Telling stories: Narrative methods of data analysis

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Excellent! Enjoyed seeing you tackle dual analyses of your data, and I appreciate your efforts. However, the section ended without a missed opportunity to explore the final question you posed on p. 9 (lines 1-2)....
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Telling stories: Narrative methods of data analysis

Telling stories has the power to inform and transform practice. The stories that are told by participants and the stories that are constructed by researchers become the vehicle in which engagement and knowledge sharing take place. Stories are also important data and it is through the sharing of stories that educational practitioners can uncover new ways of interpreting and understanding themselves and their students (Lyons, 2007). Although there is an expansive amount of research that highlights the theoretical need to conduct narrative inquiry, little work has been done to make the methodological approaches to narrative inquiry transparent (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). As a researcher that wants to conduct “quality” qualitative research, discovering sound methods of data analysis is essential. In a recent meeting with my doctoral committee I realized that my methods for data analysis stopped at coding and that I needed to begin to answer the question of “Ok, now you have data, what are you going to do with it?” I am among a group of many novice researchers that find that narrative research excludes discussion about approaches to data analysis (Reissman, 1993; Kiesinger, 1998). For the purpose of this paper I have chosen to explore the Listening Guide (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertach, 2006) and Storying Stories (McCormack, 2004). It is my hope that by exploring these methodological approaches to data that I will discover which approach or approaches could work well with my initial dissertation research design model.

Listening Guide

Gilligan et. al. (2006) stated that “the Listening Guide method comprises a series of sequential listening each designed to bring the researcher into relationship with a person’s distinct and multi-layered voice” (p. 255). As both a listener and teller of stories, the researcher
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needs to be cognizant of the multiple layers that each story holds. The Listening Guide approach can act as a guide for researchers who are making sense of the data.

The Listening Guide approach requires (1) listening for plot, (2) I-poems, (3) listening for contrapuntal voices, and (4) the composing of an analysis (Gilligan et al., 2006). These steps can facilitate a researcher’s analysis of lived experience, bringing him/her closer to the participant experience and the research questions (Gilligan et al., 2006). I have chosen to use this approach to analyze a portion of an interview with a participant named Rodrigo. I feel that only through practice will I become more skilled at using narrative methods of data analysis.

Rodrigo is telling a story about how he makes connections with his students through the use of storytelling. The original interview transcript states that:

R: Sure, well, I will pull from my own life stories, because I think that it’s difficult to tell stories without having experience, but they’re always curious about um what life was like when I was a child and so you know I try to I...they really, I think want to learn how to be good students and how to they view me as a role model and a person who can provide them that that experience and so sometimes I have to embellish a bit to provide that model for them (laughs) but um so, ah you know when the new-comers come into class and are shocked about the experience about learning in a new setting I will share with them my experience about coming to America and um this one particular story that I love to tell, which I have convinced myself it really happened but I’m sure there are parts of it that are a little bit opaque (laughing) um is about my first my first day of school in America. I didn’t know much English, but the truth is I knew enough, but I wanted to feel, I want to allow my students to feel more at home more comfortable with uh I suppose empathizing with my own life story and theirs so they feel they have a partner in education, in the classroom, that I will know exactly what they are going through and that, they can approach me with difficulties. So the story I tell is um, um about how my mom, before I embarked on my first day of school in America, she said if a stranger comes up to you and asks you a question, just say no, no. She wanted to protect me and keep me safe so I would, I kept that in mind so the first day of school I had this lunch card and I didn’t know what to do with it, but I knew I had to give it to someone in the cafeteria and they would give me food. So, I you know gave my lunch card to the cafeteria lady and she gave me a tray of food and I didn’t know what the tray of food consisted of, but I did recognize what looked like ground meat and I love
hamburgers, and I loved ground meat and uh, I was expecting this food and so this kid comes up to me and asks me a question and he says, "Hey man, do you want your taco?" and at that I said NO! and he immediately grabbed my taco and ran off and so I just stood there with an empty tray (laugh) just crying. Um I went home later that afternoon and told my mom and she just began laughing and she said "well ok, you don’t say no to everything." (laugh).

My response was:

Rodrigo is an experienced teacher who pulls from his own stories to make connections with his students. Through his stories Rodrigo is able to convey shared experiences with students, such as coming to America. Rodrigo’s telling transmits a movement from what is known to what is unknown during his experience in a new country and community. Rodrigo states that "I convinced myself." I wonder how much of his re-telling is based on actual events or if there has been a shift in the experience over time?

Rodrigo’s I-poem expressed the following:

I will pull
I think
I was a child
I try
I think
I have to
I will share
I love to tell
I have convinced myself that it really happened
I’m sure
I didn’t know English
I knew enough
I wanted to feel
I want
I suppose
I will know
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I tell
I embarked on my first day
I kept
I had
I didn’t know
I knew I had to
I gave
I didn’t know
I did recognize
I love hamburgers
I loved ground meat
I was expecting
I said NO!
I just stood there
I went home
I told

Although the original interpretation of Rodrigo’s interview suggests that he tells stories from his lived experience to make connections with his students, it becomes increasingly clear from the I-poem why students may identify with his experience of coming to America. In the I-poem, Rodrigo expresses his movement between what he knew and what he didn’t know when he was a child. He was able to convey that there were parts of his new life that were recognizable and that other unfamiliar parts immobilized him and made him seek refuge in the safety of his home. It has been my experience as a foreign language and EFL teacher that newly arrived students in a school setting may listen to this story and build a connection based on their shared experience with the teller.
After analyzing the data using the first three steps I constructed a new narrative using the conceptual voices that emerged from Rodrigo’s interview. It states that:

I will pull from my own life stories; it’s difficult to tell stories without having experience. I was a child, I think. I share with them my experience about coming to America. One story I love to tell, I have convinced myself I’m sure, there are parts that are a little opaque. I didn’t know English, I knew enough, I want my students to feel more at home. I suppose I know exactly what they are going through. The story I tell is on my first day of school in America. I had a lunch card and I didn’t know what to do with it. I knew I had to give it to someone. I didn’t know what the tray of food consisted of. I did recognize ground meat. I love hamburgers. This kid asked me a question and I said, NO! I just stood there with an empty tray just crying. I went home and I told my mom.

The final step used in the Listening Guide approach requires that the researcher return to the research questions to examine what he/ she has learned from the participants story (Gilligan et al., 2006). My research questions from this particular study were (1) How do teachers use stories and storytelling in their classrooms? (2) What are the benefits of using stories and storytelling in the classroom? Rodrigo’s story provides an excellent example of both how stories are used by teachers and their perceived benefit to students because for Rodrigo stories help build connections with his students. He also believes that making connections is a benefit for students.

I found that using this method for data analysis was helpful in identifying the multiple layers that stories contain. As I listened to the interview again I noticed things that I may have overstated several points in my original analysis. I also realized how much I enjoyed sifting through the data using the procedural steps posed in this approach even though it was a very time consuming process. This is an approach that I will use in future data analysis.

**Storying Stories**
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Storying Stories (McCormack, 2004) is an approach that takes the data found within stories from interviews and reconstructs it to form a new interpretive story. The process of reconstruction involves both research and participant input. As a critical interpretivist who seeks to understand the world by examining experiences and a person who is aware of the power structures associated with being heard or being silenced, the incorporation of participant comments throughout the reconstruction process is very positive. Along with participatory action, an interpretive story retains the contextual nature of a participant’s experience, highlights the individuality and complexity of life, includes multiple voices, and in addition offers the reader the possibility to have multiple interpretations (McCormack, 2004).

The use of a Storying Stories approach requires that the researcher conduct procedural steps which include (1) composing the middle of the story and (2) completing the story by adding a beginning and end (McCormack, 2004). In the first step the researcher constructs the middle of a story by actively listening to the interview. This is followed by the construction of a new story, which the researcher then shares with the participant. This approach to data analysis gives the participant a voice in the research process because the participant is able to confirm or disagree with the researcher’s interpretive story. The second step occurs after receiving participant feedback and this is when the researcher creates and introduction and coda to the interpretive story. The final step helps to situate the participant’s story within a context.

In an attempt to put into practice the Storying Stories approach I have chosen to use existing data from an interview to test this data analysis approach. The original excerpt of data was obtained from an interview with Rodrigo. He stated:

Oh my gosh the benefits for me, every time I tell a story I’ve got a captive audience you know and one of the reasons I enjoy teaching is I enjoy being on
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stage. I enjoy performing and every day I’m on stage and I love it, you know. I really am and benefits for the school. I’m a representative of the school and so are they and if I tell stories that allow them to feel like they are more productive and they feel better about themselves and we are making progress and becoming more successful in our standards then clearly the stories benefit the school as well.

After analyzing this excerpt and testing the re-construction using an interpretive story I state that:

As we crossed the illuminated plaza to enter the student center Rodrigo shared small details with me about the events that unfolded during his day at school.  

I enjoy storytelling because I love performing. Telling stories gives me the chance to perform and I love it. On stage I am a representative of the school as are my students. Telling stories is a way for my students to feel more productive and to feel better about themselves.

I enjoy teaching and I enjoy storytelling.

For Rodrigo storytelling is beneficial to both the teacher and students. Through storytelling the teacher has a captive audience. Each member of the audiences is a valuable member of the school community.

Although I did not have the opportunity to have Rodrigo comment on my interpretive story I found that by using this approach I was able to move from a broader understanding to a more detailed understanding of the data. I think that this approach will be helpful in my future research because of its use of participant involvement, researcher reflection, and systematic analysis. I also enjoyed this approach and exercise because it allowed me to keep stories intact, instead of breaking them up into smaller segments. By maintaining the fluidity of the story I did not affect the transmission of participant experience to the audience. I enjoyed reading the literature on this approach because I have struggled to conceptualize a notion of having a story within a story, but McCormack’s (2004) Storying Stories has provided me with an excellent
frame of reference. The only drawback is that I am still unclear what would happen if there was a divergence between the researcher’s interpretation and the participant’s original story?

Implications for My Future Research

Telling stories is an important part of data analysis. I deeply value the use of narratives in educational research, but have had little experience moving past theoretical knowledge. I did not realize this until a meeting with my committee. In the meeting a committee member asked that I explain my choice of methods and my explanation for my methods only consisted of a list of methods for data collection; such as through interviews, observation, and written narratives. I found myself trapped in the scenario presented by McCormack (2004) where the researcher says, “Ok, now that I have all this data, what next?” I had never moved past the limited explanations of many research articles that only expose the benefits of narrative research and avoid a clear discussion of data collection and analysis methods. In this paper, I wanted to test out new approaches to data analysis, which was a recommendation from my committee and one that I agree with. I realize that it is important to keep practicing in order to both feel comfortable with the methods, but also to ascertain which methods are the right fit. I’m still a novice, but I have found that both the Listening Guide and Storying Stories would be excellent methods to support my research goals and interests.
References


