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INTRODUCTION

Engaging in educational narrative inquiry: making visible alternative knowledge

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This Special Issue on Narrative Inquiry has its origins in a series of conferences convened by Dr Grace O' Grady, Maynooth University, Dr Jacqueline O' Toole, Institute of Technology, Sligo, and Dr Anne Byrne, National University of Ireland, Galway. All three had been engaged with narrative ideas in their respective research. Indeed many conversational spaces on narrative were already in place in Ireland i.e. the Centre for Transformative Narrative Inquiry, Maynooth University, and the Narrative Cluster, NUI, Galway, among others. We recognized, however, that a wider forum was needed to discuss, debate and disseminate narrative studies in a broader context, hence was born the Irish International Narrative Inquiry Conferences. The first conference took place in IT Sligo in 2014 and in subsequent years moved to Maynooth University and NUI Galway. What was immediately in evidence was the thirst for these conferences. In addition to the huge output of narrative inquiry studies across the island of Ireland, internationally renowned scholars including Professors Maria Tamboukou, Ann Phoenix and one of the editors of this Special Issue, D. Jean Clandinin, delivered keynote addresses at the conferences. The conference series continues to offer an incredible learning space to share and learn about narrative inquiry.

Focus of this special issue

Contemporary theories of self view subjectivity as fluid and contextual, constructed and reconstructed through the stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (Riessman 2008). These stories/narratives are stitched into the ways of seeing, knowing and being that are made available to us in our culture: discourses that are often invisible. Construing the self as discursively structured has led to the burgeoning of narrative inquiry in the social sciences away from the realist assumptions of inherited positivist research methodology. Feminist/Poststructuralist and Postcolonialist writers have produced transgressive, experimental and emancipatory research genres that attempt to make visible alternative knowledge often silenced and/or contested (Speedy 2008). Locating itself in this critical paradigm, the articles in this issue explore how unquestioned, taken-for-granted meta-narratives can dominate the production of knowledge in multiple social/educational contexts and how narrative methods enable silenced knowledge to be articulated.

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Articles in this special issue draw on research across all sectors of education from early childhood through to post-primary and higher education: studies that disrupt common understandings, perceptions and practices. Power dynamics and our ethical responsibilities to avoid replicating power abuses are foregrounded. In Ruth Leitch's article 'On Being Transgressive in Educational Research: An Auto-ethnography of borders', we are guided through a strikingly personal narrative composed of Leitch's academic career marked by what she has labelled as 'episodic' moments of 'transgressing limits'. While she does not take up her journey as one of a marginalized academic, we see many of the themes suggested by Tamboukou in Leitch's analysis of her own career. From her standpoint close to her retirement from one academic institution, she shows us ways she has shifted and changed in response to changing institutional narrative plotlines but continued to transgress institutional plotlines in order to sustain herself in her work. She, too, as did Gonne as portrayed in Tamboukou's article, continually worked to reimagine her future so that she could both work within the academy but in ways that created possibilities for reform and change in education and educational research.

Jacqueline O' Toole broadens the focus as she considers questions of the critical relevance and 'value' of narrative inquiry in her article 'Institutional Storytelling and Personal Narratives: Reflecting on the "Value" of Narrative Inquiry'. With her main theoretical and methodological focus on the complex relationships between institutional storytelling and personal narratives, O' Toole attends to these questions through an analysis of the procedures undertaken in conducting a narrative inquiry study on narratives of women and weight management. Beginning with the assertion that a 'cacophony of stories' about any social phenomenon cannot be ignored by social researchers, which in O' Toole's research are the widespread circulation of stories about weight loss and dieting, she outlines the contours of designing and implementing a narrative ethnography. Asserting that the social context of the production of stories and narratives must be heard as 'stories are never told in isolation', O' Toole concludes that narrative ethnography serves as an innovative approach to analyse the relationship between institutional storytelling and personal narratives in a variety of settings including schools, classrooms, curricula and wider informal learning spaces.

In their research with Aboriginal youth and families, Sean Lessard, Vera Caine and D. Jean Clandinin problematize the labelling of young people as 'vulnerable', making visible the moral and ethical considerations necessary in representation and voice. 'Exploring neglected narratives: Understanding vulnerability in narrative inquiry', takes up questions around reducing the complexities of Indigenous youth's lives to a certainty that they are vulnerable. They argue that attaching a label of vulnerability erases the youth as people with complex experiences lived in multiple places, within multiple relationships over time. The concern about labelling Indigenous youth as vulnerable may be rooted in a belief that someone else needs to speak for youth, that is, they cannot be seen as research participants who are able to co-compose, inquire into their experiences or make decisions. By co-opting their stories of experience, by writing over their stories or by unintentionally minimizing the complexity of their experiences, the youth's stories of experience are silenced. Lessard, Caine and Clandinin show that narrative inquiry, as we also see in Tamboukou and Leitch's articles, is a way of making people visible in the research and, consequently, to make their stories

matter. Resistance to viewing the experience of the youth and their families from within a single story of vulnerability is central to their work as narrative inquirers.

The potential of digital storytelling in researching reflective practice is explored by Thompson Long and Hall in 'Educational Narrative Inquiry Through Design-Based Research: Designing Digital Storytelling to Make Alternative Knowledge Visible and Actionable'. Using interventionist and iterative, practitioner-oriented design-based research, a well-established methodology in the educational technology and learning sciences fields (Sommerhoff et al. 2018), the authors have developed a bespoke model for technology-enhanced narrative enquiry, R-NEST, which can be adopted and adapted to support innovative reflective practice in education. The digital storytelling initiative mediated alternative knowledge about PME students' school placement experience and helped them to make visible critical incidents in their practice. Furthermore, the innovative perspectives made possible through digital storytelling helped significantly to inform deepening reflection and effective changes in educational practice. Insights into how novel digital media can be integrated with narrative to make alternative knowledge both visible and actionable are offered.

Early Childhood Education and Care is an emerging profession in Ireland. Mark Taylor in his article 'Understanding Stories of Professional Formation during Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Practice Placements' makes an important contribution to the evolving knowledge base with a particular focus on the storied experiences that early childhood practice educators and students tell as they negotiate the placement experience. Articulating a case for narrative inquiry as having 'emancipatory' potential *and* as a useful methodology to understand placement experiences and professional development over time, Taylor asserts that two education theories – 'Threshold Concepts' and 'Communities of Practice' – are necessary additions to narrative inquiry to understand the nature of these key learning experiences. One central finding is that the stories reveal that learning becomes embodied as early childhood students learn to exercise their voices over the course of a placement, in the process becoming more relaxed and confident. Similar to other articles in this volume, Taylor highlights the reflective, creative and emancipatory possibilities narrative inquiry offers to educational research.

Narratives are at the heart of how women have attempted to write history, and it is this marginalized area in knowledge production and in the teaching of history that Maria Tamboukou addresses in 'Action as Narration/Narration as Action: Reading Maud Gonne's Auto/Biographical Writings as Marginalized Knowledges of the Historiographical Operation'. Tamboukou explores the interconnections of action as narration and narration as action. As Tamboukou reads Gonne's texts, she reads them 'as discursive effects of fierce power relations at play' as well as theorizes them 'as recorded processes wherein Gonne as the author of her political story emerges from the margins of knowledge production and actively inserts herself and her actions in the discourses of Irish history'. Tamboukou expands Hannah Arendt's proposition on the plurality of stories we live with to suggest that not only is the world full of stories waiting to be told but of stories waiting to be written, retold, read and reread. Tamboukou uses Gonne's autobiographical stories and letters to her friends to show 'the power of stories in conveying the unexpected effects of life events, as well as the unpredictability of political action within the life of an individual and beyond'. She highlights the crucial role of education in the processes of transformation as she writes that it is

while we look back at marginalized histories, we see the role they have ultimately played in changes and future imaginings and we thus understand that we need not be determined by the past. Marginalized histories show the power of re-imagining our future in ways that were out of step at the time of their actualization, but which nevertheless created conditions of possibility for radical futures.

Located in a larger study that attempted to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about constructions of adolescent identity and to interrogate radically the process of qualitative research in this field, Grace O' Grady in 'An Entry Into a Creative, Rhizomatic Narrative Inquiry Into Young People's Identity Construction' demonstrates how she used the figure of the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari [1987] 2004, 8) to conceptualize and frame her creative narrative inquiry. The reader is invited into a nomadic writing space as O' Grady tentatively finds footholds in the philosophical landscape in the early stages of the study and subsequently maps and enters the field of research with students in a second-level school context. In responding to questions posed to her in conversation with a colleague, she frames her rationale for a growing commitment to a form of narrative inquiry that challenges inherited dominant understandings of subjectivity and research methodology.

Finally, drawing on research based in his teaching and learning context as a lecturer in higher education, 'Getting in Tune Through Arts Based Narrative Inquiry' narrates John McGarrigle's attempts to come to terms with positionality, subjectivity and voice in educational research with Early Childhood students. Using art elicitation methods, multiple voices combine to challenge forces that continue to subjectify and marginalize the Early Childhood profession. Through a performance text, the participant voice asserts itself among critical voices from the academy and society to show the power of education to facilitate agency within limited subject positions. In using arts-based methods to inquire into learning, the value of creative research to inquire, question and problematize dominant understandings of knowledge and tell awkward stories is demonstrated.

Why the need for a special issue showcasing narrative inquiry?

As we consider the significance of narrative inquiry, the question of 'so what' always lives within our studies. The question sharpens our focus on what is important, what we may want to share with diverse audiences and the ways in which we can do this. One of the strong tenets of narrative inquiry is that we are not merely objective inquirers who study a world we did not help create. On the contrary, we are complicit in the world we study: 'Being in this world, we need to remake ourselves as well as offer up research understandings that could lead to a better world' (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 61). President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins asserted that '[T]hird-level scholarship has always had, and must retain, a crucial role in creating a society in which the critical exploration of alternatives to any prevailing hegemony is encouraged' (*The Irish Times*, April 25, 2016). Narrative Inquiry, in challenging inherited dominant understandings of subjectivity and research methodologies as well as proposing emancipatory alternatives has the potential to give voice to often silenced knowledge. A critical research methodology that works towards unveiling oppression and transforming praxis has 'the potential to implement new visions of dignity, care democracy and other postcolonial ways of being in the world' (Finley 2005, 689).

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Dr Grace O' Grady is lecturer in Education and Director of the Master of Education and Post-graduate Diploma in School Guidance Counselling. She teaches on all the programmes in the Education Department in the curricular areas of Human Development, Developmental Psychology, Child Protection and Social, Personal and Health Education and Counselling Theory. She is a founding director of the Centre for Transformative Narrative Inquiry (Dept. of Adult and Community Education and Education Dept.): <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/education/centre-transformative-narrative-inquiry> and the Irish International Narrative Inquiry Conference network <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/education/events/irish-narrative-inquiry-conference-narrating-neo-liberalism-irish-context>. She teaches and supervises narrative research on the Masters and Doctoral Programmes in the Department. Her current research is a Creative Narrative Inquiry into the shifting identity of teachers as they begin to situate themselves differently as guidance counsellors in the school landscape: <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/education/more-about-our-research>.

D. Jean Clandinin is Professor Emeriti and the past and founding Director of the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development at the University of Alberta. She is a former teacher, counselor, and psychologist.

Jacqueline O' Toole is a Lecturer in Social Research in the Institute of Technology Sligo. Her main interests are qualitative methodology; feminist theory; critical weight studies; and gender and social care.

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