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Abstract

The author examines the use of narrative inquiry in student affairs research based on the benefits of qualitative research presented by Magolda (1999). Three benefits of narrative research are presented, along with implications for student affairs research. Benefits include an increased access to student experiences and campus culture, as well as better-informed theories. Implications include changes in epistemological assumptions and a greater emphasis on student growth and relationships. The author draws on original narrative research to examine the benefits and implications.

Disciplines

Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Education | Educational Leadership | Higher Education

Comments

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The Use of Narrative Inquiry in Student Affairs Research

Robert D. Reason
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The author examines the use of narrative inquiry in student affairs research based on the benefits of qualitative research presented by Magolda (1999). Three benefits of narrative research are presented, along with implications for student affairs research. Benefits include an increased access to student experiences and campus culture, as well as better-informed theories. Implications include changes in epistemological assumptions and a greater emphasis on student growth and relationships. The author draws on original narrative research to examine the benefits and implications.

Student affairs research continues to rely mainly on quantitative research to inform its understanding of students and guide its practice. Several authors have questioned the efficacy of the application of quantitative methodology to student affairs research, advocating the use of a qualitative approach instead (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Caple, 1991, Magolda, 1999). Issues of concern in student affairs, such as cognitive and social development, lend themselves to qualitative research (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Chafe, 1990). Since most of the issues that concern student affairs researchers require the use of language-based data collection, qualitative methods are the most appropriate approach for data collection (Polkinghorne, 1988).

In 1991, the *Journal of College Student Development* dedicated an entire edition to qualitative research (Caple, 1991). Several authors called for an increased use of qualitative research in higher education (Kuh & Andreas, 1991; Patton, 1991). The use of qualitative methodology in education research has increased, although not necessarily at the post-secondary level (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Patton, 1991). Much of the recent research has focused on secondary education and classroom instruction (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Fairbanks, 1996).

This is not to say, however, that qualitative research is absent from higher education. In an article that examined methodological trends in research articles published in a major student affairs journal, Davis and Liddell (1997) examined

577 articles published between 1987 and 1995. Although the authors found a statistically significant increase in the number of articles employing qualitative methods, the overall number of qualitative articles lagged behind the number of quantitative articles. During the 8 years examined by the authors, only 39 of the 572 published articles were qualitative in nature, compared to 437 quantitative articles.

Even with the paucity of qualitative research articles, examples of qualitative research are evident. For a recent study by Feagin, Vera, and Imani (1996) that examined racial discrimination at a predominately white university, the authors used focus groups to gather data from African American students and their parents. The ethnographic study of residence hall living by Moffatt (1989) serves as another example of the application of qualitative research to the study of issues in higher education. Finally, Baxter Magolda (1992) utilized the method advocated in this article, narrative inquiry, to inform her theory on cognitive development.

Recently, Magolda (1999) advocated using qualitative methods, specifically ethnography and case studies, to inform student affairs research. Magolda defined ethnographic research to include "observations occurring in a natural setting," in which the researcher becomes the Asubjective instrument for data collection" (p. 11). Furthermore, definitions of ethnographic research stress the importance of culture and context (Swchandt, as cited in Magolda, 1999). While content is important for ethnography and narrative inquiry, the latter focuses more on the process of story construction. Although the two methods overlap and are complementary, the distinction between them is important.

This article continues the discussion begun by Magolda (1999). Magolda cited three main benefits of the increased use of ethnographic methods to student affairs professionals' understanding of college students. First, ethnographic research increased access to students' experiences. Secondly, ethnographic research increased access to student and campus cultures normally inaccessible to student affairs professionals. Finally, student affairs practice will be enhanced through the informed theorizing that accompanies ethnographic research.

An increased use of narrative research, as advocated in this article, has positive implications for the student affairs profession. The same benefits of ethnographic research cited by Magolda (1999) are applicable to narrative research. Moreover, the increased use of narrative research has potential to improve relationships between student-respondents and researchers (Oakley, 1981), and encourage growth in students (Mattingly, 1991). Narrative and interpretation from the author's original research, as well as that by other authors (Feagin et al., 1996; Magolda, 1999), is used to support each claim.

What are Narratives and Narrative Research?

The term narrative is widely used to include all verbal and written texts (Polkinghorne, 1988). Narrative research thus can be considered research using these texts as the main source of data to inform a study. Although accurate, these definitions are too broad and simplistic for our purposes.

Narrative

Polkinghorne (1988) defined narrative as the process that humans use to make meaning of their experiences. Through the application of language to continually construct and reconstruct meaning, humans gain an understanding of their experiences. People arrange their experiences in a manner that gives the events meaning and a coherent order (Atkinson, 1998). Narratives, therefore, are the process by which humans make meaning of their own experiences.

Narratives are also stories (Denzin, 1989). These stories convey the organizational scheme used to make meaning out of experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988). Stories have beginnings, middles, and ends, and are thematically organized around a central plot (Denzin, 1989; Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative knowledge is contained and maintained in the emplotted nature of stories. That is, our understanding of reality is in the temporal and relational nature of the author's reconstruction of events (Polkinghorne, 1995).

Narratives convey an understanding of environmental and interpersonal context, temporal sequence, and affective domain of the story. Polkinghorne (1995) offered the simple example of the sentence: "The king died; the prince cried" (p. 7). Taken in isolation, each adequately describes an event. Understood as a narrative story, with a temporal relationship and context, these two sentences describe a son's response to the loss of his father. They convey emotion and evoke empathy.

Narratives, thus, serve dual purposes. Along with the making of meaning by organizing seemingly unrelated events into a thematic story, narratives serve to convey that meaning to others (Polkinghorne, 1995). On a cultural or community level, narratives convey norms and values to newcomers (Mattingly, 1991). Narratives, therefore, are both the process of constructing and reconstructing events into organized schemes and the resulting story that conveys the scheme (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Narrative Research

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) stated that "humans are storytelling organisms, who individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (p. 2). Narrative research uses linguistic data in an attempt to understand empirical reality from the perspective of the teller. Narrative research uses the resulting story to understand the organizational scheme the teller used to make sense of his or her world. In narrative research, then, it is not only the content of the story that helps in understanding the experience, but the way that the story is constructed that reveals more about the experience.

Thus, narrative research begins with the teller's story, but moves the research toward interpretation. There exist many theories of narrative interpretation (Bloom, 1998). During interpretation, the researcher looks for and connects patterns of meaning and experiences in the respondent's narrative (Denzin, 1989). In so doing, the researcher may draw from a wide array of theories to inform his/her interpretation (Bloom, 1998).

Further, since the teller attends to what is important to him or her

(Polkinghorne, 1988), the researcher must examine the narrative for ordering of events, what is included, and what might have been excluded (Atkinson, 1998). Context is revealed by understanding the emotions and values conveyed in the narrative. Finally, the researcher should scrutinize the teller's use of metaphors, irony, and other rhetorical devices that offer insight into the mental state of the teller (Feldman, Bruner, Renderern, & Spitzer, 1990).

Narrative inquiry that results in the synthesis of several stories into one thematic narrative is especially useful to student affairs. Polkinghorne (1995) labeled this "analysis of narrative" (p. 13), and Baxter Magolda's (1992) research illustrates its application to student affairs. Baxter Magolda examined narratives of hundreds of students over several years to identify major concepts regarding their cognitive development. The theory that resulted from her work is an exemplar of an inductive analysis of narratives.

Narrative research assumes either a descriptive or an explanatory purpose (Polkinghorne, 1988). Descriptive narrative inquiry reports and interprets existing narratives. Descriptive narrative research describes what underlies the values and assumptions of people within a community by examining several narratives for similarities and themes. Explanatory narrative seeks to explain why something happened, to explain an event. To do so, researchers examine narrative data for "connections between events and actions that have led to a particular occurrence..." (p. 174), seeking causal connections between antecedents and events.

Although only providing a superficial definition for narrative research, the previous discussion provides a basic understanding of the major concepts in narrative inquiry. To fully appreciate the application, benefits, and implications for student affairs, it must be recognized that the overarching purpose of narrative research is to "share meaning and understanding of phenomena encountered through and constructed from experience" (Fairbanks, 1996, pp. 322-323). Specifically, student affairs professionals are interested in understanding the meaning of the phenomena encountered and constructed by the experiences of the student with whom they work.

Applications and Benefits for Student Affairs

As stated previously, the benefits of narrative research mimic the benefits of ethnographic research cited by Magolda (1999). Narrative research provides access to student experiences, provides access to student and campus cultures, and enhances theories regarding college students.

Access to Student Experience

Denzin (1989) stated that people live lives full of meaning and the expressions of these meanings are the "windows into the inner life of the person" (p. 14). Narratives are expressions of the meanings in peoples' lives. Narrative research with college students thus provides windows into their inner lives. Since narrative research focuses on everyday events (Mattingly, 1991), student affairs researchers gain access to the everyday events that affect how they experience college.

Feagin et al. (1996) uncovered and explained the effects on African-American

students attending traditionally White campuses. The authors listened to the words of African-American college students gathered during focus group interviews, uncovering feelings about incidents of racial intolerance and discrimination. The students spoke of being surrounded by the “whiteness of university spaces” (p. 49). Through their words, the students shared their daily experiences at predominately White institutions.

In my own research in student affairs, I found a better understanding of student experience through narrative. The following narrative came from Jim, the respondent in my study. It provided insight into Jim’s every day experiences on campus at a large university in the Midwest. When asked why he involved himself in leadership positions, Jim spoke of “giving back.” His narrative continued, revealing much insight into Jim’s experiences and feelings. Specifically, Jim stated:

to give back to my living area, West Hall, and the people that I’ve met there are big reasons. We live together and we see each other at 3 in the morning when we’re dead from studying for finals and we see each other, and this is especially on my floor, when the world is crashing down on you or you just — a guy came running in yesterday and he’d just gotten a research grant, and he’s only a freshman, to be something with NASA — and so it’s a whole extreme of emotions. People really bond when you open up. The people on my floor sort of have a thing, the older people learned as first-year students how to be open and build community and it’s passed on. It’s like a family. We take care of each other. Nobody locks their door; people share their computers. We play Intramurals together. We go out to eat together... For me to be able to say now that I’ve been built up and built up through that, and received that community, and enjoyed that, then I can go out and talk about that when I’m in student government. Then I can give back to the people who supported me and the people who are going to be leaders in the future.

Jim transformed his everyday experiences into a story that described why he chose to involve himself in leadership positions. In so doing, Jim revealed the importance of his residence hall experience, mainly due to the people with whom he lived. The narrative revealed a close, caring relationship between the floor members, similar to that of a family. This family shared both positive and negative emotions, as well as a mutual protection of their community.

Jim mentioned several aspects of what we have come to understand as the college experience, such as all night study sessions. He also hinted at the importance of older students in the maintenance of the floor’s culture. The upperclass students, according to Jim, “passed on” what they have learned about community living, ensuring that the positive aspects of the community survive each year. Jim also provided a list of activities that are important in maintaining community, reinforcing Mattingly’s (1991) statement that narratives convey cultural norms and values to newcomers.

Jim answered the simple question about the reasons behind his involvement

in student government. In so doing, however, he revealed in great depth what it was like for him to be a member of a close community. Without prompting from the interviewer, Jim attended to what was important to him and his experience: the relationships he has built with the people for whom he serves as a leader.

Access to Student and Campus Culture

Magolda (1999) studied student and campus culture by taking a campus tour given by a student tour guide. By assuming the role of participant-observer, Magolda gained access to the descriptions of campus norms and traditions given when the guide left the written script. Magolda heard how questions were answered and faculty and classes were described. Magolda was able to experience how the campus culture was conveyed to prospective new members of the community.

Listening to Jim tell his story, I gained access to student and campus culture as well. Jim conveyed directly and indirectly a distrust of campus administrators, and a perceived invalidation of student opinions on the part of campus administrators, a perception reinforced by articles and letters to the editor in the student newspaper. Jim spoke, for example, of the students' distrust regarding a recent decision made by the administration. Specifically, Jim stated:

This administration, students, that whole power struggle, if you want to call it that...I felt like this time, it was an issue that people cared about, not just me. It was an issue where it was clear that...even if the administration feels like it is doing the right thing, it is not being well received by students.

Later, Jim invoked a metaphor of oppression when he stated that the administration held a "sword over the students' head." This metaphor further illustrated the culture of distrust.

Throughout our interviews, it became clear that Jim's own beliefs clashed with the view of the administration. Several times he discussed the trustworthiness of students. For example, at one point he stated:

we're the ones living under these rules and what can we do to help? Why can't we assume some sort of authority here? It's almost that [the administration] doesn't trust us to make rational decisions...I don't see it that way because we've been getting things done... Students are the ones who have to follow the rules and you get a totally different perspective when you're writing a rule that you'll enforce or you're writing a rule that you'll be forced to follow.

Jim was able to articulate an argument against the perceived devaluation of student opinion, while also explaining why a distrust of the administration existed.

Jim later revealed another contradiction between his own experience and the culture of mistrust on campus. His familiarity with university administrators gained through his leadership positions allowed him to build a level of trust. Although he still characterized one university administrator as "slick," Jim admired the integrity and openness of several administrators.

The apparent contradiction between Jim's personal experience and the culture of mistrust on campus was telling. Listening to the narrative presented by Jim served as a caution against painting campus culture with too broad a brush. Although a general understanding of the culture can inform student affairs practice, we must understand that each student possesses his or her own culture, which influences how each student experiences the college. Narrative research reminds us of the idiosyncratic nature of humans, and that as researchers we must value and understand the differences and contradictions we observe.

Better-informed Theories

According to Atkinson (1998), "a personal narrative is the most helpful research approach available to gain a subjective perspective on and understanding of whatever the scope of the topic or issue is under consideration" (p. 13). Baxter Magolda (1992) used narrative research to inform her theory of cognitive development. Throughout her work, Baxter Magolda came to know the benefits of narrative research for greater understanding and better-informed theorizing. At this time she began to focus on qualitative methods to build her understanding of students.

Narrative researchers strive to find themes and major concepts in the narratives they hear. According to Rubin and Rubin (1995), "the goal is to integrate the themes and concepts into a theory that offers an accurate, detailed, yet subtle interpretation" (p. 226). The process of deconstructing the student narrative and reconstructing it into "overarching themes" (p. 251) addresses the concerns and informs the theories of student affairs. The interactive nature of narrative research allows for deeper inquiry into student life (Kuh & Andreas, 1991).

Narratives provide retrospective causal connections between choices and consequences. This is not, however, the type of causality assumed in positivist research (Polkinghorne, 1995). Through the collection of numerous individual cases, researchers amass a foundational understanding of potential consequences to analogous situations. The understanding of new actions, or a theoretically grounded assumption about student behavior, is based on this previous collection of understanding, "while being open to the specific and unique elements that make the new episode different from all that have gone before" (p. 11).

The amassing of narrative understanding through narrative research thus provides a depth of understanding of student behavior. Polkinghorne (1995) continued by stating:

the more varied and extensive one's collection of storied explanatory descriptions of previous actions, the more likely that one can draw on a similar remembered episode for an initial understanding of the new situation and the more likely that one will appreciate and search for the elements that make the new different from the recalled instance. (p. 11)

Thus, increased exposure to narrative research, both as a practitioner and a consumer, broadens one's collection of stories, providing a greater understanding of the commonalities and differences in student development.

Implications for Student Affairs

An increased use of qualitative methods, specifically narrative interpretation, in higher education holds several implications for student affairs. Beyond the benefits of narrative interpretation discussed above, the incorporation of narrative research means an acceptance of the epistemological assumptions of qualitative research. These assumptions will influence how research is completed.

The increased use of narrative research by student affairs has the potential to encourage the growth and development of college students. Narrative research, as do many qualitative research methods, focuses on relationships (Oakley, 1981). Relationships between students and professionals have potentially positive effects on the students (Astin, 1993). Finally, the process of creating a narrative is reflective and encourages growth in the teller (Bloom, 1998; Clandinin & Connelly, 1991).

Epistemological Assumptions

Traditional positivist research and qualitative research make several different assumptions, especially regarding epistemology. The two methodologies also have different goals for research (Patton, 1991). The increased use of narrative interpretation, and other qualitative methods, in higher education requires that researchers shift their epistemological assumptions from those of the positivist methodology to those more congruent with qualitative methodology.

Positivist methodology assumes that knowledge comes from correct theorizing or direct observation of some event (Patton, 1991). Researchers can prove a reality by replicating results of an experiment. One major goal of quantitative research thus becomes the replication of results that leads to a clearer picture of truth, and the support of a hypothesis.

Under a qualitative paradigm, researchers attain knowledge indirectly, through interpretation (Patton, 1991). In the case of narrative research, for example, knowledge is interpreted first by the teller of a narrative and then by the researcher. Qualitative researchers assume that truth is fluid, that knowledge is context-bound, and that multiple realities exist (Baxter Magolda, 1992).

Unlike positivist research, qualitative research does not begin with a hypothesis (Atkinson, 1998). The findings of qualitative inquiry direct any resulting theory, rather than the hypothetical theory directing the research, as is the case under a positivist paradigm. The goal of qualitative research, then, is to gain a better understanding of an event or situation from the perspective of the respondent (Patton, 1991).

Student affairs researchers should not strive for the ultimate theory that explains and predicts student behavior. Such a theory is unattainable. We must, therefore, understand the importance of context, multiple realities, and inductive reasoning (Baxter Magolda, 1992). Our theories should highlight the similarities of the students we study, while not diminishing the differences. Narrative inquiry allows researchers to fully develop those differences.

Growth through Relationships

Narrative research methods focus on relationship building between the respondent and the researcher (Oakley, 1981). An interview, the data collection instrument of narrative research, is a "pseudo-conversation" (p. 32). Although interviews have rules that are not part of a conversation among peers, the interview establishes a rapport between the participants. According to Oakley, interviews often establish honest, interactive relationships outside of the interview process.

Building a relationship that influences both the respondent and the researcher, established on mutual respect, trust, and disclosure, should be a goal of the interview process (Bloom, 1998). Relationships between student affairs professionals and the students with whom we work are the cornerstone of the profession. Student affairs professionals mentor students and serve as role models for appropriate adult behavior. Participating in interviews to collect narrative data, therefore, is one tool for establishing the beneficial relationships with students that student affairs professionals desire.

Although the relationship between Jim and I did not reach the level of intimacy discussed by Bloom (1998), it remained collegial long after the study ended. Reflecting upon our time together, I believe a mutual relationship could have developed as a result of our research relationship. Jim and I shared many common characteristics, such as gender, race, and childhoods spent in small midwestern towns. There were also many areas in which I could have, and did, grow as a result of my relationship with Jim, and him from me. Circumstances, such as our busy schedules as students and my status as a recently married, commuter student, unfortunately hindered the establishment of a mutual enhancing friendship.

Growth through Reflection

The reflective nature of narrative research is a fundamental method for growth (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991). The "storying and restorying of one's life" (p. 259) is integral to self-understanding. When students tell their stories, they must recreate the meaning of their experiences; they must understand their experience and find the words to relate it to the listener. Throughout this process, students are forced to examine previously unexamined values and beliefs (Kuh & Andreas, 1991; Mattingly, 1991).

During my work with Jim, I ended each of our meetings with the question, "What have you learned from your role on student government?" Over the 3 months we worked together, Jim's answer changed from superficial to more in-depth and reflective. Initially, Jim stated that his new-found knowledge of parliamentary procedures was the most important outcome of his student government work. During our last meeting, Jim discussed the integrity needed to be a senator, admitting that he finally realized that "not everybody is going to like your decisions." Further, he discussed his need to find and embrace his intrinsic motivation for his position.

The change in Jim's answers to my final questions was likely a combination of increased comfort with our relationship, as well as an increasingly deeper

reflective examination by Jim. Regardless, participation in our narrative study required Jim to reflect upon and verbalize the benefits of his student leadership position. The change in the quality of his answer to our wrap up question is indicative of the type of growth borne out of the narrative process.

Growth is not reserved solely for the respondent in the narrative process (Bloom, 1998). I too grew as a result of my interaction with Jim. As I reviewed the journal I kept as part of my research, I saw my confidence grow as a researcher. I came to critically examine several assumptions I had made regarding student leaders that were uninformed, and often absolutely wrong. I recognized how these assumptions affected my work with Jim and other student leaders during the course of my career. Most importantly, these assumptions will not guide my work with student leaders in the future.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to continue the valuable discussion regarding the efficacy of qualitative research methods begun by Magolda (1999), focusing specifically on the application of narrative inquiry to student affairs research and practice. Examples from the author's original research, along with supporting literature, illustrate how narrative research can provide access to student experiences, provide access to student and campus cultures, and enhance theories regarding college students. Furthermore, the article provides examples of how participation in the process of narrative inquiry can assist in the growth and development of students through building relationships with student affairs professionals and providing opportunities for reflection.

Student affairs professionals are expected to be experts on students, their cultures, and their environments (Kuh & Andreas, 1991). In order to achieve the breadth and depth needed to be experts, student affairs professionals must be engaged with the students with whom they work. More so than other research methods, narrative inquiry provides an opportunity for student affairs professionals to engage in extensive conversations with students, listening to the stories students tell. By examining the narrative of students' stories, student affairs professionals stand to gain a greater understanding of student experiences and cultures, build relationships that benefit both parties, and better inform theories that guide our professional decisions.

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