

Excavating and (Re)presenting Stories: Narrative Inquiry as an Emergent Methodology in the Field of Adult Vocational Education and Technology

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ABSTRACT

Narrative inquiry has been a popular methodology in different disciplines for the last few decades. Using stories, narrative inquiry illuminates lived experience, serving as a valuable complement to research methodologies that are rooted in positivist epistemologies. In this article, we present a brief introduction to narrative inquiry including narrative data collection, analysis and interpretation. Situating narrative inquiry under the umbrella of post-qualitative research, we argue that, because of its ability to communicate evocative stories and to inspire empathy, narrative inquiry is an indispensable methodology in the study of human being and becoming, making this methodology an important contribution to the field of adult vocational education and technology.

KEYWORDS

Narrative Inquiry, Positivism, Post-Qualitative, Storytelling

INTRODUCTION

As researchers in the field of adult vocational education and technology attempt to understand how adults make sense of their life and work, narrative inquiry can be employed as one of the field's emergent research methodologies. Research has shown that adult education and adult development is best conceptualized as a process of meaningful experience (Kolb, 2015) and personal transformation (Mezirow, 1991), rather than as a function of deliberate practice or knowledge accumulation. Adult development is, essentially, a set of stories (Rossiter, 1999; Stroobants, 2005). Indeed, adults do not always engage in deliberative, discrete decision-making when immersed in practice (e.g., vocation or daily routines). Instead, they may rely on intuition to formulate action and to make sense of the situations in which they find themselves (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1988; Schön, 1983). Said differently, although adults do use logic, rationality, and empirical evidence to make sense of the world, they often use stories to make sense of who they are and what they are doing. Gathering and retelling these stories is at the heart of narrative inquiry.

In this paper, we present narrative inquiry as an emergent methodology that can be employed in the field of adult vocational education and technology. We begin with narrative inquiry's philosophical

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orientation and contrast it with other methodological approaches. We then highlight some key features of narrative inquiry and demonstrate how narrative inquiry is a fitting methodology for understanding the livelihood of adults and their ways of meaning making.

NARRATIVE INQUIRY AS EMERGENT METHOD

Narrative Inquiry Opposing Positivism

Positivism is still alive and well in academia (Barone, 2007; Haskell, 1977; Lather, 2008; Maxwell, 2004; St. Pierre, 2011), and, indeed, one might say that this epistemology functions as an unconscious force in the social sciences (Steinmetz, 2005). Positivism is an epistemology that posits that empirical science is our only valid and reliable source of knowledge when it comes to understanding the world. Discourses throughout academia and education are permeated with the lexicons of “scientifically-based research” and “evidence-based educational practices” (Anderson, 2006; Biesta, 2007), as seen, for example, in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (Barone, 2007).

The epistemology of Positivism is not, itself, problematic; however, the problem is that the philosophical doctrine of Positivism has become the prevalent approach that social science researchers tend to adopt (Schön, 1983). Positivistic science, unfortunately, can lose sight of everyday life experiences in favor of generalities and abstractions (Crotty, 1998). While generalities and abstractions are useful tools in human thinking (Dewey, 1933), human thinking does not always operate in these terms. In his seminal book, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Bruner (1986) argued that human beings operate according to two complementary modes of thinking: the paradigmatic mode and the narrative mode. The former, influenced by Positivism, relies on scientific analysis, logic, and empirical evidence, minimizing ambiguity and pursuing universal truths that can be verified. The latter uses stories to understand the meaning of human actions and experiences. It focuses on emotions, mood, perceptions, values, and nuances of meaning. While the paradigmatic mode is concerned with certainty, universality, and theory, the narrative mode of thinking is mainly concerned with ambiguities, particularities, and metaphors. Whereas the paradigmatic mode is considered to be “objective” and free of context, the narrative mode of thinking is rooted in the subjectivity that is revealed through specific stories (Polkinghorne, 1995).

The goal of narrative inquiry, therefore, is not to discover “objective” truths that can be verified via empirical methods; rather, the goal of narrative inquiry is to provide unique insight into possible human experience, or, in other words, to illuminate what is lifelike (van Manen, 1990). Narrative inquiry serves as a valuable counterweight to positivist social science by asserting that the narrative mode of thinking is a vital dimension to how human beings know and cope with the world.

Situating Narrative Inquiry in the Realm of Post-Qualitative Research

It is also significant to contrast narrative inquiry with traditional forms of qualitative research in the social sciences. Ironically, many methods of qualitative research employ boilerplate approaches to data collection and data analysis that tend to obfuscate the uniqueness of the context being investigated and the unique voices of the author and participants (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Billig, 2013; Hyland, 2002; Kamler & Thomson, 2004). In part, this is due to the fact that many qualitative studies in the social and human sciences aim to achieve the same standards of “rigor” as empirical, quantitative research (Gage, 1989; Howe, 1988; Morrow, 2007; Ponterotto, 2005), and, often this rigor is signaled through concepts such as triangulation, reliability, replication, and procedural transparency.

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