

# Narrative discourse in research on teaching\*

## ABSTRACT

Recent reading on the practices and discourses of academic research prompted me to investigate the conventions of research reporting, especially in the field of teaching. When researchers have gathered information on their hypotheses (or research questions) in a systematic fashion, reflected on the meaning and implications of the information, and arrived at certain conclusions, they evaluate, interpret and analyse the information and, finally, put it forward in the form of some kind of report. Such reports often take the form of journal articles, which present the information in an impersonal, 'objective' and rather intimidating fashion. This seemingly 'logical' and 'pristine' form of presentation conceals the fact that 'real research is often confusing, messy, intensely frustrating, and fundamentally non-linear'. In the public writing down of research questions of genre come in, like considering which voice, which form of discourse, would be most appropriate for the research 'story' to be told in. Over the past two decades there has been increasing interest in the personal nature of experience and in how people make sense of their worlds by telling stories about them.

**Key words:** teaching; research reporting; scientific genres; narrative in research

## Introduction

Recent reading on the practices and discourses of academic research prompted me to investigate the conventions of research reporting, especially in the field of teaching. When researchers have gathered information on their hypotheses (or research questions) in a systematic fashion, reflected on the meaning and implications of the information, and arrived at certain conclusions, they evaluate, interpret and analyse the information and, finally, put it forward in the form of some kind of report. Such reports often take the form of journal articles, which present the information in an impersonal, 'objective' and rather intimidating fashion.

This seemingly 'logical' and 'pristine' form of presentation conceals the fact that 'real research is often confusing, messy, intensely frustrating, and fundamentally non-linear' (Marshall & Rossman, 1989: 21). Would researchers dare to reveal what Bargar and Duncan (1982: 2) describe as the 'real inner drama' of their work, with its intuitive base, its halting time-line, and its extensive recycling of concepts and perspectives, their work would probably not be published. Not

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getting one's research published is the ultimate scientific job in a world where research isn't considered research until it has been 'peer-reviewed' and published in a *bona fide* scientific journal, where it is displayed as an absolutely sequential and objective endeavour, using highly standardised reporting practices. In such writing, the voice of the author is often masked, creating a detached sense of objectivity and truth to the findings<sup>1</sup>.

It is, therefore, in the public writing down of research that questions of genre come in, considering which voice, which form of discourse, would be most appropriate for the research 'story' to be told in. The term 'genre' is here used rather loosely to refer to aspects of textual structuring as well as to social structures and processes, and their functions in the production of a text. The genre of academic writing that holds certain power and status has evolved as a result of observation and experiments in the natural sciences, characterised by the assumptions and methods of enquiry associated with positivism and quantitative research.

These theories and methods have been questioned by philosophers and theoreticians such as Kuhn, Feyerabend and Laudan, who emphasise that the scientific genre as we know it is not absolute. Gradually, some social scientists and educators have come to reject the traditional sciences model, as it is often not appropriate for use in their disciplines. Instead, they sometimes prefer to work within a qualitative research paradigm and do research from non-naturalistic ideological perspectives (such as hermeneutic, interpretive, phenomenological and critical perspectives), in an attempt to explain and interpret the social actions of people within a culture. Within a qualitative research paradigm, the role of the researcher is made more explicit, while research procedures are described more 'richly', that is, they include the researcher's personal observations.

'Scientific language', as a variety of present-day English (and other languages) can be expected to evolve and change in its orientation. Halliday and Martin (1993: 20–21) say that, on the one hand, it is likely to shift further towards semiotic explanations, both at the highest level of scientific abstractions and at the technological level, influenced by the information society. On the other hand, it is likely to move away from its 'present extremes of nominalisation and grammatical metaphor and go back to being more preoccupied with processes and more tolerant of indeterminacy and flux' (*ibid*: 20). Though the language of science might be forward-looking in its origins, it has always been and still is undemocratic and even increasingly anti-democratic: its mysterious discursive conventions continue to set apart those who understand them, shielding them from those who do not and thereby making its mastery an elitist practice. The genre literacy movement aims to demystify these discursive conventions by means of explicit teaching (*cf.* Martin, 1993). Halliday and Martin (1993: 21) mention that there are signs that people are looking for new ways of meaning, for a grammar which 'instead of reconstructing experience so that it becomes accessible only to a few, takes seriously its own beginnings in everyday language and construes a world that is recognisable to all those who live in it'. Constructing such a language would ensure that we would no longer have to choose between a research philosophy that is not 'scientific' and an alienating science (*ibid*: 21). Some researchers see the use of narrative discourse in scientific reporting as being in line with the search for more democratic forms of discourse.

### **Narrative: towards definition**

Over the past two decades there has been increasing interest in the personal nature of experience

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1. See Gilbert and Mulkay (1980); Brodkey (1987); Halliday and Martin (1993); and Becker (1986), for example.

and in how people make sense of their worlds by telling stories about them. The study of narratives in formal and informal situations comprises a relatively new area of inquiry in the human sciences. Students of literature tend to think of narrative as a literary genre typical of novels or epic poetry. However, narrative is found in a wide number of contexts. In addition to 'literary works' such as the afore-mentioned, autobiographies and memoirs, narratives also occur in speech events or stretches of discourse such as letters, news reports, court testimonies, speeches, interviews, psychological case studies and dialogue journals.

Essentially, narrative is a way of linguistically representing past experience, whether real or imagined. The basic characteristic of narrative discourse is that the order in which it presents events in speech is the order in which those events are claimed to have occurred in time (see Traugott & Pratt, 1980: 247–9). McEwan and Egan (1995: vii) describe narrative form as 'basically extended language configured in such a way that its earlier embodiment in life becomes revealed'. At the level of individual consciousness, narrative tells of personal growth in a wealth of moral tales and stories of development, such as autobiographies, diaries, case studies and several didactic forms in the arts and popular culture. 'Stories are necessary to weave a web of meaning within which we can live. We all live in story worlds' (Miller Mair, in Plummer, 1995: xiii). David Lodge (1990: 141) observes that narrative is 'one of the fundamental sense-making operations of the mind, and would appear to be both peculiar to and universal throughout humanity'. Despite the antiquity of the human practice of telling stories, the term 'narrative' and its cognates, such as 'narrativise' and 'narrativity' are fairly recent terms; it is only of late that they have been used in the reflective language of human action and practice (Swearingen, 1990).

The work of pioneers such as Labov (1972) has paved the way for expanding research on narrativisation in non-literary discourses. In a chapter entitled 'The transformation of experience in narrative syntax' (*ibid*), he describes techniques to obtain stretches of oral discourse and discusses the structure of narrative discourse. By means of specific questions and answers, he and his research team obtained narratives of personal experience from a large body of data ranging across age levels, socio-economic, cultural and ethnic groups. They studied these narratives to determine how verbal skills are used to evaluate experience and explore the linguistic techniques used for this purpose, especially within the Black English Vernacular (BEV) culture. In this study, they described a fully-formed narrative as having the following structural elements, which could be seen as a series of answers to underlying questions (*ibid*: 370):

1. Abstract: What was this about?
2. Orientation: Who, when, what, where?
3. Complicating action: Then what happened?
4. Evaluation: So what?
5. Result: What finally happened?

Labov and his team were mostly concerned with the evaluation of narratives; that is, what makes the events in the narrative reportable. All sections of a story may contain orientative and evaluative information. They distinguished different levels of complexity in the evaluative syntax used by children and adults, and by adult speakers from different socio-cultural backgrounds. Labov (1972: 396) concludes that in 'reporting their own experience, adults have developed the ability to evaluate their own behaviour with more complex linguistic devices', while also being more aware of the significance of such representation of their personal experience and being 'more likely to talk about it'. It is these characteristics of adult narratives that would suggest that adult learners could benefit from 'telling stories' of their learning experiences. By means of evaluating reports of

their own actions and beliefs that might become apparent through the stories, they could gain insight into the personal theories that they hold.

The form of a narrative utterance varies according to its communicative function and context. Not all narratives are stories, however. The story is distinguished from other narrative discourses 'by the fact that it is an utterance type used when one is recapitulating experience for display purposes, rather than for simple information-giving purposes or for some other purpose' (*ibid.*, 250). Narratives of personal experience usually have a story structure, one part of which is the evaluation; stories convey not only the attitude of the speaker to the events being narrated, but also why the speaker believes the events to be unusual, unexpected or worthy of display.

Gellner (1988: 39–53) seems to see the primary, undifferentiated quality of narrative thought as common to beginner learners as well as to the inhabitants of oral cultures. He contrasts that kind of thought with what he sees as a neat and logical division of labour that is characteristic of specialised work and instrumental reason. Though I do not agree with the implication that other types of thought are necessarily supreme to narrative thought, there is logic in seeing narrative thought as a forerunner and essential feature of learning. This is also the view of McEwan and Egan (1995: x–xi):

Narrative discourse, which is expressive, exploratory, and conducted in the idiom of informal conversation, is not just a manner of speaking but foundational to learning as a whole. Thus, the capacity to narrate is a condition of learning the more developed forms of thought and writing. We cannot learn these specialised genres, such as the formal essay or research report, if we do not first engage the subject through narrative.

Narrative, then, is not only a feature of our childhood learning, but plays a vital role in adult consciousness and is most active when we learn something new. For those reasons, it could be harnessed to a greater extent in childhood and adult education. Research on narrative has accelerated in a variety of disciplines, conceptual and methodological approaches (e.g. education, anthropology and folklore, psychology and psychiatry, law, medicine, sociology and sociolinguistics) over the past two decades; it provides both a framework for and source of research topics. Mishler (1997: 223) points out that, despite this variety, research on narrative seems to focus on some general concerns, such as defining the features of different narrative types and genres, specifying contextual influences, and analysing their cultural, psychological and social functions.

Denny (1978) distinguishes between ethnography, case study and storytelling in research. He sees an ethnographic study as a complete account of some culture-sharing group which is framed by a conceptual system believed by the writer to represent the reasons behind the way things are. Case studies, on the other hand, need not have the 'immersion component' of ethnographic studies and seek to describe rather than to analyse and even to explain. Unlike storytelling, however, case studies do aspire to completeness as they are 'intensive and complete examinations of a facet, an issue, or perhaps the events, of a ... setting over time' (Denny, 1978, in Goodson & Walker, 1995: 187). Storytelling distinguishes itself from ethnographies and case studies in that it does not necessarily aim to help in the creation or evaluation of educational remedies, but can facilitate problem definition. Stories need not test theory, need not be complete and need not be robust in either time or depth (*ibid.*).

Hall *et al* (1997) note that recent studies of narrative have a large and small purview in the literature; studies have discussed narrative as a communicating device on the one hand and as a legitimating and constituting discourse on the other hand. Narratives are constructed through the interaction of both of these levels, in the process weaving together events and characters, deviance and normality. This construction process has been analysed *inter alia* in studies of social work

discourse, where narratives have been shown to construct professional discourse, while also establishing and re-establishing professional legitimation and control (*ibid*: 275). A personal dialogue journal is often used in such situations for deepening client self-awareness and therapeutic communication, as well as for deepening professional self-awareness. Witherell (1991: 92) proposes that there are at least two reasons for the use of narrative in teaching, which will be the focus of the next section: the first has to do with the 'coherence and the ongoing autobiographical activity of the self' and the other with the power of story and metaphor in human action and feeling.

### **Narrative in research on teaching**

Lately, researchers such as Gee (1985), Conelly and Clandinin (1990) and McEwan, 1995, *inter alia*, have begun pursuing issues related to narrative and research on teaching in order to find a better language to talk about teaching, with the ultimate goal of improving practice. But what does *narrative* mean in the sense in which it is used in educational philosophy, linguistics, and other fields of study such as those mentioned above? According to McEwan (1995: 180), *narrative* refers to 'an open category of discourses that are, in general, involved with the construction and reconstruction of events, including human conscious states, in an order that places them in or configures them in such a way that they imply a certain directedness or orientation to some goal'. Informal speech is often structured in this way, and so are works of literature, various forms of reporting and, significantly, our practices.

Donald Freeman (1996b: 106) focuses on research on teaching and asks the question whether the prevailing 'scientific' genre as described above, with its restricted structure and dependence on passive, abstract, detached language which still persists, truly serves teachers in articulating what they know and learn about teaching. With Halkes and Olsen (1984: 1) he questions the adequacy and usefulness of this genre to express the immediacy of teachers' coping with classroom practice. 'Indeed, it is ironic to talk about including teachers' voices in discussions of teaching and learning when those voices must be rendered in specialised forms in order to be heard or considered legitimate contributions' (Freeman, 1996b: 106). He suggests that it might be more useful and appropriate to develop and strengthen personal ways of describing teachers' inquiries than to write about them in a seemingly objective, disinterested fashion, a practice which would offer an important antidote to the perspectives of researchers and non-teachers on what teaching is or what it should be. 'The complexity of teaching cannot be cleaned up simply by pretending it is not there; order cannot be forced on it by writing and talking in a detached voice about its messiness' (*ibid*: 107).

Freeman (1996b) draws a comparison between narrating a story and describing research in teaching. He expands the statement 'You have to know the story in order to tell the story' (*ibid*: 90) into a metaphor to describe different views of teaching (behavioural, cognitive and interpretivist views) and the place of research in teaching. He describes teachers' knowledge as stories of knowing what to do, following on Bruner's (1986) ideas of 'narrative ways of knowing'. Freeman (1996b: 101) states that describing their knowledge as narratives draws attention to the possibility that it 'may not be that what teachers know is subjective or unsystematic, but that researchers, who generally import their methods and their notions of truth and validity from the natural sciences, have overlooked such knowledge because they are using an incomplete means of examination'. He draws attention to the deep coherence and the social, interpersonal nature of teachers' stories, situating teachers' knowledge as 'individually constructed within a network of social experience' (*ibid*). The stories and the search for their interpretations become part of a process of examination of teaching.

In constructing a story of teaching, the aim is more than merely to describe a state of affairs. The descriptions are implicitly prescriptive, for relating what teaching is, also embroils us in defining what it may become when looking at it from another perspective, when 'telling a different story about it' than stories that have been told before. Finding a new language in which to talk about the practices of teaching – a language that can, moreover, become part of the practice of teaching itself – adds to the history of teaching and simultaneously participates in its evolution too. McEwan (1995: 181) remarks that research on teaching, in telling stories about teaching, is inevitably oriented towards changing how teachers think and act because it contributes to changes in the languages that constitute teachers' practices. Through the agency of what Coles (1989) refers to as the 'moral imagination', stories have the potential to transform us by making the richness contained in them part of our understanding and practice. In this regard, there should be recognition of the contribution of stories (such as case studies and ethnographies) to the theory and practice of educational change.

### **Narrative genre in teaching research reports**

The notion of teachers' knowledge as stories is helpful in explaining what they know and how their knowledge develops and is constructed over time (*cf.* Elbaz, 1992; McEwan & Egan, 1995). Like other stories, stories of teachers' knowledge have plots and often unfold in unexpected and seemingly illogical ways, but are still deeply coherent. They are also social in that they involve others in their webs of understanding. Within this metaphor, teachers' knowledge is 'built on interpersonal relationships; it is individually constructed within a network of social experience' (Freeman, 1996b: 101). Research, then, becomes writing down these stories as part of a process of seeking viable interpretations for them.

Teacher research within this more personal framework would concern itself with the process by which teachers seek interpretations and give voice to what they know and learn by virtue of their experience, combined with close and disciplined examination of their practice. This approach could render conventional research findings or atypical ones such as narratives, anecdotes and conversations, equally or even more useful and valid to practitioners, students and researchers. As narrative is a highly subjective form of writing, some might argue that these research accounts are not valid. On the notion of validity, Mishler (1990: 419) has suggested a test of trustworthiness by which to assess these narrative accounts, thereby connecting validity to action rather than to a collection of so-called 'objectively truthful findings'.

The essential criterion for such judgements is the degree to which we can rely on the concepts, methods and inferences, of a study, or a tradition of inquiry, as the basis of our own theorising and empirical research. If our overall assessment of a study's trustworthiness is high enough for us to act on it, we are granting the findings a sufficient degree of validity to invest our own time and energy (Mishler, 1990, in Freeman, 1996b: 107).

The way in which research on teaching is conducted and discussed should recognise the complexity and variability characteristic of any teaching situation, this characteristic renders teachers powerful and vulnerable at the same time. The teacher's role as participant observer is unique as one who can watch, intervene, listen and interact. Conventional ways of writing up research do not allow for the complexities of such constantly changing situations, making teachers vulnerable and lending undue power and status to those who are masters of the specific genre. This state of affairs calls for new, more personal and accessible ways of conducting and presenting research that are more achievable in terms of the real demands on time and energy that are part of teachers' lives. Freeman (1996b: 109) calls for new discourses to make public the results of research:

The usual forms of telling associated with research are impoverished. They are restricted as well as restricting. Current ways of articulating research are not readily available to teachers or learners who are unprepared to alter their voices and what they have to say in order to fit into the confines of the genre. When teachers adapt to the researcher stance without challenging it, they can allow the genre to subtly alter their concerns and insights. It is crucial to recognise this fact and to break out of these restricted forms ...

Part of 'breaking out' of these restricted forms of the genre of research reporting entails making the identity of the narrator of the research story more explicit. Revealing the researcher's identity – explicating her/his 'emic' perspective – is critical in a political and epistemological sense, as including the narrator fully in the story creates a different picture from a story in which the narrator is obscured. Although this approach has shortcomings, its basic legitimacy in presenting the researcher as a filter through which the research is approached, designed and described has to be recognised.

The increasing 'turn to narrative' in educational research is seen by some as a sign of 'respect for narrative as everyone's rock-bottom capacity, but also as the universal gift' (Coles, 1989: 30). McEwan (1995) suggests that a practice and the language in which it is executed cannot be separated. He elaborates on the interrelatedness of language and practice: 'the constitutive language of the practice aims to clarify the purposes of the practice' (*ibid*: 180). Thus, narrative language is not merely about practice, but is also a part of the practice it constitutes. Ideas about the interrelatedness of language and practice connect with hermeneutical views of practical reasoning, which dissolve the dualism between theory and practice. In the 'hermeneutic circle', knowledge and practice are seen as moving in a circular fashion, demonstrating that practices are never devoid of at least some level of theoretical understanding.

For teachers, the implication of this conclusion about language and practice is that they should not just become more aware of their practices as partly constituted by narrative, but also (and as a result of this awareness) begin to see their lives and practices as in some way changed significantly by their narrative understanding. Research could become a more personal enterprise: in addition to coming to understand teaching as a narrative, they should practise it as informed by narrative and so, in reflection, also come to see their own pedagogic values and purposes as contingent and revisable.

By drawing an analogy between Berger's (1978) distinction between public and private photographs<sup>2</sup> and meaning in the public and personal domains, Goodson and Walker (1995: 188–191) explore possibilities to make research and evaluation a personal or even private enterprise, a service to the institution and to the person rather than to the research community. They suggest that doing so might bring us further on the way towards unifying research and practice, stressing that the most essential point in this process is not the kind of information that is developed by research but the structure of the channels through which this information travels.

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2. To summarise briefly, Berger (1978) distinguishes between private and public uses of photography. Private photographs are mostly of one's loved ones and are read in a context which is continuous from that in which it was taken, creating a parallel continuity to that from which the photograph was originally taken. By contrast, public photographs (for example those used in advertising) are usually images of the unknown or of people/things that are only known through photographs. In this sense, they were severed from life when they were taken and remain isolated images, separated from one's personal experiences. They are not part of one's personal memory, but remain pictures of strangers drawing attention to the event, person or object recorded on film.

Research creates information, and usually that information is about the relatively powerless, or those with low status in the system, and for the relatively powerful, or high status. When we talk about connecting private and public worlds we mean this in the sense of creating new channels of communication or of revising existing channels (*ibid*, 1995: 189).

Moreover, it is not only the culture of research that creates inequalities of information control and its interpretation, but also patterns of specialisation, deference to 'scientific' endeavour and perceived authority. These are all ingredients of our personal and research cultures that we bring to the research situation, but we often compound their effects by our actions. (See Goodson & Walker, 1995: 193).

While some qualitative or descriptive studies might be seen as working towards the above-mentioned goal of connecting private and public worlds, others tend to resemble the 'public' photograph more closely: the context which gives the study meaning does not primarily come from the data or even from the researcher's interaction with the setting and the subject, but from his/her culture and/or from the culture and methods of reporting used. Though a context is provided, it is one that might be alien to the world of the subject; like a public photograph. The criteria for qualitative research of a high standard remain subtle and even elusive at times, but Goodson and Walker (1995: 189) direct us towards 'the best of this research': good qualitative research 'enters the world of the subjects and presents it to the outside with understanding and sensitivity, increasing the potential competence of the reader who enters similar situations'. A participant observer, who is personally involved in every step of the research process, best does this presentation.

Connecting the realms of 'personal' and 'public' meaning is one of the most appealing characteristics of harnessing narrative in applied research. This connection between 'emic' and 'etic' perspectives<sup>3</sup> of research has important implications for style and presentation in research discourse. Goodson and Walker (1995) indicate some of the complex challenges and advantages of using storytelling, narratives and case studies as format for reporting research. One advantage is that these formats offer the possibility of a form that is authoritative rather than authoritarian in the ways it accounts to and about its subjects.

Though some researchers might see a return to the journalistic accounting style of storytelling as a regressive step, such a move need not entail turning our backs 'on the accumulated wisdom of social sciences and accepting a style of description that deals only in superficialities and trivialities' (*ibid*: 187). Such a move would touch deeply on the values held by the scientific community. Rather, there is a need for a parallel research tradition, which would not concern itself solely with studies that would traditionally be considered 'scientific', but would attempt to confront educational phenomena 'from the inside', so to speak. Problems in education will be identified, rendered, portrayed and disclosed in such a way that the reader could empathetically participate in the events described (Eisner, 1978).

The skills required for such a parallel research tradition, i.e. one that involves extensive use of narrative, might be difficult to acquire for people trained in the conventional research tradition, for they often go against the grain of what they have learnt. Goodson and Walker (1995: 188) point out that one of the first things that people should learn in such research is 'to record events, instants, interactions, places, and people in ways that make them memorable'. This is a very different aim from that of some traditional research reporting, which is written to make it appear

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3. 'Emic' perspectives are those held by 'insiders', such as the participant observer in a (mostly qualitative) study. 'Etic' perspectives are associated with traditional research reporting within a positivist framework and refer to an 'objective', 'outsider's' perspective on research.



more complicated and authoritative by means of distant (and distancing) seemingly 'objective' language use.

When talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths. These truths don't reveal the past 'as it actually was', aspiring to a standard of objectivity. They give us instead the truth of our experiences. Unlike the Truth of the scientific ideal, the truths of personal narratives are neither open to proof nor self-evident. We come to understand them only through interpretation, paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and to the world views that inform them (The Personal Narratives Group, 1989: 261).

This statement about the use of narratives points towards some of its greatest strengths – revealing personal consciousness at a deep level, and taking into account the context in which events occur – as well as towards one of its weaknesses, which is that the personal nature of narratives opens them up to personal erroneous interpretation. These inherent strengths and weaknesses of the use of the narrative genre in education have received attention from several researchers. For example, while being in favour of the use of narrative in teaching and research, McEwan and Egan (1995: xii) have a word of warning: though the story form contributes to our self-understanding, it may just as easily contribute to self-deception. As people are prone to the persuasive power of myths and ideologies, narrative could be used to distort and conceal some perspectives and promote or legitimate one point of view to the detriment of others. Critical theorists and poststructuralists have demonstrated the power of narratives to shape consciousness and 'direct the operations of our educational institutions' (*ibid*). The implication for teaching and teacher education in particular is that, if narrative content and/or structure are used in teaching, they should be taught and used within a critical framework.

Furthermore, while narratives might appear to have their origins in individual creativity, they are – like research reports – also the products of social experience (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993: 15). The reader of a narrative, as a cultured person, is as much part of the meaning-making process as the author of the narrative text; in fact, the reader is in a position to disrupt the narrative and read into it things which the author might never have intended.

Another point of caution is that, while research description in the form of narrative might give teachers and researchers a voice, the mastery and use of narrative discourse conventions might not provide them with as much power and standing as the mastery and use of other genres could. Narrative is only one of the genres students need to master as part of their school literacy (Martin, 1989) in order to equip them adequately for the demands of higher education and the workplace. As proponents of the genre literacy movement point out, students need to be literate in a variety of genres, such as reports, explanations, procedures, discussions and recounts (Macken *et al*, 1989) in order to achieve success at school and thereafter.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

While storytelling has much value at the level of self-knowledge and reflective inquiry into personal beliefs (through journal writing, for example), mastering the genre at that level only does not prepare teachers themselves for the demands of being a teacher-as-researcher, or for equipping their students for the literacy demands of school, further education and the workplace. In essence,

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4. In this article, I base my understanding of genre literacy mainly on that of Australian genre theorists such as Frances Christie, J.R. Martin, Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope, as well as that of British theorists such as Norman Fairclough and Gunther Kress.

the more genres one has access to – and the more sub-genres within each genre – the greater one's potential social power and influence. Narrative thought is essential to learning, while narrative discourse could be seen as a necessary preparation for the mastery of other genres, such as reports and arguments.

The use of narrative in research on teaching and teachers provides exciting possibilities for the liberation of teaching practitioners and researchers from the constraints of conventional research discourse. However, while exploring the narrative genre in this context, they should also remain aware of the academic and social implications of their own and their students' choices of language variety and genre in a variety of social contexts. A variety of genres should be studied to ensure not only mastery of their text patterns and conventions, but also critical awareness of their relative social and educational status.

When approached in a disciplined way, in full knowledge of its richness as well as its constraints, research becomes a matter of balancing and assembling different points of view, each of which can contribute to aspects of the story of teaching and learning. This insight will entail 'recognising diverse ways of telling those stories so that more voices can be heard' (Freeman, 1996: 112). Genre studies could present us with one way of exploring diverse discourses in a more democratic, less exclusive and excluding fashion.

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<p>niana roos paola's main interests in applied linguistics are language awareness; critical language awareness; genre literacy; and reflective learning and teaching. she explored these interests in her book entitled <i>pro-active language teacher education in a multicultural society</i> (peter lang, 2001). niana currently lives in basle, switzerland, where she is a full-time mother and a part-time teacher of english.</p>	<p>Dr. niana roos paola spitzackerstrasse 66 CH-4103 bottmingen switzerland tel. +41 61 4216283</p>
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