

Researching professional development with the use of narrative enquiry

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Introduction

Following its emergence in the mid-1980s, narrative inquiry has become an established, though diverse, approach to research. Today, narrative inquiry is widely used by researchers from across social sciences, including education and TESOL. In this paper, I will briefly introduce narrative inquiry, share how I research professional development using it and reflect on what I have learned so far through this process. This paper is based on my presentation at the 49th IATEFL Conference in Manchester in April 2015.

Narrative inquiry: What is it?

Narrative inquiry is usually defined as a particular subtype of qualitative research methodology, even though the possibility for quantitative narrative inquiry has been discussed in the literature (Elliot, 2005). In its essence, narrative inquiry is an inquiry into a phenomenon through focusing on narratives, or stories. What is meant here are not fictional stories but rather stories of personal experience. The assumption is that we are a storytelling species: we understand ourselves, the world around us and our experiences through telling stories. As Polkinghorne (1988, p. 13), one of the pioneers of narrative inquiry, explains, "Narrative is the fundamental scheme for linking individual human actions and events into interrelated aspects of an understandable composite".

The common argument of narrative inquirers then is that "if we understand the world narratively, as we do, then it makes sense to study the world narratively" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17). Together with this, the ways with which individual narrative inquirers bring this argument to life vary (see Riessman, 2008 for examples). Thus the story that follows of narrative inquiry within my ongoing PhD research should not be seen as a prescription of the right way to do narrative inquiry but rather as a practical example of one of many possible ways of engaging with this approach.

The story of my research into stories

Within my ongoing PhD research, I am investigating the professional development of English language teachers

on an MA TESOL programme. The programme in focus is a one-year, full-time, on-site MA, located at the University of Manchester. My aim is to better understand professional development based on how teachers talk about their experience of life and development within the timeframe of the programme. It was this aim that made me turn to narrative inquiry: I needed a theoretical framework and methodological tools suitable for dealing with people talking about their experience. This was in early 2014.

After a phase of planning, piloting, and getting ethical approval, I started to generate data in September 2014 when the new academic year began. One day while still in the first week of the programme, I attended one of the MA TESOL classes. Having agreed with the tutor in advance, I gave a short presentation introducing myself and my research. I then distributed participant information sheets inviting volunteers to take part in my research. Within the next few weeks, I received seven positive replies: from three female and four male students of four different nationalities.

Figure 1 below summarizes in graphic form what happened next and what is still to happen.

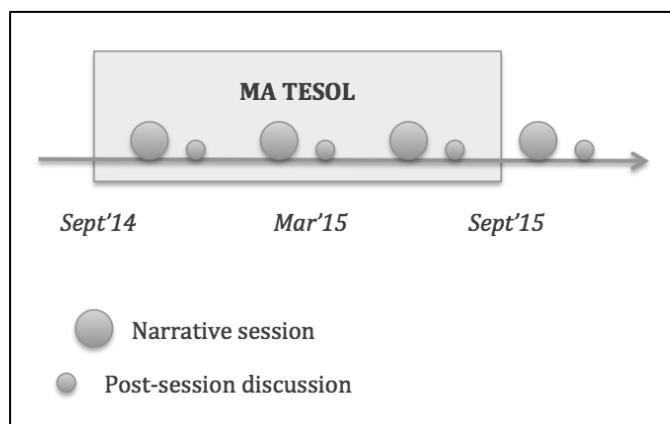


Figure 1: A graphic summary of my data generation process

In October 2014, I met individually with my participants for a narrative session (indicated in Figure 1 with the first big circle). The narrative sessions were biographical in nature and aimed to get to know the teachers and to begin rapport building. I started the sessions with an open-ended question: "So, how are you doing these days?", which served as a prompt to explore their current experience. We then moved onto the participants' past and explored their background, decision to become an English language teacher, their career up to starting the MA TESOL and their decision to undertake this degree. We finished off with a discussion around their aspirations for the future. This produced extended story-like accounts in all cases. With permission from the participants, I audio recorded all the seven narrative sessions. I then transcribed the audio recordings and sent them to the participants, with

the request that they read their transcript and think whether it had captured what they wanted to say at the time of the narrative session and whether anything had changed since then. In a way, this process resembled member checking (Stake, 1995, pp. 115–116), even though there were some important differences: I shared the transcripts, not the final report, and my main objective was not to verify but to prompt further reflection.

To capture such further reflection, I met again with the participants for post-session discussions. This happened in November 2014 (indicated in Figure 1 with the first small circle). The post-session discussions followed a similar format to that of the narrative sessions. They were individual, held in the same place and audio recorded. This time, though, the discussion was structured around the transcripts. This enabled a filling in of any gaps in the stories that had emerged during the narrative sessions, as well as providing a fresh perspective on the stories. Moreover, the post-session discussions complemented the narrative sessions with the addition of new stories of the participants' current experience, which might never have been shared had I waited longer for the next meeting, or omitted this step in my research plan.

Time passed and the participants lived through the stressful time of assignment writing. In February 2015, after they had submitted their assignments and started the second semester, we met again for the second narrative session (indicated in Figure 1 with the second big circle). Having covered the bigger picture of their lives in the first round of data generation, we now focused on their current experience and any reflections they might have had on their own professional development. I opened up the conversation with the question "So, what have you been doing since we last met?" and then was as responsive as I could be to their replies. These narrative sessions were transcribed and returned to the participants as before and complemented by the post-session discussions (indicated in Figure 1 with the second small circle).

Two more rounds of data generation are still to come: one in the summer of 2015, during the dissertation stage, and one in the autumn of 2015, immediately after finishing the programme (indicated in Figure 1 with the third and fourth big and small circles). Being in the middle of the data generation process, I believe this is a good time to pause and reflect on what I have learned so far from using narrative inquiry to research professional development.

Reflections on using narrative inquiry to research professional development

First of all, looking at the data that I already have in hand, I feel that narrative inquiry has served the purpose of my research well. During the narrative sessions and post-session discussions, my participants

told many stories that were rich in details with regard to what they were doing, thinking and feeling over the year of MA in TESOL. These details might never have emerged had I just had a pre-determined list of questions requiring direct answers. For example, had I not been prepared to hear stories, I might have never realized that working at a local restaurant could be linked to a teacher's professional development. However, for Carol (all the names are pseudonyms), a Chinese teacher with a strong belief in the importance of getting students interested and motivated, such a link does exist. For her, working at the restaurant is a chance to get to know the local life. She hopes that in the future she will be able to share this experience with her students and this will have a positive effect on their interest and motivation. Having details in my data like this makes me hopeful that I will indeed get a better understanding of professional development, which is the aim of my research.

Together with this, seeing how rich my data are has made me more aware than ever of the ethical issues involved in doing narrative inquiry (Josselson, 2007). My participants have entrusted me with their stories, and it is now my responsibility to take good care of what I have been entrusted with. This will involve finding a way of staying loyal to both my participants and the world of academia. I will need to strike a balance between being honest and transparent about what I did and what I found, on one hand, and protecting my participants' identities and being sensitive to how they might feel reading what I have written about them, on the other. As Geertz (1988, p. 131, cited in Josselson 2007, p.537) says, "What once had seemed only technically difficult, getting 'their' lives into 'our' works, has turned, morally, politically, even epistemologically delicate", and this is precisely how I feel.

Looking through the data, I also realize that the narrative sessions and post-session discussions were not just encounters for my participants to talk about their development, they were a source of development for them. Johnson and Golombek (2011) suggest that narrating their experience helps teachers to externalize their understandings and beliefs and to systematically examine themselves, their practices and the contexts of their work. This resonates with a postmodern conception of the qualitative research interview as a construction site of knowledge (Kvale, 2007, p. 21). Within this research, the participants noticed themselves that they were benefiting from sharing their experience. They appreciated in particular the opportunity to read the transcripts. Beatrice, a Chinese teacher dissatisfied with traditional teaching and the exam-oriented system in her teaching context, commented that reading the transcripts was like reading her own diary – it helped her to clarify her thoughts; and Zulkani, an Indonesian teacher keen on introducing technology into English language teaching, said that

reading the transcripts helped him to understand his own situation better.

Finally, as I was contemplating my participants' stories, memories of my own teaching started to emerge and I found myself problematizing what I used to see as unproblematic. For example, I never doubted the need for a course book. I always used one to teach my students or to learn foreign languages myself and it seemed to work well. However, when I heard Tom, a Chinese teacher fascinated with languages and language acquisition, telling a story of how he learned to speak Japanese without a course book, I started to question myself. Today, I do still believe that course books are useful but I am more explicit about my belief and the reasons for holding it. In other words, this experience has been a source of professional development for me as well - not only as a researcher but also as a teacher. After all, raising the tacit practical knowledge gained from experience to the surface is an important part of developing expertise (Tsui, 2003).

Conclusion

To summarize, narrative inquiry is a promising approach to research, and it seems to suit researching professional development particularly well. Being just in the middle of the data generation process, I can already see it bringing about insights, which I believe will be helpful for better understanding professional development. Moreover, the approach in itself seems to be a source of professional development for both the participants and the researcher. This makes the approach even more attractive.

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Biodata

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