Research as Stories: a subjective academic narrative

Abstract

The academic world depends upon peer reviews of scholarly narratives. Such narratives are usually performed subject to a strict set of rules and regulations that have become formulaic since the Enlightenment processes of scientific methodology dominated the academy (Gallop 2002; Midgley 2004).Over the later part of the 20th century and this early 21st century, there has been much debate about the relationship of social science methodologies and those of the natural sciences. This debate reveals that the various natural sciences themselves have formulated different methodologies, and that the social sciences have moved from aping the natural science methodologies to an array of qualitative ones. At the same time, the refereed peer reviewed journals almost all ask for Enlightenment style articles to disperse social science knowledge within a continuing paradigm that bows still to the Enlightenment values of Adam Smith and David Hume. This paper surveys the telling of a research story as a narrative that discusses documenting case studies through recording and analysing interviews; the case study and/as narrativity; and the methodologies emerging through ethnography and autoethnography

Introduction: Can a system uncontrol?

There is a wonderful paradox in trying to set up systems against the controlling systems, isn't there? In looking at how the academy may benefit from ambiguity and the dominance of the narrative, I propose that it is the power of the paradox that works as a kind of dynamo to produce energy from the 2 opposing movements. The postmodernist term of 'deconstruction' allows scholars to inhabit this dynamic space. Bent Flyvbjergquotes Nietchze's point about science research: 'above all one should not wish to divest existence of its rich ambiguity' (2006:237). It is this acceptance of paradox and ambiguity that underpins my 'subjective academic narrative' methodology (Arnold 2012).Flyvbjerg calls this the 'casting off preconceived notions and theories'; this process acts to keep the research 'case' open rather than close it down (2006:236). He rejects the dualism of qualitative and quantitative methodologies seeing both/and as superior to either/or,saying that '…narratives typically approach the complexities and contradictions of real life. Accordingly, such narratives may be difficult or impossible to summarize into neat scientific formulae, general propositions, and theories' (2006:237). For me, the subjective academic narrative I propose and practice accords with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's(1988) concept of the rhizomatic text that replaces the ideal of the tree of knowledge.

The rhizomatic text

In discussing the 'arboreal text', Delueze and Guattari identify the 'aborescent system' as a model that shows society and its knowledge to be metaphorically expressed as like a tree. The root system is connected to the main branch which has many minor branches, fruits and

leaves coming from it whilst relying upon it. This kind of system is essentially a controlling one. They reject it as everything in this model is controlled and controlling: it is in its place, in order of its importance. The main tree survives all assaults and losses. Meaning as well as social activities can only take certain controlled paths and certain circumscribed choices can be made within the system. Once a choice is made other choices are unavailable and selected choices lead to certain predetermined paths. This is a very patriarchal model of social structures. It dominates advanced western capitalist social constructions.

The post Enlightenment domination of knowledge constructs within the academy as arboreal constitutes anaborescent system having an unquestionable central source that allows everything to be traced back to its sources, so it limits improvisation and innovation and controls what is considered to be knowledge. In doing so, it restricts the scholarly conversation as it prescribes pathways and journeys through it, selects and valorizes only those things which meet its particular needs and hence devalues and rejects other models by allowing templates and processes to dominate human individuality and difference.Deleuze and Guattari propose another way in which knowledge might work which they term 'rhizomatic'. A rhizome is a root which can be sliced at any point and still lead to growth; it is grass that grows and mats itself. It can expand in multiple directions unlike the tree which is bound by its own botanical conventions that dominate its use as a metaphor for 'the tree of knowledge'. The plants which surface from a rhizome are unable to be traced back to one root. Many grasses grow from rhizomes: they are not singular and linear…they are wildly lateral and intertwined. Deleuze and Guattari propose that this is a better model for knowledge that the root-tree model because it encourages difference and laterality rather than conformity and linearity.

The rhizomatic system, then, has multiple possible combinations to produce meaning and so permits individual journeys through the same materials as it functions without prescribed pathways. It encourages rather than inhibits creativity becoming productive rather than reproductive as it does not follow templates or grammars. Thus it enables the production of new meanings by making new connections possible and develops semiotic chains which draw together meanings and connections in the arts and between the arts and their struggles with organizations of power. So the range of ideas that a rhizomatic 'assemblage' encourages is greater than that offered arboreally. New connections can be made and differences, including binary oppositions, overcome. The rhizomatic permits the creative bringing together of new things, elements and sets of ideas. The tree will always have the same trunk, it will always produce and reproduce itself in the same way. The rhizome is constantly re-inventing itself and allowing others to do so. There is no *'axiomatic hegemony'* to disrupt the sense of multiple possibilities.

Terry Eagleton discusses how Derridaen 'difference' challenges tightly held 'givens' of cultural ideologies. In doing so he opens for consideration the power of the cultural ideology over the social 'norms' and the 'natural:

Ideologies like to draw rigid boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not, between self and non-self, truth and falsity, sense and nonsense, reason and madness, central and

marginal, surface and depth…The tactic of deconstructive criticism…is to show how texts come to embarrass their own ruling systems of logic; and deconstruction shows this by fastening on the 'symptomatic' points, the aporia or impasses of meaning, where texts get into trouble, come unstuck, offer to contradict themselves (1988,133-4).

The concept of the rhizomatic text alters our Western mindset of 'the tree of knowledge'. Instead of arboreal interconnectedness, it proposes that knowledge may be more diverse in itself and may be propagated indifferent ways. The rhizomatic metaphor brings to our consciousness as one example the way that grass develops into a lawn. This provides a model for the consideration that electronic deliveries provide a space that is not restricted by the linear nature of the printed book. The influence of print to the urge for analytico-referential 'proof' is thus disturbed.

The dispersal of certainties

One aspect of a dispersal of certainties within the academy is a fear of 'mere relativism'. John Caputo addresses this in looking towards the postmodernism that Jacques Derrida established and continues to utilise so as to question metanarratives and givens within culture and especially within knowledge. Following Derrida, Caputo describes the humanities as 'the privileged place' and places this within an imagined University that 'poses the possibility of the impossible' (2003:11). Caputo asks the challenging question: what would it be like to rid ourselves of the theology, the politics and the anthropology of sovereignty?' (2003:12). In doing so, he claims enacts to enact deconstruction as the dispersal of certainties, as a whole new way of telling a story. Caputo calls this 'the power of the powerless': the 'perhaps' (15-16).

In bringing forward the unconscious behind our conscious academic acts, we can identify the construction of our scholarship and its foundational barriers. Caputo describes Derrida as opening up possibilities through his resistance to the given, the authoritative: 'reason for Derrida is precisely defined by its openness to the other, to the event, to the future, its desire for the incalculable and the unconditional, for the promise' (2003:19).

This is a dynamic challenge to the academy as it opens up possibilities. Rather than seeking a conclusion, it marks the knowledge that can be acquired through deconstruction itself, and accords with Derrida's determination in his thesis a time of punctuation not to do again what has already been done.

' "Deconstruction is the least bad word for a profoundly affirmative undertaking to unearth the most deeply buried and unfulfilled promises lodged in our least bad words-words like "justice" and "democracy", the "gift" and "forgiveness', 'friendship" and "hospitality" ' (Caputo. 2003:20).

In giving up the rule of sovereignty, a dispersal of certainties opens the academy to new ideas rather than continues to judge such ideas against intransigent methodologies that grew from the Enlightenment. Recognising the personal story within scholarship is one aspect of this that I put forward within this paper.

Telling our research story

In an extensive move from a consideration ofnarrativity as a research methodology, Stacy Otto suggests that literary narratives can be utilised as 'data that might lead to complex understandings of human phenomena' rather than 'dangerous, fictitious and subjective' (2007:73/4). Whilst not looking at proclaimed fictional and literary narratives in this paper, I would agree that just as literature embodies a fictional truth, so research narratives embody a literary way of telling stories…another mode of fictional truth. This acts to incur a love of paradox and ambiguity in my subjective academic narrative methodology. Otto claims that 'linear, rigid classic scientific method's pull enjoys its position of privilege in part due to human's desire for epistemic certainty' (74). Yet fiction enjoys multiple sales and readerships compared with academic publications. This paradox places the academy in a certain position of authority that proposes proof and disproof. Otto rejects this stating that 'the findings from traditional scientific enquiry are not meant to invoke the researcher's surprise, but to prove the hypothesis or its exact opposite, with no room for nuance beyond disproof' (2007:75).

As researchers we bring to our research personal observations and reactions as well as our academic reading and thinking. Can the purely personal be acceptably utilised as evidence of a more general situation? In a postmodernist dispersal of certainties as described by John Caputo, this question can be emphatically answered in the affirmative. This concept follows upon Gregory Ulmer's idea of a 'mystory', Ulmer (1985) identifies a 'mystorical' approach to thinking and research. A 'mystory' puts under erasure all claims to fact/authenticity in writing. It shows all writing to be both personal and mysterious (my story and mystery) whatever its claims to authenticity and depersonalisation. It reveals the academic text to be sewn together as a compilation of the scholarly, the anecdotal or popular, and the autobiographical. It questions the dominant analytico-referential model of knowledge.

Singular and subjective experiences can also be seen in what Jane Gallop proposes as 'anecdotal theory'. She sees this as a feminist activity that enables non-patriarchal ways of thinking and doing academic work. 'Anecdotal theory" aims to 'tie theorizing to lived experience…anecdotal theory must be…the juncture where theory finds itself compelled -against its will, against its projects- to think where it has been forced to think.' (Gallop 2002:15) Her work contributes to our conceptual methodological attitude.

Personal story-telling as an accepted academic method of enquiry has impacted upon all forms of knowledge. Narrative non-fiction, narratology and autoethnographic methods, for example, are becoming a more and more acceptable part of academic discourse. For example, Ellis and Bochner refer to such narrative enquiry as including : 'personal narratives…lived experiences, critical autobiography…reflexive ethnography …ethnographic autobiography …autobiographical ethnography, personal sociology…autoanthropology.' (2000:739-740)

Of course, positioning oneself as the central player within the research narrative has its own demands for scholarship. In their paper setting out guidelines for teachers regarding self-study research, Robert BulloughJr andStefineePinnegar note that 'Many researchers now accept that they

are not disinterested but are deeply invested in their studies, personally and profoundly' (2001:13) They note that this approach is 'quite different from those typically valued by the academy'. (2001:14)

Case study narrativity

Considerations of case study narrative enquiry raise a central question: 'Who does own the story?' Smythe and Murray say that 'true anonymity is a problematic requirement to meet whenever a person's story is presented and analysed as a whole and in detail'. (2000:319) While they are considering the narratives of the subjects, it is also true of the storyteller. For them:

> narrative discourse is structured more temporally than conceptually, concerns relations among particulars rather than abstract generalities, addresses the vicissitudes of human intentions and motivations, and aims to be convincing more by virtue of its believability than in terms of its logical coherence or empirical testability…narrative accounts are told from multiple perspectives …narrative meaning is multiple as well. (2000:323)

In reflecting upon and unpacking case studies, we are aware of the sensitivities of both researchers' perspectives and the subjects' stories. In bringing them together, we practice a narrative qualitative methodology

Case studies are undertaken so as to identify the ways in which people understand a certain aspect of human behaviour. For example, case studies may indicate how creativity works in practice. (Edmonds et al 2005) Edmonds et al utilised them to understand how '…the application of knowledge that is highly expert, distinctive in character and constantly evolving is a feature of the way creative people work' ((2005:454). Utilising case studies of commercial creative studio members as primary data sources rather than case studies of academic-practitioners gave them particular insights into practice. This also opened up a data source that was outside the academy yet contributed stories that were important within the relevant scholarly conversation.

There is continuing debate about whether case studies are scholarly if they are singular. The traditional proposition is that multiple case studies around a given issue are necessary. What this method achieves is the compression of the stories into one acceptable version.in what Brent Flyvbjerg sees as 'rule-governed use of analytical rationality' that acts to inhibit knowledge production and ensures that large samples and 'context-dependent knowledge and experience are at the very heart of expert activity' (2006:222). Flyvbjerg rejects this as limiting knowledge acquisition and discussion.

Case studies as data have been utilised by academics within both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The richly narrative data has many nuances and can be unpacked and unpeeled in many different ways according to the goals of the study itself and the positioning of the project members themselves.

In their health research, seeing interviewees' stories as providing 'research interest in the analysis of stories…to see the world through the eyes of others' (2004:226), Therese Riley and Penelope Hawe have utilised narratives and/as case studies . They see them as providing 'a unique means to get inside the world of health promotion practice'. It is this quality applied to the understanding of

creative studio practice that underpins this project and these interviews with creative industry practitioners. Riley and Hawe emphasise the 'key informant' elements of such interview narratives stating that 'narrative methods' are used to enable the production of 'new and deeper insights into the complexity of practice contexts.' This accords with our use of studio based industry practitioner interviews as data.

Narrative enquiry

Of course, the interviewer and the project dimensions themselves are not anterior to the collection of such qualitative data through interviews and case studies. Each plays a part in the narrative itself and in the use of that narrative. Robin Mello notes researchers create '…frameworks that help ground final conclusions within the broader narrative environment and context' (2002:231) The framework for this project has been established in the project outlines and further developed in the work of this team. Mello notes that in 'narrative enquiry' whilst the interviewee tells their story, the 'researcher is currently situated as the author of the culture' (2002:232) For Mello, academic enquirers have '…reduced the role of our work away from the hierarchical position of creating conclusive knowledge to that of interpreting and story-telling personal experience: we do this with voices that are both idiosyncratic and dependent on individual perceptions'. For this project, as with other academic enquiry, we note that the border between the narratives is blurred and we are able to recognise the importance of the personal narratives of the researchers as well as the subjects.

Reality and representation are discussed by Mello as 'ephemeral and personal'. Narrative enquiry acts to draw reality and representation together, showing the text always to be made of multiple individual stories. The researcher is no longer 'other' , but Mello looks at how the researcher can 'use these data both reflectively *and* analytically' (2002:233) reminding academics that 'we must continue asking how best to practice analysis so that it remains grounded, authentic, and inclusive of the complexity found in discourse practices so that narratives and their meanings remain intact'.

It is recognising and maintaining this delicate balance that enables clarity and validity in the findings of a project such as this. Mello says: 'The narratives we call data are illustrative, linguistically, of perceived human experience. As such, their meaning is dependent on context, time, place of telling, and audience response, as well as the teller's viewpoint, coupled with the researcher's findings' (2002:234). Scholars who are aware of the complexity of such narrative enquiry are particularly keen to illustrate the researchers' narratives. These begin with the choice of interviewees and the establishment of questions to develop useful data along the same narrative directions.

In the context of this paper, a significant challenge in unpeeling and unpacking case study narratives as well as researcher narratives is to reject standardization and seek epistemological uncertainty rather than the academic straight jacket that is often found even within qualitative narrative enquiry. Mello sees (and rejects) a need on the part of researchers '…to standardize analytical practices. The reasoning behind this seems to be that if one can formalize, technologize , or institutionalize qualitative research, one can more easily legitimize findings' (2002:234) In an attempt to clarify the alternatives to such practices as breaking data into bites that 'are then

reorganized according to perceived connections or overarching themes', Mello suggest that we 'collocate' the data. (2002:235) Such 'collocation' means that the narrative, the research project, the researchers and the data are analysed according to a number of 'operations' that lead to multiple readings and interpretive practices. Mello abjures researchers to

> …carefully place the narratives and perspectives of others alongside our own. We can accomplish this, or at least attempt it, through connecting and collocating data. In doing so, the researcher becomes the storyteller, a bridge-builder working to link the use and production of stories in the field together with the analytical discourse of research literature (2002:241).

Such storytelling makes the singular narrative of the academic researcher into a case study as the self becomes data through telling the personal/academic story. Bent Flyvberg argues against conventional academic wisdom in his discovery that a case study not only can, but must, provide broader generalisations from a single study. Rather than being context specific, a case study might be seen as the basis of generalizability such as in the (in)famous example of 'all swans are white'. It will not be paradigmatic, but an acceptable and probable narrative based on an individual intuition that appears sensible within the scholarly conversation. As such it will challenge preconceived views brought to it by the researcher , for 'the question of subjectivism and bias towards verification applies to all methods, not just the case study and other qualitative methods. For example, the element of arbitrary subjectivism will be significant in the choice of categories and variables for a quantitative or structural investigation…' (2006:235).Flyvbjerg puts forward the interesting proposition that it is more important to disprove and question than to prove and ratify: he calls this falsification rather than verification as 'the researcher who conducts a case study often ends up by casting off preconceived notions and theories' (2006:236)

Ethnography to autoethnography

Ethnography arises from anthropological studies wherein the ethnos (the people) and the graphikos (a written story or painting) are understudy through providing a researcher with a narrative about the group or culture. Philippe Bougois discusses 'the reproduction of academic habitus' in relationship to ethnography and in doing so accepts that:

> Postmodernist critique has been beneficial for ethnography. It has debunked the naively positivist enlightenment project of mainstream social sciences and humanities and has unsettled the essentializing tendencies of anthropology's culture concept which so easily slide into another version of racism and postcolonial domination. The recognized illegitimacy of the omniscient ethnographer now forces even positivist ethnographers to locate themselves within their texts and to recognize that reality is socially constructed-if not fragmented, dialogical, and contested. (2002:418)

The ethnographic aspects of anthropology moved to include self-reflective insights by and about the anthropologists themselves. This has come today to be known within academic circles as

'autoethnography'. As we go on to discuss, autoethnographic practices seem to dispute the closed nature of academic literacies and scholarly conventions within discrete communities of knowledge.

In rejecting the dominance of such 'academic literacies' and 'scholarly conventions', Nicholas Holt discusses 'the use of self as the only data source' in relationship to feedback from 7 reviewers so as to develop 'appropriate evaluative criteria for such work' He premises his discussion on the assertion that 'the postmodern research movement has raised doubts about the privilege of any one method for obtaining authoritative knowledge about the social world.' (2003:18). He identifies that there is a continuing application of outmoded concepts and practices of 'academic literacies' to self as data by referees in the academic publication process. Holt sees this as misplaced. Holt states of autoethnography that it produces texts that are:

> …usually written in the first person and feature dialogue, emotion, and self-consciousness as relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure and culture…authors use their own experiences in a culture reflexively to look more deeply at self-other interactions. (2003:19)

I propose that such personalized academic authorship is a 'subjective academic narrative' wherein the author is not silent has not gone unchallenged just as/because it challenges more traditional academic modes of discourse. The self as data, then, has become a more recognised and accepted methodology in academe, even though there is still vigorous debate about its academic veracity and standing. (Ellis; Green; Grant; Spry; Liu & Lazlo; Pentland; Labov; Rappaport; Richardson)

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