



International Conference on Theology, Religion, Culture, and Humanities
Re Imagining Theology, Religion, Culture, And Humanities for Public Life
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Developing Narrative Thinking in Children: A Critical Study on J.S. Bruner's Narrative Thinking Patterns

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Abstract

In the midst of rapid technological advancement, the world of exact thinking has become the focus of attention. As a result, the world of learning emphasises conceptual thinking and logical thinking. In reality, in meaning making, conceptual and logical thinking are not enough. Narrative thinking is one of the provisions that help children learn more deeply and optimally. This qualitative research using the literature study method focuses on exploring Bruner's thoughts on narrative thinking. The main purpose of this paper is to find the main ideas and steps to develop narrative thinking to provide a balance in educating children's worldview, namely a balance between logical thinking, conceptual thinking and narrative thinking. This research found that narrative thinking is very important to help humans finding the meaning of life. For Bruner, meaning is the driving force for humans to move on in their life journey. Developing a narrative mindset from an early age is very helpful for children in their development as a whole human being. A narrative mindset has a cultural character that equips children to live and engage

in the dynamics of their community. It helps children grow and become rooted in their culture. Narratives can be an inspiration for children's lives. By sharing our experiences with others, we are invited to process, organise and make meaning of our experiences. In sharing our stories, we are invited to reflect on our goals, motivations, and the way we tell our stories. In so doing, we could contribute to the development of the community.

Keywords: *paradigmatic, narrative, reflection, meaning*

Introduction

Cognitivism emerged in the early 20th century. This theory arose from the failure of behaviorism to explain how humans process information (Yilmaz, 2010). Unlike behaviorism, which explains human behavior in terms of stimuli and responses, cognitivism focuses more on how the brain processes information. In cognitivism, memory, attention, and information processing are key concepts. In other words, the main focus of cognitivism is actually how humans derive meaning from what they learn (Yilmaz, 2010; Bruner, 1990).

In the course of time, what stands out from cognitivism is learning as an active process that involves processing information (Yilmaz, 2010; Ertmer and Newby, 2013; Walat, 2014). The key word is cognition, which refers to the mind. With the term cognition, this approach believes that all activities have a thinking process, such as writing, reading, and so on. Understanding the thought process involved in writing and reading provides guidance on how people should learn to write and read (Kendou, Broek, Helder, Karlsson, 2014). In other words, cognitivism describes how humans acquire knowledge through mental activities (thought).

In his work, *The Act of Meaning* (1990), Bruner asserts that cognitivism, first and foremost, wants to explore the drive of human which is a meaning. In this perspective, the main focus is on how humans try to understand and make sense of events. In other words, Bruner is trying to return to the original purpose of the emergence of cognitivism. He criticizes cognitivism for stopping at mental processes: cognitivism means information processing. For Bruner, cognitivism is not just about information processing. Instead, cognitivism is about meaning formation.

Bruner (1990) states that meaning is very different from information. Information processing is related to coded messages that are already systematized. In other words, information processing involves registering, combining, comparing, and codifying information. In this sense, information processing requires clear planning and rules, or

what we call programming. Information processing cannot capture messages or meanings that are beyond the coding programming. To make it easier to understand, we can look at the following example. If information processing is identical to codes such as addition. For example, one plus one equals two ($1 + 1 = 2$). But, in another case, the meaning is not just two when the case is as follows: one male student and one female student in one room at night. This does not just mean two people.

To understand the second case above, Bruner (1990) argues that processing information alone is not enough. More than that, knowledge of cultural context, symbols, and also the intentions of the actor is needed. In other words, to arrive at meaning, an understanding of culture and actors (agents) is needed. Culture, in this case, is the key to reaching meaning because it is in culture that humans share values and meanings.

Bruner (1990) also argues that to understand humans, information processing is not enough. This is what Bruner criticizes *cognitiveism* for considering knowledge as just information processing. For Bruner, to understand humans being, there are two main things that need to be seen, namely 1) the intentions of humans and 2) the culture that shapes them. By expressing this, Bruner acknowledges the role of culture in shaping human life and mind. Through culture, humans organize, recognize, and interpret their life experiences.

Since meaning is closely related to the intentions of actors, the organization of experiences, and culture, narrative thinking becomes crucial. Therefore, Bruner develops narrative thinking so that we are not stuck in "just" processing information. Instead, we are invited to go further, to make meaning. Of course, by offering a narrative thinking pattern, Bruner does not diminish the role of other thinking patterns. The narrative thinking pattern offered by Bruner can complement the existing thinking patterns. And, in the authors' opinion, this thinking pattern is very helpful for us to achieve a balance thinking's process that are too filled with exact, conceptual, and paradigmatic thinking patterns.

Methodology

This text basically analyses Bruner's thinking on narrative thinking patterns. Bruner's writings on narrative thinking patterns in various works will be discussed and analysed. The results of the analysis include the concepts, foundations or reasoning of the concepts, and the logical implications of the concepts offered by Bruner in the world of education in general and specifically in the world of teaching. This research provides two advantages. First, this research provides important foundations for the importance of culture in the world of education. Second, this research helps the process of reflection of children which is very useful in their development process.

Result and Discussion

Bruner (1986) believes that there are two cognitive functions of the brain, namely paradigmatic thinking and narrative thinking. These two modes of thinking complement each other, even though they have their own uniqueness in organizing experiences and constructing reality. According to Bruner, disregarding one of these modes of thinking would reduce the richness of thinking patterns because both of them are ways for humans to recognize, know, and understand reality.

To understand these two modes of thinking, we can imagine a story and an opinion. Stories and opinions have different characteristics. Bruner (1986) emphasizes that both forms can be used to convey ideas and persuade others. However, they have different procedures and functions. Opinions convey ideas and persuade others based on a logical and systematic sequence of ideas, empirical evidence, and facts. Stories rely on the sequence of events and the similarity of events to what is being conveyed. Bruner (1986) also provides an example of how in an opinion, there is a logical formulation such as "if x, then y", whereas in narrative thinking, the formulation and meaning can be different. For example, if the king dies and then the queen dies, it does not simply mean "if x, then y" because the relationship between these two events in the narrative can imply many things: the queen died because she was too sad to be left alone, committed suicide, or something else.

From the example above, it can be concluded that the paradigmatic or scientific logical mindset uses mathematical and logical modes in its explanations. Therefore, categorization and conceptualization, as well as their relationships, are very coherent and logical, using applicable logical rules. The strictness and consistency of the mindset are very striking and at certain points refer to empirical observations or hypotheses. We can assume that this pattern has developed greatly in the world of mathematics, science, logic, and others. The narrative mindset, on the other hand, focuses more on the intentions and actions of the characters and the consequences of their actions. In this case, the narrative mindset places experiences (events) in a specific time and place. If the paradigmatic mindset tries to find conclusions that can be used to explain specific situations, the narrative mindset focuses more on human conditions: happy ending or sad ending or comic ending.

Since the narrative mindset focuses on human conditions, generally, a good story contains two landscapes of stories, namely the landscape of consciousness and the landscape of action. The landscape of consciousness describes what is known or unknown by the character, what the character thinks and feels, and what surrounds the character's actions. The landscape of action focuses more on introducing characters, their

intentions and goals, situations, and ways to achieve goals (Amsterdam, Bruner, 2002; Bruner, 1986; Burke, 1969). In other words, developing a narrative mindset means that we are invited to pay attention to our landscape s of consciousness and landscape s of action.

Generally, narratives are interesting to certain people because of these two things (landscape s of consciousness and/or landscape s of action). Some are interested in the character in the story because their landscape of consciousness is similar. Some are interested because their landscape of action is considered cool. It can also happen that both landscape s are interesting to everyone (Bruner, 1986). In Indonesia, there is the folklore of Malin Kundang. Malin Kundang's landscape of consciousness is the shame of acknowledging his poor, old, and ugly mother. His landscape of action is to deny his mother. Meanwhile, his mother's landscape of consciousness is sadness and disappointment when her son (Malin Kundang) denies her even though she has longed for his return. Her landscape of action is to curse her disobedient son.

These two landscapes (landscape of consciousness and landscape of action) can serve as a means of reflection for readers of the story. Still in the story of Malin Kundang, the common moral message is about the value of a mother's love and being a good child. The focus is on Malin Kundang! However, an interesting note is given by Citraningtyas. Citraningtyas (2011) who emphasizes the issue of focusing on the mother: is she a loving mother or an evil one for cursing her son? In this sense, the narrative could promote another interpretation.

Narrative thinking is very open to new meanings. In fact, in narratives, portrayals of good and evil can be seen from various sides and reinterpreted. This is very different from the paradigmatic pattern which is laden with formulas like "if A then B" or "if you are evil, then I will retaliate." Narratives, as Citraningtyas (2011) points out, can also perpetuate these formulas - or in Citraningtyas' (2011) language, stereotypes - through stories that are passed down from generation to generation. However, on the other hand, narratives are also open to new meanings when they are processed through new reflections. The two landscapes in the narrative thinking pattern become a door for processing and new meanings in a narrative.

This narrative thinking pattern becomes a means for us to interpret the world we live in. Through narratives, we try to recognize, understand, and interpret the world we live in because the narrative thinking pattern tries to choose, organize, and structure our experiences in a form that we can understand (Bruner, 2004). That is why what is called reality, according to Bruner, is the result of the human narrative thinking process about the world.

The Relevance of Narrative's Mode of Thought

In the description aforementioned, the importance of narrative thinking is implicitly revealed. There are several reasons that can be used to explain how important narrative thinking is in our lives. There are at least three main reasons why narrative thinking is important: 1) narrative thinking is related to the process of meaning-making; 2) narrative thinking is one of the ways our brain thinks; 3) narrative thinking is very sensitive to stories that can be used as references in life. These three reasons will be explained as follows.

Firstly, as previously stated, narrative thinking is important because it directly influences the process of meaning-making. According to Bruner, culture and the search for meaning in culture are important because they are the main source of human action (Bruner, 1990; also see Mattingly, Lutkehaus, Throop, 2008). Bruner believes that the process of meaning-making is closely related to culture.

Bruner (1990) explained the connection between culture and meaning-making as follows. Culture and language are symbolic systems that humans use to construct meaning. In this sense, Bruner sees culture and language as a "toolkit" in the formation of meaning. This is because, in Bruner's view, humans live and exist in society, so culture influences and shapes their mental condition (Bruner, 1990).

In the perspective above, the meaning and values that are lived become the direction of human life. Humans act to realize the values that they live. The values that are lived generally come from the culture in which the human grows and develops. With this consideration, Bruner (1990) argues that what causes human actions is culture and the effort to find meaning. In this regard, Bruner rejects the view of the behaviourist group, which emphasizes that human actions arise from biological drives. For Bruner, the biological functions of the body are only conditions that can be overcome. Of course, there are biological limitations, but these limitations do not always confine humans. For example, the existence of fasting in various religions shows that humans are not only driven by biological needs. Instead, humans who fast do so because there is a meaning which human being tries to live.

The example of someone who fasts demonstrates that what humans seek is not only biological drive. Therefore, Bruner (1990) suggests that to understand humans, we need to understand how human experiences and actions are shaped by beliefs, desires, meanings (intentional conditions), and how these beliefs, desires, and meanings are embodied through culture. In other words, culture, in Bruner's view, provides meaning because in culture, humans seek value through symbols that exist. Bruner, a psychologist, calls the discipline that studies this subject as cultural psychology.

Up to this point, the authors have explained the connection between human action, meaning, and culture. The final step is to reveal the relationship between narrative thinking patterns and *the factors aforementioned*. According to Bruner (1990), the organizational principle of these factors is not conceptual but narrative. Culture explains the values contained in it, generally in the form of narratives rather than concepts. For example Malin Kundang, instead of explaining the concept of respect for parents, the form taken is a story or narrative. In the narrative thinking pattern, beliefs, hopes, and meanings are packaged in the form of a story. In other words, the narrative thinking pattern helps humans to easily capture the stories that grow and develop around us.

The second reason why the narrative thinking pattern is important is that it is closely related to how the brain works. From the perspective of cognitivism, in an effort to understand something, the brain works by forming mental representations that can take the form of frames, scripts, and schemas. All of these terms refer to the same thing, which is the brain's ability to form mental structures about concepts, events, or activities (Whitney, 2001). A simple example is the word "party." When we hear the word party, our brains form a mental representation that is a gathering of many people, there is various food, music, and so on. In other words, these terms (frame, script, or schema) are used to indicate the brain's ability to process information.

In this writing, the focus is on the term "script". Script is often interpreted as the manuscript of a film, drama, or even writing. In the context of cognitivism, a script means a structure that describes the sequence of events in a specific context (Schank, Abelson, 1975). A script is a mental representation of the social situations that we commonly encounter in everyday life (Whitney, 2001). Take, for instance, the script of teaching activity. The common script that occurs is the sequence of events as follows: 1) the first event, the student is ready in the classroom; 2) the second event, the teacher enters; 3) the third event, the student greets the teacher; 4) the fourth event, the teacher takes attendance, starts the lesson, and so on. When we hear the word "teaching," this sequence of events usually comes to mind. And this is the script that helps us understand the word "teaching". This sequence of events appears because of the experiences we have.

In that script, the sequence of time and cause-and-effect relationships are essential (Chen, 2004). Because of these relationships, things that are not directly expressed can be understood in a particular context. For example, the conversation below:

A: So, do you want to have dinner together?

B: Oh, I just had pizza earlier.

Even though the answer is not direct, people can understand that it is a form of rejection of the invitation given. With an answer like the example above, we can interpret that the invitation is rejected. This script is what helps us understand the situation. Or, to

put it more simply, this is how the brain works to help us understand the situation we are in.

A script can be interpreted as knowledge stored in our memory, and this can occur spontaneously, automatically, or semi-automatically. This knowledge is based on familiar contexts with ourselves (Grishakova, 2009). This knowledge contains "common sense" in everyday life. And because it starts from everyday life, it is closely related to culture. Misunderstandings of scripts can occur when there are cultural differences.

The way the brain works in the form of a script is closely related to a narrative mindset that relies on understanding through the sequence of time and cause-and-effect relationships as well as interpretation. With this ability, the human brain tries to understand the world (knowledge) by organizing knowledge through time sequences, looking for relationships between things in the form of cause and effect or other relationships. In seeking these relationships, the meaning of narrative events emerges. This is possible because according to Bruner (1996), knowledge is formed, organized, and created. By revealing this, Bruner (1996) argues that science has a narrative element.

Bruner's opinion can be interpreted as follows: humans form narrative patterns in organizing their experiences and memories (Bruner 1991; 1996). And this is the third reason why narrative thinking is important. Narrative form is a common and easily found form in daily life. And, narrative thinking helps us to be sensitive to the existence of narratives around us.

The power of a narrative does not lie in whether the story is true or not. The power of a narrative that attracts humans is actually in its resemblance to daily life. Folklore can be fictional but have an amazing power because of its resemblance to daily life. The story of Guardiola with Barcelona team in the 2009 Champions League final illustrates this. To motivate his team, Guardiola asked them to make a video of Barcelona's journey combined with the film *Gladiator* (Lazuardi, 2020). Regardless of whether the film *Gladiator* is true or not, the similarity of events, namely fighting to win, gives more motivation to the Barcelona. Narrative provides inspiration because of the similarity of events. So, in this context, even fictional narratives can provide inspiration when the story contains similarities in a specific context. Narrative thinking has the ability to reference specific stories that may "speak" to us because of certain experiences triggered through those stories.

Pedagogical Orientation

Narrative thinking as one way of knowing has implications in the realm of teaching practices. The thinking pattern proposed by Bruner opens up new dimensions in teaching

that may have been overlooked. Bruner's concern is that information seems to already exist and what is needed is only codification to capture that information. Narrative thinking, on the other hand, opens up interpretative space because it accesses symbol systems that are dispersed and brought to life by members of society (Bruner, 1996). This symbol system is not only dispersed but also perpetuated and passed on to future generations. Therefore, from Bruner's thinking, several logical consequences can be inferred regarding teaching:

1. Science is a creation, and it is inseparable from the culture in which it was born. As we have discussed earlier, every science has a narrative dimension. Bruner, through narrative thinking, invites educators to understand the narrative elements of the science being taught, even in the case of the science, which also has a narrative element. In Bruner's perspective, even the exact formulas are explained narratively, and students are not merely asked to memorize formula symbols. For Bruner, narrative comes first. After understanding the narrative, the brain is invited to recognize the formula symbols.
2. Still related to the first point, familiarity with local culture is essential from Bruner's perspective. Without cultural symbols, it is difficult for humans to find meaning because, as mentioned above, meaning finds its space within the culture. Cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings because what is not spoken in the script in one culture may be interpreted differently in another culture. The following is a simple story based on the author's experience:

There was an educator who had a strong Javanese culture. This somewhat influenced the educator in expressing his ideas or in educating his students, who tended to be indirect. One time, after a break, a student was eating fruit by himself. The educator was not pleased and reminded him by saying,

"Wow... it's so delicious to eat alone, isn't it?" The student responded innocently,

"Yes... it's especially delicious on a hot day like this..." The educator was surprised and remained silent.

From the story, the student's response was not meant to be malicious. The teacher's script was meant as a satire, but the student's script was just an expression that needed to be answered. This occurs because of different interpretations that arise from different cultures. Therefore, narrative thinking is very cultural. Introducing culture in teaching is not just about introducing values but also symbols used in everyday life.

This also brings other consequence: not all stories can be easily understood by children when the culture in the story is very different from the children's culture. For

example, funny stories (jokes) that come from a certain culture. In that culture, it may be very funny, but sometimes the humour diminishes when translated into another culture. Therefore, to understand a story, the symbol system in the story needs to be explained first. This symbol system relates to law, custom, tradition, religious belief, ritual, and so on (Dowling, 2011).

3. Narrative thinking opens up interpretation or meaning or reflection because this pattern thinks from the side of chronological order and looks for relationships between one and the other. In looking for the relationship between one event and another, one character with another character, two narrative worlds are highlighted: the world of action and the world of consciousness of the character in the narrative. Therefore, narrative thinking will support the reflection process when teachers help students to highlight these two narrative worlds (the world of action and the world of consciousness) from each shared story. Simply put, these two narrative worlds invite us to continue grappling with questions of what I am thinking, feeling, and knowing, and what I have done, am doing, and will do. The same thing happens when we read a story: what is the character thinking, feeling, and what is the character doing? Answers to questions related to these two narrative worlds can trigger our evaluative side. This evaluative side can then become a reflection material for us.
4. Narrative thinking also reminds us of the narrative dimension of human beings. The journey of human life contains narrative elements where there is a beginning, middle, and an end. This narrative dimension teaches us that we, humans, are authors of our own life stories (MacIntyre, 20073rd). As authors of our own stories, we are also invited to be good authors: building responsible stories in our lives. Ultimately, the hope is that the stories we build will have a good and beautiful "ending."

Conclusion

The narrative mindset is often less discussed or rarely discussed. However, in practice, this narrative mindset is very important because it helps humans in finding meaning. According to Bruner, meaning is very important because it is the driving force for humans to move forward in their life journey. Developing a narrative mindset from an early age can greatly help children in their development as humans.

Because it is cultural, the narrative mindset will encourage children to be closer to the community where they belong if it is developed optimally. In other words, developing a narrative mindset makes children grow and be rooted in their culture. Narratives can

be an inspiration for children's lives because stories can exemplify human life and vice versa, human life can also exemplify stories (Bruner, 2004).

The narrative world helps our development as humans through two things. Firstly, by retelling experiences, we are invited to process, organize, and reflect on our experiences. Secondly, by emphasizing the importance of the authorial element within us, we are invited to take responsibility in creating our own stories. This means that we are invited to reflect on our goals, motivations, and the ways we choose to achieve them so that the story we write has a good and beautiful ending.

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