

CHAPTER 3.

**METHODOLOGIES FOR LIFESPAN
WRITING RESEARCH: USING
COMPOSITE NARRATIVES
IN NARRATIVE INQUIRY**

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In this chapter, we focus on the narrative inquiry method of creating composite narratives that embrace storied accounts and focus on the places, actions, and agents of a group's experiences. Composite narratives draw on the power of shared experiences by combining multiple stories into one narrative that highlights patterns and themes of experience, provides anonymity to participants, and conveys findings in narrative modes that foster understanding. Our interest in this method stems from a study that we (four teacher education researchers) conducted to understand how in-service K-12 teachers grow as writing educators across their career span. While this project did not investigate writing itself, an important part of writing teacher development involves their experiences as writers, and writing teachers' pedagogical orientations shape the way others are taught writing. Moreover, we see composite narratives as a useful method for lifespan writing research because composites draw from the genre of creative nonfiction to reveal patterns of participants' shared experiences.

In our own research, we used narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013) and composite narratives to represent 19 teachers' experiences of writing pedagogy development across their lifespan. The full composite narratives are presented in

the next chapter, and a condensed version was originally published in *Literacy Practice and Research* (Donovan et al., 2023). Exploring the teachers' lifespan of writing pedagogy development (Bazerman, 2018; Dippre & Phillips, 2020) through composite narratives afforded us an opportunity to detail the teachers' shared experiences evident in their varied yet similar trajectories of learning how to implement writing pedagogy with K-12 students. In this chapter, we explore the history of narrative inquiry and composites, discuss the affordances of composites for lifespan writing research, and share our processes for creating composite narratives so researchers can apply the methods according to their needs.

AN OVERVIEW OF NARRATIVE METHODOLOGY AND ITS HISTORY

Narrative inquiry methodology grew out of the premise that lived experience and narrative are valid and valuable ways of knowing (Clandinin, 2013). Interdisciplinary research in educational psychology and neuroscience reveals that the human brain is activated complexly when telling stories; also, the emotional connections and experiential thinking that take place in storytelling are vital for long-term learning and knowledge development (Immordino-Yang & Knecht, 2020). Therefore, narrative is a generative tool for understanding human experience and developing new knowledge, and for these same purposes, it's an equally powerful research methodology that draws on people's physiological affinity for stories.

Narrative methodologies focus on how human beings live their lives through story and construct their lived experiences through the telling and retelling of critical events (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Narrative inquiry has broad, interdisciplinary origins across fields such as education, literature, psychology, healthcare, and history (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and may draw upon the following method(s): narrating or storytelling as a mode of understanding and generating data; narratives or the textual narrative data that are examined; and/or narrative analysis that focuses on setting (place and time), people, and actions or events (Riessman, 2008).

Although stories themselves date back to the beginnings of oral literacy, the narrative turn in social science research occurred as a response to an emphasis in the early 1900s on scientific generalizations derived from quantifiable data (Lagemann, 1996). Following the early and widespread uptake of behaviorist learning theories such as Thorndike's operant conditioning, there have been frequent and aggressive returns to measuring teaching and learning throughout the history of education, as exemplified by the current "science of reading" era inundating the US (Goodwin & Jiménez, 2020).

In the 1980s, Bruner's (1986) articulation of narrative as an epistemological stance and the development of narrative analysis methods counteracted positivist and post-positivist researchers' insistence on "truth and proof" (p. 12). Bruner (1986) asserted that there were two primary modes of thought—narrative and argument—and theorized that they were very different "ways of ordering experience" and "constructing reality" (p. 11). Arguments move toward universal truth and proof statements, whereas narratives seek to situate the details of experience "in time and place" in a way that illustrates the "likely particular connections" between events (Bruner, 1986, p. 12–13). Polkinghorne (1988) added the distinction between two kinds of narrative inquiry products—descriptive narratives that detailed sequences of significant events in people's lives and explanatory narratives that highlighted causal connections between events. Lyotard (1984) described narrative's usefulness as a research tool and distinguished between meta-narratives (or grand narratives) that operate in generalizations and micro-narratives that are grounded in differences and diversity. These interdisciplinary works were influential in the development of narrative inquiry.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) built on this interdisciplinary scholarship and expanded it through their own decades of work with narrative inquiry and methodology in their landmark book, *Narrative Inquiry*. Drawing upon Dewey's (1934, 1938) work with experience, they aimed to develop a research methodology that would resist researchers' tendencies toward identifying "manageable," measurable, and "miniscule realities" by highlighting people's lived experiences and how they are composed in narrative events (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxii). Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) book, along with scholars such as Riessman (2008) and Schaafsma and Vinz (2011), provide a multifaceted methodology of narrative inquiry that returns the researcher's gaze to people's experiences. The goal of narrative inquiry is understanding *how* those experiences happen, *how* growth and change take place, and *how* temporality and context influence experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Several theoretical concepts help researchers attend to questions of how experiences take place and guide data collection and analysis in narrative inquiries. The concept of *story*—a temporally and spatially sequenced telling of events that includes a problem, conflict, or disruptor that leads to a change—is central to understanding an experience, although there is variation among scholars (and across cultures) about the essential structural components of a story (Riessman, 2008). Related to temporality and the sequencing of events, *continuity* is another important narrative inquiry concept; continuity refers to how experiences are linked and the ways past and future experiences are connected as part of a narrative unity (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Regarding narrative plot structures, nuclear *episodes* of "specific autobiographical events which have been . . .

reinterpreted over time to assume a privileged status in the story,” and *thematic lines* of “recurrent content clusters in stories” provide additional analytic concepts (Plummer, 2007, pp. 399–400). Within a narrative perspective, then, life stories include a point of view or lens that necessarily shape the tone of the episodes and thus construct its meaning and significance. These and other narrative elements such as *social interaction* and *situation* (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011) are employed by educational researchers to create complex, contextualized narratives of teaching and learning that (re)present accounts in a way that the initial narrator, the researcher-narrator, and the reader “can imagine or ‘feel’ as right” (Bruner, 1986, p. 52).

Beyond the goal of understanding how experiences take place, “narratives do political work” (Riessman, 2008, p. 8). For individuals, narratives may provide connection, persuade, argue, or entertain, among other purposes, but for groups, narratives can serve as a means of advocacy and activism (The Center for Story-based Strategy, n.d.). Riessman (2008) states, “Stories can mobilize others into action for progressive social change” (p. 9), and this mobilization is enacted in present-day activist organizations such as The Center for Story-based Strategy. The political affordances of narrative can also be seen in related methodologies such as oral history and ethnographic case study. For example, Dyke et al.’s (2022) oral history of the 2018 teacher strikes in Oklahoma and Heath’s (1983) landmark ethnographic case study of socio-cultural literacy development do political work to expose oppressive social systems and equity issues.

While narrative, oral history, and ethnographic methodologies use similar narrative methods, they also differ in important ways. Although oral histories capture individual people’s lived experiences through story, the narratives are typically presented in the participant’s original words, without interpretation, revision, or reconstruction by the researcher and/or considered raw data for further study (Ritchie, 2015). On the other hand, although the data of ethnographic case studies are often storied to varying degrees, they are not necessarily presented in narrative form and typically do not systematically employ narrative analysis in the ways that a study using narrative inquiry as a methodology would.

As mentioned, narrative inquiry studies include a variety of data collection, analysis, and representation methods that draw upon narrative theory and narrative elements to understand human experience through and with story. Narrative can serve simultaneously—or separately—in the following roles: the methodology, informed by an epistemological and theoretical perspective and the researcher’s questions; a data collection method to gather stories through narrative interview protocols or written accounts; a data analysis method using some of the narrative elements and concepts discussed above to interpret the data; and/or a data representation method that might convey storied themes of

experiences, significant narrative elements of the experiences, or full or partial stories as findings. There are many possible permutations of these methods with any given application.

Scholars from many disciplines contributed to the development and acceptance of narrative inquiry methodologies that include diverse approaches to storying people's lived experiences holistically, structurally, episodically, or thematically (Riessman, 2008). Composite narratives grew out of this complex and interdisciplinary history of narrative inquiry.

COMPOSITE NARRATIVE METHODS: ORIGINS AND AFFORDANCES

The composite narrative is a method of data representation that involves synthesizing multiple stories into one narrative to convey both the patterns of experience across individuals as well as the particularities of those experiences (Willis, 2019). There are many approaches to narrative analysis and data representation (Riessman, 2008), including the layering of narratives with methods such as *tandem tellings* in which two or three people story the same experience from different perspectives, demonstrating that one narrator's account is not more or less true than another's (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011). Rather than focusing on one participant's story, as is often seen in traditional narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), or chaining individual stories or cameos together in a manner common to oral history analysis (e.g., Brandt, 2001), composite narratives provide a way to synthesize multiple stories or interviews into one narrative that represents patterns of shared experience. The researcher attends to the patterns so that each participant's story resonates in the composite synthesis.

Composite narratives represent specific aspects of the research findings (they are not all-encompassing) in an analytic-interpretive act that moves beyond a simple retelling:

It is interpretation by the researcher in several important ways: through her knowledge of the literature regarding the phenomenon under enquiry, through listening and hearing the stories told by the informants, and through her own reflexivity during the process. (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 2)

This interpretive work is supported by the researcher's experience with the content and context of the study; therefore, insider perspectives are viewed as an asset, not a hindrance (Willis, 2019). The end product, the composite narrative, presents empirical, interpretive findings that maintain a narrative structure and sense of a narrative whole.

THE EVOLUTION OF COMPOSITE NARRATIVES

Composite narratives, as a research method, developed recently, with most publications occurring within the last quarter-century (Johnston et al., 2021). Much of the early composite narrative antecedents came from feminist post-structural scholarship in social sciences (Brook, 2004). For example, Haug (1987), an early pioneer of composite narratives in the form of *collective memory work*, helped participants and researchers fill memory gaps as they recalled their lived experiences as women. Haug's (2000) approach differs from other composite narrative methods because it involves a group of participants collectively revising one member's personal account or scene from a memory into a complete narrative that includes a co-constructed theme and interpretive elements. Building on Haug's work, Davies et al. (1997) and Davies and Gannon (2006) employed a form of collaborative dialogue and writing they called *collective biography*. Used as a data generation/collection approach rather than a data representation method, collective biographies involve memory work and a recursive composing process of individual storytelling with group feedback to elicit details, followed by writing, sharing, and revising the personal narrative. These collaboratively developed but individually written biographies are then studied as data for the focal topic.

The *essence statement* in phenomenological research (e.g., Moustakas, 1994) can be considered another antecedent genre to composite narratives. To present study findings, phenomenologists have historically composed essence statements, a synthesis of several participants' experiences distilled down to the experience's structurally essential elements and textures. Todres and Galvin (2008) stated that, traditionally, phenomenological essence statements have a more summative nature "that can over-sterilize or even deaden the aliveness of the shown phenomena" (p. 569). Thus, they developed a more "embodied interpretation" method that evokes emotional connection and elicits "concrete, life-world descriptions of the experience" (p. 578). As with our own study detailed in the next chapter, Todres' (2007) goal was not to be exhaustive with a particular composite narrative but to tell a story that allows readers personal insight into a storied experience's themes.

To convey detailed experiences, composite narratives have been used in education (Miller et al., 2020), medicine (Creese et al., 2021), and social work (Hordyk et al., 2014). Lambert (2003) employed composite narratives to describe four kinds of principals that correspond with her grounded theory model of school leadership: each composite narrated one quadrant of her leadership model. In Lambert's findings, composite narratives provided anonymity for the schools and principals exemplifying low leadership capacity, but they also

showed the patterns of behavior, characterization, and context across cases. Johnston et al. (2021) also used composites with grounded theory and found they can represent “multiple facets of theory construction through a singular narrative point-of-view” with potentially higher transferability due to their relational and memorable qualities (p. 1). These researchers demonstrate how composites can “reflect the complex theoretical categories, properties, and dimensions of a grounded theory,” and posit their usefulness in a range of methodologies (Johnston et al., 2021, p. 3). Because of the interdisciplinary origins and affordances of composite narratives, they are well suited to several research methodologies and problems.

AFFORDANCES OF COMPOSITE NARRATIVES

A main advantage of composite narratives is their ability to forward participants’ voices through incorporation of their own language while masking identities in sensitive situations. For example, Willis (2019) studied 14 United Kingdom politicians’ decision making. She used composites to provide anonymity while conveying how the politicians, as a group, navigated their complex work contexts. Anonymity was key in the politicians’ abilities to share their experiences openly.

A second affordance of composites is that experimentation with form is encouraged, which allows for countless ways to represent multiple voices (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Researchers can incorporate direct quotes or text from participants in narratives from any literary point of view. Researchers can create multiple, layered narratives for one person’s composite like Richmond et al. (2011): they created three narratives for each preservice teacher participant, narrating their identities as educators through “stories they told about themselves to others and to themselves in first-person narratives, stories others told about them to them in second-person narratives, and stories others told about them to others in third-person narratives” (p. 1894). Flexibility of form enables the researcher to present findings in ways that align with the research purpose, question, and theoretical perspective.

Third, composites provide an avenue for pushing back against Western and “scientific” hegemony in research through narrative inquiry methods (Tierney, 2018). Supporting a variety of data representation structures that are responsive to both participants and diverse research frameworks is one way composites counter a narrowed research paradigm: the length and structure of the composite can range from a brief “cameo” (McAlpine et al., 2014) up to full chapter-length composites (Lambert, 2003). Privileging participants’ voices in research products is another counter-hegemonic affordance. Researchers may also integrate

their own stories into those of their participants to create a co-storied, polyvocal composite, such as Vintz (1996) does in her research of teachers' early career experiences. Forwarding participants' own voices, engaging them as co-researchers, prioritizing their own storied interpretations of their experiences, and publishing scholarship that challenges the measurement culture with humanizing and contextualized data are critical affordances of narrative inquiry.

A fourth benefit of composites is that they represent patterns across experiences without reducing data to categories. Composites allow the reader to retain the sense of the big idea or theme while hearing multiple people's stories. Johnston et al. (2021) argue this affordance supports readers' understanding of the experience and enables findings to transfer from research to real life. Through the process of coming together and compiling, the composite narrative can resonate with all participants (Brook, 2004).

A fifth affordance of composite narratives is the researcher's ability to synthesize data across large participant samples into relatively brief representations. For example, Bosanquet et al. (2017) created five composites to represent the various early-career academics' experiences across 522 participants. Their brief, composite narratives layer participants' voices via direct quotes along with researcher-created portions to characterize the trajectories they observed. Altogether, these affordances make composites a flexible method for presenting qualitative, narrative findings that synthesize multiple participant voices and shared experiences, sometimes across large data sets, with anonymity and detail.

AFFORDANCES OF COMPOSITE NARRATIVES FOR LIFESPAN WRITING RESEARCH

Although the field of lifespan writing research, like composite narratives, is early in its development, and its repertoire of characteristics, methodologies, and methods is yet to be compiled (Bazerman, 2020), its main defining feature is its longitudinal examination of writing development and writing lives (Dippre & Phillips, 2020). We argue that composite narratives allow researchers to harness agentive representations across many participants and/or across a lifespan study. "Narratives are inherently and explicitly agentive, demonstrating individuals' hopes and intentions as they attempt to navigate their present and future" (McAlpine et al., 2014, p. 955).

Through our experience as researchers, we propose that these two relatively young approaches, composites and lifespan writing research, can be productively paired for research focused on (a) expansive data collected during lifespan writing research, (b) developmental trends of writers and writing teachers, and (c) stories that capture the intricate tapestries of living as writers across contexts.

Understanding lifespan writing development is imperative for writers and teachers of writing because the complex journey of writing evolves across writers' learning trajectories and experiences. As teachers of writing develop their pedagogical understanding of how to write and how to teach writing, their insight directly impacts the quality of instruction from which writers develop. Because writers' experiences and trajectories vary, align, and intersect, composites provide many affordances for lifespan writing research.

First, researchers need methods for analyzing and presenting the vast data required for effective longitudinal research. Illustrating her findings based on the reading and writing life histories of 80 Americans born across a hundred-year timespan, Brandt (2001) presents brief, partial biographies and character sketches, organized thematically. Without these narratives, her findings risk being fragmented and decontextualized. While Brandt composed several short biographies to illustrate common themes of experience, composites synthesize by integrating common experiences into one or more composites that capture themes and convey a narrative arc. With or without direct quotes from participants, composite narratives offer an approach for representing the writing or literacy lifespan data of multiple people across a long timeframe.

Second, because variability exists across writers' and writing teachers' experiences, particularly in large studies, composites are useful in storying the patterns. Researchers investigating the developmental trends of writers and their teachers must be able to present their findings in a way that helps stakeholders understand "the varied pathways to competence and expertise in writing" (Bazerman, 2018, p. 327). Such knowledge "can help educators provide support to writers at every stage from early childhood through adulthood, and further it can help people self-monitor and guide their own development" (Bazerman, 2018, p. 327). Developmental trends are complex and dependent upon individuals' opportunities to learn and to transfer their understanding from past to present to future contexts (Brandt, 2001) and they are also influenced by learning opportunities in and outside of the classroom. As Bazerman et al. (2018) highlight, lifespan writing research is riddled with challenges; however, those challenges can be overcome through intentional, longitudinal research designed to understand how writing teachers' development intersects with their students' writing development. Composite narratives provide a valuable method for synthesizing shared experiences and highlighting developmental trends.

Third, composite narratives make findings accessible to a wider readership (Wertz et al., 2011). Stories can be transferred more easily into existing conceptions and situations of practice (Willis, 2019). In the same way that individuals connect with one another's stories, participants' experiences and feelings represented in composite narratives are relatable for other individuals. Thus, each

composite is at once singular and multi-voiced. In lifespan research, composite narratives offer relevant scenes with explanation, reflection, and a re-seeing of the past along with a reimagining of the future, which is unique to the temporal and spatial nature of narrative.

CREATING COMPOSITE NARRATIVES

Composite narratives are a relatively modern analysis method. The works of Wertz et al. (2011), Willis (2019), and Johnston et al. (2021) are foundational in articulating procedures for composing composites. Composite narratives may be written from first-, second-, or third-person perspectives. Wertz et al. (2011) describe their approach to writing first person composites, stipulating that the composite be written with the pronoun “I” to create an “increased sense of contact” (p. 3). This approach conveys the composite person or storyteller as “someone who typifies the general experience within a living and situated context” (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 3). Other researchers prefer to create third-person narratives using “he/him” or “she/her” pronouns (or non-binary pronouns, as appropriate). A third-person composite may include verbatim quotes from multiple participants who make up one composite, and specific details in the narrative are included because they exemplify patterns across participants (Willis, 2019).

A narrative study that employs composites might have a range of participants from as few as two to five who comprise one composite to as many as dozens represented in multiple composites. Participants are typically represented in one composite narrative, with participants grouped by shared experiences, attributes, critical events, narrative threads, or story themes related to the research question. Researchers assess the fit of each participant’s salient experiences with its group members’ experiences to solidify the final composite groupings. The final composite should have resonance for all participants represented in that composite group.

Compiling practices from resources listed later in this chapter and our own study, we provide the following additional procedures for composing composite narratives:

1. The research questions, focal findings, units of narrative analysis employed, and the narrative elements (e.g., story grammar, temporality, sociality, physicality, continuity, nuclear episodes, thematic lines) foregrounded in that analysis will determine the shape and content of the composite narrative (Brook, 2004)
2. The quotes used in the composite are data taken directly from the represented group’s participants. Even if written in third person, the composite text draws heavily from participants’ own words. Johnston et al. (2021)

recommend keeping an audit trail of the raw data excerpts used to develop the composite

3. Other details (e.g., setting, people, actions, events) are taken directly from one or more of the original data sources from the group's participants
4. Researchers must not impose judgment or assume motivations; thus, any statements to these effects must come directly from the group's data (Willis, 2019). For example, in our composites included in the next chapter, the feelings Sam expressed came from one of the "Sam" participant's raw data: "Sam often pushes back when things do not go the way he thinks they should go. Sometimes this is well received, other times it is not."
5. The composite's length will depend on the story itself and on the constraints of the publication venue. Willis' (2019) composite narratives were 500–600 words. Our final composites are 800–900 words. In book-length publications, one composite may be a chapter
6. Composites offer a unique opportunity for member checking. Researchers can share the composites with participants, gather their feedback via focus group discussions or written response, and revise the composites to reflect any missing or misinterpreted nuances of their experiences

These steps help researchers create composite narratives clearly grounded in the data and participants' own storying of their experiences while also representing the shared experiences through narrative arcs that may resonate with or reflect readers' experiences. Even with clear guidelines for compiling composites, researchers may experience challenges in composing them and may encounter limitations of the method.

LIMITATIONS OF COMPOSITE NARRATIVES

One limitation of a composite narrative is reliance on researchers to create the composites (Willis, 2019). Because we, as researchers and narrative composers, must select what to include in each narrative, we also inevitably decide what to exclude (Schaafsma, 1993) and important details in individual stories are left out in the process of constructing composites. The readability, resonance, and representation afforded by composites come at the expense of some specific details of each person's story. This limitation speaks to the importance of collaborative data analysis and narrative composing, in addition to member checking.

A second limitation of composites is the problem of what to do with a single outlier experience or perhaps two experiences that are divergent from others. If one participant's story is quite different from the others and does not fit into any of the other composite groups' experiences, a researcher will have to decide

what to do with the divergent story. It might be omitted from the findings or addressed in a discussion or limitation section.

Another limitation might be “a danger of privileging narrative, relying too much on accounts provided by individuals, and not seeing the wider context or structure” (Willis, 2019, p. 478), but this concern for understanding the wider context may also be an epistemological question of what counts as knowledge and knowing. In our study, we could have taken an ethnographic approach, observing each teacher’s place and practice to situate their story, but this would risk negating the participants’ lived and told story. We relied on the teachers’ reflections on and storying of the critical events, people, and places in their development as writing teachers, and we were clear about how these stories were generated and how the composites were constructed. But we were only able to provide context and representation of structures at work insofar as the teachers narrated those contexts or structures themselves, which may result in limited contextualization. Ultimately, a researcher chooses a methodology and data representation methods based on the research purpose and questions as well as the kinds of knowledge valued in each particular inquiry.

GETTING STARTED WITH COMPOSITE NARRATIVES

Throughout our journey to better understand narrative inquiry and composite narratives, we found the following resources useful: AERA’s Narrative Research Special Interest Group; *Narrative Inquiry* (Clandinin & Caine, 2013); “Constructing Composite Narratives” (Johnston et al., 2021); and “The Use of Composite Narratives to Present Interview Findings” (Willis, 2019). Additional resources can be found in the reference list.

Researchers who are ready to try out composite narratives for the first time might consider conducting a self-study (Myers et al., 2022) or collaborative autoethnography (Hernandez et al., 2017) with a group of colleagues. The participant-researchers could interview one another and/or write personal narratives about the experience under investigation, analyze the data for narrative elements, and collaboratively construct one composite narrative to represent thematic lines and critical elements of the group’s experiences. We found that it was easier to shape a composite narrative that represents one’s own experiences when it was developed in collaboration with other researchers.

We conclude that composite narratives can assist scholars in understanding of how writers and writing teachers develop throughout the lifespan and understanding the experiential trajectories that impact writing development. This social science method enables scholars to continue the narrative turn toward relational, humanizing, and contextualized forms of research.

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