

Choose one of the topics covered in the course (see Units 1-12) and explain why you believe it is important for language teachers to be acquainted with some of the issues related to that topic.

Narrative Inquiry

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Though by now an apparently established element to many language-learning classrooms, narrative inquiry methods were relatively new to me before taking this course. Examples of the benefits of employing narrative inquiry methods in the classroom alongside perhaps more established research techniques abound. Halbach (2000) states, "By reflecting the processes that go on inside the writers' mind, they [language-learning diaries] open up fields that are normally not accessible to researchers" (85). Bell (2002) cites narrative inquiry as "a particularly valuable approach for members of the TESOL profession" in that it provides "a key way of coming to understand the assumptions held by learners from other cultures" (207). "Personal narratives", adds Pavlenko (2002), "are extremely important for the TESOL field" and grant researchers/teachers "insights into learners' motivations, investments, struggles, losses, and gains as well as into language ideologies that guide their learning trajectories" (212-3).

Authors seem unified behind the idea that language teachers can become better at what they do by listening to the stories their students have to tell them. That said, Connelly & Clandinin (1994) provide an engaging caveat to the idea that teachers are all able to listen without themselves having spoken. They suggest, "if a teacher understands (can tell) the story of her own education, she will better understand (tell the stories of) her students' education" (150, Connelly & Clandinin, 1994). It is more on teachers' narratives that I wish to focus here rather than language learners' narratives.

As a review of professional development literature makes clear, narrative inquiry is not a tool restricted for sole use with language-learners. Teachers, be they pre- or in-service, may as equally benefit from the use of narrative inquiry methods as their students. By making reference to my own experience with writing teacher narratives in addition to surveying contemporary published thought, I focus here on a definition of what narrative inquiry is and how it can provide what Whelan et al. (2001) describe as constructive personal and/or professional "growth and change" (154).

What is Narrative Inquiry?

As Connelly & Clandinin (1990) describe, "story telling, letter writing, autobiographical writing, documents such as class plans and newsletters, and writing such as rules, principles, pictures, metaphors, and personal philosophies" as well as interviews may form the basis of data subjected to "inquiry". As Bell (2002) defines, "Narrative inquiry rests on the epistemological assumption that we as human beings make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures" (207). The stories that we tell illustrate our hopes, fears, successes and failures, and often try to assign meaning to our daily experiences. "The principal attraction of narrative as method is its capacity to render life experiences, both personal and social, in relevant and meaningful ways" (10, Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Through an analysis of narrative data, practitioners may better recognize their approach to an issue and, most importantly, trace where conflict may arise within experience.

Perhaps the most widely used data source for narrative inquiry as teacher development takes the form of "story". Connelly & Clandinin (1994) remark that "It is in the stories of ourselves that we tell ourselves and tell others that we make and re-make meaning" (150). Defining "story" is not as easy as it may appear, however. In an attempt to clarify, Carter (1993) posits the following (abbreviated) elements: conflict, engagement in the conflict by an interested party, and, finally, resolution of conflict through "a sequence of implied causality" (6).

Pavlenko (2002), however, suggests well-warranted caution in applying Carter's description of "story" to all participants stating, "life stories may not even exist as a genre in particular cultures, or, when they do exist, they may be told or written in ways quite different from temporally structured Western narratives" (214). Vygotskyian sociocultural theory as cited by Johnson & Golombek (2004) and Johnston (1997) also challenge Carter's assumption that plot is necessarily a chronologically set series of actions based on previous actions. "Development," as seen by Johnson & Golombek (2004), "is not smooth and linear with predetermined start and end points" (309). Recognizing a plot specific to an individual's role as "teacher" is equally problematic. Johnston (1997) finds that "teachers' stories reflect dynamic and nonunitary identities that interact discursively in complex ways with a range of other discourses from the social,

economic, and political context" (681). There are, as Knowles (1994) makes clear, "few clear boundaries" to be drawn between teacher and social being (6). In addition, neat resolution in the form of changed practice or behavior is not always guaranteed at the conclusion of a teaching "story" as Johnson & Golombek (2004) find through their analysis of three teacher narratives. While two of their subjects achieved observable, practical change in the classroom, a third "did not design and implement the material activities that would have enabled her to overcome her internal contradictions" (316). Resolution remained for this participant "an unspecified plan to change" (316).

While the third element of Carter's description of story may not be universally accepted, the involvement of a participant seems fundamental to the idea of "story". Conflict, in either a recognized or unrecognized form, might also be viewed as seminal in a definition of "story". "[E]ntanglements" Connelly & Clandinin (1990) observe, "become acute" in the telling and re-telling of stories (4). Identifying the practical conflicts that cause emotional "dissonance" is a key concern of Johnson & Golombek (2004) in their analysis of teacher narratives. When Doecke (2004) asserts narratives "should remain a vehicle for all English teachers to scrutinize their teaching" (300), the assumption that this close analysis of practice is geared towards uncovering problems and avenues for resolution seems relatively clear. Recognition of conflict, then, emerges as a centerpiece to my definition of "story" and it is through the recognition of conflict and, to some extent, resolution, within stories that I view the following issues in narrative inquiry.

"Emancipation" and Equal Participation

Referring to the uses of narrative inquiry with L2 learners, Pavlenko (2002) remarks, "the telling of life stories in a new language may be a means of empowerment that makes it possible to express new selves and desires previously considered untellable" (214). These "stories of empowerment" are not limited to the L2 learner (4, Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Language teachers are finding that narrative inquiry provides a voice for them to challenge both the assumption of their professional standing (or lack thereof) within the TESOL field and prejudices minorities may experience in the workplace.

As seen in Johnston's (1997) survey of EFL teachers in Poland and reflected in my own narrative experience as well, there is a sense of significant inequality

within the TESOL field between the “front-line” language instructors and those that teach teachers or would be researchers. Johnston (1997) finds that his participants’ perception that they “lack influence, status, and power” is crucial in understanding high attrition rates and high levels of dissatisfaction within the field (702). In my own narrative I draw a sharp division between my position as a language instructor and those who teach “in the faculties”. As Lin et al. (2004) succinctly summarize, “In TESOL, those who teach future ESOL professors and researchers are at the top, those who teach future ESOL teachers come next, and those who teach ESOL are at the bottom” (495-96). This inequality is a wellspring for discontent and conflict that language teachers chaff under in many contexts. “[L]ife history and other forms of narrative inquiry”, however, have emerged as a way for those “at the bottom” to speak alongside their more recognized (and published) colleagues (389, Davis, 2004).

Bell (2002) quotes Canagarajah as saying “narratives function in opposition to elitist scholarly discourses and that their use in research offers an opportunity for marginalized groups to participate in knowledge construction in the academy” (209). Pavlenko (2002) adds that personal narratives “allow for both teachers’ and learners’ voices to be heard on a par with those of the researchers” (214). The ability to meaningfully engage with decision making at both the local and international level of language teaching and research is a goal of many in-service teachers that is often quashed by time and resource restrictions. Narrative inquiry allows teachers in diverse contexts to meaningfully participate in the shaping of their own profession. This participation, I suggest, levels perceptions of marginalization and moves towards resolving feelings of professional inadequacy shared by many language teachers.

In addition to providing a voice for the professionally marginalized, Lin et al. (2004) and Simon-Maeda (2004) provide, among others, encouraging uses of narrative inquiry to address marginalization resulting from gender and/or race. “[S]trength”, Lin et al. (2004) write, “for healing and transformation” (501) spring from their analysis of shared narratives. The “life history narratives” of female EFL instructors in Japan Simon-Maeda (2004) bases her report on “reflect the need for TESOL professionals to better understand how ideologies of marginalization and discrimination work and how to confront them” (430). Narrative inquiry can offer an important and legitimate way for minority language instructors to both struggle for greater, equal recognition in their field and, on a larger front, “to expose and transform social injustice” (398, Davis,

2004).

Sharing Narratives

“Usually”, Lyons & LaBoskey (2002) write, narrative ventures are accomplished “collaboratively” (21). The role of external “‘expert’ knowledge” factors large in Johnson and Golombek’s (2004) participants’ envisioning of solutions to the problems they perceive in the classroom. In my own view, and with particular reference to language teachers who may find themselves without a viable external resource to either communicate their story to or glean expert knowledge from, the role of external collaborator is secondary to a commitment to reflection. While we all undoubtedly live storied lives, choosing where and with whom to share these stories is an important consideration. Lyons & LaBoskey (2002) also point out that “Narrative or inquiries of any teacher research may not always be a commitment of schools or the academy” (24). As unfortunate as this may be, one of the abiding strengths of narrative inquiry in my estimation is its ability to be pursued along personal, in addition to professional, avenues. While a given institution may frown on the practice, this need not be viewed as a hurdle careful, personal reflection could not mount.

Conclusion

What excited me most about narrative inquiry for the benefit of professional and/or personal development was the technique’s fundamental autonomy. Teachers, I would argue, by and large know what they are doing in the classroom and have the ability to figure out, mostly for themselves, where problems are and where improvements can be made. What narrative inquiry seems to offer most teachers is a self-help tool, not another course in “how to teach”.

As such, while the issue of external assessment of narrative ventures deserves attention (how might I be graded on this?), I would suggest to teachers new to narrative inquiry that the primary importance in narratives is what they might tell you about whatever direction they lead you in. Scant few of the articles referenced here allowed for the idea that narratives might lead a practitioner out of the language teaching field altogether.

It is unfortunate the allusions Connelly & Clandinin (1994) make to narratives as perhaps a risky and dangerous enterprise are not significantly echoed in much of the literature that deals with narrative inquiry. The “prisons for our habits” that narratives can become are real (151, Connelly & Clandinin, 1994). My own attempts at constructing a teacher narrative illustrated this point quite well to me. It was not without some great effort that I came to suspect that in order to break out of the prison of complaint I had woven through my narratives I needed to entertain the idea that resolution existed beyond the confines of the language teaching profession. While I would suggest recognition of conflict is at the heart of narrative inquiry, I would not suggest transformation is always to be found through a change in teaching practice.

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