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5 It's Open to Interpretation: Telling Porkies - Narrating and Rewriting Life History and the Use of Dramatic License

STEVE LYON AND GRAHAM THURGOOD

Introduction

This paper provides some personal reflections on issues relating to how people tell their life stories and interpret their past experiences, and how nurse teachers and researchers may interpret and use these narratives.

This is a discussion of whether tales appearing on paper and told in the classroom are ever truthful accounts and the extent to which they may be manipulated for maximum effect considered. In a world fed on super graphics and sound bites; what hope the subtle story teller. When 'King Kong' is preferred over "Brokeback Mountain" the temptation to dramatise looms large. Examples of the use of dramatic license from both the narrators and researchers view point are provided. An exploration of why stories may be dramatised, and some of the legal and ethical dilemmas that surface for anyone who is representing the life stories of others either on paper or in the classroom are discussed.

There is discussion of whether it is ever justified to fabricate life stories in order to best secure the ear of an audience and particularly in relation to when the life story is not ones own, but belongs to another. The purpose of 'stretching the truth' is explored and its methodological implications for the researcher considered.

Reflections From a Teacher - Steve Lyon

I thought I'd start by narrating a story. When I was first learning to be a teacher as a young man, I received some obscure feedback via an assessor. He looked me straight in the eyes and said "I can truly say that was the most soporific lesson I have ever witnessed". Not knowing what the word meant, I broke into a huge grin and naively began boasting "Me I'm a soporific teacher". Once I understood what was meant, its impact is still felt some twenty years later in both the classroom and on paper. I have used this story on 'umpteens' occasions

with people learning to be teachers, to illustrate the need to have impact at the beginning of a lesson and maintain interest throughout – a tall order.

When I reflect on the ways in which I have fought to maintain interest, I cringe. Working in the field of mental health I have had access to a mountain of material which I could divorce from the patient and his/her context and use it to keep the student entertained and to meet my own needs to be appreciated and affirmed. It has only been recently that I have cared to explain at the start of lessons the reasons for using case material and being extra careful to ensure anonymity of the patient.

To be perfectly honest, I have been drawn to those cases that I knew would guarantee me the maximum emotional impact and sometimes the cheapest of laughs, at the patient not with the patient. Hence, I have recalled ‘true’ stories where I have found people hanging and retold stories about people using a hammer and stake to attempt suicide. When even the tragic ‘true’ events were seemingly missing the emotional mark then I could slip in some extra tragic circumstance – give them an extra kid or trauma. It rarely occurred to me that there may have been people in the room who had lost relatives or friends through suicide, and that they were disengaging because of the very nature of the topic. The word blasé comes to mind but worse words could be used.

And yet, I can rationalise and say that I am meeting the needs of my students by captivating their attention and with less chance of disruptive classroom antics, my experience is that in those occasional moments when I have the entire audience glued to their seats that they are behaving at their best.

What about alternatives? I could deliver a purely clinical lecture not dissimilar to the narrator in ‘The Life of Pi’ (Martell, 2002) who invites the listener to choose between a believable clinical account of his boat journey or a less likely but more gripping account. A lifeless and clinical delivery (let me give you facts, facts and more facts) runs the bleak risk of disengaging the audience with consequent tutor aloneness and anxiety, a common price paid by the teacher for their ‘craft or sullen art’ (Thomas, 1998) when he misses the mark and feels misunderstood. An alternative may be to use technology such as slides to present the facts (devoid of real lives) which initially arrests attention but eventually kills the student; ‘death by PowerPoint’ (Clarke, 2003). Much better then to borrow from ‘real lives’ as a means to capture the audience. You can imagine my delight when both my Mum and Dad developed dementia, with the amount of material it could provide me with. I had an endless supply of funnies to delight audiences and maintain interest. The truth is whilst they were alive I never used any of their material, and rarely do now. But I have used Mum’s life in an article to discuss, albeit briefly, the ethics of recounting the life of someone who is no longer able to give permission (Lyon, 2006).

The debate about the misrepresentation of a person’s life and particularly when they are unable to give permission I find fascinating, as well described by Malcolm (1994). Even with the best will in the world it is impossible to

give a true account, and when attempting to gain attention or entertain readers or audiences, or gain publication and publicity, the chances are that what is presented is likely more fiction than fact. In previous publications (Lyon, 2005, 2006) I have provided highly fictionalised accounts for a number of reasons; to arrest attention, to make a point, to develop an insight, to effect a possible change in attitude, or for creative satisfaction. To illustrate, I place my Mum and a *'truish'* conversation on the beach at the quiet end of Blackpool where I can take her conversation in two ways; animated as she looks towards the noisy Pleasure Beach and quietly reflective as she looks towards Wordsworth's Lake District. These conversations are then used to explore Mum's animated hopes for the future or quietly taking stock of a past life. Such artistic licence paved the way for a respectful tribute to a person who experienced dementia as a positive process, and allowed me to engage the reader in my hopes for the future care of people who have dementia.

Reflections From a Researcher - Graham Thurgood

There are clearly legal and ethical issues raised by the use of story telling in teaching which are also reflected in narrative research activity. Indeed, Widdershoven and Smits (1996) suggest that nurses' stories mostly aim to engage other nurses but do not suggest they should be fabricated. Within professional nursing practice there are examples of 'bending the truth' such as Tuckett (1998) who explores nurse's narratives about lying and deception in relation to information giving and dying patients.

Ethical issues of narrative research are numerous and have been reported in many publications such as Bar-on (1996), Widdershoven and Smits (1996) and Richardson and Godfrey (2003).

It is generally agreed that researchers are required to protect their research participants and their stories. Serious breaches of trust are documented such as MacNeil (1992) who discussed the 'Metropolit' project in Stockholm and Pittenger (2002) who described the concept of deception in research. Researchers are also charged with ensuring they provide equity in relation to obtaining a sample, the analysis and interpretation of data and publication of results.

As Dunaway (1992), Finnegan (1997) and Summerfield (1998) argue in relation to oral history narratives the interview and resultant narrative can be regarded as performances as the story teller, by selecting and ordering the narrative, carries out some censorship. Turnbull (2000, p.22) argues, "Performances and censorship are intricately linked. All presentations involve a censorship of the self: the conscious selection and ordering of material". Within this there may be some element of 'dramatising' a story to try to make

it sound more important or interesting. Perhaps this is where the 'good' story teller excels?

So, the stories people tell are the stories they want to tell or want others to hear. However, they may be censored, sanitized, edited or fabricated for public consumption by the narrator. Williams (2001) suggests interviewees inevitably reconstitute the past and control the amount and type of information disclosed.

There are two issues here, accidental changes by the narrator and deliberate changes in stories by others.

Firstly, accidental changes in stories by the narrator such as those brought about by personal editing, time restrictions, memory loss or wanting to please the interviewer may be acceptable and may be to a certain extent inevitable.

Turnbull (2000) identifies time as a restricting factor which can 'force' narrators to fabricate or censor their stories to fit in. Researchers (and teachers) are also often under these time or word count limits.

Memory is another factor and in my research involving elderly retired nurses, having to be aware of the 'rose tinted glasses' concept was important to try to guard against the narrators potential to fabricate or elaborate their stories to fill in memory gaps? Triangulation of data may help in this area. Another problem area was related to narrators potentially mixing together different stories or a time period which was particularly difficult to manage during analysis and interpretation. Polishuk (1998) supports these issues by confirming narrators may sometimes keep secrets, deliberately lie, make mistakes or misremember.

Narrators telling stories they think are required to please the interviewer can lead to changes from reality in the content and nature of the resultant story. Also, narrators wanting to protect third parties may alter their stories to protect others. An example from my research was an interviewee saying something derogatory about one of her children and in retrospect wishing this to be erased from the record. The issues related to this have been discussed further by Thurgood (2002, 2003).

In relation to the use of 'dramatic licence' there is some anecdotal evidence suggesting that TV soap story lines are found by programme researchers exploring life history sound archives for 'true' life stories to use and develop into 'dramatic' story lines. This may be legitimate for them but the question remains how much can teachers and researchers use 'dramatic licence' in their work.

The accuracy and quality of a narrative may ultimately rely on the story telling skills of the narrator. In my research it is unclear whether the sample that emerged were the people who were 'good storytellers' or comfortable with talking and who found it easy to talk, while the ones who declined to participate were the people who found talking or telling stories more uncomfortable/difficult. Gottlieb and Lasser (2001) describe this ethical

sampling issue as 'privileging voices' where researchers prefer some voices over others.

These examples of accidental or unintentional changes to stories by the narrator can occur during their collection, and researchers need to be aware of these issues when planning and conducting their data collection.

The second point of deliberate changes in stories by researchers or teachers is clearly more contentious and the degree of change and rationale and motives for this are important to clearly state.

In the modern world of narrative research the ethical and legal aspects of the use of others stories are becoming even more important to consider. This is because of the increasing use of narrative methodology and the subsequent exploration of many different areas of people's lives, often involving very personal and sensitive information.

As Riessman (1993, p.22) noted, "narratives are interpretive and, in turn, require interpretation." It is also suggested that, "They do not speak for themselves" (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p.264). This may lead to doubt about the credibility of analysis (Ayres and Poirier, 1996). Interpretation therefore becomes an important concept for researchers to consider. Cormack (1996, p.172) suggests that in relation to the analysis of narratives "interpretation is a dynamic and interactive process". It can therefore be argued that this process requires imagination and creativity.

This creates a conflict of interest for the researcher in relation to maintaining an honest and trustworthy approach and ensuring research integrity. Therefore, 'reading between the lines' can be argued to be demonstrating either imagination and creativity in the reconstruction of a story, or 'tampering with the evidence' and fabricating the story.

In legal terms the United Kingdom's (UK) Data Protection Act (HMSO, 1998), provides a framework and identifies eight principles of good practice ensuring data are:

- fairly and lawfully processed;
- processed for limited purposes;
- adequate, relevant and not excessive;
- accurate;
- not kept longer than necessary;
- processed in accordance with the data subject's rights;
- secure;
- not transferred to countries without adequate protection.

The Act defines data both as facts and opinions about individuals and it incorporates the concepts of 'obtaining', 'holding' and 'disclosing' data.

Ensuring data is accurate and processed in accordance with the data subject's rights seem to be two particularly important principles in relation to

the use of stories. This begs the question does changing or altering other people's stories break these principles? In relation to the Act it would seem the fourth and sixth principles are particularly relevant in relation to teaching and research.

Our own University's 'Ethical Guidelines for good practice in teaching and research' produced by the Ethics Committee highlights key principles relating to 'conflicts of interest when teaching/researching' and 'the importance of research integrity' (University of Huddersfield, 2006). It states that two forms of misconduct are the 'fabrication or falsification of research results' or the 'misquoting or misappropriation of others work'. The guidelines confirm that 'honesty' applies to the whole range of work including 'generating and analysing data'. Fraud is defined as 'involving deliberate deception including the invention of data and the omission from analysis and non publication of inconvenient data'. It is therefore clear that employers of teachers and researchers recognise the 'conflicts of interest' staff may have and stress the importance of honesty in all areas of employment. All researchers therefore have to consider these issues and as required seek help and advice from local experts in relation to legal and ethical issues, submit their studies to ethical committees, encourage feedback from supervisors, present their work at conferences or in publications, and obtain peer review. By addressing all or some of these the researcher or teacher can begin to feel more comfortable with their use of narratives.

The question of changing or altering other people's stories is an important issue for qualitative researchers to consider preventing 'conflicts of interest' and ensuring honesty and trustworthy research. Price (1996) identifies trustworthiness as an important part of the researcher's role and suggests other important ethical issues are secrecy/deception, gatekeepers power, interpretation and ownership.

Smythe and Murray (2000) discuss the importance of 'narrative ownership' and the ethical aspects of interpretation of stories. These ethical considerations are linked closely to the concept of power between the narrative researcher and the research participants (Turnbull, 2000). These power relations are just as important when teachers select and use stories in the classroom with students. For instance, the teacher may choose to recall more dramatic stories at the expense of the more mundane.

Miles and Huberman (1998) additionally discuss honesty and trust, competence boundaries, worthiness of the project, advocacy, research integrity and quality, ownership of data and conclusions, and the use and misuse of results.

All these terms illustrate the complexity of issues that researchers need to consider to ensure research is conducted within a suitable legal and ethical framework to prevent harm to either the interviewee, third parties mentioned in the interview or the researcher.

Research validity and reliability need to be protected so that narratives are as accurate as possible reflections of the interviewee's life, warts and all.

In relation to story telling if a narrator is a poor story teller or tells a very uninteresting ordinary story, is this not 'warts and all' and how they saw it and therefore should not be exaggerated. It could therefore be argued that it's 'ordinariness' is it's strength, the story reflects this and confirms that often our lives are composed of routine and mundane events and experiences. The interviewee's feelings, emotions, beliefs, values and thoughts are all central to presenting an accurate portrait of their lives, even the boring bits!

Ensuring the authenticity of the narrator's story becomes another of the researchers and teachers conflicting priorities to be balanced with harm reduction. Should teachers tell students the 'boring story' to ensure they are given a realistic view of life, and therefore preventing any chance they will suffer from reality shock at a later date? Is there anything students can learn from listening to a realistic if somewhat 'dull' story? Rhetorical questions arise such as; how much does editing a story "tamper with the evidence"? Is this ever acceptable to do in either research or teaching? If the answer to these questions is yes, a danger of editing is that the information becomes diluted or exaggerated and out of context therefore distorting the narrator's account. Is there a tendency in all of us to 'elaborate' and 'exaggerate' our stories, or 'tell porkies', to ensure others will listen and be interested, no captivated, by them. Polishuk (1998) believes there is a need to portray the person's life as they saw it, to be true to the spirit of their memories and maintain their unique voice.

Conclusion

We have presented two views, firstly of how the use of personal and other people's stories can be used in classroom educational settings to stimulate student interest and enhance learning. As quoted in the feature film *Big Fish*:

Most men they'll tell you a story straight through, it won't be complicated but it won't be interesting either. (Sony Pictures, 2006)

Secondly, there has been an overview of how the legal and ethical aspects impinge upon the researchers interpretation of narratives in relation to trying to discover or represent the 'truth' and the impact these issues have upon validity and reliability of data.

Qualitative narrative researchers need to ensure they do not prompt others to accuse them of creating a parallel with the quantitative researchers statistical saying, 'Lies, damned lies and stories'.

Interpreting the fact from the fiction can be a problematic aspect of the researchers attempt to analyse narratives and retell others stories accurately and

honestly. This leaves this area for teachers and researchers 'open to interpretation'. Therefore, perhaps in some cases it is best to let the narrator have the last word? This second quote from the feature film *Big Fish* provides further examples of how qualitative narrative data is often by its nature incomplete and a mixture of facts and interpretations by the narrator:

In telling the story of my father's life, it's impossible to separate the fact from the fiction, the man from the myth, the best I can do is to tell it the way he told me, it doesn't always make sense but, that's what kind of story this is.

(Sony Pictures, 2006)

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