

“Tell me about that time when...”

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"Tell me about that time when...": When Stories and Observations Become Data

Narrative research methods have become increasingly prevalent in the field of education, largely because of their potential to combine empirical and aesthetic descriptions of the human condition (Alvermann, 2002). Educational researchers are often interested in the intersections between learners' past experiences and current practices. As a result, much of what they are truly seeking are the stories learners have to tell: the settings, backgrounds, character, key events, and themes that have surrounded aspects of their learning (Alexander, 2010). Knowing that present learning is inseparable from past experiences, having a pragmatic tool for accessing both can enhance our research practices with learners. Narrative research has the potential to provide such a tool.

Purpose

While this study comes from a larger dissertation inquiry of the identities and experiences of an expert video gamer, I focus the proposed paper on the intersection of narrative methods, particularly *think scenes* (Fitzgerald & Noblit, 1999), and more traditional observational methods. I address the following research question: In what ways did narratives help me to understand and describe John's identity and experiences as a gamer? To what extent did narrative methods enhance more traditional qualitative methods in this case study? These questions open conversational space for researcher to consider both the pragmatic and analytical values of narrative methods in coming to interpret and describe the experiences of learners through the stories they tell and the actions they take.

Theoretical Framework

Individuals act in the world in response to the meanings they ascribe to the objects, events, and communities around them (Blumer, 1969). Blumer's understandings of symbolic

interactionism allow us to see meaning-making as a transaction (Rosenblatt, 1978) in which meaning is not solely found a priori in the world nor purely subjectively in the individual, but in the interaction between the two. As we engage in qualitative research, it is the intersection of meaning and meaning-makers that researchers strive to reveal through their data. Additionally, an advocacy/participation orientation towards research (Creswell, 2009) allowed me to position my participant as a co-investigator through this study, allowing us to negotiate methods and purposes of the research in order to “get at” the ideas that were both relevant to my research goals and to his developing understanding of his own experiences.

Methods

The methods for this study organically developed as my participant, John, and I talked openly about what each of us hoped to accomplish, how we may symbiotically come to meet those goals, and how we might revise less successful processes along the way. Having larger research questions specific to John’s video gaming learning experiences and identities, I collected data in the form of interviews with a balance of pre-determined and spontaneous questions, observations of online game play, debriefing interviews of his game play, and my own game play and research journal. As John recounted events, explained ways-of-being, and guided me through his observed experiences, stories began to fill out interview data. Over time, I began taking key moments referred to across interviews and constructing *think scenes* (Fitzgerald & Noblit, 1999), or short fictionalizations based upon data. I then returned these think scenes to John for verification; while I fabricated the dialogue and sensory details, events, characters, settings, and themes were expressed by John in the interviews. Our conversations about the stories provided additional data and guided further analysis of all other data. In addition to more

globally relevant findings to learning and video games, the think scenes provided space for both analysis and member-checking.

Findings

By engaging in research that privileged stories as both a source of data and analysis, I came to more robust understandings of what gaming meant to John, the transaction between his expression of understandings and his in-game actions, and the role of stories in helping a participant verbalize otherwise tacit understandings (Cadair, 2013). A brief review of findings included the following:

- By combining narrative think-scenes, observations, and debriefs, John was positioned to understand that story was an appropriate way to help me understand his gaming from a contextually situated perspective.
- I was able to triangulate data in ways that offered both a fuller gestalt and precise details, particularly as John could see glaring misunderstandings in reading the think scenes I crafted and then corrected.
- Narrative methods, coupled with observation and interview data, positioned me in a more advocacy-centered role: I was researcher/learner and he was participant/expert. Expertise was respected on both sides.

Discussion and Recommendations

Clearly I found the use of think scenes to enhance the interview and observation data I collected. I found it invaluable as a tool for processing data, exploring themes, nurturing a trusting relationship with my participant, and intensive member checking to ensure validity. At a time when research paradigms dedicated to quantifying human learning and experiences are largely rewarded in the academy, I encourage researchers to consider the power of a story to

convey not only the *how* and *what* of an event, but also the purposes and intentions that relate to a larger narrative.

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