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Examined Lives: The Transformative Power of Active Interviewing in Narrative Approach

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Examined Lives: The Transformative Power of Active Interviewing in Narrative Approach

Abstract

An unexamined life is not worth living Socrates (470-399 BC)

In this article I reveal transformative experiences stemming from non-verbal communication in the context of active interviewing in narrative research. Drawing upon my recent experience interviewing positive veteran teachers about the relationships they believe vital in maintaining their passion and enthusiasm for teaching, I explore the unique nature of narrative research in fostering intra-personal transformation. The goal of the article is to highlight transformation as an outcome in narrative research, with particular focus upon non-verbal communication in active interviewing. The article is constructed to examine transformation in thinking and understanding within the relational nature of narrative research in education; to highlight the complexity of non-verbal communication in the context of narrative research; and, to consider the nature of personal reflective practice in examining one's ontological and epistemological framework for establishing respectful and ethical relationships between researcher and participants in narrative research.

Keywords

Non-Verbal Communication, Active Listening, Active Interviewing, Transformation, Narrative Research, Ontology, Epistemology

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Examined Lives: The Transformative Power of Active Interviewing in Narrative Approach

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An unexamined life is not worth living

Socrates (470-399 BC)

In this article I reveal transformative experiences stemming from non-verbal communication in the context of active interviewing in narrative research. Drawing upon my recent experience interviewing positive veteran teachers about the relationships they believe vital in maintaining their passion and enthusiasm for teaching, I explore the unique nature of narrative research in fostering intra-personal transformation. The goal of the article is to highlight transformation as an outcome in narrative research, with particular focus upon non-verbal communication in active interviewing. The article is constructed to examine transformation in thinking and understanding within the relational nature of narrative research in education; to highlight the complexity of non-verbal communication in the context of narrative research; and, to consider the nature of personal reflective practice in examining one's ontological and epistemological framework for establishing respectful and ethical relationships between researcher and participants in narrative research. Keywords: Non-Verbal Communication, Active Listening, Active Interviewing, Transformation, Narrative Research, Ontology, Epistemology

Purpose Statement

As one adopting a qualitative approach to research for the first time, I had not anticipated this would become a transformational personal learning journey that led me to reflect upon my own ontological and epistemological outlook on my career and my life. Accordingly, I felt compelled to share my experiences to encourage and affirm other likeminded academics, including those whose work I read as background to my reflections. Further, I trust sharing my own intentional examination of transformative experiences of learning and connections with participants might serve as helpful considerations to others adopting a qualitative approach to their own research, an approach I now wholeheartedly endorse.

My opportunity for sharing transformative moments I experienced interviewing positive veteran teachers stems from a study undertaken with three colleagues into the lives of teachers in Australia (Lowe, Gray, Prout, Jefferson, & Shaw, 2019). In the process of conducting interviews in this study I examined my own teaching career and I could see I had become less rigid in my beliefs and views and more inclined to want to listen and to learn. I was more relaxed about what I didn't know, yet more confident in my faith alignment that allowed me to embrace ambiguity and change without having to be radically changed in my core beliefs and values. Further, I am way more assured now to prosecute my ontology and epistemology, especially as I seek answers to questions about schools and schooling in multi-cultural Australia. Teachers face a tsunami of challenges in their work and I feel I am well

suited to enter their lived experiences to encourage, support, advocate, inspire, and in some cases to heal. In short, if we as researchers are not too proud to own our own frailties in the process of narrative research, I believe we can gain insights beyond our imagination.

Ontology and Epistemology

My own lived experiences ranging from being raised on a dairy farm to military service, teaching and training, pastoral and school leadership, and, a university lecturer/researcher have all combined to shape my ontological view of reality.

My Formative Years

I was always the smallest kid in my classes at school and bullied at high school. I left school age 14 to come home and work on the farm, under the supervision of a dad who was quick, ferocious and frequent to physically and emotionally punish errors. Age 15 was a hard time on the farm, being isolated from peers, but secure in the love I experienced from my mother and our Parish Priest, Fr. Cunningham, both of whom have died, but remain key figures in my life. During this year I also began to appreciate times of quiet and aloneness, but not always lonely, that was somehow therapeutic for me. After a year I ran away from home and from age 16 – 20 I roamed our state working on farms and shearing teams and as a welder. My first existential experience of transformation occurred when I was 16. It was a cold, dark night in our mid-winter month of June. I was driving a tractor under brilliant stars when I became aware of a gentle, quiet assuring presence that I was OK and that this was not all there would be for me. For a kid who had little schooling this experience was hard to understand, but I had no doubting the veracity of the experience. I still cannot explain why that was so, but it came to me in quiet, except for the sound of the tractor and disc plough cutting through the red earth. In hindsight I can declare this was a moment of transformation from feeling lost and hopeless to a quiet belief and determination there was something better for me in the future.

At age 20 I was conscripted into the Australian Army, which was a major turning point in my life. I had already experienced a growth spurt in my late teens, and I was now the biggest kid from all my former classmates; that felt good! In the army I soon became a leader of my peers. I was also blessed with a gentle spirit in a grown man's body. I was posted to a conflict area in Borneo where I was seriously injured. In a makeshift Aid Centre that night I was given the last rites of the Catholic Church, but obviously survived to then complete a university degree to become a teacher. In my final year at university I had a serious time of self-doubt where I contemplated suicide. At the end of that final year I participated in a hike in the state of Tasmania in Australia and early one morning as I was sitting alone on a log over a lake I experienced my second spiritual experience of great inner peace and another assurance I was OK. This was followed by a similar experience walking alone by a lake in New Zealand a year later. Following this period, as I began my teaching career, I sought counselling and I was able to make some sense of my life to date. Three years later, aged 28 in Edmonton, Canada, was a fourth life-changing experience of spiritual awareness that I was not useless as my dad had claimed, but loved and treasured by God, whom I had only known about, but with whom I now had a personal and safe relationship.

The confidence I gained in my own ability from these life experiences, including my learned habit of intentional reflective practice, which was a conceptual framework for a study with colleagues among teachers in Tanzania (Lowe, Prout, & Murcia, 2013), has contributed to my current confidence in what I choose to research and learn. As Stalker (2009) succinctly states, ontological experiences are life histories. Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2007) declare ontological experiences are “different positions on the nature of reality” (p. 149). My life

history as outlined previously included being taught by my mother to be mindful of people and the environment. In addition, she modelled humility, hard work and respect for all people. In her later years, my mother relayed an experience she had with my youngest daughter who, after spending time with my mother in nature declared; “listen to the quiet Gran.” I was humbled and delighted; through an appreciation of lived experiences with her Gran my daughter was developing her own ontology for her life.

During my early teaching career, including times working in church-based ministry and pastoral care I had numerous opportunities to sit with students and adults as they shared intimate thoughts and reflections about their lives. It was in these times I came to appreciate the power of quiet to give people time to think before responding. For example, I conducted exit interviews with graduating students from one of the schools where I taught for many years. In these interviews I asked about memorable moments from their high school years. Michael responded that he didn’t enjoy any of his high school and that he always missed his primary school days where he could “hang out with his friends and just be free.” I was quite shocked, but as Michael finished speaking, he sat back in his chair, breathed a heavy sigh and totally relaxed. It was as if a huge burden had been lifted from his shoulders. This was a sacred moment for me as we both sat in the quiet. I felt a sense of sadness we had failed Michael at high school, but a deeper sense of honour that he had shared this information with me. I also felt I understood and that I had been in those places myself as a teenager. Another student, Varnia said she would miss her “faithful old school shoes” she had worn all the way through high school. I loved the comment and as Varnia looked down at her well-worn shoes I was moved by the simplicity of her words in a life that I knew had been packed and successful for this special student. In all the pressure we face as teachers a student was reminding me to never lose sight of the simple and mundane and to take time to reflect and appreciate accordingly.

Active Interviewing and Non-Verbal Communication

Fast forward to the recent five years where an examination of my past lived experiences, particularly in teaching led me to re-frame my epistemological stance towards research. Most of my adult working life has been around my passion for teaching and teacher education, but since 2015 I fully embraced the freedom to engage with teachers and their lived experiences within the umbrella of qualitative research. My own years of lived experiences in social groups within and outside my workplace taught me the value of active listening and reflection in meaningful personal and interpersonal communication. In my sojourn as a father, pastoral carer, and teacher I have been privileged to experience exchanges of personally meaningful conversations, or simply non-verbal cues that have led to self-reflection and deep learning on my part. My reframed epistemology led me to embrace narrative research as an opportunity to develop a relationship of trust with participants in order that they might be comfortable to share their true thoughts and lived experiences.

According to Stalker (2009) epistemological narratives are “the stories the researcher is conveying to the reader about a particular social world” (p. 219), or in the view of Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2007), “the relationship between the knower and the known” (p. 149). In telling the stories of positive and passionate veteran teachers I felt I needed more scope from actively listening for information to more fully revealing the lived experiences of our best teachers. In this regard, “The researcher is in a dual role, one being in a potentially intimate relationship with the participant, and the other, in a professionally responsible role in the scholarly community” (Josselson, 2007 p. 538). It was in the latter role of academic research where the utility of active listening and non-verbal communication between participants and myself became apparent.

Active Listening

Active listening has been described by Rogers and Farson (1987) as an important way to bring about changes in people, their attitudes toward themselves and others; and “not the least listening to the change that takes place within the listener himself” (p. 1). As acknowledged harbingers of the concept of active listening, Rogers and Farson stress the active listener must “listen for total meaning; respond to feelings; and, note all (non-verbal) cues” (p. 3). In addition to these criteria, Weger, Castle, and Emmett (2010) stress the listening skills required for effectively executing this strategy and they highlight the “positive outcomes for listener, speaker and/or the relationship” (p. 36). In the context of teaching the nuances of interviewing skills for students, Roulston, deMarais, and Lewis (2003) reported students being overwhelmed with all the things they had to attend to in an interview. Specifically, these authors indicated that “students were confronted with the emotional aspects of the interview process, both in experiencing difficult emotions themselves and in understanding the emotional effect of the interviews on their participants” (p. 661). I appreciated what Roulston, deMarais, and Lewis (2003) implied regarding how difficult it would be to teach a number of the key skills of interviewing and I was grateful for my advanced years and wisdom that I was able to sit with participants with focus, respect and empathy without being overwhelmed by the emotions being brought forth at the time.

Active Interviewing

In relation to narrative research I am now more inclined to adopt active interviewing (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003; Wolgemuth & Donohue, 2006) which I perceive as a more recent application of active listening in qualitative inquiry. As distinct from active listening in a counselling or therapeutic intervention, I perceive active interviewing as a more appropriate term for describing the researcher/participant relationship in narrative research. Wolgemuth and Donohue describe active interviewing as “an interview method typical of narrative research” (p. 1026), and as such explain precisely the role of the researcher to “create a space for telling complex, multiperspectival, and information-rich stories” (p. 1026). Holstein and Gubrium explain active interviewing: “conceiving of the interview as an interpersonal drama with a developing plot is part of a broader vision of reality as an ongoing, interpretive accomplishment.” (p. 73). Holstein and Gubrium also indicate meaningful reality in active interviewing is found in the nexus of the “how” and “what” of shared experiences between interviewer and participant.

With respect to the “how” and the “what” described by Holstein and Gubrium (2003), our research team recently invited 10 of the veteran teachers (one declined the invitation to be further involved) I interviewed to a gathering on our university campus where we structured time for them to share whatever they chose from their interview experience. We provided this opportunity for participants to meet one another, understanding in the process from Wolgemuth and Donohue (2006) as we did that “it is essential to acknowledge that narrative inquiry is a powerful interview method that requires commitment, responsibility and compassion from the researcher” (p. 1032). Further, Ellis and Berger (2003) note “many interactive researchers have heeded the call for research that gives something useful back to respondents and their community” (p. 160). It was my desire to introduce 10 of the positive veteran teachers to one another in order that they might be encouraged accordingly. Following that day when we adopted our name the “February 15 Group,” I received an email from Maxine: “I wanted to write and say a huge thank you to you for a magnificent opportunity on Friday to get inspired and share our stories.”

Non-Verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication is described by De Vito (2001) as communication that “can be integrated with the verbal; it can help (shape) impressions; it can define relationships; it can shape the structure of conversations; it can influence and deceive; and, it can express emotions” (p. 93). I was interested in the transitional nature of non-verbal communication described by Josselson (2007): “We listen people into speech” (p. 547). The potential of inherent relational outcomes from narrative research, including the non-verbal features, are a key point of interest in this article. In this regard Noah (2017) acknowledges that “Relationships are built in the silences. You spend time with people, you observe them and interact with them, and you come to know them” (p. 110). Like Noah it has been my experience that by not rushing participants in interviews, but by intentionally spending time with them, by inviting deeper reflections about something they had said, and by allowing time (and silence), each one was able to share significant insights into their experiences within social groups and in family dynamics. Moreover, during these moments in interviews, participants were able to identify specific people and events that had shaped their character and that positively tempered their passion and enthusiasm for their career.

In one interview, Amy spoke of the power of community in the school social group when a member of staff died suddenly and unexpectedly. Amy went on to say how thrilled she was with the parent response and care for her staff, including the way her staff gathered around their colleague. As she mentioned this event, Amy took a period of quiet when I noticed her tearing up, but to her credit she just quietly sat with a faraway look on her face. Eventually I suggested, “This must have been a tough time for you as leader.” Amy just nodded, and I quietly added, “and a strong endorsement of your leadership.” With that Amy tended to dismiss her previously stated passion for building a strong team, shifting focus to her staff. I recalled during this brief interaction with Amy how in past times during my own therapy, I had to be guided to stay with the feeling in order to fully comprehend and appreciate the process of examining my own past emotional experiences and to respect my own strengths and gifts accordingly.

I perceived this action by Amy as another example of the tendency to self-deprecating behaviour of some teachers and leaders in which they are reluctant to admit they have done well in their role. In Amy’s case, I could not simply report the fact about the obvious power of community she experienced, without reference to the privilege of being drawn into her community, albeit briefly through her personal experience of significant shared social experience with colleagues. This was an example of a courageous teacher referred to by Palmer (2007) as “dealing with vagaries of fate in their workplace, without losing their identity or character” (p. 211). I also understand these precious moments of silence with busy teachers in terms of Wolgemuth and Donohue (2006) stressing an ethic of friendship where they note that “participant and researcher must feel comfortable to share their beliefs, assumptions, and vulnerabilities, acknowledging that comfort creates space for fully experiencing discomfort, ambiguity and transformation” (p. 1033). I found this view to be highly relevant as I allowed time to “listen to the quiet” as my daughter so eloquently expressed, thus allowing participants time to relax and to listen to their own inner voice and lived experiences. I also acknowledge these times could have been moments when they were engaging in processes of narrative editing, narrative control, substantive monitoring, and formal narrative control as described by Gubrium and Holstein (1998).

In Amy’s account of losing a colleague, I felt some of the loss she shared. However, I was also inspired and relieved to hear her account of later healing that was experienced within the school community. McNiff (2007) declares, that “in effect we learn as we focus upon actions/events in relation to informed purposeful practice” (p. 319). Amy could both access the

pain, and the redemption of community through taking moments of silence in sharing the incident in the interview. In these poignant moments of verbal and non-verbal communication, one can easily recall the value of having someone to really listen to us; someone with whom we can share the burden for a moment, and how profoundly healing those moments can be. It was also clear during these non-verbal stages of interviews that many participants were visibly transparent when sharing their insights into the strategic value of close friends to care for, mentor and question them. These experiences leave me in no doubt that the spoken word alone cannot convey the full measure of specific lived experiences.

In these times of silence in a number of interviews, I noted participants taking time to relax shoulders and arms before sharing personal lived experiences that could sometimes be painful, for example, misty eyes or a tear from Amy and Maxine. Alternatively, memories of sheer joy and delight surfaced when Mary recalled moments of triumph in her teaching. In both cases I experienced a depth of respect and admiration for the participant, especially as they revealed deeper insights into their own behaviour when recalling a particular incident in their career. This range of emotions evoked in me a powerful sense of honour and privilege that I had been trusted so completely by these teachers. In this regard, Dempsey, Dowling, Larkin, and Murphy (2016) suggest that “emotions expressed during an interview enhance our understanding of the participant’s experience and are as epistemologically beneficial as other data, allowing the researcher to enter into the lifeworld of that person” (p. 487). The transformation for me in these moments was an inner sense of almost fierce determination to tell these stories of veteran teachers when most other research and social commentary is about what is wrong in schools and the deficits of teaching and schooling generally. Following consultation with members of my research team, the vehicle I arrived at for facilitating this in-depth window into the professional and personal lives of our positive and passionate veteran teachers was narrative research.

Transformation and Narrative Research

In a helpful introduction to postmodern interviewing, Gubrium and Holstein (2003) refer to this methodology as “more a set of orienting sensibilities that contrast on many fronts with modern interview prescriptions than it is a particular kind of interviewing” (p. 4). They also note in relation to post modernism, “the possibility of certainty must be regarded sceptically, if not rejected outright” (p. 4). Rather than the “possibility of certainty” being shared in narrative research, I believe with Rosenblatt (2003) that “many people I have interviewed seem to me to feel an almost sacred obligation to provide the truth” (p. 227). I accepted each participant’s descriptions of lived experiences as certainty and recorded accordingly.

Transformation

Further, the most effective strategy I defer to for simultaneously accepting certainty and rejecting it outright, is the apostle Paul’s reference to transformation as “the renewing of our minds,” thus being changed “from inside out, including how we think and how we gain a greater depth of understanding about who we are” (Romans 12: 2a). As a practicing Christian seeking to learn and to respect different ideologies as a pathway to learning, I am comfortable with Paul’s definition of transformation, without prejudice. From this perspective I embrace postmodern narrative research as the “set of orienting sensibilities” referred to by Gubrium and Holstein (2003), which enable us to seek to understand the lived experiences of interviewees by building trust and rapport with them (Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Clandinin & Murphy 2009; Corbin & Morse 2003; Holstein & Gubrium, 1997; Josselson 2007; Pinnegar & Daynes 2007).

According to Chase (2011) transformation results from a participant freely sharing lived experiences with the researcher. Since engaging in this research, I sought wider reading as part of my own reflections about what I was learning. As a result of my ongoing research I was drawn to the recent phenomenon of emancipatory narrative research, described by Wolgemuth and Donohue (2006) as “the explicit intent of transforming participants’ lives by opening up new subjective possibilities” (p. 1024). These researchers indicate the emancipatory approach represents an intentional objective on behalf of the interviewer to suggest alternatives and possibilities for the respondent to consider and possibly reveal deeper personal insights and learning. Thus, the transformative experience in emancipatory research stems from intentionally seeking transformation for the respondent, whereas the initial and possible ongoing relationship in narrative research has the potential to reveal shared meaning and experience for researcher and participant (Clandinin & Caine, 2013), which can be transformative for either, or both parties. It was this latter approach described by Clandinin and Caine that I adopted as a framework for my interviews with positive veteran teachers.

After considering what I was learning from each interview I perceived merit in what I understood was the potential of the emancipatory approach when meeting with teachers. I arrived at this view based upon my own lived experiences as a teacher and teacher educator practicing in Australia, Canada, USA and three African countries. From these experiences I noted teachers often default to self-deprecating behaviour often minimizing the impact of their work. In follow up work with the participants from our study I believe there could be merit in the emancipatory approach that would enable me to challenge them to think again about the significance of their relationships with multiple students they teach and affirm each day.

Narrative Research and Positive Connections

Since I recently embarked upon interviewing positive veteran teachers, I did not “need to imaginatively place (myself) amidst possible lives of potential participants” (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 170) since I am an experienced teacher and teacher educator. Moreover, I was confident that “while my intent (was) to enter the relationship with participants as researchers” (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 170), I was comfortable that participants would have no trouble developing a relationship with me as a colleague in education. As an appropriate research methodology, narrative research is declared efficacious by a wide range of qualitative researchers including Chase (2011), Clandinin and Caine (2013), Clandinin and Murphy (2009), Craig and Huber (2007), Meister (2010), Pinnegar and Daynes (2007), and Wolgemuth (2013). According to these researchers, narrative research offers the opportunity for establishing mutual trust and respect between researcher and participant, including shared dialogue in which both parties have the potential for shared and personal learning from reflecting upon their respective lived experiences. I was therefore satisfied in my choice of narrative research as a methodology affording me permission to seek beyond participants’ beliefs and ideas to understand more of their lived experiences.

Subsequent to my first three interviews, I began to realise I was being drawn into the lives of positive veteran teachers in a way I had not anticipated or intended. By way of illustration, the first two teachers I interviewed revealed heartfelt appreciation for their family backgrounds. David and Rachel spoke softly and lovingly of the role of their parents in support and encouragement in their childhood and early career decisions to become teachers. David spoke of his parents “coming from humble beginnings with an ethic of hard work and generosity,” and for Rachel her parents, “provided a stable and close family where all members felt safe and affirmed, faith was shared, and dad always spoke of building character for the future of his children.”

In listening to these two teachers, I was caught off guard by my own (concealed) reaction of admiration for their families. I processed some of the dysfunction of my own childhood, and of the amazing unconditional love of my own mother for me, including during my early 20s when she encouraged and affirmed my decision to seek university entrance as a mature age entrant to study teaching. Initially I was concerned that I was meant to be just gathering information for research, not reflecting upon my own sojourn as a teacher, but after speaking with my research colleagues I began to understand more the opportunity offered in the narrative research process to engage with participants in their lived experiences.

Non-Verbal Communication and Narrative Research

I embraced the narrative research approach as it can afford us the option to seriously consider the non-verbal nature of information transfer that De Vito (2001) indicates takes place in communication. In terms of non-verbal communication, silence can also be a vital gift for participants to take time simply to access the emotion that is clearly there as they think about an important event or person that has influenced them in their lives. I understand this could be a further example of either narrative editing, narrative control, substantive monitoring, or formal narrative control as previously described by Gubrium and Holstein (1998). With respect to the possibilities outlined by Gubrium and Holstein I believe in narrative research we make considered decisions that whatever participants choose to reveal is their timely and best recollection of events or people.

As an example of the possibility of participants editing their lived experience in the moment, I recall Kayla taking time to outline the changing nature of her social network groups. It was fascinating to later reflect upon her narrative editing and (somewhat) control. Kayla began sharing the importance of her social connections outside school, referring to the “trivial friendships of my 20s to my growing up stuff where I now seek older women for company and mentoring.” Kayla then apologised for “not meaning to be critical of some of my earlier friends,” but as I then shared the high price I ascribed to men as father figures in my life, I noticed how relaxed Kayla became in also valuing the role of older women as her mentors. Being aware of the fact that participants may consciously or sub-consciously edit, control, or monitor their initial sharing of information, I now see that taking time for silence and employing various cues in active interviewing is strategic and highly appropriate in seeking deeper understandings and shared experiences between researcher and participant in narrative research.

Once interviews had concluded almost all participants expressed relief and pleasure to have been provided with an opportunity, and the time, to be able to reflect upon and talk about their careers. Eve referred to “having a fun 60 minutes,” while Amy stated, “I feel like I have been with my counsellor for an hour.” David noted that “few people understand teaching as a noble calling,” and Ray referred back to his corporate world of work where “you add value for your client, but maybe haven’t achieved much, whereas in teaching the added value is seeing kids grow intellectually, socially and spiritually, and that is what matters most.”

These contrasting experiences by four teachers reveal a common experience of being heard and respected for an hour. Each interview formally lasted one hour, but inevitably after pens and notebooks were put aside, insightful self-reflection with participants about our profession generally, or about our own personal views and observations about our careers and personal journeys as teachers followed. I subsequently recalled in these times that Josselson (2007) observes “all interviews are interventions, thus the encounter inevitably has an impact on the participants rethinking or added personal meaning as they reflect upon their own words” (p. 546). In these instances, since we both expressed delight in sharing insights, I valued the

post interview reflection as a primary time where I experienced transformation, including as I drove, sometimes long distances to other appointments.

Further Transformative Moments in Narrative Research

I experienced the interviews as an intervention into my own wondering about the teaching profession. I was often conscious of using questions such as “could you tell me more about that?” or “do you have other insights on that?” that inevitably led to a greater depth of probing of the participant’s insights about the topic in question. Josselson (2007) describes this as a way of “encouraging a sense of collaboration and building rapport,” but that “its influence on the relationship and the material that emerges become issues of analysis” (p. 549). This issue of analysis can be a challenge to try and express the depth of insight and emotion that participants had in sharing their passion and enthusiasm for their work. In summarising the passion and enthusiasm of four veteran teachers they interviewed, Meister and Ahrens (2011) described them as

striving to improve their teaching skills; exploring new strategies, materials and methods; being receptive to new ideas; seeing their jobs as challenging; loving their jobs; constantly seeking new ways to improve their teaching; and, their key attributes are enthusiasm and high levels of job satisfaction. (p. 772)

During interviews I was privileged to listen to passionate and enthusiastic veteran teachers who expressed similar views about their teaching, and I knew I would not remain unchanged in the presence of these remarkable and inspiring teachers. I became considerably more than an objective listener; rather, I was invited to also reflect upon some of my own insights and musing about the importance of relationships in teaching and learning. These experiences of transformation also helped me reflect upon and appreciate many of the non-verbal nuances that transpired in the process of interviews and that these would be significant in reporting overall findings. I became acutely aware of the fact that taking time, even allowing for moments of silence for the participant to ponder before moving on, was a highly significant way of building a relationship of mutual respect with participants. Reflections in this regard made by Noah (2017) resonated strongly, particularly the importance of silence in building a relationship, or at least allowing time for the participant to think in silence before responding to a question, or an invitation to respond further.

As I reflected upon these feelings of respect and empathy for participants, I noted I sometimes felt a great responsibility of pastoral care for them, carrying the “shared secret stories” of some as described by Craig and Huber (2007, p. 254). I came to understand, as a narrative researcher, it was incumbent upon me to be wise in presenting information gleaned from interviews that often ended with both the participant and myself agreeing the time we spent was a mutually rich time of learning and reflection. These experiences were unforeseen gifts from all interviews with these extraordinary teachers and leaders.

Ethical Issues

As I later pondered the developing respect I had for the positive veteran teachers I was interviewing I recalled Josselson (2007) stating: “narrative research consists of obtaining and then reflecting on people’s lived experience and, unlike objectifying and aggregating forms of research, is inherently a relational endeavour” (p. 537). It was a relief to embrace the relational nature of narrative research apropos my own ontological stance, and to understand this was ethical and appropriate. In this respect, Clandinin and Murphy (2009) acknowledge that

“ontological commitment to the relational locates ethical relationships at the heart of narrative inquiry. The ethical stance of narrative inquirers is best characterized by a relational ethics” (p. 600). It is also noteworthy that Howard and Johnson (2004), Meister and Ahrens (2011), Meister (2010), and Thomas and Lacey (2016), refer to similar circumstances, concerning their own personal interests relating to research they conducted in schools in Australia and the USA. These authors declare employing narrative research in education is based upon strong beliefs concerning the robust nature of working with our peers and students, while demonstrating our respect and concern for their wellbeing.

In the process of reviewing interview notes, I was cognizant of the complexities of ethical and moral behaviour that can arise in narrative research. As Josselson (2007) cautions: “Ethics in narrative research is not just a matter of abstractly correct behaviour (on the part of the researcher), but of responsibility in human relationships” (p. 538). It is the latter statement concerning the depth of relationships we can develop in narrative research that is most significant to me. I became acutely aware of the ethics of narrative research as I listened to Narelle, the third teacher I interviewed, as she shared her responsibilities and stressors as a pedagogical leader in her school, including being primary family provider for her children, and carer regarding the health issues of her partner. I was moved at times by a profound sense of pastoral care for Narelle as I listened to the challenges she was facing in her professional and private life.

Corbin and Morse (2003) raise the potential of researchers connecting significantly with participants, particularly in the context of interviewing participants for details concerning potentially sensitive personal health issues. In the view of Corbin and Morse:

researchers often connect with participants at a very deep level. At the same time, experienced qualitative researchers are able to step back and provide empathy and support that participants might need to work through troubling experiences. Much of this is done in silence, the researcher sitting, being there for the participant. (p. 343)

With respect to a range of interviewer and participant experiences in qualitative research Wolgemuth et al. (2014) note that “a growing body of literature points to the potential value of interviews as opportunities for self-reflection, appraisal, catharsis, being listened to, responded to emphatically, and being validated” (p. 354). Accordingly, as I read more widely to understand the depth of information I was gleaning, including about my own learning, I arrived at a deeper sense of appreciation for my personal comfort with silence, including in relationships of significance where I could be still and allow time for participants I was interviewing to feel no pressure to respond verbally. Rather I invited time for participants to sit back and relax and to take their time in reflecting upon their own lived experiences in teaching. I did this by assuring them I valued their time, by adopting a relaxed posture myself, by listening to and responding to feelings and emotions behind words, and by inviting further ideas from participants for the purposes of acknowledging what I heard or observed. In my own self-reflections after interviews I also came to appreciate the opportunities afforded in narrative research for me to wonder at the gift of age and gathering wisdom in my senior years. Although I relish times of quiet, I am by nature a person who thrives in relationships and what I learn about myself and others accordingly.

As I reflected upon the relationships I was forming with participants during and after interviews, I was aware of developing deeper respect and awe for the commitment and passion of the positive veteran teachers I was interviewing and a renewed passion and commitment on my part towards telling their stories. Further, as I examined the lived experiences of the 11 teachers, I became conscious that my epistemological framework for reporting what I was

learning was being further shaped by my own learning and transformation. According to Clandinin and Murphy (2009) this relational phenomenon of narrative research requires “a thorough understanding of ontological and epistemological commitments situated in the relationship generated between narrative researchers and their participants” (p. 599). In this respect, I was mindful that taking a neutral role as an option in narrative research was becoming increasingly difficult.

Having acknowledged and shared my unease with this evolving transformative shift in one of our research team meetings, I was encouraged in my ongoing reading by Elbaz-Luwisch (2007) who invites researchers “to examine closely their own assumptions and biases” (p. 377). A caveat I must declare accordingly is similar to Rosenblatt’s (2003) reflections concerning a modernist/postmodern challenge in undertaking research, particularly in relation to “wanting to learn something like truth. . .to be less ignorant and no longer wrong. . .to get closer to whatever is right” (p. 226). In my own research practice, I endeavour to align my lived experiences with a vertical faith-centred relationship that I believe enriches all my horizontal relationships. Accordingly, a measure of my own transformation led me to the merits of postmodern narrative research methodology whilst simultaneously being influenced deeply by my ontological stance to seek truth, which aligned with my faith perspective to be guided by what is right and wrong. I was now faced with wondering if my own depth of intellectual and emotional engagement with participants was polluting the validity of my reported findings, or that considering the postmodern approach to highlight the lived experiences of teacher-participants was possible.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to highlight transformative moments for participants, and myself, in relation to narrative research, especially during moments of non-verbal communication. With respect to narrative research I was encouraged that participants often expressed relief at being able to share their insights with someone who seemed to understand the unique machinations of their profession, without criticism or challenging their ideas. In the view of Clandinin and Caine (2013), “In all our interim and final research texts we pay attention to the temporal unfolding of experience, and to the unfolding of relationships. Each telling shifts, as each time the composition of the audience or the experience of the audience changes” (p. 176). In relation to the shared “temporal unfolding of experience and relationships” I now salute and embrace these views of Clandinin and Caine (2013). Further, I experienced significant empathy with each participant as they reflected upon the highs and lows of their careers. My own thinking and ideas about interviewing as mainly a means of gathering information also developed to embrace a more intimate dialogue where I entered into respectful relationships with participants to share and to learn from their lived experiences.

I now also believe a significant feature of narrative research stems from non-verbal modes of active interviewing from which I gained a deeper understanding and respect for all participants and their experience and insights. From my experience interviewing 11 passionate and positive veteran teachers, moments of silence were vital for allowing participants time to take us to those moments of insights they were processing. I don’t believe this is similar to “narrative editing” described by Gubrium and Holstein (1998), rather more like “listening people into speech” as suggested by Josselson (2007), or not unlike Craig and Huber’s (2007) metaphor of “sitting around a table watching one another and attending with respect” (p. 274). Throughout time spent conducting interviews I was thankful for my own mindfulness about the power of silence and reflection that enabled me to be totally comfortable with the silence. I hasten to add, silence can be unnerving for many people, and that it is essential in these moments that I extended respectful non-verbal cues to participants. In these moments I believed

I was contributing to the relational endeavour typical of narrative research. I was also conscious of communicating my own willingness to be open to learning in all situations.

In acknowledging the power of narrative research for affording permission to report a greater depth of learning and insight, I suspect a more traditional approach of listening for and reporting information has limitations. A narrative research approach that seeks insights from passionate and enthusiastic veteran teachers can be simultaneously helpful in gaining information and potentially transformative for the researcher and the participant. This includes the subtleties of non-verbal communication in active listening that move the research from one-dimensional reporting of information to highlighting lived experiences of interviewer and participants. In terms of understanding the power of human relationships in the workplace, including allowing time for mindful and reflective thinking on behalf of interviewer and participants, a narrative approach is highly effective and invigorating.

Finally, my summative view of narrative research is that without this option, reporting on any study would be not dissimilar to watching movies with the soundtrack turned off.

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