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NARRATIVE ACCOUNT

Narrative Inquiry: Learning to Walk on Shifting Sands

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With its potential to illuminate both the processes of learning and their connections with various aspects of context (ranging from the personal to the sociopolitical) in which learning takes place, the research approach of narrative inquiry has, in recent years, been attracting more attention from educational researchers. However, relatively little work has been done to explore the ways in which narrative texts emerge as the result of a process of co-construction between participants and researchers. Extending the work carried out in my doctoral study, which focused on stories of learning French in Hong Kong, in this paper I describe how I reconstructed the narrative account of one participant ("IC") with two colleagues from *The Learner Development Journal* (Issue 5) who discussed and responded to my writing of this narrative account in six online meetings over a period of one year. I then reflect on the value of this reconstruction process, covering the additional insights gained into IC's narrative as well as more general reflections on the nature and value of narrative inquiry as a tool for educational research and learner development.

学習のプロセスと、学習が行われているコンテキストにおける様々な側面（個人的なものから社会政治的なものまで）との関連性の両方を明らかにする可能性を秘めたナラティブ・インクワイアリーは、近年、教育研究者の間で注目を集めている研究手法である。しかし、参加者と研究者の共同作業の結果として、どのようにナラティブ・テキストが生まれてくるのかを探る研究は、これまでほとんど行われていない。本稿では、香港でのフランス語学習の物語に焦点を当てた私の博士課程での研究を発展させ、一人の参加者 (IC) のナラティブ・アカウントを、*Learner Development Journal* (第5号) の2人の同僚と共に再構築した手法を説明する。再構築のプロセスとして、1年間にわたって6回のオンラインミーティングを行い、議論した。このプロセスの価値を省察し、ICの物語から得られた新たな洞察と、教育研究や学習者ディベロップメントのツールとしてのナラティブ・インクワイアリーの性質と価値に関する考察を行う。

En raison de son potentiel à éclairer à la fois les processus d'apprentissage et leurs liens avec divers aspects du contexte (allant du personnel au sociopolitique) dans lequel l'apprentissage s'inscrit, l'approche de recherche des récits de vie intéresse les chercheurs en éducation. Néanmoins, relativement peu de travaux ont été menés pour explorer la manière dont les textes narratifs émergent à la suite d'un processus de co-construction entre les participants et les chercheurs. Comme prolongement du travail réalisé pour mon étude doctorale qui portait sur des récits d'apprentissage du français à Hong Kong, je décris dans cet article comment j'ai reconstitué le récit d'une participante ("IC") avec deux collègues du *Learner Development Journal* Issue 5 au cours de six réunions en ligne sur une période d'un an. Je réfléchis ensuite à l'intérêt d'un tel processus, m'intéressant à ce qui a émergé de nouveau en lien avec le récit d'IC et en réfléchissant plus généralement à la nature et à l'intérêt des récits de vie en tant qu'outil de recherche pédagogique et de développement de l'apprenant.

Keywords

narrative inquiry, French learning, narrative co-construction, learner development

ナラティブ・インクワイアリー、フランス語学習、ナラティブを用いた共同構築、学習者ディベロップメント

récits de vie, apprentissage du français, co-construction narrative, développement de l'apprenant

IC was one of the four participants in my doctoral study on the topic of French learning in Hong Kong (de Beaufort, 2019; see also de Beaufort, 2021). This study used the approach of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Clandinin, 2013) to produce an account of the participants' experiences. What I intend to do in this paper is to focus on one participant, IC, firstly to reconstruct IC's narrative, drawing on the additional perspectives of two readers from our *Learner Development Journal* Issue 5 (LDJ5) group, and

secondly to reflect on the insights gained from this process of reconstruction. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) present readers as the third pillar of narrative inquiry, the two others being the inquirer (IC) and the inquirer (me). I am interested in exploring what can be learned from taking such an approach, especially with two readers who, at the start of this process, knew nothing about IC and little about the Hong Kong context.

What I also wish to do is to take some distance from a process I have been deeply involved with for several years. The process of data collection and inquiry lasted from the spring of 2014 to the summer of 2018 with IC, and formally ended in May 2019 when I submitted the completed version of my thesis. My participation in the LDJ5 project is thus also a way for me to deal with a frustration I experienced during my doctoral study, namely that I did not have the opportunity to discuss with others the connections between IC's life and her engagement with learning French. Occasionally, I had wondered if my interpretation of the meaning of French for her was plausible (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 18; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, pp. 184–185) and trustworthy (Barkhuizen et al., 2014, p. 90). Asking two outsiders to give me their views about the meaning of French for IC would be useful for me as a researcher, French teacher, and French speaker working in Hong Kong.

More generally, the theme of multilingual learner development in LDJ5 is of great interest for me. Hong Kong is a fitting place to study multilingualism; it is a territory with two official languages (English and Chinese),¹ and the education policy is one of biliteracy and trilingualism (Cantonese, Mandarin, and English). In addition, people like the participants in my study might have studied or been in contact with regional dialects or additional languages such as French. I myself am originally from France although I have lived outside France for more than 25 years, mainly in Asia (China, South Korea, and Macau) and in Hong Kong where I have resided since 2005. Professionally, I am a language teacher (French and English). At home, I mostly use English with my British husband. Apart from French and English, I speak a little Mandarin, having lived in Mainland China for about five years. I also have some familiarity with German, Hebrew, Korean and Italian from my school years or from my travels.

Organisation of This Narrative Account

This narrative account is organised as follows. I first provide some introductory background about IC and briefly introduce the concept of co-construction which led to IC's narrative. This is followed by a summary of my interpretation of the role of French and other languages in IC's life, drawn from my original doctoral study. Moving on to the reconstruction process I undertook with my two LDJ5 readers, which constitutes the heart of this paper, I first introduce the three questions I asked my readers. These formed the basis for discussion in our six Zoom meetings, which lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours and took place between March 2020 and March 2021. These meetings also served to exchange ideas on the process of narrative inquiry and to reflect on ourselves as researchers and participants in the LDJ5 project. After presenting my colleagues' responses to my three specific questions, I then summarise my overall reflections on these interactions, covering both the insights gained into the narrative inquiry process and the possible applications of narrative inquiry in education.

1. Article 9 of the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China stipulates the co-official language status of English alongside Chinese. However, as Poon (2010, p. 7) notes, "Chinese" is "ill-defined" but in Hong Kong it is usually taken to mean written Modern Standard Chinese and spoken Cantonese. Poon further explains that "[t]he spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese is Putonghua (or Mandarin), which is the national language in Mainland China and Taiwan. The written form of Cantonese is not accepted as standard written Chinese used in formal writing because Modern Standard Chinese is unanimously accepted as the only written form used in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and overseas Chinese communities." (Poon, 2007, p. 7)

In what follows, I include hyperlinks in various places. These are intended to give the reader the opportunity to access the text in the way and order s/he wishes, thus allowing for a deeper reading of this exploration. The hyperlinks are numbered for convenience of reference and there is no specific order in which to access them. Although there is no obligation to click on any of the hyperlinks, I recommend reading [PDF1](#), which concerns IC's experience of learning French and is the narrative I initially asked my two readers to read.

Introducing IC

IC was born in Hong Kong in a Cantonese-speaking family. Her father migrated to Hong Kong from China's Guangdong province at a young age, after the Chinese Civil War, and her mother comes from Macau. IC speaks the three main languages of Hong Kong (i.e., Cantonese, Mandarin, and English) as well as knowing some French and some Japanese. I first met IC during the academic year of 2006–2007, when she took two beginner French courses with me at a Hong Kong university. When I started my study in 2014, she was 27 years old. It took roughly four years—from the spring of 2014 to September 2018—for her stories of learning French to cohere into the narrative I presented at the end of my doctoral study and that I revisit here with my two LDJ colleagues.

I chose IC for this collaborative reconstruction for the same reasons as I included her in my doctoral study report. Among the other participants, she was the most able to verbalize her experiences in a detailed manner whilst demonstrating sustained curiosity about the inquiry. Every time we met, she asked about the progress of the study and her interest stimulated the self-reflection process and led to deep and interesting exchanges during the interviews. As the inquiry progressed, I came to realise that IC was gradually finding her own purpose for participating in the study, for example by enabling her to better understand her experiences and emotions during a transitional phase in Hong Kong's history. In other words, IC's example seems useful not only because of the content of the interviews, but also because her case deepens our understanding of participants' involvement in narrative inquiry and illustrates its power to transform (Barkhuizen, 2011, p. 397; Barkhuizen, 2009) and empower (Clandinin interviewed in O'Donoghue, 2012; McKenna, 2017). The transformational potential of narrative inquiry makes it highly relevant to considerations of multilingual learner development.

The Co-construction Process with IC

Narrative co-construction means that narratives emerge as a result of complex interactions between human actors and their environment. The researcher does not, and cannot, simply “step back.” Clandinin notes that narrative inquiry must begin by questioning one's assumptions and reflecting about the complexity in himself/herself as a condition to understand the complexities in others (Clandinin interviewed in McKenna, 2017; Clandinin, 2013, p. 36). This is to say that narrative inquiry starts with a process of becoming “wakeful” about all the narratives that shape us as people and researchers: “You cannot be wakeful to someone else if you are not wakeful to yourself” (Clandinin, interviewed in McKenna, 2017).

Acknowledging co-construction thus means that the observer becomes “part of what is viewed rather than separate from it” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 524, cited in Shkedi, 2005, p. 5; see also Clandinin, 2013, p. 24). During the inquiry process, whilst participants are reliving and telling their stories, the narrative inquirer is drawn into recalling and reliving past experiences and as s/he does so, new perspectives emerge. It is in this space where two experiences and two lives interconnect that a narrative text emerges, as was the case with IC and me. In noting this,

I refer to the principle of “verisimilitude” in narrative accounts (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 161). Verisimilitude includes, as one of its aspects, that the reporting of stories should “resonate with the experience of the researcher” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 99).

My Interpretation of the Role of French and Other Languages in IC’s Life

The main overall insight of my doctoral study of learning French in Hong Kong was that French could be characterised as an affordance for identity construction. French, along with other languages in the participants’ lives, can be seen as a symbolic tool to exercise agency and resist being positioned in a certain way. Even with what would, in conventional terms, be described as a limited level of proficiency, IC uses and appropriates aspects of French to agentively and creatively perform individual acts of resistance “in the interstices of power” laid bare in an otherwise constricting and normative environment (Barfield, 2019, p. 128; see also Pennycook, 2010, p. 129). This is also to say that languages are a way for IC to “assemble” herself according to what is important to her (Rampton, 2006, p. 12) (click on [PDF2](#)).

Linking between the micro level of individual practices and the macro level of group identities and political structures, French also appeared in IC’s story as a way to symbolically re-assert Hong Kong’s identity as a multilingual and multicultural city at a time of severe political crisis.

To clarify, I started meeting participants for my doctoral study in the spring of 2014. The autumn of 2014 will be remembered as a significant moment in Hong Kong’s history, as Hong Kong people, and especially a large number of youth (university and secondary students) assembled in the central districts of Hong Kong and paralyzed the heart of the city, including the financial and business districts for a period of about four months. This protest movement, known as the Umbrella Movement, gave voice to Hong Kong people’s wish to hold elections for their Chief Executive, the highest post of political power in this territory of about 7 million people. A significant portion of the Hong Kong population felt that it was time to push for this basic democratic right, as progress towards this goal had been promised in the agreement made between China and the U.K. in 1997.

Not surprisingly, the crisis brought about many tensions in Hong Kong society and ignited passionate debates about Hong Kong’s identity. IC’s concern for Hong Kong’s future and its ability to retain what she saw as its distinctive identity dominated many of the stories she shared with me at the time of the inquiry. At the same time, she expressed her concern about her own ability as an individual to make choices and live the life that she wanted to (click on [PDF3](#)).

My LDJ5 Colleagues’ Responses to IC’s Narrative

As already mentioned, during the original study I did not have the opportunity to reflect on my inquiry with another narrative inquiry researcher. Several times during my study, I felt the need to discuss the connections I had started to make between the various levels of context (personal, institutional and socio-political; see Barkhuizen, 2016, p. 663) and IC’s accounts of learning French. Amongst the questions I asked myself was whether it would be possible for somebody with less firsthand knowledge of the Hong Kong context to understand my interpretation of the meaning of French in IC’s life. Thus I was curious to find out how much of my co-construction experience would resonate with new readers.

I asked my two LDJ5 colleagues—our team of three making up one of the response communities as part of the LDJ5 project—to read IC’s final research text in the doctoral study

(click on [PDF1](#)) and to answer three questions. The questions and the responses from Reader A and Reader B are presented below in verbatim form so that the readers of this paper can “hear” the comments without interference from me. I then discuss the comments in the following section.

1. *Does this text make sense to you, or do you feel you need more information to come to the conclusions I have come to?*

Reader A: I get IC’s sense of unease and foreboding, and the unsettledness that she feels both in Hong Kong and living outside Hong Kong—of floating life, so to speak.

One of your conclusions is that “one of the main roles of French (as well as other languages and cultures, particularly English) was to symbolically re-assert Hong Kong’s identity as a multilingual and multicultural city at a time of severe political crisis.” I would also take that as re-asserting her own identity as a multilingual and multicultural rights-conscious / rights-custodial HK citizen person at a time of severe political crisis. In other words, it may be important to extend the articulation of “multilingual and multicultural” to include civil, social, political rights, and language rights—that she has particular freedoms in her own life and in her work not to be a slave to others, but rather to be interdependent and autonomous in the exercise of her rights, responsibilities, and freedoms.

Reader B: I remember you wrote somewhere something like an interview excerpt with IC, Britain occupied a small village and made HK, then Britain left, and now mainland China came to hold HK. When I read this, I had an impression that IC had a strong sense of history. I assume being multilingual is an essential part of her HK identity, as you mentioned. I guess the political agenda that affected her identity would not be only the current one, but also a historical one. It seems like the story of French is popping up a little bit suddenly for me.

One thing I don’t understand is why IC doesn’t appreciate Hong Kong culture. She says Hong Kong culture is not sophisticated. Even though she had a great pride for the Hong Kong identity as a cosmopolitan, why could she not have the same pride for the Hong Kong culture? Even that is exactly the symbol of a mixture of diversity. What is the time span between interviews? Is there any chance that the change of political situation during the period affects IC’s perception of HK culture and her identity?

2. *Do any of IC’s experiences resonate with you?*

Reader A: Very much so. The struggle to localise myself in other lands resonates very strongly with me. I’m struck by how IC decides to return to HK and make her life there to re-establish/re-create her sense of belonging, of “non-fractured” living, if you will, but risks even greater fracturation socio-politically. I feel in contrast an ongoing sense of dis-location in my life in Japan. I am here, but I am not of here.

Reader B: Yes, the experiences both you and IC had marginalized when you were using English in Britain and Kibbutz resonates with my experiences in the US and Korea. The difference between you/IC and me is I ran away from being in the situation which threatens me, but you stayed.

3. How likely is it that IC's experiences would resonate with learners in your culture?

Reader A: I think so, for students who may have returned or were born into mixed home environments and live multilingually with different languages, or live with a diverse linguistic repertoire in Japanese (including the use of non-standard varieties of Japanese). IC's story, from one perspective, is one of return migration, and how migration leaves individuals—especially the first generation—fractured about where they belong or desire to belong.

Reader B: One thing it is interesting to me is the lack of *genchi* / 現地 [the place the language is used]. One of my students conducted a small interview project in which she asked the university students who are taking a second foreign language course even though it is not compulsory. She found a couple of participants told their desire like “I want to go to ××, and use the language.” In IC's story, I could see the point [that IC is not particularly interested in visiting France]. I am wondering why.

Insights Gained from My LDJ5 Colleagues

Insight 1: IC's Narrative Resonates with a Wider Audience

One outcome of the process of reconstruction is that it has confirmed that readers living in and coming from other cultures could identify with IC's narrative, even though they may have had relatively limited knowledge of Hong Kong. Reader A shared this comment about what it meant to be multicultural and multilingual:

I wonder if this is the contested condition of groups who are positioned as minorities in disproportionate power imbalances as much as it is a normal state of affairs for societies that espouse multilingual policies as part of their imagined community. One can imagine a similar claim being made in terms of officially multilingual societies?

I reflected that although it might be true that IC's situation was similar to the position of any minorities living in a dominant culture (in our LDJ group, we talked about dialects and minorities in Japan), I nevertheless believe there are still distinctive aspects in different stories.

For IC, the representation of herself as multilingual and multicultural was important for her in a very personal way as well as a social way. First, even though her links with the French language were tenuous (she said she had half-forgotten it) and even though she had notions of French culture which lay mostly in her imagination (for example, she said: '*it's[French culture] just a creation... a perception*'), these connections gave her a feeling of being more accomplished not only because other Hong Kong people would look at her differently, but also because she was aware that learning languages would transform her general outlook on life:

IC: They [Hong Kong people] will be impressed that you can speak a third language, they will keep giving you some French to ask you to translate it, they may ask you is Agnes b. pronounced as Agnes b...

IC: ...people who are able to speak different language are having a broader sense in looking at things because language...making you look at things differently

And she wanted her audience (me, to start with, and other people who would come to read her narrative account) to appreciate this accomplishment, perhaps partly because she came from a family which did not have the same cosmopolitan outlook. In the inquiry, she talked

at length about a trip to London with her sister, who had rarely mixed with foreigners as she had. She described to me with many details the differences she had noticed between her sister and herself during that trip, for example:

IC: So last year... because I had a business trip in London so she [her sister] travelled with me which is her first time to go to London, Paris and Amsterdam and... I can feel that euh... she has a less exposure internationally than me

From multiple opportunities to interact with people from different cultures, IC was gradually observing changes in the way she thought about things, and she became proud of the doors this opened in her mind:

IC: I'm not a Chinese traditional person yeah... ..I'm quite o-p-e-n (said slowly) in terms of thoughts yeah... positively I'm opened to change

IC: When you step up outside you can see the reality differently

Moving from the personal to the social, she repeatedly talked about the multicultural character of Hong Kong society in trying to explain the uniqueness that Hong Kong identity entails, as well as to emphasize its complexities (click on [PDF 4](#)). For example, a part of Hong Kong's identity is inextricably linked to its past as a British colony, and this is still inscribed in an official document, the much-prized BNO (British National Overseas) passport:

IC: I get a BNO passport that means I'm born in Hong Kong before 1997, which is still under the colony of Britain. And...those local people like me will regard having a BNO passport is a real Hong Kongese more than getting a Hong Kong passport

Emphasising the multicultural character of Hong Kong is currently to be understood in the light of the ongoing socio-political tensions in Hong Kong. Reader A reflected that reinforcing Hong Kong's multicultural identity appeared to be a way for IC to "recreate and reproduce a cultural, socio-political and linguistic alternative to the threat of/growing domination of China."

However, more than emphasising one's multiculturalism as a way to differentiate oneself or claim space as a minority in a culturally dominant environment (as suggested by Reader A), I see IC's recurring narrative of multiculturalism as an urgent cry for help, a need to convince others (mainly me, and other readers of her narrative) and to inform the world of the situation in Hong Kong:

IC: I want those non-Hong Kongese people to understand so for example I have friends from France, Taiwan, Britain, somewhere else, I want them to know what exactly is happening in Hong Kong

Having said this, it could also be that I am influenced today by what has been happening in Hong Kong since I concluded the study. In 2019, the political tensions in Hong Kong escalated and led to decisive intervention by Beijing in the form of a national security law, which Hong Kongers are still learning to live with today. In other words, my reconstruction of IC's narrative is influenced by my having experienced some of the events in Hong Kong since the end of the original study, as elaborated in the next section.

Insight 2: The Changeable Nature of Narrative Texts Reflects the Changeable Nature of Lived Experience

An important insight gained from the feedback I received from my LDJ5 colleagues is that interpretations of others' experiences vary according to what is happening in one's life at the

moment of reading, as suggested by Reader A:

I'm writing this a couple of days after president Trump has declared publicly his intention to suppress the vote in the USA, and the 75th anniversary of the end of Second World War (or "defeat of Japan" according to some media sources). Sombre images and memorials to the devastating loss of life and wanton destructiveness of industrialised warfare in WW2. And then there's the pandemic, and all the impacts that it is having and will continue to have, not to mention the climate crisis, and whatever litany of crises we might wish to focus on.... I get IC's sense of unease and foreboding, and the unsettledness that she feels both in Hong Kong and living outside Hong Kong—of floating life, so to speak.

Reader A's comments suggest that his perception of unease and conflict in IC's narrative was heightened by media accounts of events taking place elsewhere in the world at the time (click on [PDF5](#)). This is to say that the construction, reconstruction and interpretation or re-interpretation of narratives always depends on perceptions of the surrounding environment at the time of writing or reading the narratives. Just as the researcher has one set of experiences and perceptions, readers can find their own set of resonances in a narrative. This does not mean that the original version was unreliable or in need of improvement, but rather that narrative texts are inherently changeable and never finalised (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 13; Connelly & Clandinin, 1995, p. 9).

The changeable nature of narrative texts also means that it is not only the result (the text) that matters, but also the process of deep reflection that the construction of the text triggers. As Clandinin repeatedly notes, taking part in narrative inquiry should be a form of empowerment for the participants, especially those who feel marginalised or are not usually listened to (see Clandinin being interviewed by O'Donoghue, 2012, and McKenna, 2017). Regarding the specific benefit of narrative texts for readers, Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 42) also note the "vicarious testing of life possibilities" that these texts inspire as they offer the power to imagine oneself differently.

Insight 3: New Perspectives on IC's Comments about Hong Kong Culture

During the inquiry with IC, I had the recurrent impression that she had an unshakable attachment and love for Hong Kong. Thus, I found it interesting that Reader B picked up on IC's parallel harsh criticism of her culture, which I had noted but not fully analysed or understood. Getting Readers A and B's perspectives helped me understand IC's apparent criticism better. Reader A's comments below helped me revisit the connection between IC's remarks and the wider socio-political context in Hong Kong:

Reader A: As I was reading through again, I questioned why IC should find it so hard to see "home-written" / "locally produced" HK literature and/or arts as being sophisticated or prestigious. That perhaps points to a cultural struggle of re-adjustment and re-appropriation to re-locate herself within a Hong Kong world of reference and resonance at the time of such political tension and confrontation with the PRC. My own understanding of this tension is that the Basic Law runs until 2047, so, for the young generation now and people of IC's age everyone who is resistant to the PRC's take-over of HK, they are already experiencing within their lifetimes—and which they would face in any case (no matter the democracy protests and political moves happening now)—and are seeing a fundamental and intensifying realignment of their region as a political and economic entity, but also of their everyday lives and lifeworlds towards the PRC. So, at a deeper level, while IC struggles to locate her cultural identity as Hong Konger in terms of literature and the arts at the same level as French culture

(or British or European), she is also struggling to locate an identity free of [...] the PRC. A post-colonial dilemma as colonisation by the PRC grows?

Reader A's perception echoes that of other observers of the situation in Hong Kong. Although the central demand of the 2014 protest movement—known as the Umbrella Movement—was for a greater say in the election of the region's chief executive, the movement was also symptomatic of the deep level of anxiety in Hong Kong regarding its identity at this juncture of its history:

The Umbrella Movement and all the protest movements that came before it were never just about the immediate issue at hand—whether the universal suffrage or the protection of heritage buildings or support for democracy in Mainland China. These protests have always had at their core anxiety about Hong Kong's identity. (Dapiran, 2017, p. 108)

Dapiran's view is that Hong Kongers have never had a free rein in determining their identity, and continue to be subject to external forces (British colonialism in the past, and assimilation into a homogenising "greater China" today).

Thus, IC's impatience regarding Hong Kong culture's lack of self-awareness (she suggested that it lacked creativity and confidence and was only able to copy other cultures) can be understood as a prompt from IC for Hong Kong to embrace its unique identity. In his account of Hong Kong culture at the time of the return of sovereignty to China, Abbas (1997) noted that one of the effects of colonialism was that Hong Kong "did not realise it could have a culture" (p. 6), but he also suggested that Hong Kong was experiencing the emergence of "some original and yet untheorized" form of culture (p. 7). IC's struggle to locate Hong Kong culture does indeed appear to be part of a continuing crisis of post-colonial identity, but also one which contains the possibility of recovering what has always been there but is somehow hidden (click on [PDF6](#)). This is an interesting new insight for me, which again points to the inherently changeable and multidimensional nature of narrative texts.

Reflections on the Process of Revisiting IC's Narrative With Two Readers

As already mentioned, my aim in participating in the LDJ5 initiative was to revisit IC's narrative and, using my two readers' feedback, to reflect back on the more general process of narrative inquiry. My reflections were in two main areas, the first relating to the "truth" value (Foucault, 1980) of research texts and the second more concerned with the effects of such texts and their associated conditions of production.

My first reflection is that there cannot be one "true" narrative that stands unconditionally above the others. There cannot be one "correct" narrative because interpretations are constantly changing according to the inquirer's perspective at the time of telling the story, the inquirer's perspective at the time of writing the narrative account of that story, or the reader's perspective upon reading the narrative, as already mentioned in the previous sections. In other words, narrative accounts and their interpretations are constantly shifting. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) remark that writing a narrative research account is a process of "continual unfolding" (p. 9). After the original narrative inquiry, a process of reconstruction takes place with each new audience as new perspectives arise by the mere fact of sharing a narrative, as suggested by the authors:

I tell you a researcher's story. You tell me what you heard and what it meant to you. I hadn't thought of it this way, am transformed in some important way, and tell the story differently the next time I encounter an interested listener or talk again with my participant. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 9)

However, the fact that narratives cannot be “fixed” does not mean that there are no ways to evaluate their effectiveness for the purpose at hand. The concepts of verisimilitude, plausibility and trustworthiness, and the involvement of additional readers (as in this study) are among the means that narrative inquirers can use to assess their accounts. Although narrative researchers often point out that narratives are constantly in flux, the need to produce a written narrative for consumption by others creates a necessary, if temporary, form of closure.

Another aspect of the impossibility of ‘true’ narratives arises from considering the different perspectives of readers. What happens when someone reads a narrative is that they are confronted with resonances and questions about their own experiences. Revisiting IC’s narrative with my two LDJ5 colleagues enabled me to become aware that some of my actions which I had so far considered as being agentic—which in my mind were linked to notions of strength, confidence in oneself, and self-esteem (like a story I told to my colleagues of a volunteering experience in a kibbutz in Israel)—were in fact heavily constrained by my own psychological environment at the time (Barkhuizen, 2016, p. 663).

For IC, anger about the political situation in Hong Kong which she felt was pushing people out in spite of their attachment to their city was acutely felt and gave rise to feelings of despair and hopelessness, but her feelings connected to the macro socio-political context were equally strongly linked to a feeling of fear for herself. Re-reading IC’s transcripts makes me think anew about what IC had meant when she described French children in the first interview:

IC: so there’s again children playing [with] each other ... there’s a forest like with a lot of trees, no buildings and yeah it’s a big playground and they just run and with a lot of greenery and yeah it is what I perceived about “Oh how great French children can play in a big greenery forest... but we can’t!” (laugh) yeah! that’s what... that’s what I perceive about French culture somehow

I had wondered many times what IC was referring to when she mentioned the “big greenery forest.” To me, who was born in a region of deep forests in France, a forest is at once a place of freedom and protection as well as a threatening and claustrophobic space in which one can get lost and hidden from view. What was IC trying to say? To me, her comment suggests envy for the freedom French children seemed to enjoy and which French culture seemed to embody, but it also suggests a feeling of entrapment, of not being able to achieve a life she had dreamed for herself.

The importance of perspective in narrative suggests, first of all, a wider implication for research, namely the impossibility of detached observation. Writing from a posthumanist perspective on the natural sciences, Barad (2007) encourages us to see that researchers’ practices of thinking, observing, and theorizing are “practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being” (Barad, 2007, p. 133). Narrative inquiry replaces the “detached observer” of positivist science with a fully human researcher, engaged with equally human participants and readers. All of them bring their knowledge and experiences, their intellects and emotions, their prejudices and vulnerabilities to the processes of investigation and interpretation. The “narrative turn” in a range of disciplines (e.g., Polkinghorne, 1988, on the humanities) reflects the influence of philosophers such as Gadamer (1977), for whom understanding is made possible by the “fusion of horizons” involved in interaction and dialogue.

This also leads me to my second reflection, concerning the effects of research texts and their processes of construction. Narrative inquiry has the potential to help participants (researchers, learners and readers) develop as human beings by unsettling their perceptions and encouraging self-reflection. It reveals to them their own complexity, which increases

empathy and serves as a bulwark against forms of exclusion. In addition, through thinking more deeply about other people's life experience, we are brought to reconsider our own experience and standpoint, including what Gadamer (1977) refers to as "prejudices" (biases) and personal vulnerabilities. Although the process of recognising biases and vulnerabilities might be difficult and uncomfortable, it opens the way for researchers to become more ready to hear her/his participants' stories in their full complexity and with the least possible judgement and expectation. So although the results of narrative inquiry might be judged as fleeting by some, it has an important potential benefit for both the researcher and the researched: It forces them to recognize and value a more complex and hidden side of themselves and of each other.

Linked to this, one of the crucial values of narrative inquiry for education is that it provides learners with the opportunity to discover new aspects of themselves. This can have a range of benefits, some directly linked to learning but others related to the rest of their lives. It may help them to become more confident and knowledgeable, and to become more accepting of others through discovering their own complexities and contradictions. Conducting narrative inquiry has taught me that as a language teacher, I need to try and grasp this complexity, to give room to all the other "stuff" in my language learners' lives, and to see them as complex human beings rather than as just learners.

To conclude, the "shifting sands" of narrative inquiry may appear to be disconcerting for those accustomed to positivist concepts of detachment and objectivity. Narrative inquiry exposes multiple entanglements and perspectives, opens up individuals to themselves and to others' complexities and forces researchers to place themselves in the heart of the research process rather than above or beside it. But the path it reveals is a new and exciting one for all concerned, because it is a more meaningful and ultimately a more honest way of doing research.

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Review Process

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