An Overview of Narrative Research Methodology with Underprivileged Youth in an Out-of–School Visual Arts Programme in Singapore

Vincent Twardzik Ching, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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Abstract
This paper will review the methodological approach and reasons for its particular use and value in a qualitative research study consisting of three descriptive case studies that delve into the experiences of three at-risk and/or underprivileged young people, age fifteen to seventeen, who attend an out-of-school visual arts programme in Singapore. The original research titled, ‘Making, Feeling, Thinking: Narratives of three at-risk and underprivileged youth in an out-of-school visual arts programme’, asks, ‘What factors in this particular programme have contributed to the motivation for the long-term participation of these three young people?’ Through a series of interviews the study found the participants were motivated by an environment where the Arts are valued. The physical environment created by the staff and students was also found to be conducive to their ongoing attendance. At some points during their time in the interview process each of the participants described in positive ways how they felt about themselves and what they thought about the art experience. Conversely, certain factors have affected student motivation in negatively; in particular, their early experience at the institution differs significantly from the recent conditions at the site. This following overview will examine important aspects of the methodology of the research as it relates to the researchers intent and how it may have contributed to the successful uncovering of previously unknown perspectives of the participants about their experience at the site.

Keywords: At-Risk Youth, Visual Arts Programmes, Out-of-School Arts
Introduction

The site of this research, the Youth Arts School, was as far as I could ascertain at the time of the research, the only permanent informal arts school in Singapore devoted to delivering fully subsidized, long-term arts programmes for at-risk and underprivileged young people.

The uniqueness of this site lay in the consistent and long-term attendance of many students from childhood through to young adulthood, with many of the students returning as young adults to volunteer their time and work with YAS in various capacities.

The founders of the school hold the conviction that no child with interest and potential in the arts should be denied the opportunity to develop his or her talents due to a lack of financial resources. They believe in the benefits of arts training and aimed to level the playing field for young people from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. Since 2005 the Arts Fund that sustained and initiated YAS has reached out to more than 15,000 financially disadvantaged children and youth, between the ages of 6 to 19 years old.

The goal of the original research project was to gather data on the experiences of the participants in the hope that it may produce an understanding of factors in their out-of-school arts environment (within the context of Singapore) that encourage them to continue attending. A Narrative research approach was used because this study’s foundation rests on the exploration of the stories of the three participants and their art-making experiences at the school. My personal goal was to foreground their voices about their experiences and not to assess the effectiveness or value of the programme in relation to learning or any form of Key Performance Indicator (KPI).

Having had a long-term Teacher/student relationship with the respondents, I had already built rapport which within the framework of narrative research would make it easier to re-establish a connection of trust. I had a basic understanding of their personal histories in the school and of the evolution of the conditions of the school itself. All of these established interconnections made it more likely that the participants would give authentic and detailed answers during interviews (Yin, 2013). The following pages will review the reasoning behind the choice of methodology, definition of a ‘case-study’ within the context of this research, the interview process and procedures, my background at the site, the background of the site, the recruitment processes, data collection and analysis procedures, emergent themes and conclusions on the importance of narrative research methodologies in relation to this and future research.

Methodology

This Qualitative research study consists of a series of narrative case studies from a single out-of-school charitable arts organization whose focus is providing access to high quality art experiences for at-risk and underprivileged youth in Singapore. The aim of the study was to record and analyze the experiences of three outstanding long-term visual arts participants at the Youth Arts School. The student’s feelings about their experiences at the school, what motivates them to continue and what they think
they may have gained from their experience were the locus of investigation. The founding Director of the school was also interviewed to gain an understanding of the original goals and background of the institution.

Case Study

Definition and Categories. A case study in this instance is defined as an in-depth exploration of a bounded system of activities, events and processes, and of individuals based on extensive data collection (Creswell, 2015) all having taken place within and around the YAS visual arts classroom. This study may be seen as three case studies bound in one. According to Stake (1995), as there is more than one individual included in this case study, it can be classified as a collective case study of a phenomenon, specific population or over-all condition. The aim was to gather data on the experiences of the participants in the hope that it may produce an understanding of factors in their out-of-school arts environment that encourage them to continue attending. In looking at their thoughts, feelings and beliefs about their experiences I hoped to stabilize conceptions about how the factors they mention may contribute to their success and satisfaction or conversely that lead to their non-participation and dissatisfaction. Some of the categories that were investigated include: teacher/student communication, the effectiveness of pedagogy, and perceived differences between past and present environmental factors. There were some significant perceived differences noted by the participants over time, they include: restriction versus freedom in access to materials and variety of materials, restriction versus freedom in relation to personal creative exploration and commission artworks for donors. For each student in this study the effect of these changes is perceived in a unique way, however, there is also consensus among them in many areas.

The Interview Process

Contextualization. As the field researcher I conducted the interviews. Since I had taught the respondents in the past as a visual arts trainer at YAS, I had a prior relationship and familiarity with them. I hoped this familiarity would help them feel relaxed and willing to share their subjectivities as openly and honestly as possible. In the interviews I applied an Interview Guide Approach (Patton, 1980) using predetermined question categories and a more ‘conversational’ mode that requires the investigator to have sound prior knowledge of the subject matter if not about the specific person being interviewed (Yin, 2013). My prior knowledge of the environment and participants in this case was well suited to drawing out the subjective views and feelings of the selected participants. My background, having been a part of their experience in the YAS programme, is sometimes reflected in the narration of their stories and as such constitutes a critical ethnographic, reflexive approach.

Contemporary discussions on ethnography consider the researcher’s role as an integral part of the research process and should be contemplated upon in depth as part of the research study… it is imperative that the researcher’s role and background are included, in order to present a more complete picture of the research methodology and motivations of the study

(Hogan, Dolan, & Donelly, 2009, p. 43)
My Background at YAS. In 2008-2009 I was recommended as a visual arts trainer for YAS. After meeting the Director I began working at YAS as a visual arts trainer. I taught several different classes of different age groups on Saturdays and Sundays, the busiest days of the school. At that time I met a few of the students that are in this study through teaching them. The following year YAS decided to group the school’s outstanding visual arts students together in an advanced and experimental class. The Director approached me and it was decided that the approach would be something like an Atelier with students using their own ideas and working towards a year-end public exhibition, the concept was to be entirely student-centered and student–directed with myself acting as a facilitator to encourage and provide technical assistance. This was an exciting idea for me as I had taught art to young people for many years but almost always within the confines of a restrictive curriculum. As a practicing artist I welcomed the opportunity to work with these youth in a progressive way where artistic autonomy was encouraged. It should be noted that at this time I had little training as an educator and was not familiar with major theorists and thinkers in Arts education such as Howard Gardner, Vygotsky or Piaget.

As their former trainer, I viewed myself as a figure in their history that had earned a degree of trust through mutual experience. While my own perspective on my past with these three individuals influences my interpretations, it does not prevent readers or other researchers from imagining or interpreting different conclusions from those found in this study. One of the expected effects from a consciously reflexive approach is that conclusions may often be tentative, a quality leaving the research open to new questions (Creswell, 2015). A reflexive approach is important in this case for its ability to excavate a more complete history that adds to the data through detailed elaboration of an accessible story-like form.

The Research Site

Description of the Site. At the time of this research the YAS research site, consisted of two separate locations within Singapore, and was one of, if not the only informal arts school in Singapore devoted to delivering fully subsidized, long-term arts programmes for at-risk and underprivileged young people. Its uniqueness and success in attracting practicing artists as trainers and in being able to hold the consistent attendance of many students from childhood through to young adulthood made it a model worthy of study.

Recruiting Participants

Recruitment Process. The case studies that resulted from the research revolve around three students both female and male. For the purpose of anonymity due to the fact that YAS is one of the only schools of this nature, I have in one or more cases changed the sex of the students for the purposes of this study. At the beginning of the recruitment process a preliminary meeting with four to five students of the original participants was held where I explained the purpose and expectations of the study. During this meeting the ratio of male to female and number of participants were as yet unconfirmed as some of the four to five invited students were unsure of their participation. The conditions for participation were that they will have attended the YAS visual arts programme consistently for four or more years and had been part of
the advanced class that I had taught. The participants were approximately nine to twelve years of age when they entered the YAS programme and at the time of the interviews were between fifteen and seventeen years of age.

The school, the students and their parents were informed of the confidentiality of their identities through preliminary meetings and written communications. Within this research paper their identities are hidden through aliases and the previously mentioned arbitrary gender changes of the respondents. These meetings and communications served to ensure that the school, the participants, and their families were comfortable with the process and helped to establish rapport.

**Interview Process and Procedures.** All participants were issued a letter of consent and made aware that participation in this study was voluntary. Permission was sought from the current Principal, the parents/guardians of the participants and the participants themselves. All participants were informed they were free to withdraw from the research project at any time and that anything said in the interviews was confidential and would not affect their standing within YAS.

The interviews were conducted using open-ended questions focused on the experience of participants in the programme. Care was taken in the wording of the questions to avoid preconceived outcomes associated with leading questions (Brenner, 2006). In order to protect the students from any harm it was decided this investigation would not pursue questioning that may delve into student’s personal family issues. Any questions related to family were oriented to the student’s own thinking about family support for attending YAS.

Interview questions were framed chronologically and the interview process began by asking participants to recall their early years at the school and how they came to attend. I made it clear that I was open to commentary on any experience at the school including any negative experiences or feelings, however, I was always conscious of the fact that students would likely censor their responses particularly around my own practice with them. I had planned to conduct further interviews with both the current Principal and past Director but only the interview with the past Director materialized as communication with the current Principal became non-existent over the course of the interview process. The focus of the interview that did take place with YAS’s original Director was to reveal the institution’s original goals and to extricate any changes over time that may have affected participant experience. To maintain the foregrounding of the voices of the young people in this study the former Director’s interview was not retold in a narrative format but does inform my interpretation of the findings and adds to the richness of the description the YAS site.

Interviews were filmed and recorded at the original school site as well as at the new branch of the school located in an affluent location in a busy downtown shopping area. These sites were chosen because the rooms provided by the school, gave us a quiet, comfortable and psychologically safe space within a very active and often noisy environment. At each location the interviews took place in comfortable meeting rooms with typical office tables and chairs, the doors to the rooms had small windows and the rooms as in most schools in Singapore were monitored via security camera. The interview with the former Director was recorded offsite under similar conditions in a room generously provided by a local Arts Funding Council. The Director
interview took place in an alternative site due to time constraints of the former Director and due to the fact that he/she was no longer affiliated with YAS.

**Qualitative Procedures**

**Data Collection.** The research as a whole followed narrative/ethnographic procedures and methods: one-to-one interviews, field-note taking by myself as the researcher during and after visits to the site, my personal recollections of past classroom interactions and events which were recorded in a journal, collected artifacts such as exhibition catalogues, photographs of past student artworks, newspaper articles and various digital records of student artworks and events such as online articles, arts blogs and the YAS website and examples of past lesson approaches, all contributed to the body of data.

A narrative research approach was used because this study’s foundation rests on the exploration of the stories of the three participants and their art-making experiences at the school. Narrative research is used, as in this study, when there are individuals willing to share their stories and personal experiences from a specific site. The close tie between myself, as the researcher with the participants can make the respondents feel their stories are important and that they are given a voice. This may help the participants understand their own experiences and in this story-telling format, narrative research represents these everyday events in a widely accessible form (Creswell, 2015).

The interview questions were developed for this study by thinking about the chronological story of the participant’s at YAS. Developing question categories in advance did not however preclude that the sequence remain flexible during the interviews (Patton, 1980). The advantage of this strategy is that the data collection is somewhat more systematic than in a purely open-ended conversational interview and results in a more straightforward analysis. (Patton, 1980). The categories below represent sub-headings under which interview questions were developed:

- Participant introduction to the YAS programme
- Past participant experience with the arts
- Participant experience at YAS
- YAS trainer methods compared with formal school art experience
- Participant thoughts on motivation for continuing at YAS
- Student feelings and thoughts about art-making

Interview with the former Director:

- Perceptions of original goals and the inception of YAS
- Tensions between the original goals and administrative concerns
- Reflections on at-risk student needs
- Reflections on successful and unsuccessful pedagogies

The current YAS management generously volunteered to liaison between myself the researcher, and the participants and their parents for communications needed to begin the interview process. The interviews took place at the convenience of the participants
and the school. Students were informed that each interview may last from thirty minutes to one hour and they did vary as such. It was intended that each participant would be interviewed twice over a four to ten week period and that they would participate in a single focus group discussion. It was also hoped they would be consulted in an additional single informal review of some of their contributions by reading through the transcripts as a means of internal self-checking and validation.

Out of the three participants only two were interviewed twice. The one that was interviewed only once was present at the school during the second batch of interviews but declined to participate citing a sore throat. This particular participant had a record of high achievement and involvement at the YAS site and at the time of the interviews was holding a mentorship position. Upon reflection of the interview with this participant a reluctance to talk about anything that may be perceived as reflecting negatively on the school was apparent. Plans for achieving secondary validation did not materialize due to the constantly expanding timelines of the project resulting from difficulty with participant commitment to interview dates and with sometimes delayed responses from the YAS management. As a result the interview process extended far beyond the original four to ten weeks.

**Transcription.** The interviews were transcribed by the researcher/interviewer. A type-based transcribing software (F5) was used to control the audio recordings and efficiently label the conversation. By transcribing the recordings myself I had the advantage of repeatedly re-listening to the audio. This gave me an opportunity to become extremely familiar with the content and was a factor in locating significant themes. Subtleties of respondent reactions were noted in the transcription, for instance, “she smiled after responding…” or “he visible shifted as if uncomfortable…” Including these kinds of details is a way to capture the subtleties of in-person communication with its pauses, intonations and stutters (Silverman, 2001) and serves to remind the researcher of the experience of the interview and allows human qualities to carry over into interpretation.

**Analysis.** The analysis of the data began with open-coding of the transcribed interviews where I formed initial categories of information from experiences, thoughts and feelings of the participants as found in the data (Creswell, 2015). The interviews, as previously mentioned, were ordered chronologically to echo the stories of these particular students at the research site. Although this chronological structure was already present I looked for more broad themes that may emerge from the discussion of the respondents within this framework. What emerged upon a first reading were three major areas under which all other areas of discussion could be categorized:

- Teacher /Student Interaction
- Student Thoughts and Feelings about Art and Art-making
- Parental Support and Personal History

These first three categories were colour coded using orange, pink and green, however, it became apparent that the colour coding was confusing matters due to the complexity of the overlap of many student responses. I soon became aware there were many more than three distinct categories and after multiple reviews the data was finally refined into seven categories. These seven categories were helpful in
identifying significant themes and were also used to frame the narratives of the case studies. The seven categories are as follows:

- Student Descriptions
- Introduction to the School
- Art Experience and Art Making
- Learning and Perceived Benefits
- Altruism and Community
- Teachers and the Environment
- Changes in the School

Although coding was used to identify and clarify categories of data it should be emphasized that the end goal of this research was the foregrounding of the stories, thoughts and feelings of these three participants about their experience at YAS.

In reviewing the interview data I attempted to identify significant correlations between each participant’s thoughts and feelings as grouped under the categories. It became apparent there were unique responses to some questions from each participant. This disparity became valuable in representing the complexity of their characters and experience within the school environment and revealed significant negative factors for two of the participants. Many more of their responses, however, indicate clear correlations between each of the participant's thoughts and feelings about factors that motivate them to continue attending.

All of the categories, themes and insights from the analysis emerged from the raw interview data through an organic process of open coding that included copious margin notes and revisions of redundant categories. A rough form of axial coding was later used to represent the resulting categories as a form of visual representation through a bubble diagram. This visual representation (see Figure 1.) helped to refine correlations with certain categories being subsumed by others where the data was overlapping to such an extent that it was inseparable.

**Emergent Themes.** The themes that began to emerge from these categories were reduced to five and represent the most prominent subjects found in the interviews. Categories with the most detailed and correlated discussion by participants and with the most significant and surprising data became coalesced into the following five themes for discussion: The Environment, Altruism and Community, Feelings of Learning, Beliefs about Art, Dissatisfaction and Voice. These themes were revised once more in order to accurately reflect and align the subject matter of the narratives and efficient cross-referencing between the narrative and the findings and discussion of this study. The final themes are: 1. Art Experience: Feelings and Thoughts, 2. Student Beliefs: Learning and Benefits, 3. Feelings of Altruism and Community, 4. Teachers and the Environment, and 5. Responding to Changes in the School.

**Conclusion**

The Narrative approach and qualitative procedures used in this research, combined with reflexive thinking, revealed some unknown perspectives these long-term, at-risk/underprivileged students hold about their present and past art experience within the YAS visual arts programme. Many of the positive benefits associated with other
major research on the subject seem to be confirmed within this project, likewise
certain negative factors that may inhibit attendance were also confirmed. This kind of
research can contribute valuable knowledge that comes directly from the feelings and
thoughts of the recipients based on their actual experience of such programmes and
can benefit all stakeholders who are interested in sustaining and improving such
programmes. The ability to reveal previously hidden perspectives seems to justify the
need for more such research that locates the participant’s feelings about their
experience at the centre of investigation. This approach does not preclude other types
of research but can be seen as a parallel source of knowledge that is adept at
extracting subtle and often unknown affects that happen in complex learning
environments like those found in this study.
References


