The Narrative of My Inquiry: Re-searching Thesis Research
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This paper, which has its origins in a presentation I gave at the 2007 Education Graduate Student Symposium, is not a typical sharing of research results, but rather a reflective telling of a journey. This is a story of the on-going process to use narrative inquiry as the methodology to write my Master’s thesis. It is therefore fitting that I begin this paper by conjuring the image of a bus and a train, two commonly recognized modes of transportation one could choose for a journey. Michel de Certeau (1984) explains:

In modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transportation are called metaphorai. To go to work or come home, one takes a “metaphor”—a bus or a train. Stories could take this noble name: every day they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. (115)

Stories traverse, organize, select, link and make sense of our experiences: a powerful vehicle for those of us struggling with those very tasks as we face our research.

With that in mind, I will tell the short version of a story:

Once upon a time I became interested in studying the issues of transition from high school to university. When I went to graduate school, I learned I had to situate my ideas, assumptions, and eventually my research plan amongst established studies and theories. Right now I am gathering data and beginning to write my thesis and I wonder if I have chosen the right match of theory and methodology...

Although only three sentences long, this is a story: my story. It has a beginning, a middle, and, despite its lack of absolute conclusions, an end. Both the structure and content of this
story become the focus of this paper. It is my purpose in sharing the narrative of my
inquiry to allow you, as readers of the proceedings of this Symposium, the chance to
reflect upon your own stories of research. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write:

People live stories, and in the telling of stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and
create new ones. Stories lived and told educate the self and others, including the
young and those researchers new to their communities. (p. xxvi)

As a “young” researcher “new to my community,” I am living the story of my thesis and
this paper had become an initial telling of my story: an opportunity to reaffirm, modify
and create new avenues for my inquiry while I am in the midst of my research.

The Beginning: The Story of How I Became Interested in the Issue

When I was writing my thesis proposal, I prepared a series of narratives that came
from different experiences in my life: one from when I wrote an essay that bombed in my
first year English class, one from when I was a secondary teacher working with self-
described “working class kids” in Oxford, England, and finally one derived from many
dinner conversations I’ve had with my husband and his colleagues who teach first-year
English students at university. I thought I might share one or all of these already written,
already polished narratives in this paper—a neat, tidy, and quick cut-and-paste job.
However, I am trying to stay true to the nature of inquiry, so instead of neat, tidy and
quick, I felt compelled to tell you a story that recently flooded back to me while
interviewing one of the participants in my study:

It took will power not to stand on top of my chair and shout to the 219 other
first year journalism students, the eight or so Teaching Assistants and the prof I had
gradually come to despise, “I don’t belong here! This is not me!” Instead I silently
fumed through the soul-wrenching discussion of ethics and knew that this would be the very last journalism lecture I would ever attend. I restrained myself from public humiliation by focusing on the image of a piece of paper sitting ready next to my phone.

Back in my dorm room, I had neatly copied out the codes for dropping my journalism course through the telephone registration system after the first few lectures and seminars when I began to suspect that this really was not the place for me: that this really was not who I was. I made myself wait for a while, thinking that I should not rush this decision. I knew I was homesick. I knew I was adjusting to life across the country. I knew I was only 17 and pretty young to be making such a huge decision. So I had looked at my course outline and decided that I would make my decision after the lecture on ethics. And I knew by just a few minutes into that lecture that this was over for me.

I took the telephone off the wall, grabbed the piece of paper, picked up the receiver and had all intentions to begin dialing. I thought I was calm and ready and even a little thrilled. But when I looked down to see my hands shaking so violently that I was not sure I would be able to dial, I hung up the phone and began weeping instead.

I didn’t drop classes. That was not who I was. I was a good student, a finisher, a success. I always had a goal, a focus, and a life plan. I was not only going to be a journalist, but a world-famous journalist. Hadn’t I boasted about that in my year book? Hadn’t I been telling everyone since Gr. 2 that I was going to be a
journalist when I grew up? Hadn’t I worked so hard so I could get a scholarship to one of the best universities for journalism in the country?

If I made that call, it would all be over. I would never be the same. I would have to figure out who I was all over again. (Researcher’s Note, Feb. 5, 2007)

This is as Summerfield (2005) would say, a “mediated memory”: a recollection that has been tempered by time, perspective, and other tellings. If you caught me in that dorm room while I was trying to dial the phone, I probably would not have told you this version of the story. Yet, what is important now is that this story still holds meaning for me. I have carried some version of this story about a moment when I felt at crisis in my first year of university into every classroom I have ever taught, every dinner table where I have discussed reading, writing and learning at university, and every lecture and seminar I have attended as a graduate student. The moment where I had a crisis of identity and chose to change my educational path is what eventually inspired me to apply to graduate school, write scholarship proposals, and articulate my desire to learn more about the issues of transition from high school to university.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain that growth and transformation is central to narrative inquiry:

Following Dewey, our principal interest in experience is the growth and transformation in the life story that we as researchers and our participants author.

Therefore, difficult as it may be to tell a story, the more difficult but important task is the retelling of stories that allow for growth and change. (71)

I have many stories living inside me, but the story I tell above is one that freed me to grow and change. By making a phone call, I stepped away from a path that was leading
me to a career that would have mostly frustrated me and a self that would likely have felt unfulfilled. By allowing myself to remember and retell this story, I have transformed myself from a first-year survivor to a first-year researcher.

Yet, as with much of the growth I have experienced in my life, I feel both proud and slightly embarrassed when I consider what I thought at an earlier stage in my inquiry. Splashed across early applications to graduate school and statements for academic awards are assumptions I held about transitions issues: some of which I was aware of and others I was only able to recognize through reading and candid conversations with classmates, instructors, and my advisor during my Master’s coursework. First, I assumed that all students should desire further study in higher education. Second, I assumed they should all be able to succeed in higher education. And third, I assumed that there was something we as members of the institutions of high schools and universities could and should do to help ease the transitions so that success would be universal. I started with my experience: I had desperately wanted to be in university, but parts of my first-year at university were devastatingly difficult, so I wanted to find a way to stop others from having to go through similar anxieties. I started with my experience, my story, because it was what I knew, what mattered to me, and what fuelled my passion. And, I apologize about the abruptness, but I think we have now hit the middle of my original short story.

The Middle: The Story of How I Discovered a Theoretical Framework

I became immersed in the university setting as a full-time graduate student. I was once again facing the tasks of literature reviews, writing papers and preparing presentations, and conducting pilot studies for my emerging thesis project. I became acutely aware as I expanded my reading that the issue of transition to university was far
more complicated than I originally thought. The first complication: I was not the only researcher who had thought to study the difficulties of students and instructors in first-year, so I would have to situate my thinking amongst established work. The second complication: the underlying assumptions that other researchers thought and wrote with did not always match my own. Or, even more uncomfortably, there were also times the authors’ assumptions mirrored my unconscious way of thinking, but I did not like what I saw reflected. Many of the quantitative designs I originally thought I wanted to emulate left me questioning what exactly they revealed about the issue or how the data would be used by the institution. Although they were very helpful to contextualize what might be affecting a sense of success or ability to complete an undergraduate degree in a traditional non-stop, no-detour route, I was left with many questions. Did drop-out or a pause in study mean “failure” in transition to first year studies? Was it important to isolate the factors of success and failure? Could knowing these factors help “fix” the problem? Why “fix” the problem? Was the “fix” needed for students to achieve successful further education or was the “fix” needed for institution to keep consumers who would continue to pay tuition fees?

The questions carried me into another space of thinking: if I had been immersed in academic discourse before, I was now drowning in theory. I allowed myself to sink into and swim through a variety of theoretical debates about what constituted literacy or literacies, identity and identities, and sociocultural contexts. By reading the work of many, but especially Vygotsky, Street and Gee, I began to understand that how we speak, think, believe, dream, envision, and articulate are markers of both our individuality and our social construction. We define ourselves and our world through our experiences with
others. As Vygotsky argues: “Every function in cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later on the individual level; first between people, and then inside…all the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals.” (1978, p. 46) Through my newly adopted sociocultural lens, I began to look at studies that were more qualitative in nature, using ethnography or grounded theory methods to explore transition from the position of situated literacies, academic literacies, discourse communities, and identity formation. However, the theories and studies that followed the New Literacy Studies tradition I had grown so fond of did not answer all my questions either. In fact, I began to formulate more questions: how are discourse communities and identities linked? Do these theories fit real instructors’ and real students’ experiences? Do theories emerge from listening to narratives or does the telling of narratives become inspired by theories?

My struggle was not just with finding the right methodology, but more importantly my struggle was with finding my identity as a researcher. When I began my coursework, I felt reluctant to use the word researcher to describe myself. I felt the word needed quotation marks as it was not really me yet: I was a “researcher”, but only as a pretend role and not an authentic identity. Then I was introduced to the idea of being a re-searcher: finally, I could identify with the process of searching again and again, looking for links between lived experiences and theories, and reflecting on what impact that might have on individuals and social communities. I became more comfortable situating myself amongst other researchers and theorists with a belief that my place exists in the balance of theory and practice, negotiated through my own and others’ stories.
I try no longer to think in certainties. I have learned that all theories and all methodologies carry assumptions and that those assumptions, whether implied or explicit, are as important and as powerful as the data and discourse that is represented in the written product. I still carry assumptions, but I am beginning to question many of them, a process that is both frightening and freeing. Is university the best-fit for all students? Should all students be successful in first year? Does all learning require some struggle and conflict? If struggle is needed for learning and re-forming of identities, should first year be about the struggle rather than the transition? Are the struggles and the conflict the reason that first-year stories become such powerful illustrations of discourse and identity theories?

I guess the middle of this wee tale of a search for my thesis methodology is about questions, and one might think that the end of this narrative would be about answers. Yet, I’m both proud and afraid to say that this inquiry is still driven by far more questions than conclusions.

The End?: The Story of How I Continually Question the Methodology

So whether I credit serendipitous forces, divine intervention, or just good advice from my advisor, I came home finally to narrative inquiry. I say home because I have long seen myself as a story-lover, story-collector, and story-teller. I believe the methodology of narrative inquiry suits me as a person, but it also fits the type of data I wanted to collect. I wanted to give voices to the numbers, faces to the crowds, and stories to the statistics. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state:

Experience has a wholeness and an integrity about it that is neither left in the field nor on the pages of a field text but is alive at the end just as it is in the beginning.
The purpose of this retelling, like any retellings in any aspect of the narratives of our lives, is to offer possibilities for reliving, for new directions, and new ways of doing things. (p. 189)

It is through re-telling and re-living that we begin to make sense of our experiences and to position them in a wider personal and social context. It becomes the articulation of words in story form that is so often an illumination of what we truly think, believe, and assume about our communities and our identities. My study is following the path of narrative inquiry by attempting to create spaces for participants to re-search, re-live, and re-construct their experiences by telling their stories of transitions to new communities and new identities.

I am nearing the end of the data collection process for my project and I am beginning to evaluate whether or not I have created the space for participants to tell their stories. So far, I have remained elusive about the particulars of my study because I am cautious to differentiate between methods and methodology. The methods are the step by step how-to of the study, whereas the methodology is the underlying philosophy and driving force behind all the methods’ decisions. I wanted to focus on my journey to the methodology because that was the hard part. The easier part was deciding I was going to talk to six first-year students and two first-year instructors, engage in story-structure focused interviews, develop a short narrative for each participant from the transcriptions, and then meet again to member-check and discuss the narrative inquiry process. The decisions I made about the methods were driven both by a desire to be true to the methodology, but also fuelled by the pragmatic needs for a project that was realistic and attainable.
I am a long way from devising any conclusions from my data, but so far I believe the theory and methodology behind my project has mostly matched my participants’ experiences during the inquiry. If I return briefly to Vygotsky’s description of the social and individual processes involved in cultural functions and juxtapose it with Clandinin and Connelly’s description of narrative inquiry, I can see a parallel of ideas. By telling others about an experience through story we have the needed social context that allows for our individual learning. I am impressed with how, without reading the theories or methodological descriptions, many of my participants are articulating similar ideas. One participant said:

I enjoyed telling my story. I think everyone should have the opportunity. Like everyone feels like their story is different, and is not the normal, or the, the average story. I think everyone should get into it with someone else, even if it’s an older person, compare your stories, or even give advice to a younger person who is considering coming here [to university] (Second Interview Transcription, Feb. 20, 2007).

Another participant expressed her feelings:

‘Cause it was just more me talking and like figuring it out in my head. I hadn’t really sat down and said, “This is my transition from high school to university.” And um, it was good to, …think it through and … put it into words. I’m still like not completely sure I know what I want to do, and I’m trying to figure it out. So it was kind of good to like think of it in a new way (Second Interview Transcription, Feb. 21, 2007).
They re-lived their experiences in their telling and have expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to discuss their search to understand their own transitions.

My Master’s thesis is about the search. The re-search. It is about the desire to learn more about important issues and the need to learn more about myself and my participants. This is what we all do. We re-search. I am going to end this paper by jumping back on the bus or train and I will redirect the questions back to you. How would you tell your story of your current research? Does knowing your story help you create new stories? What would you reveal about your own research story if you filled in the blanks of this frame narrative?:

Once upon a time, I was interested in ________________________________.
When I went ____________________ I learned ________________________________.
Right now I am ________________________________ and I wonder ________________________________.

The end? For now, my friends, for now.
References


