

Once Upon a Time: The Power of Story in Research

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Abstract: This paper explores the role of stories in research in a variety of methodological, cultural and geographical contexts. Stories are rich in texture, real in their descriptions of events and experiences and are often more accessible than traditional academic approaches to knowledge. Research that is understandable and relevant to our lives can be readily interpreted. Thus, it can provide an effective educational tool for creating and disseminating knowledge and translating knowledge into practice. Through the collecting and sharing of the stories of our various research participants we have gained deeper insights into their lived experience than we may have with other data collection technologies.

Introduction

Stories have been a way of transmitting knowledge in most cultures since the beginning of time. Many of our earliest childhood memories include sitting on the lap of a parent or grandparent and listening to their stories. According to Cajete (1994) “The telling of story is such a universal part of human communication and learning that it may be that story is one of the most basic ways the human brain structures and relates experience” (p. 137). Through stories we share our feelings, heal wounds, discover hope, increase understanding, and strengthen community. Indigenous people around the world still tell ancestral stories to invoke healing spirits and inspire change (Sunwolf, 2003). Utilizing storytelling to transmit educational messages is a traditional and culturally respectful pedagogical method practiced by American Indian people (Hodge et al, 2002). In western culture, storytelling is an important but often under-valued way of conducting qualitative research. And yet, human beings respond to stories – for each of our lives is comprised of stories.

Storytelling as a way of collecting and presenting research findings cuts across many research paradigms. While it is most noted in narrative inquiry, biography, autoethnography and feminist research; stories often emerge through phenomenology, case study and collaborative inquiry as well. The narrative power of story can be very compelling, more moving, more physically and emotionally stirring than life itself. According to Van Manen (1990), “Textual emotion, textual understanding can bring an otherwise sober-minded person (the reader but also the author) to tears and to a more deeply understood worldly engagement” (p. 129). It is in the sharing of stories that we begin to learn in community with others. Possibilities become illuminated, lighting the way for personal transformation, the subtle shifts in who we are and how we are in the world. Stories encompass multiple functions including: relational (ways of connecting people), explanatory (ways of knowing), creative (ways of creating reality), historical (ways of remembering) and forecasting (ways of visioning the future) (Sunwolf & Frey 2001).

This paper draws on theories of indigenous learning (Cajete, 1994; Sunwolf & Frey, 2001; Hodge et al, 2002), feminist research (Ribbens & Edwards, 1998), oral history (Thompson, 2000), life stories (Van Manen, 1990) and narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The

process of apprehending experiential knowledge through stories as well as the content of the stories themselves informs our practice as adult educators.

Veronica's Research: Past and Path – In the Game at 70 and Beyond Women Recall Their Life Journeys

With increased longevity, the life stories of individuals who age successfully (i.e., maintain their independence and zest for life well into their seventh and eighth decades and beyond) may provide insight as to the experiences that contribute to rewarding, fulfilling and independent later lives. Women currently outlive men by seven years; yet, the bulk of aging research has not been gender specific. This propelled me to conduct a study of a diverse group of five older women, self-identified as aging successfully, who were willing to re-tell the stories and experiences that they believe have placed them on the path of a successful old age.

Two or three interviews of ninety or more minutes were conducted with each participant in a relaxed, conversational, open-ended manner. All of the women were enthusiastic about the process and willing to recount extremely personal tales of triumphs and tragedies. Each interview was poignantly peppered with understanding, laughter and sometimes tears. It has been said that “eagerness to tell one’s story signals a desire to live” (Bruner, 1999, p. 9). As each participant drilled down further and further into her life history, her zest for life, past, present and future, became increasingly apparent. According to Cruikshank (2003), “the emphasis in storytelling and life review should be as much on the pleasure and satisfaction of the elder as on the enlightenment of her audience” (p. 48). It was evident that the interviews were enjoyed by each of the narrators and certainly by me as researcher and provoked critical reflection among all the participants, me included. This critical reflection contributed to deeper and more meaningful probing and informative discussions as our conversations continued.

Cohen (2001) states that “Life story can be... a highly personal journey inward that can lead to new self-discovery and potential in the days to follow. The external process of sharing our experiences and telling what we know enables us to combine qualities of creativity and aging to become *keepers of the culture*, the long recognized role of elders passing on values, wisdom, and a way of life, whether in the culture of a family, a geographic community, or a people bound by ideology” (pp. 233-234). In the study conducted, the storytelling process resulted in the weaving of an intricate and vivid tapestry of each individual. Every one told a unique survival tale complete with lessons for those younger and, I believe, each far more rich and colorful than what might have resulted from a more structured, formal interview process.

Soni's Research: Discover Your SELF in the Arts – The Role of Imagination & Creativity in Transformative Learning

An estimated 40% of people in the US will develop cancer in our lifetimes (Healy, 2004), approximately one in two marriages will end in divorce, a large percentage of individuals have lost their jobs in the recent past, and nearly all of us will experience significant grief over loss of a loved one. Clearly, the majority of adults in our culture will experience major transitions that may cause them to experience the world and their environment in totally new ways. This environment in which we live is, “in its most fundamental state, a qualitative one made up of sights and sounds, tastes and smells that can be experienced through our sensory system” (Eisner, 2002, p.1). Creative expression can link our senses to making meaning of events and our environment, whether it is through sound (music and poetry for example), taste (gourmet

cooking), kinetic touch (dance, gardening and sculpture) or is visual (decorating, photography, etc). The types of expression are endless. According to Eisner (2002) “work in the arts...is a way of creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning, establishing contact with others, and sharing a culture.” This phenomenon is available to *all* people, not just those that deem themselves “artists” (p.3).

This research documents and tells the stories of adults that experience a disorienting dilemma as described by Mezirow (2000) and how they then find meaning through creative expression. Creative expression informs transformation. It complements the cognitive process by enhancing interpretation of the unconscious and increasing imagination of alternatives when one discovers old habitual modes of interpretation are no longer effective (Cranton, 2000; O'Sullivan, 2002). Thus, Narrative Inquiry lends itself well to this study as narrative “stories” can expose the meanings of lived experience.

Informal, unstructured interviews were digitally recorded as respondents told their deeply personal stories of transformation and their creative expression experience. They spoke with passion, demonstrated their “art”, and created a new collage expression with accompanying artist’s statement describing their feelings regarding their “art.” It was and continues to be a particularly moving experience for both the researcher and participants. This process fits within the “Peeling the Onion” Paradigm, as described by Clandinin & Connelly (2000). Based in Dewey’s foundational thinking that experience is our imaginative touchstone, they place their thinking of narrative inquiry in the following three dimensional spaces: 1- *Interaction (personal to social)*, 2-*Continuity (past, present, and future)*, 3-*Notion of Place (Situation)*. Thus, within narrative inquiry, we move back and forth freely between these dimensions in order to develop the true story to be told. It is through this layered approach that respondents and researcher co-create meaning, supporting the narrative theory that we create meaning through recounting our life events in a narrative form.

Themes from this study have emerged in relation to *non-artists* discovering meaning through creative expression and adult education’s role for the participant group. It is proposed that the arts are not only a legitimate way of knowing - but a crucial and different way of accessing meaning than our current western linear rationality. Thus, the stories illuminated in this research will inform program and curriculum developers as well as grant foundations about the potential for artistic expression in adult education programs for individual *and* societal transformation.

Tania’s Research: Stories of Parents Who Become Advocates

For too many individuals in society, feelings of powerlessness and domination are almost inescapable (Greene, 1978 as cited in Moss, 2001, p. 43). Advocating is an essential role for parents because it is one way to address the imbalance of power and control in the public school system. Unfortunately in numerous school systems across the country, many parents’ voices are suppressed and silenced, often leaving these parents feeling marginalized and oppressed. Using narrative inquiry as my methodology allowed me the privilege of listening to parents and their untold stories with the goal of seeking rich thick descriptive information through what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) call the four directions of inquiry:

1st direction: *inward*: feeling, hopes, aesthetic, moral reaction

2nd direction: *outward*: existential conditions, environment

3rd and 4th direction: *backward/ forward*: past, present, and future

The purpose of my study was to explore the common characteristics, motivation and experiences of strong parent advocates. My study consisted of eight women, who are all parents of children attending public schools. These phenomenal women's lived experiences offer us all lessons and stories of inspiration. Narrative inquiry is not only concerned with these stories but also how these stories are told, keeping in mind at all times that these stories are "personal interpretations of past times [that] are often in deep and ambivalent conflict with the official interpretive devices of a culture" (Kay, 1986 as cited in Hurtig, 2005).

Parent advocacy is a topic that is very close to my heart. As a parent who advocates and as a researcher, it was important to me to choose a methodology that allowed me an active role. Narrative inquiry is a collaborative process that allows both, the researcher's and participant's voice to be heard. In narrative research "it is not only the participants' stories that are retold by the narrative inquirer, it is also the inquirers' stories that are open for inquiry and retelling" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.60). This reciprocal style of research forces me to reflect and confront my own untold narratives.

Melany's Research: Readers' Theatre: A Catalyst for Cancer Education, Conversation, and Action in Alaska

I struggle with the lack of words, suffering from the shortcomings and limitations of the language I own. Often, I do not have confident language to break the silence or enter the chaos for difficult conversations. My mother often quoted Thumper, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all." Fear paralyzed my vocal chords, often keeping a shroud of silence intact. Could Readers' Theatre give words to bridge difficult conversations? There is a hunger to speak out if all the health disparities and 'isms' are to become extinct racism... sexism... ageism... If we are to become whole as people.

Understanding, a 45-minute cancer education script developed in Alaska, shares people's experiences, questions, and concerns related to cancer and served as the catalyst for two Readers' Theatre workshops and 23 follow-up interviews. Situated in Alaska, this organic inquiry began with respect for the knowledge of living experience and from that place of strength engaged in the hopeful discovery of possibilities. Readers and listeners actively conversed about the script sharing their unique cultural experiences, navigating beyond the limits of existing perceptions. Boal (1979) argues that it is not the place of the theatre to show the correct path, but only to offer the means by which possible paths may emerge and be examined.

The Readers' Theatre experience held a place for people to learn new information, gain new understandings, hear different perspectives, and feel and express in a variety of ways. There was also a sense of affirmation, the feeling that "I know this inside from my experience". Sometimes there was a listening for what was not there and the conversation shifted to explore relevant areas. People brought their own story to the discussion, which illuminated new pathways for meaning and action.

During a follow-up interview, Reggie, a Readers' Theatre workshop participant, shared, "There are many ways that Readers' Theatre seems to tap into our level of knowing that we don't often talk about. Touches some sort of tap root inside us. You can see that when it touches that place, it nourishes something inside us because you will see people flower right away in the post reading discussion. They blossom right in front of your eyes, like places that haven't received water in awhile." The strength of Readers' Theatre lies in the transformational journey

of each participant, as she or he engages in conversation, reflection, and action in community with others.

Dianne's Research: It Must Be Told: Stories of Hope, Dreams, and Possibility from *The Open Book*

The purpose of this study was to chronicle the history through participants' voices of *The Open Book*, an adult literacy program in NYC, which was deeply inspired by Paulo Friere. Oral history honors ordinary people by bringing history in and out of the community and explicitly supports the idea that the community should be writing their own history. This story isn't about packaging the greatness of *The Open Book* and exporting it to the rest of the literacy field. Instead, it is an invitation for other community based organizations in the NYC literacy community to engage in a dialogue about the spaces that exist for democratic possibilities within their own programs.

This project is composed of thick, rich stories and how meaning was constructed from the experience that when woven together is a vibrant co-story filled with a multitude of colors and textures. Approximately a year and a half ago, a group of ten of us from *The Open Book* convened to decide whether we felt telling this story would be of value. At that meeting, there was an impressive amount of passion as people resoundingly decided this story must be told. Since then, sixteen people from the program came together in ten group interviews ranging from 3-8 participants in each group. In each conversation, I felt that sense of magic and possibilities envelop me as we co-created new knowledge about our experience. Each time we met I felt we had entered a portal where collectively we were being transported back in time; yet, it wasn't really "back" because our stories about *The Open Book* had been shaped and flavored by our current lived realities and present experiences.

Coles (1989) says that people come to us with stories that represent their lives. They hope they tell these stories well enough so we can understand certain truths about their lives, and they hope we know how to interpret those stories correctly. In literacy education in NYC, all too often we engage in an expert problem-solving approach to viewing students and "othered" segments of our society with preconceived notions of what matters and what doesn't matter. Instead of listening to students' stories unfold we're likely to rush in with labels. We scarcely pause at the messages omitted, yarns gone untold; details brushed aside together, so rushed are we to get to the conclusion. Their story, yours, mine - it's what we all carry with us on this journey we take and we owe it to each other to respect and honor those stories and learn from them. (Coles, 1989). As Blaise (1993) suggests, people's stories make us into world travelers. We learn, if only temporarily, to live in each others' countries, speak their language, negotiate their streets on their buses and turn our keys in their locks.

Conclusion

The research studies described above vary in location, focus and methodology. The common thread that weaves them together is stories. Research is fundamentally about creating new knowledge and sharing that knowledge within communities. Stories provide us with an authentic means for honoring the voices of our research participants and presenting these voices in a way that connects with our audience, inviting further dialogue and exploration.

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