

Narrative inquiry is a type of qualitative research within in the field of educational knowledge development. It is based on the premise that people learn both through listening to stories and through *creating* (telling and crafting) stories.

The data that narrative researchers gather are stories. Re-telling or re-writing these stories (also known as re-storying) acts as a first stage of analysis; the re-storying enables the researcher to become intimately acquainted with the data, and so understand it better. When the re-storying is complete, the researcher identifies the new understandings s/he has come to. These new understandings of the stories amount to research findings: new knowledge has been developed. This assignment invites you to engage in narrative research – *to learn from your own stories*.

Topics: The premise behind this assignment is that you know an awful lot about teaching and learning. If this tacit understanding is articulated and analyzed, it can be profoundly informative to your personal development as an educator. Draw from your own rich personal experience of teaching and learning. Tell a story that is meaningful to you, and that has potential for developing your understanding of teaching and learning.

Possible Prompts: • I had a learning experience... • I had a teacher... • I had a student...

• Epiphanies • Meaningful Moments • Small Victories • Frustrations • Failures

Assessment Rubric

Richness of Narrative: How well do you draw the reader into the story (descriptive detail)?
Please be aware: this process of richly telling your story allows you to come closer to it, providing you a better chance of understanding the knowledge embedded within.

A (Excellent)

B (Very Good)

C (Adequate)

D (Marginal)

Analysis: Have you shown thoroughness and thoughtfulness delving into the meanings the story holds? *What does the story illuminate about yourself and your understanding of teaching and learning?*

A (Excellent)

B (Very Good)

C (Adequate)

D (Marginal)

Connections: How thoroughly have you pondered the implications for your own work as a teacher? Have you explained how the knowledge developed here might inform your teaching? What will you do and say in teaching/learning contexts?

A (Excellent)

B (Very Good)

C (Adequate)

D (Marginal)

Narrative Exemplar: Bach and the Blues

I began piano lessons in earnest at age twelve. (There had been an attempt when I was six, but the teacher, in my estimation, was too grouchy; I did not last long.) Mrs. Murphy had the best reputation around, so – despite the hefty fees – my parents signed me up and so I joined the classiest studio in our small Ontario town.

My advanced age meant I was always woefully behind the others. Most of Mrs. Murphy's students began at age six or younger. Edward's lessons immediately followed mine, and Mrs. Murphy would place a stool below the piano bench so that his little legs did not have to dangle so uncomfortably far above the floor. While I put on my coat and boots to leave he would climb up on the bench, spread his chubby little fingers over the keyboard, and launch into some Beethoven sonata or other that invariably brought a delighted smile to our teacher's face, emphasized my own incompetence, and provided a gleeful sound track for my dejected post-lesson departure.

Every term we gave a recital. Parents and uncles and aunts and grandparents and the odd self-sacrificing grade-school teacher would crowd into folding chairs in Mrs. Murphy's piano studio. The students would wait (quietly) in the dining room until we were ushered in one by one, like lambs to the slaughter, to plunk out our offering for the assembled throng (who were usually as terrified as we were).

One particular term I was to play a Bach sinfonia. I loved the piece, and after months of dedicated practicing (rigorously enforced by Mrs. Murphy's diligent tutelage) I understood it perfectly. My fingers, however, did not.

My piano technique was (and, to be honest, still is) a nightmare. Bach's polyphonic musical lines, moving contrapuntally in different directions at different times, demand a rigorous physical and mental dexterity to keep them in check. My relationship with these particular polyphonic lines was still under negotiation, and on this occasion they quickly made it clear who was in charge – not me. As I sat at the piano before the captive audience, my traitorous, trembling fingers were dragged deep into an unfamiliar, atonal, and very un-Bach-like forest well past the point of no return.

I panicked. So did Mrs. Murphy. So did all the parents and uncles and aunts and grandparents and the odd grade-school teacher. I stopped playing. Everyone in the room stopped breathing. We all wished mightily we were somewhere else.

Then, magically, mysteriously, my fingers began to move. My unconscious dredged up the knowledge that the piece was in the key of A, and I tacked on a Blues cadence that Dylan (who had perfect pitch, and could play anything he heard on the radio) had taught me the week before. It fit! It was as though I had stumbled across the key to my prison cell. I pushed it into the lock, held my breath, turned the key, and . . . was free! I bolted from the room, the relieved applause ringing in my ears and reaching a rare volume in the habitually reserved ambiance of Mrs. Murphy's well-appointed studio.

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Analysis: Bach and the Blues—Finding My Voice

I tell this story because it marks one of the first times I ever *really* expressed myself with music. I combined the muddled Bach of my formal music-lesson training with a snappy Blues cadence culled from the pick-up truck tape-deck soundtrack of my small town existence, and the cheeky result was my own voice: gloriously crying out the triumphant solution to my disastrous predicament.

Much later in life this incident was further illuminated for me by the words of composer and educator Stephen Hatfield, offered at a choral conducting workshop: “The thing to remember, ladies and gentlemen,” he declaimed, in his inimitable, dramatic style, “is that there are as many different ways to be musical, as there are different ways to be beautiful.”

My way to be musical, or beautiful through music, was not by performing, but by composing.

As I analyze this experience now, I recognize the resonating feature, a theme central to my complex and cherished relationship with the arts: I was *finding my voice*. I was discovering my unique musical instrument – my means of creative self-expression. That particular piano recital stage provided me with the opportunity to fling part of myself out into the world. The captive audience was a sounding board that returned the echo, allowing me to consciously hear and recognize the joyful clamour of my own artistic self-expression.

The search to find my voice was not easy; there were serious obstacles along the way. I was primarily frustrated in my musical attempts at creative expression by my insufficient performance technique. As I sat that fateful day at Mrs. Murphy’s Steinway grand I had effectively painted myself into a corner; an attentive audience waited with baited breath, and my wretched fingers gave me nothing to say. Then, suddenly, miraculously, I found another way to speak. The adversity of my situation squeezed the utterance from me as surely as a generous behind descending on a fully inflated whoopee cushion.

Implications for Teaching: Encouraging the Voices

I vividly remember the words of Lee Willingham, speaking to my class of pre-service music teacher candidates. “A teacher’s job is not to teach subject matter – our job is not to teach music – it’s to teach *kids*. And *we* have the opportunity to teach kids through music – isn’t that wonderful?” As I teach students through music, my special area of interest, of passion, of love – is in helping students explore and share their own, unique voices. What I try to do is provide opportunities for students to express themselves through music. There are many challenges with this. How do I help students overcome all the frustrating hurdles and learn the technical skills they need to realize personally satisfying and fulfilling musical utterances? How do I help them believe they are capable of using music as a meaningful vehicle for self-expression? How do I overcome the limiting pre-conceived expectations (held by my students, colleagues, administration, community, and most dangerously *myself*) of what music class should be?

As I teach students through music, my special area of interest – of passion – is in helping them to creatively express themselves through music. My experience has led me to believe that composing, often neglected in school music programs, is a particularly rich vehicle for students to explore and share their own, unique voices. I wish for young people to have the chance to compose; indeed, music students *deserve* this opportunity. To help a student learn to compose is to acquaint that student with magnificent possibilities for personal expression. Much of my motivation is personal – I have found composing to be deeply emotionally and aesthetically fulfilling. I desire for young people to have the opportunity to experience a similar sense of fulfilment. I know they will not all be as interested, or enjoy composing as much as I do, but I believe with all my heart that all students deserve the chance to try it out.