FIRST EXPERIENCES OF FOUR PH.D. STUDENTS IN COLLABORATIVE NARRATIVE INQUIRY RESEARCH: THE ARTSSMARTS RESEARCH PROJECT

Debra Abraham Radi, Phyllis Hildebrandt, Joan Martin, and Beryl Peters

Stories go in circles. They don’t go in straight lines. So it helps if you listening stories because there are stories inside stories and stories between stories and finding your way through them is as easy and hard as find your way home. And part of the finding is in getting lost. [For] if you’re lost, you really start to look around and listen (Metzger, D, 1986 as cited in Oliver, 1998, p. 222).

In the preface to their book, Literacy Research Methodologies, Duke and Mallette (2004) underscore the importance of preparing graduate students to be “both producers and consumers of a variety of different kinds of research” (p. xv). They suggest that, given the recent diversification of research methodologies in education, “it is essential that educational researchers understand the unique contributions as well as limitations of particular forms of research and, as important, ways in which different forms of research can work together toward useful insights and understandings” (p. xvi). As aspiring researchers, we recognize that we have had limited time and exposure to the many different methodological and epistemological perspectives being employed in educational research. We also understand the importance of making connections to different kinds of research. Together, multiple research methodologies yield greater insights than any one type alone. As graduate students at the University of Manitoba, we are appreciative of the opportunity to be engaged in research to develop our skills and thank the Principal Researcher, Dr. Ralph Mason, for extending the invitation to become involved in the ArtsSmarts Project. Furthermore, we are grateful to have had the opportunity to share our understanding of the research experience with others at the Graduate Student Symposium, March 12, 2005.

This paper is about our experiences as novice researchers involved in the ArtsSmarts Manitoba Research Project. We are all graduate students in the Faculty of

1 We wish to thank everyone who made this experience possible. Thank you to Dr. Ralph Mason, the ArtsSmarts Manitoba Research Project, and all the teachers and schools who were willing participants.
Education with Debra in the Educational Administration cohort, Phyllis in the Language & Literacy cohort, and Beryl and Joan in the Inclusive Special Education cohort. We understand and recognize the need to talk about our stories. Sharing the stories helps to legitimize, validate, and further the research and its objectives. Also, in telling our stories, we will have opportunity to grow and develop as research inquirers. We have organized this paper into three sections. These sections represent different aspects of our participation as research inquirers. We begin with opportunity. Opportunity presented itself in the form of the ArtsSmarts Manitoba Research Project, and we begin with a brief description of the project. The focus of the next section is to portray the experience. The research design of collaborative narrative inquiry and the method of data collection are described. The third section focuses on reflection and our efforts to take the narrative experience public. In this section we explore our opportunity as researchers to tell the research story. This is our story, our interpretation of the way it happened.

**Opportunity**

The opportunity to become involved in field research presented itself through the ArtsSmarts Manitoba Research Project. ArtsSmarts is an arts-based education program that provides opportunities for professional artists to visit, perform, and teach in school classrooms to facilitate the arts being integrated into other areas of classroom instruction. The Manitoba ArtsSmarts program is part of a larger Canadian ArtsSmarts Secretariat Program. One of the key objectives of the Canadian ArtsSmarts Program is to “enable schools/community organizations to explore ways to integrate arts activities in non-arts subject areas, aligned with provincial curriculum where possible” (Cameron, 2001, p. 4). The ArtsSmarts Manitoba Research Project is designed to “support, chronicle and interpret teachers’ efforts to develop self-initiated changes to their professional practice resulting from their experience observing an ArtsSmarts artist at work” with their students (Mason, 2004, p.1). The Project is based on a belief that when a teacher makes one change, the effects ripple throughout the whole web, resulting in different pedagogical practices not only for that teacher but also for other educators within the school and system (Cameron, 2001).

There are four elements to be investigated within the ArtsSmarts Manitoba Research Project. The elements are as follows: a) collaborative narrative inquiry with host teachers; b) effects on students’ sense of self as learners; c) effects on the artist’s sense of audience; and d) nested narrative inquiry. The last element stimulates a self-reflection process
Experience

Duke and Mallette (2004) suggest there are many ways of doing research; some methodologies do not always fall into exclusive categories. They suggest that “some research can be considered more than one type of research or may combine methodologies in various ways” (p. 1). The research method used in the ArtsSmarts Manitoba Research Project has elements of both collaborative action research and collaborative narrative inquiry, each of which is briefly described.

Collaborative Action Research

One important aspect of collaborative action research is that it includes and engages teachers in the various stages of inquiry (Fisher & Berliner, 1979; Tikunoff & Ward, 1983). According to Tikunoff and Ward (1983), when teachers are involved in conducting the research, “it is more likely to be practical and oriented toward resolving actual classroom instructional problems” (p. 458). The obvious benefit of conducting collaborative research is that it serves the purpose of informing classroom instruction and can also be used as a vehicle of presenting professional growth opportunities for both the teacher and the researcher (Fisher & Berliner, 1979; Tikunoff, Ward, 1983).

There are several elements of collaborative action research design that have been borrowed for this project. The first element is inquiry. Collaborative action research is about adopting professional collaborative roles around a point of interest (Clark, 1980). It includes and engages the teacher in the inquiry process as the outcomes are intended to inform his/her practice (Tikunoff & Ward, 1983). The second element is a commitment to action. Both the researcher and teacher mutually focus on the problem presented by the research and both make a commitment to action. “Attention is given to both research and implementation issues from the beginning of the inquiry” (p. 466). The third element is collaboration. Both the researcher
Collaborative Narrative Inquiry

Simply stated, narrative inquiry uses stories to describe human experience and action (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1995). Collaborative narrative inquiry is “grounded in the notion that teachers not only hold and use knowledge but also create new knowledge based on their storied experiences in context” (Craig, 2001, p.306). In effect, the term “narrative” has a dual meaning: it involves a story version of the events for the teacher and a narrative as a lived experience between the researcher and the teacher (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Craig, 2001). These two narratives become, in part, a shared narrative.

There are several important aspects of the narrative inquiry cycle particular to this project for us as researchers. First, as research inquirers, it is important that we become familiar with the teacher’s narrative of lived experience. Thus, we first have to listen to the teacher’s story ensuring that it is their story that gets told first (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). However, narrative inquiry is a collaborative process and therefore involves “mutual storytelling and restorying as the research proceeds” (p. 4). We need to tell our own stories as we live our own collaborative researcher/teacher lives. What is to follow is a brief description of the method of data collection for element one of the ArtsSmarts Manitoba Research Project, collaborative narrative inquiry with host teachers.

Our Roles As Research Inquirers

Our first visit to the school involved watching a lesson with the artist, teacher, and their class. The artist’s sessions varied lasting from one to three hours. The focus of each artist’s visits to schools was predetermined. We had the opportunity to observe Aboriginal cultural experiences, puppetry, storytelling, and video/film making. Immediately following the performance, our role was to try and capture what the teacher thought was of pedagogical significance of the artist interacting with the teacher’s students. It was important in this first step of the inquiry process that we listen to the teacher’s story of the experience. The sessions usually lasted no more than thirty minutes, and taping was optional. Most school administrators provided release time for the teacher to dialogue with us immediately following the artist’s presentation. While our first visits to the school were prearranged for us, we were responsible for arranging the next visits.
The next step in the research process was for the research inquirer to construct a three-paragraph narrative text, selectively capturing the essence of the ArtsSmarts lesson from the teacher’s perspective. The narrative text, usually constructed immediately following the conversation, was shared with the teacher at the first opportunity. In some instances, when we travelled to rural schools, the narrative text was shared on the same day. In other instances, a week or two lapsed between visits. During this second visit, the researcher’s role was to engage the teacher in negotiating the priorities and details of the narrative text. The duration of the visit was dependent on the negotiation that took place around the mutual understanding of the experience. In this instance, both the voices of the teacher and researcher were heard. This session was tape recorded and lasted between twenty and thirty minutes. Both the narrative text and follow-up conversation were submitted to the principal researcher in the project.

There was opportunity for a possible next step in the research inquiry process. If a teacher suggested that there were ways they’d like to stretch their classroom practice in follow-up, we extended the offer to become involved. Involvement could be simply listening or helping with planning. It could also mean coteaching or providing feedback. In this instance, there was movement toward collaboration with an emphasis of mutual construction of what the research relationship could look like.

**Reflection**

*Making the Narrative Inquiry Experience Public: Rationale and Theoretical Basis*

*Inquiry and Interpretation*

We are, in narrative inquiry, constructing narratives at several levels. At one level it is the personal narratives and the jointly shared and constructed narratives that are told in the research writing. But narrative researchers are compelled to move beyond the telling and the lived story to tell the research story. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 10)

As graduate students in doctoral programs at the University of Manitoba, we had an opportunity to tell our research story of first experiences as narrative inquirers at the Faculty of Education Graduate Student Symposium at the University of Manitoba on March 12, 2005. In sharing our experiences, we entered into the process described by Connelly and Clandinin (1991): “In some ways the researcher moves out of the lived story to tell with another ‘I’, another kind of story” (p. 141).
Olson (2000) states:

Careful examination and exploration of stories is the essence of narrative enquiry. People often focus on the word narrative but skip lightly over the word enquiry. Yet it is the enquiry into the stories that creates the educative experience as individuals find new and expansive ways to interpret their own and others’ experience. (p. 350)

As narrative inquirers, we have taken Olson’s words to heart in our attempts to carefully examine and explore the stories that have been shared with us. In our endeavours to find new and more expansive ways “to interpret our own and others’ experiences,” we reached out to colleagues in the field and invited other graduate students to be a part of this process.

Scholarship

We are supported in our efforts to reach out to the broader educational community by the literature in the field. Fifteen years ago, Boyer (1990) published a landmark book called Scholarship Reconsidered. Boyer argued that educational research needed to move beyond the traditional models of scholarship toward scholarship of discovery. One of the three forms of scholarship he identified was what he termed the scholarship of teaching. A fundamental feature of this new scholarship was the notion of active inquiry into teaching by practitioners themselves. This is a scholarship that contributes to, transforms, and extends our knowledge of teaching and which is validated by sharing with our scholarly community. Shulman (1998) stated that three key characteristics are needed for an activity to be considered scholarship: a) scholarship must be made public, b) scholarship must be susceptible to critical review and evaluation, and c) scholarship must be accessible for exchange and use by other members of one’s scholarly community. This is the scholarship to which we, as graduate students, aspire. This is the scholarship for which we strived in making our stories public, accessible for peer review, exchange, and evaluation with members of our scholarly community.

Windows into the Experience

Narrative inquiry is a powerful means of legitimating the work of teachers and of constructing meaning and ways of knowing for teachers, their students, and the wider educational communities (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002). Nevertheless, there are inherent limitations that must be considered. Mulholland and Wallace (2003) noted that: “When a
narrative inquirer acting as the instrument of research [Eisner, 1991], retells another’s story, the inquirer’s ideas and values both structure and alter the narrative” (p. 5). Bell (2002) notes that the multilayered and ambiguous nature of narrative inquiry results in constructed truth based on subjective researcher interpretation. “We need to remember that stories are limited interpretations; they carry with them our assumptions and biases. Listeners process the stories through their own experiential lenses” (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002, p. 196). As novice researchers to the process of narrative inquiry, this experiential lens is a new one. Therefore it is important for us to share the stories we heard, to seek others’ insights, and to extend the inquiry.

Extending the Inquiry: Developing a Discourse Community

The literature on narrative inquiry (Connelly, & Clandinin, 1990; Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002) is in strong agreement that this form of research helps us to “build connections with others in ways that both allow and encourage the joint construction of knowledge” (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002, p.191). There is a need expressed in the literature to articulate the experiences in front of an audience, as we did at the Graduate Student Symposium. Such articulation and expression are important factors in our self-awareness and growth as well as a way to gain multiple perspectives on the experiences rather than relying solely on our singular, and perhaps, limited views. Mulholland and Wallace (2003) stated that “using multiple levels of interpretation or viewing events at different distances from the lived experience can legitimate the study more fully than a single telling” and propose that “different forms of legitimation can be achieved by telling different and separate stories” (p. 7). And so we told our “different and separate stories,” and issued the invitation for multiple levels of interpretation.

An Invitation

At the Faculty of Education Graduate Students’ Symposium, we invited the members of our scholarly community to join us in our work as narrative inquirers. We each presented a story or stories from our experiences and asked our colleagues to “interpret what they believed to be the salient points” of each presentation and to record them on a graphic organizer which we prepared and handed out to all members of our audience. We also asked our colleagues to “record any themes or ideas central to all presentations” in the centre of our graphic organizer, which we termed our “inquiry extension” (Figure 1).
Figure 1. Graphic organizer used for inquiry extension
What follows are excerpts of our stories. They are as diverse as our experiences.

Joan’s Story

My first interview was with Charlene (pseudonym). I observed the culminating event of the artist’s visit to her class, a pow-wow. Students were wearing masks they had created and were dancing and acting out the legend of how the pow-wow came to be. Here is a portion of my understanding of the experience.

Charlene spoke of the role of active and artistic activities in promoting increased involvement for many students who tend to be timid and inhibited in the regular classroom. She identified the significance of these activities to improve self-esteem of students who normally struggle with paper and pencil learning activities (e.g., multiple intelligences).

She strongly identified the significance of a “celebration” in creating “class cohesion” by noting that the songs and activities that led to the pow-wow encouraged the development of a sense of team and belonging. She described her class as containing a number of “outsiders or loners” and that the pow-wow played a role in improving their self-esteem. Lastly, she commented, and demonstrated with facial expressions, how her students reacted to the legend of the loon, a creature normally on the outskirts of the in-group of animals, but who saved the day. She liked the way that the legends were used to include all students.

We discussed how she would take these three concepts and use them in her daily teaching to support the desired benefits for her students. She will attempt to include more active and artistic opportunities. She will use the idea of a “celebration” each month to support the class cohesion, and she will incorporate legends into her social studies, language arts, and other subjects to support the moral dilemmas her students encounter.

Deb’s Story

As an emerging narrative inquirer, the sharing of the narrative is very important. Here is an excerpt of the three-paragraph narrative that was created with a kindergarten teacher.

You articulated that the process started with the school retreat where you had an opportunity to brainstorm how the artist could be used in your school and, most particularly, in your classroom. When you met with the artist you were impressed that he took your classroom environment into account using the picture clues that were evident in your classroom. As a result of this classroom visit, the artist
designed a series of lessons revolving around the bear theme, incorporating groundhogs, which built on your students’ prior knowledge. You remarked that the artist used voice in the classroom—small voice, medium voice, loud voice—to transition the students when they became restless and also used a “walk-about the school” strategy in the storytelling. Both of these strategies were ones that you plan to incorporate into your classroom practice. While having the opportunity to watch the artist’s presentation, the practices that you use in your classroom were brought to your consciousness (e.g., using hearts for the story bear as visual clues for your students to remember the key messages of the story).

When you thought of changing your practices in the classroom, you discussed becoming more open-ended versus your current practice of being more structured. You plan to risk more with your students, allowing them to determine the flow of the lesson by being open to going where it takes you and them, as learners. You also remarked that you plan to let themes flow from one to another without having a definite end point to them as a result of the artist demonstrating how many themes can integrate into one story or a series of story lessons.

Beryl’s Story

My experience began where the artist’s experience ended. On the day I arrived at a school in Winnipeg, an artist from Freeze Frame was concluding her video project with a Grade 4 class.

The day that I arrived was the final day of student editing of their videos and a class sharing session of the video productions that the students had created. The students, teacher, and the artist were all very excited about what was happening in their class, and everyone was eager to share their perspectives with me. The teacher’s story provided an inspiring narrative of the process. The teacher saw ways in which this experience had already changed his practice, as well as potential ways for further self-initiated professional growth. I was very struck by the fact that there was an expressed desire and opportunity to enrich and possibly construct new knowledge through changed practice, but sadly, the constraints imposed by the system seemed to prevent this from happening. Here was a teacher who wanted to use these new ideas, but was unable to do so. The artist came into the school with software, laptops, and video equipment for the project, and when she left, the software, laptops, and video equipment left with her. The teacher had the willingness to apply these new ways of constructing knowledge, but had none of the necessary tools. There was no appropriate software in the school or division and no computers that could accept any borrowed software. Digital cameras were also nonexistent at the school. But then the story took a new turn. It wasn’t just the teacher whose practice was transformed; it was also the teacher candidate in the teacher’s room. The teacher candidate, made
arrangements for applying the techniques learned in the video project to a Language Arts unit in the classroom. The teacher candidate arranged with the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba to bring the students’ book talk videos to the Faculty for editing and then bring them back to the school and students for their presentations. As a result, I am fortunate to be able to be a part of a second cycle of storying, where I will observe the teacher; or in this case, the teacher candidate, teaching using the experiences with the artist to change and transform practice. My first story in this journey has been an unexpected but most interesting one.

Phyllis’ Story

As a professional, I am most interested in helping teachers help kids by seeking opportunities for transformative teaching and learning to occur. So it comes as no surprise that I have interpreted my experience as a researcher from this perspective.

"Experience is the primary catalyst for change to occur. In this instance, it was an artist’s visit to a grade one classroom. The teacher desired to incorporate “the arts” and more specifically the “language arts” into her math lessons. The artist was there to model the process. And as researcher, in this instance, my role was to serve as an observer during the lesson. And so it was in this context, the teacher was watching the artist and the kids, the artist was performing, watching the teacher, the kids, and the researcher, and as researcher, I was trying to capture it all! I did not anticipate that the artist, in this instance, would stop the lesson every so often to explain to me what he was trying to do. This was somewhat disconcerting to me at the time because the scenario was not unrolling as I had envisioned it.

The experience was to provide an opportunity for the teacher to reflect on the lesson. I was to meet with the teacher to debrief. My primary role in this instance was to listen to the story as seen through the eyes of the teacher. You can imagine my distress as a three-way conversation broke out between the artist, the researcher, and the teacher. However, I managed to gain control, sequestered the teacher off in a little room and let the story unfold.

On my second visit I learned that the teacher had a discussion with the artist about story vines we had discussed as a follow-up activity and had done some thinking and searching on the topic. I learned that the artist had patiently waited until she and I were done to find out what she and I thought. While the second visit was to serve the purpose of confirming my interpretation of her story, we pretty much went straight to a discussion of a plan of action. I brought some resource materials to help facilitate the process. And so the stories began anew."
Validit\text{y} through Validation

Verhesschen (1999) stated, “A narrative account can be seen as an interpretation. So the narrative is a construction” (p. 4). He notes that more than one interpretation is possible and asks the question “How do we judge the interpretation?” (p. 4). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) warned that narrative, like other qualitative methods, “relies on criteria other than validity, reliability, and generalizability” (p. 7) to judge the interpretation, and they observe that the criteria for conducting narrative research are still under study by the research community. Conle (2000), likewise, acknowledged the need for narrative inquirers to develop their own criteria and terms for what is being studied and how it is studied. Mishler (1990) stated that validity for inquiry-based research requires concrete examples of actual practices, described and “tested through the ongoing discourse among researchers” (p. 415). In our experience as presenters at the Graduate Student Symposium, we strived for validity by sharing our examples of practice and inviting members of our educational community to engage in discourse by examining our exemplars for themes. Lyons and LaBoskey (2002) stated that valued teaching and research practices are subject to a continuous process of trial and interpretation, resulting in shared understandings. Conle (2001) believes that “the legitimacy of narrative methods in the social sciences hinges on . . . the suggestion that validity claims are made, and should be made, to safeguard the rationality of narrative inquiry in both research and teacher education” (p. 30). Conle (2001) borrowed from Habermas (1984) to suggest four validity claims about narrative inquirers to anchor rationality:

- They truthfully represent their feelings, and intentions, and motives;
- Their stories are socially acceptable and appropriate;
- The narrative contents are true to what they describe;
- The language is comprehensible, and the narratives well-formed.

Mulholland and Wallace (2003) argue that “legitimation of the findings in qualitative research is enhanced by multiple tellings of stories of lived experience” (p. 22). It is our hope that the stories we shared at the Graduate Students’ Symposium resulted in shared understandings and enhanced legitimation.
Our experiences as graduate students undertaking the role of narrative inquirers have led us to believe that “this discovery—of the contextually grounded, experience-based, socially constructed nature of scientific knowledge—should be cause for celebration” (Mishler, 1990, p. 436). Pavlenko (2002) noted that narrative study permits us “as researchers and practitioners to approach narratives . . . as discursive constructions rather than as factual statements. Such an approach will allow us to uncover multiple sociocultural, sociohistorical, and rhetorical influences that shape narrative construction and thus to understand better how the stories are being told, why they are being told in a particular way, and whose stories remain untold” (p. 217). “Narrative inquiry’s soft data can illuminate hard realities” (Bleakley, 2005, p. 535).

Riley and Hawe (2005) stated that “Narrative inquiry captures how people make sense of the world” (p. 230). They suggest categories adapted from Young (1984) as ways of constructing knowledge. These categories consist of questions designed to elicit information and meaning from the narrative: Are the sentences descriptive? Are the sentences consecutive? Are the sentences consequential to the story? Are the sentences evaluative? Are the sentences transformative? We have asked these questions of the stories we have heard and examined the stories as data for trends, themes, and insights (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000). “Categories may be drawn inductively from the raw narratives to provide manageable data for further investigation—often a framework or typology that can then be applied back to illuminate single cases” (Bleakley, 2005, p. 537). We have synthesized the trends, themes and insights we discovered in our first stories together with the insights shared with us by members of our academic community at the Graduate Student Symposium to produce categories for further examination. These are our findings:
Figure 2. Inquiry extension.
Conclusion

“We can endeavour to provide exemplars that can provide frameworks for meaningful interchange and thereby make powerful knowledge construction more possible” (Lyons, & LaBoskey, 2002, p. 197). It is our hope that the stories we have examined will provide exemplars for meaningful exchange and powerful knowledge construction. “In its fullest sense, narrative inquiry requires going beyond the use of narrative as rhetorical structure, that is, simply telling stories, to an analytic examination of the underlying insights and assumptions that the story illustrates” (Bell, 2002, p. 208). Bell stated that hallmarks of the analysis of the story “are the recognition that people make sense of their lives according to the narratives available to them, that stories are constantly being restructured in the light of new events, and that stories do not exist in a vacuum but are shaped by lifelong personal and community narratives” (p. 208). Norum (2000) describes narrative inquiry as a form of research that is capable of transforming systems. “As individual stories are woven into a ‘long’ story of the public education system, collective wisdom emerges” (Norum, 2000, p. 10). We have attempted to allow the voices of teachers, through their individual stories, to be heard in a wider education community, to allow their stories to be restructured to facilitate and be a part of knowledge construction in our academic community. In a discussion on storytelling and reflective conversation, Hole (2003) states:

*Once the story is found, storytelling requires a willingness to share those experiences with others. It requires an openness that encourages others to tell their stories as they arise. It requires a desire to search for the value of experiences. It is difficult work, requiring much time and a high tolerance for risk. The learning and growth that occur as multiple voices join in searching conversation is worth the effort. We must continue to attempt, together, to learn more than we now know.* (p. 49)
References


First Experiences of Four Ph.D. Students


