Creative Non-Fiction: One Approach to Narrative Research in Education

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Abstract:
There has been an increasing trend in using narratives to present individual or group experiences over the last twenty years (Sparkes, 2002 and Heikkinen et al., 2007). However, this approach continues to have its critics as well as its advocates, with some regarding it as invalid due to the creative element within it. There are many different forms of narrative used in education research, such as autobiographical writing. Sparkes identifies different levels of creativity within the narrative process which, he suggests, impact on the validity of the story. He describes one form of narrative as “ethnographic fiction”, based on the researcher “being there” at the time of the incident. This significantly strengthens the validity and credibility in his view as the stories are creative in their use of fictional techniques but are non-fictional in nature being based on real characters and real events and he terms them “creative non-fiction”. Drawing on doctoral research this paper suggests that creative non-fiction can be highly effective in education research as a means of capturing and presenting key themes in learning. As such it is an effective vehicle for understanding how people learn and develop throughout their lives. The paper offers a case study of the use of creative non-fiction and the opportunity it provides for exploring learners’ experiences.

Key words: Narrative, Ethnographic fiction, Qualitative methods, Validity.

Introduction

This paper draws on a doctoral study which was presented in narrative form as creative non-fiction. It presents an overview of creative non-fiction, a term introduced by Sparkes (2002) and considers issues of validity, reflexivity and ethics related to it. It makes a case for creative non-fiction being an effective narrative approach for research in the complex field of education and discusses how narratives can be constructed using this genre.

Narrative approaches are increasingly being used in social science and education research, with a significant increase in this form of data presentation over the last twenty years, (Sparkes, and Heikkinen et al., 2007). This paper is based on Shacklock and Thorp’s (2005) definition of narrative research as they focus on lived experience, as did the doctoral study:
Narrative inquiry is concerned with the production, interpretation and representation of storied accounts of lived experience. (Shacklock and Thorp 2005, p.156)

Shacklock and Thorp’s definition is particularly appropriate for the study discussed here as it enables the researcher to locate life experience, identity and cultural formation within a narrative frame. In doing so they encourage the writer to ‘introduce additional anchor points for understanding the subjective and structural as mutual informants in understanding our own and other people’s lives’ (p.156). The doctoral study was seeking to understand the lives of young people with particular reference to identity and culture and so Shacklock and Thorp’s approach seemed most helpful.

The use of narrative to present data does receive mixed responses, however. Some authors regard it as invalid due to the creative element within it; it challenges traditional, more scientific approaches:

The criteria for judging research narratives are still diffuse … Blurring the line between fact and fiction, narrative research has challenged the traditional terms of validity. (Heikkinen et al., 2007, p.6)

This paper will consider the validity of this approach and how researchers might address such criticisms, by drawing on the example of the doctoral study presented here.

Creative Non-Fiction

Sparkes, identifies different levels of creativity within the narrative process which, he suggests, will affect the credence that the reader gives to the story. He describes one form of narrative as ‘ethnographic fiction’, based on the researcher ‘being there’ at the time of the incident. In this form the researcher is keen to make clear that he/she was there and so the story is constructed from an actual observed event, in settings or within a community that he/she has studied ethnographically. For Sparkes these claims of ‘being there’ are an important element of ethnographic fiction as it strengthens its validity and credibility. Such stories, he explains, are creative in their use of fictional techniques but are non-fictional in nature being based on real characters and real events. He gives them the term ‘literary non-fiction’ or ‘creative non-fiction’. A contrast to this form of writing is ‘creative fiction’ which can be based on things that never happened and may use entirely fictional characters; such form is less likely to be regarded as a credible research approach. However, Sparkes suggests that individual researchers have to decide on the balance between reality and fiction. He presents a continuum at one end of which is ‘creative non-fiction’ and at the other end of which is ‘creative fiction’. Individual writers must place themselves and their narrative accounts on this continuum and acknowledge that where they sit may affect their credibility and validity.

Considering the issue of legitimacy of narrative inquiry, Conle (2001), in recognising the importance of truth and rationality, promotes the principle of dialectics. She regards narrative inquiry, the gathering and presentation of data, as being based on ‘communicative action’ as defined by Habermas (1984). Habermas described communicative action as interaction aimed at mutual understanding between two or more
people as opposed to “strategic action” where one party is trying to influence the other and win them over to his or her position. According to both Habermas and Conle, everyday conversation is aimed at developing mutual understanding and so it can be assumed that each party is acting rationally, speaking truth and sincerity that are socially appropriate, or else they would not bother talking. Conle proposes that this rational interaction characterises narrative inquiry, as well as, everyday dialogues. If you accept that data is gathered through rational interaction then, Conle claims, narrative inquiry is a rational exercise, based on truth and therefore it is a valid research approach:

I suggest that it is worthwhile to consider narrative inquiry as communicative action and therefore as subject to the same challenges that Habermas perceives in communicative action. I should be able to challenge a narrative researcher about the truth of the things she tells; about her capacity to truthfully represent the state of her own mind, feelings and motives about the social appropriateness of the narrative and norms expressed though it; and about the comprehensibility or well-formedness of the narratives she constructs. If I can issue these challenges, if I can assume that she makes these claims, then we are engaged in a rational enterprise that can be differentiated from fiction, irrational babble and power games. (Conle, 2001, p.24)

Conle’s view relates to Sparkes’ description of ethnographic fiction discussed earlier as she recognises that it is, in fact, not fiction but creative non-fiction.

Validity

All research, but particularly alternative forms of qualitative research, of which creative non-fiction is one, need to be able to demonstrate their validity, as Sparkes points out. This requires appropriate criteria to be used:

If alternative forms of qualitative inquiry and new writing practices are judged using inappropriate criteria, there is the danger that they will be dismissed as not being proper research and, therefore, not worthy of attention. (Sparkes, 2002, p.194)

Some, such as Garratt and Hodkinson (1998) adopting a criteriologist’s view, call for one set of universal criteria against which any piece of qualitative research can be judged. Others, such as Smith and Deemer, (2000) take a non-realist approach, suggesting that specific criteria should not be pre-determined. In this paper the second approach is favoured as it allows for flexibility and creativity within and across different pieces of research. It is therefore necessary to use different criteria to judge different forms of writing and different types of research.

One set of criteria which is appropriate to creative non-fiction is that suggested by Bochner (2002) as he uses these specifically to judge stories. His criteria look for:

1. abundant, concrete details in facts and feelings;
2. structurally complex narratives which move between past and present;
3. the author’s emotional credibility, vulnerability and honesty;
4. tales within the story, showing development of self;
5. a high standard of ethical self-consciousness from the author.
These criteria focus on the construction of the story thus allowing for creativity within each different story. Carless and Sparkes (2008) support such an approach as they suggest that a characteristic of a good story “is a degree of openness that allows different readers to make use of the story in varied ways” (p.205).

**Ethical Considerations**

Elliott (2005) cautions that the ethics involved in a narrative study are significantly more complicated than those involved in most other forms of research. This is because of the direct link between the personal stories sought by the researcher and the individual identities of the interviewees which are likely to have been constructed, in part, by their personal stories:

> The recognition that personal narrative is firmly bound up with individual identities raises important questions about the analysis of this narrative materials and the impact of the analysis on the research participants. (Elliott, 2005, p.140)

Therefore, informed consent based on detailed information about the research process, method of analysis and audience is particularly important.

A key ethical issue in the use of narrative is how to preserve the individual’s anonymity and confidentiality. The researcher should do all within his/her capability to uphold the anonymity and confidentiality of the participant. Once a combination of personal attributes and experiences are woven into a particular case within a research report it can, as Elliott suggests, “be very difficult to ensure that the case does not become recognizable” (p.142). Goodley et al., (2004) suggest that the incorporation of fictional devices is one way of ensuring that the stories remain confidential to those who originally told them.

The production of a personal narrative may be seen as central to the construction of self-identity and a sense of self, and to the process by which an individual makes sense of his/her own life in relation to others, such as peers or family members. In adopting a narrative approach the researcher deconstructs those personal stories and interprets them. If this is not done and presented sensitively it may be damaging to that self-identity (Elliott, 2005).

Interestingly Penn and Soothill (2007) do question the “accelerating tendency to introduce ‘ethical’ issues into all areas of social science” (p.4). While this paper is concerned with the paradigm of education it has strong elements of social sciences; it is difficult to separate the fields of education and social science research completely and so their views are worth consideration here. They suggest that a move by the natural science paradigm to assert its exclusivity has sought to undermine social science research by demanding evidence, in the form of detailed scrutiny, of underlying ethical issues:

> We consider this to be misguided and misplaced development. Indeed, we believe this ‘ethical’ agenda is a deliberate attempt to neuter proper social
scientific inquiry and is part of a process of wider deprofessionalisation in the UK. (Penn and Soothill, 2007, p.4)

They do not argue that social science research has no ethical dimension, but that it is ‘inherently ethical’ and had previously been based on a ‘high trust model of professional autonomy’ which has been replaced by external bureaucratic controls in the form of numerous university-based research ethics committees. Their views are worthy of note here as creative non-fiction accounts are, by their very nature, reliant on professional judgements about what should, or should not, be in the final narrative accounts.

Creative Non-Fiction and Research in Education

Education, taken in its broadest form, can be said to be principally about relationships (McGettrick, 2008); relationships are central to effective learning. Relationships are hugely complex in that they are based on individuals’ identities, on personalities of real people. Given this complexity creative non-fiction is well suited to research in education. Writers of creative non-fiction, according to Barone:

… seek to penetrate personalities of real characters, unveil aspects of their experience (and) explicate the social meaning underlying important events.” (Barone, 2000. p.28)

If education is seen as more than measurable outcomes which can be tested and quantified and it is seen as the development of individuals and societies, brought about by relationships with others and with one’s self, then it requires a qualitative methodology when researching aspects of it. Creative non-fiction, this paper suggests, enables the researcher to capture the complexities of education and learning, such as self-esteem, motivation, identity and relationships.

The doctoral research which this paper draws on sought to capture the identity of and influences on young unicyclists, exploring their personalities through their experiences of the sport and suggesting social meaning in their actions linked to identity. Barone’s description of the purpose of creative non-fiction gives further credence to the adoption of this form of writing in the thesis, and in research in education more generally. The narratives in the thesis constructed can be categorized as “creative non-fiction” in that they are directly based on the individuals interviewed, their stories and experiences and observations of them at actual events.

The two extracts from the thesis which follow illustrate something of the complexities creative non-fiction can capture. The first one illustrates the importance of relationships, friendships, in school and their potential to impact positively on identity. The actual event around which the narrative was constructed was a unicycle marathon. This provides a long ride during which the rider, Pete, reflects on past friendships:

Pete’s group was lining up now. He breathed deeply and tried to focus on the task ahead; deep breaths, sweaty palms, knot in the stomach, slightly unpleasant taste in the mouth. The horn sounded and the riders were off. It was so unfair how those tall, long legged guys could just step up and be away, they made it look effortless…
Thinking back now as he sat in that easy rhythm, riding through Farum on that hot sunny day, he remembered those times as good times. They were a group, a gang, mates. Pete realised now how much those friendships had meant to him at the time. He had been feeling awash in a year of people, boys, drifting amongst others, not really sure who he was or where he belonged... The Guys had changed all that, given him a defined groups, good friends... They shared a common interest, a group identity; gave him an identity, no longer drifting, now forged with others. They stuck together, had to stick together: they were different from the rest and that wasn’t always a good thing. Being different at school wasn’t always a good thing; you felt like a party in the wilderness, you had to keep together or you’d die. He realised early on that he couldn’t get along with everyone so he forged strong relationships with those he did, the Guys...
(Bignold, 2009, p.217 & 220)

The second extract highlights possible transferable skills from leisure to school and a perceived lack of interest on the part of some teachers to their pupils likes and dislikes, which could impact on identity and self-esteem. This piece of creative non-fiction is constructed around an actual unicycle hockey tournament which the young rider, Scott, participated in. Introducing a local newspaper reporter into Scott’s story was a creative literary technique that allowed a dialogue to be created which represented part of the formal research interview:

He spotted a tall, lanky lad with short, spiky blonde hair across the hall; he looked normal, or as normal as he could do sitting on a one-wheeled bike going backwards and forwards on it on the same spot. He’d do; he walked over to him and held out his hand.
"I’m Paul from the local Advertiser. Mind if I ask you a few questions?"
"Awright" nodded Scott, still moving backwards and forwards.
“What’s your name?”
“Scott.”
“Scott?”
“Scott Rhodes.”
“How old are you?”
“Fourteen.”
“You look like a normal sort of lad; what are you doing with this lot, playing this?”
Paul asked cocking his head at the other unicyclists....

“Me mum says it ‘elps me concentrate. She says it ‘elped me balance too.”
“Didn’t you want to give up when you couldn’t ride immediately?”
“A bit … me mum says it taught me to try ‘ard things … I don’t mind ‘ard things now. I’ll ‘ave a go. Me mum says it’s good we ride together, wiv Lewis and Dad … and Anna.”
“What do your mates think about it?”
“Dunno.”
“Do any of them ride?”
“Na … used to … used to come to the club – and me cousin. Were lots of us; it was mint.”
“What about your teachers? They must think you’re really clever.”
“Na … they don’t know!”
“But they’d be amazed if they saw you play this.”
“Me mum says I used to ride it at primary school … won a talent show!”
“Scott, we’re on again in a minute. Are you ready?” his dad called. (Bignold, 2009, p.149 & 154)

The above extracts illustrate a number of complex themes in education. The structure of creative non-fiction as a framework has allowed these complexities to be articulated as lived experiences.

Research Methodology and Construction

Having given two examples above to demonstrate how creative non-fiction was used as an approach in education research to capture learner identity, motivation and self-esteem, the actual process of approach taken to constructing these stories will now be discussed. The narratives constructed in the doctoral thesis can be categorised as “creative non-fiction” in that they are directly based on the individuals at the centre of the case studies, their stories and experiences and observations of them at actual events. The intention of them was, as Heikkinen et al (2007) encourage, to stimulate dialogue based around new considerations of unicycling and new interpretations of individual and group motivation and identity related to that.

Within creative non-fiction, there are a variety of different approaches possible for gathering data. The doctoral study adopted a participatory, ethnographic approach, as the researcher was a part of the community she was researching. Hansen identifies what he describes as “the ethnonarrative approach that seeks to combine ethnographic methods and narrative methods”; this is an appropriate description of this study. Goodley et al discuss the influence that methodologies have on the style of narrative selected by the researcher in that they provide the persuasions from which the stories actually emerge.

Different methodologies facilitate different levels of participation by the researcher, the participants and the reader and they affect the authority of the researcher. The ethnographically-based case studies of this piece of research allowed for participatory interviews and observations. Semi-structured interviews enabled the interviewees to tell their stories at their individual paces, unrestricted by time schedules and closed questions.

The dialogue created was analysed thematically in relation to the underpinning research questions, as were observations of each individual riding. Alongside this individual data other supplementary information was collated from a range of sources, such as a questionnaire distributed amongst the wider community, both in the UK and overseas, conversations with significant relatives/friends of the interviewees, interviews of key individuals within the unicycling community, research field notes from unicycling meets and events, direct quotes from secondary sources, such as the international Uni magazine and conversations with unicyclist and supporters.
While the observations of each young rider at the centre of each narrative provided a real-event framework around which to build the story, the interview transcripts and supplementary information provided content which was creatively developed and woven around the actual observations. Where possible verbatim quotes from the interviews were used as part of dialogues, or self-reflections, within the stories. This example from Pete’s interview and then story about his intrinsic motivation for participating in a unicycle marathon race illustrates this technique:

I’ve not thought where I want to come in the race, what position, I’m not bothered about that, but what time I want to have. That’s something I can predict; if I train this much and get this fit then I could do it in this time. (Excerpt from Pete’s interview: Bignold, 2009, p.306)

It was a good morning and he was on a high so Pete momentarily wondered why he was putting himself through this again…. He’d not thought about where he wanted to come in the race, what position, he wasn’t too bothered about that, but what time he wanted to have. That was something he could predict; if he trained this much and got this fit then he could do it in this time. He had set himself two goals: one, to beat his previous time; two, to beat the world record for marathon running. His brother and dad were really keen runners so there was a bit of family pride at stake, a bit of fun. (Excerpt from Pete’s story: Bignold, 2009, p.306)

In keeping with Miles and Huberman’s (2002) concept of three concurrent “flows of activity”, data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification, before actually writing the narrative account the data were reduced. The interview recordings were selectively transcribed to allow what was analysed to be the most significant elements of the interviews as these provided the main content of the reconstructed story, in order to ensure authenticity. The decisions on what to transcribe and what to leave out were based on existing knowledge of unicycling generally, the different disciplines within it and any prior knowledge about the interviewees and therefore what was already understood to be important to them in their riding. This interpretation of the researcher was moderated by what seemed to be significant to the subjects in the interviews based on their body language, tone of voice, time spent on a particular topic and so on. It is acknowledged here that decisions and interpretations were influenced by her own identity and the need for researcher reflexivity will be discussed in the next section. Once each narrative had been constructed by the researcher it was then shown to the young rider for his comments and any necessary modifications were made.

Having taken the decision to present the data as narrative stories it was not feel that it was necessary to transcribe the interviews in full as may be required for a discourse analysis, as the narrative approach lends itself more to thematic analysis and it was key themes related to identity and motivation which the study was seeking to identify and explore. By selectively transcribing the interviews summarisation of the data took place automatically. Once the transcripts were made they were coded based on the key themes of the study for each interview within a set of three and then within each case study with the
supplementary data. This process of data reduction provided the basis for the narrative account to be constructed and presented.

**Discussion**

Heikkinen et al (2007) do caution the researcher to give careful consideration to the construction of any narrative account and to his/her relationship to it, warning that reflexivity is crucial for validity and credibility. Beginning with Somekh’s (2006) acknowledgement of the self as a research instrument they stress the importance of the researcher analysing his/her relationship with the object of research. Coffey (1999) advises, similarly, that undertaking fieldwork is a personal, emotional and identity-orientated process for the researcher and presenting the data involves self-presentation and identity construction. What is crucial then is acknowledging and recognising this, understanding the location of self within the narrative. This is the principle of reflexivity (Heikkinen et al, 2007), researcher reflexivity. As well as the principle of reflexivity, the principle of dialectics, referred to earlier, is important to the credibility of the narrative account as it relates directly to the notion of authenticity of content in representing voice and thought (Heikkinen et al, 2007).

It is not sufficient for the researcher to just recognise his/her bias and identity, a credible researcher will remind readers of this and that the narrative account has been created by him/her and is not a direct observation. Heikkinen et al regard this as the starting point in constructing a narrative account;

"The starting point of narrative thinking is that the research report is a narrative story, produced by the researcher, not an image like replica. It is a researcher’s virtue to be aware of how he/she produces reality – and to explicate his/her personal process of knowing the text.” (Heikkinen et al, 2007, p.11)

This is particularly so with creative non-fiction as it is based on actual events observed and so the researcher is inevitably located within the story, implicitly or explicitly.

In reflecting on her own position as a researcher, in relation to the study concerned the doctoral student recognised that she was subjectively bound up with it. She had observed unicycling have a positive impact on key members of her family and it was difficult for her to be objective about it. The approach she took with this dilemma was to begin the thesis by explicitly telling her own story as a piece of creative non-fiction. As with the other stories what was key was the use of a real event as a writing frame around which to construct the narrative. This is illustrated in the short extract below;

You don’t ride!” exclaimed Tu.

“No!” I replied defiantly.

“But… I just assumed… I thought you did. Why not?... It’s so much fun. It’s such a great feeling…. Everyone should ride!”

“I don’t haven the patience; I couldn’t persevere… I’m too busy to learn.” were my lame excuses and then I moved straight to my trump card; I always used it.

“Besides, if I did ride then who would provide the support, who would do all this?”

I waved my hand at the Van, the large tent with chairs and beers ready and
waiting for the riders who had gone to shower after a long, sweaty, muddy, wet day in the saddle. (Bignold, 2009, p.117)

Narrative analysis has a “triangular structure” which is key to it, according to Miller:

One apex of the triangle is the respondent with their pre-existing subjective and negotiated view of social reality. A second apex of the triangle is the interviewer with an agenda of research interests and goals. The responses to the interviewer’s questioning producing the third apex of the triangle. (Miller, 2000, p.130)

This triangle recognises the interpretational bias of both the interviewee and interviewer as they impact on the dialogue and both are acknowledged in the analysis of data in this study. The triangle model is key in any research which draws significantly on dialogue, according to Frank (2005), who sees the analysis of dialogical research being based around “how the researcher and participant came together in some shared time and space and had diverse effects on each other”, the dialogue (or data) being the outcome of this. The subsequent analysis then is the researcher’s representation of the young riders and as Frank points out, the researcher cannot claim any last word about what they represent, only her interpretation of that.

Conclusions

The doctoral study on which this paper is based was not a scientific measurement; it was an exploration of young people’s lived experiences, their motivators, identities and relationships within and outside of formal education. If the education system is to be successful in engaging young people, re-engaging disaffected youth and maintaining engagement with younger children then it must consider what motivates these individuals.

Failure, or simply lack of success, at school can have a negative impact on self-esteem, identity and relationships. As young people start to develop stronger, sometimes new, self-identities based around activities in the realm of leisure (Hendry et al, 1993) schools and other settings would do well to take an interest in these experiences and the complexities surrounding them. Narrative approaches can provide an opportunity to capture and make sense of these experiences; creative non-fiction, in particular this paper suggests, can facilitate this.

What is key in creative non-fiction is its validity and credibility, given that it is based on real events, allowing the voices of those whose stories are being told to be heard with authenticity and validity. Alongside this, the creative nature of it enables the researcher to construct a story which will draw the reader in and help him/her to understand something of the lived experiences underpinning the narrative.

References


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