

Narrative Inquiry: A Research Method in the Education Field

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Abstract

This article elucidates what narrative inquiry is as a research method, what questions or puzzles it addresses, the research tools used, and ethical considerations in conducting this type of research. Published exemplars are provided to reveal how narrative inquiries are utilized in real-life education studies. As a storied format of personal experience research, narrative inquiry has the potential to transcend the specialties of the immediate research field to influence the discourses and the practices of those in a larger research community. The purpose of this article is to unpack narrative inquiry as a research method in the education field and encourage more teachers and researchers to engage in the narrative inquiries important to their teaching and research.

Keywords: narrative inquiry, research puzzles, research tools, exemplars, research method

1. Introduction

Grounded in the philosophical tradition of Dewey who believed that education, experience, and life are inextricably intertwined (Dewey, 1938), Connelly and Clandinin (1990) used the term *narrative inquiry* first in the educational research field in 1990 and established the educational importance of narrative inquiry as a research methodology. Prior to that, narrative inquiry “has a long intellectual history both in and out of education” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). It has been used in a wide variety of disciplines outside education, such as anthropology, linguistics, literary theory, philosophy, theology, women’s studies, organizational theory, psychotherapy, geography, law, and medicine (see Craig, 2007). In short, narrative inquiry has gained wide acknowledgment across disciplines for fostering multiple interpretations of the phenomenon being studied, generating insights, and inviting attention to complexity.

This article elucidates what narrative inquiry is as a research method, what questions or puzzles it addresses, and the research tools used. Published exemplars will be provided to reveal how narrative inquiries are utilized in real-life studies. The purpose is to unpack narrative inquiry as a research method in the education field and encourage more teachers and researchers to engage in the narrative inquiries that are important to their respective teaching settings and research agendas.

2. What is Narrative Inquiry

According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), “(t)he study of narrative, ..., is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2). Translated into educational settings, the study of education is the study of experience, which is also the study of life. “One learns about education from thinking about life, and one learns about life from thinking about education,” as Clandinin and Connelly (1994, p. 415) explain. Experience is the stories people live, and stories are the closest form that can research experience. People by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, and in the telling of them, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Therefore, education and educational research are the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories in education by educators alongside the researchers involved. The responsibility of narrative researchers in education is hence to describe such stories, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience, for stories, lived and told, relived and retold, to educate the self and others in the community in meaningful ways.

As qualitatively oriented research, although narrative inquiry shares features in common with other forms of

qualitative inquiry, it is distinct from others. Its uniqueness lies in the “primacy” of human experience which is “narrative phenomena best understood through story” (Craig, 2007, p. 173). In some educational studies, researchers may not be aware of using narrative, but their data were collected and reported in the form of stories. In education research using narrative inquiry, all stakeholders—researchers, teachers, students, parents, school administrators, etc., are storytellers of their own and other’s stories. This type of educational research may not promise immediate practical benefits, yet it values individuality, originality, and ownership by giving voice to participants.

Often, teachers are used as objects of educational studies with no voice of their own. The educational enterprise has been traditionally dominated by the “teachers as curriculum implementers” image (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992), in which teachers are depicted as “mediators” or “conduits” who simply adopt and implement stipulated curricula channeled through them from the top. The top-down prescriptions have been shown not effective or long-lasting in improving teaching. When teachers are confronted with challenging situations in their practices, their motivation to change emanates. The internal drive from the teachers leads to the most successful change in educational practices.

In sharp contrast to the pervasive “teacher as curriculum implementer” image is the “teacher as curriculum maker” image also presented by Clandinin and Connelly (1992) building on many researchers’ scholarships, primarily Dewey (1916, 1938), Jackson (1968, 1987), Tyler (1949), Schwab (1962, 1983), and Eisner (1982, 1988). As the name suggests, the “teacher as curriculum maker” image considers teachers as collaboratively constructing the curricula alongside learners and fully acknowledges the agency of teachers in curriculum-making. The two differing teacher images not only reflect a view of teacher in relation to curriculum but also provide the backdrop in which narrative inquiry is situated.

At the core of the “teacher as curriculum maker” image resides narrative inquiry as a research method in the education field. In narrative inquiry, all the stakeholders have voices and are empowered to tell their stories and explore the implications of their stories through building a research relationship with the researchers. Researchers listen to teachers closely as teachers experience their lives in and out of classrooms. Researchers then become part of the stories by bringing in their own stories, making the narrative a shared construction and reconstruction of stories through inquiry. Therefore, narrative inquiry is a collaborative inquiry of both educational researchers and teachers as curriculum makers as they jointly conceptualize and enlighten educational life experiences.

3. Three Commonplaces of Narrative Inquiry

Narrative is important as both process and product, and as method as well as the resulting narrative accounts. Situated in the narrative accounts are three commonplaces—“temporality, sociality, and place—which specify dimensions of an inquiry space” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). Narrative inquirers are described “as being in the midst of a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, always located somewhere along the dimensions of time, place, the personal, and the social” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 144). All three strands come into play in making meaning of the experience within the three-dimensional inquiry space.

Temporality is based upon the conceptualization that life is ongoing while narrative inquiry is temporary. Whenever and wherever researchers embark on their narrative inquiry, they are amid certain contexts of life. Life continues when the inquiry is formally completed. Inquiries neither stop nor redirect the flow of life; rather, they take life as it comes to them. Therefore, “in narrative inquiry, it is important to always try to understand people, places, and events as in process, as always in transition” (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 23). Sociality requires narrative inquirers to describe both the personal and social conditions of the people under study. Personal conditions mean “the feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480) of the inquirer and participants. Social conditions mean “the existential conditions, the environment, surrounding factors and forces, people and otherwise, that form each individual’s context” (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 23). Place requires narrative inquirers to attend to the specificity of the location where events take place because the specificity of location is crucial in narrative inquiry. “Place may change as the inquiry delves into temporality” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480) and a narrative inquirer needs to “think through the impact of each place on the experience” (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 23). To understand a narrative inquiry, there needs to be a “simultaneous exploration of all three commonplaces” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479).

I will use the article “A Narrative inquiry of cross-cultural lives: lives in Canada” by He (2002), a Chinese Canadian female teacher educator, to illustrate how narrative inquirers make sense of the stories lived and told, relived and retold, in light of the three-dimensional inquiry space. Using narrative inquiry, the author investigated how the cross-cultural lives shaped the self-identity, education philosophy, and practice of three educators in Canada

including herself who were originally from China. As identities are not static but change with the shifts in cultures, languages, and places, she navigated among the historic self, current self, and future self in the inquiry into their cross-cultural identities. Through the life-based cross-cultural narratives, it brought to life how the way they were educated and educating others in China, together with their experience of being pushed and pulled between different temporal spans, cultures, languages, and identities, molded who they are and how they become who they are as educators. Though constantly feeling lost and challenged between the two cultures, they kept learning and growing from the reflection upon their cross-cultural experience which allowed them to become better educators. Within the three-commonplace framework, the author made narrative inquiry a multi-dimensional exploration of experience in a “contextual and therefore contingent nature” (Conle, 2000, p. 56).

4. Research Puzzles

Narrative inquirers are inclined to use the term “research puzzles” rather than “research problems.” “Problems carry with them qualities of clear definability and the expectation of solutions, but narrative inquiry carries more of a sense of a search, a ‘re-search,’ a searching again” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 124). Craig and Olson (2002) pointed out that “while narrative approaches unearth complexities, help people to manage dilemmas, and elucidate more fully the human condition, they offer no quick answers” (p. 128). Providing a sense of particularity that abstractions cannot render, this method enables researchers to obtain an in-depth look at individuals or situations. Individuals and situations can take on their own distinctive qualities and, in the meantime, allow researchers to see beyond a particular individual or setting. Connecting with fundamental human qualities of experience, the storied format of personal experience research has the potential to transcend the specialties of the immediate research field to influence the discourses and the practices of those in a larger research community. Arising from Dewey’s (1938) notion that the principal interest in experience is growth and transformation, the greatest force driving narrative researchers is to “enter into and participate with the social world in ways that allow the possibility of transformations and growth” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 425).

The edited book *Narrative & Experience in Multicultural Education* (2005) is an exemplar. All the authors developed research puzzles from their own lives or the lives of the people they worked with by drawing upon what they care about personally and carrying on the inquiries in daily life and practice. Employing a narrative approach to understanding multicultural issues in education, all the inquiries in the book begin with the research puzzles of individuals and examine the experiences of individuals yet have the power of transcending individuals and shedding light on a greater number of people and communities. As the editors of the book wrote in the preface, the special quality of this book that distinguishes it from others in multicultural education is that while understanding “how do individual people live, and are educated in, their multicultural lives,” the emphasis is on “transforming this understanding into significant social and educational implications” (Phillion, He, & Connelly, 2005, p. 2).

5. Research Tools

Narrative inquirers contribute to the research by virtue of their presence in the setting as observers, the questions asked, and participation in the mutual process of elaborating on the participants’ stories. The data sources of narrative inquiry are myriad, such as observations, field notes, journal records by either participants or the researchers, interview transcripts, letter writing, documents, picturing, metaphors, personal philosophies, autobiography, biography, and storytelling. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) pointed out that “the possibilities for other kinds of field texts and for different nuances of what story or journal or field note meant were virtually endless” (p. 116) and they encourage narrative inquirers to be “open about the imaginative possibilities for composing field texts” (p. 116).

Lived stories emerge from the raw data and are represented in the narrative form of field texts. The field texts characterized by lived stories “reflect the temporal unfolding of people, places and things within the inquiry, the personal and social aspects of inquirer’s and participants’ lives, and the places in the inquiry” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 485), which is the interplay of the three commonplaces of temporality, sociality, and place in the inquiry process. In weaving lived stories into field texts, the particularities of the participants, personal and concrete, such as traits, values, and ways of life, are embedded into something broad and generic, shaping a major storyline of the narrative account in meaningful ways.

According to Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007), “narrative inquiry is much more than the telling of stories” (p. 21). Besides, “(w)e need to move to the retelling and reliving of stories, that is, to inquiry into stories” (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 33). This requires that researchers transition field texts into research texts, in other words, lived

stories to research stories, or personal inquiry to research inquiry. As the stories of the participants are told and written, the researcher's stories will mingle with the researcher's personal references and perspectives intertwined. The researcher will hence gain a new dimension of interpretation and generate new shared stories. The sharing of the participants and the interpretation of the researcher will interweave, which collectively characterizes the stories, lived, told, relived, and retold. Complex as it is to tell a story, the retelling of stories is more complex yet significant as this is where growth and change take place. While field texts are richly detailed and descriptive, close to experience, and shaped around particular events, research texts, transcending the mere telling of stories, are broader and bring to light the educational implications of the narrative.

I will use my autobiographical narrative inquiry (2016) as an exemplar to illustrate what research tools I employed to unpack the tensions experienced in my cross-cultural teaching journey as a TESOL teacher educator. The data sources of this research include my education and teaching-related life history, journals, teaching notes, course syllabi, students' reflective journals, and postings on Blackboard. Three analytical tools—broadening, burrowing, and storying and restorying (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990)—are used for “narratively cod(ing)” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131) the field texts in their transitioning to research texts. By broadening, my teacher development story is situated in my life and education experience in both East and West. Burrowing allows me to gain an up-close examination of the tensions I have lived with in both socio-cultural contexts. Storying and restorying engage me in unfurling the breadth and depth of my teacher-educator development. Taken together, the three interpretive devices enable me to channel field texts into research texts that “grow out of the repeated asking of questions concerning meaning and significance” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 132).

6. Establishing Researcher “Signature”

In the process of transitioning from field texts to research texts arises a difficult issue in doing narrative research, which is also a significant issue, that is, establishing researcher identity or “signature” in the words of Clandinin and Connelly (1994, p. 424). In negotiating between the representation of the participant's voice and the researcher's voice, it is the researcher's narratives of experience—his or her own tellings, livings, retellings, and relivings—that take up the centrality and determine the starting as well as the ending point of the inquiry. It is the narrative researchers' responsibility to manipulate between capturing the participants' voice, representing the researcher's voice, and speaking to the audience's voice.

Once with inadequate wariness, the researcher will be easily stuck into a dilemma of putting too strong a stamp on the inquiry running the risk of overshadowing the voice of participants, or too thin a stamp that appears to duplicate the voice of the participants. Clandinin and Connelly used “the analogy of living on an edge” to describe this dilemma (2000, p. 147). Therefore, to create an appropriate researcher “signature” in the collaborative process of storytelling, while being fully involved and “falling in love” with the participants, narrative inquirers should “step back and see their own stories in the inquiry, the stories of the participants, as well as the larger landscape on which they all live” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 81).

Additionally, it is worth mentioning that in educational research using narrative inquiry, “validity” rests on concrete examples of actual practices presented in enough detail through creating believable stories, convincing drama, and credible historical accounts. This way the relevant community can judge the trustworthiness and usefulness of the inquiry. The prominence given to the participants and researcher voices and a heavy reliance on the establishment of a research relationship between the participants and the researchers result in narrative inquiry having to play a “believing game” (cited from Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). Hence, the significance of a narrative inquiry is rooted in its believability rather than the absolute consistency or authenticity of events.

Another difficulty in establishing the credibility of a narrative inquiry is the “open-endedness,” an intrinsic feature underlying all narrative inquiries. A good narrative inquirer should always be open to different interpretations, leaving readers to fill in the gaps with their own experiences and perspectives. As Conle (2000) pointed out, “there are no single causes, no predictable effects. Instead, open-endedness pervades all data” (p. 52). Therefore, for narrative inquirers, “ongoing reflection” is essential, which Clandinin and Connelly (2000) named “wakefulness” (p. 184). A narrative inquirer should always remain awake to critiques.

7. Concluding Remarks

Narrative inquiry is a form of experience-based research. As a way of understanding experience, it features exploration into experience. The researchers using narrative inquiry focus on living, telling, reliving, and retelling the

stories of the experiences that make up people's lives, both individual and social. Researchers are not only concerned with life as it is experienced in the here and now, but also life as it is experienced on a continuum—temporally, spatially, the personal and the social. For a good narrative researcher, having merely a discerning mind, sensitive heart, and keen eyes and ears is not enough. He should also be competent in capturing the depth under the surface and the background behind the foreground in living, telling, reliving, and retelling the stories, as well as in describing and reporting the narrative in a graphic and lifelike way.

What also deserves to be noted is as “a continual unfolding” of life (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 9), it seems to be an ever-unreachable goal for a narrative inquiry to exhaust all the possible meanings. Though a limitation ostensibly, it is where the greatest vitality of narrative inquiry lies, because it is in this endeavor that human knowledge goes broader and deeper infinitely. Finally, it is my hope that narrative inquiry as a research method will be utilized by more teachers and researchers, not only enlightening their own teaching and educational research but also prompting ongoing storying and restorying of experiences in a wider community in an impactful manner.

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