

# 1 Research as Stories: a subjective academic narrative

## 4 Abstract

5 The subject of this paper addresses how the academic world depends upon peer reviews of  
6 scholarly narratives. The goals of this paper are to present a challenge to how such narratives  
7 are usually performed subject to a strict set of rules and regulations that have become  
8 formulaic since the Enlightenment processes of scientific methodology dominated the  
9 academy). Over the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and this early 21<sup>st</sup> century, there has been  
10 much debate about the relationship of social science methodologies and those of the natural  
11 sciences. This debate reveals that the various natural sciences themselves have formulated  
12 different methodologies, and that the social sciences have moved from aping the natural  
13 science methodologies to an array of qualitative ones. At the same time, the refereed peer  
14 reviewed journals almost all ask for Enlightenment style articles to disperse social science  
15 knowledge within a continuing paradigm that bows still to the Enlightenment values of Adam  
16 Smith and David Hume. The method of this paper is to practise and to survey the telling of a  
17 research story as a narrative that discusses documenting case studies through recording and  
18 analysing interviews; the case study and/as narrativity; and the methodologies emerging  
19 through ethnography and auto ethnography. The theoretical perspectives engaged with  
20 include postmodernist deconstruction and the rhizomatic text as well as narrativity and the  
21 anecdotal within scholarship.

## 22 Introduction: Can a system uncontrol?

23 There is a wonderful paradox in trying to set up systems against the controlling systems, isn't  
24 there? In looking at how the academy may benefit from ambiguity and the dominance of the  
25 narrative, I propose that it is the power of the paradox that works as a kind of dynamo to  
26 produce energy from the 2 opposing movements. The postmodernist term of 'deconstruction'  
27 allows scholars to inhabit this dynamic space. Bent Flyvbjerg quotes Nietzsche's point  
28 about science research: 'above all one should not wish to divest existence of its rich  
29 ambiguity' (2006:237). It is this acceptance of paradox and ambiguity that underpins my  
30 'subjective academic narrative' methodology (Arnold 2012). Flyvbjerg calls this the 'casting  
31 off preconceived notions and theories'; this process acts to keep the research 'case' open  
32 rather than close it down (2006:236). He rejects the dualism of qualitative and quantitative  
33 methodologies seeing both/and as superior to either/or, saying that '...narratives typically  
34 approach the complexities and contradictions of real life. Accordingly, such narratives may  
35 be difficult or impossible to summarize into neat scientific formulae, general propositions,  
36 and theories' (2006:237). For me, the subjective academic narrative I propose and practice  
37 accords with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's (1988) concept of the rhizomatic text that  
38 replaces the ideal of the tree of knowledge. I am drawing upon those aspects of their work that  
39 challenge Enlightenment 'givens' as templates for academic scholarship as I now discuss  
40 below as the 'rhizomatic text'..

## 41    **The rhizomatic text**

42    In discussing the ‘arboreal text’, Deleuze and Guattari identify the ‘aborescent system’ as a  
43    model that shows society and its knowledge to be metaphorically expressed as like a tree. The  
44    aborescent **means that the** root system is connected to the main branch which has many minor  
45    branches, fruits and leaves coming from it whilst relying upon it. This kind of system is  
46    essentially a controlling one. They reject it as everything in this model is controlled and  
47    controlling: it is in its place, in order of its importance. The main tree survives all assaults and  
48    losses. Meaning as well as social activities can only take certain controlled paths and certain  
49    circumscribed choices can be made within the system. Once a choice is made other choices  
50    are unavailable and selected choices lead to certain predetermined paths. This is a very  
51    patriarchal model of social structures. By this I mean that much academic intervention from  
52    feminists has challenged and continues to challenge the Enlightenment discourse models so  
53    as to reveal their intrinsically gendered nature. Like **Deleuze and Guattari, they discuss how**  
54    **it dominates advanced western capitalist social constructions to their detriment as other**  
55    **means of knowledge-discourse are not advantaged.**

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

72    The rhizomatic system, then, has multiple possible combinations to produce meaning and so  
73    permits individual journeys through the same materials as it functions without prescribed  
74    pathways. It encourages rather than inhibits creativity becoming productive rather than  
75    reproductive as it does not follow templates or grammars. Thus it enables the production of  
76    new meanings by making new connections possible and develops semiotic chains which draw  
77    together meanings and connections in the arts and between the arts and their struggles with  
78    organizations of power. So the range of ideas that a rhizomatic ‘assemblage’ encourages is  
79    greater than that offered arboreally. New connections can be made and differences, including  
80    binary oppositions, overcome. The rhizomatic permits the creative bringing together of new  
81    things, elements and sets of ideas. The tree will always have the same trunk, it will always  
82    produce and reproduce itself in the same way. The rhizome is constantly re-inventing itself

83 and allowing others to do so. There is no ‘*axiomatic hegemony*’ to disrupt the sense of  
84 multiple possibilities.

85 This is central to my view of narrative inquiry and production as it builds into scholarly  
86 discourse possibilities that are otherwise not accessible. There is growing academic  
87 discussion about the importance of inserting the scholarly story into the text and  
88 acknowledging the presence of the scholar herself or himself. This resides within the  
89 postmodernist dispersal of certainties. For example, the Marxist literary critical scholar Terry  
90 Eagleton discusses how Derridaen ‘difference’ challenges tightly held ‘givens’ of cultural  
91 ideologies. In doing so he opens for consideration the power of the cultural ideology over the  
92 social ‘norms’ and the ‘natural: in scholarly writing such as this, then, a challenge can  
93 reasonably be mounted against a discourse template by Enlightenment knowledge practices.  
94 Such qualitative methodologies as I propose and practice add to this scholarly debate.

95 In doing so, they confront the power of ideologies to draw rigid boundaries between what is  
96 acceptable and what is not, between self and non-self, truth and falsity, sense and nonsense,  
97 reason and madness, central and marginal, surface and depth...The tactic of deconstructive  
98 criticism...is to show how texts come to embarrass their own ruling systems of logic; and  
99 deconstruction shows this by fastening on the ‘symptomatic’ points, the aporia or impassés of  
100 meaning, where texts get into trouble, come unstuck, offer to contradict themselves  
101 (Eagleton 1988:133-4).

102 The concept of the rhizomatic text alters our Western mindset of ‘the tree of knowledge’.  
103 Instead of arboreal interconnectedness, it proposes that knowledge may be more diverse in  
104 itself and may be propagated indifferent ways. The rhizomatic metaphor brings to our  
105 consciousness as one example the way that grass develops into a lawn. This provides a model  
106 for the consideration that electronic deliveries provide a space that is not restricted by the  
107 linear nature of the printed book. The influence of print to the urge for analytico-referential  
108 ‘proof’ is thus disturbed. This article adds to the discussion of the importance of narrative  
109 discourse and the importance of the self as/in data.

## 110 **The dispersal of certainties**

111 One aspect of a dispersal of certainties within the academy is a fear of ‘mere relativism’. John  
112 Caputo addresses this in looking towards the postmodernism that Jacques Derrida established  
113 and continues to utilise so as to question metanarratives and givens within culture and  
114 especially within knowledge. Following Derrida, Caputo describes the humanities as ‘the  
115 privileged place’ and places this within an imagined University that ‘poses the possibility of  
116 the impossible’ (Caputo 2003:11). Caputo asks the challenging question: what would it be like  
117 to rid ourselves of the theology, the politics and the anthropology of sovereignty?’ (2003:12).  
118 In doing so, he claims enacts to enact deconstruction as the dispersal of certainties, as a whole  
119 new way of telling a story. Caputo calls this ‘the power of the powerless’: the ‘perhaps’ (15-  
120 16).

121 In bringing forward the unconscious behind our conscious academic acts, we can identify the  
122 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 of narrativity 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’ (Otto 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). The epistemology of narrativity within scholarship is still open to some debate, although widely accepted in some academic areas. William Smythe and Maureen 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).

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.' (Ellis & Bochner 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 Bullough Jr and Stefinee Pinnegar 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**

As we have seen, considerations of case study narrative enquiry raise a central question: 'Who does own the story?' Smythe and Murray say:

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’ (Flyvbjerg2006:222). 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’ (Mello 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 suggests 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

282 significant in the choice of categories and variables for a quantitative or structural  
283 investigation...’ (Flyvbjerg2006:235).Flyvbjerg puts forward the interesting proposition that  
284 it is more important to disprove and question than to prove and ratify: he calls this  
285 falsification rather than verification as ‘the researcher who conducts a case study often ends  
286 up by casting off preconceived notions and theories’ (2006:236)

## 287 **Ethnography to autoethnography**

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

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

300 The ethnographic aspects of anthropology moved to include self-reflective insights by and about the  
301 anthropologists themselves. This has come today to be known within academic circles as  
302 ‘autoethnography’. As we go on to discuss, autoethnographic practices seem to dispute the closed  
303 nature of academic literacies and scholarly conventions within discrete communities of knowledge.

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

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

## 316 **Conclusion**

317       propose that such personalized academic authorship is a ‘subjective academic narrative’ wherein the  
318       author is not silent has not gone unchallenged just as/because it challenges more traditional academic  
319       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.(Spry 2001; Pentland 1999; Rappaport 1995; Richardson 2000). Considerations of 'who owns the story?' are central to ethnology, and the insertion of the narrator/scholar as a player in the data collection and research write-up has become recognised generally (Ferrell, J. & Hamm, S. 1998). In her discussions of the narrative structure of the stories told in research, Kay Inckle describes her work as evolving 'into a complex and messy narrative from which I am unable to separate myself' stating that this has led her scholarship to moving past boundaries usually seen in academic writing as it 'dissolves the borders of fact and fiction, truth and representation, self and other...this confirms my initial premise that a separated and objective researcher is an impossibility' (2005:227).This paper acts to further confirm the impossibility of a detached academic researcher.

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