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To cite this article: Maggi Savin-Baden & Lana Van Niekerk (2007) Narrative Inquiry: Theory and Practice, Journal of Geography in Higher Education, 31:3, 459-472, DOI: [10.1080/03098260601071324](https://doi.org/10.1080/03098260601071324)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098260601071324>



Published online: 19 Oct 2007.



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Narrative Inquiry: Theory and Practice

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ABSTRACT *This article offers an overview of the method of narrative inquiry and explores competing trends in the use of the approach. It not only examines the theories relating to the method but also offers practical guidance on using narrative inquiry, including an exploration of what might count as a narrative and ways of analysing narrative data. The final section of the article presents two different examples of how narrative inquiry has been used. The first example is the use of narrative inquiry as a reflective learning process for students in an undergraduate curriculum. The second example is a narrative inquiry into staff experiences of role change in problem-based learning. Suggestions are also made as to how narrative inquiry might be adapted for use in geography in higher education.*

KEY WORDS: Qualitative methods, narrative enquiry

Introduction

She was just slightly disappointed when he admitted that he came to the nursery window not to see her but to listen to stories.

“You see, I don’t know any stories. None of the lost boys knows any stories.”

“How perfectly awful,” Wendy said. (Barrie, 1929)

This article offers an overview of narrative inquiry, an approach that focuses on the use of stories as data. The idea of narrative inquiry is that stories are collected as a means of understanding experience as lived and told, through both research and literature. Peter Pan is seen as listening to stories in order to make sense not only of his own world but also those of Wendy and her siblings. There have been a number of recent debates (Crang, 2002, 2003, 2005; Fish, 2004) relating to the use of qualitative methods in geography. Crang has argued that there needs to be a wider use of



qualitative approaches in geography, in particular arguing that geographers should not “fall back into a position where ‘realism’ and transparency are taken as unproblematic, nor should we suggest that all rhetorical work conveying a sense of the real is somehow out to deceive” (Cragg, 2005, p. 226). Further, he suggests that there needs to be greater debate on what counts as research and evidence and the interrelationship of these two concepts and practices. Fish (2004) also introduces questions concerning the use of qualitative methods in rural studies, suggesting that narrative, as a term, is often used with more precision than is often admitted. He suggests that narrative predominantly refers to event horizons and that in rural studies there is a tendency for causality, consistency and linearity to provide the means for managing reality. Whilst he argues against such a position, Fish suggested that what is needed is anti-narrative, a position in which it is possible to embrace hesitancy, circularity and incoherence. It would seem to us that Fish’s anti-narrative is the kind of narrative inquiry that we present and argue for here, but perhaps with more incoherence and diversity than he suggests.

Thus, we argue that narrative inquiry is seen in a variety of ways and tends to transcend a number of different approaches and traditions such as biography, autobiography, life story and, more recently, life course research. In terms of locating it in the broad spectrum of qualitative research, it tends to be positioned within a constructivist stance with reflexivity, interpretivism and representation being primary features of the approach. It is possible to see these features by comparing how reflexivity is seen in narrative inquiry compared with other approaches. For example, Lincoln summarized the general use of qualitative research methods as follows:

- to grasp phenomena in a holistic way;
- to understand phenomena within context; or
- to emphasize immersion in and comprehension of human meaning.

Lincoln separated what she termed conventional qualitative methods from constructivist methods that emphasize holism.¹ She highlighted the ontological stance of constructivist research as being that “realities are constructed entities” (Lincoln, 1992, p. 379), and emphasized the subjective nature of its epistemology.

Differences regarding the issue of representation seem to be one of the strong points of disagreement between qualitative researchers who hold different perspectives. This is not surprising, because to debate the issue of representation would usually draw into question the very processes with which the voices of participants are believed to be captured and presented. We consider that such opinions are, in turn, strongly influenced by views that are held about the nature of truth. Denzin’s view of the representational crisis is characterized by the assumption that “much, if not all, qualitative and ethnographic writing is a narrative production . . .” (Denzin, 1997, p. 4). He explained that the writing of narratives poses particular complexities because of the presence of four paired terms in any social text. These are: “(a) the ‘real’ and its representation in the text; (b) the text and the author; (c) lived experience and its textual representations, and; (d) the subject and his or her intentional meanings” (Denzin, 1997, p. 5).

The assumption that follows is that “there is a world out there (the real) that can be captured by a ‘knowing’ author through the careful transcription (and analysis) of field materials (interviews, notes, etc.)” (Denzin, 1997, p. 4). Denzin, positioned within critical poststructuralism, challenged these assumptions by stating that:



Language and speech do not mirror experience: They create experience and in the process of creation constantly transform and defer that which is being described. The meanings of a subject's statements are, therefore, always in motion. (Denzin, 1997, p. 5)

Further, Polkinghorne (1995) suggested assuming that narrative is one of the operations of the realm of meaning and therefore the examination of this realm would aid in the understanding of narrative. He concluded that:

... narrative meaning is one type of meaning produced by the mental realm. It principally works to draw together human actions and the events that affect human beings, and not relationships among inanimate objects. Narrative creates its meaning by noting the contributions that actions and events make to a particular outcome and then configures these parts into a whole episode. (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 6)

More recently, Alvesson & Sköldbberg (2000) took a different stance shown by their separation of hermeneutics from data-orientated methods, which comprised grounded theory, ethnomethodology and inductive ethnography. They labelled these methods 'hyper-empiricist' because of their structured nature, strict guidelines and the tendency to work in close proximity with data. Their criticism of data-orientated methods was captured as follows:

These currents miss the main part of the interpretive problematic, so that the data appear as more or less unmediated, pure, and the research process is endowed with a naïve character of gathering and threshing empirical material according to some sort of agricultural metaphor. (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000, pp. 48–49)

Thus in practice narrative inquiry is used to study educational experience since it is argued by those in this sphere that humans are storytelling organisms who lead storied lives.

Table 1. The reflexive position of narrative inquiry

Methods are increasingly reflexive in nature				
Lincoln (1992)	Conventional qualitative research methods	Constructivist methods or naturalistic methods		
Alvesson & Sköldbberg (2000)		Symbolic interactionism		
		Symbolic interactionism: Typical qualitative research methods—to include grounded theory Social constructivism		
Denzin (1997)		Inductive ethnography: strongly emphasizes data—quantity and quality	Critical ethnography	Postmodern ethnography
			Interpretive ethnography	
				Interpretive biography Narrative inquiry



Those who use this research method argue that stories are the closest we can come to shared experience. For example, Clandinin & Connelly (1994, p. 415) argued that: “Experience . . . is the stories people live. People live stories and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones.”

However, we argue that narrative inquiry must go beyond the notion of just telling stories. By using our narratives at the beginning of this article we hope to begin the process of illuminating the difference between ‘stories’ as data and narrative inquiry. Our interest in narrative inquiry emerged from our experiences of using stories in our teaching, Lana as a lecturer in occupational therapy, Maggi as a lecturer in higher education and research methods. Both of us told stories to illustrate points and used stories and case studies for small-group teaching. Yet often our readings of the cases and stories were so different from those of our students that we began to examine the ways in which stories were used for teaching and this then extended into the research projects in which we were both involved. For example, the notion of what counted as a story was something we necessarily saw as problematic, but how it was problematized, and by whom, was an issue that seemed to slip in and out of focus as we used it as a research method, as we illustrate in the examples below.

Competing Trends in Narrative Inquiry

Polkinghorne (1995) has suggested that the term narrative is used by qualitative researchers with a variety of meanings. He has argued that narrative within narrative inquiry was “a discourse form in which events and happenings are configured into a temporal unity by means of a plot” (p. 5) and has located Bruner’s (1996) classification of narrative inquiry in two distinct groups, namely narrative analysis and paradigmatic-type analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). Polkinghorne built on Bruner’s classification in order to draw a clear distinction between (a) analysis of narratives and (b) narrative analysis. The first refers to studies in which the data consist of narratives that are then analysed to produce categories. The latter refers to “studies whose data consist of actions, events, and happenings but whose analysis produces stories” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 6).

However, what counts as ‘story’ varies within methodological fields. The biographical-interpretive method was first developed by German sociologists to produce accounts of the lives of Holocaust survivors and Nazi soldiers. This method is part of the narrative tradition and the main theoretical principle in this method is the idea that there is a gestalt—a whole that is more than the sum of its parts, informing each person’s life. It is the job of the biographers to elicit this ‘meaning frame’ rather than follow her/his own concerns. Hollway & Jefferson (2000) have suggested that four principles facilitate the production of the interviewee’s meaning, which we have adapted here:

- (1) Use open-ended questions: ‘Tell me about your stories of doing fieldwork.’
- (2) Elicit stories: ‘Relate examples of learning in fieldwork that are particularly memorable.’
- (3) Avoid ‘why’ questions—these tend to encourage intellectualization and can be threatening.
- (4) Follow up using respondents’ ordering and phrasing: ‘You said working in a different environment was very complicated, can you tell me some more about that?’



We suggest that when using narrative inquiry it is important that the researcher is not only able to ask questions that elicit stories but also that she/he is able to position her/himself so that stories can be analysed effectively. For example, some researchers within the ethnography tradition would argue that stories emerge largely from interview questions asked by the researcher. However, there are those within the interpretive tradition who disagree with this stance, and would always ask participants to tell and define their story in a way that would convey the meaning that they, as participants, would wish to be heard. Stories constructed by the narrator (written, oral and even film) have been used by anthropologists and sociologists who label their work as ethnography. Yet we increasingly believe that the distinction between different types of narrative inquiry tends to be in the co-construction and strategies for interpretation rather than between the traditions; in other words ethnography can be carried out with a modernist (non-interpretive) stance or with an interpretive one.

Using Narrative Inquiry: Considerations for Practice

Despite this theorizing there is often a sense that stories are just something that is told to explain or make a point, whether within a lecture or a seminar, and it would be easy to assume that stories are merely subjective accounts told in the coffee room. However, data sources in narrative inquiry include

- field notes of shared experiences;
- journal records of participants;
- interviews (usually unstructured);
- storytelling;
- letter writing;
- autobiographical and biographical writing.

Some important points to consider when undertaking narrative inquiry are that the researcher should:

- listen to participants' stories;
- acknowledge the mutual construction of the research relationship (both researcher and participant have a voice with which to tell their stories);
- acknowledge that people are both living their stories in an ongoing experiential text and telling their stories in words as they reflect on life and explain themselves to others.

Nevertheless, the whole notion of storytelling is more complex than is often supposed and telling a story may be undertaken for a whole host of reasons; it may be told in a particular way using different sounds and voices. Furthermore, it is important to realize that stories can be used as a verifying mechanism, as a means of confirming or defending truths. Alternatively they can be used as a means of control. For example, in professional education, stories from practice can promote the idea that a given story represents what it means to be a *good* nurse or an *excellent* teacher. Thus, storytelling can be a means of laying claim to a particular notion of professionalism in order to encourage students to take up particular modes of practice. Stories are difficult to argue with when presented as good practice and therefore they are immediately problematic as representations of life. This is because stories are both connected to, and representative of, identities and thus to criticize a story is often therefore seen as a criticism of identity.



What Counts as a Story?

Researchers describe lives, tell stories about them and write narratives of experience. Thus in telling a story the narrator takes responsibility for making the relevance of the telling clear—so that meaning is created between storyteller and listener. The role of the researcher is to be an effective listener and to see the interviewee as a storyteller rather than as a respondent. Therefore in interviews the agenda is open to development and change—depending on the story being told. Authors such as Bauer (1996) take the position that the object of narrative analysis is the narrative itself, as opposed to the events being narrated or the experiences of the narrator.

Some researchers would argue that narratives are structured with a beginning, a middle and an end, held together by some kind of plot and resolution (Sarbin, 1986). However, we would argue against this, suggesting instead that narratives do not necessarily have a plot or structured storyline but are interruptions of reflection in a storied life. Further, such storied lives may have unplanned interruptions such as an unexpected illness that may disrupt identities, thus changing the story and the storied-ness of lives. For example, Lana met participants in one of her research projects whose story had been interrupted:

Sharon had been at university for one month, having won a scholarship to study English literature, when she first became ill. After her first hospitalization, she made one more unsuccessful attempt to study before finding work that she was able to maintain for just over a year. Sharon was then unemployed for 13 years, until she obtained administrative work in a library as part of a supported employment programme; she loved being surrounded by books. Sharon saw her work as an important achievement, the story she had imagined had been interrupted by illness and connected narratives across and through the illness by locating herself in a work situation that she believed resembled the dreams she initially had for her future after leaving school. Work had a major positive impact on her identity and gave her new hope for the future, despite her disrupted story.

In narrative inquiry we would argue that the focus of analysis is the people who tell us stories about their lives, the stories being the means of understanding our participants better. Thus, storytelling tends to be closer to actual life events than other methods of research that are just designed to elicit explanations. Consequently, stories are created and re-created in the interview and then negotiated, so that both researcher and participant do not assume that the stories necessarily reflect a pre-existing reality. The meaning-making through story construction and interpretation first happens between the narrator (person who had the experience) and the listener (researcher). In the next step, this process is re-enacted on a different level (one that might be understood to be less personal in nature); the researcher assumes the role of narrator whilst the listener will be the consumer/reader of the published research.

Analysing Stories: The Realities

The process of undertaking narrative inquiry involves not only collecting stories but also undertaking analysis. Analysis is often undertaken in narrative inquiry by examining the epiphanies and metaphors inherent in the stories. Although Epiphany is the Twelfth Night



after Christ's birth when he was visited by the Three Wise Men, and his divinity was revealed to the world, it derives from a Greek word, *epiphainein*, meaning 'to manifest'. However, the main writer to extend the meaning of the word was James Joyce, who was interested in sudden, dramatic and startling moments that seemed to have heightened significance and to be surrounded with a kind of magical aura, which he referred to particularly in *Ulysses* (Joyce, 1922).

The notion of epiphany has been developed in various ways but in interpretive research Denzin has proposed four different types of epiphany:

- Cumulative epiphany: an event that is symbolic of profound changes that may have been going on for a number of years or be a turning point in one's life caused by the accumulation of numerous related experiences.
- Illuminative epiphany: a point in time or particular experience that reveals insights; or an event that raises issues that are problematic.
- Major epiphany: such as an event or experience that is so traumatic or challenging that its meanings or consequences are immediate.
- Relived epiphany: an event or issue that has to be relived in order to be understood.

All epiphanies are seen as transformational; that is, they significantly change people's lives. However, Denzin has not discussed the transitional process of shifting into, through and out of an epiphany, yet we suggest that exploring epiphanies is seen to be a vital component of people's storied lives. A further means of analysing data in narrative inquiry is by examining metonymy, metaphor and writing in the first person.

The use of figurative terms and imagery is something that is also used in narrative inquiry, and understanding what is meant by their use is a source for analysing data and exploring the subtext. Metonymy is the substitution of the name of something for an attribute of it. Familiar examples of metonymy are referring to the American presidency as The White House and using The Stage for the theatre. We tend to be relatively unaware of the use of metonymy in speech and often adopt new forms through the power of media such as the press and radio. Exploring the ways in which metonymy is used is often an effective means of understanding how participants view and theorize about their world and can help us see the influences of class and culture in their lives. However, a predicament with narrators' use of metonymy and metaphor is that it is developed and used in mother-tongue language (therefore carrying meaning) but its use in a second language is often 'copied', therefore becoming an intellectual function rather than an expression of experience.

Metaphor is also a mechanism that has been used often in the process of writing up qualitative data, but for some this approach is seen as rather passé. The kinds of metaphor we can use are phrases or words that give symbolic meaning to data: 'no smoke without fire', 'throwing the baby out with the bath water'. Using metaphor at an early stage of writing and formulating the data is often a way of beginning to see what is being said through metaphor that at first was not obvious. Thus examining metonymy and metaphor can promote insight into researchers' and participants' tacit assumptions by exploring how such figurative terms are used. For example, Maggi referred to one university where she was undertaking research as a sausage factory—because she perceived that it just filled students with heaps of propositional knowledge and turned them out at the end of 3 years. A re-examination of this indicated her prejudice against lecture-based forms



of teaching that she perceived to be mechanistic and outmoded—which in many cases it is not.

When between 10 and 50 stories have been collected it is often difficult to work out how to analyse them in a way that is coherent but does not fragment people's voices. One of the strategies we use is to begin by writing a personal summary of each participant and his/her story. Writing such biographical accounts enables us to interpret the data through focusing on an individual in context. This process demands that we locate the person in a context and community, describe what she/he does and how she/he sees her/himself. This mechanism helps us as researchers both to begin to see how we view the participants and to engage with the judgements and perspectives that we have brought to the research. This facilitates reflexivity, by enabling us not only to see how we have come to know the participants but also to review our own biases—to see how we have imposed value judgements upon participants.

A further strategy we use is to write in the first person, since many of us do not know how to begin to place ourselves as researchers and thus how to speak when presenting data. The result is that we try to attribute our perspectives and views to the participants, instead of making clear what is interpretation and what is our reflection on that interpretation. Through writing in the first person it becomes possible to see one's own interpretations and personal stances. However, it is important to acknowledge and recognize that we use multiple voices and hold multiple perspectives and that we, and our stances, change and move over time. Managing such shifts can become somewhat complicated when writing up narrative accounts, remembering how we position(ed) ourselves initially, as we write and later as we rewrite and reflect. As our personal, professional and researcher identities change, so does our data interpretation and our perceptions of how 'honest' we have been in the research process. From here, it is possible to begin to explore how participants' stories overlap and interlock and examine the ways in which such accounts relate to the overarching issue under study. Having explored the theories and practicalities of using narrative inquiry it is possible to see that there are a number of challenges.

Challenges of this Approach

One of the difficulties of using narrative inquiry is in 'managing' the story, in terms of how participants in the story are represented and 'spoken' for in the presentation of data. A further challenge is the way in which researchers present themselves in data, whether they are present, absent or backstage. For us collecting stories often feels most straightforward. It is the choices we make concerning data management, presentation and trustworthiness that seem to be the most troublesome. Some of these issues are explored in the section below.

Pros of Narrative Inquiry

- (1) It is relatively easy to get people to tell stories, since most people are pleased to share a story about themselves.
- (2) Gaining in-depth data (thick description) is possible because this often occurs with ease in narrated events.



- (3) It is possible to gain in-depth meaning and reflection because participants are content to reveal themselves in stories and to reflect on their accounts at a later date as well.
- (4) People tend not to hide truths when telling their stories, or if they attempt to it usually becomes apparent in thorough data interpretation.

Cons of Narrative Inquiry

- (1) Stories can be difficult to interpret in terms of the relationship between the storytelling in the interview and the story-making in the presentation of data.
- (2) Decisions need to be made about whose story it is and how it is interpreted and reinterpreted; this becomes complicated if the participant disagrees with the presentation or she/he wishes to include data that may cause her/him more harm than she/he understands. Researchers in narrative inquiry must be prepared to protect their participants—sometimes from themselves. Yet it is also important to acknowledge that disagreement between participant (narrator) and listener (researcher) can add depth of understanding—or at least highlight potential misinterpretation that might not otherwise be discerned.
- (3) It is often difficult to decide the relationship between the narrative account, the interpretation, and the retold story.
- (4) The negotiation of data interpretation and presentation of data can be continually troublesome.

Dilemmas

Understandings of concepts such as credibility, validity or trustworthiness that are used to ensure rigour must be addressed with honesty in narrative inquiry. Thus, we must engage with the issue of ownership of interpretation, so there is a sense that what we are presenting is shared truths and shared values. Thus, people's norms and values, including our own, are always evident in the way data are presented and portrayed. Yet such negotiation remains a difficult, complex and time-consuming task.

Examples in Action

This section presents ways in which narrative inquiry was used in practice and suggests ways in which it might be used in higher education. The first example offers a perspective on the way in which students' experiences were explored in South Africa. The second example presents issues that emerged from a narrative inquiry in problem-based learning in the UK. The final examples illustrate how narrative inquiry could have been used in two different geography studies.

Student Experiences of Learning

The University of Cape Town attempts to attract a diverse group of students in order to serve the needs of a diverse population. Natural differences, for example in culture and language,² have been magnified by apartheid policies, resulting in differences in educational background, socioeconomic status and availability of opportunities. Such



differences result in disjunctions that students have to resolve in order to succeed in the programme. Different forms of narrative inquiry are taught in order to bridge the gap between students' own experience and that of the people they work with, as illustrated in Duduzelo's story.

When 18-year-old Duduzelo registered for his degree he was surprised to discover that he was the only male student in a class of 55 occupational therapy students. He was also the only Zulu-speaking student; other black/African students were Sotho- and Xhosa-speaking. Duduzelo grew up in a rural environment and traditional family structures meant his uncles had almost the same status as his own father in terms of the power assigned to them to make decisions on his behalf and therefore to influence his direction and his future. Duduzelo found aspects of the curriculum uncomfortable to deal with and avoided direct discussion of issues that were considered taboo, thought it rude to ask certain questions when the person being interviewed was older than he was and felt strongly that men or women at particular stages of development should not be involved in discussions of particular topics. When assertiveness training as a life skill was taught, it was done using narrative accounts. A scenario was used in which an 18-year-old confronted her parents who would not allow her to go away on holiday with a group of friends. A lively class discussion ensued and many suggestions were made. Duduzelo, however, held a different view and explained that the suggested behaviour could have serious negative consequences if used in the community from which he came. In Duduzelo's frame of references holidays were a time when family working and studying away from home returned to visit together and he believed that younger people should only disagree with older members of the family in exceptional circumstances. In other words, Duduzelo felt strongly that the girl in question would make matters worse by using the strategies being discussed in class. Duduzelo's telling of his story in the classroom context immediately clarified that complex sets of assumptions and principles require consideration when potential solutions are sought. A systematic approach using storytelling has therefore been incorporated in the curriculum to help students construct an understanding of the life-world of others.

Stories of Becoming: From Lecturer to Facilitator in Problem-based Learning

Narrative inquiry was used to understand the stories and journeys of staff as they developed in the role of facilitator in problem-based learning. For many staff, becoming a facilitator is a daunting experience, because although they may have taught students through workshops and small-group sessions, their role as a facilitator in problem-based learning often requires more of them than these other forms of teaching. The research was undertaken between 1998 and 2002 with a group of over 20 staff who were from diverse backgrounds in the field of nursing and midwifery in a UK university.

Initially it appeared that tutors' approaches to facilitation would predominantly reflect their pedagogical stance (how they saw themselves as teachers) and that the findings would reflect the issues related to disciplines relatively new to academe which were also rigid, traditional and densely populated with women. Over the course of the three-year study it became apparent that although tutors' stances did impact on their overarching approach as facilitators, what seemed to be pivotal was the way in which they 'positioned' or 'placed' themselves. Thus in this sense the notion of how tutors positioned themselves did not displace their pedagogical stance but rather *overlaid* it. Positioning, then, was relational and was affected by a number of factors. How staff positioned themselves



as facilitators changed over time and also in relation to the problem-based teams they were facilitating, as well as possibly other things that they were undertaking in their lives (such as a higher degree).

Through the stories of their role change staff spoke of the changes in perception of themselves as teachers. For example, no longer being controllers of a body of knowledge that must necessarily be 'covered' and given to students felt perilous, and resulted in challenges to self-esteem and fear of loss of status and control. Staff experience of problem-based learning led them to realize that the concept of teacher centrality in student learning had to be redefined, as did their role and position as 'teacher'. Exposure to problem-based learning brought recognition over time that the variation in student personalities and abilities required facilitators to be flexible, adaptive, responsive and inclusive; and such recognition interrupted the expected narratives, for many staff, of what it meant to be a lecturer in higher education.

Using Narrative Inquiry in Geography

The research literature on higher education geographical research seems to have few studies using narrative inquiry as a research method. However, this approach could be used to analyse students' experiences of curricula and fieldwork. It could also be used to understand the relationship between the kinds of knowledge creation that occur in the university setting compared with the way in which students manage and create knowledge during fieldwork. The articles by Fuller *et al.* (2003) and Hughes (2004) can be used to illustrate this.

Summary of Article by Fuller et al. (2003)

This article sought to compare students' experiences with and without fieldwork, at a time when fieldwork was withdrawn from many degree programmes in the UK due to foot-and-mouth disease. Fuller *et al.* used nominal group technique to explore students' perceptions of fieldwork using five groups of students from five different UK universities and they received 300 responses from 33 final-year students. The findings indicated that developing generic skills and subject knowledge along with the experience of geographical reality and working with peers and staff were positive benefits, whereas the negative impact was seen as the high level of time involved.

This was an interesting and innovative study and nominal group technique was certainly appropriate. However, the difficulty with this kind of nominal group technique is that students' stories become lost amidst the translation into quantitative data and clear results. Yet rich in-depth data collected through narrative inquiry would have provided insights into the impact of the cultural context on students' stories, and enabled Fuller *et al.* to see how students' stories and prior pedagogical perceptions influenced and impacted on their journeys through fieldwork in the complex context of foot-and-mouth disease.

Summary of Chapter by Hughes (2004)

This chapter explores the spatiality of lone parenting, that is, the contexts in which lone parents make decisions about their lives. Hughes argues that lone parents are highly dependent on their social circumstances and spatial contexts. The study was undertaken

Table 2. Adapting studies to narrative inquiry

Methods, perceptions and concepts	Actual approach Fuller <i>et al.</i> , (2003)	Adaptation required for narrative inquiry	Actual approach Hughes (2004)	Adaptation required for narrative inquiry
Sample	33 students	None	31 lone parents	None
Setting	Five UK universities	None	North Norfolk villages	None
Methods	Nominal group technique	Narrative inquiry	Pilot study, research method not clearly stated, referred to at one point as 'survey' but appears to be case study	Narrative and collaborative inquiry
Data collection	Structured group-based decision-making controlled by leader	In-depth stories	In-depth interviews	In-depth stories
Notion of validity	Validity assumed to be objective	Trustworthiness and reflexivity	Not stated	Trustworthiness and reflexivity
Positioning of researcher	Objective and outside the stories	Co-inquirer, part of the stories and represented	Researcher with a sense of own position in research, but not explicit co-inquirer	Co-inquirer, part of the stories and represented
Data analysis and interpretation	Merging of responses, evaluation using rank ordering and voting	Allowing difference to be heard, prevention of privileging of some data over others The representation of storied lives	Analysis appeared to be undertaken in relation to issues that emerged from cited literature	Stronger representation of storied lives and comparison of difference across stories
Presentation of findings	Descriptive statistics based on evaluation using rank ordering and voting	Complex, contested stories, focus on similarities and difference Data presented as interpreted quotations held together by overarching themes but seen as necessarily problematic	Data presented as quotations to illustrate points; located with some participant contextualization	More interpretation needed to illustrate and explain complex, contested stories Greater sense of important overarching themes emerging from data to illustrate problematic nature of findings in more depth





with 31 lone parents in North Norfolk villages in the UK using interviews of between 1 and 3 hours long. The findings supported much of the literature cited by Hughes who argues that lone parenthood continues to be seen as an urban concern. In particular she suggests that notions of the category of lone parent have been constructed through recent political discourse and associated with poverty, dependency and criminality; further she suggests that symbols of rural idylls mask the complexity of rural lone parenting. Finally, she suggests that sociocultural constructs influence thoughts and practices of both urban and rural dwellers, which results in a sense of distancing from communities with lone parents.

Whilst this study has many of the characteristics of a narrative inquiry in that there is a focus on the stories of lone parents, there is much that is missing from the detail of this study that illustrates the storied lives of participants. Thus although this was an interesting and informative study a stronger methodological stance would have been useful. For example, even though Hughes does locate in terms of giving participants a pseudonym and a context so that there is a sense of positioning of participants, there needed to be a greater sense of representation of the participants and an illustration of the ways in which their perspectives related to the themes and issues raised. There was little mention of how the methodology informed the way data were managed and interpreted. Thus in order for this study to be transferred into a narrative inquiry the participants would need to be more centrally located so that the stories emerge and are not merely located within the literature. The way in which narrative inquiry could have been used in these studies is represented in Table 2.

Conclusion

Narrative inquiry is a challenging and useful method that can be employed in a variety of contexts and disciplines. Participants involved in narrative inquiry invariably enjoy the process and often see themselves as co-inquirers and co-collaborators in the studies in which they are involved. Collecting data involves the use of unstructured interviews and where possible exploring texts and field notes. The challenge of this approach is in the data management and the way in which stories are interrupted, an impediment that those who prefer more qualitative techniques might find troublesome. However, given the increasing emphasis by the UK's Higher Education Academy on the student experience, it is an approach that will certainly provide some interesting stories both within and across disciplinary cultures.

Notes

¹ Lincoln equates what is called the 'constructivist' view in the discipline of psychology with what other disciplines refer to as the 'naturalistic' paradigm.

² South Africa has 11 official languages.

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