

Article

Drawn to Story

Daniel Gregson 

Faculty of Education and Society, School of Education, University of Sunderland; Sunderland SR6 0DD, UK;
daniel.gregson@sunderland.ac.uk

Received: 7 January 2020; Accepted: 5 March 2020; Published: 13 March 2020



Abstract: Rising to the demands of academic writing, scholarship and research is challenging for many practitioners in post compulsory education. Only a small number manage to see their research through to completion and write-up. Therefore, their work is under-represented in peer-reviewed, published literature in the field of educational research. This article foregrounds the role of stories, storytelling and image in the development of different kinds of language, including scholarship and academic writing. Narrative accounts of experiences of practitioner-researchers beginning to engage in research through intensive residential research development workshops, delivered as part of a national Practitioner Research Programme (PRP), are used to illustrate the power of oracy, imagery and story in extending our ability to develop language; research and represent experience; and portray different forms of understanding in a range of educational contexts. The results indicate that being able to listen, read and ‘see’ the research stories of more experienced researchers, as well as telling stories of their own experiences of research, enables participants to become more comfortable in using experiences of educational practice as a starting point for research and to regard research and practice not as a dichotomy or as separate activities, but as dynamic and integral aspects of educational improvement.

Keywords: practitioner-research; story; visual image; academic writing and scholarship; meaning-making; experience

1. Introduction

The research problem which provided the impetus for this qualitative, empirical, research study came from the pre-intervention observation of the low numbers of practitioner-researchers in the post compulsory education sector who manage to see their research through to successful completion, write-up and publication [1]. Difficulties in and barriers to practitioner-research across the sector can be attributed to a number of factors including high-workloads, a sense of isolation among busy practitioners and a research landscape in which practitioners in the sector often see themselves as having little or no place [1,2]. Furthermore, qualitative practitioner-research based upon accounts of experience and narrative inquiry are sometimes seen as being second-rate or inferior in comparison to ‘big research’ based upon randomised control trials (RCTs) and meta-analyses. Such ‘big research’ is often legitimised with reference to positivist world views and the pursuit of abstracted pure forms or absolute truths. Questions regarding the nature of educational research, who should conduct it and what counts as good research have to date, generated considerable heat but not much light and competing discourses can at times become strident in tone and sometimes derisive and even dismissive of each other.

An important consequence of existing research support arrangements is that much practitioner-research in post compulsory education is never written-up, published or disseminated and so does not have a discernible impact upon practice. To compound the problem, a great deal of educational research conducted by researchers from universities and other institutions of higher

education (HE) upon teachers in the post compulsory education sector is never read, let alone acted upon, by a wider audience of sector practitioners and therefore this research does not have much impact upon practice either.

1.1. Review of the Literature

No matter how broadly or narrowly we construe the remit of educational research and scholarship, what goes on in the classrooms of colleges of further education (FE), and in the many other sites of teaching and learning in the post compulsory education sector, cannot be fully understood without a recognition of the complex and interrelated nature of teaching, learning and research. The separation of teaching, learning and research as discrete activities can lead to the framing of problems in teaching in terms of deficit pathologies of practice, which it is often assumed, can be remedied by simple application of technical, 'recipes' or 'blueprints' for good teaching [2,3]. In the long term, this separation of teaching, learning and research ultimately proves to be unhelpful in that it overlooks how putting an idea from educational theory or research into practice, of necessity takes time and involves systematic and on-going investigation in context. The argument presented in this article is that taking an idea from research and putting it into practice, is a process of inquiry and can and indeed must, be recognized as a key aspect of research and scholarship in education.

While much has been written about the development of research and scholarship in academic programmes situated in higher education contexts, research in the development of scholarship in post compulsory education is underrepresented in published literature. In addition, many teachers who attempt to write-up and share their experiences of realizing ideas from theory and research in practice are often hindered by their own underdeveloped levels of scholarship and academic writing. Rising to the demands of research and scholarship in post compulsory education can therefore be daunting, particularly for teachers who have not engaged in formal study for some time and they often find themselves overwhelmed by scholarly protocols and the academic language used in peer-reviewed literature which has been published by other educational researchers. This study explores the role that oracy, story and image can play in developing practitioner-researchers' scholarship and academic writing alongside their ability to represent experience, portray different forms of understanding in ways which contribute to new knowledge and encourage growth of mind.

Foregrounding the development of scholarship and practitioners' engagement in educational research, accounts of experience are used to illustrate the influence of story, oracy and visual image in encouraging the development of academic writing and scholarship in post compulsory education contexts. Pinker [4] reminds us that language is an instinctive aspect of the human condition. Language, he notes, comes to all of us in one form or another and is used by all of us to communicate our experience of the world and to mark our existence within it.

The role of stories, storytelling and image in the development of different kinds of language, including academic writing and scholarship, is the main focus of this study. Accounts of the experiences of practitioner-researchers working in post compulsory education contexts as they begin to engage in developing the language of educational research, are drawn upon to illustrate the storied nature of human experience [5]. In the context of this research, the storied nature of human experience presented is based upon data derived from beginning practitioner-researchers' narrative accounts of engaging educational research.

Despite the well documented historical importance of the role of speaking (oracy) and listening in the development of literacy, Andrews and Smith [6] illustrate how oracy has become subordinated in the national curriculum in England, to the extent that reading and writing are prioritized over speaking and listening. They draw attention to how the national curriculum assumes that reading and writing are more reciprocal than speaking and writing. They note how the relationship between speaking and writing is being significantly underestimated and go on to argue that this elevation of reading and writing over speaking and writing is operating to inhibit, rather than enhance, the development of literacy of large numbers of people. They call for a redress of this situation through the increased

use of pedagogical devices which link speaking and writing and advocate the greater use of images and storytelling in the development of literacy. To privilege reading and writing over speaking and listening, they argue, is to fail to notice the importance of the reciprocal nature of speaking and writing and the storied nature of all human experience, including the experience of acquiring literacies of many kinds including (in the case of the research reported in this study) the literacies of academic writing and scholarship.

An exploration of the practicalities of implementation of pedagogical devices which link stories, speaking and writing also sits at the forefront of this research. The power of stories to draw us into other worlds that enable us to imagine new ones, connect with other forms of life, and embrace different ways of thinking is a recurring theme in literature reviewed in this study. Consideration is given to the pedagogical potential offered by the power of oracy and image in opening up 'consummatory experiences' Dewey [7], which spark thinking. According to Dewey, these experiences draw learners into new experiences that an individual may not have had direct access to on their own. He describes these experiences as moments which invite thinking. He points out how the mind reaches out and may seize any material that engages it, so that the value of the material can be formed into a new experience. He also illustrates the inverse of this where the mind can be encouraged to reject or shy away from materials and refuse to admit them into a space where they may become beneficial experiences. Greene [8] observes how the work of Dewey [7] is helpful in explaining how the mind can become closed, when thinking becomes passive, uncritical and routine. She argues that in these circumstances, our sense of possibilities becomes dulled and perceptions of new opportunities become narrowed and limited.

Taking this argument further, Berger [9] (1) points to the power of the visual image in sparking imagination where he argues that,

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.

Here, Berger [9] is spotlighting, the power of visual stimuli in animating the imagination and sparking language and the dynamic relationship between the two. He notes that when we see we are not just looking; we are reading the language of images. Carter [10] argues that possibilities for inventing and capturing 'other worlds' on paper can be 'closed down' or 'opened up' by the extent to which a learner's imagination is 'activated' or 'deactivated' in the teaching of writing. This not only applies to the teaching of literacy but to other subjects including academic writing and scholarship. He reminds us that we normally do not learn to write until we are already able to speak. Berger [9] observes how speech comes before writing and that it is easier to learn to speak than to learn to write. He points out that, across the field of human history, storytelling is one of the most highly developed and widely used ways in which we make sense of ourselves, each other and the world around us. Gregory [5] supports this view, and draws attention to how we use stories to construct pictures of the world's workings. Stories he argues, embrace human experience in a narrative. They connect with us. They take us out of ourselves to help us to connect to each other, other cultures, and new and exciting ideas. For Gregory, stories provide interpretations of human experience and the world's events. Eisner [11] reminds us that as human sensibility is refined through increased experience, our ability to construct and represent meaning expands and the mind develops.

Pinker [4] contends that language is an instinct which we use to communicate experience and to make our mark on the world. A most recent example of our ancient instinct to see the world and ideas within it in pictures can be found in the recent Amazon Prime Documentary James May: Our Man in Japan [12]. May interviews the principal of the largest Manga and Animation School in Japan, Daiki Hashimoto. In this interview, they discuss various stories that are told through the medium of Manga comics. Hashimoto explains that "Manga (comics) are just part of literature ... in Japan

expressing something with a picture has been a part of our culture for several hundred years.” Here, he underscores how reading images and the language of images is ancient and can have deeply positive and culturally significant advantages in the teaching of literacy. Whether it is the basic starting points for the development of speech and language with children, or the more academic literacies that are required in the writing of academic and scholarly papers, articles, books, image and story have much to contribute.

1.2. Research Question

This study explores the question of if/how story, image and oracy influence the development of the language of scholarship, academic writing and engagement in research for beginning practitioner-researchers working in post compulsory education.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Methodology

This qualitative, empirical research study explores pedagogical interventions which may be capable of supporting practitioner-researchers as they begin to develop the language of scholarship and engage in educational research. The purpose of the study is to contribute to understandings of subjective experience. This article is, therefore, essentially an act of communication, which has to be accessed by interpretation and subjectivity, not objectivity. This study is underpinned by the ontological assumption that the social world is neither objective nor singular but that it is built upon multiple realities constructed by individuals. From this standpoint, it is argued that it is not possible to achieve knowledge of the social world through observation or measurement of the phenomena being investigated, but that accounts and interpretations of the world provide indirect indications of phenomena. In this way, knowledge is developed through a process of interpretation.

The use of narrative accounts enables the practitioner-researchers participating in this study to voice their experiences of engaging in educational research. They tell their own story of how image, storied works and digital media contribute to the development of their research skills, scholarship and academic writing. These accounts of experience are supplemented by the author’s own personal and professional experiences of learning to write in general and in learning to write for research and academic purposes. In this way, this article provides biographical and autobiographical components of the research. Drawing upon narrative accounts and examples of practitioner-researchers’ experiences as they begin to engage in research and develop their academic writing and scholarship, this article describes a number of pedagogical interventions designed to develop scholarship, academic writing and support engagement in educational research through the use of oracy, story and visual images. All of these pedagogical interventions are delivered through intensive residential research development workshops as part of the Practitioner Research Programme (PRP) and HE supported research programme for practitioners in post compulsory education in England, funded by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF).

2.2. Participants

This study presents accounts of the experiences of beginning researchers participating in the PRP, as they engage in developing the language and practice of educational research. All PRP participants are engaged in an individual practice-focused research study, which involves investigating an aspect of their practice which they have identified as being in need of improvement.

The research population reported here consists of a group of fifteen practitioner-researchers engaged in Year 2 of a customised MPhil research degree programme as part of the PRP in 2018–2019. All of the participants in the research are tutors working in post compulsory education settings in England. Tutors participating in the study teach specialist subjects including English Language, Maths, Music Technology, Drama, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), Special Educational

Needs (SEN), Science, Technology Engineering, Motor Vehicle Repair and Maintenance, Construction and Photography. The ages of tutors involved in the study range from those in their late twenties to those in their early sixties. Research participants work in a variety of educational institutions across England. This MPhil Year 2 cohort forms parts of a larger cohort of the forty-seven practitioner researchers following one of three pathways of customised research support. Of these forty-seven practitioner-researchers, twenty-one conducted their research at Master of Arts (MA) level as part of MA short course, eleven followed the MPhil Year 1 route and fifteen followed the MPhil Year 2 route. Each of these routes is customised through a series of residential research development workshops, which provide intensive research training at the appropriate level for each pathway.

2.3. Selection of Sample

The MPhil Year 2 group was selected for this study from the three possible pathways in 2018–2019 for a number of reasons. Firstly, this group was considered by the research team to face the steepest learning curve in rising to the demands of academic writing, scholarship and study in the second year of a research degree. Secondly, in order to progress to Year 2 of the MPhil, each participant-researcher was required to present and defend their research to a university Annual Monitoring Review Panel. This meant that each participant had already had completed Year 1 of the MPhil and had recently had a successful experience of justifying their research methodology and methods in a scholarly conversation with a panel of other research-active academics, who were not involved in the delivery of the research programme. Finally, following almost two years of intensive research support, this was the point at which each MPhil Year 2 practitioner-researchers begin to approach the final write-up and submission of a 40,000-word thesis (minimum), including its defence in a Viva Voce examination.

The sample chosen is warranted to be both typical and representative in that, all of the members of this cohort were selected and recruited in the first instance to Year 1 of the MPhil programme via a systematic, transparent and criterion-referenced process which had been agreed with the sponsor ETF and in place a process which has been audited and commended over the past 3 years. All had recently satisfied the requirements of a rigorous annual monitoring review process and progressed to Year 2 of the MPhil all were therefore in the final year of their research.

All MPhil Year 2 students in the sample attended three research development workshops in the North East of England in the final year of their studies. These were timed to take place once per term. Each workshop was residential and lasted between three and four days. A key aim of each residential research development workshop is to nurture a sense of belonging to, and being included in, a vibrant, national community of researchers. This sense of belonging to a community of researchers was deliberately designed into the PRP to act as an ‘antidote’ or corrective to the solitary and isolated experience of research encountered by most practitioner-researchers in the sector.

2.4. Procedures and Pedagogical Interventions

Three ideas are central to the pedagogical interventions employed in the study. The first, is that the tendency, the ability and indeed the need to tell and learn from stories is ancient and within each and all of us Pinker [4]. The second, is that in order to become successful scholars and academic writers, practitioner-researchers can gain from immersive experiences of research that animate their imagination, generate thinking, turn thinking and ideas into words, words into dialogue, dialogue into written words and then into acts of scholarship written on a page. The third idea is that oracy and imagery (in particular storytelling and image) are powerful precursors to the development of language of many kinds, including the language of educational research, scholarship and academic writing. Pinker [4] and Gregory [5] contribute to a growing body of literature which underscores how language enables us to discover and place ourselves in the world in the first and most direct way open to us through oral and visual expressions of experience. In other words, bringing ourselves and the world into being through language. Pinker [4] describes this as our ‘instinct to acquire an art’, the art and representation of language [4] (15). Both authors go on to argue that the art of listening to, writing and

reading stories contributes to the enhancement of the human condition as well as the enhancement and development of character.

The pedagogical interventions employed in this study are influenced by the works of the above authors and include discussion of how stories and images of research and experience can help beginning researchers working in post compulsory education contexts to engage with key theories, concepts, ideas and issues in educational research. This study describes how they are supported in increasing their capacities to convey their engagement in research in a variety of forms to others. This includes attendance at three residential research development workshops in each year of their studies; oral presentations of their research to their peers and attendance and presentation at an annual ETF national research conference; preparing for and engaging in monthly tutorials; responding to formative, oral and written feedback; participating in the creation, design and presentation of research posters; providing oral and written accounts of engagement in research; constructing and updating impact grids capturing impact of their research; producing written assignments and theses. These pedagogical interventions and subsequent research outputs all begin with experience, take experience seriously and share experience of engaging in educational research through oracy, dialogue, stories, storytelling and image. These media are harnessed to enable practitioner-researchers to begin to develop the language of scholarship and educational research and to communicate engagement in practice-focused research to others well enough enable practitioner-researchers to defend and justify their work to the wider research community in scholarly and credible ways.

From the residential Research Development Workshop 1 onwards, practitioner-researchers work alongside their mentors to help hone and refine their research idea and develop their academic writing. With the exception of a small number of joint projects on the MA, short course, very few of the practitioner-researchers know each other in the early stages of the programme. The majority of practitioner-researchers have not engaged in any systematic educational research since they had completed their first degree or following their initial teacher training. Many lack confidence in themselves as researchers and need some reassurance that they will be able to rise to the demands of research, scholarship and study at higher degree level.

In the MA Short Course and in MPhil Year 1, induction activities are designed to encourage practitioner-researchers to get to know each other and the university team better. At this point, the members of the university team take time to challenge some widely held myths and assumptions about the nature of educational research, who can and should conduct it and how. By way of a simple 'icebreaker' activity, MPhil Year 1 participants are introduced to storytelling dice and are encouraged to use these dice in small groups to tell a simple fictional story and then share this story with the whole group. The purpose of the storytelling dice activity is to encourage and support practitioner-researchers to 'see' ideas in the images and symbols on the dice, and to cooperate in order to make connections between the images and symbols on the dice, in order to co-construct a story and to then to say that story out loud and together. Here, the storytelling dice are simply being used to encourage beginning researchers to talk to each other, get to know each other and the members of the university team and to start to lay the foundations for the development of a sense of belonging to a supportive research community in which images, concepts, symbols and ideas are shared and meaning is made together.

Around the same time, PRP participants are also invited to play the Good Research Game, a game devised by members of the university research team which is not yet commercially available. The Good Research Game is a variation on the game of Snakes and Ladders where players roll dice, land on a bonus, chance or hazard squares, where they draw a card from the appropriate deck and move forwards or backwards on the board according to the instructions on their card. For example, a hazard card might read, "You don't keep your references up to date! Move back six squares". Another hazard card might read "You don't take the time to check you have understood what you have read. Miss a turn" or, "You have not proof-read your draft to check the quality of your English". "Move back five squares." However, the cards do not always proclaim 'doom and gloom'. Bonus and chance cards might read as follows; "You are invited to present your work at a National Conference! Move forward

four squares” or “You base your research on robust literature from your field of study. Move forward seven squares”. Each card is designed to be a slightly comedic/dramatized example (mini-story) of real issues people often face when conducting research, in order to demystify the process. The purpose of this activity is also to help PRP participants to see engagement in research as something which is not a simple step-by-step or detached technical process where everything progresses smoothly as planned and predicted from the inception of the research to write-up stage. On the contrary, the purpose of the Good Research Game is to highlight that educational research, much like any other activity in life, is seldom as smooth or as straightforward as people might at first think. This is also the first time practitioner-researchers encounter visual and oral mini stories of research.

Following this activity, practitioners are introduced to published peer-reviewed research papers in the form of the works of Gregory [5], Clandinin and Connelly [13], and Coffield [14] who respectively illustrate the power and potential of narrative inquiry, story in educational and other research contexts. Their stories of research are used as a means of conveying key concepts and issues regarding experiences of the realities of conducting educational research. These papers are analysed and discussed on a number of levels, including authors’ use and justifications of methodology and methods, and the quality of academic writing and scholarship presented in each. At this point, each member of the university team shares their own stories of their direct experiences of conducting their own research. They explain how when engaging in their own research, they encountered unexpected twists and turns along the way, and how they overcame these in the course of the study. The purpose of this activity is to progressively introduce practitioner-researchers to, and to draw them into, the storied reality of educational research, as well as the unexpected developments they too may have to face in the process of conducting their research.

As a part of considerations of methodology and methods MPhil Year 2, practitioner-researchers are also introduced to the works of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Until then, many practitioner-researchers are not familiar with the ideas of these philosophers, beyond some brief encounters with their work as part of their first degree studies or their initial teacher-training. The intention here is to not present each philosopher as a lofty thinker from Ancient Greece, but more as a human being, a scholar and a researcher trying to make sense of the world around them. Our purpose at this point is to enable practitioner-researchers to appreciate that they are engaged in a similar endeavour. The personal relationships between each philosopher are discussed in some detail, as are the stories of their lives before they came to be known as great thinkers. Following the use of storied research papers, oral stories of education research and considerations of ontological and epistemological issues in educational research, practitioner-researchers begin to regard educational research and even discourses surrounding methodology and method in the philosophy of education as human activities and social practices. Issues of methodology introduced in MPhil Year 1 are taken up and developed in MPhil Year 2. In particular, discussion of methodology is deepened to include wider discourses and debates in the fields of ontology and epistemology. Once again, biography, story and image are used to illustrate the socially, culturally and historically situated origins of theories and ideas about the nature of the social world and how we can have knowledge of it. Here, we are trying to encourage practitioner-researchers to see how early philosophers were engaged in making sense of the world, in much the same way as philosophers and educators still attempt to do today. From here, MPhil Year 2 practitioner-researchers then engage with a number of widely-used research methods textbooks as they go on to develop their own justifications for the design and conduct of their research, which they then take forward into the actual conduct of their research.

2.5. Positionality Statement

At this point, I bring my own experience to this study. As a child, I was a reluctant writer and I often found the experience of putting pen to paper a daunting one. Listening to oral stories in audiobooks, and watching visual and oral stories in the form of cartoons on TV sparked my own interest in writing. Stories continue to play a big part in my life.

For me, TV shows broadcast on the Cartoon Network channel such as *Pinky and the Brain* [15], *Dexter's Laboratory* [16] and *Courage the Cowardly Dog* [17] introduced me to different worlds, different ideas and new genres. For example, *Courage the Cowardly Dog* [17] gave me my first experience of the horror genre as a child and has me hooked on horror stories to this day. For me, these were not just cartoons, they were stories about life and living in worlds beyond my own direct experience. In addition to stories on TV, in the years to come I was drawn to stories in film, video games, anime, manga comic books, board games, and tabletop role-playing games, such as *Dungeons and Dragons* [18]. From these, I grew in confidence, first as a storyteller, telling stories out loud to others and discussing film reviews with others, then, as a writer of stories, building my own worlds and narratives merging the written narratives into oral ones. More recently, through my degree in Primary Education, my MA studies and now as I embark on my PhD, I find that I am gaining confidence in my academic writing and scholarship. The journey from being a reluctant writer, through to becoming a teacher and now a beginning researcher has taken some time, but it has never been uninteresting. The role that stories of all kinds have played for me along the way has been pivotal. As I develop as a teacher and a researcher, the power of story remains with me and is a central aspect of my work with PRP participants.

Much has been written about the reluctance of significant numbers of boys and men to write. Perhaps not surprisingly, little if any, of this published work has been written by male reluctant writers. This article is an exception. It discusses how as human beings, we are drawn to story in its many forms across the lifespan and how stories and storytelling can support language development, motivate writing and encourage the command of many kinds of literacy. As explained above, in the context of this study, the focus is upon beginning researchers and their development of the language of research, academic writing and scholarship.

2.6. Data Collection and Analysis

The collection and qualitative analysis of data from the study involve a range of methods. These include analysis of PRP's written comments on evaluative postcards; fieldnotes and observations of critical incidents at residential research development workshops; records of tutorial conversations; narrative accounts of engaging in research; impact grids and extracts from theses. It is not possible within the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive analysis of all of these data sets, as some of this is still work in progress.

For the purposes of this article, data from evaluative postcards completed at MPhil Year 2 residential research development workshops, records of tutorial conversations and extracts from theses are drawn upon to highlight emerging themes and preliminary findings in the research.

Evaluative postcards are completed at the end of research development workshops and are not focused on specific evaluative questions, as we did not want to 'lead' any aspect of these evaluations. Instead, the reporting formats of evaluative postcards are deliberately left open-ended, so that practitioner-researchers can write about their experiences of the workshops as freely as possible. Evaluative postcards are designed to enable practitioner-researchers to focus on aspects of the workshops that are meaningful to them, or which they identified as having had the most impact upon their thinking and their research.

Tutorial records capture, in detail, tutors' tracked changes and comments on draft chapters for the thesis. They also reflect the discussion of progress made in relation to actions agreed at the previous tutorial, the identification of next steps and deadlines for completion. Each practitioner-researcher is required to submit a draft chapter prior to each tutorial, and each receives tracked changes and feedback on their draft before each tutorial. Tutorials are conducted on a monthly basis, either face-to-face or by telephone, and normally last for about one hour.

Impact grids are used by practitioner-researchers to identify and directly attribute the impact of their engagement in the MPhil, during and between residential research development workshops and

at the end of the programme. They report on impact in terms of impact of themselves and other teachers and researchers; impact upon their students; impact upon their colleagues and their organization.

MPhil theses are submitted and examined at the end of MPhil Year 2, with a minimum limit of 40,000 words. These are externally examined by academics at the forefront of research in post compulsory education, in the specialist field of research which forms the focus of each thesis.

Trustworthiness and credibility in the analysis of these data sets have been secured in a number of ways. In the early stages of data analysis, the research team individually immersed themselves in the data, to familiarise themselves with the depth and breadth of the content. This involved repeated reading and re-reading of evaluative postcards, impact grids, tutorial records, draft chapters and extracts from theses. During this phase, individual researchers made notes about possible initial codings, highlighting important sections of evaluative postcards, impact grids, tutorial records and extracts from theses related to particular issues, which appeared to capture qualitatively rich statements and ideas regarding experiences of the PRP and its impact upon their practice. Individual codings were then compared and discussed at meetings of members of the research, to ensure that each code was distinct. Once agreed codes were then categorized and inductively clustered into overarching themes. These overarching themes are reported below, with practical examples provided to illustrate how they were expressed by participants.

Following British Education Research Association Guidelines (2018) [19], all practitioner-researchers participating in the study gave informed consent and were aware of their right to withdraw from the research process at any time.

3. Results

The following emerging findings and illustrative results are presented to illuminate the impact of the pedagogical interventions employed in the PRP, as described above. These are based upon the use of stories and images to develop PRP participants' engagement with key ideas and concepts in educational research, as well as their development of academic writing and scholarship.

3.1. Theme 1: Taking Experience Seriously

A recurring theme in data drawn from evaluative postcards and impact grids reveals how PRP participants show signs of becoming more comfortable in using their own experiences of educational practice as a starting point for research.

For example, MPhil Year 2 Practitioner J records how the PRP has 'added value to my teaching and leadership and programme management' and 'inspired me to launch community projects relating to the research (Special Educational Needs, 16–17, 19+)'. They often remark upon how the PRP has 'led to consultancy income generation and career development opportunities' for them as an individual and how it has 'influenced staff development across my college' and 'inspired a learning culture at my college'. They regularly make comments that the PRP has 'inspired me to have articles published and speak at conferences'. and 'created a model of forward thinking and pedagogy that models the best elements of good, democratic education'. Many conclude with remarks which point to how the PRP has been supportive, such as in 'focusing and guiding me on what I have done and what I need to do next'.

The Good Research Game was regularly noted by a PRP participant as 'helping to make engagement in research more human. I made some of these mistakes in my own research experiences as an undergraduate!'

3.2. Theme 2: Places and Spaces to Talk about What Is Really Happening in Practice

Data from the same sources illustrate how opening up spaces and places for PRP practitioners allows them to talk about their individual and collective experiences of 'what is really going on in practice'. They often refer to how this enables them to see how well-intended policy initiatives at the national level can have unintended and sometimes unhelpful consequences in practice in the local

context of their work. Bearing in mind data from the workshop evaluations and other sources, these comments show how being able to share stories of their own research as it develops provides PRP participants with direct experiences in which the dichotomy research and practice collapses enabling research and practice to be seen, not as separate activities, but as an integral part of educational improvement in practice.

For example, MPhil Year 2 Practitioner M reports how, on completing the PRP, they recognised that it had provided a ‘customised and bespoke’ supported research experience, which had significantly developed their understanding of research methodology and methods in education’ and ‘enabled [them] to make a contribution to knowledge in the context of their work’. They describe their engagement in the PRP as ‘an exceptional teaching and learning experience’ which helped them to find ‘a place and a space in my career where [they] have not been before’. They record how, through their engagement in the PRP, the culture of research in their ‘institution has changed’. Several PRP participants report on how their college has changed their contract of employment so that their research is now contributing to their institution’s research profile.

The importance of time and space to get away from the pressures of the workplace to share experiences and ideas with peers is a recurring theme in practitioner-researchers’ comments on evaluative postcards. Data from evaluative postcards also make repeated reference to the importance of regular and dedicated support from their thesis supervisor and other practitioner-researchers at and in between residentials, lending further support to the claim that PRP enables practitioner-researchers to feel that they are being given space to think, where they can talk about what is really happening in practice (included unintended consequences of well intended policy) and how they feel, that belong to and are supported by a genuine, national community of research and practice.

3.3. Theme 3: Development of Educational Research Scholarship through Story

The data gathered from the evaluative postcards, impact grids, tutorials and extracts from PRP theses lend tentative support to the claim that introducing practitioner-researchers to the human backstory of philosophers and educational researchers allowed them to engage with concepts and ideas concerning methodology and methods in educational research, which they had not had the confidence to engage with previously.

Evidence of this can be found in tutorial discussions and assignments regarding the work of these key authors and thinkers in the philosophy of education, as well as careful references to and considerations of matters of ontology and epistemology in methodology chapters of theses. This suggests that making key concepts and theories in the philosophy of education accessible and relatable, allows practitioner-researchers to see parallels between enduring issues in the philosophy of education and educational research and their own experiences of educational practice and research.

For example, MPhil Year 2 Practitioner D notes that the PRP provided an ‘excellent opportunity to talk in a small group with my tutor to improve the methodology further. She observes that their latest ‘residential particularly helped with confidence building over how I am approaching my work, and this has motivated and refreshed the previous points covered on other residentials’. In addition she comments that ‘as always the time to think and focus on the research project has been greatly appreciated’.

MPhil Year 2 Practitioner F remarks how the PRP has ‘enabled me to arrive at the point to transfer to PhD and the developmental journey it has provided—so proud!’ and that ‘it is thanks to the university team, the pace, attention and support we have been given that we have travelled this far’.

MPhil Year 2 Practitioner K records how The PRP has given them time to ‘think critically about my research and a clearer justification for my research methodology’. The same participant also comments on how the PRP has allowed them to ‘engage with others in discussing my research to help me clarify my thinking and highlight further areas to develop’.

MPhil Year 2 Practitioner T notes how the PRP has, ‘allowed me to review my thesis in terms of the academic-vocational and theory-practice divide and to make certain of and review my approach to

research'. They also identify how the PRP 'provided an opportunity to reflect, think, comment and revise my thesis' and how their PhD transfer review 'gave me invaluable contributions to my thesis'.

3.4. Theme 4: Stories of Methodology and Method in Educational Research and Engagement with Discourses in the Philosophy of Education

The practical engagement of practitioner-researchers in considerations of stories of and issues in the development of ideas in the philosophy of education in relation to ontology and epistemology is often evidenced in extracts from theses. This reflects a growing awareness of the importance of experience and practice in relation to methodology and method and in the conduct of educational research. Practitioner-researchers' written accounts of research are frequently set in terms of stories of experience and framed in the language of narrative inquiry. They also include real world examples of how their understanding of the research problem changed in the course of their research, as they engaged with the literature and as they tested out ideas from literature in the arena of practice.

Practitioner-researchers, in their evaluative postcards, tutorials and in their theses, often refer to the ways in which PRP research development workshops turn to story and popular culture by employing extracts from films, GIFs, images on record album covers, songs and YouTube. They report that it has not only helped to make complex theories and ideas from research accessible, but also brought home the essentially social, human (sometimes humorous, sometimes serious) nature of the practice of education, the purpose of educational research and the importance of having a sound grasp of issues in methodology and method.

For example, the extract presented below from this practitioner-researcher thesis illustrates how he has now developed a confident grasp of issues surrounding discourses in methodology and methods. He also illustrates a command of academic writing and scholarship and how he is using that to report his research and defend its findings. In MPhil Practitioner S' thesis on assessment theory and practice in the context of the General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) English (Creative Writing) he notes that.

3.5. Extract from MPhil Practitioner S Thesis

The relationship between assessment criterion and the assessment of creative writing is a tangled one. In Dunne's (2005) *Back to the Rough Ground*, he examines the concept of what he calls 'technical reason' and how appropriate it is to provide guidance for us in complex areas of life. This examination is in part a response to what he deems to be a dissatisfaction with the increasing prevalence in education to define and enact standards, focus on outcomes and increase accountability. For Dunne, the problem stems from a tendency to elevate what the Classical Greek thinkers termed *techne*, a form of scientific reason, to one of universal applicability that is capable of revealing to us all aspects of rational human action (*ibid*). In this fashion, *techne* offers knowledge on what constitutes good quality creative writing that can be recorded with reference to criteria, and applied to any given text in a procedural fashion in a way that leaves 'nothing to chance'. The problem is that in practice attempts at defining universal criterion encounter significant challenges.

In response to these challenges, Dunne (2005) makes a distinction between *techne* and *phronesis*, a form of practical wisdom. This is characterised by 'sensitivity and attunement' towards its subject-material (*ibid*:256). Rather than being separable from experience, *phronesis* is realised through experiences, and is open to new experiences. Accordingly, it is made possible by negotiating with one's experience and judgement, rather than adherence to rules or criteria. It is in this conception of *phronesis* that we can recognise to be critical in underpinning and informing the process of making a judgement on the quality of a creative writing text. We can look again at the Newbolt Report's (1921) assertion that 'English is essentially an art and the effect of English literature, in education, is the effect of art upon the development of the human character' (1921:21) as a reminder of the nature and purpose of creative writing. This must not be lost as we consider the most effective way of forming a judgement of the quality of a student's creative writing text. The 'sensitivity and attunement' that *phronesis*

provides the teacher assessor is critical in an assessment scenario so their experiences, including those that are being formed as a result of participating in that specific assessment decision, can shape the judgement they are reaching.

In addition to enabling engagement with issues of methodology and methods, while this study did not set out to draw direct comparisons between sector practitioners who engaged in the research and those who did not, the completion rates for MPhil and PhD practitioner-researchers on the PRP compare favourably with MPhil and PhD completion rates at some of the most prestigious universities in England, with the PRP achieving and sustaining a completion and achievement rate of 80% and above. This is particularly significant, as many of the MPhil Year 2 students have now progressed to PhD study and are balancing the demands of full-time employment alongside their studies. It is also important to note that a number of these PRP participants come from groups which are not only under-represented in higher education (HE), but also under-represented in peer-reviewed published literature in the field of post compulsory educations.

Data presented above lend tentative support to the claim that stories of educational research and narrative accounts such as those employed in the PRP can generate immersive experiences, in which the mind is, of necessity, engaged in an active search for connections and meaning-making. As Gregroy [2] and Carter [10] argue, such experiences take us out of ourselves and connect us to others. The consummatory experiences advocated by Dewey [6] not only invite us to think, but also to think differently and with some care. The same storied interventions helped to illustrate to practitioner-researchers that the identification of a research problem might not be as easy or as straightforward as it might first appear and that what looks like a problem at first may turn out to be no more than a symptom of the underlying (and often enduring) deeper educational issue. Data from the study also suggest that the use of stories of research where things did not go at all as expected helped bring to the fore how every research study is not always a 'runaway' or 'overnight' success. These stories often graphically illustrate how we can learn as much from mistakes made in conducting research as from their success. They also convey an appreciation of the gap (or perhaps more accurately the gulf) between taking a good idea from research and its successful implementation and realization in practice.

At first (often as a result of research training underpinning their first degrees), many practitioner-researchers felt that it was necessary for an academic researcher to write in the third person, as if in fact they were not present in the research. The storied nature of many of the research outputs supporting the workshops provided practical examples of why this does not need to be the case. They show how a researcher could make their presence clear in the conduct of research. At the same time, they illustrate how researchers can make their judgments transparent by justifying to the reader the decisions they made and how they arrived at them in the conduct of the research. Through their experiences of the PRP, participants begin to see how this transparency and these justifications can serve to ensure that the practitioner-research remains systematic, and its findings robust.

Some PRP participants report that they find it particularly helpful to be able to see what examples of good research look like and to understand that not every good research output has to look the same. Some began by imitating the style of researchers who had taken a more storied approach to their writing. Gradually, however, as in the example of MPhil Practitioner S above, they begin to modify these imitated approaches by developing them into scholarly writing more appropriate to the contexts in which they are conducting their research.

As PRP participants progress through the programme, developments in the academic writing and scholarship of PRP participants become more closely aligned with the focus of the study, more finely attuned to issues of the methodology and methods used to conduct the research, and more able to moderate and justify the outcomes of their research, in order to make them more appropriate and accessible and of use to intended audiences.

Extracts from the evaluative postcards, tutorials, impact grids and theses presented above bring to light how stories, storytelling, oracy and visual image are contributing to strengthening

practitioner-researchers' engagements with key ideas and concepts in educational research. As explained above, these artefacts give voice to and provide evidence of the impact of the experiences of the practitioner-researchers' as they progress through the PRP. It is important and encouraging to note how participants praise whole organisational changes in the research cultures of their organisations and how much they value feeling part of a national community of research and practice in the post compulsory education sector in England. Ultimately, as data from the PRP also suggest, allowing practitioner-researchers to use and share their own experience and their own professional knowledge to inform their research and improve practice across the vocational education sector is vital to a self-sustaining system of educational evaluation and improvement which aims to improve educational practice from the ground-up.

Data from this research also lend qualified support to the claim that the PRP allows practitioner-researchers to reflect upon issues in practice and to tackle these in context, away from the day-to-day demands of work, in ways which can resonate with other sector practitioners and can contribute to policy formation and decision-making in the future. Evidence of the success of the PRP comes from the first-hand testimonials from the practitioner-researchers and in the influence and impact of their work, within and across institutions. As entries in evaluative postcards testify, almost all of the practitioners commented on the quality of their research journey and how far they had travelled. Achievements documented in evaluative postcards and impact grids range from accounts where PRP participants describe how their learners' demonstrate deeper engagement in learning, following their research, to accounts to promotions and international research presentations, collaborations and publications.

The works of PRP participants presented above are now influencing new cohorts of practitioner-researchers to begin to take similar journeys of their own and develop their own thinking, in light of another colleague's research journey. The use of storytelling resources, interactive media, and storied academic works is repeatedly cited by practitioners, often in terms of "excellent teaching and learning" in helping them to engage with concepts and theories they may not have had the chance or the confidence to engage with prior to their involvement in the PRP.

4. Discussion

This study is limited in a variety of ways. The scale and size of the study dictates that the emerging findings reported above, and any conclusions drawn, must be tentative. In addition, it is clearly not possible to generalize from a qualitative empirical study of this nature and it is too early in the study to venture recommendations. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that as the analysis of data sets is still ongoing, there is a need to treat emerging findings from this study with a measure of caution.

The introduction to this article explains how the purpose of the study is to provide insights into and to contribute to the understanding of subjective experiences of the PRP and how it is therefore essentially an act of communication, which has to be accessed by interpretation and subjectivity, not objectivity. In terms of trustworthiness, the strength of this study may be determined by the extent to which these accounts carry with them a 'ring of truth' or a sense of authenticity regarding the conduct of the research and the experiences of PRP participants as they engage in it.

Conveying stories and experiences of research in ways which help to describe and explain the ethos and content of the PRP in human ways, such as the use of The Good Research Game, appear to bring the research process to life for beginning and more experienced researchers alike. This is something that members of the research team aim to do as an integral part of the PRP. It is also something the illustrative practitioner accounts presented in this article attempt to highlight.

In terms of next steps, although there is clearly a need for further research in this area, completion rates of 80% indicate that the PRP is in some way addressing factors which have previously prevented many practitioner-researchers in post compulsory education from seeing their research through to completion.

In addition, data from the narrative accounts, etc., presented above suggest that practitioner-researchers' experiences of the PRP are enabling them to engage in educational research, write-up and share their findings in scholarly and credible ways, which are supporting the improvement of aspects of educational practice in the post compulsory education sector.

5. Conclusions

Overall, the PRP, through the use of stories of experience and narrative inquiry, appears to enable PRP participants to engage with stories of educational research, theory and practice by encouraging them to begin with their own experiences of practice to develop their own academic writing and scholarship. In the process, PRP participants are becoming more able to see how the thinking of other researchers may have parallels with their own situations and contexts. Storied experiences of the PRP are in turn enabling PRP participants to become better storytellers, teachers and researchers in their own right. The impact of this upon educational practice is evidenced in the accounts of the PRPs presented above.

This article illustrates how the PRP is providing practitioners in post compulsory education with storied experiences in places and spaces which encourage cooperation, shared meaning-making and educational improvement, in the contexts of educational research and practice. It also underscores the importance of how belonging to a community of research can successfully sustain practitioner-research and produce credible and impactful research outcomes. Evidence from this study lends tentative support to the claim that the PRP not only allows practice and experience to be taken seriously as a starting point for research, but that it also enables theories and ideas from research to be critically examined and tested out and developed in the arena of practice.

Funding: This research was funded in part by the Education and Training Foundation. Grant Number 93381. However, the research outcomes from the PRP were arrived at independently through systematic, HE-supported research. The findings of this research are therefore not in any way influenced by partial support from ETF funding.

Acknowledgments: The Guest Editor Professor Maggie Gregson and all authors contributing to this Special Issue of the Journal of Education Science would like to thank Farrah Sun and Hayley Chen for their advice, help and support in seeing these articles through to publication.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

1. Gregson, M.; Hillier, Y. *Reflective Teaching in Further Adult and Vocational Education*; Bloomsbury: London, UK, 2015.
2. Coffield, F.; Coffield, F.; Costa, C.; Muller, W.; Webber, J. *Beyond Bulimic Learning: Improving Teaching in Further Education*; Institute of Education Press: London, UK, 2014.
3. McCarthy, M. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: An Overview. In *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*; Murray, R., Ed.; Society for Research Higher Education and Open University Press: Maidenhead Berks, UK, 2008.
4. Pinker, S. *The Language Instinct*; Penguin: London, UK, 1995.
5. Gregory, M. *Shaped by Stories, the Ethical Power of Narratives*; University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, IN, USA, 2009.
6. Andrews, R.; Smith, A. *Developing Writers: Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age*; Open University Press: Maidenhead, UK, 2011.
7. Dewey, J. *How We Think*; Dover Publications Inc.: New York, NY, USA, 1910.
8. Greene, M. *The Handbook of Education and Human Development: New Models of Learning Teaching and Schooling*; Blackwell Publishers: Malden, MA, USA, 1998.
9. Berger, J. *Ways of Seeing*; Penguin: London, UK, 2008.
10. Carter, D. *Teaching Fiction in the Primary School: Classroom Approaches to Narratives*; David Fulton Publishers: Abingdon, UK, 2000.
11. Eisner, E. Forms of Understanding and the Future of Educational Research, American Educational Research Association, Presidential Address. *Rep. Educ. Res.* **1993**, *22*, 5–11. [[CrossRef](#)]

12. James May: Our Man in Japan. Amazon Prime Video. Available online: https://www.amazon.co.uk/CABBAGEROLL/dp/B082WRK5BN/ref=sr_1_1?crd=IW6P020HRFZO&keywords=james+may+our+man&qid=1584000534&s=instant-video&sprefix=james+may%2Cinstant-video%2C158&sr=1-1 (accessed on 15 January 2020).
13. Clandinin, D.J.; Connelly, F.M. *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*; Jossey Bass: San Francisco, CA, USA, 2004.
14. Coffield, F.; Borrill, C. Entrée & Exit. *Sociol. Rev.* **1983**, *31*, 520–545.
15. Pinky and the Brain. Warner Brothers. 1995. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=EL59PviS4ZCNQqgk7pQp00Rw> (accessed on 15 January 2020).
16. British Educational Research Association. *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*; British Educational Research Association: London, UK, 2018.
17. Dexter’s Laboratory. Cartoon Network. 1995. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCX9EuLuarfDjJRYt9l0Bbjg> (accessed on 15 January 2020).
18. Courage the Cowardly Dog. Cartoon Network. 1996. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCxsiZ1drga5K2na09h1yhyg> (accessed on 15 January 2020).
19. Crawford, J.; Wyatt, J.; Schwalb, R.J.; Cordrell, B.R. *Dungeons and Dragons Player’s Handbook*; Wizards of the Coast Publishing: Seattle, WA, USA, 2014.



© 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).