Stories of Value: researching values through narrative enquiry

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We are presently using the methodology of narrative enquiry to investigate how university teachers teach values and how they believe students learn values. This method has been developed by researchers such as Connelly and Clandinin, although it is not yet widely used in tertiary education research. Narrative enquiry is based on the understanding that we lead storied lives; that narrative can be a powerful way to locate and understand our values, experiences and learning. By uncovering, shaping and reflecting upon university teachers’ stories, we hope to illuminate some of the key pleasures and dilemmas in teaching values. We hope that these stories and our reflections will raise important questions about values and the practice of teaching them in the university context.

In our discussion we would like to examine our current research methods in the context of the values project. Firstly, what are the connections between the topic of values and the narratives we collect? It seems to us that these two ideas are linked by more than chance or our intellectual predilections. Our values are often most profoundly expressed in the stories we tell of conflicts, of choices to be made, and of joy or despair. And when we are told a story, with all its complex play of meaning, motivation and consequence, we often find that what we are coming to know is the experience of living with particular values in a particular world.

Secondly, as this project has progressed, we have recognised various ways in which narrative enquiry is problematic. For example, what is the place of narrative enquiry within the broad field of tertiary education research; how valid are our findings; what are the most appropriate means of collecting, working with and responding to narratives; what is the role of the researcher; what do truth, critique, anonymity and respect mean when, as researchers, we ask strangers for their stories and propose to make them more widely available? Far from being abstract concerns, these questions have a direct and unavoidable impact on our interactions with our participants, our reflections on their stories, and our discussions about the forms in which the research will be made public.

We warmly invite discussion and comment on these issues.

Some key narrative enquiry references:


