the thesis has to be done. For them the thesis is a mere punishment, with which students can be harassed by making their graduation more difficult. There is nothing appealing in the thesis writing process: 'I have never had any motivation to start to work on the thesis. I have always considered it as a necessity, something you are forced to do'. The student thinks that, in the case of few theoretically oriented students who aim at an academic career, the thesis is a reasonable requirement, but for ordinary, professionally and instrumentally oriented students like themself it has nothing to offer: 'For me the only aim is to get it over and done with. Then researchers are a totally

different case. It requires a totally different structure of mind, a structure of brains and different personality and motivation, a different level of interest. It is not for me. I prefer some practical job'. Thus, the student's attitude toward thesis writing is totally negative: 'It was just an unpleasant matter hanging over me. I did not expect anything positive out of it'.

The only rationale behind writing a thesis is that it is a compulsory step in order to get the degree accomplished. Thus, it cannot be avoided. It follows that the student's goal is merely temporal, as they try to reduce the time of the penal servitude to the minimum: 'Frankly, my aim was temporal, so that I could do it as quickly as possible'. With regard to the grade, the student has no goal, since they are convinced that in working life it does not matter at all how well you have managed to do your thesis. Besides, the student is convinced that the thesis has no relevance to anybody, since no one has any interest in it: 'It makes no sense, I mean nobody even reads them for heaven's sake … Nobody but the examiner ever reads it'.

Suffering.   As anticipated, the working process is full of pain and suffering: 'There was nothing rewarding in it. To be honest, it was a real dry bun'. Thus, the student's experiences continue to be extremely negative during the whole thesis writing process: 'I had the feeling, why the hell must I do it after all these years? Why isn't some sort of smaller work enough, when I want to have some practical job and am no researcher'. The student is especially irritated by the theoretical reading required in thesis writing: 'It is just that it is so awfully theory-oriented. You have to collect many pages of bibliography and references at the end and all sorts of issues from the books'. The student prefers to work with some simple and practical problem, but feels that this kind of approach is not accepted by professors, because it is not regarded as academically valid enough: 'I wonder why it is necessary for everybody to discover their own framework for it. In every damned small, lousy thesis you have to have some sort of definition and everything. Why is it not enough that people would do a nice, pretty, little piece of work?'

The meetings between the student and the supervisor also take place under unfavourable terms. The student feels the supervisor is like a prison-guard, who protects academic purity and prevents the student from attaining the degree. There is a deep gulf between the two parties: 'It is so funny to discuss with some professors. Let's say they have not worked a day in their lives, they have a totally different way of thinking. When I went to talk there I had in my mind a practical matter concerning where I could start to work, and he began to tell me about all fine theories. And I thought well, well. I got totally depressed'. The student becomes convinced that the supervisor is totally unable to understand them: 'When I went there, they asked me first if I have searched for literature. At that moment I thought that, oh no, I only have a sketch of my topic and they ask me if I have references ready'. On the basis of these kinds of bitter experiences, the student decides to work alone and avoid further contact with the hostile academic world, even if this might be a risky business: 'If it is not supervised the professors will take offence'.

Release.   Finally, the student decides to carry the heavy burden to the end. They work in full swing, rapidly write the minimal amount of pages and send it to the university. Although the work is far from excellent, the student hopes that it might nevertheless be accepted: 'I got a feeling that, what the hell, I'll write it and take it to them so that they can fail or accept it … I'll write it and take it there and say that you can do whatever you want with it. Even if it would just scrape through, I mean whether the grade is good, bad or average, it doesn't make any difference, if only I could get my certificate'. Even if the thesis happens to get an unexpectedly good mark, the student's attitude towards thesis writing does not change.

However, they are satisfied as the long pain is finally over: 'It was a relief … I wasn't interested in it at all. I just wanted to get rid of it. That's why I did it so quickly and so badly. The main thing was to get rid of it'.

From the beginning to the end, for the student, thesis writing means wasted time and unnecessary suffering without any internally motivating rewards. The student sees it only as a peculiar requirement of the peculiar academic world, which has no significance in life outside the university. Therefore, the student demands alternatives to the thesis so that those without academic ambitions would have sensible and useful ways to finish their university studies: 'Perhaps it would be most reasonable that a thesis would be oriented more towards outside this building, in that sense that you could go, for instance, to some institute or office or company where you could work for some time without being paid. It would be closer to life, it would be more motivating'.

Discussion

The four core stories represent different plot-structures and storylines (see Gergen & Gergen, 1983). The businesslike story and the penal story are stability narratives, since in them the protagonist's position remains essentially unchanged with respect to the final evaluative position. In these stories there is no crucial change during the working process in the relationship between the student and the thesis—in the businesslike story the relationship remains positive and in the penal story it remains negative. The heroic story and the tragedy, in contrast, entail a change in the plot structure, as the relationship between the student and the thesis alters during the working process. In the case of the hero-story, the end has a progressive storyline leading to the 'happily ever after' result, where the student and the thesis achieve everlasting harmony. By contrast, the tragedy ends up with a regressive storyline, since the student fails to attain the goal, which leads to perpetual disharmony and a kind of 'unhappily ever after' situation.

It is important to emphasise that there is no direct correspondence between the type of story and the group of students interviewed. Instead, the empirical basis of the four stories is distributed fairly evenly across the data. This means that 'perpetual students', for instance, are not protagonists only in the tragedy, as might perhaps be expected. Although some of the students belonging to this group give accounts in accordance with the tragic storyline, there are others who consider their prolonged thesis writing from within other frames, like the businesslike story, arguing that, due to their family or work situation, they have considered it sensible to delay graduation until a more convenient moment.

It must also be stressed that the four stories presented are ideal-types of the collectively shared cultural stories among the students under investigation. Thus, they do not directly correspond to the personal narratives of individual students, each of which has its own idiosyncratic features. Students live and study in the midst of these shared core stories, but, on the basis of their particular life situation and perspective on studying, they transform these cultural narratives in their unique ways into personal narratives. In other words, personal narratives concerning thesis writing are micro-narratives (Gergen, 1994), which are nested in different ways in the students' autobiographical life story. Furthermore, as individual students create new elements for the way thesis writing can be interpreted, and as some of the transformations spread within the culture, there is constant interplay between personal and cultural stories.

In conclusion, the narrative approach can be applied as one method for trying to solve the many problems involved in the thesis writing process. The aim of the narrative perspec-

tive adopted in this article is to help to take distance from the prevailing practices of thesis writing, and to promote reflective thinking on them. This can be done at least at three levels:

At the individual level, it is essential for students to reflect on which kind of story they are protagonists in. Changing the story alters the student's relation to the thesis writing process. Therefore, it is of crucial importance what kind of story the student is living by. Especially when faced with problems, the narrative perspective can make the taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs in one's action problematic and offer alternative stories for consideration. For instance, if a student is oriented to thesis writing according to the heroic story, but feels that the story is changing into a tragedy, the student could try to view the process from another framework, like the businesslike story, and get the thesis done without too much suffering. This kind of change is a thoroughly moral issue (Hydén, 1995), since the individual has to settle how to adhere to values and morals essential to them in the changing context. In this self-reflection, students can be helped by teachers and other academic staff presenting alternative narratives, and, accordingly, new and more fitting ways of being students (cf. Grant & Graham, 1999).

At the interactional level, the narrative approach can contribute to the improvement of supervision practices. The four core stories represent significantly different views of the role of the student and that of the supervisor. In the businesslike story, the supervisor is seen as a counsellor or a trainer who guides and takes care of the student throughout the whole process. Similarly, the student is willing to submit themself as an object of supervision and to follow the instructions the supervisor gives. The questions the student asks of the supervisor are, for example, 'how could I make this better and develop it further?' By contrast, in the penal story, the student regards themself as a victim and the supervisor as a prison guard or a gatekeeper, who ensures that the thesis meets the required standards. The main role of the supervisor is to define the minimum limit for an acceptable thesis, and, accordingly, the questions asked of the supervisor are such as, 'is this enough and can I get through with this'. In the heroic story—and in the first phase of the tragedy—the supervisor is viewed as a more advanced colleague, with whom the student wants to discuss issues of interest to both parties. The student views themself as a young researcher and wants to work independently, but discussion with the supervisor is in itself motivating, besides which it can help the student to comprehend better their own thoughts and to find new points of view. The questions asked of the supervisor are such as, 'what do you think about this idea and could you comment on the text?'

In order to make the supervision process work well, it is important that the student and the supervisor are part of the same story; if not, mutual understanding is difficult. Therefore, students' narratives should be compared to supervisors' narrated experiences (see Linden, 1999). For instance, if a student who lives the businesslike story meets a supervisor who sees thesis writing according to the heroic story, the student may easily feel disappointed at not getting enough guidance and support. Likewise, a misunderstanding may occur when a hero-student does not want to proceed according to the detailed instructions and advice a supervisor, living a businesslike story, offers and expects the student to follow.

Finally, at the cultural level, the narrative approach could help to make visible the tacit norms and values concerning good studying, including thesis writing, which prevail in different disciplinary cultures and into which students are socialised during their study time (e.g. Traweek, 1988; Becher, 1989; Gerholm, 1990; Thomas, 1990; Ylijoki, 2000). Thus, self-reflective practices are important, not only at the individual students' level but also at the departmental level. The fundamental question is about what kinds of narratives the disciplinary culture is producing and sustaining, as well as what problems are involved in them. Is the disciplinary culture, for instance, dominated only by one narrative, so that students

have few alternative resources at their disposal if the thesis work runs into problems? If the disciplinary culture is, for example, strongly against thesis writing as crystallised in the penal story, it would be beneficial to consider possibilities to produce and to promote alternative stories in teaching and learning practices. Or, if the disciplinary culture cherishes the mythical nature of thesis writing and the individualistic heroism associated with it, teaching practices could try to deconstruct the myth and present thesis writing in a more mundane light. And conversely, if the thesis is comprehended only as businesslike work, teaching practices could perhaps also encourage a little heroism and adventure, which could enrich students' study experiences at the university. In all cases, it is important to reflect critically on what kinds of narratives are told and maintained in teaching and learning settings. As Howard (1991, p. 196) admonishes, 'Beware of the stories you tell yourself—for you will surely be lived by them'.

Correspondence: Oili-Helena Ylijoki, Department of Sociology and Social Psychology, 33014 University of Tampere, Finland; e-mail: ytoiyl@uta.fi

REFERENCES

AITTOLA, H. & AITTOLA, T. (1988) Yliopisto-opiskelu elämänvaiheena ja opiskelun mielekkyys [University studies as a phase of life and the meaningfulness of studying], in: T. AITTOLA (Ed.) *Korkeakouluopiskelu elämänvaiheena ja opintojen kulku* [*University studies as a phase of life and the progress of studies*] (Jyväskylä, Institute for Educational Research, Publications B 30).

BECHER, T. (1989) *Academic Tribes and Territories* (Milton Keynes, Open University Press).

BECHER, T. & KOGAN, M. (1992) *Process and Structure in Higher Education* (London, Routledge).

BOYS, C.J., BRENNAN, J., HENKEL, M., KIRKLAND, J., KOGAN, M. & YOULL, P. (1988) *Higher Education and the Preparation for Work* (London, Jessica Kingsley).

BRUNER, J. (1986) *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press).

CLARK, B. (1986) *The Higher Education System* (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press).

ENTWISTLE, N. & TAIT, H. (1990) Approaches to learning, evaluations of teaching, and preferences for contrasting academic environments, *Higher Education*, 19, pp. 169–194.

GERGEN, K.J. (1994) *Realities and Relationships* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University, Press).

GERGEN, K.J. & GERGEN, M. (1983) Narratives of the self, in: T.R. SARBIN & K.L. SCHEIBE (Eds) *Studies in Social Identity* (New York, Praeger Publishers).

GERHOLM, T. (1990) On tacit knowledge in academia, *European Journal of Education*, 25, pp. 263–271.

GRANT, B. & GRAHAM, A. (1999) Naming the game: reconstructing graduate supervision, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 4, pp. 77–30.

GRÖHN, T., KAUPPI, A., RANTA, M., JANSSON, J. & PAANANEN, S. (1993) *Developing Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (Helsinki, Helsinki University Press).

HARRÉ, R. (1983) *Personal Being* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell).

HOWARD, G.S. (1991) Culture tales, *American Psychologist*, 46, pp. 187–197.

HYDÉN, L-C. (1995) In search of an ending: narrative reconstruction as a moral quest, *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 5, pp. 67–84.

JONES, C., HORROCKS, N. & GALVIN, C. (1994) First journeys to Samarkand: reflections on the undergraduate dissertation experience, a paper presented at the *Society for Research into Higher Education* 1994 Annual Conference, The Student Experience, University of York.

KOLB, D.A. (1985) Learning styles and disciplinary differences, in: A. CHICKERING (Ed.) *The Modern American College* (San Francisco, CA, Jossey–Bass).

LINDEN, J. (1999) The contribution of narrative to the process of supervising PhD students, *Studies in Higher Education*, 24, pp. 351–370.

MACINTYRE, A. (1987) *After Virtue* (London, Duckworth).

MISHLER, E.G. (1995) Models of narrative analysis: a typology, *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 5, pp. 87–123.

MURRAY, K. (1989) The construction of identity in the narratives of romance and comedy, in: J. SHOTTER & K. GERGEN (Eds) *Texts of Identity* (London, Sage).

POLKINGHORNE , D. (1995) Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis, *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8, pp. 5–23.

POLKINGHORNE , D. (1988) *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (New York, State University of New York Press).

SARBIN, T.R. (Ed.) (1986) *Narrative Psychology: the storied nature of human conduct* (New York, Praeger).

SARJA, A. (1991) Pro gradu-tutkielma oppimisprosessina [Thesis as learning process], in: P. HAKKARAINEN & J. VÄLIMAAA (Eds) *Korkeakoulutuksen kehittäminen ja laadun arviointi* [*Development of higher education and quality assessment*] (Jyväskylä, Institute for Educational Research, Publications B 71).

SHEPPARD, C. & GILBERT, J. (1991) Course design, teaching method and student epistemology, *Higher Education*, 22, pp. 229–249.

TAYLOR, C. (1992) *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

THOMAS, K. (1990) *Gender and Subject in Higher Education* (Buckingham, Open University Press).

TRAWEEK, S. (1988) *Beamtimes and Lifetimes* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press).

TRIGWELL, K., PROSSER, M. & WATERHOUSE, F. (1999) Relations between teachers' approaches to teaching and students' approaches to learning, *Higher Education*, 37, pp. 57–70.

WILLIS, D. (1993) Academic involvement at university, *Higher Education*, 25, pp. 133–150.

YLIJOKI, O-H. (2000) Disciplinary cultures and the moral order of studying—a case study of four Finnish university departments, *Higher Education*, 39, pp. 339–362.

YLIJOKI, O-H. & AHRIO, L. (1995) *Gradu lähikuvassa* [Thesis in portrait] (Tampere, Research Institute for Social Sciences, Publications 12).