Life Among the Pages: Studying, Researching and Teaching through Barbara Czarniawska

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Abstract

This article offers an auto/biographical and reflexive engagement with the work of Barbara Czarniawska, foregrounding the epistemic and academic value of narrative methodologies in contemporary social science research. Drawing on Czarniawska's theorisation of narrative as both method and object of analysis, the contribution explores how auto/biographical writing functions as a space of mediation and negotiation between life and text. Through a personal re-reading structured around Hernadi's triad, the article reflects on three auto/biographical moments associated with different academic roles (student, doctoral researcher and lecturer), coexisting modes of engagement with Czarniawska's thought. Rather than treating biography and auto/biography as self-referential or methodologically weak genres, the paper argues that narrative reflexivity constitutes a necessary condition for sensemaking in organizational and social studies. By situating Czarniawska not merely as an object of study but as an active presence within the author's own narrative practice, the article demonstrates how scholarly identities are performatively constituted through storytelling. In doing so, it challenges positivist assumptions about objectivity and generalisability, reaffirming narrative inquiry as a rigorous and ethically grounded approach to knowledge production. Ultimately, the article positions Czarniawska's legacy as a living methodological invitation, one that continues to shape how scholars learn, teach, and narrate the social world.

1. Introduction

In her work, *Narratives in Social Science Research (2004)*, Czarniawska observes that the novel is the literary genre most representative of modernity (Czarniawska, 2004 [2018], p. 21). Before reaching this conclusion, the author invites the reader to reflect on the role that other literary genres played in past eras, such as the epic and the saga in heroic societies or tragedy in the city-states of antiquity. Epic and saga historically functioned as collective narrative forms in heroic and kin-based societies, organizing memory around exemplary deeds and shared origins (Ong, 1982), while tragedy in classical antiquity staged moral conflict and civic responsibility within the polis. The novel, by contrast, emerged as the literary form capable of accommodating fragmentation, interiority and social plurality, thus becoming emblematic of modernity (Watt, 2001). Its openness to contingency, multiplicity of perspectives and unfinished endings mirrors the epistemic condition of modern social life, making it particularly suitable for the understanding of organizations (Boje, 2001; Czarniawska, 2004 [2018]; Vivek & Nanthagopan, 2023). Within the social sciences, the so-called narrative turn has been articulated through different strands of thought, ranging from psychology and

Submitted 16/12/2025 – Accepted 21/02/2026

philosophy to organizational studies. Narrative has been approached as a fundamental mode of human cognition and meaning-making (Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988), as well as a constitutive process of organizing (Czarniawska, 1997; Gabriel, 2000; Boje, 2001). Czarniawska's contribution is distinctive in this landscape, as she does not treat narrative merely as an object of analysis, but mobilizes it as a methodological practice, blurring the boundary between theory, method and empirical material (Czarniawska, 2004 [2018]; Czarniawska, 2014 [2020]).

But why does this assertion carry renewed relevance today? According to Jean-François Lyotard (1979), modernity ended when we stopped believing in Grand Narratives. Yet despite the proclaimed end of the Modern era, its transformation into *Liquid modernity* (Bauman, 2000 [2002]) and even the denial of its very existence (Latour, 1993 [1995]), the novel genre continues to survive and plays a fundamental role in our societies. It persists as an indispensable hermeneutic device capable of restoring a morphology of meaning to the fragmentation of human and/or post-human experience through the narrative re-composition of reality (Ricoeur, 1991).

However, what struck me was the author's insistence that for us, students and academics (or more generally for researchers) the auto/biographical genre (with the slash to identify its character, separated in form but united in its purpose) represents a particularly significant type of novel (Czarniawska, 2004 [2018], p. 27). Our identity and our understanding of the world are built through the stories we narrate and hear about ourselves and others around us. Scholars, in most cases, learn how to do research through the stories of other scholars and gain a series of benefits (not only in terms of "what to do" or "how to do it") from contact with the glimpses of personal life revealed by those same authors and stories. Biography and autobiography therefore form part of this process of meaning-making and continually call back to one another (Stanley, 1993). It is possible to state that on the one hand biographies and autobiographies, as narratives, help us give a natural sense to the methodologies and theories we use daily in our work. On the other hand, this genre of novel forces us into an introspective confrontation with ourselves. Auto/biography, in particular, becomes an opportunity to recognize that the tools discussed by Czarniawska (2004 [2018]) apply both to understanding the external world (that is, as methods for collecting and analyzing data) and to interpreting our inner world (that is, understanding social life as narrative in action).

However, the use of the auto/biographical genre is not free from problems, as it is often subject to criticisms of excessive self-referentiality and limited scientific generalizability. Moreover, the traditional conception of auto/biography presupposes a coherent, monolithic self that remains stable over time and unfolds in a linear way. This approach has led to the marginalization of certain more complex subjectivities and, above all, of the unruly nature of lived experience (the *bio* contained in auto-bio-graphy, so to speak). In this regard it is Czarniawska herself, who reminds us that auto/biography does not describe a preexisting order but is an attempt to give coherence to an intrinsically fragmented self. Along the same line, Paul John Eakin (1999) argues that personal identity is inseparable from narrative practices. The self is not a fixed entity a priori but is constituted performatively in the very act of telling, through the selection and interpretation of events. Auto/biography thus becomes a space of mediation between text, life and individuals.

In writing these lines about her, in order to remember her, I enact that constructive self-referentiality which ultimately represents both a shortcoming for science and the only true contribution of this work. In this context Barbara Czarniawska herself ceases to be a mere

Submitted 16/12/2025 – Accepted 21/02/2026

object of study (biography) and becomes an integral part of my narrative (autobiography). How, then, can I read a chain of fragmented events that form part of my life and turn them into an auto/biography? Among the many occasions on which I returned to *Narratives in Social Science Research* for teaching and research purposes, one interpretive tool offered by the text gradually acquired a central role for me: Hernadi's triad (1987), to which Czarniawska dedicates an entire chapter. In his work Hernadi distinguishes three ways of reading a text, ways that in practice tend to intertwine (Czarniawska, 2004 [2018], p. 101) but that in theory make it possible to account for different moments of positionalities between reader and text. By transposing this hermeneutic framework from the written page to lived experience, an operation that is legitimate if we accept that identity is a narrative practice, the aim of this contribution is therefore to remember Barbara Czarniawska through a re-reading of certain moments of my life connected to her, offered to the reader through auto/biographical writing.

As Eakin reminds us (1999; 2008), autobiography is not simply a literary genre but a practice through which the subject shapes their own identity. In this perspective my personal re-reading becomes a way of remembering Barbara Czarniawska within the fabric of my experience. A bond that profoundly marked the last seven years of my life and that, although developed mainly through her writings, took shape in three moments of encounter and dialogue with and about her. Three moments that I tried to overlap with the categories of Hernadi's triad. Three moments through which I re-read my academic path: as an undergraduate student in an explicative mode, as a doctoral student and researcher in an explanatory mode and finally as a lecturer in an exploratory mode. These moments are not presented as successive stages of progression, but as overlapping narrative positions that continue to coexist and re-emerge throughout academic life.

In conclusion, this brief personal reconstruction hopes to show that engaging with Barbara Czarniawska's work through autobiographical narration can serve not only as a form of intellectual remembrance, but also as a methodological illustration of narrative as a mode of knowing. By foregrounding the reflexive and constitutive role of storytelling in academic life, the paper suggests how Czarniawska's approach continues to provide valuable resources for understanding learning, identity, and sensemaking in contemporary social science research.

2. Life among the pages: My journey with Czarniawska

Mobilizing auto/biography in organizational and social studies does not mean privileging the self as an object of interest, nor indulging in introspection for its own sake. Rather, auto/biography functions here as an epistemic and narrative device through which the conditions of knowing become visible. By foregrounding situated experience, auto/biographical writing makes explicit the partiality, temporality and relational nature of theory-building. In this sense, auto/biography operates as a methodological practice that allows theory and life to interrogate one another, exposing how concepts are encountered, appropriated and transformed through lived experience. Auto/biography thus relies on specific narrative dispositifs - selection, sequencing, reflexivity and self-positioning - through which knowledge is not merely reported but actively composed.

Submitted 16/12/2025 – Accepted 21/02/2026

In this section I present three auto/biographical accounts of my encounters with Czarniawska, re-read through the categories of Hernadi's triad.

TABLE 5.1 *The hermeneutic triad*

Explication	Explanation	Exploration
Standing under	Standing over	Standing in for
Reproductive translation	inferential detection	existential enactment
Reconstruction	Deconstruction	Construction

Source: After Hernadi (1987)

Table 1. The hermeneutic triad proposed by Hernadi (1987) and presented by Czarniawska (2004, p. 61)

I interpret these auto/biographical episodes as moments within a learning process: first beneath the text, then above the text, and finally in place of the text. In this way I show how my way of reading, thinking and doing research has changed over the years precisely through my encounter with the author's thought. Despite the sequential presentation of these three moments, it is important to refrain from interpreting them as a linear progression or as a movement toward greater authority. These positions should therefore not be understood as stages that replace one another, but as narrative tensions that continue to coexist, overlap and sometimes contradict each other across studying, researching and teaching in continuity with the Hernadi' Triad coherence. As Czarniawska herself explicitly states in her presentation of this theoretical method (Czarniawska, 2004 [2018]). The decision to depict this construction through the phases of explication, explanation and exploration is not to replace each other, but rather to establish them as narrative positions that coexist, overlap and occasionally conflict.

Explication	Explanation	Exploration
Student of Organization	PhD researcher in Organization	Lecturer of Organization
Studying Czarniawska for my own comprehension	Researching my fields through Czarniawska	Teaching Czarniawska as existential enactment
Reconstruction Czarniawska theory thought	Deconstruction Czarniawska through my research	Constructing new ways of narrating Czarniawska

Table 2. Implementation of Hernadi's Triad as a method of auto/biographical comprehension.

Although I insist that the three postures coexist, the narration inevitably orders them. This retrospective ordering is not meant to prove progression, but to make visible how coherence is produced ex post through narrative work, the very operation that auto/biography performs. Hernadi's triad therefore functions here both as an analytical vocabulary and as a compositional constraint that I keep deliberately visible, so that the reader can see how "learning" is narrated into a sequence while remaining lived as oscillation.

2.1. Reader standing under the text: Back in the Organization class exam

It was 2019, October if I recall correctly, and I had just begun a new course of study intended to refine the skills I had acquired during my bachelor's degree and to prepare me, at last, for entry into the job market. I hadn't yet decided for which job. It was a complicated period,

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because without knowing it, shortly thereafter I would find myself facing a very personal experience of chronic illness that would accompany me for years.

During that period there was a certain sense of euphoria among the first-year students in my degree programme. It was a newly launched master's programme, and we, the students of that cohort, were its first-ever enrolees. There was a sense of uncertainty in the air. The students wondered whether the investment would pay off, just as the lecturers were trying to find ways to give meaning to this new educational experiment. I remember that the first-year programme included a series of elective exams to be placed in one's study plan as one saw fit. Most of these were accounting exams, then a couple of Law exams, and finally something caught my curiosity. It was a course in "Organizational Learning", a subject I knew very little about but that brought me back to those happy moments experienced during the Business Organization course I had taken two years earlier. I decided that I would include that exam in my study plan, only to immediately forget about it because of more imminent exams. Weeks went by, and since no one escapes the tyranny of time, it came for me as well, reminding me that the course I had chosen would be starting shortly. I decided to send an email to the professor holding the chair to ask for some preliminary information, and so we arranged a first meeting in his office.

That morning, I woke up very tired; the period had begun in which every inch of my body played a melancholy and bleak symphony, but I decided to go to the appointment, nonetheless. It was on that day, at that time, in that space and with that body that I first came to know Barbara Czarniawska. Not physically, nor through a Zoom call, as some of you might think. I will get to that in a moment.

I knocked on the office door and after a few seconds I was invited in. The office was different from how I had imagined it, especially because of the presence of a few small, framed pictures and paintings with just the right critical and self-reflective weight. It was an office whose space had something to tell. In the meantime, the usual anxiety that had given me no respite for months rose within me. The nausea prevented me from speaking and my head began to spin. I needed to sit down. Thinking back on it, that day I did not even take off my coat, and my face must have conveyed as much discomfort as one of the paintings to my right, depicting a man with a chainsaw cutting through histograms, conveyed the subjectivity of Economic thought.

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Image 1. The place of my first encounter with Barbara Czarniawska.

In any case, that day I had arrived at the office with the usual questions of a university student, the usual doubts, the uncertainties about the programme, the desire to understand the feasibility of that exam in relation to my academic progress, and so on.

Then the professor asked me:

« Do you smoke? Do you mind if I smoke? ».

I replied that it wasn't a problem. But I couldn't help wondering whether he was actually allowed to do so. To dispel any doubt, I decided to take part in the misdeed and lit a cigarette myself. Then he asked me another unlikely question:

« How would you feel about studying this book instead of the one listed in the syllabus? ».

It was a green book, the green of a forest after the rain, with a lady with white hair absorbed in some unknown reading, drawn in pastel on the cover. *Narratives in Social Science Research* was the title of the book, and this caused me great confusion. At the time I knew nothing about the Narrative Turn, nor about the value that narration could have in relation to Organizational Studies. What has been defined as the "narrative turn" marks a re-orientation in the way we understand organizations. It is a shift from understanding organizations as stable objects, to understanding them as a continuous process of meaning creation achieved through narrative practices. The construction and deconstruction of meaning become a narrative activity, through which realities, identities, and courses of action are made intelligible and negotiable, rather than explained by universal laws (Czarniawska, 2004 [2018]; Bruner, 1986).

I took the book in my hands and asked:

« Is there really a book about narration in the Faculty of Economics? ».

I was told to try studying it, to see what impression I could form of it. I tried to understand where the catch was, then I took the book, noted down all the necessary information, and told the professor that we would meet again once I had completed a first reading of the text. From that day on, Barbara Czarniawska, without knowing it, marked crucial moments and decisions

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in my development as an individual and as a thinker. I went in person to the publisher of the book in the centre of Naples and then headed home, where I abandoned the book for a few weeks. Once I had completed the more imminent exams, I made a brief classroom exploration among my course mates to understand who had chosen the same exam as I had. I had to acknowledge, however, that Accounting and Law had prevailed over Organization, as I turned out to be the only one who had chosen that exam. I would have to study alone, something I hated doing at that time, but that was what I did. As Czarniawska herself writes: the most obvious method of explication is to summarise the text. Which is also the method most used by university students in the early stages of studying.

Nothing during that period helped me understand more clearly what Hernadi (1987) means by explication. Studying that text was for me a moment to confront intellectual issues, but also personal ones. The idea of engaging with such a fascinating topic as narration led me to study that book day and night, to talk about it with friends, to peek through the author's references. But it was also a moment of deep discouragement. I remember that after a first reading I went to the professor to ask him a simple question that tormented me:

« How can a person know all these things? How did the author manage to fit all these writers into a meaningful discourse? ».

At the time I did not know what academic research was, nor how much the author had invested in bringing that topic to the attention of the relevant community. The professor was very kind and replied:

« You'll see that when you too are a pleasant little old man, if you wish, you will manage it as well ».

Weeks passed and I re-read the book several times. I took the exam with great success and for a while I forgot about Barbara Czarniawska and her work. Yet something in me slowly matured. I am certain that my decision to try pursuing a doctoral degree two years later can be traced back to that feeling of discouragement at not knowing. I believe I understood it many years later, but without meaning to, Czarniawska had pushed me towards research. This explicative posture, however, did not belong only to that moment. Even today, in research and in the classroom, I repeatedly return to this position of standing under the text, exposed to its opacity and to my own not-knowing. She had legitimised that part of me that saw in Economic Studies what I could find interesting, relevant and beautiful rather than grounded, scientific and reliable (Czarniawska, 2004 [2018] p. 216). I like to imagine that, after leaving the professor's office for the first time that day, Czarniawska and I took a long walk to the centre of Naples to visit the publisher of the book.

2.2. Reader standing over the text: Those days as a doctoral student

The phase of explanation is distinguished by a reversal of positionality between the reader and the text. What was previously summarized, translated, or reinterpreted in one's own explanatory language is now first investigated and then de-constructed. At the end of my university experience, I decided to continue my education through a doctoral path, a period during which it was possible for me not only to continue studying some of the theoretical and methodological perspectives proposed by Czarniawska, but also to apply them in my research works. But let me proceed in order. Between the end of my first year at university and the beginning of my doctorate, I had set aside (though not forgotten) Czarniawska's writings. Caught up in the euphoria of having completed my master's studies and of having begun the

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doctorate, I found myself in a spiral in which time seemed to contract. It was toward the end of that same year that I happened upon the opportunity to attend a Winter School focused on the use of narrative methodologies for social research. After almost two years, therefore, the possibility of returning to those themes so dear to me opened once again. Now, also thanks to the writing of my master's thesis, I felt more aware and better trained, and I was curious to return to those topics with new eyes. Only after enrolling did I discover that Czarniawska herself would also be giving a brief presentation. I remember that learning this came as such a surprise to me that I almost decided to withdraw. On the one hand, I felt the need to deepen my understanding and learn more about the topic of narration; on the other, I felt the desire to interact with the author who had inspired me so profoundly years earlier. I wanted to give a human form to the texts I had read.

It was to be an entire week of meetings held at one of Rome's universities, and I therefore necessarily had to find accommodation nearby. This allowed me to arrive a day early and to get to know some of the people with whom I would share this formative experience. I do not deny that during those days I thought a great deal about the risk of encountering Czarniawska outside of her texts. A part of me feared that, if she were not the person I expected, a myth would fall, and with it the attachment I felt toward her writings. But I tried not to dwell on it too much, and with the support of my colleagues I spent a few days enjoying myself. A few days later the classes began, opening with formal presentations and explanations of the program. I recall that we played an introductory game to break the ice, using tarot cards: each person had to draw a card and then explain why that figure had fallen to them. It was very enjoyable, but my mind was already focused on what was about to happen shortly thereafter.

A few hours later, we were informed that someone wished to greet us and to wish us good luck for this experience. I clearly remember the anxiety rising, and I wondered whether I would manage to exchange a few words with her. On the screen appeared a woman with a pleasant face, very light hair, and a smile that put me at ease. She vaguely resembled the cover of the Italian edition of *Narratives in Social Science Research*. She spoke clear Italian, though it was impossible not to notice the strong Scandinavian influence. It was indeed Barbara Czarniawska. I am certain that she said something very interesting about the value of narration and about the opportunity we had in taking part in that experience, but I was too absorbed in wondering what intelligent question I might ask her at the end of her talk. Thoughts as rapid as they were ineffective followed one another, and before long someone asked whether we had any questions. The usual reverential silence fell over the room. My mind raced. I gathered my courage and raised my hand.

Looking back on it, I do not believe that everything I am about to recount from this point onward was the result of a reasoned intention. I would not even know why, among the many possible questions, I decided to ask precisely that one. With a slightly trembling voice, I asked:

« Professor, it is a real pleasure to meet you. I was wondering… how can organizations tell their own stories? I mean, tell them without being influenced by the individuals who narrate them? That is, can organizations narrate themselves? ».

It immediately struck me as a very foolish question, and yet I received a very kind reply, one that has inescapably marked my entire research experience. Czarniawska smiled at me and then answered:

« I don't know, but it would be very nice to have research on this. Perhaps one has to draw the organization itself out of individuals? Maybe one day you will let me read something ».

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What she meant by this I do not know, but the mere fact of being acknowledged in my curiosity reassured me. Once I returned home, I began once again to study some of her texts, in search of my own methodological reinterpretation that might help me make sense of her invitation. Standing over the text did not mark a passage toward mastery. On the contrary, this explanatory posture intensified uncertainty, multiplying questions rather than providing answers and revealing the fragility of interpretation itself.

A few months later, Czarniawska was invited to give a seminar at my university. During that period, I indulged in the thought that perhaps an opportunity would arise to engage in dialogue about some questions concerning my research and the methodologies I had decided to employ. Perhaps I would ask her to help me understand the exchange we had had some time earlier. These fantasies were short-lived. I was informed that the professor had chosen to hold the seminar remotely, as certain conditions did not allow her to travel physically to Naples. I was very disappointed. Nevertheless, the seminar was extremely engaging, especially because by that time I had already gained familiarity with a substantial portion of the relevant literature. I asked her whether she had any advice to help me write during moments of creativity void. She told me that she was accustomed to reading a novel before devoting herself to writing a paper or anything academic. This is a piece of advice that I still carry with me today, in both my heart and my everyday life. That was the last time I saw and spoke directly with Barbara Czarniawska.

The years of field research that followed, spent in contact with individuals, in relating to their bodies, their spaces, and their stories were also moments in which I sought an answer to that question. I am still not certain what Czarniawska meant by "drawing it out of individuals," but what has my research been up to this point, if not an attempt to draw the organization out of individuals? Over the years, I have devoted much of my time to interviewing people; yet their stories, however rich, have never constituted the sole empirical source of my work. I have photographed artefacts, observed bodies in motion, and attended to the narratives of material and virtual spaces, all in an effort to apprehend the stories of organizations, of which those individuals may have constituted only one of the channels through which they could narrate themselves. I have sought to rise above her texts, her theories, to deconstruct them and then reconstruct them as I saw fit, in search of new and previously unexplored intertwining.

2.3. Reader standing in for the text: That time in class…as a lecturer

Outside, it was raining. It was one of those dreadful days on which you are forced to choose between the freedom of your motorcycle, which also means arriving to the office soaked to the skin, or remaining stuck in the traffic of a city paralysed by the rain with your car. The usual two turns of the key in the door, and I was inside. I went to the window without turning on the light, raised the shutter, and that timid sun breaking through heavy black clouds gave colour and shape to the study. It was the very same study where, years earlier, I had first encountered Czarniawska as a university student, and to which I now continued to return for one reason or another. What I love most about that space is that it never changes. Along the walls hang the same drawings as on that day, though they now carry an entirely different meaning for me.

I let my gaze wander along one of the bookshelves, searching for some paper on which to jot down a few issues I intended to address in the class that would begin shortly. The first lecture was never an easy task. Czarniawska's books tend to intimidate university students, and I had

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grown accustomed to that. My eyes fell on a volume with a fiery red cover. It had been years since I last reread my master's thesis, and I could not help reflecting on how emblematic that colour was of a series of misguided decisions. As if awakened from a dream, I recalled that I had devoted an entire chapter to what I considered the foundational issues of Organizational Studies, including those explored in several of Czarniawska's books. The very same books that were now kept in my backpack, and through which I would attempt to teach what I knew to the students of the Organizational Behaviour course.

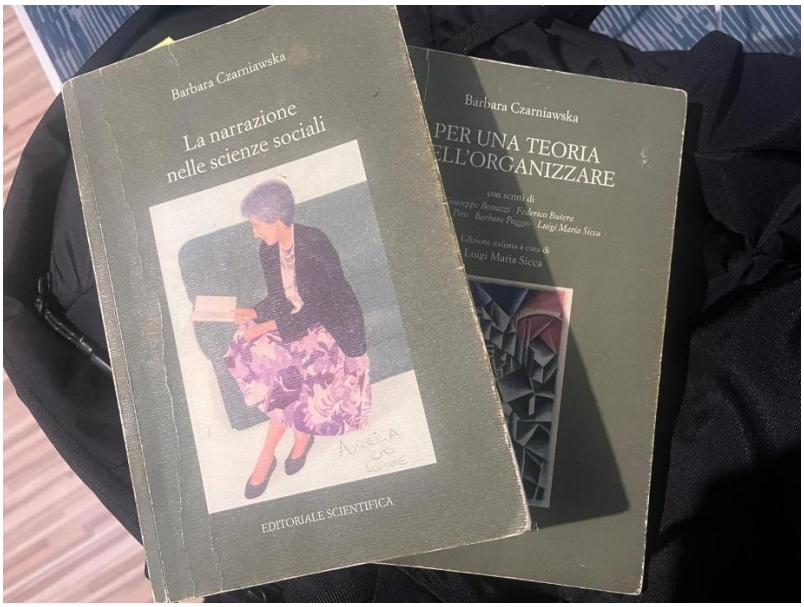

Image 2. Artefacts and memories that I bring with me to every lesson.

Exploration means that the reader temporarily takes responsibility for the text, risking authorship without ever fully taking the place of the author. This position should not be confused with epistemic authority or with speaking in the author's name. On the contrary, it is perhaps the most problematic posture, as it exposes the lecturer to misreading, resistance and failure. And what possibilities remained to me other than this one, now that Czarniawska was no longer there? The quintessence of exploration is to project one's identity into a text or to construct it through the text (Czarniawska, 2004 [2018], p. 120), and I found myself, in part, invested with a legacy and an immense responsibility. Yet this legacy cannot be understood as substitution. Personally, I never experience myself as truly 'in for' any text I bring into the classroom, but rather as constantly oscillating between explicative, explanatory and exploratory modes.

Writing more than twenty years after the first publication the first edition of *Narratives in Social Science Research*, it seems obvious to me that Czarniawska's perspectives today possess immense value and are, at the same time, extremely complex to internalise. As scholars, we may appeal to the idea that the Narrative Turn has become a fashion of the past. We know how the academic world functions, and this, to some extent, relieves us of certain questions and concerns. Yet this does not necessarily apply to students, especially university students. That was my thought while reading the chapter I wrote five years ago. I have always thought that the main difficulty for Management students lies in the process of accepting that the social sciences cannot provide certain and objective answers about reality. But why should they? Their strength, as Czarniawska herself suggests, lies precisely in offering us the possibility of

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constructing a "plot of reality", a theory of what surrounds us, without the burden of having to think of it as the only possible one. An openness of endings.

I continued leafing through the pages of my thesis, analysing the thinking of a younger version of myself, in search of those doubts and fears about which I had wished, at the time, to be reassured. I did not agree with what I had written, and in part I did not agree with some of the things written by Czarniawska herself. By then, it was almost time. I took out paper and pen and wrote a light note: teaching the difference between conformity and reliability for scholars of social sciences. That day the classroom was sparsely attended, as many students had seized the opportunity to stay in bed and enjoy the sound of the rain on the rooftops. I offered a brief introduction to the author and to the themes we would address throughout the course and then asked whether there were any preliminary questions. Experience had by then taught me that there is always at least one question, the question that cyclically reappears every year. And so, a student in the front row raised his hand and asked:

« Why are we studying a book on narration in a course in Business Administration? ».

It was the very same question I had asked myself many years earlier. I smiled and then replied:

« We are not obliged to do so. But doing so may offer advantages compared to not doing so ».

To be honest, I keep asking myself the same question every time I have to start a new year as lecturer. At that moment, teaching did not coincide with certainty, but with the exposure of doubt. The classroom became a space where authority was suspended rather than affirmed. I had borrowed that statement from Czarniawska, with the difference that now the responsibility of convincing them of its validity rested with me. As I spoke those words, I noticed something strange; I was not quoting them, I was saying them. There is a subtle but decisive difference between repeating an author's thought and discovering that thought has become part of one's own way of being in the world. Years earlier I had underlined that sentence in pencil, with the sense of someone annotating something important but still foreign. Now it came out of my mouth with the naturalness of a personal conviction, and yet it continued not to be entirely mine. This, I believe, is what Hernadi means by exploration, that liminal zone in which their voice and yours become temporarily indistinguishable, and in which that indistinguishability exposes you…before your students, before the text, before yourself.

The silence that followed was filled only by the incessant tapping of the rain against the classroom windows. I saw the student lower his hand, not entirely convinced, while the others stared at me, waiting for me to turn that cryptic aphorism into something useful for their future as managers. Yet I felt that the figure of Czarniawska was changing shape: she was no longer a ghost to be commemorated, but something more alive than ever. I was doing exactly what she had theorised. I was rewriting her text through my own voice, adapting it to that damp room and to those sceptical gazes. Since then, in my relationship with students, I have found personal ways of explaining Czarniawska's theories. I have found keys to readjust those ideas to the contexts of younger generations, and vice versa. I have embraced the responsibility of becoming an author, and every year, in every classroom, with every student, I experience the creation of new intertwining. Moments that remind me of Czarniawska, moments in which I seek to pass on that passion for research and for uncertainty.

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3. Between the lines: What studying, researching and teaching through Czarniawska thaught me

This article challenges the tendency to treat reflexivity as a supplementary or corrective practice, proposing instead to understand it as a longitudinal narrative posture that accompanies the scholar across different academic moments of positionalities. By retracing my encounters with Czarniawska and some of her works, through the categories of Hernadi's triad, the narrative has attempted to show something that cannot be stated without first being enacted: that the relationship between a scholar and a theoretical framework and its exponents is never purely intellectual. Rather, it is temporal, material, embodied and constitutively unfinished. What follows is an attempt to draw out the implications (methodological and/or pedagogical) of this representation, moving from the autobiographical to the analytical register, while remaining accountable to both.

On the very first hand, implication concerns reflexivity. What the three vignettes reveal, however, is something more specific than a general endorsement of reflexivity: they reveal its longitudinal character. The posture of standing under the text, which I associated with my first encounter with Czarniawska as an undergraduate, did not disappear when I became a doctoral researcher or a lecturer. It resurfaced, sometimes unexpectedly, in the middle of a seminar, in the margin of a fieldwork notebook, in the moment before answering a student's question. This is not a weakness of the scholar but a structural feature of narrative knowing. As Polkinghorne (1988) argues, narrative understanding does not accumulate in a linear fashion; it reorganises itself retroactively, assigning new meaning to past experience in light of present circumstances. Reflexivity, understood in this longitudinal sense, is not a methodological choice one makes at the beginning of a research project. It is a condition one inhabits across an entire scholarly life. Auto/biography, far from being a merely solipsistic exercise, emerges here as the necessary space of mediation between text, life and individual. Returning to one of the initial claims of this work, this auto/biography has attempted to show the potential that this narrative genre can have for scholars, regardless of their field of study. I cannot determine whether it was the events I reconstructed that gave meaning to my relationship with Czarniawska or the reverse. But it is not my intention to find out.

On the other hand, the Narrative Turn within which much of Czarniawska's work can be situated, emerged from a broader reorientation in the social sciences marked by renewed attention to the narrative constitution of the self (Ricoeur, 1991), the relation to the other (Bruner, 1986), the formation of communities (Somers, 1994), and the social and historical ordering of experience (White, 1987). These discussions remain generative precisely because they resist resolution. They offer sensibility to be cultivated. This distinction matters enormously in the context of university education, and it is one that the three vignettes enact concretely. In the first vignette, studying Czarniawska as an undergraduate meant encountering a framework that could not be summarised without remainder, something always escaped the notes, the highlights, the exam answer. In the second, working with her ideas as a doctoral researcher meant discovering that her concepts were not tools to be used but orientations to be inhabited, often uncomfortably. In the third, teaching her work as a lecturer meant accepting that transmitting a theoretical sensibility is categorically different from transmitting information. Each of these experiences points toward the same conclusion, that the value of Czarniawska's contribution for students in training lies not in the answers it provides but in the quality of the questions it makes unavoidable.

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The third hand (which is always the hardest one to imagine) is perhaps the most consequential, and it concerns what it means to work within a theoretical tradition after the death of one of its central figures. We have to consider the hypothesis of intend that condition as an epistemological one, that affects the entire community of scholars who have worked within the narrative tradition she helped to define. It transforms exploration, in Hernadi's sense, from a hermeneutic posture into an ethical one. To stand in for a text whose author can no longer respond means choosing, with full accountability, which version of that thought to carry forward, which questions to keep open, and which tensions to refuse to resolve prematurely. Derrida (1994) argued that inheriting a thought is never a passive act of reception, but always a reactivation, a selective and responsible restart. Inheriting means filtering, choosing and, in choosing, exposing oneself to the risk of betrayal.

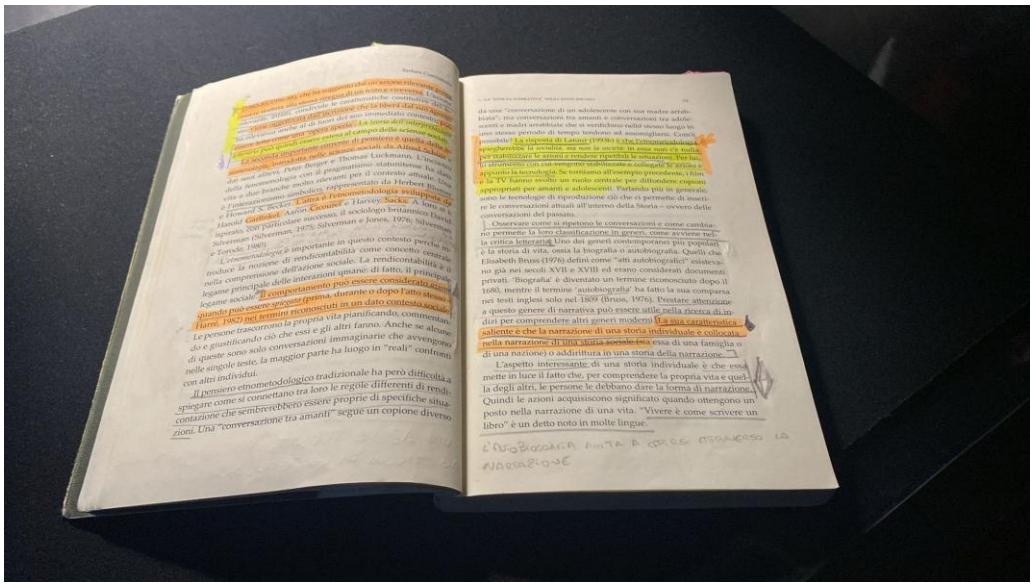

Image 3. My first copy of Narratives in Social Science Research*. Highlighters, pencil marks and pen strokes bear witness to readings that took place at different moments in my educational journey.*

The legacy of Barbara Czarniawska does not lie only in the amount of her writings but in the challenge she left to us: that of continuing to reflect on the stories that we produce and that we listen to. This means accepting that the theories we make use of are tools for reading the disorder of the world. And while this disorder continues to rage outside our classrooms and our studies, it is up to us, now, to negotiate a new meaning for it. In this perspective, some considerations that I have annotated over time and that find in the work of Czarniawska a decisive foundation become useful again. If we accept that theory and plot coincide, as the author herself suggests, then we must recognize that every production of knowledge in the social sciences moves between three strategies of narrative composition. The first is the one in which only the plot exists and no story: it is the case of pure theory, which offers interpretive structures without yet rooting itself in a concrete event. The second is the one in which we find only the story and no plot: the empirical studies that gather the world as it is, recording events, voices, traces, without yet reconnecting them within a conceptual framework. Finally, the third strategy, perhaps the most complex and the most fruitful, is the one in which story and plot are developed in parallel, intertwining with each other, allowing the data to feed the theory and the theory to give form to the data.

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In conclusion, the relevance of the Narrative Turn lies not in its formal adoption as a methodology but in its capacity to shape how scholars learn to remain inside uncertainty. Studying Czarniawska today means equipping oneself not with answers but with the ability to inhabit questions responsibly and to distinguish, as she always insisted, between not knowing and not caring to know. This distinction, modest as it may appear, is perhaps the most demanding thing one can ask of a student, a researcher, or a teacher. It is also, I would suggest, the most necessary. The disorder that continues to rage outside our classrooms and our studies will not be resolved by better methodologies alone. It will require scholars capable of narrating it with rigour, humility, and the willingness to begin again.

Keywords

Narrative, Auto/biography, Hernadi, Identity, Social sciences

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