

Singing songs as a creative method for narrative inquiry in the English classroom

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Abstract

Narrative inquiry has a long tradition in qualitative educational research, although it remains a relatively untapped method of investigation in English curriculum and pedagogy studies. This paper presents one experimental narrative approach through the use of song lyrics as a musical method for storying interview data. Working with non-linear and non-representational approaches to narrative inquiry allows researchers to move beyond the need to capture the 'real' and instead experiment and play with data recombination, analyses, and syntheses. The intent of this method is to create new concepts for making meaning of the world in which we live, learn and work.

Introduction

Stories are part of the bedrock of English curriculum and pedagogy; English teachers live and breathe narratives both in the work they do with students. However, the idea of telling stories as a method of inquiry for English teaching and learning is something that remains relatively underutilised. In this paper, I outline what I see as some of the potential ways in which stories can be deployed as part of a growing repertoire of educational research practices. In particular, I employ a strategy of producing song lyrics from interview transcriptions to unsettle the taken-for-granted assumptions of how we come to know what is and what might be in our research endeavours.

I am interested in narrative inquiry as a productive field for telling stories about learners and their lives in and out of school. In particular, I have been experimenting with music and the notion of singing songs as a way of trying to work with narratives in a non-linear and non-representational way (see: Riddle, 2013; Riddle, 2014; Riddle, in press). Music making, or in this particular case, lyric writing, as method allows for different enunciations that reject the boundaries between art forms, genres and conventional narrative (Campbell, 2013), in order to allow for play, multiplicity and experimentation. Richardson (2001) claims that "writing is a method of discovery, a way of finding out about yourself and your world. When we view writing as a method, we experience 'language-in-use,' how we 'word the world' into existence" (p. 35).

St. Pierre (2004) makes a call for working with new concepts in our research endeavours, as a way of breaking apart the limits of representation and possibility of what can be known and understood. I agree with her assertion that "we and the world are products of theory as much as practice, and that putting different theories to work can change the world" (St. Pierre, 2011, p. 2011). While I support practice-focused research, there is a place for theoretical and conceptual work, especially in the English classroom.

Telling stories through a more musical mode lends itself to creative expression, where the connections between different discourses is where meaning is found, rather than through a search for universal truths. As Davies (1993) explains, we have mistakenly learned to divide reality from fiction, which imposes a binary and treats the world as if there really are “linear, singular truths separable from the multiple layers of possible readings of any one event, of any one emotion, any one text” (p. 152). As English teachers know, the possible readings of texts vary according to sociocultural contexts and the discourses brought to bear on the meaning making practices of the reader, and research texts are no different.

Narrative inquiry has been receiving growing support in education research, although there are some problematic tensions affecting the place of such approaches, where narrowly-defined research methods are valued as the correct way to conduct education research (for example, see Barone, 2007; Davies & Bansel, 2007). Further compounding this issue is the imperative of education research being framed by discourses of continual improvement, which limits the creative potential that is offered up by productive difference in research, particularly risky, daring research that is willing to “envisage the not yet known and to make visible the faults, the effects of the already known” (Davies, 2005, p. 2).

In this paper, I share a small section of data from my doctoral study (Riddle, 2012) where transcriptions of interview audio recordings were combined in a storying process to transform those data into song lyrics using some elements from Gee’s (1991) prosodic approach to narrative inquiry, including paying attention to phrasing, pace and pause to order the prosodic structure of speech-into-song, alongside Connelly and Clandinin’s (1990) notions of the sociality and place in story-telling.

In this sense, storying in this sense is not a simple matter of following well-worn conventions of traditional narratives with linear plotlines, characterisation and setting. Rather, the idea is to break apart the structured Western literary approach. Some of these approaches include the heterogeneity of plotlines, narrative laterality, nonlinear time-space organisation, and a lack of causality that invites monstrous elements of self-as-story to emerge (Sermijn, Devlieger, & Loots 2008).

Stories are always political and personal, constantly shifting and contradicting the sense of a unified, stable research subject. Such movement can be quite disconcerting, particularly for researchers who are most interested in seeking certainty, yet they provide various pathways for reading the lives and experiences of the people we seek to research. As Semetsky (2006) explains, these pathways produce possible story lines that are contingent and situated, where “experience is rendered meaningful not by grounding empirical particulars in abstract universals but by experimentation” (p. xxiii). The creative act of inquiry produces the inclination to tell a story. All that is different here is that the binary between fact and fiction becomes blurred.

Through the storying process, we necessarily make strategic decisions on what to include, what to exclude, what to highlight and what to ignore. These decisions, which are ongoing throughout data collection, transcription and analysis, determine the types of stories that might then be produced. Reismann (2008) claims that we cannot be neutral or objective, “merely presenting ‘what was said.’ Rather, investigators are implicated at every step along the way in constituting the narratives we then analyse” (p. 28). Further, I make no claim to revealing the real through stories but that the very idea of the real can be “deconstructed and broken open to show the ways in which the real is constructed” (Davies, 2004, p. 5).

The process of turning interview transcript data into song lyrics involves using several traditional literary elements, such as narrative voice, metaphor, figurative language and theme, as well as non-traditional elements of destabilising temporality and spatiality through the lack of predictable narrative plotlines. Davies and Davies (2007) claim that the techniques used “to generate, transform, and analyse the data also play their part in the production of

possible meanings” (p. 1140). In this sense, the lyric writing process is an active production of possible meaning. Like music and language, turning interview transcripts into song lyrics becomes itself a social act of meaning making.

An example of ‘singing songs’ about students

The two sets of lyrics provided below have been taken from a project where I was investigating how music links to the literacy learning and school experiences of young teenagers. These are very brief extracts taken from songs about Jac, a Year 9 girl at a low-SES state high school and Tali, a Year 8 girl from an elite private girls’ school. For a more detailed description of the study’s research design, contexts and results, please see Riddle (2012). Here, I want to share these very short excerpts as a contrasting pair of exchanges, which provide an illustration of how an approach such as this might be put to work in a creative method of inquiry.

Jac

*I hate literacy
I want to shoot it
Because all we do is shit
I’ve done since I was in Grade 3*

*I write
I do blogging a lot lately
I have a blog at the moment
There’s a lot of crap on my blog*

*I have been passionate about writing
Stories, poems, plays, blogs, etcetera
For a long time
Some of the writing is music inspired*

*I get kicked out of Science
For writing lyrics
and music and stuff
I also refuse to do any Maths whatsoever*

*I love English
And grammar and literature
And all that crap
I hate literacy, it bores me*

*I threw my literacy book at my teacher
I also took over her class
And told her every single answer correctly
Just before I threw my book at her*

*I’ve already thrown two books
At two different teachers*

Tali

*Dad said you have to work full on
Grade eight to grade twelve
And then another ten years in university
And it’s all worth it*

*My teacher gives us scaffolding sheets
And you have to put in a quote
From the book to back your answer
It’s a bit boring but I think it works*

*I was banned to bring my books to school
Because supposedly
The covers revealed too much
on the blurb or something*

*The teacher ended up just saying
I could read it but
It couldn’t be lying on my desk
It had to be my pigeonhole*

*We are learning about poetry this term
And I would never have thought
That I would understand the true definitions
Of poetry and what it does*

*But I realised
That in comparison to my class
I have a much better understanding
As I think outside of the square*

*I just wish we were allowed
To listen to music*

*But hey!
Who hasn't?*

*While we're studying in class
It'd make me enjoy the task more*

The Western tradition of narrative as containing linear plot movements, recognisable characters and settings that take place in temporal, spatial and social certainties is replaced here by a heterogeneous explosion of possibilities that destabilise the temporal, de-place the spatial and recreate the social in different ways. Partly this is in order to remove the subject as a unified storied self, recognising instead the plurality of possible storylines that weave through the self as a storied life, while also recognising the multiple and contradictory selves represented within different texts (Honan 2007).

Further to an understanding that data collection, transcription and analysis presents particular versions of events and encounters, Riessman (2008) claims that data analysis therefore cannot be separated from the collection and transcription processes. Davies (2004) adds that our “ways of making sense are not only not transparent, they are not innocent. What subjects describe of what they see and what they think may be taken as evidence of the ways in which the world outside themselves has forcefully shaped them” (p. 5). We cannot escape our discourses, but we can certainly put them to work in creative and productive ways.

An important consideration for narrative inquiry is that the stories researchers tell and the songs they sing are never simply those stories of the participants being researched. They are re-imagined stories worked from the data analysis, recombined and synthesised in ways that make sense to the researcher. It is impossible to position oneself as an objective, impersonal omniscient narrator. As such, the stories that we tell are therefore very personal encounters where we restory our own stories in the process of undertaking our inquiries (Richardson, 2001).

What might this then mean for how we take up theories and conceptual practices for our inquiries in the English classroom? I believe that there is something in the non-representational power of narratives, in this case represented through the use of lyrics, in producing an affective encounter with the data that does something different to a more traditional qualitative analysis. Rather than attempting to capture ‘the real’, instead an event is experienced, one that is affirming and creative. For me, working with stories and songs is much more about an affective knowing, which we might call intuition, which Bergson (1912) describes as the coming together of science and philosophy. In doing so, we create new concepts for making meaning of the world in which we live, rather than making claims to truth and absolute certainty.

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Bio

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