

0015 AP

Part 2 Outline

Introduction

For a number of years, my colleagues and I have been documenting the experiences of doctoral students, researchers and new lecturers as they navigate careers and seek employment within (and sometimes beyond) the academy. This research, in common with others examining academic experience, is framed within an identity perspective. We characterize our approach as narrative research. This methodology, which is somewhat novel in higher education research (though well known in teacher education), builds on a tradition in the social sciences in which narrative is seen as a window into identity. Its underlying premise is that narratives can integrate two aspects of the construction of identity: the permanence of an individual's perception of personal identity combined with the sense of personal change rather than stability through time (Elliott, 2005).

Aim

This paper describes how narrative has been used as a methodology in documenting early career academic identity construction.

Linking identity construction and narrative

Narratives, common in everyday life, are situated in a particular space-moment potentially linking past, present and future – therefore representing a smaller scale than story (Juzwik, 2006). Their structure: a) makes connections between events; b) represents the passage of time; and c) shows the intentions of individuals (Coulter & Smith, 2009). They are either oral or textual snapshots on the identity under construction that influence in their telling who individuals see themselves becoming and how others see them.

In this view, identity construction constitutes the integration of multiple negotiated experiences, intentions and emotions through time and space as individuals constantly form and re-form (through different narratives) who they have been, are presently and hope to become. Each account provides the teller with a robust way of integrating past experience into learning, locating oneself and others in the account (agency - intentions and related actions; and feelings, motivation, values). The extent to which these stories impact the teller's present and future actions as reference points to replicate or live up to will vary.

Collecting narratives represents a negotiated interaction (Taylor (2008); researchers are engaged partners in the narratives collected (see Sfard & Prusak (2005) thus influencing the stories that emerge. Further, narratives capture only a limited number of experiences since they are told in a particular time and place to a particular person. These features of narrative are also present in researcher-constructed narratives based on participants' narratives. In this case, the researcher imputes meaning in blending diverse experiences into relatively coherent new narratives of identity construction in which agency, time and connections between events provide an integrative thread (Coulter & Smith, 2009).

How do we use narrative?

Participant narratives: We ask participants to construct narratives of different kinds. Three are written and semi-structured (i.e., biographic questionnaire, logs of weekly activities completed monthly, pre-interview questionnaire). The fourth narrative is an oral and semi-structured interview drawing in part on the earlier narratives. These participant texts-as-narrative are accounts representing aspects of the participants' lives that are 'editable' (by us

– and the participants if they wish to edit them) and ‘edited’ (reduced by the location, the time, the format, and the interlocutor – in the case of the interview).

Researcher narratives: Drawing on the participant narratives, new narratives are constructed for different purposes. Initially, we construct for each participant a case narrative: a short descriptive text with minimal interpretation to preserve the participant’s voice (Coulter & Smith, 2009). These accounts, developed through successive re-reading of all data for each individual (narrative analysis), preserve individual variation but enable us to look across the cases for themes of interest to examine in more depth (Stake, 2006). Through the creation of the case narratives, reading across the cases, and team discussion, cross-case themes emerge which we can then take up for further analysis. In this process of analysis, new focused-case narratives are created that highlight the individual experience of the cross-case theme(s); these narratives fore-ground the theme and thus enable interpretation and links to the literature. Lastly, in preparing manuscripts or presentations, we construct more reduced narratives in order to ensure that readers gain a sense of the individuals from which the cross-case analysis has emerged. For instance, we may include very short focused-case narratives to preserve individual variation in relation to the pertinent themes. Alternately, a table structuring individuals’ stories related to the themes enables the presentation of a larger number of participants.

Narrative potential

A narrative approach complements other perspectives on early academic experience that privilege a more structural approach, such as socialization. Narratives are inherently and explicitly agentic demonstrating early career academics’ desires, hopes and intentions in the ways they attempt to navigate their present and future (McAlpine, 2012). We document more explicitly the role of the personal in how individuals invest in and commit to academic work as well as the influence of the individual’s past on the present. Overall, such personal legacies shape how individuals learn through and from experience (Billett, 2009).

References

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