Thinking with Stories: The Potential of Narrative Inquiry for Vietnamese Education Research

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ABSTRACT
Despite being one of the major modes of inquiry in qualitative research, much confusion remains over what distinguishes narrative inquiry from other qualitative methodologies. This paper aims to clarify and deepen the understanding of narrative inquiry among the Vietnamese educational research community, where scholarship using this methodology is still limited. Narrative inquiry is the study of human experience as it is lived through the form of stories. It invites scholars and readers to not only think about stories but think with stories. The article delves into the philosophical and methodological distinctions of narrative inquiry, before offering some methodological notes on data collection, analysis, and representation coming from the author's own experience with conducting narrative research. The holistic appreciation of contextuality and relationality embedded in narrative inquiry resonates well with Vietnamese culture and philosophy. Consequently, this research methodology can be useful to advance research on the lived experience of education in Vietnam.

1. INTRODUCTION

The advanced qualitative methodology seminar I took in graduate school began with this question, "How would you explain what qualitative research is to a ten-year-old?" The use of words rather than numbers as data? The thick and rich descriptions of the participants, their contexts and experience? The typical methods of interviews, observation, and document analysis? The inclusion of quotes from the participants' own voices to make the findings more relatable, resonant, *human*? I really like what a colleague shared that day, "Here's how I describe what I do to my daughter: I'm trying to explain puzzles about how education works through telling stories." Indeed, in qualitative educational research, it is widely recognized that real human stories are essential to understanding the complex web of ideas, beliefs, habits, emotions, motivations, relationships, practices, and other dynamics influencing educational processes.

Scholars who love stories may be particularly pulled to narrative inquiry, one of the main approaches to qualitative research alongside ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and case study. Yet the 'narrative' in its name can also cause confusion over how it differs from other qualitative methodologies. The common interest in the participants' stories in most qualitative research, coupled with the trend of blurring boundaries and mixing different qualitative methods or methodologies (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015), can obscure the special characteristics of narrative inquiry. It is almost as if any qualitative study can be narrative research! However, after four decades of maturing since it first emerged in the 1980s, narrative inquiry has developed into a rigorous qualitative research methodology with a distinct and robust ontological, epistemological, and methodological basis (Clandinin, 2019).

The purpose of this paper is to clarify and deepen the understanding of narrative inquiry among the Vietnamese educational research community, where scholarship using this methodology is still limited. In brief, narrative inquiry

is the study of human experience as it is, and it makes the specific onto-epistemological claim that that this experience is lived in the form of stories (Chase, 2018; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). What narrative inquiry is interested in is not just *what* is being told but also *how* they are told because the telling of a story is also a process of knowing by the storyteller as they select and give meaning to their experience through existing story structures and sociocultural worldviews. Narrative inquiry thus invites scholars and readers to not only think about stories but think *with* stories (Bochner & Riggs, 2014). This narrative thinking emphasizes contextuality, temporality, and relationality, aligning well with Vietnamese worldviews and, consequently, has much potential to contribute to educational research in Vietnam.

This paper will first provide a brief overview of narrative inquiry's emergence in the history of international educational research and discuss its foundational philosophical claim that human lives are experienced through stories. I then examine the distinctive features and main methodological concerns of narrative inquiry. While some may assume it is an 'easy' methodology, I provide some methodological guidance notes on how to approach data collection, analysis, and write-up in narrative research. The last section of the paper discusses the potentials of narrative inquiry for educational research in Vietnam.

2. THE RISE OF NARRATIVE INQUIRY: EXAMINING HUMAN EXPERIENCE THROUGH THE LENS OF STORY

Compared to other dominant qualitative research methodologies, narrative inquiry emerged relatively recently in the 1980s. This emergence was part of the 'paradigm war' in educational research that called into question the appropriateness of traditional positivist and post-positivist methodological approaches to the study of human experience (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2019). With a commitment to finding the objective Truth through the elimination of human biases (Pernecky, 2016), positivist and post-positivist paradigms favor quantitative methods (e.g., statistical correlations, quasi-experimental studies, and program evaluation) to generate definitive, technical answers to educational issues. However, while numbers and statistics may be useful for examining the aggregate, they only provide static snapshots that cannot fully capture history, context, process, action, cause, motivation, and change - all integral components of education. Moreover, educational scholars increasingly pointed out that quantitative research was not actually free from biases. As Donmoyer (2023, p. 133) asserts, "*Before even the most rigorous quantitative researcher can start counting, that researcher must decide what counts and what to count. The researcher must also decide how to characterize the phenomena being counted*". Critical education scholars argued that supposedly 'objective' research had contributed to the ongoing oppression and marginalization of minority groups through erasing the impact of social contexts and historical inequalities on educational underachievement (Tillman, 2023). Growing recognition of the politics of knowledge production also meant an increasing interest in ordinary people's narratives as authoritative sources of knowledge (Bochner & Riggs, 2014). Scholars began to recognize that allowing practitioners to tell their own stories can have a strong impact on professional institutions and push for positive social change (Chase, 2018).

In educational studies, Clandinin and Connelly are often hailed as 'founders' of narrative inquiry for being the first to use this term in a 1990 article on *Educational Researcher* (Call-Cummings & Dazzo, 2023). In the decades since, narrative inquiry has grown into a huge, vibrant, and perhaps also confusing field, with a myriad of types, approaches, and philosophical strands, from Deweyan pragmatism, critical realism, postmodernism, constructionism, to Marxist critical theory (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2019). A narrative inquiry can appear in the forms of a life history, autoethnography, biography, composite narrative, counternarrative, and many others. It can refer to studies that use stories as data, studies that use narrative analysis on qualitative data, studies that represent the findings in the form of a narrative... As Clandinin (2019, p. 213) reflects, "*This diversity in the various ways that narrative inquiry is taken up both enriches, and troubles, those of us engaged in narrative inquiry*". Yet if there is one thing that ties this diverse field together, perhaps it is that narrative inquiry is a study of human experience as story (Chase, 2018; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2019; Kim, 2016; Trahar, 2013).

In the words of Clandinin (2019, p. 216), "*Narrative inquirers understand experience as a narratively composed phenomenon*". In other words, humans – individually and socially – lead storied life, and narrative inquiry begins and ends with the participants' story as they tell it and interpret it. Though one should be wary of anything claiming to be a universal human experience, storytelling does seem to be a core way of human expression and communication all over the world (Kim, 2016). Humans make meaning of random events happening to us by organizing them into

narratives – shaped by stories we already hold about ourselves, our communities, and our past – so as to construct a coherent sense of who we are and who we can be (Bochner & Riggs, 2014).

Not only do we tell these stories to ourselves, we also share them – and thus our understanding of the world – with others. As these stories continue to be lived, told, and shared with other people, they end up forming communities, cultures, and nations that inform future storytelling (Cao, 2022). As MacIntyre (2007, p. 218) asserted, "*I am part of [other's stories], as they are part of mine. The narrative of any life is part of an interlocking set of narratives*". As such, analysis of individual narratives can also reveal the socially shared conventions and rules that that shape what stories can be uttered and how they should be told in each context (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008). This is why, while storytelling may be a universal human practice, the plot structures, conventions, and worldviews embedded can have significant differences cross-culturally. For example, Western storytelling tends to lean towards the individualism of a hero's journey, while Eastern stories can often be recursive, lacking in conflict, and hinges on the interconnectedness of life (Qian, 2018). Through exploring such sociocultural 'grammar' of the stories shared, narrative inquiry uses what may seem particular to a few individuals to illuminate the broader dynamics of society.

3. NARRATIVE INQUIRY AS A METHODOLOGY

From this foundational assertion that "*the human condition is largely a narrative condition*" (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 197), narrative inquiry presents significant changes in thinking about human experience and how to access it through research methodology. This section touches on three major methodological aspects of narrative inquiry: the attention to ordinary, lived experience; the relationality of narrative thinking; and the holistic approach to contemplating the research.

Honoring the Ordinary and the Unheard

First is the honoring of ordinary lived experience through the voice of everyday people as a valid source of knowledge about the world (Clandinin, 2019). In general, interviews in qualitative research gather 'big' narratives that "*entail a significant measure of reflection on either an event or experience, a significant portion of a life, or the whole of it*" (Freeman, 2006, p. 132). But in addition to these 'big' stories, narrative inquiry is also interested in 'small' anecdotes emerging from spontaneous, casual, everyday conversations.

For many educational scholars, it is this very recognition of the ordinary that makes them fall in love with narrative inquiry methodology (Call-Cummings & Dazzo, 2023; Kim, 2016). The participants in narrative inquiry research tend to be people "*whose lives are often dictated to by those who consider themselves to be wiser*" (Trahar, 2013, p. 12) in other studies, but here are invited to be co-analysts of their own lived experience. In education, including in Vietnam, a lot of research and policy change are conducted from above and then imposed on teachers, administrators, parents, and students at the local level, with few thoughts on how these actors are also significant sources of expertise in improving education. In contrast, narrative inquiry validates daily experiential knowledge, making it suitable for research projects focusing on professionals' daily experience in the field. Indeed, some fruitful areas of narrative inquiry in educational research include teacher identities, experience, and practice; the actual experience of teaching and learning in the classroom; or how teachers, administrators, and students negotiate educational changes.

Narrative inquiry is also important when it comes to studies invested in uncovering counter-narratives with practical aims of social change. Trahar (2013) argues that "*a much-proffered reason for using narrative inquiry is that it supports silenced voices to be heard and that it has an overtly political purpose – to challenge or trouble established ways of thinking*" (p. 12). Many Indigenous, feminist, post-colonial, and decolonial scholars have helped to clarify the workings of power and oppression through research and academia where Eurocentrism continues to rule (Chen, 2010; Connell, 2021; Smith, 2021; Swadener & Mutua, 2008). As Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021, p. 1) asserts, "*[T]he term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism*", for indeed modern social sciences emerged to support colonial regimes' need to control and exploit the colonized Other. Even today, research is still largely rooted in the default viewpoints, perspectives, and paradigms of the West which are presented as if they are the universal Truth (Le, 2021; Espino, 2012; Vu, 2016). This Eurocentric foundation continues to produce deficit-lens research that assumes the inferiority of non-White peoples. In this context, storytelling can be resistance. Counter-narrative research can provide the opportunity for not just sharing one's story but also self-reflection, self-emancipation, and social emancipation (Espino, 2012). For Vietnamese

educational scholarship, examining counter-narratives from the ground is crucial not just for taking control of the stories being told about us in the international research community, but also for a better understanding of Vietnam's current educational issues and how best to address them.

Thinking Narratively

Narrative inquiry is not just about gathering stories from participants; one of its distinctive features is the centrality of narrative thinking as a way of knowing (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Kim, 2016). Narrative thinking can be conceptualized as "*a specific form of cognition in which people are naturally disposed to search for the connections between events and actions*" (Bruner, 1986, as cited in Beal, 2013, p. 701). Indeed, neuroscience research is also telling us that the human brain is naturally wired to think narratively (Armstrong, 2020). Yet it is now more common for us to think *about* stories, rather than to think *with* stories (Morris, 2002, as cited in Clandinin, 2019). Thinking *about* stories is to treat stories as objects or data to be dissected and analyzed, whereas thinking *with* stories is to explore those stories in relation to other stories, other people, other contexts, and other timepoints.

One key element in narrative thinking is temporality. It is to recognize that events happen over time, and everything has a past, present, and can influence the future. Likewise, narratives always come from somewhere and will continue to change from interactions with the environment, with the social context, and with other experiences. Our understanding gained through narrative inquiry is likely to keep changing as well. The insights, emotions, and experience that the researcher gains from first listening to the narrative are unlikely to remain the same in further revisiting. The 'findings' presented in a publication are just one understanding captured at that particular moment in time; they may very well change as the scholar continues to reflect upon the research. This is perhaps what the 'inquiry' part in 'narrative inquiry' gestures toward: it highlights the process more than the conclusion of producing knowledge through stories.

Another important element to narrative thinking is sociality and spatiality, which recognizes the social context of experiences, the influence of other narratives and discourses that we are all embedded in, and the environmental, material surroundings of experiences. As discussed above, a person's experience and their story does not occur in a vacuum; it is always formed and (re)told through existing worldviews and socially shared conventions to make such stories understandable in particular sociocultural contexts (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008). The participants' stories collected in a narrative inquiry may indeed be partial, local, and situated, but they still have broader social implications. The role of the narrative inquiry researcher is to use narrative thinking and tease out these connections in search of findings that can resonate across different contexts.

Holistic Contemplation of Narrative

The holistic appreciation for contextuality and relationality in narrative thinking extends to how the data is approached. Call-Cummings and Dazzo (2023) argue that a large reason behind the institutional embrace of narrative inquiry in educational studies is the desire to move away from "*a dissection – and consequential diminishing – of people's experiential knowledge,*" towards maintaining the wholeness of their lived experience (p. 647). This holistic approach to the participants' stories is a central difference that distinguishes narrative inquiry from other qualitative modes of research. In fact, many studies mistakenly claim to be a narrative inquiry because they gather stories through interviews, but then end up treating these narratives through the typical coding processes to break up the data. In contrast, in a narrative inquiry, the narrative should be listened to and maintained as a whole. It is not gathered for the sake of testing theories, finding cross-cutting themes, or just making the research article more compelling. The task for the narrative inquirer is to "*to link theory to story by inviting others to think and feel with the story, staying with it, resonating with the story's moral dilemmas, identifying with its ambiguities, examining its contradictions, feeling its nuances, letting the story analyze them*" (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 207). In other words, narrative inquiry methodology compels the researcher to give up many of the analytical practices we are used to.

This is, of course, easier said than done. The way that most qualitative researchers are trained now takes for granted that the task of research is to identify the common themes. "*But the themes of a story don't necessarily tell us what the story does, how it works, what relationships it shapes or animates, or how it pulls people together or breaks them apart*" (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 205). Furthermore, as scholars, we are used to interpreting data in light of previous literature we have been exposed to, thereby over-privileging our pre-existing understanding of the world rather than that of the storytellers. It is easy for the analysts to only hear the story we want and expect to hear, rather than the story that was actually told to us.

This is a reminder that storytelling is always a social performance: the story is being told to *someone*. In research contexts, it is being told to the researcher. The narrative may be significantly different from how it would be told to another layperson rather than an 'expert.' It may be unintentionally guided by the interviewer through direct questions, reactions, or nonverbal cues. This performative aspect is a feature of all qualitative interviews, only that in other methodologies, the context of the interview "*is largely effaced in the telling, thereby creating the illusion that the resultant story is self-sufficient, wholly 'one's own,' surging up from the depths of being*" (Freeman, 2006, p. 133).

Hence, researcher's reflexivity is essential in conducting a narrative inquiry. Lots of methodological discussions have established that a researcher's personal and cultural biases have a tremendous effect on their research (Sriprakash & Mukhopadhyay, 2015). Reflexivity does not merely mean a simple list of the scholar's identities in a positionality paragraph, which is how it unfortunately has been reduced to in many qualitative studies (Le et al., 2020). Rather, reflexivity should be a process woven continuously throughout your entire study, even beyond publication. How did your identities and biases make you select this particular research problem and this methodology? How did they influence your dynamics with the participants, and the kind of stories that were told to you? How did your contextual and cultural sensitivity – or lack thereof – affect what you paid attention to in your data analysis and writing? What kind of blind spots may be produced by your identities? For example, Vietnamese scholars conducting research with Vietnamese participants might not mean an automatic 'clearer' insight into the participants' stories. These concerns make it even more important for the researcher to place themselves under critical analysis as part of the holistic contemplation of narrative inquiry.

4. SOME METHODOLOGICAL NOTES ON HOW TO ENGAGE IN NARRATIVE THINKING

I engaged in my first narrative inquiry as a student project for a basic qualitative methods course. In other words, I approached it without training, dazzled by the prospect of doing research where I could talk to real people, and honestly, the pragmatic concerns of what kind of study would be feasible to complete in one semester. As other narrative inquiry scholars have reflected, "*Didn't I secretly think it was an 'easy' methodology that concerns 'just telling stories'?*" (Clandinin et al., 2007, p. 21). The 'pitfalls' I have mentioned in this paper, such as the breaking up of narratives into codes, are things I myself have fallen into. Below, I would like to offer some methodological notes from my own experience of conducting narrative inquiry, knowing that they are by no account the definitive guide. Perhaps the most important thing I have learned from doing narrative inquiry is that I am always still learning.

Narrative inquiry intentionally chooses a very small sample of participants for each study, sometimes even limiting it to one individual. Purposive sampling is most often used in narrative inquiry which, again, intentionally seeks participants from whom one can learn a lot about the issues central to the purpose of study (Cook & Dixson, 2013). It is easy to mistake that a narrative inquiry interview can just invite the participant to tell their story, but qualitative interviewing skills of engaged listening, framing follow-up questions, and using nonverbal cues are just as, if not even more important. I do usually begin with the simple prompt "Please tell me your story," and it is always my favorite part to contemplate how participants choose to begin their story. But while some participants are comfortable talking about themselves, many may only offer short, succinct answers. As research in Vietnam is traditionally quite structured (Warrington et al., 2023), participants and researchers alike may experience more discomfort with the open-endedness of narrative inquiry. Vietnamese participants may also feel that because they were not 'experts,' they would have little to contribute. Phan (2017) offers a detailed guide on how to ask probing questions in Vietnamese research contexts and then connect discrete anecdotes together to form a smoother narrative.

For me, data analysis was the most difficult part of a narrative inquiry as it required me to shift my thinking away from traditional coding methods. I find it useful to engage in a combination of coding the data and interpreting them holistically, taking inspiration from Kim's (2016) dual method of analysis of narratives and narrative analysis. Analysis of narratives is the search for emerging themes across cases, while narrative analysis focuses on each case and seeks to understand the specific elements of the story, such as plot lines, characters, time, and settings. Sometimes narrative inquiry can overly focus on retelling individual stories without linking back to social significance, so the analysis should include both burrowing into specific details and broadening for a critical analysis of the context and power implications from each narrative. Qualitative researchers are likely familiar with finding patterns and themes, but for engaging with the specific elements of narrative in the data, the following questions inspired by Loseke (2012) and Espino (2012) can be helpful:

(1) *Establishing the relational context of this storytelling moment*: Who is the author? Why was the story told? Who is the audience? What is the relationality between the storyteller and the audience? What is the implication of this relationship?

(2) *Close reading*: What is the plot? Who are the characters? How did the participants frame their stories? What is the moral of the story? What, if anything, is missing from the story? How do I interpret the silence within their narratives?

(3) *Characterizing explicit descriptions of story characters*: How are characters and events described? What are the implications?

(4) *Unpacking the implicit codes and narratives*: What are the implicit assumptions and codes in the narrative? What are the emotions expressed by the storyteller? What emotions did the researcher experience? How do these factors affect the reception of the narrative? How does this narrative function in social life? What master narratives are present in the construction of the story? In what ways are counternarratives developed?

With Vietnamese participants, it is important to think about the cultural tendency to 'beat around the bush,' to use euphemism, and to say what people expect to hear to avoid possible conflicts. If critical opinions are voiced, they tend to be quite subtle and already integrate multiple sides to a story. Such pluralistic thinking embedded in Vietnamese worldview (Nguyen, 2007) would necessitate significant reading between the lines. To help uncover these hidden insights, the researcher can use the data analysis guiding questions above, informed by cultivating relationships with the participants to understand their speaking patterns, developing a deep familiarity with local discursive norms and sociocultural contexts, and above all, deep and continual re-reading of the data while cross-referencing it with not just other participants, peers, the literature, but also broader community discourses.

Writing up the findings should not be considered a separate process but rather an integral part of data analysis itself. In narrative inquiry, creative nonfiction writing technique, even fictionalization, is not rare, especially when the study is working with minority participants whose identities need to be protected. Some scholars create a story involving composite, fictional characters (Cook & Dixson, 2013; Smith et al., 2007). These composite narratives are not fabricated out of thin air but rather are based on the patterns emerging from the data, and they are written to highlight the concrete theoretical and practical significance of the findings. Finding ways to 'restory' what participants share and ensuring their lived experience is honored is part of fully understanding the data. Here is a memo I wrote while engaging in this dual analysis-writing process: "*In re-storying, this process of constructing the composite narratives and fictional encounters, this is itself a layer of analysis. Because it forces me ever closer to the participants' lifeworlds – more than if I was just copying and pasting quotes from the transcripts they gave me, or cataloguing their anecdotes under 'codes.' Here, every single word I write is the answer to the question 'Am I staying true to my participant as an entire being?' It is a constant wrestling with the question: 'What is it about their life, experience, and identity that led them to this particular utterance – and how do I honor this linkage in my composite narrative?*" (Author's dissertation memo).

The focus on a small number of individuals and their subjective knowledge, the challenge to methodological orthodoxy, and the openness to creativity and fictionalization mean that narrative inquiry continues to be met with skepticism, especially from those whose knowledge paradigms place a high value on positivism, rationality, and objectivity. Yet arguably, all inquiry is expressed in narrative form, meaning it is always already a partial account of the world (Cao, 2022; Hendry, 2009). As objectivity is impossible, narrative inquiry aspires towards truths that are not capital-T Truth, but rather "*emotional, dialogic, and collaborative truths. Not Truth but truth; not truth but truths*" (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 209). To find these truths, narrative inquiry scholars should engage in data triangulation, member checking with the participants, peer checking with other researchers, constant reflexivity and thorough documentation of our interpretation process.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR VIETNAMESE EDUCATION RESEARCH

Positivism and post-positivism are still the predominant paradigms in Vietnamese research, with scholars being generally reluctant to move away from familiar, prescriptive, and empirical methods (Do, 2022; Pham & Hayden, 2019; Tran, 2013; Warrington et al., 2023). Yet holistic thinking, perpetual change, and interdependence have always been central to Vietnamese epistemology (Pham, 2024), just like how storytelling and folk narratives are valuable

sources of knowledge in our culture (Vu, 2022). The relationality embedded in narrative research feels very appropriate to honoring these aspects of Vietnamese identity, culture, and philosophy.

In the past decade, the push to decolonize research methodologies has become increasingly accepted and welcomed in educational research globally, and it is also beginning to be taken up by East and Southeast Asian scholars (Kester, 2023; Smith, 2021). Scholars have warned that the hegemony of Western epistemologies can reproduce "*a compliant research imagination*" where scholars continue to commit to positivistic assumptions and "*a simplistic, mimicking, derivative, or compromised imagination determined solely in Western research*" (Nguyen & Chia, 2023, p. 224). Pushing back against this, the decolonizing research movement calls for alternative ways of knowing and being that can hold together different systems of knowledges as complementary (Swadener & Mutua, 2008). Although the emergence of narrative inquiry, at least the way it is taught in introductory textbooks, is still situated in the Western academia, its spirit and practice take much inspiration from non-Western ways of knowing such as Indigenous storywork methodology (Call-Cummings & Dazzo, 2023). How wonderful it would be for more Vietnamese scholars to engage with narrative inquiry and examine its resonance with our own folk epistemologies, cultures, and traditions that have been heretofore marginalized in spaces of research. Narrative inquiry can also be a vehicle to bring Vietnamese pluralistic worldview (Nguyen, 2007) to international scholarship in education, with the potential to contribute many new, interesting and practical findings that are no longer just derived from a monolithic way to understand the world.

Several Vietnamese educational researchers have conducted and published narrative inquiry studies, both in Vietnamese and international journals (e.g., Dao, 2021; Le, 2018; Nguyen, 2017; Nguyen, 2020; Nguyen, 2024; Nguyen & Tesar, 2024; Pham, 2024; Tran, 2019). For example, Le (2018) presents an autobiographical narrative of his lifelong learning journey, which also sheds light on the 60-year history of the English Department at Vietnam National University of Languages and International Studies, as well as provides valuable insights on professional development for other English language educators. In Dao's (2021) study, the author uses a Tree of Life activity as an interview method to prompt participants to reflect upon and tell stories about their development of teacher assessment identity. Nguyen's (2020) piece is an example of more pragmatic use of narrative inquiry to reflect on their lived experience as a Vietnamese teacher, from which the author provided practical advice for other teachers who may be struggling or demotivated by the constant policy reforms in this country. Pham (2024) may not frame her study as a 'narrative inquiry,' but this article shows narrative as a process of inquiry in action, where the scholar weaves not only her personal lived experience with the research participants' narratives, but also shows how engagement with Thich Nhat Hanh's 'interbeing' philosophy and a novel by Vietnamese diasporic author Ocean Vuong enabled new awakening for her. Nguyen (2024) showcases the aesthetic power of narrative inquiry by choosing to present her findings in a poem that uses bamboo, a familiar Vietnamese cultural imagery, to illuminate the resilience of Vietnamese teachers. The studies already conducted by Vietnamese researchers, though still limited in number, show the dazzling diversity of ways that narrative inquiry can be conducted and, importantly, the pragmatic contributions this qualitative methodology can offer to the field of education.

In conclusion, narrative inquiry is a qualitative research methodology with distinct philosophical base, knowledge assumptions, and characteristics. While it is still only emergent in Vietnamese social sciences, there is much that narrative inquiry can offer to scholars seeking to untangle the complexity of education. Moreover, the reflections on narrative inquiry in this paper should be of use even for researchers using other qualitative methodologies, for they can help us to ruminate on the nature of the qualitative data we gather, how we analyze it and represent it, and the power and influence of the researcher on any inquiry. The open-endedness, flexibility, and uncertainty of narrative inquiry may cause a lack of confidence to embrace this methodology, but the merits are fully worth it.

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