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Afternoon Tea in the Valley: Events, Discourse and the Writing of Qualitative Research

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Abstract

In this paper we describe a recent workshop for pre-service teachers engaged in a research project. The workshop explored the potential of narrative approaches to professional reflection and qualitative research by means of our own writing process, and invited analysis of our writing using a three-question method (Hay and White 2005a). In this illustrative tale there is an example not only of our joint writing performance but of dialogic interchange between narrator and observer, highlighting the way voice, perspective and stance contribute to narrative. We use these fragmentary texts to problematise a common definition of narrative in which 'events' are crucial, and to show how narrative is produced not so much by events as by 'discourse' in the narratological sense. The nature of teacher-researcher discourse is then contrasted with more 'artistic' and 'creative' forms and finally compared with 'paradigm positions' (Guba and Lincoln, 2005) for the selection of research issues. Finally, the three question approach (Hay and White, 2005a) and the 'story form model' (Egan, 1989) are linked with these positions in order to provide students with a means of locating their own research interests within a genre of writing that conveys a sense of the 'passionate participant' as well as the 'events' of their selected research issue (Guba and Lincoln, 2005).

Introduction

In our previous work we have drawn attention to the limited uses of narrative in teacher writing of the kind that emphasises identity (Hay and White, 2005a; White and Hay, 2005). In earlier work we have also engaged with narrative theory in order to posit a more suitable match between the content of qualitative research and the writing style frequently adopted by teacher researchers (White and Hay, 2006; Hay and White, 2005b). For some years we have been working with students on narrative approaches to pedagogy (Morton et al., 2004) and on uses of 'creative' genres in the formulation and writing of research questions (Senior and Hay, 2005). What follows in this paper is a description of a recent workshop for researchers in which we used our own process of writing to demonstrate a distinction between 'academic' discourse and the kind of discourse in which narrative theory is linked with research writing.

We opened with the idea that teacher researcher and thesis writer might well benefit from an exploration of narrative as much as the more 'artistic and creative' writer of a novel or a play. We explained the use of a cue card system based on key questions (Hay and White, 2005a, White & Hay, 2006). These questions were derived from an interpretation of elements of narrative, or discourse, and used originally to permit early childhood teacher storytellers to use a theoretical basis for the development of a repertoire for storytelling. In this paper we describe how we used the 'three question approach' in the different contexts of research and pre-service teaching (see below). Ultimately we intend to refine our approach in order to encompass a comprehensive list of elements of narrative within a compact framework. This paper, however, focuses on 'discourse' (Culler, 1997, p. 86-87; Barthes, 1957, p. 109-111) and 'events' (Porter Abbott, 2002, p. 12-24) in narrative, subsuming the much more complex and formulaic narratological distinction between story and plot (Forster, 1963; Eagleton, 1996, Cuddon, 1991). The material below was distributed to workshop participants for initial consideration in relation to any simple story of their own choosing, whether 'literary' or recalled from their own experience.

Three Questions about Narrative

1. What happened?

Try to record the sequence of events, as they are supposed to have happened chronologically

2. How do we know?

Identify 'witnesses' to events, both *inside* the text, (a character, a fictional narrator, or some kind of detached observer/recorder), and *outside* the text, (omniscient author).

What can each witness see? What can you see of the witness?

3. What does it mean?

What is the relationship between the sequence of events and the 'intention' of the author? What kind of discourse best conveys the tale?

(adapted from Hay, 2003)

The questions led us inevitably to familiar elements of narrative such as 'voice', 'perspective', 'story', 'plot' and 'characterisation' and to a broad appreciation of 'discourse' in the narratological sense (Culler, 1997; Barthes, 1957). Complex theory about elements of narrative was distilled into a blend of the key elements needed to convey the story, thus emphasising the *effect* (or possibly 'affect') of particular *kinds* of discourse (e.g. myth, folk tales, biography and 'research tales'). After warming up with application of the three questions to stories and recollections by workshop participants we then provided a sample of our own writing which starkly illustrated the difference between a complete sequence of events minus discourse and a rich but fragmentary discourse minus events. We wanted to show that events were only part of a discourse, part of narrative, and ultimately part of narrative enquiry. We chose as our theme our recollections of a visit to a village during a recent British Educational Research Association (2005) conference in Wales.

1. Text One

We went to a conference in Wales and delivered our papers and had tea in a village in a valley and then we all went home on an aeroplane.

2. Text Two

Late afternoon and it's already a little darker than we'd thought it'd be and everything seems to be yet another bus trip away after a trip round the backwaters of Swansea. Huge terminal, scraps of paper and subdued miserable looking people – a very dismal terminal with gate – more like a cage – separating one gate from another. All the romance evaporated in the bleak post-war brutalism of Swansea. You couldn't imagine witches here – despite what the man at the tourist bureau had told us. In spite of this, Trevor, who thinks he's one of the Grimm brothers, is banging on about essential nature of the Welsh banshee as opposed to the Walt Disney witches on broomsticks. Perhaps this is his way of paying me back for dragging him out here?

*All waiting expectantly for their bus to take them home. But our bus doesn't come. We ask.
'Well, now. Cwmgrach then, is it?'*

*Suddenly I'm enchanted again, because it's the voice of my grandmother.
Half an hour later the bus arrives.*

I'm on the top step of the bus. Sally has still got one foot on the road while Trevor hasn't yet taken the fateful step.

'Well, we're here now. This is why I came to this conference. How much are these two going to put up with? It's getting quite late. We're all tired and I don't even know how long this trip is going to take or what I'll find when we get there. What kind of look is that on Trevor's face? Is he still with me on this, or has he had enough? What do I do?'

The bus driver's looking at me, waiting for a reply. I feel like an inconvenient and time consuming foreigner.

Trevor is fumbling again. It's never a good sign. We need exact money.

'There's no bus back tonight, mind,' in response to my innocent question about how regular the buses are.

Like a tableaux, three of us standing on different levels on the bus – all looking to someone else for a decision. I'm responsible and anxious, and Trevor is looking grumpy.

Sally steps up.

'No. We've come this far now. We're not turning back. We'll get back somehow.'

Sally, who'd told us of her school report that described her as 'wan and ethereal' was

suddenly transformed into a leader and saviour.

The workshop participants were then asked to consider the three questions in relation to both texts. With the first text, the question, 'What happened?' was hesitantly greeted with responses such as, 'You went to a conference' and 'nothing happened.' The unanimous response to the second question, 'How do you know?' was, 'It says there what happened' - 'We went to a conference.' You told us yourselves.' And the third question, 'What does this mean?' drew a bemused blank. The second text, on the other hand, produced a lively discussion. The process we used this time was to pair up the participants to discuss each of the three questions in turn and, of course, there was no clear agreement as to the meaning of the text – or even what happened, if indeed anything at all happened.

We then introduced the commonly held view of narrative - that it must contain events in order to even qualify as a narrative. We introduced H. Porter Abbot's treatment of 'events' documented in *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, where he says:

Simply put, narrative is *the representation of an event or a series of events*. 'Event' is the key word here, though some people prefer the word 'action.' Without an event or an action, you may have a "description," and "exposition," an "argument," a "lyric," some combination of these or something else altogether, but you won't have a narrative. "My dog has fleas" is a description of my dog but it's not a narrative because nothing happens "My dog was bitten by a flea" is a narrative. It tells of an event. The event is a very small one – the bite of a flea – but that is enough to make it a narrative (2002, p. 12).

When the participants asked us what we were looking for in using the questions we pointed out that we had not even commenced our bus journey, let alone been to the conference or come home again, so it was rather strange that we had managed to elicit half an hour of discussion out of the second text and nothing from the first, where the whole action was complete.

It seemed, from this example that every moment of an incident or part of an event may have significance when invested with elements of voice, perspective, character - in short, when events are embodied in a discourse. One of the key observations from participants themselves concerning discourse was that the second text clearly ties events to character. Without Trevor being grumpy, Julie being anxious and Sally displaying an unexpectedly intrepid spirit, this would amount to a simple sequence of events not much different from the first. Does character drive events?

We followed this with amplification of the Porter Abbott idea of 'My dog has fleas' in order to test his contention that this did not constitute a narrative. First we added a form of characterisation (intonation) to these four words by placing the emphasis on each of the words in turn, showing how each intonation changed the meaning, and then we invited the participants to turn the four words into a narrative using any device of their own. The results enabled us to distinguish between discourse and events in a quite entertaining and novel way. For example, Madeleine Grumet, one of the keynote speakers at the Dialogues and Differences Symposium (White and Hay, 2006) came to our workshop and handled it in this way:

My Dog Has Fleas was the tune she sang over and over. I heard it in the kitchen and the living room. She hummed it in the car and under her breath in the supermarket. The tune seemed to beg for an ending and lacking one, she would repeat the melody over and over. One day as I was struggling to close the zipper on my overstuffed suitcase, I heard to my horror My Dog has Fleas coming from my own vocal chords. It seemed to orchestrate exertions, to deny anxiety, to smack of fact.

Brenda Holt wrote:

My dog has fleas. It wasn't my fault. Like any very busy mother juggling 1000 (at least) projects, demands, friends, commitments (and did I mention a PhD thesis) while at the same time trying to be a clam, dutiful, supportive wonder mother, I actually bought the flea collar. (You know the kind in the ads that promise not only ridding your dog of fleas but actually changing your dog into one that sits in your lap calmly and rolls toilet paper under your toddler). Yes, I bought the flea collar. Is it my job, too, along with every other aspect of my life aforementioned to put it on...?

Rosemary Blight wrote:

"My dog has fleas," pleaded the elderly woman to anyone who would listen. Shabbily dressed, carrying an old weathered bag, she shuffled through the park. People avoided her. She came to an empty bench seat and placed her bag carefully on it. Opening the top of the bag she peered inside. A dirty, scruffy mongrel sat inside shaking and whimpering. Filled with love for the animal, she touched its head lightly with her sleeve. A voice

in her head kept repeating over and over...”Don’t pat the dog. Dogs have fleas.

Our own quick-fire analysis of these texts using the three question method yielded the following, which we contributed to the group discussion.

In Grumet’s narrative, ‘What happened?’ someone remembers a tune hummed by someone that seems to have been irritating. ‘How do you know?’ Someone (was it the author? was it the narrator?) told us. And thirdly, ‘What does it mean?’ One interpretation is: this person who’s telling the story is reproducing the behaviour of the person who annoyed her in the first place – but it’s got nothing much to do with dogs or fleas.

In Brenda Holt’s narrative, ‘What happened?’ Someone bought a flea collar and wondered whether she should put it on. ‘How do we know?’ Because someone (the author? The narrator? A fictional character?) told us. What does it mean? Whoever this person might be is annoyed and resentful that she has to think about such things and take responsibility to remember to do everything – despite the fact that she’s extremely busy.

In Rosemary Blight’s narrative, ‘What happened?’ A poor old woman sits on a park bench and pats a dog she keeps in a bag. ‘How do you know?’ The author/narrator tells us. What does it mean? Interestingly we each had quite different interpretations of what this meant. Hay’s interpretation was that the old woman had been brought up in such a way that she thought love was dirty. White, on the other hand, assumed that the old woman herself had been treated like the neglected and dirty dog.

In all these cases it would seem that ‘events’ do not constitute the bedrock of narrative.

We then set out to relate narrative to research in the following way. Using a sociological meaning of discourse (Mills, 2004) we introduced the idea that research has certain discourses of its own that are not dictated by necessity so much as convention. Taking ‘bullying’ as our theme, we invited participants to formulate research questions and to begin a written introduction to the research, based on the discourse they believed was appropriate to this form of enquiry. Predictably, the mood shifted from the excitement of storytelling and uses of narrative as in our Wales example, to a more ‘academic’ discourse.

In order to provoke the students back into the storytelling frame of mind, we then displayed a number of quotations, including some from well known ‘literary’ writers.

Stuart Hall said:

Academic work is inherently conservative in as much as it seeks, first, to fulfill the relatively narrow and policed goals and interests of a given discipline or profession and, second, to fulfill the increasingly corporatized mission of higher education; intellectual work, in contrast is relentlessly critical, self-critical, and potentially revolutionary for it aims to critique, change, and even destroy institutions, disciplines and professions that rationalize exploitation, inequality and injustice (Hall, 1992, cited in Olson and Worsham 2003, p. 13).

Ursula Le Guin said:

People often use the passive voice because it is indirect, polite, unaggressive, and admirably suited to making thoughts seem as if nobody needed to take responsibility. Thus the passive is beloved of bureaucrats and timid academics, and generally shunned by writers who want to take responsibility (p. 68).

Henry Giroux (2003) said:

[Writing allowed]...me to speak to many audiences and extend the meaning of what it means to make one’s pedagogy more public. It also allowed me to define myself as something other than a traditional academic, which always conjured up for me a kind of professional posturing defined through the degraded ritual of being disinterested, specialized, apolitical, and removed from public life. Writing allowed me to break out of the academic microcosm, take sides, fight for a position, push against the grain, and say unsettling things – all those attributes that make one “un-cool,” as one of my colleagues recently suggested of those who avoid the cleverness of academic posturing and happen to believe that intellectuals actually have some public responsibilities in fashioning a politics of resistance and hope (p. 99-100).

And Laurel Richardson said:

I have a confession to make. For 30 years, I had yawned my way through numerous supposedly exemplary studies. Countless numbers of texts I abandoned half read, half scanned. I would order a new book with great anticipation – the topic was one I was interested in, the author was someone I wanted to read – only to find the

text boring. It was not that the writing was complex and difficult, but that it suffered from acute and chronic passivity: passive-voiced author, 'passive subjects.' 'Coming out' to colleagues and students about my secret displeasure with much of qualitative writing, I found a community of like-minded discontents. Undergraduates, graduates, and colleagues alike say they have found much of qualitative writing – yes – boring (Richardson, 2000, p. 924).

We also provided a handout of Guba and Lincoln's (2005) paradigm positions on selected issues and highlighted the issue of 'Inquirer posture' which range from positivism to constructivism and 'participatory' paradigms:

- "Disinterested scientist" as informer of decision makers, policy makers, and change agents;
- "Transformative intellectuals" as advocate and activist;
- "Passionate participant" as facilitator of multi voice reconstruction;
- Primary voice manifest aware self-reflective action; secondary voices in illuminating theory, narrative, movement, song, dance, and other presentational forms (see Table 8.4, p. 196).

In light of these comments, we then asked the students to work in groups to revisit and analyse the discourse in which their questions were couched. The results were most revealing, and using Guba and Lincoln's (2005) paradigms, we decided, as a group, that by and large the passages were at the most conservative end (see Table 8.4, p. 196) with no proposals venturing into the spectrum of 'critical theories', 'constructivism' or 'participatory' paradigms of contemporary qualitative research. However, the subsequent interlocutory discussion about possible ways of 'researching' bullying rapidly moved the discourse from areas such as the 'prevalence of bullying in schools' or 'the need for education about bullying' into the realms of 'What does it feel like to be bullied?' - and even into the realms of 'What does a bully feel like?' We then discussed what kind of discourse was appropriate for telling each tale.

In order to extend our three question approach and link it with other narrative approaches, and other pedagogical theory and practice, we closed the workshop by drawing attention to Kieran Egan's (1989) 'story form' model, used for planning teaching. We suggested a modified form that might be suitable for research.

Under the heading, 'Identifying Importance,' Egan suggests:

1. What is most important about this topic?
2. Why should it matter to children?
3. And what is affectively engaging about it? (p. 41).

We modified the questions in this way:

1. What are some important aspects of this topic?
2. Why does it matter to you as a researcher?
3. Why should it matter to your readers?

The last of Egan's questions, 'What is affectively engaging about it?' we absorbed under questions 2 and 3 and, in the course of discussion, related it to Guba and Lincoln's 'passionate participant' in the paradigm positions (p. 1996). We closed the workshop by reminding the participants of our distinction between 'events' and 'discourse' and asked them to consider this distinction in the context of an issue for research, such as bullying. We asked them to think of the difference between research that emphasises frequency of bullying episodes, definitions of bullying and locations in which bullying occurs and research which is 'affectively engaging'. Could this be the difference between 'events' and 'discourse' in the writing of research?

Conclusion

In our Faculty of Education we frequently wonder at the rather haphazard process that leads students to select a research theme, and to match it with a research paradigm. Even if that all comes together mysteriously, students never seem to find their way clear to a means of matching their own 'passion' to a suitable discourse for conveying the story they have on their minds. These workshops are a beginning. We have found that it is not terribly difficult to enthuse students with the possibilities of narrative forms of qualitative research, or to convince them of the value of 'writing as a method of inquiry' (Richardson 2000), but it is very tricky finding ways to illustrate how writing differently makes for different research. One of the principal obstacles is to be found in the conceptual gap we have previously identified (Hay and White AARE 2005a, White and Hay, 2006) between writing of the kind associated with creativity, (imagined, fictive) which is contextualised and illuminated not only by literary theory but by critical and cultural theory, and writing of the realist or naturalist kind associated with teacher identity or teacher lives and work (biography, autobiography), (Hay and White, 2005b), which is more likely to find a conceptual paradigm within sociology. In this paper we have outlined our approach in one of a series of workshops we have devised for pre-service students undertaking pedagogical research for the first time, and for research students undertaking dissertations in qualitative educational research. We are, in the process conducting our own qualitative

research into the kinds of responses we get to exercises in writing which are open-ended, 'creative', not necessarily linked to the kind of themes one normally encounters in research topics or research questions, and certainly not embedded in conventional academic discourse. As we proceed we will try to collect an anthology of short pieces like the ones we have presented here, which may help to illuminate the links between discourse and paradigm. In this paper we have outlined the steps we took to highlight the place of 'events' and, by implication, the 'findings' of research within a form of discourse. In time we hope to link these writing/storytelling exercises with other forms of narrative at work in 'creative' dissertations (art installations, performance ethnography, exhibitions) and with specific research topics and questions.

Finally, and in keeping, with the spirit of our workshop, we should explain why we called the paper 'Afternoon Tea in the Valley'. The greatest 'event' of the visit to Wales was an unforgettable meeting with old neighbours of Julie White's family in the village of Cwmgrach, and the rich – and poignant – experience of sharing tea and cake one late autumn evening in a street that had changed little in fifty years. When we started the workshop - on the theme of events and discourse – we intended to tell the 'whole story', but we only got as far as the steps of the bus to Cwmgrach in the Valley of the Witches.

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