

# A Narrative Approach to Research

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## **Abstract**

*In this paper I present a narrative approach to environmental education research. This approach evolved through a dynamic interplay between research questions, theory, experience, conversation, and reflection. I situate the approach with respect to narrative inquiry and clarify the key conceptual metaphors underpinning my study, including “story,” “narrative,” and “metaphor.” I then discuss the particular methods involved and their compatibility with my underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions about the storied reality of human experience. Finally, I reflect on writing as part of the research process and on the possibilities and responsibilities inherent in the act of writing.*

## **Résumé**

*Dans cet article, je propose une approche narrative de la recherche en ERE. L'évolution de cette approche s'est faite à la faveur d'une vive interaction entre éléments de recherche, théorie, expérience, conversation et réflexion. Je situe cette approche quant à son rapport avec le questionnement narratif et précise les principales métaphores conceptuelles sur lesquelles repose mon étude, soit le « récit », la « narration » et la « métaphore ». J'aborde ensuite chacune des méthodes touchées et leur compatibilité avec mes hypothèses ontologiques et épistémologiques sur la réalité, mise en récit, de l'expérience humaine. Enfin, je réfléchis sur l'écriture en tant que composante du processus de recherche ainsi que sur les possibilités et les responsabilités inhérentes à l'acte d'écrire.*

I am one among a growing number of environmental educators and researchers with an interest in stories and narratives. Guided by William Cronon's (1992) contention that bad story-telling has “wreaked havoc” with nature (p. 1361), I place great importance on the recovery and/or crafting of alternatives to some of the broader societal narratives which so profoundly shape the North American school experience (e.g., individualism, rationalism, technological determinism, resourcism). For my doctoral research in particular, I aimed to probe and work towards an in-depth understanding of patterns of meaning-making among a relatively small group of people involved in school-based habitat restoration. What storylines and metaphors guided their undertakings? How did language capture, construct, and otherwise mediate their experiences? In what sense did their storied practices attest to possibilities of honouring and renewing human ties and commitments to the rest of nature?

Such questions pointed me firmly in the direction of narrative inquiry as a methodological approach to research. Certainly I shared the ontological and epistemological perspective described by F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin (1990) who write:

The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are story-telling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world. (p. 2)

As Catherine Kohler Riessman (1993) explains, narrative researchers attend to the ways that culture speaks itself through an individual's story, or in other words, to the ways that private constructions mesh with "a community of life stories" (p. 4). They understand language to be "deeply constitutive of reality" (p. 5) and not a "transparent medium, unambiguously reflecting stable, singular meanings" (p. 2).

There was considerable common ground between my theoretical orientation and that described by Riessman. Nevertheless, the term "narrative inquiry" fit my work best as a "sensitizing concept" (see Schwandt, 1994, p. 118) rather than as a label that neatly situated it within a research paradigm or tradition. I also took inspiration from constructivist and interpretive/phenomenological approaches (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lather, 1988; Schwandt, 1994; Schwandt, 1997). They seemed to more easily accommodate my desire to interpret across personal accounts in order to investigate and represent the storylines and broader societal narratives which informed them. I wanted to explore not only the private constructions of individuals, as is commonly the focus in narrative research, but also collective interpretations and constructions (e.g., teachers' perspectives, students' perspectives).

For the purpose of this paper I concentrate on the ways that a narrative approach characterized my research, in terms of both the opportunities and the challenges it presented. To begin, I clarify some of the key conceptual metaphors with which I struggled, for many months, to define in a way that suited my understanding and research intentions. I then discuss the methods I used to hear, gather and participate in stories of school-based habitat restoration and how, in this case, narrative assumptions gave them a special twist. Finally, I turn to the question of the researcher as story-teller: what were the implications for "writing up" research, when I conceived of interpretation as an ontological condition?

I like the wetland because it's a home for all the people in the wetland, or um, all the creatures.  
*Grade five student*

## Making the Metaphors Mine

One does not have to delve very far into narrative research to realize that there is no single way of using or defining terms such as “story” and “narrative.” For as Robert Bringhurst (2002) contends, “in the real life of language these terms overlap” (p. 16). The distinctions we might impose are thus arbitrary and ephemeral. For the purpose of my study, however, one of the initial challenges I faced was to come to grips with prevailing understandings and to articulate my particular use of the terms. With the hope that the outcome of that process may be of interest to others, I offer the following words of explanation:

*Story, Narrative.* Many writers invoke the terms “story” and “narrative” to convey a sense of our human involvement in the creation of the realities we live and perceive. As Riessman (1993) notes, scholars from various disciplines are “turning to narrative as the organizing principle for human action” (p. 1). Cronon (1992) writes, for instance, of “the storied reality of human experience” (p. 1369) to draw attention to the way that human accounts of experience are discursively constituted. He explains that narrative is fundamental to the way humans organize experience, not only as individuals, but as communities and societies: “our human perspective is that we inhabit an endlessly storied world” (p. 1368).

As guiding images, story and narrative challenge the “discovery” model of epistemology (i.e., reality is “given” and thus “found”). They point to the settings, characters, tropes, and plots through which we make sense of experience, reminding us that we are implicated in what we know. They work against the limited conception of language as a tool of conscious purpose while foregrounding instead its power to evoke and resonate with our multifarious experiences.

Elusive terms, “story” and “narrative” are used, often interchangeably, to refer to a wide variety of discursive practices (e.g., childhood recollections, fables, scientific explanations, television documentaries, historical accounts) and dimensions of understanding (e.g., allegories, theories, ideologies, myths, paradigms, normative frameworks). For the sake of clarity in my study, however, I used each term in a distinct and specific manner.

I grounded “story” in the spoken and written utterances of individual human beings. I did not distinguish, as Riessman (1993) does, between “talk organized around consequential events” and other forms of discourse such as the question-and-answer exchanges typical of interviews (p. 2). Rather, I treated all meaning-making efforts of each participant as part of her/his story.

I reserved “narrative” to refer to broader societal patterns of meaning, and in so doing acknowledge the discursive context within which participants’ stories were enmeshed. In contrast, Riessman locates “narrative” in the personal experiences of research participants.

*Storyline.* I used the term “storyline” to speak across and between the stories of participants and to highlight shared understandings. In speaking of storylines, my intent was to convey a sense of the plots-in-common that shaped participants’ engagements and pointed them towards desired outcomes. Examples included “providing habitat for wildlife,” “making the schoolyard look better,” and “creating areas for student socializing.” Without locking participants into specific courses of action, these and other storylines suggested particular roles for participants and ascribed importance to certain actions, attitudes and values while downplaying others.

*Narrative Thread.* I used the term “narrative thread” to evoke a sense of the sometimes unfinished, sometimes shared, always multidimensional weave of storied accounts of habitat restoration. I thought of a narrative thread as an element (e.g., an explanation, a hope, a vision, an emphasis, a perspective) figuring in one or more stories or storylines. Examples of narrative threads running through the study included:

- the notion of student empowerment;
- visions of eco-societal transformation;
- a pedagogical emphasis on process over product; and
- enthusiasm for physical activity.

As I intended it, the notion of narrative thread served as a reminder that stories are not discrete units but rather are part of a larger, polyphonous fabric.

*Metaphor.* Commenting on the contemporary explosion of interest in metaphor, Wayne C. Booth (1979) writes: “Metaphor has by now been defined in so many ways that there is no human expression, whether in language or any other medium, that would not be metaphoric in *someone’s* definition” (p. 48). His remarks signal the difficulty of attempting to explicate one’s use of the term. According to J.H. Gill (1991), “contemporary models of metaphoric activity range along a continuum, between the extremes of those who see it as primarily ‘decorative’ and those who think of it as essentially ‘constitutive’ in nature” (p. 105). My understanding fits into the latter end of Gill’s continuum, where metaphoric speech and thought are held to “comprise the very substance or framework out of which both factual knowledge and literal signification obtain their meaning” (p. 105). I agree with George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) who contend that metaphors are not simply part of poetic, fanciful, or rhetorical language, but are also part of ordinary literal language and, fundamentally, part of the way we conceive of things and structure our everyday activities. Metaphors are thus pervasive in everyday life, in thought and action as well as in language, and because they are so pervasive, they are often taken literally as self-evident, direct descriptions of phenomena (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; see also Buell, 1995).

W.V. Quine (1979) concurs: "It is a mistake [. . .] to think of linguistic usage as literalistic in its main body and metaphorical in its trimming. Metaphor, or something like it, governs both the growth of language and our acquisition of it." The crux of metaphor, he explains, is "creative extension through analogy," a process through which a metaphor is forged "at each succeeding application of an earlier word or phrase" (p. 160).

In my study, for instance, such key expressions as "restoration" and "naturalization" could be understood as metaphors in this sense. Each has a long history, and only recently have their meanings been extended to include efforts to rehabilitate natural communities within a landscape. "Restoration" first appeared in the English language in the seventeenth century, and referred to the act of reinstating a person, territory, or thing to a former position. In the eighteenth century, it took on connotations of restoring (a person) to health. In the nineteenth century its meaning was extended to denote the process of carrying out alterations and repairs on a building with the idea of returning it to something like its original form. The present day notion of ecological restoration draws from and extends particularly the latter two meanings.

The verb "to naturalize," in the seventeenth century, meant to admit (an alien) to the position and rights of citizenship. Its meaning was extended in the eighteenth century to include the action of introducing animals and plants to places where they were not indigenous. Ironically, today, in the context of schoolyard naturalization, it is often used in the opposite sense: reintroducing animals and plants to places where they *were* indigenous.

To speak of "restoration" and "naturalization" as metaphors is to undermine their literalness and to evoke their power to mediate our sense of reality rather than to simply label phenomena. Each expression filters, transforms, and brings forward particular aspects of experience, inviting a movement of interpretation (see Gill, 1991; Black, 1962; Harries, 1979). By the same token, the meaning which each metaphor achieves depends upon the context within which it is used (Black, 1962).

*Narrative Field.* Borrowing from Donna Haraway (1988), I used the expression "narrative field" (p. 82) to refer to the broader discursive contexts within which the study was situated, one such field being ecological restoration, and the other, education. I was trying to evoke a sense of the "dynamic web" of metaphors, stories, storylines, and narratives which characterized these fields.

*Carol:*  
Anne,  
Anne,  
remember  
when I  
kept doing  
those milk-  
weed cray-  
on rub-  
bings  
because I  
loved those  
leaves so  
much?  
*Anne:* Yes,  
it was a  
beautiful  
leaf, wasn't  
it?  
*Grade one  
interview*

## A Narrative Twist on Methods

I chose a multi-method approach to my study which included participant observation, interviewing, and an open-ended survey. These methods were particularly well-suited to hearing, gathering, and participating in stories of habitat restoration. They allowed for diverse perspectives on participants' experiences and for a variety of relationships with the research participants.

### *Participant Observation*

My study spanned an entire 10-month school year during which I spent a total of 72 days (423 hours) at a public elementary school in southern Ontario engaged in participant observation. The great value of this method was the sense of continuity and embodied intimacy for which it allowed. My intent was to ground my discussion and reflections in the intricacies and complexities of a personally experienced (and thus personally meaningful) habitat restoration programme.

When choosing the research site I was looking not for an "average" or "typical" or "representative" programme (as would be more characteristic of an objectivist approach), but rather a programme congruent with my desire to investigate the *potential* of school-based habitat restoration. Where and how might a particular programme disrupt dominant human-centered societal narratives and foster a lived sense of being in a more-than-human world (see Bell, 2001)? In other words, I wanted to take my research in a particular direction, and my research questions, from the beginning, set the broad contours of my research story.

Further, as a researcher, I was concerned about the quality of the relationships that would develop between me and the other participants. I agree with Paul Hart (2002) who contends that the "way in which we know" is tied up in our relationships with our research participants (p. 150). I wanted not only to develop an insider's perspective on school-based habitat restoration, but also to work towards the sort of research relationship described by Connelly and Clandinin (1990) where participants "feel cared for and have a voice with which to tell their stories" (p. 4).

I proceeded on the assumption that both the discursive and non-discursive dimensions of restoration practice were key to understanding its transformative (disruptive, nourishing, healing) potential. Recognizing the difficulty of

I think our most memorable moment came when we first sighted "our" ducks who returned for three years to nest. We haven't attracted the birds we had hoped to attract, especially in the winter. So it was very exciting to have the ducks use our site for nesting.  
*Teacher,  
Board survey*

accounting for the unspoken (somatic, tacit) dimensions of experience in words, I hoped to be able to fully immerse myself in, and attend to, the phenomena I was trying to understand. Lous Heshusius (1994) writes of research relationships based not on distance between self and other, but rather on knowing through participation. They require “an attitude of profound openness and receptivity” (p. 16), an “active, vigilant, absorbing passivity” (p. 18) where the researcher strives for a participatory quality of attention. I wanted to bring such open attention to my work since I felt it would help me to develop accepting and trusting relationships with the research participants and to better sense the social and institutional parameters which shaped habitat restoration at the school.

Another important consideration was to situate myself so that I would be able to attend to ways that the more-than-human world spoke through participants’ stories. There is a danger, I believe, when focusing on the metaphors and storylines that structure human experience, to forget that our words, as David Abram (1996) puts it, emerge “from our ongoing reciprocity with the world” (p. 56). The tendency, certainly in educational research, is to ignore the “intelligence” of the animate earth (see Abram’s comments in Panel Discussion, 2002), including the agency of nonhuman beings and the extent to which they shape our experiences and understanding. One of the challenges I faced then, was to differ from this norm, and to convey where possible a sense of a more-than-human world that “beckoned” and “solicited” (Abram, 1996, p. 55) the attention of participants.

Indeed, my very choice of programmes to study was in large part a visceral response to a place that beckoned and solicited me. Known as “the wetland,” the school’s restoration site was large in extent and relatively unkempt, with a small pond as a focal point. The many trees and shrubs that had been planted there by students were growing tall. There were also birds, bees, frogs, and wildflowers making homes for themselves, and dead trees left standing. Teaming with a regenerative wildness, the place called out to me. I wanted to be there.

Typically, I would spend a seven hour day at the school, at times in the classroom, listening to or assisting with a lesson, and often outdoors with small groups of students, gathering leaves, trimming paths, moving soil, or planting trees, shrubs, and wildflowers. These outings gave me a chance to interact more intimately with students, to exchange stories about nature experiences, and to see what caught students’ interest in the restoration site.

For example, on my first leaf-collecting expedition with a grade one class, students remarked on the softness of sumach branches and the scent of cedar, and they collected leaves from plants so close to the ground (red clover, lamb’s-quarters) that I had overlooked them entirely. They were also very excited about being near the water, and this was the first thing they mentioned to their teacher when we got back to the classroom. Bird nests, frogs, and groundhog holes evoked a similar degree of excitement on subsequent outings.

Because the involvement of classes in the restoration project was sporadic, I made myself available for whatever opportunities arose. As a result, I often had unstructured time during the day which I would usually spend writing field notes, organizing restoration-related activities, chatting in the staff room, helping to tidy up a classroom, or accompanying teachers on supervision duty during recess or lunch.

This flexible approach allowed for unanticipated interactions and conversations with people at the school. For example, I met most teachers and parents (volunteers) simply by spending time in the staff room. There I was visible on an almost daily basis, and little by little, people began to approach and chat with me and accept my regular presence. Most often teachers would tell me stories about gardening, pets, animal encounters, and their experiences in the wetland. These chance meetings later led to a number of invitations to casually visit and work with classes.

I was keen to develop, with the research participants, the sort of ongoing collaborative process of reflection and revision described by Connelly and Clandinin (1990). I soon realized, however, that this was likely to prove an unwelcome burden, especially on the teachers and parents. I had hoped, for example, to conduct recurrent interviews (as in Lather, 1988; & Reinharz, 1992) to allow for a more dialogic, collaborative approach to interpretation, but found it extremely difficult to schedule even an initial interview with some participants. It was only outside school time (a weekend, the summer holidays) that I managed to interview the two teachers most closely involved with the project. My experience was thus reminiscent of that of Hart (1996) who notes the reluctance of busy teachers to devote time and energy to ongoing, reflective experiences with researchers.

### *Interviewing*

Interviewing is central to narrative research. In my case, it created opportunities to pause and reflect with participants about what they remembered, valued, liked, and disliked about their involvement in habitat restoration. Among other things, interviewing allowed participants to make explicit certain feelings, beliefs, and opinions which might otherwise have been left unsaid and/or passed unnoticed.

So that participants would feel freer to express themselves in their own words and attend to what was most important to them, I opted for semi-structured interviews based on open-ended questions. Because the interviews were grounded in shared experiences, they unfolded like comfortable conversations. As a result, there was a considerable degree of variation among the interviews, with comments sparking unanticipated questions and leading, at times, into lengthy digressions (e.g., about politics, social interactions, animal encounters). There was also a reflective dimension to the interviews, as participants (including me) took advantage of a rare moment's

stillness to gather their thoughts and share insight and stories about the matters at hand.<sup>1</sup>

The interview process was not without surprises. Before beginning the interviews with the adults, for example, I showed them a list of the questions I intended to ask. My intent was to set their minds at ease so that their stories would flow. This was precisely the result in most cases. I was surprised, however, when the list of questions seemed to heighten the anxiety of two parents interviewed. They had not had time to look it over closely before meeting with me and assumed that I expected them to have their answers prepared. As one mother explained before the interview, she felt like she had come to school without having her homework done.

Another technique I used to try to set participants at ease was to begin each interview in such a way that they could discuss something about which they were eminently knowledgeable—in this case, their own experiences (see Reinharz, 1992). I asked the teachers, parents, and principal at the school to describe their involvement in the school's habitat restoration project, a question which, by and large, served nicely to get the conversations flowing. I was surprised, nevertheless, when some of the adults (one teacher, two parents) seemed at a loss for words, as though their involvement had been minimal. I found myself prompting and encouraging them by reminding them of the many things that had happened during the year and by inquiring about their role in earlier years. In all cases, these preliminary exchanges helped to clarify and validate the significance of participants' involvement and to set a friendly, respectful tone for the remainder of the interviews.

With the students I took a different approach. I showed them pictures I had taken of activities in which we had been involved so that they could explain to me their role in and understanding of what had taken place. This technique worked well with students of all ages (grades 1 to 8), most of whom were excited to see and reminisce about the people and events depicted in the photographs. It helped to ground and provide a setting for the questions and anecdotes which followed.

To help the students feel more comfortable with interviewing, I conducted group rather than individual interviews, involving 2 to 4 students. One advantage of this method was that students could build upon and gain confidence from each other's words and stories. With a couple of exceptions, the group interviews unfolded smoothly, in a relaxed and conversational manner. Occasionally, for instance, the students would joke with or tease me, as in the following grade eight interview:

When you're sitting in the classroom it's like pictures everywhere. But when you look outside it's all natureful and it makes you happy.  
*Grade eight student*

Anne: Now, of all those things, what did you like best?

Larry: The wetland.

Mark: Working in the wetland.

Anne: OK. Why is that?

Larry: 'Cause you get to see frogs.

Mark: It's, like being out in nature. It's relaxing.

Larry: Hearing frogs make out.

Anne: Hearing frogs what?

Steve: Mating.

Anne: Hearing frogs mating.

Mark: I could put that in different terms but I won't.

### Survey

While one particular school programme was the focus of my research, I also wanted to get a sense of how the stories which emerged there were set within a wider web of school-based habitat restoration initiatives. I therefore decided to conduct a survey of all the schools within the same southern Ontario school board where restoration projects were ongoing (42 schools altogether of which 23 responded). The survey represented a means of looking beyond a particular case to consider other programmes and to identify idiosyncrasies and shared storylines.

As with the interviews, I phrased the survey questions in an open-ended manner so that participants would feel free to tell stories and to write about what they deemed most significant. I asked them, for example, to explain how they had become involved, to describe their projects, and to recount a memorable moment in the planning, development, or use of the restored site. I also asked them to comment on the ways that restoration-related activities differed from and/or added to indoor classroom activities and environmental education generally. Finally, to elicit comments about their vision for restoration, I asked them to discuss, in light of their programs, two very different definitions of ecological restoration, one which invited a technical interpretation and one which highlighted a more embodied and spiritual understanding. As I had hoped, most respondents provided generously storied accounts of their motivations and experiences.

*Question:*

Please recount a memorable moment involving the restored site.

*Answer:*

After a heavy rain, pupils went out and collected over a thousand worms and then put them in the restoration area to act as "little ploughs."

*Teacher,  
Board survey*

### The Researcher as Story-teller

One of the long-standing conventions of social science writing is that the researcher conducts her/his study and then "writes up" the "findings," as though somehow the content and form were separable. This convention, as

Laurel Richardson (1994) explains, is historically rooted in the strict divide between literature and science in Western society, where, since the seventeenth century, literature has been aligned with metaphoric and ambiguous language, while the words of science have been prized as objective and precise. Increasingly, however, especially under the influence of poststructuralism, this convention is being called into question. It assumes a static, “mechanistic model of writing,” contends Richardson, which “ignores the role of writing as a dynamic, creative process” (p. 517). Instead, she argues, researchers need to recognize that writing is a way of knowing, “a method of discovery and analysis” (p. 516) which does not innocently *reflect* a social reality, but, rather, *creates* that reality. As she puts it, “no textual staging is ever innocent” (p. 518).

Richardson’s critique helped me to understand the extent to which analysis, interpretation, and writing were intertwined throughout the research process, from my very first field notes to the final draft of my thesis. Just as interpretation involved separating and tracing key elements in the data and committing them to paper, so writing entailed distinguishing, organizing and mulling over the patterns of meaning that emerged. The form and content of my work, in other words, took shape at one and the same time.<sup>2</sup> When I engaged in the process of coding, for example, I could not help but proceed with an implicit conceptual structure. While I might strive to keep my codes as descriptive and as close to the words of participants as possible, I needed to be cognizant of the ways that my research interests and questions might and should come into play. Indeed, early on in the coding process, my supervisor, Lous Heshusius, suggested that I keep my research questions more prominent and that I tie my coding framework more closely to my thinking about metaphors, stories, and narrative so that it would suit my central epistemological assumption that humans lead storied lives.

I decided, consequently, to use literary concepts to organize my groupings of coding categories. These were:

- setting;
- storyline;
- perspective;
- diction;
- motif; and
- theme.

Each of these terms reflected a different way of thinking about and handling the comments of participants. For instance, I grouped under “setting” those coding categories which identified contextual, background information about school-based habitat restoration (e.g., project locale; community context). I used “storyline” to refer to those categories which marked the broader purposes shaping participants’ endeavours and pointing them

towards particular outcomes (e.g., helping nature; raising environmental awareness). Under “perspectives” I grouped together those categories marking the general affective orientations of participants towards their involvement in restoration projects (e.g., long-term hope; pride and sense of achievement). The “diction” categories included key metaphors used by participants to refer to the type of work in which they were engaged (e.g., habitat restoration; naturalization). I used “motif” to bring together those coding categories which identified elements of knowledge gained by participants through their involvement (e.g., names and lives of plants and animals; what plants need and how to do it). Finally, under “theme” I included categories marking expressions and comments which highlighted the pedagogical ideas or beliefs underlying participants’ engagement with habitat restoration (e.g., student empowerment and ownership; learning through process).

My supervisor encouraged me always to regard my coding framework as work in progress. Indeed, as my analysis developed, I recoded all of the interviews, survey responses, and field notes and redrafted the coding categories several times. As I reworked and read across coding categories, I began to see more clearly whose voices they represented and how they interrelated. Larger patterns of meaning came to light, leading quite unexpectedly to a draft outline for the thesis.

Once my outline was in place, I was faced with decisions about interpretation and representation. Richardson’s critique of social science writing conventions had alerted me to the possibilities and responsibilities inherent in the writing process. As researcher and writer I would be selecting, deleting, framing, and re-interpreting the stories of participants. Recognizing the weight of my own voice, how might I work towards a more polyphonic representation of participants’ experiences and stories? (See Hart [2002] regarding the challenge of plurivocality.) How much theory from the literature should I include, and where? How could I make sure that the theory helped to situate and clarify my field work without detracting from it?

In putting pen to paper my aims were:

- to tell an engaging, rich and vital story, true to my lived experiences and respectful of all participants (see Richardson, 1994 & Hart, 2002);
- to ensure that participants’ voices and stories would sound through my own (while working, nevertheless, from the understanding that all experience is open to interpretation) (see Scott, 1991); and
- to explore the relation between individual and collective understandings by situating my study within broader discussions in ecological restoration and education literature.

These aims shaped my thesis in a number of ways. I decided, for example, to signal the importance of experience and story by beginning most chapters and most sections within chapters with stories from my fieldwork. For

instance, to introduce a section about fostering a sense of connection with other life through habitat restoration, I began with the following story recounted by the grade one teacher who spearheaded the project:

Out to the frozen wetland with Lorne [grade one teacher]—made a trail through the snow, around the wetland, to the wood duck nesting box—so that he could take kids out today—told him about the things that the gr. ones (interviewed) were able to remember from going outside—he was pleased, said it's neat to get this sort of feedback—unusual—generally, teachers just proceed with the hope they're doing the right thing.  
*Field notes*

There was a girl, and actually she's still at the school. Her name's Madeline Sabourin. I walked over and she said, "Mr. Dalton, Mr. Dalton, that boy just stepped on my tree," meaning the tree that she had planted. And for me that was just a fundamental realization, that these kids were really taking ownership. And again, you get back to the question of hope—I'd hoped to be establishing some of these values over the long term. But right away!?! And many of the kids, when they planted those little trees, gave them names. I don't think they would remember them now, but there was something about personalizing them. Right away the kids started personalizing them and [saying] "this was my tree,"—and it was a little five inch maple sapling. They were a little taller than that, but not much, and that was hers. She knew it was hers and that boy had stepped on it. And that was of really fundamental importance. (Bell, 2000, p. 162-163)

My hope was to draw readers in, through a dramatic *telling* of lived experiences involving both character and plot development. Explanation and analysis then followed, of course, but primacy was given, very deliberately, to stories.

Inspired by Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson's (1990) discussion of polyphony (as theorized in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin), I was anxious as well to share my storytelling power with other research participants. Unlike monologic writing, where the direct power to make meaning belongs to the author alone, polyphonic writing incarnates a world of several voices. Although aware that I could achieve polyphony to a limited degree only, I nevertheless strove to foreground other voices by inserting excerpts from interviews, questionnaire responses, and field notes in boxes on every other page, as exemplified here. At the very least, these spatial interruptions of the main text helped to disrupt my own monologue and served as a visual, concrete reminder of a world of many voices.

Finally, to acknowledge and highlight some of the shared narrative threads linking my study to ongoing conversations in the field, I decided to incorporate a discussion of pertinent theoretical insights into each chapter rather than separating them

into one contained literature review, as is often done by convention. For the same reason, I used footnotes rather than endnotes, thus bringing theoretical asides into closer proximity of the main discussion. In so doing I deviated from the standard referencing system in the social sciences. As Richardson (1994) explains, knowledge in the social sciences is conventionally constituted as focused, problem (hypothesis) centered, linear, and straightforward. Footnotes, in contrast, create space for secondary arguments, novel conjectures, related ideas, and digressions. They were thus well suited to the epistemological underpinnings of my research.<sup>3</sup>

### Closing remarks

Narrative research methods are evolving, and the approach I have described here is idiosyncratic in many ways. These idiosyncrasies are to be expected, given that my methods evolved through a dynamic interplay between research questions, theory, experience, conversation, and reflection. What I hope may be of general interest and application, nonetheless, is a recognition of the importance of matching one's methodological assumptions about valid approaches to research with one's ontological and epistemological assumptions about reality and knowledge.

Conventions and standards which underpin objectivist approaches are, I believe, ill-suited to narrative approaches to research. Hence my discomfort, at various moments during my study, when people asked me about my hypothesis, my findings, my proof, my conclusions, and so on. In so doing they highlighted expectations that were completely at odds with my methods and intentions. As Hart contends (2002), such questions are simply inappropriate. Narrative methods "are always exploratory, conversational, tentative, and indeterminate" (p. 141). They do not produce the Truth but instead offer "a measure of coherence and continuity to experience" (p. 156). Narrative researchers, he explains, are not "scientists seeking laws that govern our behaviour," but rather "storytellers seeking meanings that may help us to cope with our circumstances" (p. 155). His words aptly describe my own efforts and experience, and evoke, insightfully, a sense of both the limitations and the possibilities inherent in adopting a narrative approach to research.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Eber Hampton (1993) regarding interviews as "reflective discussions," (p. 275); and Hart (2002) about learning to engage in more authentic, two-way conversations.
- <sup>2</sup> See also Heila Lotz-Sisitka & Jane Burt (2002) who note that writing is "an integral, extensive, and pervasive feature of the research process" (p. 137).

- <sup>3</sup> See Lotz-Sisitka & Burt (2002) who used footnotes and other alternatives to the conventional literature review in their search for “greater methodological and epistemological congruency” (p. 144).

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