

WHAT AM I ACTUALLY DOING? THE PLACE OF WORKING META-NARRATIVES IN QUALITATIVE EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION: THE META-NARRATIVE PROCESS

Toby, a bright and noticeably smitten young man sits by the graceful young woman on the park bench. They draw closer together – at least he moves towards her. When they are side by side he puts his arm along the back of the bench and sees whether there might be signs of any uptake – a leaning back onto his waiting arm, a slight leaning into his juxtaposed self now very much alongside. She leans back but is it because she needs to change her position or because she is sending signals of interest. His hand descends from the back of the bench to brush an imaginary leaf from her hair and she murmurs – what are you doing?

As long as the question isn't asked, the interplay between the two has space to grow and move, to advance and retreat. If his question is answered by the language of the body, he may have room to move and to allow things to develop etc but if she presses for an articulated answer, a reasonably sized precipice opens at his feet.

In the language of love, he is challenged to name his agenda, to enter into the jeopardy of articulated declaration where hint is replaced by statement and open ended movement with a range of possible meanings. His vague unformed but hopeful initiative is now to be objectified, named and implicitly judged. He is required to name what he is doing, and he needs to find an appropriate meta-narrative to clarify and interpret the specific acts he is engaged in. It needs to be not too blunt nor too vague and he knows there is a lot riding on his answer.

When research students meet with their supervisor, there can easily be a similar unnamed question. One of the big research questions relating to qualitative research which has risen in the contemporary era where research now appears in many different guises, is what kind of *knowledge product or textual entity* is to be created and with what knowledge claims.

LOCATING THE META-NARRATIVE

Over several years of supervision, I have developed a ten point set of prompts for qualitative researchers exploring a possible topic in educational research. The first three concern the nature of the inquiry being contemplated. Subsequent questions concern the background to the inquiry, the methodology and related method, the data collection and analysis in whatever form it actually takes in these methodologies and methods and the final writing of the findings and their significance.

What follows concerns the first set of three questions which are of significance here. They seek clarification of the issue, the research question being pursued and the appropriate textual entity through which the fruits of the inquiry can best be represented. What is suggested here is that the answer to the third question can become like a keel and rudder in a boat that positions, steadies and maintains its direction and the quality of its movement.

The remarkable work of Noreen Garman, Maria Piantanida and their colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh which has found itself into two recent books (Garman & Piantanida 2006, Piantanida & Garman 2009) has been helpful in uncovering the differences in the hermeneutic work (cf. Schmidt 2006) of qualitative research and the challenges of appropriate representation.

At about the same time, Marilyn Lichtman from Virginia in USA wrote a helpful text entitled *Qualitative research in Education: a user's guide* (2006). The following quotation (p. 180) deals with similar themes to those pursued in this paper. The heading of the section is: *What are you trying to say?* She writes:

Do you want to tell a story: perhaps you are writing a biography or autoethnography. Your goal is to share the life of someone and describe the epiphanies in that life. Maybe you want to describe the lived experience of people (experiencing transition)... Maybe you take a feminist perspective and your agenda is to give voice to girls in the sciences. It is up to you to decide.... and you are the person who knows best....

So spend some time getting your thoughts together. What is important about what you learned? What adds new insights or clarifies previously poorly understood concepts? What messages are important to share? Most think that you need to go beyond description. To repeat what people have said is interesting, but I don't think it represents research. Research takes you beyond what you heard and involves your putting meanings and interpretations on what you heard. It is necessary but not sufficient to describe; you need to go beyond to give meaning. And you need to think about how what you learned informs us on a topic, takes us further than the prevailing wisdom and research.

The following explores a number of these steps from the perspective of the meta-narratives subsumed within them

WHAT ISSUE PRECIPITATED THE INQUIRY?

What issue is at the heart of your inquiry; what issue linked to your academic and/or professional work which of great interest to you which you are probably already informally

exploring and the appropriate representational text to address this issue you may already have tacitly imagined. This reflective process is then crystallised in the formal research question which drives and shapes the inquiry.

WHAT IS THE QUESTION TO WHICH YOUR INQUIRY SEEKS TO RESPOND?

Set out the precise point of inquiry in the form of a researchable question. Frame the words so that key meanings and areas of exploration are named in it.

WHAT KIND OF KNOWLEDGE AND WHAT KIND OF APPROPRIATE TEXTUAL ENTITY DO YOU INTEND TO CREATE AS THE PRODUCT OF YOUR RESEARCH?

What kind of knowledge needs to be generated in the proposed inquiry? Each of these forms of knowledge has their corresponding forms of inquiry, relevant methodology and textual entity. The textual entity carries the meta-narrative.

Facts

Empirical inquiry seeks to identify, define and where possible measure events, frequencies and relationships between events. Grounded theory might fit here. Most inquiries seeking factual data are handled through so-called quantitative research which is not treated further in this paper. The textual entity that needs to be created is the *scientific report*.

Experiences

Phenomenological inquiry seeks to reveal what an experience is like for the person experiencing it. The textual entity that needs to be created is a *portrayal*

Meanings

Interpretative inquiry, drawing on Symbolic Interactionism and Constructionism seeks to discover and analyse the meanings an event or practice may have for people in one or other human service practice. The textual entity that needs to be created is a *hermeneutic interpretation*.

Significances

How does the information uncovered relate to any of the meta-narratives of social and learning theory. This is where the researcher seeks to align the recurrent themes emerging from meanings provided by informants relating to the question under examination with relevant generalised social theories. The textual entity that needs to be created is a *theoretical reading*.

Discourses

What discourses can be identified in the structured language in which are embedded so-called hegemonic interests forces surrounding policies, provision and practices of a particular form of human service practice. The textual entity that needs to be created is a *discourse analysis*

Interests

Critical inquiry. This is often linked to Discourse analysis or critical Action research. The textual entity that needs to be created is an *expose* where the hegemonic interests embedded in inequitable and recurrent social situations which can occur in institutions such as colleges and schools, classrooms, training rooms and the like, are revealed.

Using working meta narratives

And so for the research student seeking to finding her or his way, to pose the meta-question: *What am I doing and what kind of knowledge am I seeking to create* can be helpful in creating an objectifying space in the research process which can often assist research students in overcoming blockages at different times.

The question of meta-narratives applies also to background work underpinning the precise point of the inquiry. One classis meta-narrative is the *literature search* which, as will be explored, often refers to a number of quite different meta-narratives each with its own needs and agendas.

DOING A LITERATURE SEARCH

When students engage in a research project they may hear talk of *doing a literature search*. This meta narrative may not be very helpful because it is not tight enough. The function of developing a working meta narrative being discussed here is to objectify and clarify required actions. There are four areas of scholarship of concern to a PhD student engaged researching some aspect of educational practice: the research arena and the place of your proposed inquiry in what has already been researched; the situational background of the educational practice including the place of the researcher, related theoretical ideas and questions of methodology and method. These can be arrayed as four questions:

- What research has been performed around the issues of your inquiry?
- What is the socio-historical context of the practice I am investigating”
- What theoretical ideas have relevance to the inquiry I am pursuing?
- What is the appropriate methodology that underpins my inquiry?

WRITING AN ABSTRACT AND WORKING SYNOPSIS OF YOUR THESIS AS META-NARRATIVES OF YOUR INQUIRY

Writing a synopsis of your thesis can't be done immediately you begin work but drafts of it can be done once you have developed your direction and the textual genre you intend to employ. You may be able to articulate an **abstract** which carries the elements of your argument without the same concern for its textual representation – it can be understood as the reply to questions such as: what's your thesis about, what have you discovered? What are some of the key points you are making? A pithy summary of the ideas of your thesis may come to you a little earlier than your synopsis which is a summary not of your ideas as such but of their textual representation. The important thing is that the meta-narrative of your thesis writing is not precisely about all the ideas that you have constructed and

arrayed and critiqued but the textual entity which you are creating to carry these ideas. Your response to the question what are you doing is not in fact ‘I am thinking, reading and critiquing and exploring’, which may have been a pretty accurate reply in the early days of your thesis. Your reply, the meta-narrative of the laboriously constructed working text of your thesis, will be about the structure, the strategies and texture of your writing. Your reader might be grateful that you have kindly offered the reader a textual map and textual identifier.

A **synopsis** – at least in the language of this paper – focuses on the *textual* structure of your thesis. It needs to carry fairly explicitly the component meta-narratives you intend to use for different parts of your dissertation and their place in the sequence you are pursuing. Each time you move from one part to the next part of your thesis, you can link up with the readers to guide them by a mini meta-narrative that talks about what you ‘the writer’ are up to in the section to come and explains the approach being taken in that section. The writer means *you*, but for a second or two you have stepped aside and are looking together with the reader at your writerly self.

In this way your thesis, as your textual opus, your own work with its specific character and revelations, will start to take on specific form and focus. You will find yourself more able to discriminate between what belongs and what does not in various parts of your study, what needs to be expanded and which contracted.

There is a nice symbiotic relationship between the synopsis and the written dissertation. The synopsis can act as a working textual map giving direction to the writing and when the writing shifts or the textual genre being employed proves unsuitable, the relevant part of the synopsis is then re-written to reflect the current direction of the thesis.

In many cases, the synopsis is expanded one level in the first or introductory chapter of the thesis and then to the full detail in the body of the thesis itself.

What has been argued in this paper is that these three textual renderings: the synopsis, with its symbiotic link to the abstract, the introductory chapter and the thesis as a whole can be enriched by attention to the explicit or tacit meta-narratives through which they are shaped.

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