This chapter is focused on furthering the development and understanding of an orientation to narrative inquiry research from a holistic perspective. This kind of qualitative research is focused on the study of research participants’ experiences from their own unique perspectives, and in the context of who they are as whole human beings. It is grounded in the understanding that we live storied lives, and that we can choose to tell and enact those stories that give our lives purpose and meaning. Collaborative research relationships provide an intimate context for reflecting on our stories, and for the recollection and reconstruction of the past in order to provide direction for the present and the future. When they are well researched and written, the stories that lives tell can stimulate readers’ imaginations, promote empathy and compassion for others, change perspectives, and promote new ways of knowing and being.

In this chapter, I draw on over two decades of research, and a pedagogy that was developed in a graduate course in education, Narrative and Story in Research and Professional Practice, that I have taught to Masters’ and Doctoral students at The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (Beattie, 2009). I provide an overview of three research projects where I have intentionally focused on making deeper connections between narrative inquiry research and holistic education.

In the past three decades, narrative research has flourished, as researchers in the field of education have experimented with a variety of literary forms for the representation of their data (Barone, 2007). Here, I focus on a distinctive form of narrative inquiry research, pioneered by Connelly and Clandinin (1988), where narrative is understood both as the structure of the phenomenon being studied and as a set of methods for the study of experience. This orientation to research is grounded in the understanding that narrative is at the heart of our meaning-making structures, and that we understand the events of our lives in the context of stories that have beginnings, middles, and ends (Bruner, 1986). It provides a holistic and unified framework for the study of individuals’ lived experience where it is acknowledged that meanings are human interpretations, that they have been created in a context, and that they can be reinterpreted and reconstructed.

Trusting and respectful research relationships where individuals are fully present to each other, have each others’ interests and purposes at heart, and nurture each others’ understandings, are at the heart of this approach to research. Through storytelling, dialogue, reflection, and a range of arts-based and mindfulness methods, individuals come to new understandings of how the stories they are telling and enacting enhance and constrain their lives. As they integrate these understandings into their future actions, change and transformation takes place “not as the monolithic imposition of ideas, beliefs and values by one person on another, but as the polyphonic reforming and reconstruction of understandings by all the persons involved” (Beattie, 1995a, p. 146).
This approach to research grew out of work in the social sciences and humanities, and fields such as history, philosophy, literary theory, psychotherapy, theology, and psychology. It also grew out of a postmodern constructivist approach to education, where it is understood that knowledge is embodied, relational, and socially constructed. It promotes practices that allow researchers and participants to learn from and with each other within research relationships where it is acknowledged that no two people have had the same life experiences, no two people perceive the world or interpret it in the same way; neither do they have the same purposes and goals for their future lives.

The Importance of Stories

One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early on, knowingly or unknowingly, in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives.

(Okri, 1997, p. 46)

When we reflect on our stories, we reveal the knowledge that is embedded in them, and in this way we can make our core beliefs, principles, perspectives, and worldviews explicit. When we find that these are no longer suitable to living authentically in accordance with our inner purposes and the future direction of our lives, we can choose to re-interpret, re-frame, and re-construct them. As the philosopher Charles Taylor (1989) explains:

In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going . . . [and] because we cannot but orient ourselves to the good, and thus determine our place relative to it and hence determine the direction of our lives, we must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a quest.

(pp. 49–52)

Research methods that include open-ended interviews, conversations, and story prompts help participants to recall significant events in their lives, and to tell deeply felt stories of purpose, pleasure, and passion; of family and friends, of presence and pride of accomplishment; of disappointment, shame, oppression, anger, joy, inspiration, and transcendence. These methods are designed to stimulate participants’ imaginations and memories, and to encourage them to inhabit events imaginatively before they categorized and named them; to draw insights into what has nurtured them in the past, and to identify that which could be valuable in the future. They can connect participants to the sources of their energy and inspiration, to their personal purposes, and to the wisdom that arises from the inner life; to what Thomas Merton (2005) calls “the hidden wholeness” of themselves.

When they are expanded to include methods such as reflective and creative writing, visualization, artifacts presentations, meditation, poetry, art, and music, they create spaces for mutually beneficial dialogue that allows participants and researchers alike to listen to our values, beliefs, and cultural structures, and to consider the perspectives and practices that will lead us to new ways of thinking and acting. They can allow us to access the cover stories (Crites, 1979) we all tell to the outside world to be accepted, invulnerable, and respectable, and to the suppressed, silenced, and frozen stories “[which] can become prisons of sorts when we forget that that are stories in which we are authors and characters at the same time” (Conle, 2003, p. 20). They can help us to more fully understand the extent to which our stories are repositories of our cultural ways of knowing and being, and can nurture the development of our fragile stories (Beattie & Conle, 1996)—those taken-for-granted stories that constrain us and prevent us from developing the wholeness of ourselves. These methods encourage us to use our feelings as a bridge, not only to what we know intellectually, but also to what we perceive visually, aurally, socially, intuitively, aesthetically, and spiritually, and because they also
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include written feedback in the form of interim narratives and shared interpretation, they provide rich opportunities for interacting narratives (Beattie, 1995a) where our lives meet in all their wholeness, inform and influence each other, and where both are changed through the co-creation of new insights and understandings. They can nurture the development of our insights into how all stories work—in our own lives, in the lives of others, in the world around us—and of the connections between them.

Connecting Narrative Inquiry Research and Holistic Education

Our own existence cannot be separated from the account we can give of ourselves. It is in telling our own stories that we give ourselves an identity.

(Ricoeur, 1985, p. 214)

As researchers, we need to tell and re-tell our stories continuously as we simultaneously develop our specialized knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Beattie, 1995b, 2009). A growing body of literature in philosophy and psychology acknowledges that narrative structure is at the core of the formation of the self, and recognizes the role of narrative in understanding one’s identity and that of others in the context of the wholeness and unity of an individual’s whole life (Brockelman, 1985; Carr, 1986; MacIntyre, 1981; Noddings, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1988). It is only when we know ourselves, and are conscious of what is going on internally and externally, that we can work from what Palmer (2004) calls “the undivided self”, that we can align our inner purposes with our external actions, and learn to listen deeply to research participants’ stories from these individuals’ own perspectives.

My interest in the connection between story and soul goes back to my childhood, where I grew up in the traditions of Catholicism, and learned that soul is that immortal aspect of ourselves that lives on when we die. Simultaneously, I learned through the stories and legends of the ancient Celts that, like the Indigenous peoples of many lands, they found soul and divinity all around them—in themselves, in each other, in the rivers, mountains, the ocean, the sky, and the land. For the Celts, there was no separation between mind, body, and soul, or between themselves and others. This vibrant spiritual tradition existed for thousands of years in Ireland before the introduction of Christianity in the fifth century.

I use the terms soul and spirit interchangeably here, and understand them as describing that non-material, ineffable aspect of ourselves that animates us and gives our lives purpose. George Bernard Shaw (1970) refers to the soul as “the life force”, and Dylan Thomas (1953) calls it “the green fuse that drives the flower”. Thomas Moore (1992) explains that when we acknowledge soul in our lives, we are encouraging life [and the story we tell of ourselves], to blossom forth according to its own designs and with its own “unpredictable beauty” (p. xix). Through graduate studies in English literature, I pursued my interest in the connections between religions, spirituality, and story, and also learned the creative and critical reading of texts that has served me well as an educator and researcher. The study of literature teaches us imaginative empathy. It also teaches us how to listen closely to stories, and to use our critical thinking as well as our senses and our imaginations to interpret them in order to illuminate, edify, and “secure a true comprehension of the way things are” (Eisner, cited in Beattie, 1995a, p. ix)

In research and pedagogy, I draw on Connelly and Clandinin (1988) and Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) work in narrative inquiry, and also on Eisner’s principles for qualitative research, namely his emphasis on the importance of the arts and aesthetic experiences on an individual’s efforts to create a life that has authenticity, integrity, connectedness, and meaning (Eisner, 1991, 2002). Also important is Maxine Greene’s (1978, 1995) work on the imagination, and Charles Taylor’s (1989) work on the creation of identity. In my early research (Beattie, 1995a), these authors provided the pillars for explorations into the nature of professional knowledge, the interconnectedness of the personal and professional, and of professional practice as personalized accounts of a practitioner’s knowing. In Connelly and Clandinin’s (1988) conception of personal practical knowledge, theory and practice are intertwined in a knowledge that is personal because it is derived from a person’s narrative, and it is
practical because it is aimed at meeting the needs of a particular situation. In later work, I explored the aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of this knowledge (Beattie, 2008), and drew on the work of Miller (2000, 2007), Moore (1992), and O’Donohue (1997). This new focus helped me to become more intentional about creating deeper research relationships by searching for ways to be more attentive to the soul presence of research participants, by attending to their purposes and needs within the research processes, and by acknowledging all aspects of their being in the practices and products of the research.

A pedagogy for beginning researchers needs to provide them with a range of experiences in which to learn to conduct self-study research and collaborative research with others (Beattie, 2009). They need practice and feedback as they search for the themes, tensions, contradictions, resonances, and narrative unities (MacIntyre, 1981) in their own lives and in the lives of others. For these individuals, it is only when they create their own narratives that they come to see the events, interruptions, and discontinuities of their lives as a unified and coherent whole. It allows them to see that intelligence will allow them to pose and solve problems, but it is only when they connect it to intuition and imagination that they can create personal narratives that have the qualities of authenticity, coherence, and integrity, can create an authentic identity as a researcher, and align their proposed research with their internal purposes. These individuals need a range of opportunities for critical reflection and dialogue, and ongoing guidance as they address issues such as:

- Who am I?
- What are the connections between the personal, professional and scholarly aspects of my life?
- What do I learn by reflecting on a time when I was totally present in an event (personal, professional, or scholarly), and was fully engaged with purpose and passion, pleasure, and pride?
- What is my vision for the researcher I want to be? Working backwards, how will I develop the necessary ways of knowing and being to enact that vision?
- How will my research practices and its products contribute to research participants’ lives, touch readers’ hearts as well as their minds, inspire action, and make a positive difference in the world?

Creating Collaborative Soul-Friend Relationships

Narrative inquiry research from a holistic perspective is grounded in the kind of collaborative research relationships that O’Donohue (1997) describes as soul friendship, within which individuals acknowledge the presence of each other’s souls, feel a sense of connection with each other, have one another’s best interests at heart, and engage in dialogue as only the soul knows it. Soul friendship is necessary for the creation of research contexts where participants will be willing to tap into the life force that is within them, and to explore the intimacies of their inner lives. To create these kinds of relationships requires researchers to move beyond standardized research practices, which tend to be rational and managerial, and to use their creativity, imagination, intuition, and wisdom, as well as their intellects.

Hunt’s (1987) New Three R’s—reflexivity, responsiveness, and reciprocality—are valuable in the creation of meaningful soul friend research relationships. Reflexivity describes an attitude wherein researchers engage in ongoing reflective practice and become increasingly more aware of themselves as both researchers and practitioners. Responsiveness describes a way of being in relation with participants where the researcher listens and tries to understand practitioners’ meanings as they understand them. Reciprocality describes the ability of the researcher to encourage and facilitate shared explorations, interpretations, and meaning making. Witherell and Noddings’ (1991) concept of “interpersonal reasoning” is also valuable in that it describes the enactment of a reasoning that grows out of an attitude that values the relationship over any particular outcome. It is open, flexible, and responsive to others, is marked by attachment and connection rather than separation and abstraction, and it is in contrast to logico-scientific mathematical reasoning that proceeds step by step according to a priori rules (p. 158).
Conducting Narrative Inquiry Research: Three Research Projects

I have profiled three research projects spanning a decade where I have been intentional about making deeper connections between narrative inquiry research and holistic education. I begin with the research on Corktown, an alternative secondary school in Toronto that was one of 21 schools studied as part of a large-scale national research study in Canada in 1993–4. The research was led by a national team who developed the overall research questions into the meaning and recognition of success. As the principal researcher at Corktown, I designed the study, and, in collaboration with two other researchers, we conducted the study over the course of a full academic year. This government-funded project was the largest research project of its kind in the history of Canadian education.

The Research at Corktown

The purpose of the study was to explore the reasons for the school’s success in meeting the needs of students, and enabling such a large percentage of them to graduate and to be successful in university and in their chosen lives and careers, from the perspectives of the teachers, students, administrators, alumni, and parents, as well as those of the researchers. The stated vision and daily practices at Corktown promoted “the education of the whole person, with an emphasis on the development of self-knowledge and responsiveness to others, on creative and critical thought, and on connectedness between self, school, community and society” (Beattie, 2004, p. 3). This stated vision and philosophy allowed for research questions and extended conversations that acknowledged the wholeness of students’ and teachers’ lives, and those aspects of the school relationships and community that helped students to develop according to their own interests, inner purposes, and future goals.

I began the research by observing in classrooms, and spent well in excess of the required twenty days in the school as well as attending many school events, and accompanying classes on field trips. As a research team, we conducted approximately forty hours of interviews with teachers, teacher/co-ordinators, students, community representatives, parents, alumni, school board personnel, and the off-site principal. We also conducted individual and focus group interviews with different groups of students and teachers. All interviews were taped and transcribed. We collaborated in the work of student shadowing and the analysis of documents and guidelines. In addition to this, I conducted in-depth semi-structured research interviews with three teachers and two students, and kept a reflective journal of my ongoing reflections throughout the research. The data were analysed and thematized by the members of the research team. I wrote the interim narratives for research participants’ feedback, and received feedback from them, from the research team, and from two members of the national research team. The full explanation of this research is detailed in Beattie (2007a,b, 2004).

Narrative accounts, portraits, and other literary forms allowed me to illustrate the ways in which the founding principles of the school were enacted in its daily life, in the relationships between adults and students, and in helping students to make connections between the different aspects of themselves—mind, body, and soul. From the one-on-one mentoring and counselling, the Breakfast Program, the community building events, field trips, and the Outreach programme, these practices helped students to develop autonomy and responsibility, to develop their own voices and interests, and to make a commitment to themselves, to the community, and to their roles in the wider world. Literary portraits of students and teachers allowed me to show how interacting narratives (Beattie, 1995a) worked in this context, as the wholeness of these individuals’ lives were intertwined in pursuit of a shared purpose. Narrative accounts of classes also showed how this way of working together helped students deal with their difficulties rather than being defeated by them, and to pursue their goals with confidence and resilience. Using portraits of the teacher/co-ordinators, I presented insights into the challenges these individuals experienced as well as their achievements, and outlined a holistic approach to leadership based in empathy and connectedness (Beattie, 2007a).
The Aesthetic and Spiritual Dimensions of Holistic Educators’ Ways of Knowing and Being

This five-year research project focused on exploring the meaning of long-standing mindfulness and arts practices in the lives of eight experienced holistic educators (Beattie, 2008). These practices included literary, visual, musical, mindfulness, and spiritual practices. The research was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

My interest in this topic is long-standing, and it was intensified by reading writers such as Jung, Shakespeare, Blake, and Heaney over the years; writers who have all written about how these kinds of practices allow us to access the ocean of consciousness that lies within the layers of the conscious–subconscious–unconscious aspects of ourselves. In The Spirit Level, Heaney’s (1996) poems address the connections between the practical and poetic, the visible and invisible, the mysterious aspects of consciousness, and the state of balance and measure suggested by the title.

In this research, I used an expanded concept of interacting narratives “to encompass the literary, aesthetic, and spiritual narratives chosen by research participants for their influence and shaping effects on their lives”, and an expanded conception of personal practical knowledge “to encompass the aesthetic and spiritual aspects of their ways of knowing and being” (Beattie, 2008). Each of the final narratives shows how an individual’s chosen practices provided them with contexts in which to access the creative and critical aspects of themselves, to create new connections and categories, imagine new perspectives and possibilities, and develop all aspects of who they are as human beings. Their practices affected the education of their hearts as well as their intellects, the stories they were telling and enacting, and their abilities to be intentional about choosing the narratives they would tell and enact in their future lives.

A surprising aspect of the research was the extent to which each of these individuals used their developing awareness and abilities to be of service to others in order to make a positive contribution to others’ lives. As they did so, they developed new skill sets and abilities, became more aware of others’ perspectives, more mindful of the quality of their relationships with them, and of ways to nurture their ways of knowing and being.

With each participant, I conducted three semi-structured interviews of three to four hours that were taped and transcribed. I also attended a range of events—choral concerts, art exhibitions, classes and symposia, conference presentations—and read participants’ work in novels, academic articles, and books. I wrote field notes of all events, kept a research journal, and, in the third year of the research, I wrote interim narratives to which participants provided feedback.

Before the final interviews, I invited research participants to prepare a collection of artifacts that were significant to them in understanding the meaning of their chosen practices in their lives. This helped them to identify the intersecting and overlapping spirals and circles of connections and meanings, and to engage in deep reflection before and during the interviews. Some of these interviews lasted more than the allotted three hours, and, by agreement, we carried on the following day, in some cases for three or four more hours.

Owing to the research funding, I had a team of four former graduate students to read the transcripts with me, to discuss and analyse them, and to write and re-write the interim narratives. The interpretation of each individual’s narrative can be described as taking place in layers, as the recursive processes of writing several drafts of these interim narratives led us to new levels of understanding and connections. We talked and wrote until we could agree on a satisfactory interpretation that each research participant would recognize as authentic, coherent, and true to their meanings. I wrote the final research narratives and used literary forms and language to be a witness to the complexities of the lived realities of participants’ lives, to present new perspectives and understandings, and to inspire and stimulate future explorations. The book publication from this research is still a work in progress.
Narrative in Health Care Education

Patient narratives are becoming an important part of the medical literature and more prevalent in the education of medical and healthcare professionals. Narrative ways of knowing and arts and humanities activities are being introduced more fully to teach healthcare practitioners to hear and respond to patients’ stories from the patients’ perspective, to see beyond the illness, and to acknowledge the wholeness and humanity of the person (Charon, 2006). In my own life, the disruption caused by serious illness in the lives of two people I love led me to explore how I could use my knowledge and skills as a researcher to help them explore the lived experiences of a cancer diagnosis, its treatments, and the restorative practices they chose to try to restore well-being and to forge a new identity. My two patient-participants were my husband, Jim, and my colleague and friend, Sheila.

Drawing on an innovative literary biography of Seamus Heaney by the poet Dennis O’Driscoll (2008), I designed a study where the participants wrote in response to a set of sequenced and iterative questions that encouraged them to reflect on how their experiences affected the emotional, social, moral, aesthetic, spiritual, and physical aspects of their lives and identities, and to tell and re-tell their stories. They wrote according to their own schedules, answered the questions in their preferred sequence, chose those they would answer and those they would decline, and re-worded them if necessary. I read and responded in writing to the first draft of each document, the participants responded to my comments and invitations to go deeper into the stories, and then they read and responded to each other’s work.

The writing and re-writing of the various drafts was done over a period of 18 months. With some editing and sequencing, we co-created the final narratives (Beattie, Cook, & Beattie, 2016) which provide unique insights into the realities of these two individuals’ journeys from illness to wellness, the different ways in which they used health-seeking behaviors, and the role of mindfulness, caring relationships, and community in helping each person to create a new narrative for their current and future lives.

Postscript

It is significant to note that, for the past two decades, the importance of narrative, storytelling, dialogue, and reciprocal conversations is being recognized across the disciplines and in professional programs in higher education (Beattie, 2018). Narrative inquiry research from a holistic perspective provides a framework for the exploration of the issues that concern us in our search for a better world, and in documenting the lived realities of people whose lives are affected by issues such as human suffering, social and gender inequity, oppression, the use and abuse of power, poverty, forced immigration, and war, and to do so with humility and respect for their humanity, and in ways that figures and literal prose can never do.

My hope for this chapter is that it will inspire and support researchers to conduct purposeful and meaningful research that will speak to readers’ hearts as well as their minds, will contribute to our common quest for a better world, and will allow us “to be here for good in every sense” (Heaney, 1996). When they are well researched and artistically crafted, research narratives can be a spur to the development of imaginative empathy, to what Richard Rorty (1979) calls “edification”, and to the education of the heart. Like literature, music, and art, they can speak to our conscious minds and senses in direct ways, and to our subconscious and unconscious minds in complex, circuitous, and indirect ways. They can evoke thoughts and feelings that invite us to wonder, to move across the boundaries between what we know and what we might yet know, and to change our actions. When they connect our hearts, souls, and minds to those of others, and allow our lives to interact in all their wholeness, they can be transformative. As Elliot Eisner once wrote: “The lives that stories tell cannot be told in other ways” (Eisner, in Beattie, 1995a p. ix).
References


