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**Using personal narrative and other stories  
in educational research:  
Issues of validity and truthfulness**  
by  
**Morwenna Griffiths**

Keynote presentation  
at  
**First International Conference on Educational Research for  
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**Using personal narrative and other stories in educational research:  
Issues of validity and truthfulness.  
Morwenna Griffiths**

*Introduction*

In this paper I argue that stories are essential in educational research, for policy and improving practice, including in (indeed *especially* in) those parts of the world which are not self-defined as ‘the West’. I also argue that it is essential that educational researchers are clear about the difference between the use of stories as research and their use as anecdote, rhetoric or journalism. Or, in the case of stories in other modes, researchers are clear about the difference between the use of songs, dances or visual arts as research and their use in performances or exhibitions.

These ideas were developed for the First International Conference on Educational Research for Development, which was organised and held in Addis Ababa. The argument addresses a central aim of the conference: to create a global discussion forum on the roles of research for policy and for improving practice. The paper is predicated on the assumption that discussion is meaningful when the participants acknowledge differences and explore where useful similarities occur. Mindful of this, the paper focuses on issues of research methodology that are relevant globally, but grounds them in some specific contexts to be found in sub-Saharan Africa and in the Arab region, as well as in the continents of Europe and North America. This argument itself points to the significance of contextual as opposed to generalizable knowledge. The argument also points to the significance of positionality in research, and it is therefore important to acknowledge that I, the author, live and work in the UK and that this will influence and constrain my perspectives and understanding.

This paper draws on an article I wrote with Gale Macleod in which we discussed how far narrative research provides evidence that educational policy makers can confidently use (Griffiths and Macleod, 2008). We were focusing on the UK context, but here the focus is global. The scope is wider in another sense too, since it has become apparent to me that the argument could encompass many modes of story telling. Originally we only considered stories which can be written down: stories that might be told orally, taped and transcribed, or that might be written down by their authors. But stories are often told in other ways, including through dance, song, and visual representation. These are, arguably, especially relevant in those parts of the world which depend less on the written word and where literacy is not widespread.

*A world of difference*

All too often, it is assumed by Westerners that knowledge generated in their own specific contexts is generalizable across all countries and cultures. As the Palestinian scholar, André Elias Mazawi says, the notions of the knowledge society and of development have to be understood in relation to configurations of power – national, regional and global – over the the backdrop of *struggles which occur over what is defined as knowledge and what is valued as development* (Mazawi, 2008a, my italics). Taking the example of knowledge about educational leadership, he points out that (Mazawi, 2008b, 80):

The uncritical extension to the Arab region of educational leadership models developed in Western societies dismisses vital cultural dimensions of local

contexts of conflict and their political and geopolitical underpinnings. This effectively attracts attention away from the core social and political issues that impact schooling in the Arab region. It also constructs educational leadership in ways that operate an ontological and epistemic disjuncture between the experiential realities of educators and the formal ways through which their professional judgements and performance are assessed.

In a thoughtful article reflecting on her years of experience as a Westerner working in the Education sector in Africa, Brigit Brock-Ute explores the issue of the West exporting assumptions about knowledge and education. She draws on the work of Catherine Odora, a Ugandan scholar, who (Brock-Ute, 2002, 76):

discusses the need for creating a space in contemporary education discourse that is more tolerant, more sensitive to realities *other than* the overwhelming Western one. She finds that discussing indigenous education today compels us to come to terms with the situation in which even the social construction of a people's reality is and has been constantly defined elsewhere. Discussing indigenous education, according to Odora, 'is about *asking why the school building is always quadrangled even where the local setting around it has round huts*' (Odora, 1994: 62 - italics added by Brock-Ute).

Brock-Ute and Odora also draw attention to oversimplifications and homogenisations found in terms such as 'the developing world' or 'sub-Saharan Africa'. Such oversimplifications distort the facts. Consider three countries: Botswana, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone. They are all in 'the developing world' (and we might wish to reflect on the oddness of the term, 'developing world', which implies that countries like Britain or Canada are *not* developing!); they are all African; they are all sub-Saharan; and they all use English as a medium of education. But there are immense differences between them. They each have very different histories, particularly in relation to their encounters with Europe and North America: their experiences of wars, conquests, trade, colonialisation and international aid. Their populations live in very different religious and cultural contexts, and they differ hugely in their physical geographies. It should also not be forgotten that there are big differences *within* each of these countries in terms of: languages spoken; cultural practices; living conditions in rural and urban areas; settlement in highlands, lowlands, deserts and forest; and political relationships to the government.

*What kinds of knowledge are needed in education?*

In the face of this kind of oversimplification and the diversity it conceals, the question arises: what kinds of knowledge are needed in education? Very often an emphasis is placed on a need for generalizable and universal knowledge: knowledge that applies everywhere, all the time and to everybody. The success of such knowledge in the physical and biological sciences may be a reason for hoping that equal success may be found in education. But such sciences are unaffected by the perceptions, actions, desires and hopes of people. For example, we may note that different human cultures or religions do not affect either the action of water on stone or the effect of bilharzia on the human intestine. But knowledge about learning how to read, to philosophise, to teach, or to manage a school will vary with social, physical and economic contexts. While there is certainly a place in educational research for the methods of the physical and biological sciences, the knowledge so generated can only present an incomplete picture, of limited usefulness for practice or policy making in specific contexts.

Inevitably, the knowledge generated by the methods of physical and biological sciences relates to broad similarities in the members of a given population, or to their easily measurable attributes. There can be no doubt that these similarities and measurements are often significant and relevant for policy and practice. To take just the examples of school attendance and literacy rates: it is useful for policy makers to know the percentage of the population in school for any given age range. And it may be useful for them to know the percentage of that population who are girls, or migrants, or who live in the city. Moreover it is important for policy makers to gather statistics about literacy levels among the population at large and also among particular sections of it. Equally, it is useful for teachers to know broad patterns of human development of language or fine motor skills if they are to teach reading and writing.

While policy makers need to know these broad similarities, on their own they are not enough to guide policy. Attendance statistics need to be known, but if educational policy makers want to do something about attendance, then they need to know something about the reasons behind the numbers. Similarly for teachers, trying to decide what is best for their students. Teachers faced with non-attendance are helped by knowledge of broad patterns beyond their own school and classroom. But they also need to know the particular conditions facing their own students. Again, statistics on literacy need to be known but policy makers may need to know more about why some students are not literate, and why some sections of the student population (girls, migrants, urban dwellers) are more (or less) literate than others. Teachers need to know much more about the individual and groups of human beings who are their students, before they can decide on the best approach to teaching literacy.

The previous paragraph was written as if ‘schooling’, ‘school attendance’ and ‘literacy’ were well understood concepts across countries and cultures. If that were true, perhaps there would be only a little contextualisation needed to augment the generalized knowledge. But that would be to oversimplify the complexity of educational policy and practice. All of these terms come laden with cultural, social, economic, historical, religious and political overtones which affect how they are understood in different contexts. Even in the West it can be difficult to collect cross-national statistics on these matters, because different understandings hold about what counts as school (rather than, say, college or university or apprenticeship) or attendance (how much attendance counts as attendance?) or literacy (what level, what medium, what way of testing is relevant?). Similarly for literacy, which I discuss in more detail in the next section.

#### *The example of literacy.*

In this section I use specific examples to point up some of the complexities in thinking about literacy, introduced by differences between and within different countries. In doing so I am also demonstrating the power of the individual, context-dependent, human story to show situations which are not generalizable, but which are instructive. They show specific educational situations and issues which can illuminate different but equally specific educational situations and issues which are similar but not identical. At the end of the paper I return to this question of instructive and illuminating knowledge.

The first situation I offer comes from Botswana. Botswana, like so many countries, has many peoples in it, including the San people (formerly known to much of the

world as Bushmen). Imagine the scene. I am visiting a Year 5 class (ages 9 and upward) in a school deep in rural Botswana. It has taken hours to reach it from the nearest small town, driving not on tar but on deep sand. It is indeed, as Catherine Odoro says, one of the few rectangular buildings in the village. Another one is the small shop and bar. Otherwise the buildings are neat, round houses each set in a fenced compound. The school group of buildings includes the teachers' homes. The teachers live apart from the rest of the village in rectangular government houses. Unlike the villagers who are all San people, they are native speakers of Setswana. The language of education is Setswana and English. I take a photograph of one of the children. It would be hard to tell from the photograph that she is not from the UK. She sits at a desk, in her blue uniform (provided by the government), resting her hand on her cheek, her elbow on her desk, her pencil in her hand, looking down at the exercise book in which she should be writing. In my experience, children in primary schools often look like this: writing is difficult.

The next situation comes from the UK. This time I am visiting a city school for pupils with severe or profound learning disabilities. Again I take a photograph, this time of two teenagers. They are learning to make films using video. Many of them communicate much better through visual means than through words or writing. I am there so that they can interview me as part of their project. My photograph shows two young people and a technician standing round the tripod where the video camera is mounted. Later they will learn to edit it and integrate the interview into a longer film for a CD.

The third situation I offer is again from a rural primary school, but this time in the USA. I took a photograph when I was there, doing some research with the teacher in a first year class (ages 6-7). The picture shows a corner of this well-stocked classroom of about twenty pupils. A child at the front is sitting at a desk, working at a large sheet of paper, making a story book by drawing and writing. In the background is a large display board decorated with cartoon characters, with speech bubbles coming out of their mouths. Children's work is mounted on the board, under the heading 'Our Wintry Work'. (There was deep snow outside.) Above this is another notice: 'WRITING'. There is also a set of shelves with boxes of writing implements and piles of paper for the children to use.

Each of these situations are ones in which literacy is being taught. All of them are state schools: these students are benefiting from the ordinary policy and practice of their countries. However the differences are immediate, striking and significant. What is the meaning of literacy for the San child? And what literacy policy and pedagogical practices are appropriate for her? She is learning to write in her second or third language; her classroom has a few books, all text books; the displays are posters from the education ministry; her home and village contains very little printed material of any kind and very little electronic equipment either (she will be pleased to get a copy of my photograph); she is unlikely to go on to secondary, let alone tertiary education (though it is possible). In contrast, the Primary 1 children in the USA are learning to write in their first language; the classroom is full of books and other printed material, including text books but also including books and posters for the children simply to enjoy; the children come from homes full of printed material of all kinds, even if their parents are not well-educated, and there is an abundance of electronic devices, including computers, cameras, recorders and mobile phones. All these children will

continue their education at secondary level and most of them at tertiary level too. The teenagers in the UK are different again. They have severe learning disabilities, but are able to achieve a beginning of media literacy, something that must become increasingly relevant as electronic communication expands. However they, like the children in the USA, are surrounded by print and books, at school and at home. It is likely that in spite of their learning disabilities they will be able to understand a lot about public communications and the uses of verbal and visual literacies. One of these teenagers confidently and competently presented a talk, using visual material, to a lecture hall full of student teachers on a teacher education course.

Similar differences can be found between schools in the same country, especially large, heterogeneous ones. Ethiopia provides just one example. Again with reference to literacy, consider primary schools in Addis Ababa and schools in rural Tigray. They can be compared using many of the same factors I used in my international comparisons. The schools can be compared in terms of first language of children, the amount of printed material in the classroom and in the environment outside the school, familiarity with electronic communication, and the chances of going on to secondary and tertiary stages. All of these factors are significant when deciding national and local policy and all of them will constrain teaching approaches.

A literacy statistic will hide these significant differences. Further, the definition of literacy used in the statistics will hide different sets of factors. Commonly used definitions of literacy will give very different results (and imply different strategies) for these children. One widely used criterion in sub-Saharan Africa, 'the ability to read easily or with difficulty a letter or a newspaper', may be compared with another equally widely used, 'can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his or her everyday life'. (See Aitcheson and Alidou, 2009.) What do those two statements mean to the San child? to the American child? to the British teenager? or to the Ethiopian child in the city of Addis Ababa or in rural Tigray? The meaning attached to a letter or a newspaper is not the same cross culturally. Even the ability to write a short statement will mean something different to a child in a community where literacy is needed and assumed, and to a child where it is not. So what policy is needed about literacy levels? And how should teachers approach the task of teaching children to read and to use electronic communication? (And how should teacher educators use research to help them do that?)

### *Trustworthy narratives*

I have been using narratives drawn from my experience. I offer them as a way of grounding an abstract argument about the meaning and conditions of literacy. I hope they have achieved their purpose of drawing attention to the significance of understanding specific contexts in order to interpret information gathered more generally. I also hope they have achieved their purpose of showing how assumptions that are made by Westerners about those contexts may be seriously mistaken.

The stories I told are not the products of research. They function in this argument as rhetoric and anecdote. You, the reader, may believe them, but equally you may be sceptical. For me, the story teller, they are part of my own personal knowledge, but I am well aware that they are not validated in any way that would mean that you, the reader, have good reason to trust them. To take this point further, I may have tried to be strictly faithful to the facts or I may have fictionalised some aspects of the stories,

perhaps in order to maintain confidentiality, or to bring together various aspects of the truth as I perceive it. My hope is that you may recognise them as being true enough for you to learn from. But perhaps they do not ring true for you.

I now go on to argue that it is possible to produce trustworthy knowledge of particular contexts of the kind that educational research can provide. To put this in more technical language, I argue for an *epistemology of the unique and particular*. This is a phrase I have taken from the philosopher Adriana Cavarero (2002). I also argue that this is a kind of knowledge that is needed by policy makers and teachers. Just as with the more familiar epistemology of the general and universalizable, an epistemology of the unique and particular must have a means of establishing sound, trustworthy knowledge. Research representations of the unique and particular might take the form of narrative, story, song, poem, performance or image, and there must be a way of distinguishing them from other narratives, stories, songs, poems, performances or images which do not have this status.

In order to make the argument I first present some technical terms drawn from Aristotle. Aristotle's useful distinctions are usually discussed using his original Greek terms because they have no simple translation in English (and were technical uses of common words even in ancient Greece). Aristotle distinguished the practical wisdom (*phronesis*) needed to work with practical knowledge (*praxis*) from the theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) and theoretical understanding (*episteme*) needed to carry out enquiry into timeless truths (*theoria*). *Praxis* is the kind of practical knowledge needed for the social and moral judgements made by the *phronimos* (the possessor of *phronesis*). Aristotle also distinguished practical wisdom (*phronesis*) from the expertise (*techne*) needed to apply technical knowledge (*poiesis*) when making things.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle shows that all three of these kinds of knowledge are required, and each are characteristic of different purposes. Knowledge of timeless truths is, for Aristotle, the most excellent kind of knowledge. It is undertaken for its own sake out of a sense of wonder and of a pure desire to know. It should not be confused with *praxis*, which is the knowledge that is needed for working with human beings (for example, in policy making and teaching). Nor should it be confused with *poiesis*, which is the knowledge that is used to control the physical or biological worlds (for example, in engineering, surgery or the manufacture of household objects like cups or chairs).

The success of technical knowledge in engineering, medicine and manufacturing has led some people to hope that education, too, can be improved through technical means. But this is to confuse two kinds of knowledge, *praxis* and *techne*. As Cavarero helpfully puts it, *praxis* is concerned with the 'shared and relational space generated by the words and deeds of a plurality of human beings' (Cavarero, 2002, p.506).

*Techne*, is different. Joseph Dunne explains:

*Techne* is the kind of knowledge possessed by an expert maker: it gives him a clear conception of the why and wherefore, the how and with-what of the making process and enables him, through the capacity to offer a rational account of it, to preside over his activity with secure mastery. (Dunne, 1993, p. 9)

In contrast, *praxis* requires personal wisdom and understanding, not just expertise. To quote Dunne again:

[*Praxis*] is conduct in a public space with others in which a person, without ulterior purpose and with a view to no object detachable from himself, acts in such a way as to realise excellences that he has come to appreciate in his community as constitutive of a worthwhile way of life. ... *praxis* required for its regulation a kind of knowledge that was more personal and experiential, more supple and less formulable, than the knowledge conferred by *techne*. (1993, p. 10)

Dunne's explanation mentions knowledge that is personal and experiential. That is, it is made up of evidence gathered personally as well as from others, and applied with intelligence, judgement and logic. Knowledge of this sort is only rarely expressed in the form of generalities. Rather, it is remembered as stories (critical incidents in the past or memories of particular teachers or pupils, for instance), or as guidelines (such as, 'It is better to do mathematics lessons in the mornings when the students are fresh,' or 'Do not make a threat you will not carry out.')

Such knowledge may be expressed in images, in dialogue about shared experience, in gesture, or, perhaps, in metaphors or poems. In this article I focus on stories, rather than guidelines.

Personal and experiential knowledge need not remain simply personal. It can be expressed in ways which make it more publicly available. To do this requires attention to making it sound and trustworthy. There are two ways in which soundness and trustworthiness may be challenged. Firstly it may be challenged on the grounds of truth. Secondly its validity may be challenged. In the next two sections I consider each in turn, drawing on Bernard Williams' useful distinctions between truth and truthfulness, and between accuracy and sincerity (Williams, 2002).

### *Truth and truthfulness*

The question of truth is complicated: there are difficult issues about its nature. Some researchers claim that truth does not exist at all, though there may be many truths. These multi-sided and complex discussions take place throughout the social sciences and the humanities. Education is no exception. David Bridges (2003) summarises some mainstream philosophical discussions about different theories of truth (correspondence, coherence, pragmatic, etc) in relation to education. Other recent discussions of truth in relation to educational research, can be found in Heikkinen *et al.* (2000, 2001), Hulton (2001), MacLure (2003) and in Walker and Unterhalter (2004).

Bernard Williams usefully suggests that for many research purposes it is more productive and constructive to focus on truthfulness than on truth. There is a well-known problem with truth. Two people may report on the same thing absolutely truthfully, and yet, owing to their differing perspectives and preconceptions, their accounts may not be the same in important respects. The likelihood is that only society's dominant perspectives and preconceptions will come to be called 'the truth', and this leads to widespread misconceptions. Williams points out that sceptics about truth within the humanities and social sciences are bothered by precisely this problem. That is, as he puts it, they exhibit 'this demand for truthfulness or (to put it less positively) this reflex against deceptiveness' even though they are sceptical about truth itself (Williams, 2002, p. 1).

Williams goes on to discuss truthfulness. He distinguishes two basic virtues associated with truthfulness: accuracy and sincerity. Judging accuracy and sincerity is a matter for judgement, for weighing evidence, for weighing up reasons to trust the teller. It is difficult to do. There are no infallible rules to guide these judgements about truth. However it is a familiar difficulty which we human beings overcome in order simply to carry on living in families, communities and society at large. In ordinary life we listen to and tell stories all the time. We need to judge how far they are accurate and told with sincerity. We know, and indeed expect, them to be partial, self-serving, entertaining, persuasive and to draw on imperfect memories. Judgements are even more difficult in the case of fictionalised accounts and poetic or visual representations (Bridges, 2003). Again, it is a familiar difficulty. Myths, fables, riddles and images are used the world over to convey truths. Ethiopia has a tradition of *azmari* singers who are sometimes tell uncomfortable truths in satirical verse. These familiar difficulties are an inevitable part of understanding the unique and particular, the singular and individual voice.

Researchers, like everyone else, need to make judgements of truthfulness. Of course, they do this at a personal level, producing personal knowledge, but research is public knowledge. Therefore, researchers need to make their judgements public and also to give an indication of the reasons for the way in which their judgements were reached. So a researcher needs to present the audience with evidence of how stories were produced, with what intended audience, and for what purpose. All of these factors affect accuracy and sincerity.

#### *Validity: quantitative and qualitative*

The previous section discussed truth and truthfulness in relation to the trustworthiness of personal narratives and stories. In this section I turn to the related question about how validity can be established. Most discussions within educational research use assumptions that have been drawn from the physical and biological sciences: from epistemologies of the general and universal, where numeric measurement is a basic tool. These sciences have developed a specialised, technical vocabulary of validity which suits their purposes. For the natural sciences, ‘validity’ determines whether the research truly measures that which it was intended to measure or how truthful the research results are. Not surprisingly this meaning has not translated to educational research very easily, especially for research which does not rely on measurement. But social science and the humanities need not, and should not, expect to take up a meaning that has been evolved for quite another epistemology. It is more useful to return to a more ordinary understanding of the term validity. This more ordinary understanding does not require either measurement or certainty.

The usual meaning of ‘validity’ can to be found in dictionary definitions. J.L. Austin’s comment applies. He argued that distinctions ‘in ordinary language work well for practical purposes’ and this is ‘no mean feat’ (Austin, 1979, 185). These distinctions build on what generations of human beings have needed to say when making judgements about the stories they are told. Dictionaries tell us that ‘valid’ was not originally a word especially associated with measurement; it comes from the Latin word, ‘*validus*’, which means ‘strong’. The dictionary definition gives four ways in which evidential strength may be found. Merriam-Webster (2006-7) provides the following four current definitions: (1) legal efficacy or force; (2) well grounded or justifiable: being at once relevant and meaningful; (3) having a conclusion correctly

derived from premises; (4) appropriate to the end in view – effective (as in every craft has its valid method’. The first of these evidently does not apply to educational research methods. The second, third and fourth are relevant, however.

The second dictionary definition of ‘valid’ draws attention to the way that a story might be truthful – both accurately and sincerely told – and yet not be relevant to the matter in hand. For a story to be relevant and meaningful it needs to be shown to be so with regard to its representativeness and/or the possibility it provides of re-framing the understanding of what is at issue. Sometimes narratives are significant precisely because they are ordinary. That is, they show something of the lived experience of ordinary life in all its complexity and with all the everyday differences between contexts. They are unique, individual, personal - but they are not atypical. That is their significance. The significance may arise because the stories of some individuals are rarely heard. In contrast, narratives may be significant precisely because they are *not* ordinary.

An example of how representativeness is significant in story, is provided by stories of people with low educational achievement in school. Two of the stories I told earlier are examples of such people. The teenagers I described learning to use video in the special school achieve very low results in comparison to other teenagers. These teenagers are, I think, ‘not atypical’. That is, I think they are broadly representative of teenagers with their level of learning difficulty. There is a lot of quantitative and qualitative research available about such young people. The stories of these two specific teenagers could add to this research, by showing something of their specific experiences, capabilities, aspirations, pleasures and frustrations in one school noted for its excellent provision in the creative arts. A unfocused, generalised view of pupils with special needs can become clearer and sharper. While I would expect their individual stories to challenge what we think we know about such young people, if I were using the stories as research I would need to establish how representative they are, and situate their stories within the context of similar ones.

I also described a San child learning to write. She is achieving low results in comparison to children her age elsewhere in Botswana and in the world. She is unlike the special needs students in the UK, in that stories and narratives from and about children like her are hardly ever heard publicly. There is very limited published research and knowledge available. As far as I know, she, like the UK teenagers, is ordinary: not atypical. But she is different from the teenagers in that voices like hers hardly figure in educational debates about policy and practice even in her own country, let alone in the rest of the world. So her story is worth telling regardless of whether she is individually exceptional. Her story would open a window onto a little noticed way of being. She is one of our own, a citizen of our world, equal in value to all of us, and she deserves to be represented; yet she has been marginalised. If I were presenting her story as research I would need to establish these views of mine by referring to policy and research on and with San people.

A third story of somebody with low educational achievement is provided by the world famous physicist, Albert Einstein. Einstein, as is well known, was not very successful at school. He got high marks in maths and physics, but not in other subjects. His schoolmaster wrote in his school report, ‘He will never amount to anything.’ He himself did not like school. He is reported as saying, ‘One had to cram all this stuff

into one's mind for the examinations, whether one liked it or not. This coercion had such a deterring effect on me that, after I had passed the final examination, I found the consideration of any scientific problems distasteful to me for an entire year.'

Einstein's story helps us, as educators, to reframe the issue of low educational achievement. He is not representative of most ordinary people: years after his death he is still one of the most famous people in the world. He is not rarely heard: he is very famous and his opinions can easily be found in various forms of publication. But stories like his are relevant to educational policy makers and teachers who too often frame low educational achievement as a matter of either innate ability or socio-economic conditions. Non-representative stories can help re-frame our views of low achievement, and so make us rethink educational policy and practice.

I have been arguing that the second dictionary definition shows that validity requires attention to issues of representativeness, marginalisation and framing. The third of the dictionary definitions of validity draws attention to the kinds of conclusion that would be drawn from a truthful narrative, even after these issues have been considered.

'Having a conclusion correctly derived from premises' is a more complex matter for story and performance than it is for logic and mathematics. The key issues here are representation, genre and literary quality. Representation refers to the way that a story is presented, not only by the teller, artist or performer, but also by the researcher, who is representing it (or, more accurately, re-representing it). All representation involves judgements and choices about editing, framing and form. Judgments and choices also need to be made about whether to present a representation as finished and definite or as just one possible presentation among many. Further decisions relate to genre which refers to the way that any story is influenced by the genres available – both to the original presenter and to the researcher. For instance, in the West, there tends to be an expectation of there being a hero(ine), who comes to a happy or tragic ending, perhaps with a moral attached. Other cultures will draw on their own artistic repertoires of particular characters and story lines.

The fourth of the dictionary definitions is also relevant. Literary and artistic quality is part of the craft of representation. Literary quality draws on genre, but, for some researchers, it can also be a wider concern than this. It refers to the power of a verbal, visual or performative representation to move people in the audience in some way: to make them think, and re-think; to make them feel differently or to empathise. Renuka Vithal calls this 'transformacy': the potential for a representation to effect transformative change in the reader (Vithal, 2002).

This discussion of the three relevant dictionary definitions of 'valid' draws attention to the significance of reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Reasons for trust and judgement are probably partly implicit and partly the result of experience. The audience for the research needs to make a judgment about how far to trust the evidence. All qualitative presentations are subject to a range of interpretations. Research accounts will be understood and interpreted according to what is known about the intentions and ideologies of the researcher, and of the personal and power relationships that structured the research. Gaps and silences may be noted. Intentions may be assessed. The relation between the story presenter, her audience and the researcher is brought into focus. Explicit reflexivity on the part of the researcher allows the reader to determine how much weight to place on the evidence presented.

### *Truthful and valid stories.*

I began by remarking that it is important to be able to tell the difference between stories used as research and other kinds of personal story, including anecdote, rhetoric, journalism, art for its own sake, parable and gossip. Stories used as research need to be demonstrably trustworthy in relation to their truth and validity. Further, as in all research, the story a researcher tells has itself to be shown to be trustworthy. So it is the responsibility of researchers to present research in such a way that judgements can be made about its truthfulness and validity by their audiences. To enable this, sound research needs to show that the researcher has taken account of the following.

- (1) Truthfulness: accuracy and sincerity.
- (2) Representativeness.
- (3) Representation.
- (4) Genre.
- (5) Literary quality.
- (6) Reflexivity.

Researchers need to set their judgments within their understanding of the cultural, social, political and personal contexts.

### *What difference does all this make?*

Personal narrative and stories use an epistemology of the unique and the particular. The knowledge that they generate is not the same as knowledge that comes from epistemologies of the general and universal. There are no timeless truths to be uncovered. There are no laws to be formulated. Contextual knowledge is probably more useful than generalised knowledge when formulating and carrying out complex educational policy or when carrying on the complicated business of teaching. For these purposes factual knowledge is less useful than qualities of understanding and wisdom. Stories made public and understood within the framework of individual experiences help cultivate these qualities. They show us other aspects of our world and in doing so illuminate our own small part of it. They help us question what we have taken for granted, to broaden our comprehension, and to deepen our insights.

Personal narratives and other stories in educational research are also a way for the majority of the world to put the knowledge constructed in the West into its place: useful, but *only* insofar as it is relevant to the particular contexts at hand. Thus, stories are an essential tool for developing countries in formulating their their own solutions and resolutions to their own educational issues and problems. In the long run there might even be the happy possibility that Westerners' self-belief in their own rightness and universality might be shaken.

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