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Preface

Respect for the power of narrative—for questions derived from experiences, overheard conversations, and stories of professional lives—draws us to narrative inquiry. Inquiry begins for us when something—an event, gesture, story—calls our attention to the puzzlements contained within it. Narrative lodges within our cells. We attune our mind’s eye to the stories that will inform our teaching and learning about literacy and language education, and we engage in narrative inquiry and research to illuminate the hidden, the unseen, and the neglected details of meaning as well as those that offer multiple perspectives on various aspects of learning and teaching multifarious literacies.

OPENING SPACES FOR INQUIRY

We start by puzzling out brief narrative moments. From these first glimpses, potential inquiry spaces open. Among the *narrative nuggets* gifted to us recently:

Ninth grader Aidan says, “The best thing about summer was that I read *Catcher* four times. I never read a book more than once, and this is the first book I really liked.” Just imagine the stories Aidan could tell about his reading experiences both during the summer and before. We have much to learn from Aidan about motivation, the nature of books, teaching literature, and other areas we can’t even fathom.

“In our department, there is a HUGE debate and teachers are really adamant in their positions,” says Zoe, a middle school language arts teacher, “on whether our students should be allowed

to revise their writing on computers." What are the stories behind this debate? What are the stories behind the word *allowed*? Imagine what we might learn from the stories of teachers who hold such resolute positions? What might their students tell about their experiences with school-assigned and self-sponsored writing on computers? What might this group of teachers learn if they used the collection of stories to inquire for themselves?

Lara describes her attempt to produce a written account of a recorded oral narrative by one of her participants. "Today I feel like a failure! I have this uneasy feeling every time I read the transcripts. I was face-to-face with Jiao this morning, and I realized I don't trust that she can articulate her experiences with her limited English!" Imagine how a cluster of Lara's narratives on the research processes and relationship with participants might serve to further her inquiry. What experiences lead to her uneasiness? How did trying to shape an oral text into a written one lead to her realization? How might Jiao, *embodied* and face-to-face rather than distanced through recording and transcription, affect Lara's realization? What stories might Jiao tell of this experience? How do Lara's stories of this research dilemma come together with other researchers' stories?

Nathan visited a first-year teacher's classroom where silent sustained reading (SSR) is mandated for the first 20 minutes of every ELA class period. He described his experience in a student teaching seminar: "I'm looking around and seeing that students are not reading. They are quiet, but not reading. Jania rolls her pen back and forth on the desk. Rashana exaggerates a yawn every minute or two. Isaiah's book is open, but his cell phone is tucked in the pages." Nathan looks at his colleagues and says, "I remember my grandmother used to say that you can bridge a river but not an ocean. This feels like an ocean to me."

We imagine so many stories that need be told. From those who mandate SSR, to the teachers who implement the mandate, to the students who must live with the mandate daily, these narratives of experience might inform a more interpretive understanding of SSR, avoiding the relativism created by mandated practices. Imagine the narratives that could be told about bridging rivers and oceans!

These narrative nuggets are examples of what things provoke us to inquire. As literacy educators and researchers, we stand beside, behind, and within narratives that help us understand literacy as more than a subject, series of activities, curriculum, or acts of reading and writing. Narratives told with struggle and grace—the intimacy of response, unexpected revelations, a missing detail supplied—create spaces for us to explore the complex and important work of literacy learning and teaching and the roles of language, literature, and writing in our lives. In our narratives, we strive to present perspectives, invite dialogue, and nurture thoughtful interpretations about how literacy and becoming literate are not school-work but world-work.

Both of us wrote narrative dissertations and have continued to develop our uses of narrative inquiry and research. Ruth co-authored a book about writing qualitative research (Ely, Vinz, Anzul, & Downing, 1997), to be discussed at greater length in Chapter 7. Both of us experimented with multiple ways of narrating our teaching stories in various books and journals, and we also collaborated with others to help us tell our stories of teaching and learning. As we continued to develop methods of narrative inquiry in our own work, we experienced the way in which such inquiry always renews itself, the ways in which form and function enrich one another. Narrative inquiry has taught us a great deal about issues of language and literacy that we might not have learned otherwise. In this book, we invite you to consider narrative inquiry as a way of researching, learning, and reflecting.

We prefer the personal reflections of researchers in books such as Van Maanen's *Tales of the Field* (1988) and the teacher stories that both assert and embody narrative methods, such as Stock's *Dialogic Curriculum* (1995) and Paley's *Wally's Stories* (1986). But the book by David's former student and advisee, Gian Pagnucci, *Living the Narrative Life* (2004), inspired us to write this book. He reminds us just how important it is to share our thinking with others.

TO YOU, OUR READER

As we write, we imagine you, our readers, as individuals very much like us, researchers interested in literacy education. We imagine some of you to be graduate students determining how to conduct an extended research project, one that fulfills expectations for a thesis

and allows you to investigate complex issues from various perspectives. We imagine others of you to be seasoned researchers interested in extending your knowledge of narrative inquiry or planning a particular study that will involve the use of narratives of some kind.

Throughout this book, you will find us making a case, as others have before us, for narrative as a fundamental way of thinking. We describe how narrative works “in relation” to the telling of a story or stories. We’ll provide discussions of researchers’ use of narrative inquiry to inspire you to create academic work as imaginative as it is responsible.

This book draws heavily on our experiences in writing and teaching and follows the various ways we approach narrative inquiry and story-writing in our teaching, research, and writing. Some of the examples explore various forms narrative might take and the rich sources of understanding present therein. You will find discussions on the nature of narrative and examples of narrative inquiry in teaching and learning.

Each chapter that follows will tell part of the story of our experience with narrative as a way of inquiring and researching. The plot of this book is set down to involve you as a character in this journey. We will ask you to imagine yourself in particular acts of researching and to pause in the reading to think through and write about your research interests and ideas. In the first three chapters, we introduce and illustrate uses for and ways of conducting narrative inquiry, and provide sources on the nature of narrative and narrative research along with an overview of narrative research in language and literacy education. We extend these discussions in the remaining chapters to demonstrate and discuss how narratives are constructed, the dispositions of narrative researchers and their ways of working, and the qualities of craft in narrative inquiries. In the final chapter, we offer a provocation about future considerations for narrative inquiry.

Throughout this book, we invite you to consider narrative inquiry as a way of researching the stories lives tell, those living in us, and those that might change our lives. As Okri (1997) suggests,

We live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives. (p. 46)

CHAPTER 1

Why Does Narrative Matter?

Nautical charts tell sailors where to beware of Scylla and Charybdis, how to read the stories of tides, and what a perfect storm might bring. Myths are the narratives of human chartings, too, the navigation and voyages of longing and desire and curiosity and power. Narratives of experience and of the imagination are the voyages of interpretation and analysis and unmaking. As Hardy (1968) suggested, “We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative” (p. 5). How does all this apply to narrative research in education?

Researchers in education who gravitate toward narrative inquiry are inherently interested in details, complexities, contexts, and stories of human experiences of learning and teaching. Narratives have the potential to provide complex explanations of student and teacher identities, to shed light on issues of social justice, or to reveal contradictions in practice. Some researchers are interested in story because it resists simple answers; some, because it sheds light on veiled issues that more regularized methods of research overlook. Narratives often reveal what has remained unsaid, what has been unspeakable. It reveals the importance of context, reflexivity, difference, and multiple identities and perspectives. Narrative inquiry helps us to see more carefully and completely. It compels us to care about people’s lives in all their complexity and often moves us to action.

Whether you are an experienced narrative researcher or just beginning your journey, there will be many questions that continue to tantalize. Why are narratives researched? What are the potential

purposes in doing so? What does narrative research ask and expect of researchers, participants, and audiences? How might narrative be used to gather, interpret, or analyze data?

If inquiry through narrative is one of our basic human activities, how and why must we teach it, how do we research with and from it, and what characteristics does narrative inquiry take in written forms? As researchers who have grappled with these questions for many years in our own teaching and scholarship, we know there are no easy or straightforward answers. However, throughout this book, we hope to help you learn what narrative inquiry is, and to share some of what we have discovered on our own journeys through the narrative labyrinth.

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH IN NARRATIVE INQUIRY?

In education, Clandinin and Connelly (1990) coined the term *narrative inquiry* to describe the potential and the role of storytelling in educational experience. Methods of analysis and critique are hard to come by, but the sources of narratives (curriculum materials, articles, presentations, anecdotes, gossip, and other artifacts) construct and represent meaning in the daily lives of educators. Narrative has the potential to present complexities and ways of acknowledging the influence of experience and culture on human learning and knowledge construction. They identify this research as “a way of life” in a type of work where researchers’ and participants’ stories “intermesh.” It is key to trust the uncertainty and tentativeness of this work. “In narrative thinking, interpretations of events can always be otherwise. There is a sense of tentativeness, usually expressed as a kind of uncertainty, about events’ meaning” (p. 31).

While we acknowledge that uncertainty is part of narrative processes, our many discussions on narrative have helped us tease out at least a starting point. We define *narrative* in its broadest sense—an account, tale, interview with narrator/s; artifact, object, or action with inherent narrative; co-constructed narratives—all containing a story or stories. In narrative research, then, form and function work reciprocally. Narratives have *narrators* or re-narrators—those who relate events, describe, question, tell, and show.

During the past 2 decades, narrative inquiry has gained acceptance in many fields, but particularly in education, where terms like *narrative*, *narratize*, *narrator*, *narrative inquiry*, and *storying* are defined variously. Because these terms are laden with meaning and are resistant to simple, consistent definitions, we invite you to come to understand them through examples and illustrations in this book. Our hope is that you will develop rich conceptual understandings of the vocabulary of narrative inquirers, not textbook-entry definitions. We have chosen to compose this book as a variety of narratives to illustrate some of the many possible ways that researchers use narrative to conduct inquiries. One question we hope to address is, “What is the research in narrative inquiry?” Finding the stories that you might want to tell (or those that compel you to tell them!) and then choosing among the various narrating strategies we will address in Chapter 7 to help you craft them, are only the first steps in narrative research processes. Narrative nuggets, such as those posed in the Preface, might nudge you to question further, to tell other stories, or to formalize a research plan. Stories are often the beginning of the inquiry. What can be learned from narrating or reading them? Research grows out of the telling, questioning, and rendering of narratives. What further questions are the stories provoking? We will consider these issues further in this chapter.

TANDEM TELLINGS: CONSTRUCTING NARRATIVES FOR INQUIRY

Narrative strategies give shape to the telling. To *narrate*, then, is to do more than “give” an account or “tell” a story. The verb *narrate* suggests shaping through strategies such as repetition, intensity, linkage, magnification, tensions, and/or interruptions. The verb, *narratize*, suggests strategies of shaping that situate and reveal—within and outside the rendering of the text—the hand of the researcher/writer, context/history, and all the supporting constructions. The authorial presence is made visible in the markings of the text and in the crafting and shaping of the experiences.

In the next section we’ll look at one way you might start the process, by having both researcher and participant do tandem tellings of classroom events.

A DEMONSTRATION: A TEACHING/LEARNING DILEMMA

Rochelle is in her fourth year of teaching in a school with a transitory population and high absentee rates. Her records show, averaging the first 3 years, that approximately 25.5% of her original class roster remained the same from the beginning to the end of the year. The remaining 74.5% averaged a stay of 1 to 4 months, with approximately 30% of this group staying less than a month. This tells one story of Rochelle's teaching experiences.

Take a moment before reading on to play out a narrative of what these statistics might mean to an English classroom. Imagine for a moment how the comings and goings of these adolescents might influence how a curriculum is designed, how lessons or units are taught, and the interpersonal relationships that may develop in the classroom. With these narratives you create swirling in your head, let's take a look at a couple of classroom moments through Rochelle's and Ruth's tandem tellings. Ruth has been invited by Rochelle to help her better understand how to work with her ninth-grade students, as what Rochelle considers to be sound teaching practices have not been working.

During Rochelle's teacher preparation program, she solidified her already strong beliefs that social networks augment student learning and motivation. She incorporated into her student teaching her own high school and liberal arts college experiences with collaborative project-based learning. She believed that students would benefit from small-group activities where they made decisions, solved problems, and demonstrated their learning. For her, reading was a social process where students worked to share ideas and learned from one another and the text.

Her first teaching job was in an urban high school where approximately 34% of the students lived in homeless shelters and moved quite frequently within the homeless shelter system. By Rochelle's fourth year, she was struggling to find ways to encourage collaborative learning with her students. This population—African American, Latino/a, Haitian, and Eastern European immigrants—was a racially and ethnically diverse group, but for many their unstable home lives provided a point of commonality in their discussions.

Rochelle was eager to be responsive to her students' needs. She realized that her beliefs about collaboration needed to bridge the

needs, conditions, and interests of her students in ways she had yet to determine. As a result of Rochelle's concerns, Ruth and Rochelle each decided to write narratives of moments of difficulty in the classroom and use these as the basis for discussions and reflections on teaching and learning. The gathering of these stories, then, is the beginning of the inquiry. *Shaping* and *crafting* them into narratives for further examination becomes an important next step.

RUTH'S NARRATIVE (NOVEMBER 15, 2005)

The boy I can't name turns his left shoulder into the group. All he can say is, "Ah don't want to talk no more." He says it with the exactness that assumes everyone will believe him.

Hunter responds. "Who is you tellin'? Ah'm tellin' you is picky, picky. You don't wanna talk no more? Don't then. I has an opinion and you can tighten your lips. Ah'm inspirin' Doris!"

If the new boy hears Hunter's comment he doesn't let on. He simply stands and walks away. He can see the teacher and two or three of his classmates standing between where he is and the door that he wants to get to. He weaves and bobs.

I hear the boy let the door close hard behind him and see him walk toward the staircase. He is one of three new students that I haven't met.

Later, sitting with Rochelle, she talks through her thoughts about this class period. "This collection of near strangers meets in this room every day, new ones added and old ones leaving day in and day out. Some days there is a polite hush as they sit side by side with people they barely know and are asked to talk about important issues. "They put on their thin armor," Rochelle says, with the emphasis on the word *thin*. "Even those who have friendships outside of class don't necessarily bring those inside, and then this constant turnover just seems to make it harder to get them working together. And then we might get an uneasy truce and then new ones come—like Hector."

I learn the boy's name now. Hector. For Rochelle, the incident with Hector is a familiar one that repeats a few times in the course of any given week. "Week after week," she says. She describes how "they just explode sometimes" and admits, "I'm