Narrative theory and educational inquiry:
qualitative research as metafictional storytelling

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Preamble
This paper provides a rationale for speculating about—and
experimenting with—metafictional storytelling as a form of
qualitative educational research. The presentation for which it
has been prepared will also include examples of fictions produced
by graduate students which cannot be reproduced here because (i)
some are still in transit from Canada at the time of writing
(late September 1993) and (ii) some are visual 'texts' that are
difficult to re/present satisfactorily in print.

Narrative theory and educational inquiry
The study of narrative is one way of approaching a number of
theoretic and practical problems in education. As Kenneth
Knoespel (1991: 100-1) writes:

Narrative theory has challenged literary critics to recognize not
only the various strategies used to configure particular texts
within the literary canon, but to realize how forms of discourse
in the natural and human sciences are themselves ordered as
narratives. In effect narrative theory invites us to think of all
discourse as taking the form of a story.

To date, my own attempts to apply narrative theory in educational
research have focused very largely on inquiries concerning the
ways in which the discourses of environmental education (Gough
1991, 1993a, in press c) and science education (Gough 1993b, in
press a) are configured as stories, with particular reference to
the adequacy of the narrative strategies used by science and
environmental educators in their work. More recently, I have
critically reviewed some alternative approaches to curriculum
studies as a narrative textual practice (see Gough in press b)
and have begun to explore ways in which 'fictional' stories—and
modes of fictional storytelling—might inform reading and writing
practices in qualitative educational research.
These inquiries are situated in my interrelated practices as both

a researcher and a teacher of educational research methodologies and techniques. Teacher educators and educational researchers tell stories to learners and colleagues; researchers in other disciplines, journalists and novelists also tell stories to their respective audiences. Each storytelling practice embodies a particular selection of narrative strategies and conventions, the implicit or explicit knowledge of which influences the storymaker's craft, the audience's expectations and the meanings that are mutually constructed. However, we should not take it for granted that the persistence of more-or-less distinct differences between the narrative forms found in, say, a scholarly journal, a textbook on educational research methodology, mass media journalism and literary fiction means that these differences are either necessary or desirable. In other words, the present narrative conventions of much teacher education and educational research are not the only—or necessarily the best—means of

describing and explaining educational experience to learners and other colleagues.

In this paper I will explore two specific propositions: (i) that the conventional writing practices of much educational research rarely encompass the narrative complexities that may be needed to represent and problematise educational experience; (ii) that much educational experience may be represented more appropriately—and interrogated more critically—by fictional modes of storytelling, especially the reflexive narrative strategies of metafiction. I thus argue that critical readings of metafictional texts and creative uses of metafictional storytelling strategies should be incorporated into our narrative practices. However, before dealing with the specific qualities of metafiction it may be useful to review some aspects of the relationship between fiction and empirical educational research that have been canvassed by other scholars.

Empiricism and fiction, 'truth' and lies

The ontological status accorded to 'fiction' by many educational researchers is suggested in the title of Rob Walker's (1981) paper, 'On the uses of fiction in educational research—(and I don't mean Cyril Burt)'. In much everyday speech, fiction is equated with falsehood—in a similar way to which 'telling stories' may be equated with 'telling lies'. To be consistent with such meanings, a 'truthful' representation of educational experience would necessarily comprise the documentation of 'facts' and their interpretation in a 'non-fictional' narrative. Walker (1981: 147) raises a number of pertinent philosophical questions about these sorts of assumptions—for example, 'Is fiction the only route to some kinds of truth?'—but the concerns he addresses in detail are for the most part pragmatic, prudential and procedural. He shows how 'fictionalised' accounts can be used in case studies of educational evaluation and action

research to ameliorate some of the difficulties raised by issues of confidentiality, but each of the 'fictions' he quotes is clearly based on extensive empirical knowledge and 'really changes the truth very little' (Walker 1981: 163).
Walker (1981: 163) sees research as 'essentially a documentary art' in which 'the task of the writer is to display the subject'–'his/her subjectivity, even understanding, must take second place'. By way of contrast, Tom Barone (1992: 143) argues the researcher should adopt 'an openly political stance'. Reflecting on a previous project (Barone 1989) in which he documented the life story of a potential school drop-out, Barone (1992) argues that there is a moral imperative for qualitative researchers in education to include 'critical storytelling' in their methodological repertoires. Barone (1992: 143) sees storytelling–critical or otherwise–as an artful practice which 'eschews formal theory' (of the scientific and philosophical type) and 'systematic method'. However, Barone (1992: 142) applies a number of criteria to 'the crafting of worthwhile stories', including that of 'honesty',

…more specifically, a kind of honesty achieved through a heightened empiricism, a determined scrutinizing of the world around us. Like all good art, honest stories are powerfully observed, carefully detailed. They must tend to generate in the reader awareness of the locations of (actual or fictitious) characters' thoughts, beliefs, desires, and habits, in the webs of contingencies that constitute their life-worlds (emphasis in original).

It is worth emphasising here that, in Barone's view, stories characterised by 'honesty' and 'heightened empiricism' can also be 'fictitious'. Among the examples Barone (1992: 145) describes as 'critical stories par excellence' are both 'nonfictional' works of investigative journalism, such as Norman Mailer's (1968)

Armies of the Night, and novels like John Steinbeck's (1939/1967) The Grapes of Wrath:

…this novel's power to persuade… emanates from a careful and committed empiricism that is made manifest through such features of writing as powerfully 'thick' description and invented but convincing dialogue.

In a footnote to the above, Barone (1992: 146) adds:

Does it matter that this story… [is] fictional? Hardly. I would argue that the ultimate purpose of the critical storytelling I have described can be served equally well through journalistic or novelistic modes… In that sense, critical storytelling moves

qualitative researchers and readers not only beyond theory and
method but beyond genre as well.

Novels and other forms of fictional writing have been used both
to teach about social and educational phenomena (see, for
example, Brieschke 1990, Gough 1993a) and to study them (see, for
example, the chapters by Gough, Molnar, Schubert, Taxel, van
Manen and Willis collected in Willis and Schubert 1991). However,
as Barone (1990) writes, in the past, 'a masterpiece of
educational inquiry such as Hard Times [Dickens 1854/1955] would
not have sufficed as, say, a doctoral dissertation'. More
recently, Hofstra University (New York, USA) has accepted a
doctoral dissertation in education in the form of a novel (see
Brieschke 1992: 179) and the University of Victoria (British
Columbia, Canada) has accepted a Master of Education thesis in
the form of a collection of short (fictional) stories (Oberg
1993).
While there can be little doubt that fictional writing may be
very persuasive in achieving the moral purposes of scholars
engaged in emancipatory projects, it is likely that many
educational researchers would agree with Walker (1981: 163) in
seeing that there could be 'dangers inherent in the approach':

Can fiction ever be as 'good' as reality? What are the limits on
the uses of fiction? How much of an account can be invented? How
far can the data be altered, distorted or changed? Should the
'story' emerge from the data (as in the examples I have given),
or should the story control the use made of the data (as a
serious fiction writer might feel). [sic]

Accepting that such questions signal 'dangers' depends to some
extent on accepting the categorical distinctions they imply,
although Walker (1981: 163) explicitly acknowledges the
difficulties inherent in his attempt to distinguish 'pure fiction
from fictional research styles'1.
Maintaining these sorts of categories suggests that it is
possible, at least in principle, to establish reliable
(intersubjective) distinctions between 'reality', 'facts' or
'truth' on the one hand and 'fiction' on the other. At a
philosophical level it is relatively easy to trivialise this
difficulty by saying that until we can establish the nature of
'truth' it is impossible to know if telling stories is telling
lies. But this is not just an academic problem. Even a cursory
examination of the complex interrelationships between our
'commonsense' understandings of everyday 'reality' and the worlds
created in texts of all kinds demonstrates that we cannot take
such distinctions as fact versus fiction for granted. While it
may be possible to assert that 'reality' exists beyond texts,
much of this 'reality' is—and can only be—apprehended through
texts (and much of what we call 'direct' experience is mediated

textually and intertextually). For example, much of what we call
history is inaccessible to us except in textual form (indeed, I

believe that Hegel suggested that history be contemplated as a
work of art because in retrospect it 'reads' like a novel).
Further ambiguities in the relationship between 'reality' and
'fiction' arise when we consider the ways in which writing
fiction may move us beyond documenting empirical 'truth' toward
constructing new knowledge and understanding. This argument is
advanced by Gillie Rowland, Stephen Rowland and Richard Winter
(1990: 291) in outlining a role for writing fiction in research
on professional practice:

…if we were asked why, as teachers, we encourage children to
write stories, we would explain that writing stories is a way of
'learning' about our experiences by ordering and exploring them.…
In writing (and responding to) stories, we exercise our
imaginations by playing with the relationships between
experiences and with the ideas they evoke: the structure of a
story is an implicit set of general ideas about a segment of life
experiences. This, briefly, is the rationale for our proposal
that writing fiction can be a valuable mode of inquiry into
professional practice: we recommend it for children; why not for
ourselves?
Writing in a fictional form enables familiar ideas and
experiences to be brought into new relationships, and new ideas
to be set alongside the familiar. Through fictional writing
related to our professional context we can test out new ideas and
explore the values upon which our practice is based… we can draw
into our narratives those crucial but subtle textures of thought
and feeling which are not readily accessible to more standard
forms of 'research'. In doing this, we make full use of our
professional experience, which, even if it is only haphazardly
organized, is probably the richest resource we have to draw on.

It is important to recognise that some of the 'new relationships'
and 'new ideas' that may be generated through writing fiction can
become the kind of cultural inventions that materially affect—and
are part of—our social reality. For example, there is a sense in
which George Orwell's phrase, 'Big Brother is watching you', can
be regarded as a 'pure fiction'. But in the form in which it was
mobilised in arguments against a national identity card—the
Australia card—and other anticipated forms of bureaucratic
surveillance or centralised information systems, it is clearly a
part of our 'reality'. Another way of saying this is that
fictional stories can provide us with evidence of alternative
realities. But the idea that there are multiple realities both
within and beyond our everyday experience is not confined to
literary fiction. Rather, it is something of a commonplace among

what are now loosely termed postmodernist discourses—the
discourses of poststructuralism, feminist standpoint
epistemologies, postcolonialist critiques of Western culture, and
postmodernist sciences like chaos theory. By way of contrast, the
storytelling practices reproduced in conventional educational
research and teacher education reflect what Sandra Harding (1986:
193) calls 'the longing for "one true story" that has been the
psychic motor for [modern] Western science'. This longing for
'one true story' has driven the construction of narrative
strategies in which fact and fiction are mutually exclusive
categories, facts are assumed to correspond with 'truth', and
particular kinds of facts—'scientific facts', 'historical
facts'—are equated with a 'reality' that is represented as being
elsewhere than within the reach of human agency.
Fact and fiction may be much closer, both culturally and
linguistically, than these narrative strategies imply. A fiction,
in the original sense of fictio, is something fashioned by a
human agent. The etymology of 'fact' also refers to human action;
a fact is the thing done, 'that which actually happened', the
Latin factum being the neuter past participle of facere, do

(OED). Thus, both fact and fiction refer to human experience, but
'fiction' is an active form—the act of fashioning—whereas 'fact'
descends from a past participle, a part of speech which disguises
the generative act. Facts are testimonies to experience.
Historical facts are testimonies to the experiences of historians
in actively constructing facts with their disciplined procedures
of evidence generation and interpretation and their traditions
of social relationships and organisation. Similarly, scientific
facts are testimonies to the experiences of scientists as they
actively produce facts with their specialised technologies of
data generation and inscription, their rule-governed practices of
interpretation, and their characteristic traditions of social
relationships and organisation. For example, as Donna Haraway
writes:

Biology is the fiction appropriate to objects called organisms;
biology fashions the facts 'discovered' from organic beings.
Organisms perform for the biologist, who transforms that
performance into a truth attested by disciplined experience;
i.e., into a fact, the jointly accomplished deed or feat of the
scientist and the organism.… Both the scientist and the organism
are actors in a story-telling practice.

Thus, the opposition of fact and fiction in the modern sciences
and social sciences is a fiction—part of a story which has been
fashioned to rationalise the strategies used by modernist
researchers in these disciplines to produce facts. But we still
have to address the question: what is the fiction (or what are

the fictions) appropriate to representing educational experience,
including the experience of imagining new relationships and ideas
in education?

At the time of writing, it seems to me that the first part of the
above question has been explored more constructively and more
rigorously than the (italicised) second part. For example, in
'Staying dumb?: Student resistance to liberatory curriculum',
Patti Lather (1990) responds to the question, 'what do you do
with data once you've met poststructuralism?' by fashioning four
stories (she calls them 'tales'; I would call them 'fictions'):
realist, critical, deconstructive and reflexive. Lather's multi-
voiced text juxtaposes different modes of storytelling so as to
demonstrate that no 'one true story' can be fashioned from the
data and foregrounds the generative acts that create alternative
meanings2. In 'Staying dumb?', Lather succeeds, I believe, in
demonstrating what she has more recently (Lather 1992: 95)
described as, 'a reflexive process that focuses on our too easy
use of accepted forms, a process that might lead us toward a
science capable of continually demystifying the realities it
serves to create'.

For the purposes of the argument I am developing here, it is
important to point out that all of Lather's 'tales'—including
those she labels 'realist', 'critical' and 'deconstructive'—are
in some sense reflexive, since the reader can readily discern
Lather's self-conscious production of these stories as exemplars
of their respective modes. Furthermore, while I have no
hesitation in calling Lather's stories 'fictions', they are
sufficiently constrained by the empirical data on which they are
based to exemplify something less than what Rowland et al might
mean by 'writing fiction as inquiry into professional practice'
(and certainly something less than what Walker refers to as
'pure', 'serious' or 'real' fiction). That is, while Lather
clearly provides 'suspicious' and even perverse readings of her
data, she does not invent any (at least not self-consciously).
This is not a criticism of Lather's text but, rather, a way of
pointing out that the concept of metafictional storytelling to
which I will now turn encompasses something more than the
commendable reflexivity Lather demonstrates.

Reflexivity and metafiction
My argument so far has focused on breaking down the binary
categorisation of fact versus fiction and on considering some of
the virtues of reconceiving the stories we tell in educational
research and teacher education as fictions—as stories fashioned
for particular purposes. But I also believe that we need to
reconstruct many of these fictions as metafictions—as self-
conscious or reflexive fictions. This is because fictional forms
like literary realism may not go far enough in providing readers
with a sense of multiple realities or with the critical tools to

interrogate them.

For example, the critical stories valorised by Barone (1992: 145) may be 'ideologically open' to the extent that they reveal their authors' moral and political commitments, but the storytelling modes they exemplify—such as investigative journalism and realist fiction—do not necessarily lend themselves to questioning the ideology of representation they embody. The purposes for which Barone revisits his own critical story (Barone 1989)—to retrospectively analyse it as a case study of qualitative problem solving—thus stand in sharp contrast to those displayed by Alison Jones (1992) who revisits a comparable critical story (Jones 1989) in order to deconstruct her own assumptions (such as the story's reinscription of the power dynamics to which she was theoretically opposed) and to reconstruct it reflexively (for a brief comparison of Jones' two essays see Lather 1992: 94).

It will be readily apparent that the mimetic novels of Charles Dickens or John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath could function as critical histories of their respective social 'realities'. What may be less obvious is that many of the texts of educational research and teacher education—especially those that might be termed 'empirically based'—are also like mimetic novels in some respects, despite the fiction of their differences and despite each being characterised by very different narrative strategies. These kinds of text sustain the illusion that they do not mediate between reader and an exterior world but, rather, that they are offering transparent windows onto that world. That is, the language of much empirical educational research and literary realism is similar in that descriptions are presented as though they were a selection from a whole which is the 'real' world. A key difference is that the authors of mimetic texts usually are conscious of their own artistry in sustaining the reader's belief in the verisimilitude of the world 'revealed' by the text, whereas authors of empirical educational research reports seem to believe—naïvely, I suggest—that they are constructing a neutral transmitter of 'reality' to the reader.

But, at least as I read them, many postmodernist approaches to the representation of 'reality' in a text require that the text draws attention to its own structures and properties as a generator of meaning and significance. In literary criticism, this is what is known as a metafiction, a text which, as Patricia Waugh writes, 'draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality'. I submit that the texts of educational research and teacher education should aspire to no less: they, too, should pose questions about the relationship between the stories we construct and the realities they purport to describe and explain. In other words, our texts should provide critiques of their own methods of construction, not only to lay their own structures and assumptions bare, but also to explore the fictionality (the textual and intertextual construction) of the 'realities' to

which they refer.

Educational research as metafictional storytelling
In a sense, metafiction rests on a version of Heisenberg's
uncertainty principle: an awareness that 'for the smallest
building blocks of matter, every process of observation causes a

major disturbance', and that it is impossible to describe an
objective world because the observer always changes the observed.
However, the concerns of metafiction are even more complex than
this. For while Heisenberg believed that one could at least
describe, if not a 'picture' of nature, a picture of one's
relation to nature, metafiction demonstrates the uncertainty even
of this process. The implications for educational research and
teacher education as storytelling practices are that we must
abandon the conceit of trying to tell 'one true story' and
deliberately construct our stories as multiple metafictions—self-
conscious artefacts which invite their own deconstruction.
In such a project we can be aided and inspired by those authors
who have explored or exemplified postmodernist worldviews in
metafictional texts—Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Italo Calvino,
Tom Robbins and, among the more explicitly SF authors, J.G.
Ballard, Philip K. Dick, Samuel Delany, Ursula Le Guin, William
Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Octavia Butler, Joanna Russ and many
others. Sociologists of science like Malcolm Ashmore (1989) have
acknowledged the generativity of 'new literary forms' (Woolgar
1988: 94) in developing their own approaches to reflexivity,
arguing that 'true stories about the world, in order to be
"true", must be self-conscious. must acknowledge the story-
telling process' (Ommundsen 1993: 19). Again, we should aspire to
no less.
In the short term, we at least need to treat standard textbooks,
research reports and metafictional texts more equitably,
recognising that each represents a significant cultural
expression of human transactions with 'real' and imagined worlds
and allowing each kind of text to mediate and transform
interpretations of the other. In the longer term, these mutual
transformations may produce a new kind of text—foreshadowed by
Donna Haraway's groundbreaking work in books like Primate Visions
(1989) and Simians, Cyborgs, and Women (1991)—in which stories of
scientific 'fact' and science 'fiction' are not polarised but
reciprocally generative.

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1   In a footnote Walker (1981: 163) admits that works such as Truman Capote's In Cold Blood and Tom Wolfe's The Last American Hero elude categorization as research reports or 'pure fiction', and thus to some extent anticipates the blurring of journalistic and novelistic modes that Barone (1992: 146) sees as moving us 'beyond genre'.

2   Each of Lather's four 'tales' is predicated on alternative readings of the amassed data. Alternative reading strategies are discussed by Cleo Cherryholmes (1993) in 'Reading research', which complements Lather's text by enacting alternative readings of a research report rather than alternative readings of the data it seeks to interpret.