

Exploring literate lives: Returning to the field

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Abstract. The challenges of conducting lengthy field work in today's busy academic world have impacted the types of research that are able to be carried out. In particular, traditional educational ethnography has become problematic for research beyond initial doctoral research programs. This paper analyzes data collected during a return to the field of a study about literate lives, eleven years after the initial data collection. It considers the implications of exploring people's lives over time.

Running head: Returning to the field

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Introduction

The impetus for this paper came from the experiences of both authors returning to those with whom we had conducted past research. In returning to the field, we expected that we would connect with our remembered experiences. However, we were surprised by the disconnections that became evident. These new experiences raised questions about current ways of doing qualitative literacy research in educational contexts. Because of time pressures on the lives of academics – in a world that Gleick (2000) suggested was becoming “faster” in “just about everything” – and the challenges of finding time for lengthy field engagement, it seems that researchers have moved away from traditional ethnographies (Denzin and Lincoln 2011; Erickson 2011) in the style of, for example, Shirley Brice Heath’s (1983) *Ways with Words*. As Erickson highlighted, “realist general ethnography,” which provided a “comprehensive description of a whole way of life in the particular setting that was being described” (2011:47), has been replaced by other forms of case study, ethnographic, or qualitative research. Although Erickson frames this change in terms of the difficulties of “an omniscient narrator speaking to the reader with an apparent neutrality” (2011:56), time considerations are significant as we determine what is possible for researchers today.

Indeed, it is probably unlikely that a researcher could now entertain the idea of spending up to ten years in the field collecting data, especially when universities have become so interested in the here and now of research outputs that supposedly indicate researcher productivity (Jeffrey 2004). Just as school contexts have been critiqued for their discouragement of longitudinal considerations relating to students’ trajectories (Compton-Lilly 2010), researchers are also bound by temporal constraints. For example, rules around the time allowed for doctoral study and limits to the number of years that research grants will support research projects have contributed to these constraints (Compton-Lilly 2012).

According to Heath and Street, ethnographers today rarely “live among those whose lives they are documenting” (2008:60); rather, they have to fit into the “varied conditions” (2008:62) of research sites and other commitments. Time poverty and the difficulties of spending extended time in the field led Millen (2000) to suggest a “rapid ethnography” approach, incorporating multiple researchers in the field at one time, and time sampling techniques. Others have suggested that there is a need to rethink fieldwork, to be open to collaboration (Marcus 2007), and to consider a compacted mode (Jeffrey & Troman 2004). Such attempts to think differently about how to conduct qualitative research have prompted us to consider what educational research can do and can be in current times.

However, as described below, it was a particular experience that provoked our initial thinking about returning to the field and the problematic nature of collecting data at different points in time. Interestingly, not much has been said in the literature about returning to the field. “After fieldwork” discussions usually relate to post-fieldwork data analysis and the writing of a thesis, book, or journal article (Blommaert and Jie 2010:16). Our experience suggests that reflection on a return to the field and on what that means for the data that has and will be collected is also warranted.

We begin this paper with an anecdote which explains how one of the authors returned to the field as an invited guest, rather than as a researcher. The paper then considers some of the literature relating to issues of temporal constraints in educational research, including seriality (Preissle 2011) and longitudinality (Weis 2004). Its main section deals with an analysis of data collected from members of one family during a field visit, eleven years after data was first collected. The initial data was collected to inform research about literacy practices and engagement with school literacy in mobile families (see, e.g., Henderson 2005). Drawing on interview data collected as part of the return field visit, this paper considers the possibilities of returning to the field and using a serial approach to data collection.

An anecdote: Reflections on returning to the field

Our thoughts about seriality (Preissle 2011) and longitudinality (Weis 2004) were seeded when one of us returned to a research field five years after data had been collected. The anecdote gives details of this experience, and acts as an introduction to our thinking about this aspect of fieldwork.

One of us (see, e.g., Woods 2004) received an invitation to attend a graduation ceremony at a school where she had researched, and before that, taught. The excitement of returning to see the students who had been a major part of her research career more than five years previously indicated that these young people were important to her. One student – Britney - who had been a featured participant in the original doctoral research had been awarded vice school captain and would chair the graduation ceremony. The invitation from the school made reference to the fact that Britney had achieved this leadership role, and school personnel hoped that the researcher would return for the ceremony to enjoy the student's success. For the adults in the school, the significant time spent by the researcher in the school, and the research stories that had been told about this particular child and others in her cohort were significant enough to invite the researcher to the student's honorable exit from the school.

More than half a decade before, Britney had entered the school with what was defined in the thesis work as 'form' (Sharp et al. 1975). According to this way of thinking, 'form' involves the history of verbal and written documentation collected and or known about a student, family or community that can impact on the working categories set up by teachers and others as they build relationships with students. Such ways of understanding students can be stored within the teachers' or more generally the school's textual archive and will have implications for how particular behaviours and achievements of a students are understood. The initial research detailed how, in her first year of school, Britney and her family's form

led to her being constructed as a pleasant child who lived in an imaginary world to escape reality, and whose potential to learn school literacy was limited. This was despite mounting evidence that Britney was learning literacy almost effortlessly and was, by the end of the first year of school, achieving average results as a beginning reader and writer. The thesis story ended with Britney transferring from the school with a record that detailed intervention and failure to learn – despite being able to read and write at the end of the first year of school. She presented at her new school with ‘form’ as a struggling literacy learner as detailed in school records. Her ‘failure to learn school literacy’ was no longer just located in the mythology around her and her family, but it was now established within official records and assessment requirements. While Britney was never constructed as a victim of the system, the systemic constraints of early year’s literacy pedagogy and intervention had constructed her as at-risk, which had consequences for her as a literacy learner.

Five years on, there is no doubt that the school saw Britney’s recent success as evidence that this school was one where the Britneys of the world could succeed. Although she had transferred to another school around the time that initial data collection was completed, Britney had in fact returned after a relatively short absence, and then completed her primary years (years 3-7) in this one school. However, what is interesting about this story is that, while the adults no doubt had their reasons for thinking the researcher’s return to the school to see Britney was important, for Britney herself the significance of the research was very limited. After the graduation presentation, several teachers reintroduced Britney to the researcher. She had grown a little and adolescence was setting in. However, the researcher had spent so many hours observing her on video and analyzing her classroom talk and behaviour that she remained very familiar to the researcher, even though several years had passed since the last shared meeting. One of the teachers reminded Britney of the researcher and her camera, and asked if she remembered how much she had loved to participate in the

data collection and video recording. Britney politely said “yes” and smiled as she proceeded to say, “Of course, you were the one who used to take me over to the office.” She then thanked the researcher for trips to the office - trips that the researcher had never been involved in - and smiled as she returned to her friends. The excitement about the return meeting had obviously been instated in the researcher and her teaching colleagues but had not spread to the child research participant at all.

What this story reminds us of, firstly, is that the very nature of our research reifies research participants in a particular time and space. As individuals grow and change, their representation in research remains somehow fossilized in our stories. Secondly, it reminds us that the research processes, and the constructions that come from them, remain more important to researchers than they may have ever been to the research participants. Considering the impact of such research on our academic careers, and our original time investments in participant observations and data collection, data analysis and thesis writing, this is perhaps not surprising.

Considering data collection as a ‘serial’ process

As Henwood and Shirani explained, everything that people do is “embedded and extended in time across the multiple modalities of past, present and future” (2012:1). Indeed, Preissle highlighted the serial nature of time, arguing that our futures are “composed of events particular to each of us in the coming years, decades, and centuries,” and that a consideration of “sequential moments” moves us into thinking about a “serial future” (2011:695). Similarly, it would seem that research conducted at particular points in time could indicate a serial past.

Weis used the term ethnographic longitudinality, whereby a researcher can track a “set of interactions and relationships over time, causing us to shift our eye from pieces drawn at one point in time to those drawn at another” (2004:190). She suggested that returning to

collect data some time after the original ethnographic period might insist that researchers “trace the continuities and discontinuities of identities, relations, and material lives” (2004:190). She argued that this helps to make visible the broader social and institutional formations that advance and assault the possibilities for how individuals, and we would say groups and cohorts, shape and narrate their everyday lives as social practices. In her 2004 study, Weis revisited the participants from research that she had conducted 15 years earlier. She explained that she was able to move her “eye from pieces drawn at one point in time to those drawn at another” (2004:190). This ethnographic longitudinality enabled her to “blast open the ‘freezing’ so characteristic of ethnographies conducted at one point in time” (2004:190). However, she also recognized that she could be critiqued for merely freezing two points in time rather than just one, even though she aimed to capture fluidity and change .

In contrast, Compton-Lilly’s (2011a, 2011b, 2012) longitudinal study of literacy and reading attainment occurred over a period of 10 years and incorporated three phases of data collection approximately three to four years apart. Using Lemke’s (2000) idea of timescales, Compton-Lilly theorized the “multiple dimensions of time in people’s lives, understandings, and experiences” (2011b:73), and recognized time as “a constant and inescapable dimension of life” (2012:1). By focusing on time as part of the context of literacy learning, Compton-Lilly identified it as playing a major role in how people understand the world and themselves. In particular, she highlighted three timescales: ongoing, familial, and historical. These timescales were, she concluded, related to activities and events that were discussed during interviews, family experiences, and broader social and educational histories.

Compton-Lilly emphasized that her research showed evidence of a range of temporal dimensions and that “time manifested itself in a myriad of ways” (2012:28). Although she highlighted how different research can focus on time – as a variable, in developmental accounts, as context, and as an aspect of life – her own method was to code time in her data

analysis (Compton-Lilly 2011a). She also used multiple timescales in making sense of her own experiences as a researcher as well as making sense of her research data. Rather than present her research as an account of one “slice of time,” she examined the “ways people access multiple and sometimes conflicting discourses across time to understand themselves and others” (2011a:236). According to Lemke, such an approach helps us to understand how “our shared moments add up to *social life*,” rather than being seen as a series of isolated events (2000:273). Lemke’s ideas and Compton-Lilly’s (2011b, 2012) discussion of time have extended ways of thinking about research. Compton-Lilly noted that her longitudinal focus on children identified patterns of change that would otherwise be invisible. These ideas prompted us to think about our own research and the insights – about ourselves, about the participants of our research, and about research itself – that might be gained from considering time and seriality. In what follows, we use data collected about a family at two points in time to consider these issues and what unpacking them might offer us. Calling on Compton-Lilly’s (2011b, 2012) premises about the temporal notions of research, we try to make visible the affordances, but also the problematics, of returning to the field of past research.

The original study: The Moala family as fruit pickers and literacy learners

The initial study was part of Henderson’s (2005) doctoral research. Using a case study approach, it explored teachers’ and families’ narratives about itinerant farm workers’ children as literacy learners. The children attended a north Australian primary school located in a coastal town surrounded by farming areas. The farms grew vegetables during the winter months and relied on a large itinerant workforce. Research data was collected during the 2000 and 2001 harvesting seasons. The study utilized ethnographic data collection techniques (e.g., classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and artifact collection), and Fairclough’s (2001) context-interaction-text model as a frame for critical discourse analysis.

Mr. and Mrs. Moala were Tongan and had moved to New Zealand where they worked in factories. Their three children – Leilani and her twin brothers Sepi and Sina – were born in New Zealand. In 1993, the family moved to Australia where farm work enabled them to make a reasonable living. To maximize available work, the family lived an itinerant life, spending approximately half of the year in the north and the other half of the year in the south of Australia. Once the Moala children were of school age, they joined a group of itinerant children who were called “regulars” – those who returned to the north Australian school annually but who were also absent for a major portion of the year.

When the research began in 2000, Leilani Moala was 11 years old and in Year 6 of school, while Sepi and Sina were nine years old and in Year 4. The three children also participated in a second data collection in 2001, when they were a year older and had progressed to the next year level at school. The family’s annual movement across state borders meant that the children moved between two state education systems. They experienced different curricula, were enrolled in different year levels because the states had different school starting ages, and had to cope with different handwriting styles (Henderson 2001; Henderson & Woods 2012). In interviews at this time, the children commented about how they had studied particular areas of the curriculum at one school, then repeated similar work at the other school (Henderson 2001). The logical corollary was that there were sections of the curriculum that they missed completely.

Teachers’ narratives indicated that they regarded the Moala children as well groomed, well behaved, and with a strong work ethic. Because of these characteristics, teachers surmized that Mr. and Mrs. Moala were “good” parents, even though they had minimal contact with the school. Their children were well-known and popular in the school context, and it was as though their travel away from the town was an annual aberration of their “normal” life. Indeed, the Moalas regarded the town where the research was based as home.

Even though the teachers regarded the Moala children as having the attributes to do well in school, they acknowledged that they were achieving below grade level. According to the teachers, the children's school achievements were impacted by the family's itinerant lifestyle. The children were often constructed discursively in terms of developmental discourses, whereby their literacy abilities were identified as "still developing." Although the family's itinerant background was noted as a limiting factor, the teachers rarely made mention of the children's home use of Tongan language or their status as bilingual learners. Overall, teachers were optimistic about the children's futures as they regarded the children's hard work and efforts as being able to ensure future success in literacy learning.

In their interviews, Mr. and Mrs. Moala highlighted the difficult decisions that itinerant parents have to make. Although they wanted their children to be well educated, they had to balance a range of issues, including finances, and health and safety issues, with education. The family made decisions within a much broader context than the educational context within which the teachers operated; sometimes educational considerations were overshadowed by family decisions about other aspects of their life. The parents were pleased with their children's progress at school, but they also openly discussed their own limitations in relation to education and activities such as homework.

In 2010, Henderson returned to Harbourton and conducted follow up interviews with the Moalas, who by this time had made the town their home. The parents were still itinerant workers, but they had bought a house. Although the earlier research focused on the nexus of the children's literacy learning and the family's mobility, the later interviews explored the family members' lives during the previous decade, especially in relation to their itinerant lifestyle, and the children's trajectories into adulthood and work. In the next section, we analyze this more recent data set, considering the implications for the researcher and the researched.

Returning to the Moala family: My how you've grown and changed!

During the return visit to the field, interviews were conducted with Leilani, Sepi and Sina, who were now 21 and 19 years old. There are instances in the interviews where multiple time scales were brought into play. The young people often discussed the “now” and how they saw themselves in their current lives. However, the researcher (R) draws them back to other times and her memories of their lived experiences. See for example in Extract 1, where she relates a story about the participants and how they were discussed by others at the earlier time. This is private knowledge, available only in the memories of the researcher who saw and heard things that were not necessarily seen or heard by the key research participants. We see in this extract a researcher locating the researched in time and framing them as particular objects.

Extract 1:

R: One of the things that I remember when you were at Harbourton State School and you came back from Victoria, you were very well known by the students there. Do you remember Mr. ... the deputy principal?

Sepi and Sina: Yes

R: He came back from taking you to your new classes and he said that you were like celebrities and everyone knew you.

Sepi: It was good to come back. It was different for other people 'cause they went to a different town every time. But we came back to Harbourton and we already knew people there. It was like coming back to friends and family. Yeah you're right.

R: I suppose that was better than going to different schools every time.

Sina: Yes, it wasn't like we were going to different places every six

months. We kept coming back to the same school in Harbourton.

Sepi: It was a very positive thing. It was a good thing. We liked coming back to Harbourton.

R: Yes and your parents have settled here now.

Sepi: Yes, but they still go back south now. They are still going down south.

Sina: We still go down south, but since the last interview we still went down south but we came back for the beginning of the school.

Sepi: That was the only difference. We came back for the school year. We only went down south for a month then we came back. We started grade 10 and we come back up.

Notice how, in this case, Sepi and Sina work with the researcher to fill out the details, and to construct her story as valid and legitimate. Sepi gives more details of why her memory is so, and then affirms her recollections with “yeah you’re right.” With some prompting Sina also agrees and reaffirms that the recollection was how it was. Notice, though, how Sepi and Sina are quick to ensure that the details of how they construct their identities and practices are accurate as the researcher continues to shift to a more current point in time. Both young men ensure that their continued travel to the south is legitimized as part of what their family does.

However, the research participants do not allow the researcher to take charge of detailing what their lives were like, and there is no notion that the storying of these young people, as they were when they were children, is accepted without resistance. There are cases during the interviews where the researched answer back to their reified identities from another time. They resist representations that they did not have the opportunity to challenge in those earlier times during the initial study. See for example in Extract 2, when the researcher’s memories are held to account and are not validated by Leilani.

Extract 2:

R: Leilani, I was really interested in what we were talking about before and just laughing about you doing paperwork. And I asked about your time at school. Does that mean that you didn't like school?

Leilani: I got to a grade I think around year 10 where I started to not care about it so much and stuff, but before that I was really into it.

R: You were?

Leilani: I think that just as I got older and experienced more stuff. I just didn't really care and stuff, yeah.

R: Because what I remember is, you were probably about in year 7, you were really keen to continue with your schooling and whatever. So do you think that what happened is any result of your travel from place to place, because you used to talk about the fact that you used to do lots of work twice ... you seemed to do one lot of work in one state and go to Victoria and do the same kind of work. And then you also, you know, I think we talked about the fact that if you did some work twice there was some work you never did.

Leilani: Nah, I think that it was just 'cause I was getting older and getting into boys and stuff and just not concentrating on school, which I really regret.

Here the researcher recollects a particular version of a young Leilani and proposes her analysis of the reason why this studious and engaged young person may have disengaged. She suggests that it may have been as a result of her family's transient lifestyle, which was the focus of the initial research project. However, Leilani resists this construction, proposing a more mundane, teenage proposition that it was a result of her "getting into boys and stuff."

Compton-Lilly (2011b, 2012) reminds us that not only are our lives and identities constructed and reconstructed over time, but that our lives are also mediated by time as we draw on the past and envision different futures to construct our current selves. In the next extracts, note how both the researcher and the researched travel across several points in time – the past in Extract 3, and the current and the future in Extract 4.

Extract 3:

Leilani: Harbourton was fine. We had like heaps of friends here, down south was kind of, I don't know, to me back then I felt like the people down there were different to the people here. It was really hard to interact with them and stuff. We didn't have as much friends as we did here. That was one reason why I didn't like going down there, 'cause of the people.

R: But then you probably didn't spend as long there as you did here.

Leilani: No just three months or something.

R: Yeah.

Leilani: But it felt long.

R: I imagine it would.

Leilani: I definitely didn't like it.

R: So do you think it was just the people?

Leilani: I didn't find the work, the schooling work there hard. I found it easy, easier than up here. I liked the school work down there. It was just the friends part, that was about it.

This movement across several points in time is achieved through words and phrases that locate lives in certain time frames (e.g., in Extract 3: “back then”; “three months or something”; “as long”; in Extract 4: “now”; “recently”). There are also references to time as a

construct that impacts our everyday lives and who we can be. See for example, Leilani's reply to the researcher's call that time spent was relatively short: "But it felt long."

Beyond the past and current lives being placed within time, the participants in this research also construct themselves as objects that will interact with a future time. In Extract 4, the researcher and research participants work to discuss Sina and Sepi's future lives in definitive terms.

Extract 4:

R: And I know Sina is working as an apprentice plumber now. Or have you finished?

Sina: No I haven't.

R: But you will.

Sepi: Yeah.

R: And Sepi you're at the university?

Sepi: Yes. I'm doing a degree, a Bachelor of Social Science and I'm doing a major in criminology and ...

R: I met up with your sister recently and her little boy. She's very happy working on farms.

Sepi: Yes, she is. She's been doing that for ages. She's the only one who wanted to do that. She isn't like us. We didn't want to do it.

Sina: We wanted to make a different path.

Sepi: She was brought up in that environment where she had to work ...

Sina: She earns the money now.

As also identified by Compton-Lilly (2011b, 2012), in some cases the young people negotiated their own selves as they talked, and did this in reference to time. It is apparent that

the researcher was trying to learn what had happened in the time between the original interviews and the return to the field, and the participants contributed to her understanding.

Despite discussing the positive impacts of moving and playing down any effect that it may have had on his or his siblings' education, in Extract 5 Sepi works with the researcher to renegotiate the impact that relocations during school may have had on his future prospects.

Extract 5:

R: I remember you saying that you often did a lot of work twice when you went to another school. You said you did it at one school, then you did it again when you changed schools. As a teacher, I would be concerned that there was work that you never did.

Sepi: Yes, that's right. When we went up to Harbourton, when we went back to Harbourton it was pretty difficult. We repeated a grade. When we went to Victoria it was, like we done the same grade. So when we went to Harbourton we stuck with our own age, but when we went to Victoria we went down a level, but that transition between Harbourton and Victoria was pretty difficult at times. I didn't really realize at that time. When I look back I realize it was pretty difficult and I think it did affect our education, I reckon.

R: I'm sure it did, because teachers always assume that students have been in the classroom all the time. Yet, I think that there are probably really good things that come out of travelling around. You've seen more of the world than some of the other students.

Sepi: Yes that's right.

Sina: Yes you meet lots of new people too. Yeah, 'cause there was one time that me and my brother went down south for new years and we met our

old friend. We'd not seen him before since we were in grade 4 and 5.

We went to our friend's house and he brang some friends over. Yeah, then he didn't really recognized us till we told him our names and stuff and then he knew.

Note how, when the story is told by the researcher, Sepi agrees and retells the story as a story of assent, finishing with the statement: "And I think it did affect our education, I reckon." With the researcher's assertion that he is no doubt correct, Sepi marks this as a truth: "Yes, that's right." Sina continues to invest resources into constructing past lives as positive, detailing how friendship can travel over points in time.

In each of these instances it is possible to see how the research participants and their lives are located in time, and it is evident that sometimes the researcher is left working in other available times. However, with the return of the researcher, the new discussions have allowed for multiple time scales to be brought together as the researcher and researched work together to re-story, or perhaps more accurately, continue storying lives and practices.

Conclusion

This continues to be our work in progress, and across time. Nevertheless, this short analysis has enabled us to consider the possibilities of returning to the field and how that might produce a serial approach to data collection, and continue to puzzle how this has allowed us to see different versions of our research participants as literate subjects. We assert that this approach may be one way to de-reify the objects of our research. Despite working from perspectives that recognise that representations of school children as particular versions of learners are always socially and ideologically constructed, this research has enabled us in practice to be acutely aware that our own fossilized research versions of Britney and the Moala family were mere discursive constructions. We had produced these ways of knowing the participants in our research in a particular temporal context, and based on a particular

purpose of our research.

In the intervening years, we had used those constructions for a range of academic purposes and in so doing came to know the participants intimately as particular literate subjects, and ourselves as researchers as particular knowing subjects. As researchers, our interpretations and representations of these children as particular literacy learners have come to look like more informed representations; for example, we were privy to the competence of Britney, or to the second language learner characteristics of Sepi and Sina, in ways that perhaps their teachers in the day to day business of primary classrooms were not. Returning to the fields of our research has not only enabled us to contextualize the research participants within a broader slice of time, but also to remember that our own representations are just part of a suite available. The research participants played a significant role in this, at times confirming the researchers' versions of their stories, but sometimes offering alternative explanations. To use Compton-Lilly's words, Britney and the Moala family "had experienced their lives temporally" and they were able to interpret "their lives using available discourses at multiple timescales" (2011a:249). This offers a reminder that multiple readings of research data are possible and that time is often a neglected consideration in educational research.

It is useful, therefore, to take the stories of children such as Britney and the Moala children from our research stories and provide opportunities to return our research participants to a more multi-dimensional world. Our return to the fields of our research provided opportunities for the participants to have a space and time to continue to be involved in the construction of their selves over time. Such actions also opened up possibilities for us to recognize the place that time plays in our understandings about participants' lives and experiences. Our overall consideration of time in qualitative research has assisted us to see that research memories can become static artefacts.

In this case, a serial approach to data collection gave insights into the dynamic and fluid aspects of the research participants' experiences, thus extending our understandings of aspects of their social lives over time, and when we as researchers are not present. It also made visible how researchers can bring their understandings about time to the collection of data, and how a consideration of time in the co-constructed stories of the researcher and the researched can highlight aspects that were not previously noticed.

Notes.

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