

Non-storied narrative: anonymous academic diaries

Abstract

The Share Project (SP) ran from 2008-2012 and aimed to gain insight into how educators share teaching practice; how they represent it; and how, when and with what evidence they change their practice (<http://www.sharingpractice.ac.uk>). The project comprised several inter-related investigations and used narrative both as a medium with regard to representing practice and as a methodology in research studies. In investigating teachers' practice, SP undertook four distinctly separate narrative enquiries (Fincher, 2012). One of these, inspired by Mass Observation (MO), asked academics to keep a diary on the 15th of every month between September 2010 and August 2011. This paper discusses this approach, the nature of the data it yields and the analytic possibilities it affords.

The approach

MO, started in 1937, characterised itself as a project to create an "anthropology of ourselves" and sought the everyday opinions of "ordinary" people, rather than established views from journalists and politicians, or analysis from researchers. MO was concerned with the individual and particular, placing themselves in opposition to "The obsession for the typical, the representative, the 'statistical sample' ..." (Mass-Observation & Harrison, 1943, p. 10). A standard MO technique was to ask contributors to keep a diary on a specific day; taken together these were called a "day survey".

In SP we undertook a series of day surveys, choosing a diary methodology to preserve (as much as possible) what we termed "researcher distance". A key problem of any narrative research concerns the intended audience of a story, for in construction of an audience the author adapts the tale. Interview research (whether structured, semi-structured, overtly biographical or constrained to an event or place) necessarily involves the researcher's attitudes and interpretations, even in the choice of questions. Researchers shape what is allowable, what may be said and what is permitted to stay hidden (let alone what is unseen and overlooked). We talk to "subjects" or "participants" and (for the most part) unquestioningly accept their responses as truthful and code them for similarities, for "themes" that illustrate our thesis.

In the day surveys, we were anxious to find out what was significant in academics' lives - not what someone else thought should be significant. The solicitation was explicit: "We want you to tell us what you really do. We're interested in detail and nuance, in the gaps between what is supposed to happen and what does happen, between staff and student, between institution and individual."

The data, in quantity

389 academics registered with the project, although not all 389 participated from the start, and not all wrote every month. Indeed, 140 (36%) registered on the website, but wrote no entries at all. 29 (7%) were "completists" submitting an entry for every month. In total, the corpus comprises 1,454 diary entries from the 249 registrants who submitted at least one entry. However, the entries are as

unevenly distributed as contributors. The “completists” account for the largest number of entries (348) and the largest proportion (24%) of entries, emphasising their voices and their concerns.

The data, in kind

There is no sense in which the 249 contributors are “representative” or a “representative sample” of twenty-first century academics, but that was not the point of this particular research, or indeed this sort of research. Along with MO, SP diaries are an irreducibly qualitative instrument designed to elicit descriptively rich material that cannot be adequately represented in a quantitative fashion. The diaries not only preserve, they celebrate individual concerns and their expression. And in this, our methodological choices have implications for our practice of researching academic work. Because they are not filtered through a series of researcher-generated questions and lenses the diaries are compelling in their individuality, intimacy and immediacy. This quality raises the problematic issue of “author intrusion”, explored by Plummer’s “continuum of construction” (Plummer 2001: 176). How far may we, as researchers, interpret and edit the contributors’ raw diary entries into another work, and what do different possible degrees of intervention imply?

As a text, a diary has certain features: it is written from the author’s point of view and in the present tense. A diarist may reflect on the past but does not inhabit it, and the diarist (unlike the biographer or oral historian) *cannot* know what happens in the future. That means the author has no knowledge of what “the ending” of diary is going to be, or where it will fall. In this way, common features of “story” (such as suspense, climax and denouement) are devices unavailable to the diarist, overall the plot isn’t going anywhere, isn’t leading to anything. A diary preserves a narrative structure, in that it is sequenced by time, but is unable to exploit the story sequence of causality: when a diarist writes an entry, they do not know what will happen in the next one. Lejeune (2009: 204) characterises this as *antifiction*, positioning the diary genre in “a specific category of texts that that adamantly reject fiction ... The diary grows weak and faints or breaks out in a rash when it comes into contact with fiction”. Diary entries are essentially fragmentary, non-storied narratives: as researchers we make texts of a different character, whole and purposeful.

Analytic possibilities

The day-survey diaries have an overwhelming emphasis on the quotidian, the ordinary, the matter-of-fact. This has two corollaries for researchers: one is that if a diarist mentions something, then it is likely to be important (in their life, at least); the other is that the diaries may be interrogated for any aspect of academic life that is of interest: the likelihood that one of the 1,454 entries will mention it is high.

There is additional analytic strength in the collection which is their situation in time. Just as MO diaries have particular historical resonance (one of their day-survey days fell on 12th May 1937, which marked the coronation of George VI; they gathered questionnaire and diary data over the period of the Second World War) so SP diaries cover a period which contains significant events for UK Higher Education, including publication of the Browne Report. This adds another level of methodological nuance and irony: the diarists’ immediate and unknowing response is made significant by the researchers’ knowledge of subsequent events.

Fincher, S (2012) *Using Narrative Methodology*: University of Kent Press
Lejeune, P. (2009). *On Diary* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

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- Plummer, K. (2001). *Documents of Life 2 : An Invitation to a Critical Humanism* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications