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When I first looked at Schaafsma and Vinz’s On Narrative Inquiry, I set it aside several times as oversimplified and under theorized, even a bit gawky in its insistent use of narrative frameworks to explicate the theory and practice of narrative research. Metaphor gets awkwardly out of hand in an early chapter, for example, when Burkean parlor shape-shifts into a fishing boat large enough to hold a crew of orators angrily contesting the definition of narrative (19-22). Yet readers who persevere are rewarded, because the authors eventually accomplish the important task of illuminating their central question: “What is the research in narrative?” (3).

At heart, the book is a practical how-to guide encouraging an option-based form of narrative inquiry. The authors wrote five of the nine chapters, and in these, move through issues roughly in the order that they might be expected to arise in a flexible inquiry process. The early chapters provide a literature review of narrative inquiry in education research, while later chapters take up issues such as how to identify story strands, how to acknowledge and manage researcher subjectivity, and how to deliberate amongst the options for crafting stories.

The book begins by offering a brief history of contemporary uses of the term “narrative,” locating it in Russian formalism, modernist structuralism, and then postmodernism to indicate how it has changed meaning over the past century. While the authors allude to the expansiveness of the term, they never quite capture its reach like David Herman does in a recent book, when he characterizes it “as a cognitive structure or way of making sense ... as a type of text ... and as a resource for communicative interaction” (7). Of course, Schaafsma and Vinz have a particular interest in narrative inquiry as applied to education research in language and literacy, but even with the focus thus refined they contend there is still no consensus. To bring provisional clarity, they propose a narrative inquiry that typically makes these four moves:

1. Makes visible the puzzles of mind—framings, evidences, stances, theories, and questions in the researcher’s composing of the text.
2. Challenges its own questions, answers, possibilities and theories.
3. Grapples with issues of responsibility, power, relations, and ethics as it evidences the importance of learning with others.
4. Works to redefine the products or outcomes of research. (8)
While they discuss these moves throughout the nine chapters, they feature centrally in the telling of chapter 5. In this chapter, the story builds around the self-reflective practices of Rashid, a young teacher in the Bronx who questions why his high school students remain disconnected from poetry discussions. He is participating as one of several teachers in Paul’s doctoral study aimed at composing “a tapestry of English teachers’ stories about how they enact their beliefs about literacy curriculum and instructional practices” (70). Yet rather than helping to weave this pretty pattern, Rashid’s reflections not only capture his unease as a teacher, but also provoke Paul to express similar insecurity and Ruth, in the role of dissertation advisor, to write a discouraging teaching evaluation. This story about teaching troubles has no easy or happy ending. Rashid also asks questions about the process of narrative inquiry, by which he interrogates his practice. He records both a dawning recognition that his questions elude answers, and concerns about a research process that allows researchers to decide what to tell—“Will any story do? … Who controls the research agenda, questions, and the stories that get told?” (68).

At this stage in chapter 5, Schaafsma and Vinz propose three lenses to help researchers examine decisions about what gets told: salience (what stands out and stays with you?), incompleteness (where are the gaps?), and emphasis (are there patterns of repetition that suggest a focus?) (78-79). Looking through these lenses is not a procedure that eliminates subjectivity, but a way to make provisional decisions about focus and focalization. To make other moves toward compensating for subjectivity and interpretation, researchers can situate themselves in the story and ask direct questions about how their responses to the current situation may be filtered through prior experiences and views. They can include multiple angles of vision and relevant critical theory and work to draw readers in with meta-narrative explaining design choices. In sum, the authors recommend portraying research-in-process as open-ended and generative, never as proposing final answers (68, 79).

There is the practical question of how to apply this book to scholarship and teaching in the area of composition studies. In classes that call for and examine the personal essay, creative non-fiction, and even the methodology of narrative inquiry, it would be difficult to assign the book in its entirety as a course text because it focuses so squarely on educational questions. For my students, most of the discussion issues and examples of classroom pedagogy would not easily transfer to exploring questions about writing matters and social discourse.

Yet excerpts from the book could illuminate certain standard assignments. For example, following a model used in many first-year composition courses, I ask my students to write a personal narrative essay as a first assignment. In our post-expressivist classrooms, such an assignment requires students to move beyond simply recounting a memory, and instead to reflect on possible perspectives and meanings; as Candace Spigelman notes, “narr-
tive argument” needs to be “purposeful and intended to do more than express opinion or cathartically confess” (6). One of the ways to cultivate argument and establish purpose is to introduce an outside source or theory. To see how this can be done, most students need a model, and there is an excellent one at the end of chapter 5, in a student-written narrative that connects seeing a sign that says “Keep off the grass” with Bourdieu’s theory of *habitus*. The essay is short, well written and insightful. By reading it, students can see how experience and theory can interact to be mutually illuminating.

At a more advanced undergraduate level, I teach a course called “Narrative Thinking and Writing,” a unit of which is dedicated to studying oral history and telling others’ lives. To support this work, students could benefit from examining chapters 6, 7, and 8 as a package. Chapters 6 and 8 reproduce some of the dissertation work Randi Dickson did to narrate the lives of four outstanding teachers. In chapter 6, there are notes and journal entries that capture Dickson’s thorough observations of two of her subjects, Mona and Sue. Whereas students could consult methods books for more abstract discussions of observation and field note techniques, Dickson’s notes effectively show the process in progress.

Chapter 7, by authors Schaafsma and Vinz, provides a more step-by-step discussion of some of the techniques writers can use to form their narratives, alerting them to making choices about the author’s role in the story, about the author’s relation to the audience in terms of sharing writing decisions, about bringing subjects to life, and about the role of time. Following this, we return in chapter 8 to passages of Dickson’s narrative about Mona, which is interspersed with commentary about crafting choices. Dickson points out that it is difficult to showcase her subject’s teaching talents, for Mona is now long retired and struggles in interviews to remember the details of her teaching life, let alone recreate vibrant moments (121). Dickson describes the choices she made to attempt to overcome these perspectival limits, yet avoids false optimism by acknowledging at chapter end that the narrative text will not be able to capture the full richness of the subject (122).

As a researcher who has puzzled questions about the ethos of personal voice writing and the value of narrative as evidence, I was impressed by the tenacity with which the authors of the book pressed the question, “what can be learned from narrating or reading [stories]?” (3). Like Dewey who inspires this work, the authors believe that the journey is as valuable as the destination—that rather than proving a point, they are learning as they go.

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**Works Cited**
