

# An Analysis of Three Stories

## Steve's Story

*Audience.* As stated earlier, the story of Steve and his expulsion from Unified Studies was *told to the readers of this book* to illustrate the real world of teaching and the use of qualitative inquiry by a variety of inquiring educators to understand that world better. But the story is really one that could be told to any number of audiences to illustrate a point about schooling, about young people, about responsibility, or about relationships between adults and young adults. It is a human story that people can interpret in many different ways.

*Story elements.* The story told in Chapter One is typical of the timeless story format. Barone (1992) notes that "this dynamic form which . . . mimics the rhythms of human experience, the ebb and flow of life itself" begins with "the discovery of a problem in whose solution one takes an interest." The story continues with "movement toward a resolution of the dilemma" and ends with "a closure, a coming to rest." Stories that follow this format invite general audiences as well as educators to read on and to "engage [their] imagination as the phases of [the story's] dynamic form are played out." (p. 20)

The story of Steve *begins* with the discovery that he has been smoking during the school outing, in direct violation of a school rule and the rules of the special Unified Studies program. His violation of the rules not only puts his membership in the class in jeopardy; it also represents a threat to the program's continuation as a program that is viewed as marginal by many members of the educational mainstream. The reader is invited to empathize with the teachers who have to make a decision about what to do with Steve and his choices. The body of the story consists of their reflections, conversations, analysis of their purposes and Steve's interests, and so on. The reader is invited to see them in their lived experience as real people trying to deal with the realities of school. The point is made later in the chapter that the struggles of teaching are the same as the struggles of doing qualitative inquiry; but that interpretation is not obvious nor necessary in the story itself. The reader is free to make her or his own assessment of what is going on. The story ends with the decision to remove Steve from the program; but it is softened by a kind of postscript that lets the reader know that he came back the next year and showed growth and maturity that helped the teachers feel that their decision of the year before was a wise one.

Several authors (Barone, 1992, Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, Eisner, 1991) have pointed out the value of story telling as a means of sharing educational issues, problems, solutions, and research findings by giving readers a vicarious shared experience with the people in the stories. Barone (1992) cites Eisner, who is the current president of the American Educational Research Association, to note several "differences between the language of social scientists and that of literary artists and critics. The former is linear, analytical, technical, denotative, while the latter is metaphorical, suggestive, figurative, evocative." (page 19) Barone argues that story telling can be morally persuasive and promotes critical reflection "that results in the reconstruction of a portion of the reader's value system." (page 20) He makes a case for three major criteria for judging stories— accessibility, compellingness, and moral persuasiveness and calls for educators to tell more stories with these characteristics about schools and people in schools so the general populace will become more supportive of the good things that people are doing in schools.

Stories of this narrative type add to all other kinds of sharing because all audiences can relate to a good story that is well told. As discussed below, every qualitative thesis or dissertation should include stories that are accessible, compelling, and morally persuasive. Ideally, articles should also contain stories too; but space limitations make that goal a challenge.

## Marné's Story

*Audience.* As noted above, this story of one teacher's journal keeping and reflective analysis of the stories in that journal was told to her professor as a class project, to teachers in in-service sessions, and to readers of this book to encourage them to keep a record of their experiences and thoughts and to use analysis procedures such as Spradley's to gain useful insights into their teaching experiences. For the purposes of illustration, we will emphasize here the professor as audience and ask what is included in this study and what might be added to meet the requirements of a graduate program for a thesis or dissertation using qualitative inquiry.

*Story elements.* Interestingly, a thesis or dissertation consists essentially of the same three elements as a narrative story— a beginning, middle, and end written into six chapters and several appendices. Typically the beginning is the prospectus, written in three separate chapters, which will be revised into the first three chapters of the final product—

1. An introduction to the setting and characters involved to set the stage for a statement of the conflict, problem, or questions to be addressed by the study and the specific purpose of the inquiry,
2. A review of related literature that clarifies the nature of the problem further and supports the need for a study, and
3. A statement of the procedures that will be used to address the problem.

The body of this story usually consists of two major chapters that illustrate the graduate student's efforts to solve the problem and deal with the complications raised by his or her experience doing the study—

4. A portrayal chapter is often included to tell a richly descriptive and engaging story of the genre described in the earlier section on Steve's story. Here is where the graduate student invites the reader to walk with him or her in the setting where the study was conducted, to study the "thick description" that Clifford Geertz (1973) argues is an important mark of good ethnography, to tell a story, in the traditional sense of that term. This chapter of a qualitative dissertation invites the readers to generate their own interpretations of the inquirer's experiences before going on to subsequent chapters where those interpretations are made more explicit.
5. An analysis and synthesis chapter is the climax of the story in which the graduate student makes discoveries and gathers insight from the inquiry experience and shares those insights with the reader. This is the interpretive section of the study where results of domain, taxonomic, and componential analysis (or other kinds that make sense to the graduate student) are presented and used as a basis for identifying unifying themes that address the problem or question guiding the study.

The end of the story consists of a final discussion chapter and a variety of appendices, which serve to resolve the conflicts of the study into a satisfactory, though usually incomplete conclusion—

6. A discussion chapter is often included in which the graduate student summarizes the rest of the study, discusses implications, and raises issues for further inquiry while attempting to resolve the conflicts of the study to the audiences temporary satisfaction.
7. Appendices include the audit trail, which documents how the study was conducted (see Chapter 5 and Appendix D for details), and other details from the study that invite the readers to take a closer look and make their own decisions about the credibility and value of the study they have read.

Marné's study, which was presented in Appendix B and discussed in Chapter Three, contains an abbreviated version of all of these elements. She begins the study with some brief background details about her life as a journal keeping teacher and then states her main question or conflict in this way: "I decided to take a thorough look at my journals to determine why they were so valuable to me and why they seemed to be such a strong force in my evolution as a teacher." (p. 1)

She skips over the literature review and gives a lengthy explanation of the methods she used for conducting the study, principally the analysis of her journals and synthesis of themes she gleaned from that analysis (pp 1-7). Details from Spradley which she followed to do this analysis and synthesis are presented in Appendix H.

Although still in the methods section, Marné begins her “story telling” narrative section with a portrayal of herself as a researcher (pp 7-9). This story gives the readers important contextual background for interpreting the results section, which begins with portrayals or examples of her journals and brief statements of decisions she was making about her writing of those journals over a period of years (pp 9-11).

The longest section of Marné’s piece is a presentation of the results of domain, taxonomic, and componential analyses, and theme synthesis (pp. 11-22). The latter seems to be the *climax* of the overall story, where she discovers that the main theme of her study has been that she as a teacher is really a learner and she is learning “that the act of struggling with these issues through writing was helping me realize that **teaching is a transaction with unique people resulting in change of both student and teacher**. The teaching/learning paradigm is a generative, caring act by both participants. Looking for a set answer for dealing with that delicate, unique learning moment is the antithesis of the real answer. What is the real answer? An uncomfortable, messy one: Do a ‘close reading’ of the student and the social/psychological/physical context. From heartfelt information generate the supportive action to take.” (p. 19)

In another lengthy section (pp. 22-31), Marné reviews five themes she has gleaned from her inquiry in light of literature she has identified while discovering these themes (see Appendix H. This is really a combination of chapters two and five as discussed above. Many of these books and articles had been part of Marné’s discourse for years before; but now she was interpreting them in a new way. Others were new to her. Although a dissertation would include much more review of literature in Chapter Two instead of putting it all in a later section, this example illustrates the fact that the review of literature is really another data gathering activity that should be integrated with all the other activities of qualitative inquiry in an ongoing cycle.

Marné’s resolution of her story comes in the final section of the paper, beginning on page 31 and titled “implications and conclusion. Here she summarizes why doing the study of “reading” or interpreting her own experience was worthwhile and why sharing that “reading” with others is valuable. She includes an appendix with her audit trail and a critique of her study to solidify that conclusion.

Although this outline of what might be included in a dissertation or thesis “story” seems fairly complete, if you are a graduate student considering writing a qualitative prospectus, remember that your primary audience is your committee. Ascertain what *their* interests and needs are and negotiate with them to include as many of the parts as they can use from the discussion here.

## Garry’s Story

*Audience.* As illustrated earlier, this story is of a district superintendent’s study of change which he *told to a dissertation committee and then in an article to school administrators and scholars interested in educational change* to illustrate the value of inquiry by a school administrator and to help the audience think about change in a different way. Because an article-length version of the study was included in Appendix E, this story illustrates a common format inquirers use to share what they are learning with others.

*Story elements.* As you might have guessed, the journal article is another way to tell a story using the familiar format of beginning, middle, and end. However, the distinguishing feature of an article is that everything has to be abbreviated due to page restrictions in journals. Ideally, all the elements discussed above for a dissertation or thesis would also be included in the journal article version— introduction, literature review, methods used, a narrative portrayal, analysis and synthesis, discussion and conclusion, appendices with audit trail and other relevant information.

The example from Garry in Appendix E has most of these sections but is a bit shy on the narrative portrayal. That is a typical problem and indicates why more and more emphasis is being put on the need for story telling by people like

Barone (1992) and others.

A review of articles in a journal dedicated to publishing qualitative kinds of inquiry, the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, shows that they follow much the same pattern that Garry used– they introduce their focus with some reference to a literature base (this is rarely very extensive), briefly overview the methods they used while essentially leaving the reader to assume they used adequate methods, tell lots of vignettes and include lots of quotes from participants in the setting they are studying, weave their analysis of what they think people mean in their statements and through their actions into the portrayals of those people, close up the article with a discussion and conclusion, and include nothing that looks like an audit trail.

Perhaps this is the kind of story that must be told to audiences who read journals because periodicals are so expensive and space is sold at a premium. Journals to which you might want to submit an article summarizing what you have learned as an inquiring educator will vary in the format they require. Our best recommendation is that you select a journal you think would be appropriate and study several issues of it as you prepare a rendition of your story that will be acceptable to the editors and the audience they represent.

## Quality of Writing

Spradley gives several pointers on how to write a report of a qualitative study (see Appendix H for a summary of his chapter on this topic). There are many good manuals on the general topic of writing which every hopeful writer ought to consult as well (e.g., Goldberg, 1986, Lester, 1984, Strunk and White, 1979, Troyka, 1990, and Zinsser, 1988). In addition, publishers and journal editors have specifications for the styles to be used in their publications and there are manuals detailing how to write in those styles (e.g., APA, MLA, Chicago, etc.), which ought to be consulted by anyone serious about sharing what they are learning through inquiry with a wider audience.



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