



Anna Walulik

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5607-6974>

Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow

e-mail: anna.walulik@ignatianum.edu.pl

Biography as a Spatial Frame of Meanings: A Proxemic Analysis in Pedagogical Narrative Analysis

Abstract

This article presents a method for qualitative data analysis, which is called proxemic analysis. This method was based on a didactic method of structural analysis of narratives (Knecht & Knecht, 1992; Zirker, 1991). A proxemic analysis consists in working with data and indicating five categories in the text – actors, places, time, values, and expectations – and building them using elements, called entities. During the next stage, the researcher discovers the understanding of these categories by defining the relationships between entities. This analysis can be used on narrative texts regardless of the way in which they were obtained (unstructured interviews, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, etc.). Interpreting the relationships between entities allows the researcher to formulate pedagogical implications, which they may use as a premise for constructing theories and/or activities. The example of the technique presented in this paper, from andragogical research, refers to the study of a life story obtained from a narrative interview.

Keywords: proxemic analysis, qualitative research, categorization, entity, educational implications, synergy

The social sciences are characterized by an increasing diversity of approaches to narrative analysis, which is indicative of its immense research and educational potential. Collecting, analyzing, and interpreting narratives are inherent elements of a qualitative research strategy and they designate a specific role for the researcher and the respondent (Ciechowska, 2020). In building a story in which the respondent plays a major role, they become a significant source of knowledge about themselves and the world they live in. When reinterpreting a narrative, the researcher has a chance not only to describe but also, most importantly, to understand the phenomenon in question. What happens between the researcher and the respondent creates a space in which learning occurs. There are numerous paths leading to this goal, only limited by the researcher's imagination (Trochim, 2020). The proxemic analysis described in this article is one such path. The experience gained during years of teaching and research practice – in which we have used narrative analysis, which involves discovering the meanings of categories (actors, places, time, values, and expectations), in order to understand phenomena – proves its effectiveness in both cognitive and therapeutic spheres.

In the first part of the paper, the procedures of analyzing narratives through proxemic analysis are presented. This is followed by an excerpt from an analysis of the life story of Helen, a Polish woman who lives in Australia. The methodological status of a proxemic analysis in relation to other research methods is described next, while the final section discusses its advantages and disadvantages in analyzing narratives and its links with proxemic systems.

Methodological Status of Proxemic Analysis

Contemporary qualitative research methodology is seeing continuous development. As Yvonna S. Lincoln and Norman K. Denzin predict, this will also be a feature of a *breakthrough future* for research. Moreover, the novelty of methodological approaches to the study of new social phenomena will contribute to such a future (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 1125).

Looking at the qualitative research process, proxemic analysis is the stage of working with the collected data. At this stage, the author (bearing in mind the non-linear nature of the qualitative approach) has available many traditional methods of analyzing qualitative data, each of which is necessary and justified, and the main features of which we will briefly present in order to indicate the possibilities offered by proxemic analysis in this context. Here, we understand data analysis as “an activity that permeates the entire duration of a research project. The analysis is not limited to being one of the later stages of research, preceding the next, separate stage” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, pp. 10–11). Qualitative data that are under analysis, regardless of the method with which they were collected (observation, interview, etc.), take the form of a text. Analyzing them is nothing more than searching for meanings that arise in the process of semiosis (communication and interpretation) and depend on the context and participants. Proxemic analysis is one of the ways of designating the category to the codes – while working with transcription.

In the grounded theory methodology (GTM), codes and categories are designated from the bottom: they flow from the text. As a coherent system of research, data collection, and analysis, grounded theory points to what is most important in qualitative research for such designating meanings and what coincides with the way that this phenomenon is perceived by the respondents. The researcher does not use the theory concerning the phenomenon nor the set of categories resulting from a particular method of analysis. Designating the codes (labels) – including *in vivo* codes (in the language of the respondents and categories [code families]) – thus forms the basis for developing medium-range theories that are grounded in the field. Theories developed in this way provide insight into the world of the respondents and their way of understanding and perceiving their surroundings.

However, not all research is conducted on the basis of GTM; therefore, the researcher may also be guided by top-down categories (which already exist in the literature on the subject). The author works many times with a text, resulting in a hermeneutic spiral where each subsequent return to the text enables a better understanding of the content

and may also entail changes to the codes and categories. Among the categories, it is worth focusing on various elements (e.g., feelings, people, or objects) that will guarantee an understanding of the whole phenomenon under study. The literature on qualitative pedagogical research indicates different families of codes, for example, codes of place/context, codes of situations, ways of thinking, processes, activities, events, strategies, relationships and social structures, narration, or codes of methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, pp. 162–168). All categories should reflect the purpose of the research and be comprehensive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing to the proper sense, and conceptually congruent (Merriam, 1998).

Relating proxemic analysis to the indicated assumptions to the characteristics of the category, it is coherent with them. Going further, the researcher assigns the entities (code equivalents) to successive pieces of text. Entities refer to individual categories: on the one hand, the author is free in what to name and how to designate the entities (as far as the size of the excerpt is concerned); on the other hand, it is oriented towards the meaning entity – they strictly refer to the indicated categories. However, this is not a limitation (as in a priori coding, in which the researcher refers to the assumptions of the theory), but an indication of the direction that is determined by the comprehensive, spatial understanding of the narrative. The innovation of proxemic analysis relies on treating the qualitative data in the field of social research as data located in and dependent on space-time; hence the categories of actors, place, time, values, and expectations. Here we refer to examining biographies, which requires a holistic, spatial understanding of a life story.

Principles of Proxemic Analysis

Storytelling, which has a long tradition and has been present at all times, in all places and societies (Barthes, 1966), takes an unlimited number of forms and is constantly being revived in new versions, in both philosophy and the social sciences. In the social sciences, storytelling is combined with *narratives* and refers to any intentional utterance which

is a story about something. It may be created in various ways: by writing, by prompting from a researcher during an interview or ordinary conversation, or by gathering data during field work. Norman K. Denzin links a narrative with biography, as in his opinion it presents the experiences and definitions of a particular person, group, or organization in the way in which they interpret it. The basic assumption is to conduct a study so as to maintain the respondents' perspectives and understanding and to demonstrate their dynamics (Denzin, 2009). The fundamental idea behind narrative analysis using this technique is to identify the five categories – actors, places, time, values, and expectations – through entities and through the relationships between them within individual categories. *Entity* refers to an individual, being, agent, or existence. The concept was introduced in 1976 by Peter Pin-Shan Chen to model data in IT analysis. It refers to a real or imagined object which may be distinctly identifiable or distinguishable and related to others (Chen, 1976). These characteristics perfectly render the essence of the elements in individual categories (Barker, 2005). When naming them, the researcher should aim to preserve the language used by the respondents (as with in vivo coding), as it allows for a better understanding of the meaning assigned to them by the narrator. For many researchers, it may also be helpful to present the entities and the relationships between them in a visual form. It is also important to indicate those excerpts of narratives which prompt the researcher to identify entities in a particular way. By finding entities in narratives and identifying the relationships between them, the researcher describes them and, as a result, discovers the narrator's understanding of the phenomenon. This allows them to notice the connections between individual entities and the narrator's intentions.

In the category of *actors*, the researcher indicates both people and non-person entities in the text to which the narrator attributes action. They may be individuals participating in the events, agents/objects which affect the interpretation of the event (such as books, individuals, institutions, offices, or organizations), or agents or abstract objects (anthropomorphized or not). When indicating entities that refer to actors, it is advisable to distinguish the lead actors and the supporting actors, who

are less important in the narrator's life, and to group them if necessary. This will facilitate the identification and interpretation of the relationships between entities.

The category of *place* refers to all places where our life takes place, where we are present, including all the ontological aspects of the meaning of being. After all, place is not only a space in the physical world, but also a mental and cultural community, or – as postulated by Foucault – “of other space,” that is, heterotopic spaces which are beyond any places, even if it is possible to specify their actual location (Ahmed, 2020). The analysis of the category of place that is taking place in social science discourse changes this discourse considerably, opening it up to new interpretative potential and revealing relationships which would otherwise remain hidden (Mendel & Męczkowska, 2006). Entities in this category can be identified through geographic (e.g., continent, country, province, city, town, district, street, etc.), institutional (e.g., school, workplace, official institution, etc.), and emotional (e.g., house, yard, meadow, road, street, etc.) means.

By distinguishing the category of place, one can indicate every place where the narrators locate their experiences. It is important to discover the meaning for the actors taking part in the events and the dynamics of their understanding of the experience. By identifying places through proxemic analysis, mutual spatial relationships between the actors as well as relationships between people and their material surroundings can also be identified, taking into consideration different cultures and different contexts of experience.

In the identification of the category of *time*, we suggest making a distinction used by the ancient Greeks, who had three words to denote time: *χρόνος* (*chronos*), *καιρός* (*kairos*), and *αἰών* (*aion*). *Chronos* refers to a time whose duration can be measured and placed on a timeline by specifying its length, whereas *kairos* emphasizes the events happening during a measured period rather than its length, although it also refers to a specific period. Time understood this way is more an opportunity to win, achieve, or reveal something than a duration. It is also the timing of an event or the right time for something (Smith, 1969). These two concepts of time used

in Greek help us notice more clearly that which refers to one's experience of time. Therefore, the following elements may be taken into account in the identification of the category of time in a proxemic analysis: objectively measured time, as in the calendar (e.g., a year, month, or day), time as shown by a clock (e.g., the time of day), a subjective time range (e.g., while I was a student, after I got married, after I graduated, or when I was ill), or situational time (e.g., during work or when abroad). This distinction is based on the phenomenological time perspectives in which subjective time is experienced and objective time is perceived. Moreover, the time of people's experience is considered to be more primary than the ordinary time of the world, and it is understood as the source time: the time of life, memory, expectation, imagination, and consciousness (Murchadha, 2013).

The word *aion* situates the understanding of time between *chronos* and *kairos*. On the one hand, it is sometimes used to describe the duration of life; on the other hand, it describes an age, epoch, or long period, which is characterized by individual features. With *chronos*, it connects *aion* with the extension of duration; with *kairos*, it connects it with finiteness, even if the beginning and the end are very separate from each other. In some cosmologies, the term was used to periodize eternity, becoming the only one of finiteness and infinity. This means that it absorbs some features of *chronos* while exceeding them, becoming synonymous with eternity (Bielawski, 2014, p. 64). The last meaning is used in Christianity. When used to describe the eternal survival of God, the word *zoe* can be found along with the term *aionios*, which means life that lasts through *aion*, or eternal life. The differences in the understanding of time expressed in individual words are reflected even better in Latin. The equivalent of *chronos* is *tempus*; *kairos* is no longer so unambiguous and is translated as *occasio*, *opportunitas*, or *tempus opportunum*. At the same time, all of them are associated with the meaning of events happening at a convenient time, at the right time, on an occasion or opportunity. *Aion* is translated as *aeternitas* (eternity, eternal being, or infinity) or *vita* (life), which gives this concept a teleological character.

The category of *values* is identified by the role values play, which is to permeate, stir, and shape human consciousness, evoke emotions, and

stimulate activity. The hierarchy of values determines the objectives of actions and consolidates their outcomes (Scheler, 2009). Values affect the lives of individuals and communities alike (Scheler, 1992). The researcher determines and identifies values referring to actors, places, and time. In biographic narratives it is usually possible to identify the values demonstrated by the actors: ethical and moral, pragmatic (useful/not useful), utilitarian (worthless, cheap, expensive, or priceless), aesthetic (ugly/pretty), emotional (horrible/neutral/touching), existential (pointless/reasonable or pessimistic/optimistic), and symbolic.

In narratives, the category of value is often associated with *expectations*. Following their dictionary definitions, they are treated as a feeling that good things will happen in the future, as a hope for something to happen, or as a conviction that something will or should happen. Revealing expectations allows the researcher to discover what narrators find likely, possible, worthy of attention, necessary, and random; what their goals, motives, or intentions are; and what they will find disappointing, surprising or intriguing. Expectations and values identified by a proxemic analysis are made *objective* by the mere fact that they refer to actors, places, and time.

The identification of entities in individual categories helps prepare a diverse space for the interpretation of seemingly contradictory perspectives: internal and external, objective and subjective, that of the respondent and of the researcher. These activities are significant for understanding the experience, because both the narrator and the researcher favor specific values or patterns and have their own expectations.

Analysis and interpretation conducted in accordance with the principles described above lead to the formulation of pedagogical implications in which the researcher points at what is unique in the respondents' experience. The deeper the researcher penetrates the structures and levels of individual entities and categories co-existing, the better they will understand the phenomenon and the more accurate their interpretation will be. The factors that are conducive to the emergence and interpretation of experience invariably create a network of mutual connections, the interactions of which strengthen or weaken the effects of an experience

for an individual. This may affect the adjustment of previous attitudes and behaviors and may bring new quality into the person's life (Ciechowska & Walulik, 2018).

An Example of a Proxemic Analysis of a Text

The assumptions behind the selected method of working with narrative material can be illustrated with reflections on an excerpt from Helen's autobiography. In 1949, when she was two years old, her parents left Poland and emigrated to Australia, settling in Saint Marys. We will analyze the educational experience she described during an unstructured biographic interview in November 2017. The interview was conducted in her house in Marayong (the suburbs of Sydney), where she lives with her husband. This is not a complete analysis and interpretation of her narrative, because this paper is methodological in nature and is meant to demonstrate the method used in the study – not its outcome in the form of a theory, which is something we did before on the basis of different material (Marek, 2017; Marek & Walulik, 2019).

The study was conducted within a participatory and personalistic paradigm. In the interpretation of relationships between categories and entities, we referred to the principles developed by personalism (Musaio, 2021), which allows us to emphasize the autonomous value of the person and to assume supporting his development through acquiring an ability to subordinate economic and technical values to personal and spiritual values (Barber, 2002). Although these values do not refer directly to the relationships between those actors that are non-persons, they were used in the identification process, since they allow us to identify the space which builds human existence. Both the researcher and the respondent identify themselves with the personalistic and Christian concept of a human being (Szymańska & Zelek, 2018).

Helen placed her educational experience in two meaningful contexts (school and religion), which – according to the principles of the selected research methodology – refer to the categories of *place*, *values*,

and *expectations*. The narrator spent more than 60 years in a Catholic school: first as a pupil, then as a teacher. Her story began with her open declaration that she was a Roman Catholic, which may indicate her need to be aware of the foundations of her identity. It may have been intensified by the experience of living in a country which declared total assimilation of various nationalities with the society in the 1970s; this assimilation took the form of multiculturalism and focused on the right to preserve migrants' own culture and native language and on enabling their full participation in the life of the country (Achmatowicz-Otok & Otok, 1985).

For clarity, below we present a linear record; however, during a study a researcher can do so on the transcript. The category of *place* is formed by the following entities:

- *Family home*: “At first, a shelter for refugees in which Poles lived alongside people from Ukraine, Russia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Germany, and others. There was no option to learn English, so children talked using words from various languages.”
- *Public schools*: “Public schools were free-of-charge, financed by the government from taxes.”
- *Catholic schools*: “They enjoyed immense popularity, also among immigrants from Poland.”
- *Convent schools*: “Initially, all the teachers in these schools were nuns. Later, with growing needs and an insufficient number of nuns, lay teachers were employed, but their earnings were three times lower than in state schools. In the 1970s, when Catholic schools were overcrowded and the government provided no financial support for them, even though the parents paid taxes, the Bishop of Canberra decided that pupils from these schools should enroll in public schools; however, they were not prepared to take in such a large number of students. The situation forced the government to change its policy and since then, teachers employed by Catholic schools have earned the same salary as teachers from state schools.”
- *St. Marys*: “The School of Our Lady of the Rosary in St. Marys was run by the Josephites (the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart).

I spent a total of 62 years in this school: 12 years as a student and 50 years as a teacher. In the school run by the Sisters, I was the first full-time lay teacher. There were more than 80 students in each class, mostly migrant children. Thanks to my personal experiences, I had a better understanding of the situation of these kids, and I spent long hours conducting extra classes. After some time, other lay teachers were employed."

- *Parramatty*: "I took a bus and a train, and walked for 20 minutes to get to the school in Parramatty, 25 kilometers from my place of residence. The Josephites ran a school for girls. Only eight girls (including five Poles) from my class decided to continue their education for the next two years."

The following entities represent the *values* the narrator assigns to these places:

- *Roof over one's head* – a sense of security: "We went to the school from the shelter by bus. We were very happy when it came to take us back to the shelter."
- *Polish*: "Thanks to my parents' efforts (we always spoke Polish at home) and my husband, who is also from Poland (he came to Australia in 1967), I speak Polish very well, but I am not that good at reading and writing, as I did not have many opportunities to practice it."
- *Good education*: "Many Polish migrants sent their children to these [Catholic] schools in spite of financial problems. They attached great importance to good education, which they missed themselves because of the war. I continued my education with a specialization in religion and by working with children with special educational needs."
- *Catholicism*: "The parents wanted their children to be raised with Catholic values. The children were able to prepare for holy sacraments during lessons at school."
- *English*: "The Department of Education established a special curriculum with English as a Second Language to prepare teachers to work with migrant students. When I was a deputy head, I had these

teachers help students in class. Earlier, these students had separate lessons and – as a result of working outside the group – they felt rejected and inferior. This change had a positive influence on the educational process [...] English was taught through repetition, imitation of gestures, looking at pictures, etc. We were soon able to act as interpreters for our parents, who did not have opportunities to learn English and who mostly worked with other Poles. Writing or reading skills were unknown back then.”

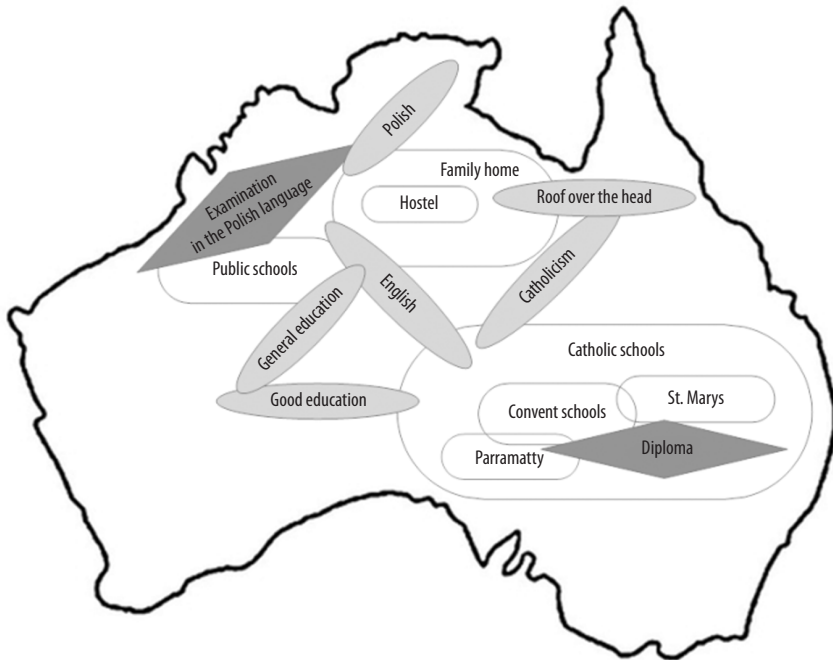
- *General education*: “After I had finished school and passed my exams, I started studying at a teacher training college.”

Expectations are defined using the following entities:

- *Secondary school-leaving examination in the Polish language*: “Thanks to the efforts of Polish communities, teachers, and parents, the government introduced an option to take a secondary school-leaving exam in Polish. Three schools in Sydney conducted preparatory courses for this exam: Randwick, Ashfield, and Chatswood. With this, not only did young people have opportunities to study at local universities, but they could also study and gain qualifications at Polish universities.”
- *Diploma*: “After I had received my diploma, I returned to my ‘old’ school in St. Marys, where I worked as a teacher for the next 50 years.”

A graphic representation of the narrator’s way of thinking about places, values, and expectations is shown in Fig. 1.

Figure 1. Places, values, and expectations in Helen's autobiography



The analysis of the categories listed above and the entities connected with them was based on the theories regarding schools and adult education. As a result of our analysis and interpretations, the following pedagogical implications were formulated:

- The analysis of experiencing education in the context of the places, values, and expectations related to them points to the importance of knowledge for daily life.
- Experience is a significant source of knowledge in education, especially in intercultural education.
- When ancient myths were created, people believed that their life was in the hands of gods who made decisions regarding their lives. Even though nowadays we laugh at such beliefs, we have created modern myths, including “scientifically proven” forms of determinism. They appear mostly in situations when researchers question experience as a source of valuable knowledge.

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- Helen's story sensitizes us to the need to introduce educational processes which will help us notice the value of education outcomes and which will form an attitude of responsibility for information and an ability to transform it into appropriate competences.
 - In order to learn competences, an educational climate needs to be created in which students not only gain knowledge and acquire skills, but also use them to solve problems creatively.
 - People's ignorance causes various problems in life. If someone understands the world and its complexity, they will also be able to make better decisions and build a better world, both as an individual and as a member of community. What we learn from Helen's story is that human development is closely related to knowledge.
 - The discovery of the importance of knowledge for the development of an individual and society leads to the conclusion that each of us contributes to something important. The life and achievements of people like Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, or Mary MacKillop (who established the network of schools our narrator talked about), as well as the lives of Poles living in Australia, prove that our life does not need to be determined by race, religion, or nationality. Helen also recalled that "a lot of my 'Polish' students obtained a high level of education; they are lawyers, doctors, teachers, and executives."
 - Knowledge is an important factor in the achievement of success, understood as a happy life, only if it comes with a mature personality and properly understood freedom.
 - Family, culture, and religion are some of the important factors that shape maturity. The powerful effects of their interaction – discovered in the biography based on relationships between places, values, and expectations – indicates the emergence of an adaptive synergy (Walulik, 2011) in the understanding of education. This synergy can reduce the gap between maintaining an individual's "status quo" and the need to create a new lifestyle. Noticing this synergy may play a significant role in the development of a person

in a diverse environment, such as a multicultural community or a religiously diverse community.

The principle of the technique presented herein that entities which form particular categories in a narrative (actors, place, time, values, and expectations) can be identified and interpreted from various perspectives argues in favor of its universality. Moreover, not all categories need be discovered in each narrative; on the one hand, this fact indicates similarities to other, classical methods of qualitative data analyses – for instance, content analysis or data analysis using the methodology of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) or the constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) – but on the other hand, it reveals differences connected with the search for a priori categories but *in vivo* entities.

The understanding of the role of the researcher and the respondent is also an element of the proxemic nature of the proposed analysis. Due to the omnipresent diversity of methodologies and worldviews, in order to formulate pedagogical implications which will serve as the premises for new theories, a researcher needs to specify the concept of a person that they will adopt in order to prevent syncretism from obscuring the real understanding of the phenomenon they are studying. This principle also results from the specific characteristics of social qualitative research.

It should also be emphasized that the universal nature of a proxemic analysis is visible in its suitability for dealing with material obtained in various ways, such as notes made during observations, various documents – including visual ones, journals, diaries, transcripts of non-standardized interviews, group discussions, (auto)biographies, etc. The possibility to approach a narrative from the proxemic perspective and to base pedagogical implications on it stem from the belief that the life of an individual and of society happen in a specific space, which is formed in the individual and collective consciousness of a given place and time. It is open to various forms and manifestations of people's activity but also imposes certain limitations. Both features may be conducive to the emergence and identification of synergy, which – due to its potential to bring new quality – is vital in developing pedagogical theories. If proxemic relationships are

analyzed from a cultural perspective, their symbolic dimension – or as Edward T. Hall (1988) calls it, the “hidden dimension” – plays a considerable role. Pedagogical implications discovered through the proposed analysis result from permeating the hidden structure of the narrator’s world. The changeability – so typical of the world around us – requires life-long involvement in the discovery of the meaning of life and in defining its understanding. This means that theories built on individuals’ experiences, the goal of which is not making generalizations, but drawing attention to *hidden* problems of both students and educators, will play an important role in contemporary education.

Analyzing a text with the use of a proxemic analysis may pose some difficulties, the most serious of which – in our opinion – are that it is time-consuming and subjective. However, these difficulties are typical of qualitative research, as the majority of the material collected for analysis is heterogeneous and multifaceted, which requires it to be read many times in order to get a deeper understanding of the respondents’ experiences. Not all researchers are keen on work which involves collecting and analyzing material, but our research practice shows that a proxemic analysis at least partially addresses these concerns. Reading a text several times in search of entities belonging to given categories and presenting them in a visual form can reveal even deeply hidden understandings of various aspects of the experience.

Conclusion

This article presents the principles of a proxemic analysis as a research method and illustrates them with an excerpt from such an analysis. Considering the theoretical nature of the paper, we did not present the complete analysis, interpretations, and their implications. This paper is the outcome of the maturation of the adaptation process of the didactic method for research purposes. Its humble attempts have been reported in several previous papers (Kryzstofik et al., 2016; Mółka, 2018; Marek, 2017; Marek & Walulik, 2019).

The technique was discussed and improved at all stages of its adaptation and implementation into research practice. We realize that this process has not been completed yet, but we also believe that at this stage the above description may be treated as a holistic presentation of the proposed technique and, as such, may be worth sharing with other researchers. The fragment of the narrative analysis conducted with the use of a proxemic analysis presented above demonstrates that the multi-layer identification of biographical elements and the relationships between them allows a researcher to identify those processes which create a new life quality, that is, synergic processes (Walulik, 2011). Thanks to this, the experiences under analysis become a source of information and knowledge on how individuals solve their life problems and how they support others in taking responsibility for their lives. We believe that pedagogical implications based on the analysis presented herein may serve as premises for developing a theory of creative learning in a multicultural environment and curricula which will strengthen the students' creative potential. In our opinion, the innovative nature of our analysis lies in the possibility of identifying synergy on the basis of individuals' experience and in using this synergy to develop new pedagogical theories.

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