

Editorial: Narrative inquiry and critical professional reflection

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The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) is now recognised as an important part of a university academic's teaching work. This recognition has emerged during a period of significant change over the last 10 to 15 years in which universities have opened up to be more inclusive and today a much higher percentage of people undertake a university education than was the case in the past. Along with changes in the funding of universities, students and governments are expecting better learning outcomes, better learning experiences and better value for money courses. University teaching academics also are now more concerned about the quality teaching and learning and how it is appraised. The engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning by academics not only provides opportunities for improved learning outcomes from a university experience, but also provides opportunities for academics to engage in scholarship and research of their practice.

This Special Issue of *Learning Communities* brings together a collection of papers that make use of narrative inquiry to document aspects of learning communities and the culture and infrastructure that supports them – from an *experiential* perspective. Each of the papers brings a different voice and tells a different story; and, each narrative teases out issues beyond the story, issues that sustain inquiry.

As a formal research methodology narrative inquiry has emerged as a relatively recent entrant to a growing range of options characterised as qualitative research (Andrews et. al., 2008; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Yet, at its core is an age-old art – storytelling. As far as we know all pre-literate societies have used story as a means to communicate, nurture and preserve cultural knowledge. When borne of experience, narrative evokes an authenticity and this is compelling not just for the listener or reader but also the researcher. And, it is an art that will likely endure many transformations and revolutions in the way we routinely communicate.

The articles in this collection also represent descriptions and analysis of critical reflective practice. Researching teaching practice is not a new phenomenon, particularly in teacher education. Numerous authors have described benefits and approaches of reflective professional practice (Allard et al., 2007; Brookfield, 1995; Schön, 1987; Dewey, 1933) and others of applications of this such as in action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Mills, 2002) and also practitioner research (Craig, 2009; Dadds & Hart, 2001; Menter et. al., 2011). However, it is still not broadly adapted as an aspect of professional practice across all discipline areas of university teaching (Loughran, 2005). All of the authors in this edition are university lecturers, or as we prefer university educators. They come from a broad range of discipline areas and their teaching activities range across undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. In this collection they demonstrate some of the useful outcomes that can be achieved through a process of critical reflection of practice both to better understand practice and also to lead towards ways of improving their own teaching for better learning by their own students. And, they do this primarily through a personal narrative enquiry approach.

For the authors in this collection the use of narrative inquiry also provides a refreshing alternative to the common approaches to research and reporting often used in educational research. Most of the papers here have adopted a particular approach within this genre with the *researcher as participant*, adopting reflective journalism to varying degrees combining perspective that results in a documentation of something personal and social as well as something located in a particular time and place, encapsulating and presenting in one process the streams of thought, of recall and story, along with the personal critical commentary all striving for understanding and meaning.

This collection though is not just a personal indulgence by each author. These authors are active university educators; professionals, in that they are striving to improve their practices, to help their students to learn. What they provide in these papers is an opportunity for other university educators to read the stories and reflections, to imagine the contexts and the times, and to have opportunities to resonate and to likewise consider their own stories and reflections on their practice. We certainly hope that this is the outcome for you, the reader; that you might learn from these experiences, and thus join in with this learning community, which is reflected in this special edition.

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