Using Narrative to Explore the Relationships Between Crisis, Innovation and Pedagogy

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This paper explores the nature of narrative in educational research, examining the resurgence of this form of research inquiry. A personal perspective on the nature of narrative is presented. All of the seven narratives are examined in terms of how the crisis nature of SARS stimulated an innovative response that clearly related to key themes which can be viewed as principles for effective pedagogy. These principles are "making connections", "developing confidence", and "maintaining focus". It is suggested that these principles may provide an effective framework for examining other contexts of educational change.

Key words: narrative; analysis of complexity; connections; confidence; focus

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Narrative in Educational Research

Narrative has always been an undercurrent in educational research, often in situations where students are immersed in schools as trainee or beginning teachers, or in clinics as trainee medical or para-medical staff. However, in recent years there seems to have been a resurgence of interest in this form of qualitative research. This may be one articulation of the concern about the imbalance between quantitative and qualitative research strategies in social science in general, and education in particular. For too long the attractive myth that certainty is possible, or even desirable, in the statement of research outcomes in education has led to an over-reliance on quantitative positivist research with experimental, or quasi-experimental, designs.

How can we locate narrative within the whole field of educational research? Traditionally there is a division of educational research into quantitative and qualitative paradigms and strategies (e.g., Burke & Christensen, 2000; Creswell, 2002). This has been a useful classification but I would like to suggest that research is not so neatly organized, and this can be seen by the title of Burke & Christensen's forthcoming book (2004); they have included "mixed" in the title which is now *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches.* Many important educational research questions benefit from a research plan that includes both quantitative and qualitative aspects. A helpful way of viewing phenomena which are not truly dichotomous is provided by Johnson (1992). He writes about organizational problem solving but his concept of polarity theory is more generally useful. He suggests that it is more realistic to focus one's attention on a series of polarities or dilemmas. These polarities are sets of opposites which can't function well independently and for which there are no clear solutions. Because the two sides of a polarity are interdependent, it is not possible to choose one as a solution and neglect the other. The aim of polarity management is to get the best of both opposites while avoiding the limits of each. The solution resides within the tension between polarities. Thus, in educational research it is not helpful to discuss whether it is better to use quantitative

and qualitative approaches; rather, the discussion should be how to get the most appropriate mix of both approaches. Table 1 lists some of the polarities that could be considered in trying to describe educational research.

Table 1   Polarities in Educational Research

Quantitative	↔	Qualitative
Seeks to find a generalisable solution	↔	Seeks to extract common themes from particular and unique instances
Process of accumulating evidence to support a stated hypothesis or position	↔	Process often includes problematising the research question or problem
Safe in that the researcher is believed to be neutral and objective	↔	Messy in that the lines between the researcher and other research participants are often blurred

Narrative is clearly within the right-hand column and any statistical analysis, for example of the costs or of the contingency planning needs of the SARS crisis, is clearly within the left-hand column. This special issue therefore is situated within a broad understanding of qualitative research and explores that part of the SARS crisis which deals with uncovering and examining the ways in which university teachers and administrators sought innovative strategies to deal with the crisis of providing support to students when the university was closed. The point which should be emphasized is that good research involves a synergy between both approaches, and this issue should be seen as one contribution to understanding the impact of SARS on The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong and the world; just one piece in the overall jig saw puzzle.

Clough (2002) writes about narratives *and* fictions in educational research. The juxtaposition of both forms of expression in the one book seems to me to be as part of his search for new ways to plumb the depths of the complexity of educational contexts. The narratives in this issue are not fictional; they are grounded in a reality of unforeseen crisis. They portray teachers grappling with new and very real challenges. However, in order to solve these challenges, they needed to work with ideas that were innovative to them; they needed to reach beyond their past experiences. It is interesting that the word "surreal" was used in several accounts of SARS experiences in the media (e.g., Gardner, 2003; SARS digital folk art, 2003). There is a

fine line between fact and fiction when we are dealing with unknown circumstances.

One of the chapters in Clough's (2002) book is titled "The map is not the terrain ...". The metaphor of the map is a useful one. The traveler may use a map but the experience of the journey is usually recorded in the images of specific places and happenings along the way. After the event, it is the photo album of rich and unique images that is used to describe the journey, and the map is not often referred to. So, it was with the SARS experience. Almost everyone here in Hong Kong scanned the websites daily for facts, charting the spread of the disease. The daily statistics of the number and ages of new cases, number of deaths, a listing of the buildings where SARS victims lived, and the number of hospital beds still available were the tracks of SARS, indicating its borders and inroads into Hong Kong. But these statistics alone cannot provide a description of how SARS affected the lives of people in Hong Kong. Narratives are needed to build this understanding, to work out how a complex and intertwined set of influences have been interpreted, considered and used in decision making. In order to understand the impact of SARS on Hong Kong, we need both the map and the terrain, the statistics and the stories.

A Personal Perspective on Narrative

"We see narrative everywhere. It's a primitive urge, a way to tie cause to effect, to convert the complexity of our experience to a story that makes sense." (Bernstein, 2001)

In trying to describe the way in which I am using narrative here, let me refer to the shift in Wittgenstein's writings. His early work was about logic and language, about using language as a tightly focused tool in the search for, and expression of, logical thought. His later work developed more as an exploration into the difficulties we have in using language to capture the meaning of life contexts (e.g., Wittgenstein, 1953). Indeed, at some times Wittgenstein doubted the existence of pure logic. In this perspective, the

importance of experience is integral to the idea of "understanding". Our explanations are expressions of our own "personal logic". Language can then be a tool in mediating between several different personal explanations in order to seek a more global understanding. The juxtaposition of accounts from nine colleagues, all working within the same university, provides several personal expressions of teaching during the time of SARS. What I am attempting in this paper is to look for common themes in the accounts of the experiences of my colleagues. Undoubtedly, I view their experiences through the lens of my own experiences during this time. My personal analysis foregrounds and backgrounds aspects of their stories as I build my own understanding of how SARS affected education in Hong Kong.

There are various interpretations of narrative. My own background in this area is more from a socio-cultural perspective (much of my career has been in Africa working in communities where English is a second language). I see narrative as a way to find out about the multiple perspectives of participants in social situations who would otherwise remain silent. David Chan's analysis focuses on what these narratives might reveal about the inner consciousness of the authors. However, in this paper, I am not exploring the mind/ language connections. This is not a paper where I analyze whether and how language can capture the meaning of experience. I am taking the position that language (spoken and written) is such an integral part of our experience, that it has a power to express, and thus influence, reality. This points to narratives as an important tool for understanding the complexity of reality.

When I speak to colleagues in the Department of English, I find they speak of narrative as a "genre" where correct forms should be used. The rules of formal narrative writing are easy to find (e.g., Springfield Teachers' Toolbox, Language Arts, n.d.) However, the power is in the articulation of experience and, for me, these rules are not very important. In reading my colleagues' narratives, I felt that what was being offered was an interesting, coherent and reflective set of views about how to deal with the unanticipated problem of providing support for students who could not come to

campus. The crisis context of SARS meant that there were extra pressures and concerns. Narrative was a strategy to understand the intertwining of the three aspects of crisis, innovation and pedagogy.

Perkins and Blyler (1999) discuss the values of narrative in the construction of self and the construction of knowledge. Narratives are constructed by individuals who view the world through one paradigmatic lens or another. They are not value-free; they serve to shape the writer's identity and understanding, and also each reader's identity and understanding. In this sense narratives are powerful instruments in society. Despite this potential for influence (or maybe because of it!) the use of narratives as a "respectable" research strategy is not widespread. Perkins and Blyler (1999, p. 11) list six factors that they believe contribute to the inferior status of narratives. In doing so, they challenge the relatively high status given to Western logic and science, and the emphasis given to a skills-orientation in professional writing. They point out that narratives are often associated in a pejorative way with a feminine, emotional perspective and that this type of writing is described as having lower cognitive demands on the writer than other forms of discourse. Again, we find the tension between opposing poles such as logic and emotion, objective and subjective judgments, and formal rules and individual expression. Again, a more valuable perspective lies not in an either-or situation but in mutual respect and accommodation between researchers and writers with a wide variety of skills and orientations.

Harrison (2002) has a lyrical style of writing and, like Clough (2002), uses powerful metaphors in discussing narratives. Many of Harrison's metaphors are based around light, describing the process of writing as giving "shards of illumination" (p. 89) enabling one eventually to be "drenched in the light". Of course, research requires much more than lyrical writing. Otherwise, one can end up a woolly "new age" set of stories. The outcomes of narrative research need to be carefully argued and justified. The coherence of the argument is paramount in qualitative research. It may not be a unique interpretation but it must be inclusive of all the data. The analytic framework I outline below is not unique but it does, to my mind, allow us to

find themes that show the synergy between all seven narratives, to see that the drivers motivating a pro-vice chancellor at the centre of the University's decision making are not very different to the drivers operating in the context of an isolated tutor working at home.

Analysizing These Narratives About the Time of SARS at CUHK

My colleagues naturally turned to technology as an educational response to the closure of our University but rather than considering the use of technology per se, it is more interesting to consider what lingering impacts the experience of dealing with SARS might have had on the educational practices of university teachers and the administrative and technical support staff who assist them.

All the narratives began with the theme of shock and fear, even powerlessness. However, in all these narratives the needs of students rapidly became the focus. Action can quell fear and, as these teachers moved forward into action, the momentum of the innovation in which they were engaged overcame many of their own fears. In all cases, the writers comment on the lessons they had learnt from the SARS experience. They all also commented to me that this learning was strengthened by the reflection needed to write a narrative. This illustrates what Diekelmann (2002) calls "narrative pedagogy... unending converging conversations" which "constantly challenge[s] the self-evident assumptions of conventional pedagogy".

Having read these narratives several times in various iterations, what do I regard as the central pedagogical challenge that each individual teacher, department or organizational unit needed to address? Are there common themes that emerge? I cannot pretend that the analysis below is in anyway objective. I am too close to these stories. However, the analysis has enabled me to make sense of what happened at this University between March and June 2003. I do not claim that the framework described here is the only way to interpret the narratives, but I am confident that it is a credible description

of the data contained in the narratives. The juxtaposition of the analyzes by several editors provides a multiplicity of interpretations and this process can enrich the reader's understanding.

As I read and reread these stories, I jotted down the words or phrases which came to my mind. Eventually, a pattern began to emerge. The words "connection", "confidence" and "focus" (or synonyms thereof) were frequently repeated. I then tried to see if all three words were pertinent to all the stories. Other words became subsumed under one or more of these key words. This is illustrated in Table 2. For each narrative my perception of the central pedagogical challenge is noted. I have also sorted the descriptive words and phrases I had jotted down into each of the three themes "making connections", "developing confidence" and "maintaining focus". (I have presented these as participial phrases for clarification and emphasis purposes.)

Another view is shown in Figure 1 where some common descriptive words are mapped onto the three themes. This shows the
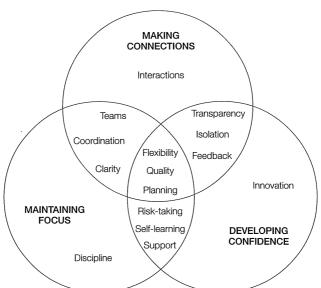
Figure 1 Perceived Relationships Between Common Key Words in the Narratives

interconnectedness of the three themes clearly. I placed the word "quality" in the centre because maximizing the quality of students' learning experience was central to all the activities and innovations described in these narratives.

It is important to note that this is not the only possible sorting and mapping; it is the one that seems most coherent. My aim was to look for a common way to describe these narratives and hence build a framework for understanding.

Are These Themes Useful Principles?

I have summarized the narratives with the themes "making connections", "developing confidence" and "maintaining focus". The pedagogical challenges listed in Table 2 are diverse, as expected from such a wide range of situations—individual teachers working with their own students, a whole department, a large central IT support group, and an operational policy group for the whole University. If, as I contend, these three themes do a reasonable job of summarizing innovative educational responses to crisis in such a range of situations, can these themes justifiably be called principles for effective pedagogy? This is not a question I can answer definitively. But I can play with the proposition using the principle of "fit" or coherence that I used to extract the themes in the first place. Educational situations are ones where *learners* engage with a *diversity of knowledge* in a *range of activities*. There is a human dimension, a content dimension, and a process dimension. Figure 2 shows each dimension straddling an interaction or tension between two themes.

Following my earlier discussion of identifying and considering polarities I have sketched how the human dimension of education relates to a tension between "making connections" and "developing confidence". Making connections involves interpersonal aspects of human activity; developing confidence involves more of a focus on intrapersonal aspects of a person's self-awareness and self-image. Both are necessary.

Table 2   Interpretation of the Three Themes in Each of the Seven Narratives

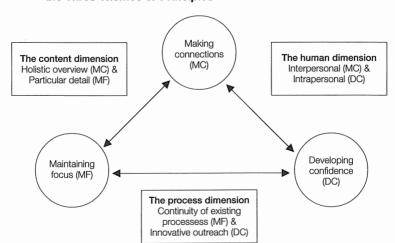| Story	Key pedagogical challenge	Analysis in terms of three themes
Cheng: SARS Task Force	Educational support alongside health maintenance and community preservation	**Making connections:** communication strategy (including website); coordination across university; working groups; transparency **Developing confidence:** responsibility; protection; decisiveness **Maintaining focus:** discipline of hygiene; university as one community; monitoring; logistics; record keeping; forward planning; complex problem solving
Leung & Keing: ITSC	Providing new strategies in a time of increased demands and needs for contingency planning	**Making connections:** overcoming isolation; team dynamics; support for many teachers **Developing confidence:** innovative planning (clean team); new systems (real-time) **Maintaining focus:** coordination of a plethora of details; determining critical IT functions; work is often details; unseen
Lau: Department of Physics	Student self-learning	**Making connections:** team dynamics in department; cycles of continuous improvement; openness and transparency **Developing confidence:** responsibility for self-learning; justified pride in achievements; innovations in teaching **Maintaining focus:** clarity of learning outcomes; effective examples to stimulate change
Wong: Nursing	Continuity of teaching for busy teachers and students	**Making connections:** synergy between professional and theoretical understanding; coordination between busy teachers **Developing confidence:** commitment to maintaining teaching plan; innovation in teaching; initial apprehension; honest feedback **Maintaining focus:** careful planning; concentrated teaching and learning period
Burd & Ng: Tutoring in Surgery	Using new strategies to maintain interactive teaching	**Making connections:** interactive teaching; evaluation for continuous improvement **Developing confidence:** resolving dilemmas; new experiences (teacher and students); innovations in teaching; initial apprehension; honest feedback **Maintaining focus:** preparation for examinations; flexibility in time arrangements
Chan: WAC	Effective feedback to students at a distance	**Making connections:** interactions with students; working in isolation; providing effective feedback **Developing confidence:** overcoming boredom; new experiences; new skills **Maintaining focus:** discipline of working alone; clarifying ideas about English writing
Jin: Assessment in English	Supporting students in a new assessment experience	**Making connections:** precise communication with students; students' lack of trust; students' lack of spontaneous participation **Developing confidence:** risk-taking; unexpected challenges; high student anxiety; adapting to change; uncertainty; fair assessment **Maintaining focus:** clarity of instructions; students' extreme exam-orientation

Figure 2   Relationships Between Dimensions of Educational Situations and the Three Themes or Principles

The content dimension relates to a tension between "making connections" and "maintaining focus". One can portray educational content as involving the "big picture", or holistic overview of discipline content, as well as attention to relevant particular details. The holistic overview is aligned with a process of making connections (in this case conceptual ones) and learning particular details requires the learner to maintain focus.

For the process dimension, I have linked to the themes of "maintaining focus" and "developing confidence". In educational situations, there is always some continuity of existing processes which I have aligned with the stabilizing aspect of the maintenance of focus. Innovation never involves completely changing a learning context. When any innovation takes place, it always involves some risk-taking which is clearly linked to the confidence level of the innovator.

Figure 2 thus shows the synergy between the three themes and dimensions of educational situations. This is an argument of coherence, not a tested model. It is presented here as an illustration of the potential robustness of the model which has emerged from these narratives about teaching at CUHK during the time of SARS.

Some Final Comments

What lingering impacts has the experience of dealing with SARS had on the educational practices of university teachers and the administrative and technical support staff who assisted them? This paper was written some months after this first SARS crisis. My impression is that the impact on the University's administration is profound. An elaborate SARS alert system has been devised with clear tasks for all sections of the University <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/sars/alert_action/all_alert_plan/all_alert_plan.htm>. Also the contingency planning for the IT infrastructure is clearly in place.

Changes to teachers and teaching? The pedagogical changes have remained to some extent. Many departments have maintained the self-learning websites that make explicit the study demands of their courses. The need for students to be supported in developing the skills needed for independent learning and adaptability has been a topic of discussion in several consultations during the last few months. This has probably been the most significant lesson that CUHK teachers have learnt from the SARS crisis.

While Lixian Jin's story is not so much about assessment as it is about supporting students to develop confidence in risk-taking, it is worthwhile looking at whether CUHK teachers have continued with alternatives to formal timed examinations. Lixian's course was one of the 193 courses whose teachers responded to the University's request to teachers to use other means of assessment in lieu of final centrally supervised examinations. Take-home tests, and additional assignments were suggested. The purpose was to reduce congestion in examination venues and hence minimize the risk of cross-infection. The consequence was that the number of courses in the second term centralized examination venues decreased from 652 to 459 and the number of candidates dropped from 8,317 to 7,609. However, the use of alternatives to formal timed examinations has not been maintained and most teachers have returned to the traditional mode. This may be due to the convenience of this format but I suspect that the belief in the need for supervised,

individual, summative, achievement measures is still very strong here in Hong Kong.

How has the use of technology changed? Those teachers who used asynchronous technology successfully have continued its use; this includes the use of forums and online assignment submissions. However, real-time teaching has not increased significantly. As one teacher commented recently: "Well, we know it can be done if we need it now. It won't be a stress."

This sums up the air of confidence that exists with the return of winter in December 2003. SARS was a learning experience for all sections of this University and our wider community. Many lessons have been learnt and there is confidence that support for students will be less fraught if SARS returns.

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