Nathalie Hyde-Clarke

Story-Telling and Narrative Inquiry as a Gateway to Methodology

Abstract Across campuses, the very word 'methodology' elicits negative reactions and utterances of dismay from students even before they have embarked on a course. Deemed to be boring or a 'necessary evil', learners often arrive for their first class demotivated or disinterested. Yet, as all educators know, without a solid foundation in research methods, students will flounder in their research reports at the end of their undergraduate degrees and will continue to battle into postgraduate studies. How then can the usually compulsory methodology course be structured in such a way as to create a constructive and engaged learning experience? This paper examines the effectiveness of introducing story-telling techniques, through the use of narrative enquiry and reflective practices. The objective is to introduce different methodologies and allow students to apply those research methods to everyday events based on their own encounters, experiences and understanding, thereby demonstrating the need and relevance of a firm understanding of these approaches and concepts.

Keywords Story-telling, narrative inquiry, methodology

Introduction

By the second class, the numbers had doubled. Yes, doubled – a bizarre occurrence as it was a methodology class that experience shows students will do their best to avoid at all costs. But there they were, sitting eagerly at the desks waiting to hear the next installment and have their chance to participate. And so, a pilot study in the first class guided us through an entire course with almost 100% attendance and all assignments submitted on time. What had changed? It was so simple: the 'me me me[1]' generation had found the pleasing combination of being allowed to talk about themselves, analyse their own behaviour in minutiae, and thus place themselves in the very centre of their own learning experience. It was about them making research relevant to their immediate realities. Through the use of narrative enquiry, the world of methodology had been demystified.

This methodology course caters to communication, culture and media students. In their minds, they are going to be the next international news desk anchor, Pulitzer

---

1 A reference to the *Time Magazine* article by Joel Stein (May 20, 2013) about the millennials, people born between 1980–2000, who are labelled as exhibiting traits of excessive narcissism, entitlement and a general lack of motivation to succeed through hard work.

winner, acclaimed director, or working behind the scenes in sound, editing and production. For them, methodology is just another course to get through so they can graduate and move on. More often than not, students who do arrive instantly immerse themselves in activities on their digital devices paying little attention to the rest of the class. This creates a dual challenge for those of us teaching: firstly, they clearly do not see the relevance of this knowledge now or for later; and secondly, as the course is generally theoretically based, more practically minded students see it as a strange and terrifying hurdle best avoided. At the start of every methodology course, I always allay the latter fears by pointing out that

> there is nothing new about methodology – you have been doing it all the time. You just haven't realised. So now, we will start to identify the steps and name them so you can use them in a systematic way later. You will be amazed at how often you will use these tools in industry and how much difference this will make to your job performance. You will just get better and more credible information when you use them correctly.

The point that is emphasised through this process is that we all engage in a cycle of inquiry and analysis on a daily, even hourly, basis and that very few of the methods that we as communication and media students use are all that different from what we as individuals have been using all along. The methods in research are simply more systematic, more meticulously selected and designed, sometimes conducted on a large scale, and include people other than ourselves.

But how to address the former challenge of a general lack of interest demonstrated by the continuous use of personal communication devices in the class? The key to getting 'buy-in' or engaged academic participation really only occurred when I introduced narratives and narrative inquiry as a means to opening the gateway to methods in research. As keen producers, consumers and reviewers of digital content, they felt a need to tell others about their experiences which outweighed their inclination to disengage. Basically, we tell each other our own stories, and then we retell them – identifying and defining key steps in a research process. We reflect on the experience described in the story and discuss how we could have changed the result or got a better result had we approached it differently. By the end of the course, learners clearly understand and are able to implement the steps in a research proposal. They are accurately identifying which research methods will work better for various types of data collection needs. They understand reliability, validity and ethics. But most importantly, they understand the relevance of what they have learned.

This chapter examines how narrative inquiry is being increasingly used as an educational tool. It suggests that the inclusion of story-telling techniques allows the 'digital native' learner to better understand academic approaches and make

those more relevant to their educational process in a methodology course. For the purposes of this paper, methodology will refer to "a set of skills, assumptions and practices that the researcher employs as he or she moves from paradigm to the empirical world" (Denzin & Lincoln 2005: 25, as cited in Lal et al. 2012: 2). At the same time, it is important to note the multiple influences the use of narrative inquiry has had on the course. Not only does it act as a means of interpretation and introduction at the individual level, it also serves to mould curriculum planning and development. In other words, both the 'digital turn' and the 'narrative turn' are influencing the educational space quite significantly. The chapter starts with an introduction to narrative inquiry and then considers its application as an educational tool.

Narrative Inquiry

The 'narrative turn' – a phrase coined to capture the sudden and increased interest in the use of narrative inquiry in social sciences – highlights the importance of meaning and social interaction through storytelling within situated contexts (Monteagudo 2012: 297). While the initial purpose may have been to analyse the structure and content of stories, there has now been a shift to exploring how those narratives may have political, social and educational functions (Rutten and Soetaert 2013). It is increasingly viewed as an "ethnographically-oriented social science approach" (Stanley and Temple 2008: 275) to be included as a research tool of analysis for visual, oral and written texts. It has been effectively applied across disciplines, including literary studies, cultural studies, psychology, sociology and education.

Narrative inquiry first appeared in research from the Chicago School of Sociology in the early 1900s, although it really only garnered noticeable interest in the 1960s (Lal, Suto and Ungar, 2012: 4). Viewed as a seminal author in the field, Jerome Bruner published a number of texts on narrative, the construction of reality, and the possibilities for education from the late 1980s to mid-1990s. In his article titled *The Narrative Construction of Reality* (1991: 6), he refers to narrative as

> an account of events occurring over time…The time involved, moreover, as Paul Ricoeur has noted, is 'human time', rather than abstract or 'clock time'. It is time whose significance is given by meaning assigned to events within its compass.

It is through the narration of those events that theories are developed to guide people in terms of understanding, as they manifest through "temporality; generic particularity; interpretability; implied canonicity; negotiability; ambiguous reference and historical extension" (Bruner 1996: 133–147 as cited in Monteagudo

2012: 298). Bruner goes on to argue that there must be some form of agency in narrative, as agency is based on selection and action. A person chooses to present chosen events in a specific way in order to either explain or interpret their or other's behaviour. Connelly and Clandinin (2006: 375, as cited in Clandinin and Huber 2010: 436) refer to narrative inquiry in the following way:

> Story…is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of the experience of the story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study.

There is clearly intent in the sharing of a story. The narrative of the self is thus largely used as a tool to make sense of personal experience or expectations. Of course, this means it is important for any researcher to note that the meaning is based on and located within an existing set of values, beliefs and desires. As such, narratives are complex and are characterised by "problems, dilemmas, contradictions and imbalances" (Monteagudo 2012: 298).

One of the narrative features explored by Bruner (1991: 8) is hermeneutic composability:

> The telling of a story and its comprehension *as* a story depend on the human capacity to process knowledge in this interpretative way.

By this, he postulates that the act of constructing a narrative is more than simply choosing events. The particulars selected need to be constituted as relevant to the story, becoming its parts and functions. In this way, the construction of reality and experience has two clear phases: how it is created as a purpose of explanation; and then how it is interpreted. It is often difficult to separate the two, as, depending on the audience, the selection and interpretation of events are also based on the intention to elicit an expected response or outcome. Context is then a mitigating factor for interpretation. Of course, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that the 'millennials' are perhaps less concerned with reception than dissemination – demonstrated by the 'overshare' culture – but certainly the proliferation of 'likes' has had some influence in this regard in more recent times.

Narratives are understood in terms of 'who speaks' and the situations in which they speak. For example, in generic terms, one may be more tolerant of children's embellishments, more supportive of friends and families' versions, and more sceptical of stories told by those we deem untrustworthy or manipulative. We also highlight points of emphasis in other people's narratives based on our own levels of importance or understanding. It is normal for narratives to change with

each telling, as people focus more on what holds true or significant to them, and not necessarily on what was of interest or significance to the original narration. Even if an individual retells a story of their own experience, it has been altered based on their first telling and subsequent response to that story, and how they have changed their understanding of that story. Less positive aspects of their own character or role they played may be toned down, or parts of the story deemed less interesting to the listener removed and those more interesting extended. In the digital sphere, the narrative may also be shortened due to space and characters available, this limiting the individual in their account of events. It would be difficult to imagine any situation where a story remains completely true to its original form in each retelling. This trend is significant when incorporating narrative inquiry into a course on methodology as a means to steer the introduction of key concepts; and the notion of subjectivity needs to be discussed very early in the process so that learners are aware of the critical aspects of the approach adopted.

Increasingly, studies indicate that the education setting can be enhanced through the use of a shared construction of meaning, presenting the opportunity to introduce and apply set frameworks, and approaches that allow learners to both elicit and interpret that meaning. Lal, Suto and Ungar (2012: 7) argue that

> narrative inquirers believe that humans communicate their experiences using co-constructed narratives that offer an epistemological portal through which experiences can be viewed and interpreted and then re-presented using storied forms.

Narrative-centred environments can therefore create a foundation for active participation and discovery learning to occur (Lee, Mott and Lester, 2011). Given the oral and written narrative traditions in most cultures, students are already intrinsically aware of basic 'research assumptions and objectives' connected to narratives, and it is through the combination of three factors that effective learning and engagement may be created. These have already been entrenched through the analysis of stories outside the self, using previously established norms and conventions. For example, in narrative theory, the first factor suggests that a character must be believable and embedded in the plot. As the plot presents circumstances to which the character should react, there is a need for agency as a selection of choice must be demonstrated to further the narrative. There is a symbiotic relationship between the character and the plot. Thus, both constructs, narrative and agency, are required to create an experience that is self-determined and purposeful (Lindgren and McDaniel 2012). Simultaneously, in order for the character to contribute to the outcomes of the plot, some form of problem-solving must occur (Lee, Mott and Lester, 2011). This is the second factor, and means that characters, or in this case, the self, cannot simply be depicted as unidimensional, but rather as

complex individuals who are influenced by events or circumstance, and who share a willingness to better understand these 'realities' through constructive means. In order to best engage with the subject and the circumstances, the audience/reader needs to exert agency and interact meaningfully and systematically with that narrative. In this third factor, elements such as purpose, aim, objectives, and the method of data collection and analysis should form a clear framework for consideration. A study by Lindgren and McDaniel (2012: 352) found that content with an explicit narrative and clear requirements for student agency increased levels of critical comprehension, improved academic skills, and increased ratings of personal development. But how best to introduce those tools to maximise the learner's information experience?

The Application of Narrative Inquiry as an Educational Tool

When using narrative inquiry as a means to introduce the research process in a methodology course, it is difficult to miss the cyclical nature of our actions. Essentially, we are analysing and – in some ways – re-structuring a narrative in order to demonstrate the creation of a different narrative based on the findings of the first. It is indeed a combination of telling, engagement, restructuring and retelling[2]. It is also important to note that the storytelling of one event or experience may occur through a variety of media and representations. Participants may use one or more techniques separately or simultaneously to express their experience to the listener: discourse, dialogue, drawings, notes, online content etc. In any face-to-face conversation, the researcher is also taking cues from non-verbal communication expressed through facial and body movements. And so one narrative may present itself as a 'sum of all parts'. This is a key aspect to emphasis in terms of data synthesis.

As narratives are complex both in terms of their content and delivery, the student needs to understand that it becomes the researcher's task to collect and possibly sort the necessary data associated with the narrative in order to make it comprehensible, to extract meaning, and to draw out the steps of the process for analysis and contemplation. Narrative inquiry is therefore a good entry to discuss alternative methods such as interviews, discourse and content analysis as well as auto-ethnography.

Clandinin and Huber (2010) identify several steps to designing a narrative inquiry: justification, naming the phenomenon, living the narrative inquiry,

---

2   In reference to Huber et al. (2013: 212) the extraordinary potential of living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories of experience.

positioning, ethical considerations, and issues in representation. First, the purpose of the research should be motivated by personal, practical and/or social concerns. Next, the phenomenon under investigation for analysis should be considered within three common places of narrative inquiry – temporality, place and sociality. This is important as it demonstrates the shifting nature of the phenomenon, as opposed to other methodologies that suggest a phenomenon is fixed or unchanging throughout the duration of a study. In the third step, Clandinin and Huber (2010: 10–11) raise a point that is significant to both design and pedagogy. A narrative inquiry is a lived experience. Not only is it changing, but it also has a life cycle that predates the time under study and will continue thereafter. Narratives are related to experience and in the telling and retelling inform and influence that experience. Thus, research is a recursive process. Learners and researchers should be prepared to revisit ideas more than once. In the final stages of presentation, there may be a need to create a chronological time frame; as Bruner (1991: 6) pointed out, narratives are shared in terms of personal importance and time may be attached accordingly. This again points to the relational role played by the researcher. Simultaneously, the researcher will probably select and sort information in order to identify what is most suitable for the purposes of the study. The combination of the above factors means that narrative inquiry is more likely to present interim instead of definitive results based on a manageable amount of information. The fourth step in design is the need for positioning the study in relation to other research and existing literature. In a methodology course, this allows for natural introduction of alternative ways of presenting and analysing information. In this manner, narrative inquiry can be an inclusionary and complementary mechanism in the curriculum. Ethics are included as a fifth step – a topic to be discussed in more depth shortly. Consideration should be given to informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and sensitivity. Researchers should also reflect on the strategy of selection and the shaping of narratives. Finally, issues of representation refer to how participants and 'voice' are presented in the research text, essentially a shared narrative with a diverse audience.

If we were to stay true to these design stages in a course, we would always begin with a story. However, in a classroom context, that is not always the case. I have found that I need to discuss 'ethical' storytelling very early in the process, and now even include references to it in the first instructions. As Cole (1989: 31 as cited in Huber et al. 2013: 218) states:

> Their story, yours, mine – it's what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them.

Basically, learners should be encouraged to identify and discuss if, when and to what extent there is a need for clear parameters and regulations regarding the choice of stories according to social, ethical and institutional policies and contexts. There are literally hundreds of news reports about 'over-share gone wrong' and the lack of personal privacy in the digital age. So, in theory, the current generation should be aware of the concerns surrounding storytelling in a public space. That said, as these cases continue to receive international media attention, the message for careful and ethical storytelling can always be reinforced. As Stocchetti (2016) points out, there is both power and ambivalence in storytelling, and it is our role as educators to alert learners to that potential. This exercise is also a good practical example of 'shared constructed meaning'. Ethics may be implemented in two ways. Firstly, ground rules could be set by participants ahead of the selection of narratives. For example, no vulgarity should be allowed or tolerated. Alternatively, students may be instructed to 'think of a story' and then consider how they chose it and whether it is appropriate to be shared with the class. In other words, critical self-reflection in relation to the community becomes a key consideration – even more so in a class of future content producers.

This first step may be a contested one in terms of the role of the researcher and the informed consent of participants. Do regulated environments hamper creativity or self-expression? Is it possible to encourage the 'digital native' to understand the ethics of sharing a story, when it is so integral to their reality? Perhaps in the field the first concern may impact original contribution, but as this occurs in an educational setting and is driven not by research on student perceptions but rather the creation of a portal to better understand the research process, originality is less important than participation and understanding. It has always troubled me, when reading academic texts on methodology, that the ethics chapter is often towards the end, and that in research proposal templates (and even the design mentioned above) the penultimate question the researcher is asked is: 'any ethical considerations?' For researchers (experienced and emerging) to conduct more socially responsible studies, this should really be prefaced – especially in subjective qualitative studies, such as narrative inquiry, where the self is at the forefront and heart of the process. From the beginning of this course, emphasis is thus already placed on context (setting and purpose) and the recognition that audience and location impact on the framing of narrative.

Then we return to the first stage of the narrative inquiry design: we start with a story. I have tried two approaches: choose your own; and respond to the following scenario. The latter has proved the most effective as it removes the concerns of personal privacy from the first interaction. It also allows learners to construct a

common understanding around a process in order to commence with the initial steps of creating research around a selected topic. This is more in keeping with what will be expected later in their degrees.

Here is an example of one scenario I have used in a second-year class (20-year-olds):
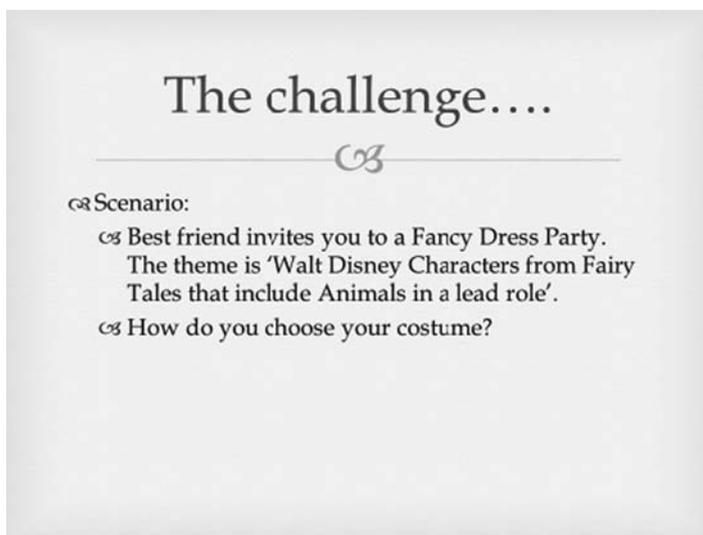
Of course, the first step should be to recognise that this is a culturally specific scenario. It requires that learners have some familiarity with the stories and characters. It should obviously be tailored based on the interests and knowledge of the students in the class. Students are given some time to think about the challenge, conduct an online search if they wish (usually by phone) and jot down a few ideas. Depending on the size of the class, they are then encouraged to share their ideas with one or more students in their vicinity. They are then encouraged to discuss their ideas with the class. This is a very organic process in that students are given (ethically responsibly) free rein to share their ideas or tell their story. Aside from verbal communication, learners include images from personal digital devices and anecdotes about previous experiences or something they have seen or heard about elsewhere.

Then comes the second phase: if this were a research project, what would we ask or test? What would be our hypothesis or research question? And so the research process starts. By the end of this class or workshop, a very basic proposal structure

is presented to reinforce the notion that research is something we have been doing all along but a good understanding of methodology will allow us to do it better:

Breaking it down…

- Identify relevant stories that fit the invitation
- Ask friends/family; and/or:
  - Conduct an online search using keywords (text and visuals)
  - Go to a DVD store and scan the shelves
- Which character 'works for you'?
- What will you wear?
  - Familiarity; affordability; viability
- Tell a friend about your idea and how you will go about making/getting the costume
- Will people recognise you as the character?
  - Try it on for friends/family to see if it works
- Did you get the costume right according to the instructions?
- If you wore it again to a different party would they still recognise the character?
- What worked against you?
- Tell a friend about the whole experience from start to finish

- Research topic
- Literature review
- Research problem/question
- Sub problems
- Research Proposal
- Methodology / research design
- Pre-test, data collection and analysis
- Validity
- Reliability
- Limitations
- Write a research report

Thus, when leaving their very first session, students will have been exposed to foundational research design and practice. While the definitions and application will follow, they have at the very least heard several key terms and concepts, and through the use of narrative enquiry, they are starting to realise the accessibility and usefulness of a variety of methodologies. It can also be an empowering experience as they become aware that they already have some of the competencies required and now need to hone them to make themselves better at getting and compiling reliable and compelling data. They have also discovered, by default, that some online sources are more credible or compelling than others.

The difficulty with implementing narrative inquiry when teaching methodology is that it may place undue emphasis on that approach, causing students to favour it over other qualitative methodologies or alternative quantitative studies. Similarly, narrative inquiry is a subjective process. Narrative inquiries are deemed to be 'overly personal or interpersonal' (Clandinin and Connelly 2000: 181 as cited in Lal, Suto and Ungar 2012: 13). The close relationship between the

researcher and the participant in constructing the narrative means that it may be difficult to create boundaries. This is further complicated if the researcher is the participant, or in this case, if the learner seeks to analyse the narrative of the self. It is sometimes difficult later when introducing methodologies that require more distance between the researcher and the subject.

This brings us to the next aspect of narrative inquiry as an educational tool. It can and does influence curriculum planning, as there must be a collaborative relationship between the class and the lecturer in terms of engagement and participation. The curriculum becomes part of the recursive process. If a particular approach is not effective, the students should be able to communicate that concern in order to effect change or at least receive feedback as to why the approach was chosen or will continue. This feedback mechanism is of course present in most courses regardless of the method of teaching. However, in narrative inquiry, much of the content takes its lead from the emphasis in the shared research narratives. So, for example, in a recent course with senior students, it was apparent from their storytelling exercises around possible thesis topics that we had a group emphasis on interviews. The course content therefore altered slightly to include more discussion around the interview process as it was perceived to be more relevant to their educational process. Of course, such emphasis does not exclude alternative methods that should also be introduced in a general methods course.

Concluding Remarks

Student comments at the end of the course referred to the lectures as "fun", "interesting" while "informative". In a conversation at the end of a class, a student told me: "we keep coming because we want to know what happens next". Perhaps without realising it, the learner completes the narrative cycle: just like with any good story, the audience only returns if they want to know more or when they feel part of or invested in the story. Arguably, there is little novel about what is presented in this chapter, except the explicit notification that narratives steer the way we experience our educational development. However, the positive influence of narrative inquiry in the presentation of a methodology course is profound and worth sharing. While storytelling gets more and more attention in terms of its digital contributions, it is its very malleable nature that garners increased interest in academic circles. The difference between a methodology course based on a narrative inquiry design and one that is not, is that due to years of understanding life experiences through narrative, it becomes easier for the current generation of learners to engage with research designs previously perceived as inaccessible so that they may go on to create cohesive studies.

References

Bruner, J. (1991). The Narrative Construction of Reality. *Critical Inquiry 18(1):* 1–21.

Clandinin, D. and Huber, J. (2010). Narrative Inquiry. In B. McGaw, E. Baker, & P. Peterson (eds.). *International Encyclopedia of Education 3rd ed* (pp. 436–441). New York: Elsevier.

Huber, J., Caine, V., Huber, M. and Steeves, P. (2013). Narrative Inquiry as Pedagogy in Education: The Extraordinary Potential of Living, Telling, Retelling, and Reliving Stories of Experience. *Review of Research in Education 37*: 212–242.

Lal, S., Suto, M. and Ungar, M. (2012). Examining the Potential of Combining the Methods of Grounded Theory and Narrative Inquiry: A Comparative Analysis. *The Qualitative Report* 17(21): 1–22.

Lee, S., Mott, B. and Lester, J. (2011, September 28). Modelling Narrative-Centred Tutorial Decision Making in Guided Discovery Learning. Retrieved from http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-3-642-21869-9_23.

Lindgren, R. and McDaniel, R. (2012). Transforming Online Learning through Narrative and Student Agency, *Educational Technology and Society 15(4):* 344–355.

Monteagudo, J. (2011). Jerome Bruner and the challenges of the narrative turn. *Narrative Inquiry 21(2):* 295–302.

Rutten, K. and Soeteart, R. (2013). Narrative and Rhetorical Approaches to Problems of Education. Jerome Bruner and Kenneth Burke Revisited. *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 32: 327–343.

Stanley, L. and Temple, B. (2008). Narrative methodologies: subjects, silences, re-readings and analyses. *Qualitative Research* 8(3): 275–281.

Stocchetti, M. (2016) ed. The Politics of Education and the Digital Turn in Storytelling: A Critical Introduction. In Storytelling and Education in the Digital age, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, pp. (13–30).