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Employing narrative methodology in educational research effectively - two case studies

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Background

This paper explores narratives as an effective means of capturing multiple identities of learners in complex social environments. This will be demonstrated by two contrasting case studies. Both studies present narratives of young people, focusing on multiple identities which are influenced by a variety of cultural and sub-cultural contexts which the participants inhabit to varying degrees. The first is concerned with the experiences of young people engaging in lifestyle sports and, within this broad community, who unicycle. The focus is on the themes of identity, individual and group identity, motivation and achievement as each relates to the youth at the centre of the narratives. The second study inquires the academic challenges faced by Chinese undergraduate students at a particular UK university. It attempts to answer how a group of Chinese students cope with a new socio-cultural environment and different institutional learning setting.

Research Questions

This paper explores how the narrative method can be best utilized in educational research. Authors use two case studies to tell their experience of narrative method in two case studies. The case studies demonstrate that narrative can be a very effective method in education research. However, there are a number of issues researchers need to be aware of.

Methods

The first case study adopted an ethnographic approach to present the data in narrative form to capture the complexity of learner identities. The narratives are based on the interview and participant observations of young unicyclists.

The second case study makes use of autobiographical narratives and semi-structured interviews. The visual representation of narrative data is a distinctive method to capture research participants' learning identities in a 'snapshot'.

Frame

Sparkes (2002), like Heikkinen et al., disputes the dismissal of narrative research and identifies different levels of creativity within the narrative process which, he suggests, will affect the credence that the reader gives to the story. He describes one form of narrative as 'ethnographic fiction', based on the researcher 'being there' at the time of the incident. In this form the researcher is keen to point out that he/she was there and so the story is constructed from an actual observed event, in settings or within a community that he/she has studied ethnographically. Sparkes regards these claims of 'being there' as an important element of ethnographic fiction as it strengthens its validity and credibility. Such stories, he explains, are creative in their use of fictional techniques but are non-fictional in nature being based on real characters and real events; he gives them the term "literary non-fiction" or "creative non-fiction". A contrast to this form of writing is "creative fiction" which can be based on things that never happened and may use entirely fictional characters; such form is less likely to be regarded as a credible research approach. However, Sparkes suggests that individual researchers have to decide on the balance between reality and fiction. He presents a continuum at one end of which is "creative non-fiction" and at the other end of which is "creative fiction". Individual writers must place themselves and their narrative accounts on this continuum and acknowledge that where they sit may affect their credibility and validity.

This is what the first study aimed to do: the narrative accounts sought to capture the identity of and influences on the individual unicyclists, exploring their personalities through their experiences of the sport and suggesting social meaning in their actions linked to identity. Barone's description of the purpose of creative non-fiction gives further credence to the adoption of this form of writing in this thesis. Bruner (1996) suggests that no stories are new, but that all stories are "borrowed" from surrounding culture; a direct link between culture and narrative.

The second study inquires the academic challenges faced by Chinese undergraduate students at a particular UK university. In order to investigate how a group of Chinese students cope with a new socio-cultural environment and different institutional learning setting, the autobiographical narratives and interview methods are employed.

Students in this study were instructed to visualise their narrative by assigning a value to different periods of their learning journey. The visualisation of their narratives provides them with an opportunity of assessing the value of their learning experience as they perceived at different stages.

The visualisation of narrative accounts provides the researcher a clearer overall sense of participant's perception of the learning experience at different stages. It also suggests some important questions for the subsequent interviews.

Research findings

The authors have identified three issues to address in their use of narrative methods. Firstly, how to present research participant's experience in their own language. Language is closely linked to identity, and multiple identities can involve multiple languages. Both studies examine the ways in which language is often used to show membership of a particular cultural, or subcultural, group.

Secondly, how to reflect research participant's culture and context accurately in the narratives. Both studies sought to do this by familiarising themselves, in different ways with the contexts they were researching.

Thirdly, how to ensure the validity of the narrative. The authors have used participant's feedback on the narrative to ensure the validity of the data in the first study, and use autobiographical narrative accounts in the second study.

The two case studies featured in this paper, we believe, have greatly contributed to the discourse on narrative methodology. They show the possibility of using narrative methodology to capture the complex of educational research. Meanwhile, it demonstrates how to address three common issues relating to the narrative methodology.

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