Narrative Inquiry As An Assessment Tool: A Course Case Study

Lesley S. J. Farmer
Professor
California State University
Long Beach
U.S.A.

In an effort to study assessment as an element in the scholarship of teaching, the investigator incorporated narrative inquiry into two courses. A content-analysis matrix of student reflections was developed to capture choice of topic, source of conflict/programme, interaction with information/situation, and demographic information. Electronic journaling enabled students to self-assess areas for improvement and to assess peers' situations and problem-solving approaches. Journals helped instructors to assess students' areas of concern; how students solved critical issues; and degree to which course content dealt with the critical events. The activity also fostered a sense of a community and helped link academic coursework and field experience.

Assessment serves as a core activity in course implementation at the university level, both for student and instructor improvement. Specifically, assessing student work on a formative basis helps instructors diagnosis student process and gaps in learning. This information can be used to modify course delivery as well as provide feedback for students so they can make their own adjustments in learning approaches. Students can also self-assess their experiences and learning. When shared, these reflections can be used to help students understand concepts through contextualisation and to generate knowledge. Colleagues can also review reflections in order to provide peer coaching. Instructors can analyse student self-assessments to identify individual and class trends in understanding and application. Moreover, instructors can triangulate the assessments to determine student self-efficacy.

With the incorporation of communications technology, students and instructors can interact more actively, and preserve their thinking processes more easily. Work can be posted and shared quickly and efficiently. Conversations about academic topics can continue throughout the course regardless of in-class time constraints. Ideas can be preserved. As a result, assessment can be more effective.

In an effort to study assessment as an element in the scholarship of teaching, the researcher of this exploratory investigation incorporated narrative inquiry into two courses at the California State University, Long Beach. In the foundations of information course, students wrote about their "life of information", and in the library media management course, students wrote about three course-related critical incidents that they experienced that semester. These activities served as a basis for (a) identifying possible reasons for differences among student performances and (b) reviewing course content and delivery.

Theoretical context

By its nature, much of the formal preparation for school librarianship melds theory and practice. Increasingly, service learning and field experience comprise central components of this academic programme. Service learning, in particular, allows students to test the veracity of theories in real-life contexts as well as apply abstract knowledge to concrete situations. Indeed, most state and National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards require field experience. Under the NCATE School Library Media Specialist curriculum standards, the reviewers ask for description of practicum experiences: "the information here should show how candidates are given opportunity to practice teaching the skills and knowledge specified in the standards" (American Association of School Librarians, 2003, p.26).

To insure that the learning circle is complete, those same real-world experiences need to be processed and generalised conceptually. Reflective journaling provides a means for students to critically analyse their life experiences, framing theory contextually. When students share these reflections, they can then compare both their experiences and their conclusions in order to draw valid inferences across contexts (Boud, 2001) and generate knowledge (Flavell, 1977). This exercise has been recommended specifically for library science preparation (Yontz & McCook, 2003) and more generally for professional development (Schon, 1983). Technology optimises this process because students can access, analyse, and respond to peers' entries at their convenience. In her review of journaling for learning, Moon (1999) posits several other benefits:

- development of questioning attitude and critical thinking skills

- means to understand one's own learning process

- increased intellectual involvement

- increased self-empowerment and responsibility for learning

- alternative means of self-expression.

In terms of research methodology, drawing from experience to deepen understanding of the theoretical may be linked to naturalistic inquiry: "research that focuses on how people behave when they are absorbed in genuine life experiences in natural settings" (Lane, 2002). The underlying premise is that social context influences what occurs, so inquiry may be validly pursued in natural settings. Moreover, personal interpretation is impossible to escape. Students journaling about their experiences exemplify auto-ethnography, i.e., examining their own lives. Instructors acting as researchers are engaging in ethnography as they discover social acquired and share shared understandings.

Within naturalistic inquiry, reflective journaling combines biographical methodology and narrative inquiry. The biographical aspect arises from exploring one's own experiences. The narrative aspect is derived from the "story making" used to construct meaning from experience. By sharing journals, students and instructors link life experiences and generate shared knowledge. Assessment of such journaling enables both student and instructor to examine the effects of milieu and strategies on the learner, and to identify interventions to optimise future practice.

In this exploratory investigation, the journaling activity focused on critical incidents: identifying and analysing key events. Boud (1999, 2001) further asserts that reflection after

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an event can be particularly valuable because it enables the learner to revisit an experience and link it with information and insights gained since the time of the original incident. Indeed, the very act of selecting a specific event among other occurrences serves as an assessment task in the same way that one identifies the key phrase or most important fact in an essay, particularly if the learner justifies the basis for that selection. Furthermore, the learner hones metacognitive skills and helps build a personal knowledge base that can be shared with others when (a) describing the main issues of the event, (b) tracing the decision-making process, and (c) identifying the main points learned.

Finally, journal writing provides a means for self-assessment, which contributes to the body of evidence demonstrating professional competence. Furthermore, it recognises each individual's responsibility and involvement in a community of practice. Boud (1999, p123) states:

> *We cannot expect students to become competent professionals unless they learn to be actively involved in constructing and reconstructing notions of good practice as they proceed. It is important to note though, that the practised of self assessment does not imply that this engagement is an isolated or individualistic activity. It commonly involves peers, makes use of teachers and other practitioners and draws upon appropriate literature.*

Of particular import in this study was the use of online technology to foster a community of practice. Students not only share their personal experiences, but they have several opportunities to respond to their peers' work. This approach enables students to ask for other people's advice as well as draw upon their course knowledge and career experience in a reflective manner to inform their peers. Although the communications channel is secure, there can be a perception that experiences need to be filtered for public view. Still, the choice of events to share indicates topics that warrant examination and response across the class over time. Thus, this exploratory study also investigates the impact of online communication in the identification and communication of critical school library issues.

Research question

This exploratory study investigated student self-reporting of their life of information, and critical events in two courses related to issues of school library media management. The following research questions guided the analysis:

- How does the curriculum impact narrative inquiry: choice and action of critical issues?

- How does an online environment impact discussion?

- How do the critical issues and their discussion change over time?

Course in foundations of information

LI 500, Foundations of Information, provides a foundation for library and information science and underlies the societal context of information and technology. The delivery mode of the course addressed the need to incorporate technology to optimise access to relevant resources (many of which in information science occur only in electronic form) as well as foster telecommunications and collaboration. Nine students enrolled in LI500, Foundations of

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Information: one male (under 30 years old), and eight females (mainly in their forties). All worked in K-12 settings.

A major assessment tool to measure student learning was journaling. Library Media Teacher (LMT) students were required to write weekly self-reflections about information within the context of the course. Students could draw upon coursework, career efforts, and personal experience. For developing a thick data set of course-centric impact, this kind of critical auto-graphical representation was an effective assessment approach. These journals were analysed in terms of timing, source of inspiration, and insights/outcomes. The other major method for measuring student learning was student work based on assignments, some of which were online entries.

The following aspects were identified for journal entries: date of entry, entry which replied to a peer's entry, entry which replied to the instructor's entry, entry in reply to a peer, entry in reply to the instructor, source of inspiration (class, online chat, readings, peer's comments, work site, assignment, personal), contribution of source, insight on information (description, affective reflection, application, implication, theorising), ethics and values, library media teacher (LMT) role, action, learning/metacognition.

Findings

Even though students were not graded on the quantity or quality of their journal entries (beyond having a minimum number of 15 entries), there was a direct positive correlation between the number of entries and the grade, with a natural "break" at 50 entries. Additionally, those students who wrote consistently throughout the semester tended to get better grades. In a couple of cases, students wrote regularly but posted their entries infrequently so others could not provide timely feedback. Students tended to "clump" their entries: just before classes, on Sundays and Mondays, and at the end of the semester.

Students tended to use the readings as their source of inspiration for their journal writing: 47 entries referred to journal articles, etc.; 38 journal entries built on site experiences; 20 responded to class experiences; 13 entries were based on peers' entries; eight entries referred to the class's online chats; and 26 entries related to other resources such as television, past experiences, or other self-identified resources. Towards the end, students started to suggest other sources for consideration. As students became more comfortable with each other in class, they tended to respond to peer issues face-to-face and write about their responses to readings online. That is, they self-determined the most effective environment in which to communicate on different sources of information.

Some students wrote topically, providing a unified theme to reflect their week's experiences relative to information: censorship, access, "rabbit holes." Others used a daily log approach. One student always wrote in response to another student's journal. Their approach did not affect their grade. However, those students who tended to generalise their insights about information tended to demonstrate deeper understanding, which was reflected in their assignments. Thus the journal mirrored their intellectual understanding of the coursework.

At the beginning of the semester, students tended to respond to their source material by describing it and sometimes giving an emotional response to it. Later on, they began to write about means to apply their insights about information. Even later, they focused on

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theory and the implications of information's characteristics. Ethics and values of information were seen to be addressed directly after a class session that included that topic. For example:

In working on the group case study, I have had lots of time to reflect on the issue of privacy. I have never considered privacy to be a basic right ... What I've come to realise over the last week is that public libraries, even though they are public, serve a vital information centres, and under no circumstances do I want people not using it because of privacy issues. Thus, regarding libraries, I have totally reversed my opinion, and now advocate for the protection of privacy of patron records.

As much as I had fought going back to school after getting my B.A. and teaching credential, I must say that this might be a great opportunity to get a master's. The report (research proposal) I read was right down our "alley" with the theme I've always been a proponent for bilingual education. Maybe I could use that theme to create a project to fit into the library/information literacy area. I need to start thinking about it now.

On the other hand, the role of the LMT was noted throughout the semester on a fairly even time distribution. Calls to action, or acting on information, grew over the semester and peaked about the same time that students "grasped the idea" about the role of information in their lives, which as just before the third class, which occurred midway into the semester. For example:

I was looking at an episode of Enterprise that dealt with time travel. The captain and a time traveller were about to enter a library and their concern was that the device they had would not be able to be used to give them the info they needed because the library probably did not have the technology to play it. As they entered the building with its dusk and decay they were shocked to see books made of paper! This blew me away because I had just finished reading Rubin a few days before where he writes about the rush to embrace new ways to store information but future generation might not have access to it be cause they machines no longer exist that can make it readable.

Do you find that since the class started everything seems to come back to information?

I think this class has awakened my consciousness about information. Before we have all (at least I did) taken it for granted. Now I'm looking at it in different ways and appreciating it more.

Recently, I mentioned the importance of tacit knowledge in a conversation with my principal and, because I better understood why I was able to do what I do, I was able to better articulate the unique and valuable role the librarian plays in a library media centre.

Interestingly, students did not comment on one another's breakthrough on the importance and ubiquity of information – or its transformation in terms of LMT mindset.

Course in library media centre management

Students in the library media centre management class were asked to write about three critical events related to the course. They were to submit them at the end of the first, second,

and third month of the semester course, with the intent that students would discuss current issues. The directions for the reports were as follows:

Identify three critical events related to library management. For each, write a narrative that describes the event, states why it is critical, states what you decided—and the basis for your decision, and states what you learned. If you are a classroom teacher, think about your interactions with the library/librarian. If you are not in a school setting, interview an LMT [library media teacher] about a critical event.

Thirty-two students submitted critical events, but five were disqualified for the study because of lack of required information. Demographic information for the 27 graduate students is as follows: 24 of those students were enrolled in the library media teacher programme, and three were enrolled in the educational technology programme; eight students were male and 19 were females; 20 students were of Anglo ethnicity, four were African American, and three were Latinos. At the time of the course writing, nine of the students worked as classroom teachers, and 18 worked in school libraries (six were in their first year; another six were in their second year; two were in their third year; another two were in their fourth year; one was in her sixth year; and one was in her tenth year). The years of classroom experience that the 27 students had ranged from none to 32 years, with a median of 12 years' experience.

Students submitted their work online, and were asked to read and respond to one other student's submission. They were graded on completing each aspect of the task. The instructor responded to each student's critical event, and read all of the replies, commenting on about a third of them. For each set of events, the instructor provided overall feedback to the class via email. Those students who did not want to share their incident with their peers could email their report directly to the instructor; only one did. They were also notified that their work was going to be used for research purposes; all approved that purpose.

At the end of the semester, the students' work was archived for further study. A matrix was developed to capture the following data: source of conflict/programme, source of support, and resolution. Captured demographic data included employment status, number of years working in a school or other type of library, presence of other library staff, years of classroom teaching experience, library media courses taken. From the investigator's first reading of the submission, entries were categorised in alignment with the course content; topics not covered in the course were categorised separately. Entries were then coded according to the categories and problem-solving process, noting the author. The investigator performed a content analysis on the matrix to identify trends, and to cross-reference the data (both the topic as well as the process) with the course delivery.

Findings

The central management issue, as identified by students, was human relationships. Interestingly, this aspect of the professional is a separate standard within the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing for Library Media Teachers. It should be noted that in a separate survey administered to library media students, most respondents thought that they had good human relationship skills, even if they were just entering the programme. In most cases, the stance taken by the librarians was reactive to other people's actions as they impacted library service. If the "offending" person seemed to be co-operative, the student

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resolved the incident through negotiation and occasional referral to policies. In some cases, students worked through fellow teachers or appealed to an administrator to back them up. Site group discussion appeared to be a powerful way to solve problems. In most cases, students did a good job in identifying the appropriate person with whom to resolve the particular issue.

The second greatest issue dealt with the management of resources. In some cases, the problem was bureaucratic (i.e., use of funds, process flow); the other issue usually dealt with circulation problems. About half of the students had not taken the course titled LI 510 Selection (i.e., collection development), and of those only one had successfully resolved her problem and she was working as the school librarian and close to finishing her programme). The issue of challenged material was discussed at the same time that it was covered as a course online activity: probably the closest alignment of course content and event. As a result of the journaling, the selection course will be modified to spend more time discussing textbooks and bureaucratic processes.

The third main issue focused on traditional administrative issues: money, space, policies. The present course content deals with the design and space allocation of facilities but should also include discussion about library use for non-library events since that was the central issue for several students. As stated above, linking specific policies to specific management issues is probably the most effective way to deliver the information. Thus, policies should be a running "strand" in this and other courses.

In those cases where students did not resolve their critical event successfully, they tended to have neither the relevant course background nor library experience. On the other hand, having had the relevant coursework alone or having worked in a library without the underlying coursework did not guarantee that an issue would be solved satisfactorily; even if students were in a library position and had the coursework, they still might not be able to resolve the issue positively. In a couple of cases, the reason for unsuccessful resolution (i.e., not one desired by the student) was an issue of control: the administration had final say (e.g., job status or resource allocation). There was no significant correlation between the success rate of problem solving and course progress. At least three reasons account for this phenomenon:

- students did not necessarily discuss an issue that occurred during that month,
- they exhibited varying degrees of comfort in posting their events and revealing their own situations, and
- students self-selected their event so they may have chosen them to demonstrate their ability to solve a problem—or to elicit help. Interestingly, there did not seem to be a change in the degree of self-revelation over the semester, or a significant difference in the amount of self-revelation in relation to the student's progress in the programme.

The critical events chosen aligned with the course content to a great extent. Students seemed to choose events that did indeed reflect management issues. Course discussions and peer postings often led to the choice of critical event to report. However, some of their events were not covered sufficiently in the course to help them in their practice; some assistance arose through the online discussions, however. In a few cases, the issue was one that was covered in another course, e.g., technology, selection, reference and information literacy. There was no significant relationship between topic and timing within the semester.

It was hoped that the online journaling of critical events would help students bridge their coursework with their daily careers. Furthermore, the investigator hoped that the identification of and response to critical events would inform course development. Thus, based on the reflections, the investigator recommended that the course content would be modified in the following ways:

- Add explicit discussion on collaboration/negotiation/advocacy with administrators and parents.

- Add face-to-face time on advocacy and negotiating skills, including role-play and other simulations.

- Add explicit discussion on adult development and organisational behaviour.

- Explicitly link curriculum with student research projects.

- Explicitly link specific policies with specific management issues rather than group policies together.

- State which other courses deal with specific management issues.

The impact of narrative inquiry

In the final analysis, having students write online about critical issues and events impacted their learning in the two courses in the following ways:

- It provided a means to discuss and share issues in a safe and supportive environment.

- It provided a means to articulate and analyse practice, focusing on identifying effective methods rather than complaining.

- It optimised thoughtful reflection and meaningful suggestions, particularly for students who were reticent to speak in class.

- It facilitated a community of practice whereby students with prior academic and work experience could help neophytes enter the profession.

- It helped contextualise theory and transition from practice to concept.

- It provided a way to blur the lines between class time and online time, and also freed up time for the instructor to focus on scheduled content during face-to-face sessions.

- It helped identify curricular areas that needed more extensive coverage.

The following course activities may help to optimise the use of critical events:

- Have students help build the agenda for each face-to-face and online session based on the findings of the critical events.

- Have students explicitly identify ways that their coursework helps them solve management issues at their work site.

- Insure that instructors refer to the critical events as they deliver course content.

- Archive in-class discussion of critical issues and events, using the same guidelines as for written reflection; compare the in-class and online discussions.

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- Conduct follow-up focus groups to reveal other course issues; compare the findings with the written reflections.

Implications and conclusions

Online reflective journaling was a useful course delivery method and assessment vehicle. It also facilitated a sense of a community of practice, extending interactivity beyond formal class time. Posting identified issues of importance to students and provided a means to share concerns and effective problem-solving techniques. Students had control of the content and presentation so they could assume more responsibility for learning as well as determine the extent that they wished to reveal themselves.

In terms of evaluation, online journaling acted as a means for students to assess
- their own areas of strength and weakness,

- each other's situations and problem-solving approaches, and

- content areas that needed to be addressed.

The journals helped the instructors to assess (a) the areas of concern for students, (b) how students solved critical issues, and (c) the degree to which course content dealt with student-identified critical events.

The length of time, the focus on one assessment method, the variability in student response, and the population limitations constrain the investigator's license to generalise the findings. However, the process has been insightful and provides a foundation for further study. Online critical event journaling constitutes one viable way to uncover and deal with relevant issues. Similarly, the increasing emphasis on communities of practice and knowledge management also provides a venue for the use of critical event reflection and sharing. In the process, the articulation between academic preparation and professional growth can be bridged more seamlessly.

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Author Note

Dr. Lesley Farmer, Professor at California State University Long Beach, co-ordinates the Library Media Teacher Services Credential programme. She earned her M.S. in Library Science at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, and received her doctorate in Adult Education from Temple

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University. Dr. Farmer has worked as a teacher-librarian in K-12 school settings as well as in public, special and academic libraries. A frequent presenter and writer for the profession, Dr. Farmer's research interests include information literacy, collaboration, and educational technology.