

The Role of the Narrator in Narrative Inquiry in Education: Construction and Co-construction in Two Case Studies

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This paper explores narratives as an effective means of capturing multiple identities of research participants in complex social environments in education research. In doing so it explores the role of the narrator in two case studies in two modes of narrative inquiry. 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. In the first case study the researcher is the narrator; in the second it is the research participants. The paper uses the two case studies to discuss three challenging areas in narrative research: participant voice, contextual complexities and researcher positionality and how the researcher responds to these challenges through construction and co-construction of the narratives. The authors share their strategies for addressing these three challenges in relation to the role of the narrator.

Keywords: narrative; narrator; construction/co-construction of narratives; narrative inquiry; educational research; case studies

Introduction

This paper explores how a narrative approach can be effectively utilized in education research by considering the relationship between the researcher and the narrator in two modes of narrative inquiry. Narratives are a means of expressing, enacting or enabling changes in life meaning, sense, identity, sociocultural formation and unconscious significance (Phoenix, 2008; Reissman, 1993). This paper uses the definition of “narrative” given by Shacklock and Thorp; “Narrative inquiry is concerned with the production, interpretation and representation of storied accounts of lived experience” (2005:156). This method of data presentation allows the researcher to locate life experience, identity and cultural formation within a narrative frame, Shacklock and Thorp argue. In doing so it allows the writer to “introduce additional anchor points for understanding the subjective and structural as mutual informants in understanding our own and other people’s lives” (156). This provides an effective means of understanding the lives of others through the construction or co-construction and narration of

their stories (Phoenix, 2008; Reissman, 2007). In narrative inquiry the narrator of the story may be either the researcher or the research participant.

There are two forms of narrative enquiry, epistemological, concerned with the nature of knowledge, often exploring lived experiences, and ontological, which the researcher is not involved in and so which requires a deeper exploration of truth as it is perceived or experienced by those in the narrative. Within these two forms there are many different approaches to narrative research; English (2006) identifies 12 different approaches, such as autobiography, life story, historical accounts, ethnographic fiction and personal diaries. The two studies discussed in this paper are examples of epistemological narratives and the discussion focuses on these. The two case studies illustrate different approaches to narrative inquiry in two recent studies. The first study adopts an ethnographic approach to present the data as creative non-fiction to capture the complexity of learner identities of young unicyclists; the researcher is the narrator and constructor. The second study makes use of autobiographical narratives and semi-structured interviews to present Chinese students' experiences of UK higher education; here the research participants are the narrators and co-constructors.

Oral history has 'steadily emerged' as an acknowledged method in epistemological qualitative research (Delgado, 2006). Recent social and research trends focusing interest on individuals has led to increased use of biographical interviewing (Rustin, 2000). The increase in narrative inquiry can be seen in feminist approaches to research, for example. A feminist epistemology considers the influences of gender on concepts of knowledge and ways of knowing (Daniels, 2010). It seeks a methodology which empowers those who participate in the research; according to Krumer-Nevo (2009), voice is pivotal in feminist research. While

narrative inquiry can sit well within feminist research it is not exclusive to it as the two case studies here will demonstrate. Narrative can be a very useful approach in educational research, however there are a number of challenges for researchers which this paper discusses, namely participant voice, contextual complexities and positionality. These challenges differ depending on whether the researcher or the participant is the narrator or the research participant is the narrator and are discussed in this paper.

Narrative inquiry as a methodological approach

There has been an increasing trend in social science research, including education, in using narratives to present individual or group experiences over the last twenty years (Sparkes, 2002). Narrative inquiry has received growing attention and critical analysis as it challenges traditional, more scientific approaches: “The criteria for judging research narratives are still diffuse ... Blurring the line between fact and fiction, narrative research has challenged the traditional terms of validity.” (Heikkinen et al., 2007, p.6) This paper explores some of the key considerations to be made in narrative inquiry.

Validity and Authenticity

Responding to the issue of the legitimacy and validity of narrative inquiry, Conle (2001) stresses on the importance of truth and rationality to both. She regards narrative inquiry, the gathering and presentation of data, as being based on “communicative action” as defined by Habermas (1984). Habermas described communicative action as interaction aimed at mutual understanding between two or more people as opposed to “strategic action” where one party is trying to influence the other and win them over to his or her position. Everyday conversation, Habermas and Conle both argue, is aimed at developing mutual understanding and so we can assume, Habermas claims, that each party is acting rationally, making claims

of truth and sincerity that are socially appropriate, or else we would not bother talking, and so we are reliant on “rational interaction”. Conle proposes that rational interaction characterizes narrative inquiry, as well as everyday discourse. If one accepts that data is gathered through rational interaction then, Conle claims, narrative inquiry is a rational exercise, based on truth and therefore is valid as a research approach.

When collecting data, either in the form of semi-structured interviews or through written documents, the researcher is presented with texts or oral accounts which are situated in time and place, as reconstructed, or told, by the participant. It is through rational interaction within an agreed methodological introspection that the researcher is able to make judgements about the validity of the data and the ‘truthfulness’ of it. In sharing their lived experiences with the researcher the participants reconstruct the past with reference to how they understand the present; successive accounts are told and re-told or reconstructed based on personal understandings of the present. Thus the understanding of the past is reconceptualized by the participant in the present. In ethnographic fiction the researcher interprets this reconceptualization and constructs the narrative by reconstructing the lived experiences in ways which she is able to validate and thus takes on the role of narrator. In autobiographical narrative the participant co-constructs the narrative account through reconceptualising his/her lived experiences alongside the researcher and through the co-construction becomes the narrator. It is through narrative and dialogue that experiences and stories are constructed, perhaps in a formal interview or in a passing conversation, both enabling a researcher to build a story and adopt the role of constructor and narrator. Interview responses whether formal or informal, Silverman (2005) suggests, can be regarded as giving direct access to an “experience” or as actively constructing a story which the narrator, whether researcher or participant, is able to tell, reinforcing Holstein and Gubrium’s (1995) view.

Positionality and Reflexivity

Heikkinen et al (2007) caution narrative researchers to give careful consideration to validity and their construction of the story; reflexivity is crucial for validity and credibility. Beginning with Somekh's acknowledgement of the self as a research instrument (2006), they stress the importance of the researcher analysing his/her relationship with the object of research. The question here is the perspective of the researcher: what is the researcher interested in within the object of his/her research? This may influence whether or not the researcher takes the role of narrator or gives it to the research participant. The ethnographic researcher or biographer has his/her own biography. This inevitably comprises a set of presuppositions constituted in the present influenced by the past. The researcher is therefore positioned both biographically and in terms of the epistemological frameworks in which the research is located. The interpreted account is therefore only one of many interpretations that could have been made and the interpretation of it should be made explicit to maximise credibility and validity. Researcher reflexivity is particularly important here as personal perspectives can and do inevitably impact on the construction or co-construction of the narrative.

Undertaking fieldwork is a personal, emotional and identity-orientated process for the researcher and presenting the data involves self-presentation and identity construction (Coffey, 1999). What is crucial then is acknowledging and recognising this, understanding the location of self within the narrative; this is the "principle of reflexivity" (Heikkinen et al, 2007). Understanding the role of the narrator in interpreting the story is important here. In autobiography, for example, the biographer usually negotiates with the participant about the completed account. The biographer may be in sympathy with the project of the participant, and therefore, the closure they mediate is in accord with that of the participant. Indeed, if the life-history interview is to be understood as the reconstruction of a 'life', then a measure of agreement is generally reached. Therefore the narrative account usually conforms to particular agendas, to varying degrees, and those agendas always make reference to the past of the biographer and to that of the

participant. For this reason biographical method is often regarded as autobiographical. The interpretive or hermeneutic procedure implicit in the biographical act is necessarily replicative of the process undertaken by the autobiographer.

Construction and Co-construction

Narratives are a means of human sense-making, representation, construction and reconstruction of lived experiences. The way in which narratives are constructed, negotiated, and performed are key considerations for the researcher (Bruner, 1990; Squire, 2008; Wengraf, 2004). It is not sufficient for the researcher to recognise his/her bias and identity; a credible researcher will remind readers of this and that the narrative account has been created by him/her and is not a direct observation, but a narration. The starting point in constructing a narrative account is that it is based on a detailed knowledge of the data being presented (Bruner, 1986). Accuracy and authenticity are therefore important to the narrative researcher as they enhance the validity of her/his work.

Miller (2000) describes narrative analysis as having a “triangular structure”, the respondent, the researcher and the responses to the researcher’s questioning. This triangle recognises the interpretational bias of both the interviewee and interviewer as they impact on the dialogue. Feng (2005) views the analysis of dialogical research as being based around “how the researcher and participant came together in some shared time and space and had diverse effects on each other”, the dialogue (or data) being the outcome of this. The subsequent analysis and its presentation then is the representation of the participant by the researcher where the researcher is the narrator, or is the presentation of the participant with his/her story where the research participant is the narrator and the researcher acts as

facilitator. Miller's triangle enables close attention to be paid to construction and co-construction.

Two Case Studies

The two case studies discussed in this paper are based on two studies (Bignold, 2009 & Su, 2010) using differing forms of life-story writing. The first study examined the motivations, experiences and identities of five young unicyclists in England. Data was gathered through observations and a series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Employing these methods the researcher acted as narrator of the participants' life stories, presenting them as ethnographic fiction in the form of creative non-fiction, once the participants had confirmed their accuracy. The second study examined Chinese students' cross-cultural learning experiences in UK higher education. Eighteen Chinese undergraduate students at an English university participated in the study by writing a 1,500-4,000 autobiographical account of their learning journeys. The research participants acted as narrators of their own life stories and as such co-constructed their autobiographies.

Case Study One – Researcher as Narrator and Constructor

“Ethnographic fiction” is a phrase Sparkes (2002) uses when the researcher was present at the time of the incident and so the story is constructed from an actual observed event, within a community studied ethnographically. “Being there” is an important element of ethnographic fiction as it strengthens its validity and credibility. Such stories 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 “creative non-fiction”. “Creative fiction”, in contrast, 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. In creative non-fiction the researcher is usually the narrator, having re-created or constructed and then presented the story using the gathered data. Case study one takes this approach only presenting the stories after approval from the participants.

The rationale for using creative non-fiction as a framework and constructing the lived experiences, rather inviting the unicyclists to co-construct the narratives as their autobiographies was the unusual nature of unicycling and the lack of familiarity with it of the audience. The use of literary techniques in the reconstruction of the lives was thought to help readers penetrate the unfamiliar experiences (Barone, 2000). The first study is concerned with the experiences of young people who unicycle, and with the wider unicycling community. It sought to understand the lives of young riders as a way of exploring the key themes of motivation, identity and achievement and therefore a narrative approach was an effective way of doing this. Because the subject matter, unicycling, is not a common activity introducing additional anchor points, as encouraged by Shacklock and Thorp (2005), would be key to helping the reader share the young riders' experiences and to the researcher in effectively narrating the stories.

The narrative accounts, in the form of creative non-fiction, 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. Three interviews were conducted with each participant and were structured to allow the young person to start talking about their present riding, reflect on their past and anticipate their future riding interests and aspirations. These provided a two-way process which enabled stories to be assembled by the riders in response to the researcher's questions, a process

encouraged by Silverman (2005) to enhance authenticity. The observations were used to create a framework of actual events around which the different individual narratives were constructed and then narrated. This framework allowed the complex identities to be recorded and explored and adhered to the concept of creative non-fiction above, with motivations and achievements set within a contextually detailed story. The researcher then becomes the narrator of the creative non-fiction accounts. The extracts below seek to demonstrate this.

Pete was 22 and had been unicycling for seven years. Author One observed Pete's participation in an international marathon race and takes this as the frame for the story. Two days after the marathon she talked informally with Pete to get his reflections on the race, having given him time to recover from it. Pete was a very articulate and confident interviewee. This greatly helped with data collection concerning his story as he provided clear, detailed examples and incidents from his memory. Having such details enabled Author One to construct the story very tightly around his experiences.

Those first three miles were pretty good today, he got into a good pace, a comfy stride; he just had to keep this up for another 23 and it'd be in the bag. It was going to be OK. He was riding on his own, most of his group having raced off in the first mile, so it was pretty quiet, the roads were pretty rural. A car passed him every now and then, the windows wound down to let a breeze in on this hot morning, passengers cheering out of the windows, the driver piping the horn. Great, a bit of encouragement always helped. That had been the great thing about learning with the Guys: the encouragement for each other, the support, the camaraderie. Right from the beginning at the school circus club they had egged each other on...

The Guys had really got together at that time, at school. They started doing stuff on the unis from the circus club; riding round the gym, trying to turn left – it was so much harder than turning right, something to do with the way your body works; they were all right-handed. He remembered how much they'd laughed in those early days, trying to ride round in a left-handed circle and forever ending up on the floor, they laughed and laughed at each other, looking so funny as they fell off... What fun! They were learning tricks together, pushing their own little boundaries together, having a laugh together and, without realising it, really bonding together. Thinking back now as he sat in that easy rhythm, riding through Farum on that hot sunny day, he remembered those times as good times. They were a group, a gang, mates...

The extract above seeks to illustrate something of Pete's changing self-esteem, a complex element of identity, which he had talked about at interview, describing himself as lacking self-esteem as a young teenager at school, wanting to blend in. As he progresses through adolescence and makes strong friendships with a small group of peers his confidence grows and positively impacts on his self-image. This process of change can be captured with creative non-fiction as the creativity allows for a frame of reference and, in this example, personal reminiscing of past experiences and emotions. The researcher, acting as narrator, is able to use these to add depth and authenticity to the construction of story.

In the second story, about Scott, a 14 year old unicycle hockey player, Author One uses a hockey tournament as the context for the story. The tournament was the actual event which the researcher observed. However using creative non-fiction she creates a character narrator of a local newspaper sports reporter. In creating such a character to be the narrator the researcher can incorporate large sections of the actual interview into the story quite legitimately, thus adding authenticity.

He spotted a tall, lanky lad with short, spiky blonde hair across the hall; he looked normal, or as normal as he could do sitting on a one-wheeled bike going backwards and forwards on it on the same spot. He'd do; he walked over to him and held out his hand. "I'm Paul from the local Advertiser. Mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"Awright" nodded Scott, still moving backwards and forwards.

"What's your name?"

"Scott."

"Scott?"

"Scott Rhodes."

"How old are you?"

"Fourteen."

"You look like a normal sort of lad; what are you doing with this lot, playing this?" Paul asked cocking his head at the other unicyclists....

The game played on for the allotted ten minutes and when the final whistle blew it was 5-4 to the Severn Wheelers. The teams went back to their respective corners and another two teams took their place. Paul jogged over to the LUNIs'

space. “Well done,” he said to Scott. “That was amazing, took me by surprise I must say! Have you been playing, or should I say riding, long?”

“A bit!” replied Scott, taking a drink and wiping the sweat off his forehead with his shirt.

“How old were you when you started?”

“Dunno ... eight?”

“You’ve been riding for six years?”

“I guess.”

“How did you learn?”

“Dunno, just did.”

“It must’ve taken a long time – to learn I mean.”

“A bit ... I guess ... Me mum says I learnt really quickly, in a day or two - rode between two chairs.”

“Wow, you must’ve been really motivated!”

“A bit!”

“ Was it really hard, it looks really hard.”

“A bit ... ‘ave to be focussed.”.....

“Why did you want to learn?”

“Score goals!”

“Yer,” laughing.....

Writing the story, the researcher keeps the narrator role and creates a lens through which to tell Pete’s story in the most effective way she feels possible. Writing a reporter into the story as the narrator enables a direct dialogue to take place between Scott and the narrator, replicating completely the interview transcript in the construction of the narrative. It also enables some general attitudes towards unicycling and unicyclists to be explored through the reporter’s own perspectives, thus exploring some of the contextual complexities of the sport and its sub-culture.

Case Study Two – Research Participant as Narrator and Co-constructor

Autobiographical writing is a written narrative of an individual’s experiences, and it is written in a way in which an individual constructs and makes sense of one’s life at a particular moment. In recent years, autobiographical account has been accepted as a research method to explore a situation in the research participant’s own words and is one of English’s 12 identified forms of life writing (2006). Thus the research participant is usually the narrator in this form of writing and is involved in the co-construction of the narrative and the

inscription of it. Like any other narrative approaches, autobiographical writing has some limitations. The use of autobiography is criticised for being self-indulgent and overly subjective, for example as discussed by Godley et al., (2004). The approach can be viewed as being open to fabrication, inaccurate memories and a concealment of events and facts. One way to mitigate the limitation of autobiographical narrative is to use a participants' autobiographies combined with interview data to gain a full picture of participants' education experiences, as was done in the second case study.

The second case study explores the experiences of Chinese undergraduate students in UK higher education. In order to ensure a positive learning experience for these students, and to facilitate the development of their confidence and independence in learning, it is essential that their needs are fully understood and addressed by their institutions. The case study was premised on the assumption that students' own perceptions of their needs are central to this understanding. Research data was collected through student participants' autobiographical narratives and one-to-one in-depth interviews. Each participant was asked to write a life-story to provide an overview of his/her prior socio-cultural and educational experience. The aim of these stories was to understand students' learning experience in both China and the UK and what challenges they faced when they made their learning journey across borders. In this study, the research participants acted as the narrator. Participants' autobiographical accounts were solicited. During the study, the researcher invited the participants to write their experiences around a number of suggested areas in relation to the focus of the study. The subsequent interviews were used by the researcher to talk through participants' narrative accounts.

When students of Chinese origin study as undergraduates in the UK they encounter numerous unpredictabilities over and above those faced by indigenous students. Not only must they engage with their chosen discipline, but they must do so within an educational and cultural context which differs hugely from their own. They are managing this transition in a second or sometimes third language and are thus studying in multiple, complicated, overlapping and sometimes contradictory contexts of learning.

The following narrative is taken from one student's autobiography. Maxine is a female Chinese student who was studying a BA Business and English degree at a university in North West of England. In this extract, she reflects on the reasons of deciding to study in the UK.

The idea of studying abroad never occurred to me until I started to feel frustrated in my 2nd year of high school. I was a very diligent person with a certain degree of talents in science and sports. However, there were still many geniuses in front of me. Confronted with the unspeakable pressure and intense focus on the college entrance examination, I didn't cope well with the stress and the gap between my expectation and preparation test outcome... Looking back to those days, I think I was completely blocked by my narrow views and blindly sought to achieve higher marks rather than pondering over what is the real meaning behind my every effort devoted to this painful torment. Not to put too fine a point on it, I was drifting aimlessly in the forest and failed to see the wood for the trees. The tremendous shock came finally when the result was announced. I always blamed myself and suffered psychological disorder and lost my faith and confidence. For outsiders, a letter of admission from a top Chinese university might seem a decent outcome for 12 years' study hardship – but it could be a shame on me because most of my classmates ended up in better universities and majors than I did. Some of them even got enrolled at Yale, Cambridge, London School of Economics, Stanford and elsewhere... I was very depressed and I started to think of a way to escape the trauma this test-orientated system had inflicted upon me. Maybe I didn't fairly fit into the current test education; it did not necessarily indicate that I was not excellent as the test had predicted. It could well be that, apart from my failure to deal with pressure, the system orientation itself should be doubted. Before I came to study in Liverpool, I made two trips to Britain and Australia and New Zealand during my freshman year and sophomore year, and had my first taste of western life – the experience was really good. The dream to go abroad aroused my curiosity and passion for life again...

In these Chinese students' autobiographical accounts, they were invited to share their reflections on the challenges they encountered in UK higher education. Mia is a female student who was studying a BA Business at the same university with Maxine. In her writing, she reflects on different kinds of challenges of studying in the UK and how she coped with these challenges.

Although I have learned English for many years, there are still a lot of challenges. Lacking the knowledge of local culture and values is probably one of the problems. Sometimes, we found it difficult to understand the dialects, colloquial idioms and some pronunciations. Also we need to pay attention to various ideologies in order to express ourselves more clearly, for example towards politics, people from the East might have a different view from those from the West or a Muslim world. In such situations, I would often ask the speakers to explain the matter to me once more. If I am still confused I will look for more information on it. Another challenging issue is in my study. Since I had never wrote an assignment longer than 1,500 words, each essay requiring more than 2,000 and even 3,000 words seems a bit overwhelming to me. I am not a perfect English user either. My tutors and staff from the writing centre are very kind to give me a hand. They guide me to re-structure my coursework and correct the grammatical errors. The British educational system does help me to acquire the analytic skills and critical thinking in a further step.

The above autobiographical accounts and subsequent interviews have provided Author Two with rich data to explore students' learning experiences in three broad themes: communities of learning, learning across language boundaries, and becoming an independent learner, and to draw out some wider implications for the education of overseas students within the UK. The research participants as narrators in their autobiographical accounts have made it possible to explore their complex cross cultural learning experience.

Discussion: Voice, Context and Positionality

Representing and Interpreting Participants' Voices

We have identified three challenging areas for consideration when using narrative approaches. The first is how to present research participant's experiences in their own language, ensuring their own voices are heard alongside the voice of the researcher.

If the researcher is the narrator and constructor she must consider how participants' voices will be heard through her mediation. How will the voice be authentic? How will it be presented honestly? If the narrative is constructed from interview data then this can be seen as a positive as the narrator has had time to think carefully about and analyse the words she uses to tell the story. From the emotionalist perspective adopted in case study one, the narrator was seeking to give an authentic insight into other people's lived experiences, This requires the participants' voices to be heard clearly in as original a form as possible. In the first example given from case study one this is done by enabling Pete to reflect on his past and recall events from memory, as he did at interview. In Pete's story it is done through the inclusion of actual interview transcripts in the created interview with the reporter.

Language is closely linked to identity, and multiple identities can involve multiple languages. In the second case study the students all spoke more than one language and used different languages in different contexts. Most of the participants were interviewed in their first language, Mandarin Chinese. The same was true for the first case study but in a less obvious way as the young people were using different cultural languages, for example, when interacting with unicycling peers they would use a technical language. In this way language is often used to show membership of a particular cultural or sub-cultural group. The importance of representing culture authentically and accurately in narrative work is discussed later.

Jackson and Mazzei (2009) emphasise the problem of presenting participants' voices in an authentic and sincere way. The two authors sought to address this by gathering first-hand accounts of lived experiences through face-to-face dialogue, gathering truths as perceived by the participants. Both case studies used in-depth interviews to gather detailed and accurate data for the basis of the narratives. Of course it is important to recognize the need for sensitive analysis of the data given the very nature of narrative presentation, in that it is about individuals' own experiences and their self-identity, the truth as they experience it. Any analysis should, therefore, be sensitive to the individual whose story it is, acknowledging the impact the analysis may have on him or her. "The recognition that personal narrative is firmly bound up with individual identities raises important questions about the analysis of this narrative material and the impact of the analysis on the research participant." (Goodley et al., 2004) The ethnographic approach and semi-structured interviews of case study one allowed for flexibility with an emphasis on a naturalistic exploration of a phenomenon rather than a formally pre-structured investigation. It put both the community of unicyclists and individuals within it at the centre of the study, and gave them a voice through the narrator, with the researcher's role being to re-presenting them.

This type of ethnography ... [referring to Hammersley and Atkinson's definition of the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time] ... I have characterised as conventional, therefore gives centre stage to the human actors, to the sense that people make of the world. The role of the ethnographer is to observe, document, and analyse these practises, to present them in a new light. (Hine, 2000, p.3)

The narrative of Pete's account draws particularly closely on his personal, lived experiences and thoughts as he told them in the interview. It paraphrases many of his own words and chosen phrases from the transcript, often in the order that they occurred. Pete was asked to read and comment on the account once it was drafted it to ensure that, from his point of view,

it reflected his story accurately. Asking participants to comment on the representation of his or her story is an effective way of ensuring integrity in the story and so its validity.

In the second study the participants were all from mainland China. Working with this small group gave the author the opportunity of spending more time with each participant, getting to know them. The second author is bilingual in English and Mandarin, allowing a first language dialogue within a methodological approach sensitive to the voices of participants. The participant narrators were choosing which pieces of dialogue to use and how the voices would be heard, or presented, which is why researcher positionality had to be made explicit, as discussed later.

The Role of the Narrator in Capturing Contextual Complexities

The second area for consideration was how to reflect the participants' culture and context accurately. One strategy is to draw in contextual materials related to the research materials, such as the surrounding cultural and political narratives. For example Reissman (2005) referred to political narratives about femininity, reproduction and activism in her study of women's stories of infertility and stigma in South India. Author One spent several years observing and establishing a close relationship with the research community. By doing so, she became aware of subcultural influences on the data which should be taken into account when narrating the stories. Author Two used his own model to explore the specific contextual complexities to understand that Chinese students within UK HE are studying in multiple, complicated, overlapping and sometimes contradictory contexts of learning.

Within the ethnographic framework of study one the process of observation was highly participatory, conducted in an open-ended way with nothing screened out. Author

One noted as many details as possible guided by overarching categories, such as culture, to gather data to analyse cultural meanings in verbal and non-verbal behaviour. Within such a framework Jones and Somekh (2005) argue that it is possible to draw large conclusions from small, but detailed facts. Coffey (2006) regards observations as beneficial to ethnography or other field-based work as they provide a theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism. Observations construct meaning from the experience of participating in the activities of others, to various degrees depending on the method of observation. Interviews construct meaning from the accounts of others about their participation in those activities.

In considering participatory observations in ethnographic research further, with regard to this research project, it was helpful to look at Jupp's (2006) continuum of research positions. At one end is full participation; at the other end is detached observation, non-participatory. Along this continuum are the preferred point of the researcher (based on the extent to which he/she sees him/herself as a full participant in the culture or activity) and the point where the individual or group observed sees the researcher (based on their view of him/her as a participant). These two points may not be the same but will both affect the relationship between the researcher, her position as narrator, and those observed; this is the relationship which Jones and Somekh (2005) regard as being of critical importance. Jupp acknowledges that it may not be possible, or desirable, to be a fully participant observer due to demographic factors, such as age, or to a particular skill, in this case being able to ride a unicycle.

While observing Pete in the international marathon in the first case study, Author One was able to observe a wide variety of unicyclists, of many different nationalities, participating in the full range of unicycling disciplines and to have conversations with some of them. This

enabled the researcher to look more broadly at her key themes and to supplement Pete's and Scott's narratives, to provide a wider setting in which to recount the actual riding and to present some of the surrounding context and culture of unicycling. In the second study, the researcher's own Chinese origin gives him some familiarity with the contextual complexities his research participants were experiencing. This enabled him to construct a conceptual framework which pays close attention to the overlapping contexts of origin (Chinese), destination (England) and the institution (HE).

Positionality of the Researcher and the Role of the Narrator

The third key consideration was how to ensure the validity of the narratives. The authors have used participant's feedback on the narrative to ensure the validity of the data in case study one, and used autobiographical narrative accounts in case study two. Our own positions as researchers are crucial to the validity of the studies, particularly given the close involvement with the participants as members of the two communities being researched.

With interviews as the main method in both studies a major concern was the potential for interviewer bias (Rapley, 2004), seen as significant to any interview. Rapley further suggests that is impossible for an interviewer to be neutral, to ask non-leading questions, without offering his/her own thoughts, ideas or experiences; the interviewer is always active in the interview. The interviewer has total control, guiding the talk by deciding which responses to follow up and using questions and silences to encourage or discourage certain lines of dialogue. Although this is true to a large extent, the interviewee does have the power to refuse to answer certain questions and stop the interview when he/she wishes to and so has some control of the dialogue. Whether or not the interviewee exercises this control will depend much on his/her self-confidence and understanding of such protocol and

the relationship with the interviewer. It is acknowledged though that these three factors are themselves strongly influenced by the interviewer's attitude and behaviour. These, therefore, became key areas of consideration for both researchers.

Author One began by telling her own story, exploring her motives for undertaking the research and her self-identity as a researcher and a non-rider in a community of riders. This enabled her to reflect on what she brought to the study, to employ her researcher reflexivity, which other quantitative researchers, and particularly narrative writers, have regarded as so important (Sparkes, 2002; Heikkinen et al, 2007). She came to the research topic from a personal perspective but recognised the need to remain objective to the study, to the data. In doing so, she recognised that she could not be completely objective, that there would inevitably be some subjectivity in her analysis. However, this must surely be true for any researcher as it is impossible to work in isolation from the world you live in and your place in it, however far removed you are from your subject. It was her intention in sharing her story that her own biases would be made explicit in advance of the young people's narrative accounts. In telling the narrator's tale first, she was clearly setting out the narrator's lens through which the subsequent stories would be told. Her epistemological position was as an emotionalist researcher seeking an authentic insight into young unicyclists' lives by using strategies which made sense of these experiences for the readers. Inevitably the stories lead the reader in specific directions which is why telling the narrator's tale first can be a useful strategy in reducing the subjective as far as possible.

In the second study, Author Two's experience of being both an 'insider', with regard to the Chinese student community, and an 'outsider', in relation to the academic community within the UK, placed him in a good position to conduct an enquiry of Chinese student

experience. However, it was important to consider how his experience of education might have influenced the research questions and the choices of methods to study these questions. It was necessary to indicate his 'position' by telling his learning journey from China to England. Doing so helped his participants to understand his perspective and the context of the research they were involved with. Being explicit about their positionality helped both authors to gain participants' trust and allowed readers to understand how their own positions might have influenced the research outcomes, adding to the credibility of the researcher and the validity of the research.

Given the nature of narratives as discussed in this paper, it can be difficult to triangulate findings and so validity remains key. Some researchers, such as Garratt and Hodkinson (1998) adopting a criteriologist's view, call for one set of universal criteria against which any piece of qualitative research can be judged. Others, such as Smith and Deemer, (2000) take a non-realist approach, suggesting that specific criteria should not be pre-determined. This second approach allows for flexibility and creativity within and across different pieces of research. In our view, it is therefore necessary to use different criteria to judge different forms of writing and different types of research. There are as many lists of criteria for judging alternative forms of qualitative inquiry as there are different forms of writing, for example that developed by Bochner (2002). In this paper we are not proposing a new set of criteria, rather sharing our strategies for addressing the three challenging areas discussed above, as set out in the table below. Each strategy should be considered by potential narrative researchers when developing their research plan.

<INSERT TABLE HERE>

These criteria above focuses on the construction of the story, placing the narrator centre stage. The second column identifies the three criteria we think narrative researchers should give careful consideration to. The third and fourth columns suggest how the criteria might be demonstrated by the narrator. We have sought to show how, through our different roles as narrators, one as the researcher and one as a research participant, we addressed these three challenges, participant voice, contextual complexities and researcher postionality. Of course this is not a straightforward exercise; we are not suggesting a tick box approach of 'have I done it or not?' Instead we see a continuum for each criteria and it is the task of the researcher to consider where along the continuum his or her research sits for each of the three criteria and in doing so consider the validity of the research for the reader.

Conclusion

The two case studies discussed in this paper have contributed to the discourse on narrative approaches by using autobiography and ethnographic fiction as examples from a wider range of narrative research traditions. They show the possibility of using narrative methodology to capture complexities in educational research while demonstrating strategies to address three potential challenges and how the narrator may contribute to meeting these challenges. This paper recognises that we may strive for clarity, authenticity and integrity in the presentation of data, but we would be hard pushed to say 'now we have it' or 'now we don't'. We are dealing here not with dichotomous categories, but with continua that require fine judgements in assessing complex issues relating to clarity, authenticity and integrity in the reporting of the research. Given that fine judgements have to be made the role of the narrator is critical and should be carefully thought through with regard to construction or co-construction of the narratives.

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Table 1: Strategies for construction and co-construction of narratives

	Aims	Role of researcher as narrator	Role of participant as narrator
1.Voice	Participants' voice is clear, authentic and presented with integrity.	To articulate in as an original from as possible the participant's voice	To express his/her voice with truth and sincerity.
2.Context	The complexity of the context is captured with concrete details.	To capture rich, tangible contextual details in the narrative.	To share multiple and actual contextual details in his/her narrative.
3.Positionality	The researcher's own position is made clear and is valid.	To communicate his/her credibility and perspective with clarity and honesty.	To listen to the researcher's own story first to understand the context of the research.