

Interdisciplinarity and Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract: This article describes the construct of interdisciplinarity as both a theory and a method and explores narrative inquiry as an interdisciplinary research methodology. The integrative and broad field of narrative research which can encompass distinct disciplines such sociology, narrative studies and cognitive psychology is then applied to an identified void in the research literature regarding how the reading could support resilience in children and adults.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that adult human beings are very much influenced by what they read as children. What causes this transformation and what are its effects? Using the interdisciplinary nature of narrative research, a pathway for further study employing empirical data collection to answer to help answer research questions such as “Is there a link between reading narratives and resilience?” is then proposed.

Keywords: interdisciplinarity; narrative; narrative inquiry; resilience; reading

Résumé : Cet article décrit les fondements de l’interdisciplinarité à la fois comme une théorie et comme une méthode et explore l’enquête narrative comme une méthodologie de recherche interdisciplinaire. Le caractère intégratif et vaste du domaine de la recherche narrative, qui peut englober des disciplines aussi distinctes que la sociologie, les études narratives et la psychologie cognitive, est donc appliqué à un vide identifié dans la recension des écrits en ce qui a trait à la façon dont la lecture pourrait soutenir la résilience chez les enfants et les adultes.

Les preuves anecdotiques suggèrent que les êtres humains adultes sont très influencés par les lectures qu’ils ont effectuées quand ils étaient enfants. Quelles sont les causes de cette transformation et quels en sont les effets? Dans le cadre de l’utilisation de la nature interdisciplinaire de la recherche narrative, et pour une étude plus approfondie en utilisant la collecte de données empiriques, une démarche est proposée afin de répondre aux questions de recherche telles que « Y a-t-il un lien entre les récits de lecture et la résilience? »

Mots-clés : interdisciplinarité; narration; recherche narrative; résilience; lecture

This paper discusses interdisciplinarity as both a theory and a process and will examine the theory of interdisciplinarity in contrast to other forms of disciplinarity such as monodisciplinarity, multidisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity. It will then discuss narrative inquiry as an example of an interdisciplinary research methodology for a study involving the effect of narratives on children. More specifically, to discover how reading textual narratives supports the development of resilience strategies in children.

Theory of Interdisciplinarity

Both interdisciplinary and monodisciplinary research rely on research created and validated within individual disciplines. However, while monodisciplinary research is validated within the discipline and by the disciplinarians, themselves, in a perpetually self-replicating and self-sustaining manner and remains housed within the discipline (Mackey, 2001, p. 63), interdisciplinarity takes the research created within two or more disciplines and integrates their differing perspectives in such a manner as to create new knowledge.

Moran (2001) summarizes his definition of interdisciplinarity with the following statement, “I take interdisciplinarity to mean any form of dialogue or interaction between two or more disciplines: the level, type, purpose and effect of this interaction remain to be examined”. (p. 16) By contrast, Judith Thompson Klein (1990) explains the concept of interdisciplinarity in two parts, first she explains that “[i]nterdisciplinarity has been described as both nostalgia for lost wholeness and a new stage in the evolution of science. Some people associate interdisciplinarity with the historical quest for unified knowledge, others with developments at the ‘frontiers’ of knowledge”. (p. 12) She then completes her definition by describing the uses of interdisciplinarity: “to answer complex questions, to address broad issues, to explore disciplinary and professional relations; to solve

problems that are beyond the scope of any one discipline; to achieve unity of knowledge, whether on a limited or grand scale”. (p. 11)

While the two definitions describe the same phenomena, the different perspectives can be attributed to the differing lenses with which interdisciplinarity is being deconstructed and then reconstructed by the authors. While Moran is looking at interdisciplinarity in practical terms, which is action oriented, Klein describes interdisciplinarity with the more intangible terms of feelings and emotions.

Examining the definitions more closely, both authors identify action as a binding process in interdisciplinarity. Moran’s definition uses the words “dialogue” and “interaction”, implying an interchange of knowledge between at least two agents. These agents would represent separate disciplines, in thought and/or action, and ideally both convey and receive knowledge. Klein’s use of the word “quest” and “development” mirrors the idea of some kind of action taking place during the process of interdisciplinarity, but she takes this idea further by implying that not only is there a progression, but also a sought-after resolution to the dialogue.

Ultimately, the value of interdisciplinarity rests in the end-result of its manifold interactions, which should ideally be the creation and dispersion of new knowledge. This idea of knowledge and its creation from previously existing knowledge emerges as a pivotal undercurrent in both definitions, stated implicitly by Moran in his discussions and explicitly by Klein in her definition, undoubtedly creating the strongest unifying element between these two definitions. Klein (1990) further defines interdisciplinarity as “a process for achieving an integrative synthesis, a process that usually begins with a problem, question, topic or issue” (p. 188). More importantly, she states in the final words of her book *Interdisciplinarity: History, Theory & Practice* that “[i]nterdisciplinarity is a means to solving problems and answering questions that cannot be satisfactorily addressed using single methods

or approaches” (p. 196), which is an overt reference to methods and approaches used by single disciplines. Interdisciplinarity is therefore necessary to answer questions or problems, which reach beyond the boundaries of a single discipline. Bailis (2001) echoes the problem-solving potential of interdisciplinarity by stating,

Interdisciplinary theories express the understanding of some phenomenon, problem, topic, theme, etc. that has been reached by bringing to bear upon it ideas and information that have been separately and differently developed in specialized disciplines. (p. 40)

Ultimately, all researchers agree that there is no definition that is universal and all-encompassing of interdisciplinarity as the phenomenon is problem-focused, and problems can be as complex as the solutions needed, which is why diverse disciplinary viewpoints and methodologies may be needed. Thus, interdisciplinarity can define both a methodology for conducting research, and the final product of newly created knowledge.

Reading the various theories surrounding the term interdisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity can be viewed as a methodology to attempt to define the creation and maintenance of an open network (whether virtual or physical) initiated by the discovery or emergence of a problem becoming the focal point of research. In this network, the various disciplines would be hubs of specialized disciplinary knowledge, which the interdisciplinary researcher gathers and takes with him/her on the path to synthesis. In the process of gathering and synthesizing knowledge from research areas in various disciplines, these knowledges interact and create new knowledge via synthesis. The synthesis, pivotal to the creation of new interdisciplinary knowledge, can be likened to an integration of previous validated disciplinary research highlighting previous research findings anew and producing new ways of looking at or interpreting or validating knowledge. This in turn creates interdisciplinary mini-hubs within the broader disciplinary network. One defining feature for such mini-hubs would be that while the disciplinary

viewpoints and methodologies are still identifiable as starting points, the knowledge, which is produced, would be interdisciplinary in nature since it has been reworked through the addition of differing perspectives or lenses into something new.

Looking at the process of synthesis achieved via interdisciplinarity, the process is similar to an additive process whereby the overall usefulness and applicability of the final product is continuously modified, however minutely, by the addition of various ingredients, in this case, differing disciplinary viewpoints and methodologies. Klein (2005) describes such a process of synthesis achieved in combining disciplinary depth and interdisciplinary breadth as follows,

Interdisciplinarity...entails conscious triangulation of depth, breadth, and synthesis. Disciplinarity is usually signified as depth, lying along a vertical axis, and interdisciplinarity as breadth, lying along a horizontal axis. The depth/breadth dichotomy, however, fails to acknowledge a third element – the synthesis that occurs in putting together different parts. Breadth opens us multiple perspectives. Depth ensures competence in pertinent disciplinary, professional, and interdisciplinary approaches. Synthesis moves across the vertical and horizontal planes, patterning and testing the relatedness of materials, ideas, and methods to a given task. (pp. 66-67)

This type of synthesis sets interdisciplinarity apart from both multidisciplinary and transdisciplinarity as the perceived outlines of disciplines (ascertained via discipline specific theories and methodologies) are muted and even erased in interdisciplinarity during the integrative process of synthesis while remaining intact in multidisciplinary, which is deemed to be additive instead of integrative. Transdisciplinarity, by contrast, is defined as the search for knowledge common to a set of disciplines (Shailer, 2005, p. 2), which may also not touch upon the integrative process necessary for interdisciplinarity to occur. Similarly, both interdisciplinary and monodisciplinary research rely on research created and validated within individual disciplines. However, while monodisciplinary research is validated within the discipline

and by the disciplinarians, themselves, in a perpetually self-replicating and self-sustaining manner and remains housed within the discipline (Mackey, 2001, p. 63), interdisciplinarity takes the research created within two or more disciplines and integrates their differing perspectives in such a manner as to create new knowledge.

Interdisciplinarity Research

There is a distinct difference between the definition and theory of interdisciplinarity and the process for doing interdisciplinarity research. The literature does not contain definitive and universally applicable instructions on how to do interdisciplinary research, although the steps outlined by both Klein (1990), Newell (2001) and Szostak (2002) provide a solid theoretical starting point. In particular, how synthesis or integration is achieved via interdisciplinary research has not been very well described in the literature (Newell, 1998, p. 117), although researchers to agree on the fact that they, “...do not, in fact, integrate across disciplines per se, but across phenomena, theories, methods, and perspectives” (Szostak, 2002, p. 119). Consequently, researchers advocate focussing proposed interdisciplinary research on a specific problem or subject area, emphasizing the uniqueness and individuality of what is being researched, which in turn validates the application and use of specific phenomena, theories, methods and perspectives as necessary.

These theoretical musings are tempered by the understanding that since multi-faceted and complex human beings initiate interdisciplinary discussions, it is of utmost importance that the focus of the discussion remains on a specific problem or subject area, so that personal biases can be unpacked and muted. This might not always be possible, depending on the problem studied and what kind of emotional response the researcher has towards the subject area under discussion. In these instances, qualitative or interpretive research methodologies, such as ethnography, and narrative inquiry, may work best as the

unpacking of personal biases and conscious bracketing of the researcher within the research process are important components of conducting qualitative research. As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) explain, “No single method can grasp all the subtle variations in ongoing human experience. Consequently, qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected interpretive methods, always seeking better ways to make more understandable the worlds of experience they have studied” (p. 21).

Given all these considerations, it can be stated that interdisciplinarity is not a static phenomenon; instead it is complex and multi-layered, with knowledge continually interacting/reacting with itself and the act of synthesis ultimately residing within the researcher.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative research has been conducted since the beginnings of research in the academy as it involves learning about the human condition from those living it every day. By arbitrarily classifying some research theories and methods as more scientific and thus valid over others this approach creates an artificial hierarchical structure within the academy, which removes it from the life of the everyday man and woman. Runyan (1984) describes how using narrative as method helps gather insight into the human being experience by focusing on their surroundings,

In attending to the particularities of thought, conversation, actions, subjective meanings, and social contexts, narrative qualifies as an idiographic method *par excellence*. The utility of the narrative method for representing individuals in their environments is reflected in its extensive use in biography, psychobiography, and clinical case studies. (p. 182)

It is Overcash, (2003), who further captures the broad nature of narrative method and its inherent possibilities for research into the human condition by stating,

The open-endedness of narrative research is the strength of the method ... Narrative method lends itself to a global view of the human experience that may not only answer a research question, but reveal additional aspects of life not identified as the primary focus of the project. (p. 182)

Overcash (2003) further emphasizes a duality of tasks contained within narrative inquiry when he explains that

...narrative research is not only the stories and accounts contributed by the participant; it is the evaluating and analyzing of those accounts. Systematically looking for themes or other details in the data defined by the researcher in the research methodology is one of the ways narrative research is different from journalism or creative writing. Narrative methods are a scientific tool to answer a research question capable of yielding data for analysis. Narrative is not simply storytelling it is a process like any other research methodology.” (p. 180)

What is striking in Overcash’s statement is the assertion that because of the researcher’s critical analysis of narratives, narrative research is a valid research method and as such can be set apart from simple storytelling. This elevates narrative research to the same level as a valid research method collecting and analyzing qualitative data alongside the more traditional empirical research methods relying on quantitative data collection and analysis. Trahar (2008) adds another dimension to the definition of narrative method when he explains that narrative as method “...is a form of qualitative research that involves the gathering of narratives – written, verbal, oral, and visual – focusing on the meanings that people ascribe to their experiences, seeking to provide ‘insight that (befits) the complexity of human lives.’” (p. 260). It is the recognition that the interpretive analysis of narratives contributes to the knowledge of the human condition, which ultimately offers validity to narrative research.

Narrative inquiry is widely recognized as being interdisciplinary in nature as evidenced by Clandinin, (2006) who recently stated that, “...narrative study is now cross-disciplinary, not fitting within the boundaries of any single scholarly field.” (p. 45), sharing a view that

she had already held much earlier as evidenced by the following summary,

Narrative is a way of characterizing the phenomena of human experience and its study, which is appropriate to many social science fields. The entire field of study ... cuts across such areas as literary theory, history, anthropology, drama, art, film, theology, philosophy, psychology, linguistics, education, and even aspects of evolutionary biological science. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2)

Because narrative research touches upon so many disciplines, it is hard to envisage it as a distinct mode of inquiry, as its acknowledged multifacetedness (Schiff, 2006, p. 20), is used in and by various disciplines to enrich either their data collection methods or analysis. Conversely, Chase (2005) observes that “[a]lthough narrative inquiry as a whole is interdisciplinary, specific approaches tend to be shaped by interests and assumptions embedded in researchers’ disciplines” (p. 658).

Schiff (2006) has observed that, “[b]ecause narrative methods are not statistical, they are deemed methodologically deficient and, therefore, outside of scientific psychology” (p. 22). He then goes on to argue that “narrative is scientific” (p. 22), and draws a parallel on how research, either narrative or mainstream, make observations which are both “...concerned with making theoretical assertions by paying close attention to what people actually say and do” (p. 22). He concludes his comparison by realizing that “[a]fter making this observation, both narrative and mainstream researchers construct an argument about the nature of the phenomenon under consideration” (p. 22). This side-by-side comparison of the research process demonstrates that the actual steps undertaken in the research process are quite similar, so what brings about the notion that researchers performing narrative inquiry are less scientific than researchers conducting traditional social science or natural science research may be the fact that words are preferred over numbers.

Moran (2001) traces the relationship between sciences and the humanities in broad historical strokes in his book entitled *Interdisciplinarity*, starting with the ideas of philosophers and scientists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through to the age of modernism and beyond. He explains how scientists and philosophers separated the study of the human body. “The former were given the task of bringing under control the neutral ‘other’ of nature, which includes the human body; the latter were left with the apparently autonomous, human-made products of the mind and culture” (p. 173). This passage explains the arbitrary division of the sciences from the humanities made by the scientists and philosophers. This division is based not only on something that could be studied, but also on the scope of the subject matter to be studied. The human body is equated with ‘neutral’ otherness, implying that it can be studied objectively. It is separated from one’s sense of self, the human mind, which is regarded to be autonomous and thus would bring about subjective studies.

This particular passage is interesting on several levels as it provides a basis for how the relationship between the sciences and the humanities came into being and continued to be perpetuated. On the level of semantics, the sciences are given something to do, an action to complete, as they are expected to tame and bring into line the ‘other’ of the human body. By contrast, the humanities are presented as the receiver of the thoughts of the human mind and their resulting creations, and are expected to interact with these mostly metaphysical entities. This distinctly separate vocabulary for the sciences and the humanities can be carried over into the level of power dynamics. The sciences are given the power to subdue “neutral” nature, an expectation that gives the sciences a certain power, which it may not have had previously. The humanities are given the challenge to work with the autonomous mind and heart, albeit on the same level. This distinction between action and interaction is further embedded in the expectation of work to be performed in either the sciences or the humanities. The

sciences would act upon the human body while the humanities would act with the human mind. Combined with Moran's statement that, "[t]he traditional distinction between the humanities and the sciences rests on an assertion of the importance of empirical proof which was first made by philosophers of knowledge in the early seventeenth century" (p. 150), this line of thinking explains the increasing reliance on the collection of empirical data in the sciences. This reliance led to the "belief that the clearly defined methods and procedures of the sciences needed to be employed in the non-sciences, [which] was a powerful factor in the development of new social science and humanities disciplines such as politics, economics, sociology, English and the modern languages in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (p. 11).

Ironically, the methods employed by the sciences are products of the human mind, the study of which had been delegated to the humanities, (Moran, 2001, p. 173). Because the methods used by the sciences are "human-made products" (Moran, 2001, p. 173), an artificial cleaving of the sciences from the humanities, in practice, is therefore not possible. Instead, the sciences and the humanities are inextricably linked to each other since the product of the one set of disciplines comprising the humanities is used to achieve results in the other set of disciplines, the sciences. This inter-dependency also negates the constructed hierarchy between the sciences and the humanities which has evolved since then as evidenced by Moran (2001), who paraphrases Popper and Toulmin and their distinction "between 'hard' disciplines in the sciences and 'soft' disciplines in the humanities and social sciences" (p. 23). As an alternative to strict adherence to clear delineation between the sciences and the humanities, which can lead to incomplete results, it would be much more beneficial for both the sciences and the humanities to be allowed to exhibit each other's methodological traits in the pursuit of knowledge (Schiff, 2006). Ultimately, the

attempts to continuously slot the sciences and the humanities into a constructed power hierarchy are nonsensical since according to Moran (2001), the relationship between sciences and the humanities evolved from a common origin,

Up until the first few decades of the nineteenth century, the word 'science' tended to be used interchangeably with 'philosophy', to mean all forms of knowledge rather than particular branches of it. From the 1830s onwards, however, the term 'science' started to refer specifically to the natural sciences and to be distinguished clearly from philosophy in both academic and general usage. (p. 10)

Narrative Research into Reading and Resilience

Applying interdisciplinary research in the form of narrative inquiry to a specific research question, there is a recognized void in the research literature with regard to the effects of reading stories on human development, which can arguably only be answered by integrating the already existing knowledge from the disciplines of human development, psychology and narrative studies and other disciplines such as literary studies, and sociology/anthropology (Klein, 1996; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). More specifically, the fields of psychology and sociology discuss the concept of protective factors such as engagement with a nurturing family member, or community. However, these disciplines do not usually classify reading as a protective factor since reading is primarily considered an individualized activity, dependent primarily upon individual preferences. By contrast, in the field of education, engagement with narratives via reading is regarded as a vital activity for children to help them grow into contributing members of society, specifically in terms of encouraging literacy. Furthermore, pathways in human development are created which lead to certain behaviours and outcomes for children and the field of narrative studies details how individuals can be affected by what they read.

Only by combining and synthesizing the information surrounding “narrative” and “resilience” from differing disciplinary perspectives,

can a more detailed and complete picture of how reading narrative structures affects human development in general, and resilience in particular, in children can be constructed. More importantly, in viewing these disciplinary insights in relation to each other, the following chasm in the research literature can be perceived. On the one hand, there exists a plethora of secondary literature within the realm of education and reader-response theory claiming that specific books of children's literature could help to strengthen resilience in children because of either the story or the character(s) and their described actions. On the other hand, there is a dearth of support in the secondary literature in either education or the realm of human development of actual studies of children exposed to such structured reading and guided interpretation to see if it has indeed supported the creation of pathways to resilience. Resilience is based within each individual human being and such a great diversity of data exists from ongoing research, that it is difficult to identify a single process, which will ensure the same protective level of resilience in everyone, even though,

...much more has been learned about the timing of these factors and the different ways they may work in the lives of children of different ages, situations, and domains of function. The same factor, for example, may work in different ways for different ages of children or different aspects of competence. (Masten, 2009, p. 29).

More important is the recognition of the knowledge that,

...resilience does not require extraordinary resources in most cases,...[but rather t]he multiplicity of adaptive systems – which is likely the result of many thousands of years of biological and cultural evolution – accounts for the diversity across individuals and also explains the many different pathways to resilience.” (Masten, 2009, p. 30)

The key is to recognize and support these various adaptive systems of protective factors to enable growth and strengthening of resilience throughout human development.

Integrating the disciplinary insights discussed above, it can be concluded, theoretically, that examples of demonstrated and expected behaviours which are mediated via narrative can indeed help shape human development in general, and resilience, specifically, and the following theoretical developmental pathway can be constructed:

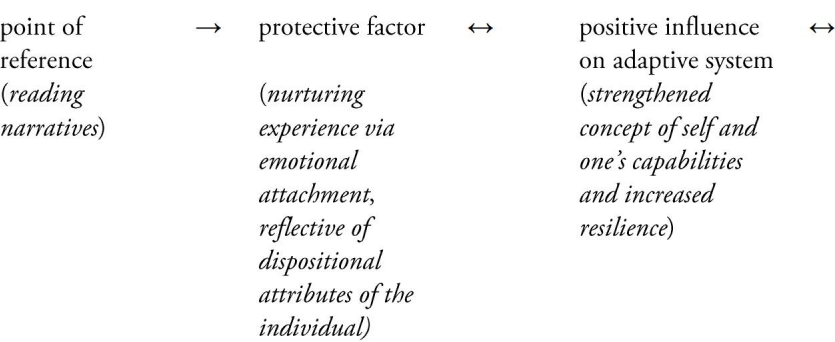


Figure 1.1 - Theoretical Developmental Pathway. This figure summarizes a hypothetical developmental pathway proposed by the author.

It is important to note that this pathway is neither a universal nor a one-way pathway. Instead, it relies upon the individual reader's personal points of reference, and how these can be seen to create or support existing protective factors. Ideally, this type of research would enable the structuring of resilience strategies, which would then be of potential use in childhood educational and therapeutic practices. It is important to note that this pathway is not "causal" as used in the scientific research community, aligning itself instead with the way "cause" is defined by Polkinghorne (1988),

In general usage ... "cause" means whatever produces an effect, result, or consequence, and it can include events, people's actions, or other conditions. Because narrative cause can relate to the antecedents of a peculiar sequence that may never be repeated, its meaning is different from that meaning of cause in formal science. (p. 173).

As the theoretical pathway described above is not based on any published empirical studies, the collection of data via narrative inquiry would

be the most fitting research methodology for this task. Overcash (2003) emphasizes a duality of tasks contained within narrative inquiry when he explains that

...narrative research is not only the stories and accounts contributed by the participant; it is the evaluating and analyzing of those accounts. Systematically looking for themes or other details in the data defined by the researcher in the research methodology is one of the ways narrative research is different from journalism or creative writing. Narrative methods are a scientific tool to answer a research question capable of yielding data for analysis. Narrative is not simply storytelling it is a process like any other research methodology.” (p. 180)

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The aim of narrative research is not necessarily to determine a ‘true’ picture of events, but rather to explore such things as how the individual has made sense of these events, their attitude toward them, what meanings the events hold for them, and how these feelings came to be. (Greenlagh and Wengrat, 2008, p. 244)

Furthermore, such an interdisciplinary narrative research framework is integrative because it combines research analysis methods from the fields of literary analysis, psychology, education and anthropology/ sociology and would fall within the category of endogenous interdisciplinarity as described by Klein and summarized by Shailer (2005) as "...concerned with the production of new knowledge." (p. 2).

Conclusion

This paper has defined interdisciplinarity as both a theory and a method and has used the example of narrative inquiry as both an interdisciplinary theory and method to research a perceived void in the research literature between the disciplinary findings of narrative studies and human development. This void has been recognized and commented upon by Nikolajeva (2010) in the statement,

While many existing studies have pinpointed the various reader categories' habits and preferences, few have endeavored to take a more challenging task of examining meaning-making. The evidence of young people having access to books and actually perusing them does not necessarily imply any deeper comprehension or even involvement, especially in classroom situations. On the other hand, the abundant studies of meaning and understanding seldom work consistently with fictional texts (cf. Bruner, 1986). Here, vast possibilities for research open, not least with focus on different genres and text types, such as multimodal and hypermedial narratives. (pp. 157-158)

This perceived void can only be filled by integrating already existing knowledge from these disciplines and with this proposed integration, such research to fall within the category of endogenous interdisciplinarity as described by Klein and summarized by Shailer (2005) as "...concerned with the production of new knowledge." (p. 2). My proposed research stems from a fascination with how an everyday activity affects human development. Therefore, Moran's (2001) words claiming that

[t]he study of everyday life is thus interdisciplinary not simply because it encompasses material overlooked by the existing disciplines, but because it

forms a kind of connecting glue which shows how these established systems of thought are ultimately related to each other,... (p. 68)

provides a fitting explanation for the necessity and direction of my proposed research.

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