

# Classical Myth in the University: A Contribution to Professional Teacher Development

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## Abstract

The use of Classical Greek myth as a narrative and metaphorical tool can contribute to the construction of a professional teaching identity. Adopting a biographical narrative approach, the present study sought to assess this contribution in a group of teacher and researcher trainees undertaking a postgraduate university course. The construction of personal narratives used for collective interpretation by the participants that generated them was analysed and interpreted in relation to the development of teacher professionalism. Our findings show the effective activation of metacognitive processes in order to rethink teacher professionalism from a narrative point of view. Using the structure and content of Classical myths as a scaffold, participants established valuable reflections on crucial aspects of teaching, identifying personal achievements and conquests as well as fears and insecurities. The structures latent in myth provided an effective framework with which to project and identify at least three hermeneutical themes—symbolism, function and structure—that form constituent elements of professional identity and are not only intertwined but are also constituted within a community of practice. Thus, Greek myths continue to offer an interesting cognitive and emotional scaffold that contributes to teacher professionalism, facilitating the formulation of a reflective, collaborative and personal meaning of identity which brings together personal teaching experiences and knowledge and is necessarily shared with the surrounding community of practice.

**Keywords:** higher education, teacher identity, educational research, qualitative research, myths

## 1. Introduction

The wealth of Classical Greek mythology remains essential cultural heritage in the 21st century. Both Heidegger (2006) and Gadamer (1997) have reaffirmed the continuing value and credibility of myth. In a similar vein, Nussbaum (2010; 2015) has proposed that higher education should help students develop an awareness of the importance of literature in its multiple facets in order to contribute, through this narrative art, to cultivating our humanity. Our capacity to develop opinions, sensitivity, emotions, sentiments and thought would be severely hindered if we were deprived of stories and thus the possibility of employing our imagination when telling and listening to narratives. As Bauman (2013) has observed, we live in a world saturated with volatile, immediate and erratic information; consequently, the reinterpretation of Classical myths being conducted in the field of mythological research, which has generated exhaustive and interesting arguments for some time now, is especially relevant in today's world. The recovery of values, ideas and reflections by a diversity of disciplines and mythographers (Eliade, 2000; García, 2013, 2014; Graves, 1985; Greenblatt, 2011; Kierkegaard, 2007a, 2007b; Lévi-Strauss, 2002, 2003, 2006; Ricoeur, 2013) reflects the rich potential that can be extracted from this Classical culture that endures, however battered, in contemporary culture (Carretero, 2006).

Myths continue to provide answers to the same fundamental questions and situations posed 3000 years ago, probably because, as Frye has claimed (1996; 1998), our minds are still amazingly primitive. However, as Olson has argued (1998), *the primitive mind* is not necessarily as *rudimentary* as some imagine. The archetypal episodes preserved in this narrative format depict the existential dance of life that animates, discourages, spurs and moves us, and from this same perspective, they seem to project the perennial conflicts (fear, attack, death, freedom, hunger, love, sex, etc.) of human psychology in an attempt to express the desire to pursue happiness and warn about the fears that dilute it (Perinat, 2002). Since myths are not logical frameworks, the psychological impact generated by the words or images they contain induces unexpected reflections, beliefs, feelings and

experiences in readers or listeners which these may accept, discard or affirm and potentially deploy to existentially manage their future development, assimilating it as human experience (Nepo, 2013). In some ways, myths imply the liberation of an imagination fettered to the tangible, to rational logic or to the enlightened paradigm (Perinat, 1995), to leap into fiction, while at the same time presenting another reality that is also true.

## 2. Metaphorical Teaching Narratives

Since the 1990s, numerous studies have attested to the importance of adopting a biographical narrative approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2014; Huberman, Thompson, & Weiland, 2000; Kelchtermans, 2014; Mcewan & Egan, 1998) as a research strategy in the quest, among other things, to understand the meaning of teaching experience; and in the last two decades, a heightened awareness has emerged of the importance of autobiographical narrative in the construction of the sense and meaning of professional identity. Recovering the subject's voice and personal story implies an authentic hermeneutic shift with which to elucidate the construction of the intricate and complex concept of teacher identity (Robin, 1996), indelibly reconstructed both socially and academically in the subject's biographical and performative (Watson, 2006), located (Dosse, 2007; Rivas, 2009; Wenger, 2011) and ubiquitous (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009) evolution.

The potential of this narrative shift that occurred in the 1990s remains the subject of interesting explorations that enable unsuspected associations with human development in general and with important issues in particular; in the present case, with professional identity and the constitution of teacher professionalism (Lewis, 2011). Furthermore, through this narrative format, we socially construct not only reality (Berger & Luckman, 1986) but also the structure that socialises our minds and makes it possible to expand the horizon of potentialities, exploring the allogical connections that also constitute knowledge and know-how (Bruner, 1997).

In research on the use of narratives, recourse to the metaphorical thinking these contain has generated interesting findings. Metaphors are not in the least irrelevant to understand our world, since our standard conceptual system is basically metaphorical (Lakoff & Johnson, 1991; Melville & Wallace, 2007); furthermore, they are now considered a valuable means to understand professional teaching life and have become the subject of research attention. Studies that have intertwined narrative and metaphorical thinking have yielded a solid bedrock of knowledge about the constitution of teacher professionalism and identity (Anspal, Eisenschmidt, & Löfström, 2012; Argos, Ezquerra, & Castro, 2011; Ben-Peretz, Mendelson, & Kron, 2003; Leavy, Mensorley, & Boté, 2007; Mahlios, Massengill-Shaw & Barry, 2010; Martínez, Sauleda & Huber, 2001; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). Metaphors appear to restructure complex situations, creating new meanings of the surrounding world and facilitating the assimilation and persistence of learning (Owen, 1984).

## 3. Myths as Metaphors: An Avenue to Address the Development of a Professional Teaching Identity

Classical myth narrative is metaphorical in the sense that it is not only a question of language but also of a conceptual structure that involves intellectual and sensory dimensions (image, colour, shape, texture, sound, taste, etc.); thus, structure is also an aesthetic experience, providing new *experiential gestalts* and facilitating our immersion in other a logical universes thanks to its persuasive, pedagogical and social function, creating new realities (Lakoff & Johnson, 1991). As also suggested by Zhao, Coombs and Zhou (2010), metaphor implies a psychological process by which experience is formatted and leads to new forms of conceptual knowledge.

While aware of and adopting a logical caution of the possible conceptual distortions and confusion that the use of ill-judged metaphors can create when trying to understand and describe phenomena that do not correspond to those used (Turbyne, 1974), we would like to note that this type of mythical tale usually complies with the criteria suggested by Quinn (2002) to create good metaphors: comprehensibility, connection with real-life experience, illumination of the meaning of a critical experience, appropriate expression of expected values for the audience and contextually and situationally appropriate in the present moment.

However, we would also like to highlight an aspect that seems to us important, which is that the emotional themes that permeate these stories can penetrate deeply into our minds (Núñez, 2011), activating our capacity to be moved and promoting participation and engagement in a nascent community of practice, as we observed from the very outset of our study with the participants in our learning and research activity.

Myth's distinctive emotional fabric induced a singular rapport or synchronisation with mythical narrative among our study participants, as evidenced by their immediate understanding of and engagement with the demands made of them, perhaps due to the activation of mirror neurons (Damasio, 2010; Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004; Rizzolatti, 2006), which make us feel and project given emotional states in situations that are meaningful to us, shedding light cognitively and intellectually on our inner world.

Proposing a scaffold of mythical and metaphorical narrative for students to make use of seemed to prompt them

to examine the stories that dominated their own lives, opening up the possibility of re-telling, rethinking, deconstructing and transforming them in new terms. Campbell's (1991) observation that "if you want to change the world, you have to change the metaphor" seems particularly apt here. In a sense, we proposed that students practise the *art of seeing* in their own academic lives, because we think that something can only begin to be resolved if it is first observable (Rosenberg, 2013).

In short, myths help us to mould and interpret experience as an epic that suggests meaning. Thus, providing participants with the means to see and interpret their own construction of a teacher and researcher identity in this initial stage of training (Ayala, 2016) also enabled them to acquire new professional roles.

Numerous studies with diverse objectives have reported using myth as a teaching strategy in university education. For example, Fernández-Cano and Fernández-Guerrero (2011) employed the conflict between Palamedes and Ulysses as an interpretative metaphor for the debate regarding the use of qualitative or quantitative research paradigms in the social sciences and education (De Miguel, 2015; Moral, 2016). Subsequently, they also conducted a review of myths as interpretative metaphors of educational research (Fernández-Cano, Torralbo, Vallejo & Fernández-Guerrero, 2012). Meanwhile, Pajack (2012) explored narcissist processes in the distortion of teachers' personalities in the 1930s using the myth of Narcissus.

In an attempt to minimise the lacuna in learning among novice teacher trainees during their professional teacher and researcher development (Orland-Barack, 2014), we chose to focus on the curriculum to explore situations that promote collaborative learning in university education (Payne & Zeichner, 2017), while at the same time leveraging the humanist legacy of Classical Greek myth. We aimed to establish a research community (Wenger, 2011) as a motivating context that would make it easier to confront real-life situations, emphasising reflection in action (Zellermayer & Tabak, 2007) and enabling participants to reach a better understanding of their identity as the core of their teacher training (Abdenia, 2012; Cross, 2017; Mathewson & Reid, 2017) through engagement in reflective dialogue (Swinkels, Koopman, & Beijaard, 2013) and autobiographical narratives using Classical Greek myths as metaphorical scaffolding (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). Classical Greek mythology forms an intangible heritage whose founding narratives have served as a fount of inspiration not only in innumerable Classical and contemporary artistic fields (Monneyron & Thomas, 2004), but also in education and psychology from various perspectives.

One of the earliest studies to link education and Classical mythology, particularly from a more psychological than pedagogical standpoint, was the classic book *Pygmalion in the classroom* by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968). However, the present study examined the hypothetical potential of myth to contribute to the construction of the experiential meaning of teacher identity on a postgraduate university course. In particular, we wished to explore the possibility of using Classical Greek mythology in a context of collaborative learning in order to facilitate the (re)construction of experiential meaning (Ruys, Van Keer, & Aeltermans, 2014) and gain a better understanding of the constitution of teacher professionalism and identity.

Our study revealed the relationship between students' narratives and the themes of Classical mythology; as March (2008) has suggested, we attempted to see the actions of mythical characters in the light of postmodernity. Thus, we designed a learning activity that formed part of the subject "Qualitative Research Methods" delivered on a Master's Degree in Educational Research, in which students were required to apply the coding procedure to their own narratives. They also had to relate their narratives to one of four proposed myths that served as material to explore both the content and the problems that emerged in the coding process. The activity concluded with a group discussion in class. This paper reports the results we obtained regarding the content of their narratives.

We posed the following research questions:

- 1) Which of the proposed myths do participants select to describe encouraging or discouraging experiences encountered during their university education?
- 2) Why were the experiences they recount encouraging or discouraging?
- 3) Have they found it meaningful to relate Classical myths to their professional development as teachers? If yes, why?

#### 4. Method

We designed a university education activity based on the use of autobiographical narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kelchtermans, 2014) related to a Classical myth in the context of a community of practice, with the aim of constructing meanings. Our participants consisted of 32 students taking this master's degree, 75% of whom were women. Most held an undergraduate degree in teaching, although a small proportion held degrees in

subjects such as sociology or anthropology, and some were working, primarily in secondary education.

They were asked to write an optional, anonymous account of a personal experience that had either encouraged or discouraged them during their teacher training and send it via *Google Drive*. Furthermore, they were asked to relate this account to one of four Classical Greek myths: Pygmalion, Procrustes, Sisyphus or Scylla and Charybdis. Brief, standard information about these was provided for use as a reference and to help them relate one of the myths to an experience encountered during teacher training.

We are aware that the use of a myth as metaphorical image could resemble a projective test such as the Thematic Apperception Test (Murray, 1990). However, our activity differed from this type of test since the ambiguous black and white images used in the above-mentioned test are entirely unrelated to the dramatic, existential and universal metaphorical images (Campbell, 2014) contained in Classical Greek mythology, nor was it our intention to identify any personality traits that might come into play (Serfass & Sherman, 2013).

Participants' accounts were processed using AQUAD software (Huber & Gürtler, 2013) to generate a map of the codes that emerged from their responses, validated by experts in qualitative research, from the School Teaching and Organisation department.

## 5. Results

With respect to the myths selected by participants (*first research question*), an initial examination of their accounts indicated that Pygmalion, Sisyphus and Procrustes were the most frequently referenced myths, whereas that of Scylla and Charybdis appeared less frequently, albeit intensely, judging by the emotional quality of the accounts.

This emerging pattern was revealing; for example, we found that practically all of the narratives related to Pygmalion used this myth to highlight nurturing situations which had provided support, encouragement and momentum during participants' professional development as teachers:

I have chosen the myth of Pygmalion [...]. In part, I became a teacher because of those teachers who had confidence in me and transmitted their teaching vocation to me. The hopes they placed in me made me see the beauty of this profession. Because the hopes teachers place in students are like the roots of a tree that sustain it and allow it to grow and bear beautiful fruit. (Narrative 030)

The myth of Sisyphus was referred to in situations of what we termed existential acceptance; namely life experiences through which participants became aware that existence always consists of gains and losses, comprising an eternal dance in which conquests and achievements alternate with new demands for effort and work:

I have chosen the myth of Sisyphus since in some way it reflects the situation of any teacher. You make an effort to study, spend four years studying a degree at university, and when you finish, you think... Great! I've achieved what I wanted, I'm a teacher now...but actually, and this isn't true. The stone starts rolling back down the hill and you realise that you have to sit a public examination, with all the difficulty that process entails. Then another journey begins, continuing education and training! That's what life's about. (Narrative 017)

The myth of Procrustes, the mutilator, sheds light on what could be termed asymmetrical power relations, uncomfortable and frustrating situations in some degree subjects:

During the second year of my teaching degree, I had a teacher in the subject of Experimental Sciences who would explain how to do the work he set us in order to pass the course, in addition to the examination [...] While we were doing this work, we attended tutorials to ask for advice, and he would completely change the structure of the work and make us change it to his liking, and so on endlessly, modifying the structure, since it was never how he wanted. That reminded me of the myth of Procrustes, when he modified the bed to his liking to torment his guest. (Narrative 015)

Finally, the myth of Scylla and Charybdis reflected the inevitable complex, critical dilemmas that arise in life. Life consists of endless, constant choices that oblige us to make rapid decisions in contexts in which not all or the best information is available (as is usually the case in education):

This academic year, I set myself two academic goals: to pass both the public examination and the Master's Degree in Educational Research. One of them would represent Scylla and the other, Charybdis, where both are sea monsters between whom I must pass without letting either of them suck me under. For me, they are two challenges that require a lot of effort if I am not to fail at either. (Narrative 022)

Through the emergence of these situations, we believe it is necessary to perceive an awareness of one's own life

story, which acquires not only a chronological but also an interpretative meaning, endowed in some cases with an epic resolution:

When you are asked to do some work or resolve a situation without knowing exactly which path to take, with very few references and which implies a new reality for you. But in the end, you manage to do it through reflection and seeking references, giving it meaning and creating your own proposal through learning, because in reality you know it makes sense. (Narrative 002)

But in others it remained open, inconclusive, but nevertheless defined, visible, identified and, therefore, positioned to integrate better in the chain of meaningful events that shape this complex and constant identity located throughout a personal life story:

Throughout my education, I have always been told to do things in a certain way and in a specific order. This situation discouraged me, because in some way it blocked my creative process by making me work in a completely mechanical manner... without allowing my creativity to blossom, which is so important in a subject such as the performing arts. (Narrative 011)

Participants gave four reasons for feeling encouraged or discouraged (the *second research question*). First, teachers could be encouraging or discouraging. This situation explicitly suggests to us a qualitative awareness in our own training. It should be noted that a practically equal number of teachers nurtured, nourished and sustained trainees' learning:

I was encouraged because above and beyond everything else, teachers must have a vocation and love their work. The expectations of these teachers helped me grow as a person and appreciate the work of teachers, because education is the engine that drives a society. (Narrative 030)

Second, the participants showed through attitudes of resilience and perseverance their positive determination to persist with strength and tenacity in their learning, which perhaps they did not usually state explicitly:

[At] that particular time, the general philosophy of these oafs encouraged me in my teaching practice, since it gave me an example of how not to use exams. Of the power of an authority figure responsible for teaching you to make you feel helpless, and, therefore, how much I myself needed to watch my attitude to make sure that nothing even remotely similar ever happened. In short, this contributed to my process of self-reflection and brought me closer to my future students. (Narrative 007)

Third, the diversity of emotional experiences was perceived and felt on occasions as facilitating or blocking progress; positive experiences (love, affection, inner strength, etc.) were vividly perceived as drivers, but negative experiences (fear or the feeling of emotional or intellectual insecurity) predominated and were experienced as a very powerful brake on their professional development. These latter were not usually explicitly processed in class and constituted the subject of debate and exploration in this community of research:

I was discouraged [by the intellectual and emotional insecurity triggered by that teacher], as it undermined my vocation and made me doubt if I was really equipped and fit to be a teacher. (Narrative 020)

Fourth, the lack of practicality of learning experiences was a dimension which concerned and discouraged participants:

Because I think it is necessary to deal with reality and everything we do is very theoretical. We're never going to learn anything that way. (Narrative 006)

When asked about the potential interest in relating past myths to the present (*the third research question*), it became evident from practically all of the accounts that participants considered this association between myth and narratives of professional development to be interesting and meaningful. In this context, the main arguments referred to the use of mythical metaphor as a means to explicitly give shape to an inner teaching world, contributing to gain a better understanding of their educational trajectory as a professional:

There is a metaphor underlying the original text that we can relate to situations that have occurred to us, in both our training and our teaching experiences. (Narrative 015)

In addition, this activity allowed them to consider their teaching and training experiences in an introspective and reflective manner:

This activity entails reflection on the stage of academic training that we have not been asked to do before. (Narrative 027)

In particular, it helped them identify and scaffold the underlying emotional themes in conflicts, enabling them to

deal with these better as part of their personal growth and involving a process of resolution, transformation or management of conflicts whereby these were incorporated as a kind of personal epic:

I think yes, because often you need to see your situation reflected in a myth, story or even a picture to stop feeling alone or helpless, regain your confidence and tell yourself that you can achieve whatever goal you set for yourself. (Narrative 009)

## 6. Discussion and Conclusions

Our findings suggest that our activity helped activate students' metacognitive processes (Costa & Kallick, 2014) by fostering professional awareness through narrating and reflecting on their experiences, but also assessing and supporting them because this is a necessary part of any process of identity construction (Watson, 2006). We would like to highlight the importance participants attributed to carrying out a particularly appropriate teacher training activity in the teaching institution (Korthagen, Attema-Noordewier, & Zwart, 2014) that defined a sensitive teaching approach (Nóvoa, 2009).

As regards the *myths selected*, Pygmalion, Sisyphus and Procrustes formed the predominant triad that participants used to scaffold their most personal experiences. This profile reflects attitudes aimed at exploring possibilities and instilling confidence (Pygmalion), resolving the inevitable uncertainties entailed in the process of initiation to life (Sisyphus) and dealing with unavoidable institutional power relations (Foucault, 1980) (Procrustes). In agreement with a study by Rivas and Leite (2009), these restrictive teaching models served students as a paradigm of confrontation to shape their *identity by omission or opposition*, enabling them to adopt future teacher roles far removed from these asymmetric and frustrating experiences of power and questionable teaching quality.

Use of the myth of Scylla and Charybdis was less frequent but highly emotionally charged as the participants recounted unavoidable dilemmas. Formatting and viewing these situations through myth may help students to process them, overcome a block and resume taking decisions (Rosemberg, 2013), achieving a degree of happiness by thus closing distressing situations (Hafenbrack, Kinias, & Barsade, 2014), protected by the possibility of expressing them in a community of research (Zellermayer & Tabak, 2007) that validates and supports them.

In particular, the emergence of the emotional semantic fields that permeated their stories suggests (Koschwanez et al., 2013; Ochsner & Gross, 2005) the spontaneous activation, through writing, of a therapeutic emotional component which served to heal.

With regard to the second of the research questions, *teachers continue to represent a key factor in facilitating or hindering* their professional learning processes (Avalos, 2016). Resilient behaviours and emotional feelings made up a second constellation of motivating or discouraging forces that we locate within the intensely emotional dimension that permeates teacher training (Kelchtermans & Deketelaere, 2016). Limiting but concealed feelings such as shame or guilt were striking (Yuan & Lee, 2016).

Emotional identification as cognitive regulation has been proposed and studied by Ohsner (2013), and possibly in this sense, myth as metaphor helps us in the task of managing emotion, whereby awareness of the emotion reduces its impact and normalises feelings of doubt about maintaining motivation and achieving academic success (Price, 2013); however, we also believe that sharing a framework of belonging and connection contributes to construction within a context that seeks to provide a true community of research.

Lastly, the necessary practicality of their learning raises the always latent problem of the relationship and tension between theory and practice in the development of teacher professionalism, and in our view represents an important subject for future research in order to establish a better approach to teacher training (Korthagen, 2016).

The third of our research questions concerned the *reasons participants gave for their potential interest in relating mythology and teacher professionalism*. This revealed that the activity provided them with illuminating holographic scaffolds by proposing complex metaphorical themes in which concepts, emotions and behaviours were intertwined, enabling them to relate their own personal experiences to unknown situations and connect *the known and the less familiar* (Quinn, 2002), thus reaching a new understanding of their experience (Saban, 2010) and reinterpreting their accounts as epics in this context of cooperative and reflective learning. This same reflection led to the emergence and construction of professional meaning and identity to the extent that it examined personal experience and related it to other experiences and knowledge at the same time as forming part of a community of learners (Glass & Rud, 2012). If postmodernity challenges university education to develop the capacity for critical questioning (Chan, 2014), it is no less true that making them aware of their own emotions is another focal point in this challenge (Elik, Wiener, & Corkum, 2010; Lampert, 2008).

In conclusion, in this sense of conceptualising ourselves as symbolic animals (Cassirer, 1975) suspended in networks of meanings that we are continually reconstructing (Geertz, 1988), we wanted to constellate their narratives in order to weave and update meanings that would transform chaos once again into a more comprehensible cosmos (order). If the celestial mythological constellations contributed to map the dark night, we have attempted to constellate teachers' accounts through earthly myth with the aim of mapping the processes involved in constructing teaching professionals. We hope it has been convincing.

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