

Narrative, negotiation and narcissism

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Abstract

This paper draws on observations about the role of critically reflexive narrative in research. The author advocates this approach as a means by which research students in a university school of art might contextualise their creative practice. The paper describes the process and application of narrative research methods, proposes the method's benefits, and identifies its limits.

The paper draws on the work of Giddens, Beck and Bauman on the role of reflexivity in the formation of identity in late modernity, on Habermas' ideas of communicative action, and building on Bourriaud's idea of relational aesthetics. It raises the collaborative formation of meaning, using models of social exchange as a way of finding meaning in the individual's work, by the individual.

If it is accepted that art and its meanings emerge from social exchange, and if social exchange can be posited as an equivalent of art, a narrative can be constructed by the student/practitioner researcher that elaborates the origins of the researcher's inspiration and articulates the creative intent of the researcher in terms of the formation of their identity.

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The central concern of this paper is how a supervisor in an art school may create a productive space for the postgraduate researcher in the visual arts by building upon the researcher's own creative experiences through a lifeworld narrative. A post graduate education in the visual arts increasingly needs to be able to satisfy the demands of the individual researcher alongside the increasing demands from the institution for such personal knowledge to be constituted as 'new knowledge' in the social realm. As part of a portfolio of methods, the paper's proposition is that lifeworld narrative methods can play a central role in locating the individual's research intentions, as they have the potential to act as an analytical and diagnostic research tool. Such methods are not without their problems; Oscar Wilde suggested that everyone had the right to talk about themselves as long as they were interesting, but how can this important qualifying criterion be measured? In proposing that creative self actualisation is a socially negotiated position and that narrative methods may be used to analyse and model creative practice,¹ this paper suggests strategies to assist the student in articulating their creative concerns without slipping into an un-reflexive celebration of the self.

Research of any kind ultimately demands some kind of assessment as to its value. So how may research students detach themselves from their creative circumstances in order to dispassionately assess their actions? This is a challenging task, and is understandably quite confronting for the student. As part of their work on their PhD proposal, research students are encouraged to write a life world narrative. The narrative is usually around five thousand words long, and students are asked to consider their creative work in terms of its chronological evolution, identify key moments during its evolution in which concepts central to their work were established, and to try to assess how those moments of creative insight were linked to material and social circumstances. By clearly scaffolding the structure and purpose of the writing, and by working with the student in mapping out the relationship of their 'inspiration' to the circumstances in which it occurred, there is a transparent, mutually agreed strategy between researcher and supervisor in which the intention of the narrative is distinguished from any therapeutic and expressive functions, important as these are in other situations.

The paper's contribution to the proposal stage of research is to assist the student in the re-casting of the intimate relationship they may have with their work. Narrative (in the form of an exegesis or report) is often used to re-affirm a close relationship (through the reflective description of a practice or work) rather than question it, but narrative methods can also be used to test the normative in art making. To challenge the normative is one of the principal functions of research, but in a purely self referential creative space it is sometimes difficult for students to shatter the paradigms they have established for their practice. Often, this is because those paradigms are invisible to them.

By making the extent of a personal practice visible through a reflexive narrative is also to reveal how it is constructed by outside values. If students can be encouraged to acknowledge that the act of communication is one that is at least culturally contextualised, and at most culturally constructed, it can equip them with criteria by which they can measure their own work. It is this dialogic approach towards the creative act that gives such acts value in the social realm, and a strategy of reflexive engagement by the student with their work enables the concept of the creative act to be taken away from the supposedly autonomous individual and introduced into wider discourse. The successful use of narrative as a research method hinges on it being part of a critically reflexive process.

It is not a coincidence that narrative methods have progressed alongside the debates about identity in the last decades. Many sociologists claim the struggle for identity as a central condition in a contemporary consumer culture such as Australia's. Ulrich Beck's² (1994) construction of second modernity as a reflexive one can be found in originally in Anthony Giddens'³ (1991) work on late modernity and is paralleled by Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity⁴ (2000). In all of these cases the idea of fixed identities (still central to the humanist conception of the function of the artist and the artwork that lingers in many art schools) has been modified to suggest that the self as it exists in a commodity culture is anchored, rather than rooted in cultural circumstances. It is this floating of the sense of self that legitimates the spectacle's power to authenticate the needs of the narcissistic individual as paramount; and just as the consumer may drift relaxingly from one port of call to another constructing themselves through objects so too can creative individuals; leisurely constructing themselves from a range of dis-embedded cultural practices.⁵ A reflexive examination

of quotidian life empowers the individual to at least understand such circumstances of identity construction and how it may, or may, not impact upon a practice.

I have found that a key issue in making the idea of a reflexive narrative accessible to the student researcher in the creative arts is to ground the task in cultural theory rather than sociological theory, as often the jump across disciplines can seem daunting. Thus, the debates that have surrounded relational aesthetics for the last decade are a productive entry point into creative research for the student researcher, and by using relational aesthetics as the theoretical armature for the introduction to this task it can enable the idea of critical reflexivity to gain a purchase point on the idea of the autonomous creative act.⁶ Nicholas Bourriaud's proposition that 'one is not in front of an object anymore but included in the process of its construction' has a venerable lineage, builds on other social theorists and has a very literal (and specific) application in some contemporary practices.⁷ Nevertheless it has a broader relevance within an art education system as the concept can be made applicable to the analysis of the creative act as well as its construction and consumption. Relational aesthetics' entry into the educational mainstream also gives an identifiable contemporary voice to ideas that there are limits to notions of 'absolute' creative autonomy. This grounding of creativity within material and social relations is not the only way in which to approach research into creativity, but its readily understandable debates does make it a very productive strategy for the student researcher.

The central issue of the students' narrative is to ask for what purpose their art is made, what it communicates and what they wish it to communicate. This examination of communication sits at the heart of an educational approach to art making, and if "the question we might raise today "as Bourriaud has said, "is connecting people, creating interactive, communicative experiences" then the next question has to be what the purpose of connecting people is for. Bourriaud suggests that "if you forget the 'what for?' I'm afraid you're left with simple Nokia art - producing interpersonal relations for their own sake and never addressing their political aspects."

In his 'co-existence criterion' Bourriaud (2002) builds on Habermas' work and locates it within the world of visual communication to suggest that all works of art produce a model of sociability that transposes reality in some way. It is this condition that then entitles us to ask when looking at a work of art whether we have been given the potential to enter into some kind of dialogue with it. This principle can be turned around and re-presented to the student creator of a work as an act of research. The

questions that are then posed are: How have you created a space for the audience? What are the social relations you are replicating? How does this impact upon what it is you wish to say? This ultimately is a performative act, for as Habermas reminds us, the communicative act rests on the assumption that the meaning created through communication can only be fully understood if one is aware of one's active role in the construction of meaning. By encouraging the adoption of performative strategies that lead to a critical self-awareness, student researchers are exposed to the idea that the components of the creative act are framed within the social, as well as in the personal, realm. In this way the researcher can once again be led to a dialogic understanding of how the individual constructs acts of communication, and how they may in turn be constructed by the institution. The research student introduced to the idea of a performative attitude through self narrative is confronted with the need to interrogate the purpose of artistic communication from an objective as well as a subjective perspective, and is encouraged in this way to enter into a reflexive intellectual engagement with their work.

It is evident that the act of self narration is performative, but how does it work as an analytical research method, and avoid the condition of monologue? Before their writing starts students are introduced to the function of narrative as a research method. William Labov⁸ (1997) proposes that the value of narration lies in the way in which the narrator's experience can be interpreted and understood by an audience. In this way Bourriaud's co-existence criterion can be loosely applied to allow us to identify whether the audience has been given a role in making the individual's narrative productive for them as well as the narrator. Drawing from Labov there are three identifiable causes that permit this happen; the circumstances of narration (that are applicable in some way to the audience), the narrator's theory of causality (that are understandable to the audience), and the narrator's identifiable viewpoint in shaping the narrative. Students are encouraged to observe that by looking from the outside into a narrative it reveals the negotiable spaces around the narrator. In effect the narrator articulates (for whatever purposes) the sum of the cultural and aesthetic relationships s/he embodies.

This analysis is used to demonstrate the value for the narrator of a narrative to the student. A reflexive narrative should reveal to the narrator the circumstances that caused action by the narrator, and how that action might retrospectively be evaluated.

In this way the narrator finds the potential in a self narrative to identify the key moments around which past creative decisions have been made. Elliot Mishler's (1995) typology of narrative models suggests that narrative research methods have value in affirming or denying cultural and social norms, in making sense of personal events and in political narratives that examine the use of power and resistance. In identifying the function of narrative it is also important to indicate the full extent as to how it might be used. In recounting a lifeworld narrative the researcher might⁹ expose and examine the cultural narrative archetypes used by the narrator, place an emphasis on interaction by providing an audience with the opportunity to position themselves in relation to the narrative, or adopt a performative position in which the narrator is seen acting amongst other actors in defining events. It is this latter aspect of self narrative that can play such a powerful diagnostic role but which also runs the risk of degenerating into narcissism.

If adopting a performative attitude through a lifeworld narrative creates the potential for the narrating individual to present their creative act from outside of the act, then adopting a reflexive viewpoint allows an understanding of the creative process from a subjective viewpoint, revealing the dynamic relationship between the context, construction and the articulation of the narrative and the acts within it. Introducing Giddens' ideas about the reflexive self (1991) to students and using reflexivity as a critical tool can create an intellectual climate for research that takes the emphasis away from the narcissistic, without negating the importance of the self. From Giddens' perspective the process of 'individuation' is an important reflexive function in coping with the contradictions and power relationships we experience in our lifeworld. However, the process of individuation also has its pathological aspects. "All self-development depends on the mastering of appropriate responses to others; an individual who has to be 'different' from all others has no chance of reflexively developing a coherent self-identity. Excessive individuation has connections to conceptions of grandiosity. The individual is unable to discover a self-identity 'sober' enough to conform to the expectations of others in his social milieu."¹⁰. A reflexive engagement with self-identity in Giddens' terms involves trying to make one's relationship with the world an intellectually and emotionally coherent and stable one. By taking this principle and adopting it as a narrative strategy for the analysis of a personal creative process, the student is forced to confront how creative autonomy is constructed and legitimated through negotiation with institutional paradigms. Both reflexive and performative strategies are introductory ways for the student practitioner

to question their methods and values. This process of investigation takes self knowledge into the social realm and initiates the de-narcissification of self evaluation.

Instigating the lifeworld narrative exercise at the start of a research project is not a difficult procedure. Many students are already used to the idea of a reflective 'professional' journal, derived from Schön's notion of the reflective practitioner (1983) and these are often used in exegesis presentations.¹¹ Critical reflection was important in the development of action research as way of understanding social subjectivity and making social change evident through professional activity.¹² There is a difference however between the strategies of the reflective practitioner and the reflexive one in the visual arts. Reflection can be characterised as a process by which the individual engages with an extant body of knowledge. Coghlan talks of reflective knowledge having "to do with normative states in social, economic and political realms. It concerns a vision of what ought to be".¹³ To be reflective is to engage in an analysis of how personal action measures up to accepted, often professionally defined, paradigms. Reflexive thinking however can be considered as making demands on the researcher to "take account of the many ways they themselves influence research findings and thus what comes to be accepted as knowledge".¹⁴ Thus writing a reflective lifeworld narrative and a writing a reflexive one, are two quite different activities.

A reflective narrative can be used as a form of presentation of data but there is, as Jipson and Paley have observed, much debate surrounding the possibilities for encoding analytical data in non traditional ways.¹⁵ The presentation of research in poetic form, or as a subjective narrative is often small in scale, but can often further reinforce the outsider's view of an essentialist, narcissistic arts research culture.¹⁶ It has to be acknowledged that the subjectivities of creative disciplines and their (mis)use of narrative methodologies can sometimes promote narcissism if they are used to validate comment on the methods and forms of representation rather than their analysis¹⁷ and accusations of dilettantism against data presented in fictionalised and poetic form are sometimes hard to rebut.¹⁸ At this juncture it is useful to re-state that Giddens' (1991) distinction between an alienated narcissism and a productive process of 'self-actualisation' is an important one, and one that is continually echoed in criticisms of misappropriated narrative methods. These criticisms make the point that the inappropriate use of narrative methods harms not just the narcissist, but the educational institution too. In her paper 'Conversation in educational research:

Empirical corrective or narcissistic pap?' Stone (1993) argues that a commitment to narrative methods that are inclusive, varying and about critical analysis can empower the individual. The use of narrative with my research students can reinforce this position.

By placing narrative methods alongside relational practices and by emphasising the role that reflexivity can play, the supervisor can introduce the student to critical processes that can illuminate the personal creative act. Such methods may be transitional, but they still hold value as a means of dis-embedding the researcher from a 'research neutral' milieu and of stimulating the researcher's renegotiation of relationship between the personal and the social realms. Undertaking a reflexive lifeworld narrative encourages the act of reflecting upon, and reconstructing the constructed world. It takes the researcher into the task of mindfully building meaning making, and indicates that meaning and its processes are contingent upon a cultural and social environment. This is because a reflexive narrative is not just about the self but is about how the self negotiates, and because it is not about acting upon others but is about dialogue, it can provide the researcher with the insights needed to clarify the inter-subjective circumstances of the creative act.

¹ Elliot Mischler, "Models of Narrative Analysis: A Typology." *Journal of Narrative and Life History*. (1995) 5:87–123.

² Ulrich Beck, et al, *Reflexive Modernization. Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

³ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

⁵ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Black and Red, 1977) and Andreas Huyssen, *After The Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (London: Macmillan, 1998).

⁶ Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*. (London: Sage, 2002). Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*. (Paris: la Presses du Réel, 2002). Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (London: Heineman, 1984).

⁷ Bennett Simpson, "Public Relations: Nicolas Bourriaud Interview." *ArtForum* (April, 2001);, 2001:47.

⁸ William Labov, "Sociolinguistic patterns." In Christina Bratt Paulston and G. Richard Tucker (eds.), *The early days of sociolinguistics: memories and reflections* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics. 1997), 147-50

⁹ Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Analysis* (London: Sage, 1995).

¹⁰ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 201.

¹¹ Donald Schön, *The reflective practitioner: how professionals think in action*, (New York : Basic Books, 1983).

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- ¹² Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis, *Becoming critical: Education, knowledge and action research* (Melbourne: Deakin University Press, 1986).
- ¹³ David Coghlan, *Doing Action research in your organization* (London: Sage, 2005), 7.
- ¹⁴ Margarete Sandelowski and Julie Barroso, 'Finding the findings in qualitative studies'. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, (2002): 222.
- ¹⁵ Janice Jipson and Nicholas Paley, Eds., *Daredevil Research: Re-creating Analytic Practice*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, (1997), 3.
- ¹⁶ Charles Hutsel "Art School not-so-confidential." *Toronto Star*, 05/07/2006
- ¹⁷ Lynda Stone, 'Conversation in educational research: Empirical corrective or narcissistic pap?' *Proceedings of the Forty-Ninth Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society* (1993), http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/93_docs/STONE.HTM Accessed 4th June 2008. And Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000).
- ¹⁸ Anna Banks and Stephen Banks, *Fiction and Social Research: By Ice or Fire* (California: Sage , 1998).