INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Methodological Diversity in European Higher Education Research

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Preliminary Comments

This special issue focuses on the significance of the use of narrative inquiry, autoethnography and collective biography in higher education research in Europe. These methodological approaches – often positioned under the broad umbrella term of ‘narrative research’ – have been growing in popularity in the social sciences, medicine and the humanities in recent decades, but narrative/biographical texts have been integral to the Europeanisation of research and methodological approaches for some years, dating back to Thomas & Znaniecki’s work on Polish peasants (1918-20). One reason for their current popularity is that researchers who favour them appreciate the universality of storytelling and work with it as a way of understanding people’s collective experiences, while acknowledging the individual differences. Importantly, they acknowledge that the stories that can be told – and the ways in which they are told – are context dependent. In addition, these methodological approaches are remarkably powerful in researching professional identities and in enabling voices that have traditionally been silenced or marginalised to be heard. Seeking to foreground people’s lived experiences, often including those of the researcher(s), these approaches thus strive to gain – and provide – insight into the local contexts in which those experience narratives are constructed. There is a plethora of researchers in higher education employing these methodologies but the topics seldom focus on higher education and its complexities. The purpose of this special issue, therefore, is to highlight the value and richness of these contemporary methodological approaches in investigating different dimensions of European – and European-influenced – higher education.

Biesta and Simons (2009) draw attention to the responsibilities of European universities to engender ‘cultural, social and civic development’ (p. 142) and I have written extensively (see, for example, Trahar, 2011) of the potential for twenty-first-century higher education to effect greater understanding between people in our turbulent epoch of globalisation and internationalisation. The university is a space within which the multilayered complexities of a variety of values, cultures and academic traditions can be illuminated and critiqued. Lawn and Grek (2012) refer to ‘cross-border travellers’ who, although ‘expert at crossing boundaries’, rarely have their tales used in order to develop ‘an understanding of the bordered nature of the research case’. Scott and Hobson (2013) speak of the ‘forgotten things’ in pointing to those dimensions of the university that can be reclaimed through telling ‘rare tales – oddly shaped personal narratives, group narratives, narratives with unusual characters’ (p. 17). The methodological approaches in this special issue enable us, albeit in different ways, to hear ‘rare tales’ from European ‘cross-border travellers’ to enable the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the ‘research case’, and, in particular, the research case in a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) shaped by Europeanisation processes.
Narrative methodologies focus on the meanings that people ascribe to their experiences, seeking to provide insight into the complexity of human lives. This renders them eminently suitable for investigating the particularities of the lives of those researching, teaching and studying in the EHEA – lives that are impacted by its policies. The standardisation of qualification frameworks through the Bologna Process, for example, does not standardise lives across national boundaries and social divisions. It is important, therefore, to understand how these macro and meso level changes impact individuals – at the micro level. There is a large body of valuable research that focuses on how academics and other staff perceive and negotiate their roles and identities in the Europeanised higher education space. Narrative, autoethnography and collective biography are rarely used, however, in conducting such research. The contemporary methodological approaches featured in this special issue can challenge or trouble established ways of thinking about identities, support silenced voices to be heard, and lead to new and different practices. They can be very powerful in illuminating how individual identities are connected, inextricably, with the social, cultural and historical landscapes. Holstein and Gubrium (2012, p. 9) refer to the way ‘storytelling operates in and relates to the social environment ... From this perspective, stories and storytelling are not only conditioned by, but also shape, their circumstances’. They propose that the ‘analytic goal is to shift the focus to capture the interplay between the whats and hows of narrative production and its environments’ (p. 9, emphasis in original). Similarly, ‘Allowing individual narratives space further allows us to recognise that if something is happening among a group of people, the same thing is not happening to each person. This is a vital insight for educational research’ (Scott & Hobson, 2013, p. 22). In the article by Remmik, Karm and Lepp, for example, these whats and hows reveal how the narratives of the academics – the ‘whats’ – can be seen to be shaping their circumstances as well as, to some extent, showing how they are conditioned by them. Readers can see transparently, in each article, how interactions between researcher and research participants help to shape and structure research texts, rendering them not only engaging and readable but also evocative.

‘Stories don’t fall from the sky (or emerge from the innermost “self”), they are composed and received in contexts – interactional, historical, institutional and discursive – to name a few’ (Riessman, 2008; p. 105). Consequently, in order to ‘understand’ another’s ‘story’, the listener/researcher either has to have sufficient understanding of the context(s) within which it was – or is being – constructed or must be sufficiently curious about it in order to gain that requisite information. So, although those who use narrative and other, related, methodological approaches – including those featured in this special issue – may claim that they are interested in the particularities of people’s stories, in order for the reader to understand an individual story, the context within which it is told, together with how it is recounted, has to be foregrounded and richly described. This necessity for close reading of stories calls for different types of analysis, such as thematic, structural and performative/dialogic, where the first focuses on ‘what’, the second on ‘how’, that is the form and language used, and the third one on ‘who’, ‘when’ and ‘why’, emphasising that the listener – and subsequently – the wider audience is implicated in the construction of the narrative (Riessman, 2008). In the narrative articles in this special issue, the authors use thematic analysis with elements of structural analysis to interpret their data, yet their interactive dialogue with their data is also evident.

The terms ‘narrative’, ‘narrative research’ and ‘narrative inquiry’ continue to be used interchangeably in much of the literature (see, for example, Chase, 2011) and those who use ‘narrative’ in the articles in this special issue employ a variety of terms, including ‘narrative psychology’ and ‘narrative research’. Similarly, ‘collective biography’ and ‘collaborative writing’ are terms that are elided, occasionally, as are ‘autoethnography’ and ‘autobiography’. While there are differences between them, I follow the lead of the writers of the articles in this special issue, and use the terms they have used.

The ‘Story’ of the Special Issue

The special issue emerged from a symposium held at the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) in Berlin in 2011. In this symposium, four people, from different European contexts, presented their higher education research that had been conducted using narrative
approaches, in Network 22, Research in Higher Education. I had initiated the symposium and was the discussant. In preparing my responses to the papers, I recall feeling somewhat perplexed, on my first reading, by how each paper positioned narrative differently and, moreover, did not necessarily interpret narrative in the way that I did. This was a familiar feeling for me, as the first book I edited on narrative research (Trahar, 2006) opened my eyes to very different readings of it. ‘Since the definition of “narrative” is in dispute ... narrative research offers no overall rules about suitable materials or modes of investigation’ (Squire et al, 2008, p. 1). This rather provocative statement can be liberating for researchers but it can also be a hostage to fortune as it may fuel those sceptics who are inclined to dismiss approaches that define themselves loosely as ‘narrative’ as vague and lacking in rigour. The challenge, in the face of these diverse interpretations then, is to present a coherent story and convincing rationale for the use of these contemporary methodological approaches. As I read and reread the papers, I realised that, while the way in which narrative had been interpreted might differ, I was gaining rich, specific and ‘rigorous’ insight into the different contexts in which the research had been conducted. Given that the papers focused on European higher education, the ways in which those rapidly changing contexts impacted, in particular, academics and their lives, were foregrounded, displaying similarities and articulating some intriguing differences between the contexts. Subsequent to the symposium, I proposed that a special issue of this journal could be an appropriate way of showcasing these methodological approaches and, moreover, could include methodologies that are related to narrative, such as autoethnography and collective biography.

A dimension of each of these methodologies that differentiates them from many other qualitative approaches is that experience, rather than theoretically informed research questions about that experience, is often the starting point for the researcher. The experience may be a personal one that has prompted the researcher into becoming curious about others’ perspectives on similar experiences and/or it may be curiosity about the experiences of her or his participants. Taking experience as the starting point does not mean that researchers eschew theory, rather that they recognise that people and their stories do not always ‘fit’ with it. Abbas et al, in their article, for example, speak of not wanting to ‘over-shape’ representations with ‘preconceived theoretical questions’. Once assigned, theoretical labels can be constraining and difficult to work loose and, more importantly, they need to be open to interrogation; in particular, to take account of the context – social, professional, cultural – of researchers and researched. ‘[Western] theoretical constructs ... are not metaphysical ends or sets of values in their own right. They must always be open to re-examination and change’ (Tomaselli et al, 2008, p. 350).

Narrative research, autoethnography and collective biography, like any other form of inquiry, are not ideologically neutral activities but imbued with philosophy, positioning and purpose. ‘Narrative inquirers frequently find themselves crossing cultural discourses, ideologies and institutional boundaries’ (Clandinin & Roziek, 2007, p. 59), yet these cultural discourses and ideologies, such as postmodernism, post-structuralism and social constructionism, are rooted in European thought with particular views of the world that may differ from, or be a challenge to, local knowledge in other contexts. For Maureen Legge, a Pākehā (European) teacher educator in New Zealand, this is especially important, as she writes in her article about living in a ‘cross-cultural space’ and examining her autoethnography through te ao Māori (a Māori worldview). Her life has been dominated by European hegemony and her autoethnographic elaborations of the complexities of border crossing in Aotearoa New Zealand can provoke readers into seeing the importance and the possibilities for understanding people from cultural backgrounds different from their own.

The use of autoethnography, where the writer is writing about her or himself in her or his ‘cultures’, in research in higher education is rare. This may be, as I propose in my article, that academics are reluctant to ‘lay bare our innermost thoughts and concerns’ (Armstrong, 2008, n.p.). Many academics now acknowledge, however, that it is no longer useful to separate the personal from the professional (Leggo, 2008) and that if we are to function effectively in the complex environments in which we now work, certainly in Europe, it is even more important to be aware of our own values and beliefs and where they might be challenged by alternative ones. Researchers using these approaches may deem it imperative to develop autoethnographic elements as their research progresses – as in my article and the article by Sancho and Hernández – or they may employ autoethnography as a methodological approach – as in Legge’s article. Autoethnography is criticised by those such as Delamont, (2009, p. 61) as ‘an abrogation of the honourable trade of the
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scholar’ because its focus is on the researcher as researched. Delamont considers that the responsibility of an academic researcher is to investigate others’ lives. A different perspective is that, executed skilfully, that is by being ‘self-luminous’ rather than ‘self-indulgent’ (Sparkes, 2002, p. 214), elements of the writer’s life story give clarity and authenticity to the text. Sancho and Hernández, for example, explain in their article that their research project centring on how primary school teachers in Spain develop their identities determined them that, together with other members of their research team, they could not investigate those experiences without scrutinising their own. Similarly, I, too, in setting out to investigate the learning experiences of postgraduate students in my UK environment, realised that it was disingenuous to expect them to share their perspectives with me, if I were not prepared to engage in a similar interrogation process. In my case, this led to a more inclusive approach to my teaching because I developed strategies that were much more synergistic, in that they acknowledged and celebrated learning and teaching as culturally mediated practices. In addition, the process caused me to reflect on what it meant to me to be a white, British academic working in environments that comprised many people who were not white and British. Maureen Legge, in her autoethnographic account, describes undergoing a similar questioning process in her New Zealand context. Both of us, I feel, move some way towards addressing ‘the daunting task of uncovering how narratives acquire their meaning within the context of asymmetrical cultural practices’ Bhatia (2011, p. 351).

Identity Narratives

The first two articles focus on student identities; in particular, undergraduate student identities and the negotiation of the transition to higher education in Denmark and in England. Both articles use fairly large data sets, thus shattering the myth that narrative researchers only involve small numbers of people in their studies. The first article, by Lars Ulriksen, Henriette Tolstrup Holmegard and Lene Moller Madsen, reports on a dimension of a European Union funded project, ‘Interests and Recruitment in Science Education’. Within Europe the recruitment of students to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects in higher education is problematic, and the authors locate their study theoretically within a (northern) European tradition that combines late-modernity theory with social psychology. They suggest that their methodological approach ‘based in narrative psychology’ could be employed usefully to compare students’ negotiation strategies, expectations and experiences in different European countries. The emphasis in this article, as with the others, albeit in different ways, is on identity/ies. The methodological approach affords access to how the meaning-making process reflects the students’ negotiations of their identities to enable them to feel that they belong to their chosen higher education programme. A strong theme is the way in which individuals construct new narratives in new contexts based on previous experiences. Another theme, which again features in different ways in other articles, is that of structure and agency. We live within particular narratives that are available to us but we can also construct narratives that we then use to form ourselves. The reflections of the student participants that are revealed throughout the article emphasise diverse experiences. Some students do not want to reproduce previous decisions made by family members; others construct choices acceptable to peers, families and the social expectations of their environments. The emphasis on the past and how we understand and reconstruct the past selectively is also highlighted, challenging the idea that memory is static. ‘My memory of events is my memory now; it is what I know and remember now, not what I knew then in the past’ (Bochner, 2007, p. 203, emphasis in original). One of the authors’ concluding points is that most narratives are not ‘smooth and well arranged’ and that researchers need always to be looking for the incomplete narrative ‘with loose ends and contradictions’.

The second article that focuses on student identities is by Andrea Abbas, Paul Ashwin and Monica McLean, and is set in the context of English higher education. The authors focus on the use of life-grids, which they propose as useful for large European projects as they provide biographical data, but are less time-consuming than lengthy life-history interviews. As they indicate, case-based approaches that incorporate biographical methods are increasing in popularity in European comparative research and, in particular, in higher education in the EuroHesc and the CINHEKS projects. Similar to the previous article, the researchers focus on understanding how students
perceived themselves prior to going to university and what higher education did to help/hinder any important transformations that they underwent. They used the life-grids to gain insight into how students’ past lives shaped their experiences of university and what they gained from higher education. In their article, Abbas et al attest to how they did not want to ‘over-shape students’ representations of their lives with pre-conceived theoretical questions’ but, nonetheless, used pre-existing knowledge about what shapes educational experiences in designing the boxes that students were asked to complete. The main purpose in collecting these biographical data was to contribute to a comparison of four English university departments’ teaching of sociology-related social sciences and, perhaps more importantly, whether the perceived quality differences in learning and teaching between higher and lower ranked universities were real. Their project focuses on questions of whether students are questions of whether the pedagogic practices and cultural milieus of elite universities disadvantage students on grounds of class, gender, age and disability, important questions in, as they say, a higher education arena dominated by notions of quality derived from international league tables. A strength of the life-grids is highlighted as providing ‘visual anchors’ which helped participants to cross-reference differently themed columns and also helped Abbas et al, as researchers, to grasp quickly the students’ personal details, invaluable in developing a relationship conducive to gathering rich data. In addition, the students themselves had considerable control over the process, although, as the writers admit, the approach pre-structures the life stories rather more than other biographical methods. In concluding their article, they discuss how this methodological approach might be used usefully in comparative European research by facilitating conversations about the possible relationships between national educational structures and biographical experiences. Biographical data gathered by this method illustrate the complex interrelationship between people’s lives and social phenomena – a key affordance of these contemporary methodological approaches.

The next article focuses on identities of early-career academics in Estonia. Located within a postmodern theoretical framework of professional identity construction, Marvi Remmik, Mari Karm and Liina Lepp use thematic analysis for their interviews with 43 early-career academics in several universities in Estonia. In Estonia, it is common for people to become academics in the same university at which they were students, a crucial factor in enabling the reader to make sense of their data. The writers talk about themselves as researchers in Estonia and of how this influenced their gathering of narratives and the subsequent analysis. Their familiarity with the environment and their pre-existing relationship with some of the interviewees are presented as both an advantage and as a possible disadvantage: an advantage because the interviewee expected the interviewer to have a similar insight into the environment; a disadvantage because of the danger of reinforcement of a perceived hierarchical relationship. Remmik et al extrapolate four strong narratives from their data – ‘I want to be a good teacher’, ‘The teaching revolutionary’, ‘Can I manage in the role of a university teacher?’ and ‘University teachers’ multiple roles’. Many of the new academics interviewed focus on teaching, communicating forcefully that they want to develop their teaching so that it is much more learner centred than that which they have experienced as students. The authors tell us that the views of these people would not be considered sufficiently important or of relevance in the hierarchical Estonian context. The value of narrative inquiry is stressed as enabling the ‘different’ or marginalised opinions of new university teachers in Estonian higher education to be heard. They illustrate how these new academics value the familiarity of their higher education environments as this helps them to feel safe at the beginning of their careers but that this familiarity can also be a complicating factor, in that it forces the new academics back into their previous roles as students. Their concluding comments foreground how today’s curricula (oriented towards the world of work) have led universities in Estonia to employ people who are professionals in their field and work outside of the universities. There were several university teachers in their sample whose main job was elsewhere and who have no intentions of connecting their future solely with a university. The benefit of this approach is that it enables the individual to immediately link work life with aspects learnt at university. However, the detrimental aspect is that an individual may not fully commit themselves to any of the non-practitioner roles – e.g. teaching, developing teaching skills and supporting university students’ learning.
Autoethnographic Journeys

The authors of the next three articles all employ autoethnography, which renders them very visible in their writing. Sancho and Hernández position themselves at the outset as holding that teaching and research are roles that are performed in higher education in a continuous, reflexive process. They write about two research projects in Spain, one an investigation of how primary school teachers learn to become teachers, and the other, an exploration into teenagers’ learning from multiliteracies, both inside and outside of school. In both projects, they and their research team employed autoethnography to explore the stories of themselves as teachers and learners, believing that not to engage in a similar process to that expected of their research participants would be disingenuous. They write, ‘we believe that we are initiating a process through which our experience is revisited in the company of others’ (p. 343) and relate their methodological/epistemological positionings to how they regard their students, which is as collaborators in the process of learning. In addition, they highlight the political dimension of their methodological approach in that ‘we do not ask people to share stories that we ourselves are unable (or unwilling) to share’ (p. 347). Engaging in autoethnographic writing before embarking on having research conversations with their participants enables the research team to articulate for themselves the social and relational processes that they have gone through in learning to be scholars. This experience enables them to formulate the broad questions that are important and that subsequently inform their interviews as well as to make visible what is often ‘off camera’ in transcriptions or field notes. Both research projects are located within a Spanish context that has undergone, and continues to undergo, major changes in its educational systems at all levels. Sancho and Hernández discuss, however, that these changes do not appear to have altered how teacher educators and policy makers define what constitutes good teaching practices. Sharing experiences as teachers and learners, through the autoethnographic process, Sancho and Hernández and their team connect the personal and professional with the social and political, enabling them to challenge reductionist discourses, develop more complex approaches to professional identity and to better understand and intervene in educational problems, thus striving to improve European education.

Maureen Legge’s article is an autoethnographic narrative about how she develops cultural sensitivity in her everyday interactions with the Māori population of New Zealand. Identifying herself as a Pakeha, a European teacher, influenced by European hegemony, she employs the methodological technique of writing as inquiry, using ‘snapshot’ stories to reveal a range of experiences, all of which challenged her to interrogate her own assumptions, values and beliefs. Legge is a physical education teacher educator working in a context that has shifted from a policy of assimilation in education to one that emphasises a more equitable curriculum and a ‘culturally responsive pedagogy’. In spite of this policy, however, Legge writes that very few students, whether Māori or non-Māori have an understanding of Māori culture or of the effects of colonialism. Initiating a stay in a marae, a platform for Māori culture, Legge, through her ‘snapshots’ reveals not only how she is a learner alongside her students, but also the extent to which her own cultural consciousness was challenged by the events there. She refers to kaupapa Māori, which asserts Māori cultural aspirations and ways of knowing to develop alternative sources of learning and, in particular, highlights how she learns to integrate te ao kōrī into her work as a teacher educator. Te ao kōrī – the world of Māori movement – is an example of how Māori pedagogy does not separate learner and teacher and encourages reciprocity between the latter and between student and student, and student and friends/family. One of my reasons for wanting to produce this special issue was a strongly held belief that the methodological approaches featured in it can enable important questioning of ourselves as academics in the multicultural communities within which we now all work. Legge’s article speaks to all of us, wherever we live, as she grapples with the complexities of border crossing as a member of the dominant culture in New Zealand, where the Māori population has reclaimed its local knowledges. She asks the key question, ‘What is a culturally responsive pedagogy?’ and explains how, for her, ‘experiencing life in a cross-cultural space’ has enabled her to embrace cultural diversity in her classroom and to be open to identification with other cultural practices – important considerations for European higher education, given our increasingly diverse environments.
Introduction

The penultimate article is my autoethnographic exploration of learning and teaching in higher education. It seeks to articulate how I came to question the worldviews that informed the ways in which I taught as a result of working with postgraduate students from different academic traditions and contexts. In this article, I seek to demonstrate how autoethnography can be invaluable in opening up spaces for a more sustained dialogue about the culturally mediated practices of learning and teaching. Through a reflexive examination of my own values and beliefs, together with the worldviews that underpin the philosophical perspectives that I held dear, I strive to explicate how these values and beliefs may differ from those held by many of the people with whom I now work. These autoethnographic journeys are not always comfortable, but remaining with the discomfort and engaging in dialogue with those whose held beliefs differ significantly from mine enables me to continue to ensure that I do not settle into complacency in my teaching practices and lay myself open to being accused of ethnocentric behaviour. Such recognition has led me to develop an approach to teaching that, while continuing to place the learner at the centre of the process, strives to attend to and be more inclusive of approaches that are more familiar for many of the students with whom I work. In doing so, I believe that this also opens up spaces for students and doctoral researchers to engage in similar questioning, in the classroom and in their research.

Collective Biography

Monne Wihlborg, in the final article, explores the potential for using collective biography in higher education, in particular to enable both students and academics to constitute themselves differently as learners. In our globalised higher education environments, understanding how the ‘global vista is translated via local experiences and assumptions’ (Saltmarsh & Swirski, 2010, p. 292) is crucial and Wihlborg proposes collective biography as an innovative method of doing this. Collective biography is a research methodology – and a method of collaborative writing – that encompasses collective data collection and analysis. Collective biography can ‘make visible, palpable and hearable the constitutive effects of dominant discourses ... and open both ourselves and discourse to the possibility of change’ (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 5). Wihlborg describes how the practice of collective biography involves participants meeting and talking, often over several days, about a chosen topic, telling their own remembered stories relevant to the topic, and writing them down. This writing is then shared with the group and each participant shares how individual pieces of writing resonate with their own story. Further writing then takes place but this time, and on subsequent occasions, each story is developing into a collective story, rather than a series of individual stories. In collective biography workshops, participants develop the skills of listening and attending to the detail of others’ stories, including the language and images used, thus opening themselves and the discourse to the possibility of change. Wihlborg draws on her experiences as a participant in a collective biography project with Davies and Gannon to explain how this approach, with some modifications, could be used by both teachers and students to ‘research’ learning in higher education. She uses the example of a story that she told as part of the project, analysing it firstly from a liberal humanist perspective and then from a post-structuralist perspective in which she as ‘subject’ is constituted very differently. Reminding us that much European higher education discourse is obsessed with the autonomous learner and the development of the individual, she shows how a more post-structuralist perspective would enable us to draw on different approaches to, and experiences of, learning that are then celebrated – rather then ignored – for their differences.

I have striven to show, in this Introduction, how the contributors to this special issue, through their differences and their similarities, make it possible to discern the potential for the methodological approaches they have favoured to gain a higher profile in research in European higher education. Each article demonstrates clearly and reflexively, not only how the selected methodological approach was interpreted and used, but also its affordances for the complexities of the research topic, for the European context and for future research. As the shape of European higher education continues to change and its constituencies become more diverse, the contemporary methodological approaches described in this special issue open up possibilities for innovative research that can permit new and different imaginings and can help us to understand
that ‘if something is happening to a group of people, the same thing is not happening to each person’ (Scott & Hobson, 2013, p. 22). Narrative inquiry, autoethnography and collective biography are methodologies that, by enabling us to understand what is happening to individuals, including ourselves, can help us to gain insight into what may be happening to a group – or groups. They can thus provide access to the ways in which different national educational structures interact with diverse European agencies and policies and, crucially, affect the lives of individual learners and academics in twenty-first-century higher education.

References


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