CHAPTER 2

Making Sense of Work through Collaborative Storytelling

Abstract Similar to social identities, each story and its narration is unique and yet relational and situated in a context of history, culture, and materiality. In this chapter, we explore local and global systems of narratives and their powerful influence on the stories and metaphors we tell and we are told to make sense of our embodied lived experiences. Through our theory of *Collaborative Storytelling*, we discuss how *Collaborative Storytelling Activity*, with the tool *Collaborative Story Craft*, expands individual and collective sensemaking at work to build inclusive narratives in organisational change.

Keywords Communities of practice • Embodiment • Metaphors • Narratives • Power • Sensemaking • Social and cultural scripts • Stories • Storytelling

*When the storyteller tells the truth, she reminds us that human beings
are more alike than unlike.*

—Maya Angelou

Each individual possesses unique stories based on their social identities, relationships, and embodied experiences in a material world. Our bodies and social material worlds are based on interacting systems that have

purpose, roles, and practices which influence and regulate our choices, how we act, our daily routines, our relationships, our work life, and local and global governance. Each individual is uniquely impacted by these systems in different ways that range from empowering to oppressive.

Intersecting these systems are powerful narratives that affect how stories are signified and told (Snævarr 2010, p. 168).

Narrative is defined as a sequence of events with a beginning, series of unfolding events but not necessarily an ending (Halverson et al. 2011, p. 11).

Narratives are produced and accessible to others through different means such as written texts, spoken words, pictures, symbols, artefacts, and so forth (Cleland Silva and Fonseca Silva 2019, p. 86). A narrative requires both a narrator and an audience, whose viewpoints and social identities affect how the narrative is received (Gabriel 2004). For instance, a narration sent through a work email about an event is received differently than a conversation in the coffee room about the same or similar event.

In this way, narrative is not simply reporting what has been done but rather how the individuals feel about the story they are telling (Greenhalgh 1999). While being narrated, the story provides agency to the narrator as the story “can float freely for any talk about a sequence of events” (Labov 2013, p. 18).

A story is what is being recounted which differs from the way the story is told through narration. In this respect, narratives can be understood as signifiers, whereas stories can be seen as the signified (Snævarr 2010, p. 168). This said, stories do not have to be restrained by narratives, and yet, the narrator or receiver may believe that stories are.

In local and global systems, certain stories can dominate or be restrained by narratives (White 1995) which are based on the individual’s social position and identity as well the individual’s perception of self in relation to

others. For instance, based on the cultural and historical context, narratives can construct stories of the “ideal worker” (see Acker 1990, 2006), the “good immigrant” (Shukla 2016), or the “caring nurse” (Cleland Silva 2019), which have material consequences for the actors affected by the narration. Material consequences can be, for instance, the “ideal worker” receiving higher pay than the “caring nurse,” whose work is constructed as a “calling” rather than of productive value. This highlights power relations in stories based on social identities which are embedded in the local and global systems of narratives.

EXCLUSIVE NARRATIVES

Exclusive narratives that construct stories of others come with a cost (Cleland Silva and Fonseca Silva 2021). For instance, narratives in the workplace that are imposed on the employees can lead to confusion, disengagement, and isolation. The challenges of identifying oneself in the collective story limit the opportunities of organisational growth and sustainable ways to collaborate.

These unconscious biases can mindlessly be incorporated in the organisation’s culture, creating work practices based on stereotype narratives. As exemplified by Ng and Sears’s article “Walking the talk on diversity” (2020), narratives of managers and leaders send messages to the employees of how the organisation constructs diversity and practices of inclusion. If the narratives are exclusive, the practices will continue to exclude employees with detrimental effects on the individual well-being, motivation, and organisational performance.

When the workplace prevents individual narratives and identities to be represented in a common story and practices, the culture of the organisation enables a narrow sense of lived experiences. Exclusive narratives and practices not only harm the individual but also send a message that the employees’ only option, in order to be themselves, is to leave the organisation (Dnika and Thorpe-Moscon 2018, p. 4). Or, if they stay, they feel obliged to “bargain” with the employers’ dominant narratives to work with their sense of purpose and skills (Cleland Silva 2019, p. 173). The sensitivity of knowing how to identify and address exclusion and inclusion in the workplace narratives highlights how important it is to talk openly about differences (Dnika et al. 2016).

Confronting or countering narratives that exclude actors, who subsequently feel “on guard” (Dnika and Thorpe-Moscon 2018, p. 4), requires

a recentring of the story, shifting the narratives from the dominant “in group” to the peripheral “out group” (Choudhury 2015, pp. 82–84). This is a process that the organisation must support, facilitate, and incorporate into their strategies and workplace activities. Policies of diversity are not enough to create an organisational culture which is inclusive. For social and cultural change to take place, leaders have to acknowledge the stories and narratives that they share, promote, and encourage versus the narratives and stories that they ignore, belittle, and silence.

There is an old Yiddish saying “what is truer than truth? The story.” Story can serve as a communication tool in processes of making explicit sense of events (Eshraghi and Taffler 2015) and through metaphorical lenses, the story harnesses the complexity of people’s emotional states (Fainsilber and Ortony 1987), especially during change (Smollan 2014). A good story that resonates and connects the narrator with the receiving audience helps to communicate and make sense of our deeper collective lived experiences (Weick 1995, p. 61).

Let us tell you a story about truth that has been told in many languages and cultures. This is our narration.

TRUTH AND STORY

There once was an old woman who was tired, hungry, and weary from her travels. She came upon a small village which she entered in search of hospitality, food, and rest.

She knocked on the first house’s door, which was soon answered by a young man who glared at the old woman with disgust.

“What do you want?” he asked with impatience.

“Please, I am hungry and thirsty. Would you be so kind to invite me in and offer your hospitality?” requested the old woman.

“Absolutely not! Can’t you see I am a busy man? I have no time for you!” he sneered.

On she went and at every door she knocked, she was either turned away, unacknowledged or even screamed at and spat on.

Giving up her search for hospitality, the old woman went to the village’s square and sat by a well-kept fountain.

It may have been a few minutes or hours, the old woman could not recall, but when she raised her eyes, she saw a beautiful stranger in a long golden cloak entering the village.

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This stranger knocked on the same doors whose residents rejected the old woman. But, this time, the stranger was greeted with a warm reception and an abundance of kindness. She was told over and over again, "Please enter!" and "What a pleasure it is to meet you!"

And, could you believe it? Even laughter could be heard in the air as the stranger skipped her way through the village from door to door.

As the beautiful stranger thanked her last host, she glanced over to the village's square and spotted the old woman, who still sat by the fountain, feeling both weak from her travels and defeated from her poor reception. The beautiful stranger approached the old woman and asked, "Dear woman, why do you look so sad?"

The old woman replied, "After a long journey, I sought food, water, and rest in the same houses that you have entered, but after looking at me, none of the villagers thought I was worth their attention."

Acknowledging her privilege and feeling a strong sense of responsibility, the beautiful stranger replied, "Would you consider coming back to the same houses with me? I have a long cloak that I could embrace you under and at the very least, you will be able to enter the homes."

The old woman agreed, not only because she needed food and water but also that she was charmed and intrigued by the stranger's presence.

As both women walked towards the first house together, the beautiful stranger said, "I still don't know your name."

The old woman replied, "My name is Truth, what is your name?"

The beautiful stranger smiled and answered, "My name is Story."

As the women entered the houses, the villagers saw Truth with different eyes.

Take a moment and ask yourself if this story speaks to you.

- Who were the main characters and how do you describe them?
- How did the story make you think?
- How did the story make you feel?
- Was there a problem or conflict that you identified in the story?
- How was that problem or conflict addressed and by whom?
- Did the story evoke a metaphor that you can identify in your reality?

In this situation, there are no right, or wrong answers like in all stories, but rather an active exchange of collaborative sensemaking. Story invites new interpretations, giving possibilities to consent and reconcile with the reality that our social worlds intersect with various narratives, reflecting the uniqueness of human experience.

THE SOCIAL WORLDS OF SNAKES AND LADDERS

Most often, stories are, in part or entirely, filled with metaphors which are used as an entry point to dialogue amongst people to make sense of larger, complex social systems. Metaphors are defined as “the phenomenon whereby we talk and, potentially, think about something in terms of something else” (Semino 2008, p. 1) and stories filled with metaphors are metaphorical stories (Gibbs 2013; Cameron et al. 2010).

According to Marshak (1996), recurring metaphors in organisations create an invisible force that influences our behaviours and ways of thinking. He calls this invisible force a metaphoric field which is “an inter-related set of conscious to unconscious, explicit to tacit, core to peripheral, organizing themes that are expressed metaphorically and which structure perception and behaviour” (Marshak 1996, p. 152). By identifying these themes, Marshak believes that we can inform ourselves about “conscious, pre-conscious and unconscious assumptions, beliefs and patterns” (ibid.), and the ways in which these metaphors impact our behaviour. For instance, Marshak writes that if organisational change efforts are consistent with the metaphoric field, members are able to relate to the change, even if the change is not fully accepted. On the other hand, if the efforts are inconsistent, members “just won’t get it” and quickly ignore, disengage, or discard the effort (1993).

Using a metaphorical story to illustrate systems of narratives, we draw from the board game *Snakes and Ladders*.

With Indian origins, the game *Snakes and Ladders* is over a century old, and its original use has its roots in morality lessons: a player’s progression up the board reflects life’s journey complicated by virtues (ladders) and vices (snakes) (Pritchard 1994, p. 162).

Designed for two players or more, the game is relational. The players are expected to roll a die on their turn, in order to move up the

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numbers, through the gridded board. “Ladders” and “snakes” are placed throughout the board, connecting two specific board squares. The object of the game is to navigate the game board, according to the rolls of the dice, from the start (bottom square) to the finish (top square), helped by climbing ladders, but hindered by falling down snakes.

At first glance, the game is a simple race based on sheer luck with a common shared sense of the same reality. However, using the lens of the game’s original morality purpose, we can interpret the metaphor of moving up and down ladders as a social system based on narratives of social position, power, and privilege rather than the simplicity of rolling the dice (Fig. 2.1).

Exploring the board game as a system of narratives, we begin to understand power as a social and relational phenomenon (I am winning or I am losing against someone else), but also a psychological one (I lost, therefore, I have bad luck), which we may carry or discard in our own constructed narratives of the world.

If we define power as our capacity to impact or influence our environment (Diamond 2016, p. 3), the game takes on new meaning in terms of where you are positioned on the board (higher or lower number), but also your capacity to influence how you navigate the snakes and the ladders.

Rather than luck, your positioning on the game board applied to real life becomes a sum of your privilege based on your rank in the world, impacting how you navigate and your influence on the larger social system.

Arnold Mindell (1995, 2002), an author, therapist, and teacher in the fields of transpersonal psychology, body psychotherapy, social change, and spirituality, argues that our position and influence in the hierarchy of a social system derives from individual ranks. He describes four sources of these ranks which Julie Diamond (2016, p. 71) divides into social and personal powers in her book *Power: a user guide*.

- Global rank (social power): context dependent, seemingly static and yet based on social norms which are random (e.g., race, wealth/class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability)
- Local rank (social power): context dependent, changes rapidly and sporadically, associated with local norms, values, conditions, partici-

Fig. 2.1 Game of Snakes and Ladders. (Image source: Tricia Cleland Silva, 17.4.21)

pants, topics (e.g., seniority or position in group, compliance to norms, popularity, communication style)

- Psychological rank (personal power): life experiences, emotional fluidity, communication skills, humour, relational skills, insight into self and others
- Spiritual rank (personal power): connection to larger purpose, vision, transcendent experience, knowledge of self and other, awareness of death and life

An individual may navigate their position with ease based on global and local ranks, but their psychological and spiritual rank (or personal power) decides how they socially construct their capacities and courage to deal with the snakes and ladders. In other words, power is both physical as well as a state of mind (Diamond 2016, p. 57).

The ways in which the individual navigates the game board mirrors how social systems of narratives are interpreted, embodied, and emotionally experienced. In parallel to the game and metaphorically speaking, everyone has their own board that represents their lived experiences, revealing the discrepancies of rank in a system of narratives. For instance, the positional rank of individuals on the board is context-specific and may reflect more their position in the dominant social and cultural group rather than luck. In other words, as in the game, the board of these individuals may consist of a privileged discrepancy of ladders versus snakes. Whereas other individuals' boards may limit them to the lower ranks specifically because of the many snakes encountered.

As opposed to the game, where luck is the driving force for action, in practice, having an overview of one's own "board" (and mapping some of the snakes and ladders) can influence choice and decision.

Acknowledging privilege and the position in one's own board also harnesses a sense of the social and personal powers which are occupied in relation to a context. When we can change the context, Viktor Frankl says, "we are challenged to change ourselves" (quoted in Diamond 2016, p. 66). This is personal power, the ability to change ourselves and to get along with even impossible situations, as well as an awareness of responsibility for what the position demands (Diamond 2016, p. 66).

Breaking through the game's metaphor, the possibility of learning from the challenges (snakes) can develop skills on how to deal with further challenges or opportunities by building or even sharing one's own ladder(s).

The "Social Worlds of Snakes and Ladders" metaphorical story is similar to the "multistoried building" metaphor of Michael White, the founder of Narrative Therapy.

White explains that our lives are multi-storied like a building, and institutional practices and systems of narratives restrain individuals to the first floor or one story, which limits the options and possibilities of other stories to help understand a problem.

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The main objective of the narrative therapist is to build a “scaffold,” a temporary structure outside the building used to support the individual to construct, maintain, and repair their stories. Located on the scaffold, the therapist asks questions to explore the problem and “thin traces” of the stories, which exist through the individual’s lived experiences and emerge to build “thickly.”^{1, 2}

Once the stories are externalised, the individual is empowered to climb the multistoried building by identifying “unique outcomes” or counter stories to the dominant cultural story or the stories enforced in their social relationships and by institutional practices.

When the individual arrives at the top of their multistoried building, they have a larger perspective of the possibilities to move forward through their own stories and self-mastery of everyday life (White 1995, 2007; Madigan 2011).

Like the explanation of a multistoried building, navigating up the social world of snakes and ladders, individuals move up social rank from small “n” narratives to big “N” narratives.³ Small “n” narratives are closely located in the person’s environment as well as their lived experiences. Small “n” narratives are based on how the person was socialised and developed by their family, community, and institutions in a cultural-historical context. Small “n” narratives are based on the stories that the person is told and has told. Although small, these narratives are potent as they influence how the individual sees their position and navigates the social world.

Big “N” narratives are based on socio-political status. Big “N” narratives accord individuals status based on identity attributes such as race, gender, class, religion, nationality, ethnicity, education, physical and mental ability, and sexual orientation. Big “N” narratives have a huge impact on the opportunities and outcomes we have in life: education, income, employment, health, and life expectancy. For instance, the higher one can climb, the more privileges and advantages one receives in the form of access to resources and information, often bestowing a heightened sense of entitlement to higher positional rank. Hence, the expression “climbing the corporate ladder.”

Being high up on the ladder, however, does not always mean that one has a broader perspective on reality. Most often, the higher one climbs, the

more isolated the individual becomes from their power's impact on others. This isolation can lead to behaviours that are discriminatory, unequal, and oppressive to others who are lower in the socio-political hierarchy, because they are marginalised or excluded from the big "N" narratives. This not only highlights a deep responsibility for those high up on the ladder and holding people accountable for their use of power, but also a systemic problem that does not critically question the big "N" narratives on the material and social worlds of those excluded.

At the workplace, the Social Worlds of Snakes and Ladders intersect with an activity system based on the community of practice (CoPs). Members of the CoPs internalise shared beliefs, values, and practices based on social interactions while engaging with the object of the work, roles, tools, rules and regulations, and the community. CoP members are assigned roles and tasks both formally and informally. For instance, a member is assigned the role of leader with a designated title and allocated specific tasks and associated material values (e.g., salary) for that position. Informally, the leader may also take on the role of friend and mentor if the leader's values and beliefs align with members of the CoP.

Making sense of work and its social and relational environment is a consensual version of reality, which is an outcome of interpersonal interaction and negotiations (Strauss 1978). Intimately connected to these interactions are individual personal stories, culture, and practices which develop and build relationships. Sensemaking of embodied lived experiences at work, therefore, is about exploring narration of stories as temporal sequences, intentions, meaning, and material outcomes through story sharing. It is also about co-creating new meanings, histories, possibilities, and solutions to the stories that exist among the individual members and in the workplace itself through **Collaborative Storytelling**.

COLLABORATIVE SENSEMAKING OF NARRATIVES AND SCRIPTS

through life stories individuals and groups make sense of themselves; they tell what they are or what they wish to be, as they tell so they become, they are their stories

—Martin Cortazzi (2001, p. 388)

Sensemaking is an ongoing process by which people give meaning to their individual and collective experiences (Weick et al. 2005, p. 409)

through telling a good story (Weick 1995, p. 61). Story is one of the oldest literary forms of understanding cultural heritage and histories of particular times and places to help explain and discern what happened. Story gives plausibility for individual sensemaking of past events that happened in powerful situations influenced by social identities and relationships (Aromaa et al. 2019).

The process of storytelling is a unique embodied experience as the individual uses their senses (sight, touch, hearing, smell, taste) in sensemaking within a social and physical environment (Geertz 1972, p. 86). Social environments, like a workplace, consist of diverse identities which interact, exchange, assert, and negotiate their sense of reality in relation to one another and the activity they are engaging with. As diverse identities co-exist, each individual embodies narratives acquired throughout their own lived experiences. Some of these narratives may intersect while others differ, causing tensions and contradictions. As author Anaïs Nin (1961, p. 124) writes, “[w]e do not see things as they are, we see them as we are.” This understanding that stories and metaphors hold and carry meaning reveals a profound sense of power and responsibility as to how stories are narrated and spread to larger audiences.

The embodied and highly emotional experience of sensemaking is difficult to communicate and rationalise as it is processed through the uniqueness of the historical context influenced by social and cultural scripts.

Social scripts are unwritten patterns of human behaviour and ways of acting in response to the social environment, relating the script to the space it exists in and the people who exist in that space (Goffman 1959). Whereas cultural scripts broaden social scripts to patterns of interaction within cultural spaces as these spaces reflect systems of meaning based on grander narratives (Yang et al. 2021).

As described above, in the Social Worlds of Snakes and Ladders, internalised scripts are a driving influence on sensemaking processes. The scripts affect individual behaviours within the situational context, creating and/or reinforcing predominant narratives. While played out and enforced in the workplace context, these predominant narratives are mostly inherited from different historical and cultural social worlds (Bateson 1972).

As big “N” narratives are incorporated into the scripts of the workplace, they tend to “legitimise” certain interactions, including assumptions and expectations as to how people should talk and behave. When left unquestioned, dominant narratives may manifest into practices and policies while problematising or silencing the scripts that do not comply.

With hidden and contradicting scripts, people struggle to make sense of their position in the unfolding story at work, which leads us to the meaning given to **Collaborative Storytelling Activity (CSA)**.

Collaborative Storytelling Activity (CSA) is incorporated into a community of practice for revealing and developing the collective meaning afforded to an object of work and understanding a common purpose. CSA draws from the culture and history of the activity through an exchange of stories. CSA in communities is no easy task because it implies **collaborative sensemaking** within the power dynamics of the workplace.

Within the concept of Collaborative Storytelling, we emphasise the action “storytelling” as an on-going craft. In other words, while telling stories, we are also crafting our reality. Therefore, **Collaborative Story Crafting** could be used interchangeably with the same meaning.

We favour Collaborative Storytelling over Collaborative Story Crafting to refer to the activity to make a distinction from the intervention method **Collaborative Story Craft (CSC)**.

In Collaborative Storytelling Activity, **Story Mediation** is used to externalise and identify the dominant narratives and scripts that influence common work activities, helping to dismantle and rebuild collective narratives which are based on each member’s story. Therefore, the role of a Story Mediator is not originally associated with the community of practice, but rather serves as an external, collaborative support for building narratives in times of change.

Framed as a research activity, the Story Mediator is *with* the storytellers at work.

“Withness thinking” is described by the late John Shotter, an organisational scholar, as a process in which researchers place themselves with those researched (2006, 2010). He asserted that “withness” can only be achieved by conversations between the researcher and the researched through questions and exploring the potentials of the present moment to change possible and future actions (Shotter 2006).

Shotter called this “situated dialogic action research” (Shotter 2006). Whereas other scholars call their methods similar to “withness” as “dialogical mediated inquiry” (Lorino et al. 2011), “collaborative action research” in process theory (Fachin and Langley 2017, p. 320) and “engaged scholarship” (Van de Ven 2007).

Story mediation in our practice with Collaborative Storytelling Activity also implies the use of the intervention method Collaborative Story Craft (CSC). Collaborative Story Craft, as an intervention method, externalises multiple stories based on social relationships and lived experiences. Working with a Story Mediator (through storytelling and crafting), the collaborative effort enables the externalisation of the stories to validate the storyteller’s narration at the workplace.

STORY MEDIATION AND COLLABORATIVE STORY CRAFT

Story Mediation in organisations is an alternative word for intervention, and it is intended to signify a supporting role in a positive process of collaboration with co-creation and applied agency in times of change.

In the workplace, Story Mediation provides a space and an opportunity to reflect on individual stories in relation to the collective work activities. In our practice, Story Mediation was appropriated to fit in the context of a Collaborative Storytelling Activity (CSA) together with the intervention method of Collaborative Story Craft (CSC). As the word “mediation” implies, the process involves an external actor who facilitates an exploration of stories (Fonseca Silva 2020). This requires bearing witness and validating individual narratives in relation to the object of work within the social and cultural scripts of a community of practice.

Story Mediation, as we know, requires familiarity with our concepts (CSA and CSC) and it is conducted by qualified Story Mediators who are trained to assist us in our practice. Alternatively, professionals and researchers who acquire the qualifications to appropriate our tools, can practice Story Mediation in the organisation that they belong to.

Through Collaborative Storytelling Activity (CSA), Story Mediators serve to actively listen to the storyteller by documenting, analysing, validating, and identifying the themes, patterns, and metaphors within the narratives and scripts of the workplace.

Both dialogue and documentation are important to Story Mediators and storytellers to keep standards and fulfil obligations of the work activities within “reasonable expectation” of the members (see accountability as documented storytelling by Boven et al. 2014, p. 3). In his book *Together: the rituals, pleasures and politics of cooperation*, Richard Sennet calls these activities “dialogic skills” (2013, p. 6).

The Story Mediator’s main responsibility is not to tell the story, but rather help explore patterns of existing knowledge, opportunities, and challenges within individual lived experiences of roles, motivation, and purpose at work.

Story Mediation relies on sensemaking through the interplay among theory, practice, external narratives, and one’s own story. In this fusion of “social worlds,” the learning opportunities are extended beyond those being “served” as the Story Mediator is also affected by (and contributor to) the collective sensemaking process.

Story Mediation in Collaborative Storytelling uses the intervention tool Collaborative Story Craft to acknowledge an undertaking process of sensemaking through exchange, story creation (crafting), and story signification.

Collaborative Story Craft, as a pragmatic tool, helps map the “inventories” of stories and narratives in social worlds to facilitate dialogue amongst the actors to make sense and build collective stories together.

In the next chapter, the **work as craft mindset** is described as the foundation to Collaborative Storytelling to build narratives in organisational change. The work as craft mindset invites the reimagining of the past and a possible future through individual and collaborative stories.

CONCLUSIONS

Collaborative Storytelling Activity (CSA) aims to make sense of the nuances of multiple embodied and lived stories in relation to an activity with members of a community of practice as the storytellers. As a tool for Collaborative Storytelling, Story Mediators use the method of Collaborative Story Craft (CSC), which requires the engagement of those who influence and are being impacted by dominant narratives or hidden scripts at the workplace.

Story Mediators applying CSC within an organisational story support validating and developing the messages that resonate with the collective. Rather than telling the stories for those experiencing the story (the storytellers), Story Mediators' main intention is to facilitate an exchange of stories through dialogue and documentation to reveal the commonalities that align with a united purpose.

NOTES

1. Similarly, Clifford Geertz (1973) calls this “thick description,” which gives detailed descriptions and interpretations of situations observed by a researcher. Thick description involves writing detailed narratives or ‘vignettes’ explaining situations and their background ‘context’.
2. “Thick description refers to the researcher’s task of both describing and interpreting observed social action (or behavior) within its particular context” (Ponterotto 2006, p. 543).
3. In 2000, Alvesson and Kärreman argued that discourse analysis of empirical data could be recognised through two key dimensions: the relationship between discourse and meaning and (2) the attentiveness to detail of a specific context versus a more standardised form of language use. To explain this, the authors describe “climbing the ladder of discourse” between big “D” discourse and little “d” discourse (Cleland Silva 2019, p. 87).

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