

## *The Hero's Journey: A Special Beginning*

David W. Chan

*Department of Educational Psychology  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong*

This issue of *Educational Research Journal (ERJ)* is a special issue. It is special in more than one way. You probably notice very quickly that we have changed the cover color without changing the cover design, conveying the message that we value both change and continuity. Briefly, our association has negotiated and entered into a second five-year agreement with the Hong Kong Institute of Educational Research, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. This collaboration will ensure that we shall again bring up-to-date educational research and practice information to you in our biannual issues.

There is also another obvious reason for this issue being special. It has a theme in which articles are specific narrative accounts of teachers and staff of a university on their coping with teaching and learning during the

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to David W. Chan, Department of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong. E-mail: davidchan@cuhk.edu.hk

time of the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). Indeed, this collection is likely to be the first of its kind in a journal of education in Hong Kong. Less obvious however is its challenge to our tradition of privileging perhaps somewhat inadvertently the voice of quantitative educational research throughout the eighteen years of our publication history. Yet, the idea of this special issue did not come about according to plans as you might expect.

### **The Beginning of the Idea of This Theme Issue**

Perhaps, it is not inappropriate, in introducing this special issue of narratives, to add a brief personal narrative of my own here. The story starts with a phone call on an early morning in mid-April. Carmel McNaught was on the other end. I have never met her, nor did I know what her work is at the University at that time. Carmel also expressed afterwards that she was unsure whether she had met me before. Anyway, she called to ask a simple question to the effect that whether *ERJ* would be interested in publishing in a special issue a collection of SARS stories. My answer was an immediate and definite yes, and I would like to have more information to make a final decision. On thinking back, my quick affirmative answer has a lot to do with my thoughts on teacher narratives at the time. I was prompted to do some background readings on narrative research with the intention that I could provide some suggestions to a graduate student who would like to do his thesis research on studying the life story of a master counselor. The student sought advice because he was unsure whether our education faculty would be sympathetic to this kind of qualitative research.

Contrary to my expectation, as most such proposals never get followed up and thus never materialize, Carmel e-mailed me a week or two later a detailed plan on "Higher education responses to SARS." The plan covered two institutional level stories from the SARS Task Force and the Information Technology Services Centre, one department's response from the Department of Physics, and four narratives of changing teaching practice to

cope with the SARS crisis from Nursing, Surgery, English, and the Writing Across the Curriculum Program. In subsequent communications, we decided on recruiting a small guest-editorial team for this special issue. The two additional members are Glenn Shive and Roger Cheng. We also decided on a simple plan. Carmel, because of her deep involvement in the telling and retelling of these narratives, would make a contribution in reflecting on the overall themes emerging from these stories. Glenn with whom Carmel discussed to come up with the idea of the SARS story collection would contribute his expertise in contextualizing the stories based on his knowledge of Chinese history and his extensive experience in global relations in education. Roger, a philosopher in our education faculty, would contribute his views through his philosophical lenses. Finally, I would read and interpret the stories from the perspective of narrative psychology.

I am greatly amazed that we could get the task accomplished despite that we hardly met. Each of us was overwhelmed with work and had other commitments at different times. Thus, meetings were scheduled but cancelled. Most unfortunately, Glenn had to undergo eye surgery and he decided not to make the contribution as planned. Glenn is now recovering well. I wish him all the best, and perhaps, I should find some reasons to get him to contribute in another project in the future. Somewhat unexpectedly, Roger was also silent for some time, as he did not respond to any of our e-mails. When I succeeded in re-connecting with him again, he told me he had in fact taken more than a month off because he felt he had been so stressed in his work that he was emotionally drained. It is reassuring that Roger is resilient. He immediately bounced back with more vigor and vitality. Telling his story with his special sense of humor, he exclaimed, "I have always thought of burnout as a textbook term and a hypothetical construct until the day I came face to face with and experience burnout." While he found that he had much to catch up in writing, he was positive and saw this lagging behind as an advantage, saying that he could start after reading all our stories first and had the final say. Readers can now see his perceptiveness in reading and interpreting our SARS stories.

Honestly, after Carmel put the idea of a theme issue on SARS narratives to me and we decided to do this special issue, I did have some misgivings about the possibility of stirring up an age-old controversy of *ERJ*. Should personal narratives be accepted as serious scholarly work publishable as educational research in our journal?

This collection of SARS narratives is about teaching and learning. While the authors are all from The Chinese University of Hong Kong, the stories are unusually diverse and stimulating. Therefore, it is my hope that each story will offer new insight to you. I recommend that you browse through all of them, pausing at those that speak most powerfully to you, but also at some that you find particularly challenging. After all, writing, reading, and interpretation are all part of our journey of discovery. To me, this journey of discovery also carries some special meanings in enhancing my understanding of narrative research.

## **The Beginning of My Journey of Discovery**

As a psychologist with a clinical background deeply versed in the study of personality and psychopathology, as well as psychometrics and statistics, I did not learn narrative research as a graduate student. More precisely, I did not learn the many forms of qualitative research, at least not in the way that I know of qualitative inquiries today. In those days, I together with my peers came to endorse randomized clinical trials or experimental designs as the gold standard. Any studies falling short of this standard were regarded as less rigorous, less objective, or even less scientific. Qualitative methods were invariably treated as subsidiaries to quantitative work, and as being compromised by the many unavoidable or irreducible human or environmental constraints. If we chose to study cases, it was because we were interested in generalizing across individual cases, in discovering patterns, in uncovering the underlying structures or systems that seem to govern particular actions or events, or even underlying universals.

In sharp contrast to the teaching in the research domain, we as clini-

cians were taught to listen empathically to our clients' personal stories. Interestingly, it is always the unique that arouses our intense interest to help. Real people in real lives are sharing with us aspects of their subjective life experiences, including their thoughts, emotions, desires, and fears. As helpers, we are allowed to catch a glimpse of who these people are, how they want to be understood, or how they make sense of others and themselves, including their life experiences and their life stories. More importantly, in therapy we are allowed to help them in, using the narrative metaphor, co-authoring or retelling their life stories in ways that are more satisfying to them.

Thus, it seems to me that doing psychotherapy is studying life experiences, and that there is only a thin line separating psychotherapy (at least narrative therapy) and narrative research. Crossing that line is a small jump that is anything but natural. This interpretation leads me to feel like the Moliere character who discovered that he had been speaking prose for the past 40 years.

Over the years, in conducting my research studies using quantitative methods, I come to appreciate that qualitative methods can also yield rich, generalizable, and valid data. At the same time, I understand that both quantitative and qualitative approaches involve assumptions that shape and restrict the interpretations of the findings based on the data (see also McGrath & Johnson, 2003). I come to the simple conclusion that if different methods pose different yet complementary strengths and weaknesses, it seems appropriate to use a wide range of methods at each level of the research process to yield a more complete picture. A rather similar conclusion has been more eloquently put forward by Carmel in her contribution to this special issue, couching quantitative and qualitative approaches as interdependent polarities. However, despite our good intention to integrate quantitative and qualitative approaches in research studies, mixing quantitative and qualitative methods is by no means straightforward, and we have to exercise great caution as the two methods are premised on divergent epistemological bases.

In many ways, this special issue has provided me with the space to consider and reconsider many of the important issues in qualitative research in general and narrative research in particular. Perhaps, in telling and retelling our life stories, we are all narrative researchers at heart. Thus, despite my initial misgivings, I am now happy with the product of our team editorship, and I thank Carmel and Roger for their great inputs. Particularly, Carmel's dedication, patient persistence, and determination combined with her amazing grasp of the logistics of turning authors' ideas into significant and readable narratives has contributed so much to the success of this issue.

## **The End of the Beginning**

In closing, I am reminded of our rediscovery of our selves in the story retold in *The Hero's Journey* by Joseph Campbell (1990). This story is recorded in the epilogue, and presumably can be interpreted in multiple ways depending on one's inclinations. This is the story of "The Tiger and the Goat," which I simplify and retell below for your reading and preferred interpretations.

Once, a pregnant and hungry tigress pounced on a flock of goats. In her attack, she died giving birth to a baby tiger. Meanwhile, the scared and scattered goats came back to their grazing place and found the little orphan tiger. Out of parental instincts, the goats adopted the little tiger that grew up as a goat and learned to bleat and eat grass.

Then came another tiger that pounced on the little flock. The goats scattered, but the little tiger stood there without fear. The tiger recognized that the little tiger was one of his species, and asked repeatedly why the little tiger lived with goats. In response, the little tiger kept bleating and nibbling grass. At his wits' end, the big tiger carried the little tiger to a pond. There was no wind blowing, and the pond was perfectly still.

For the first time, the little tiger saw his own reflection. The big tiger then put his face over the pond near the little tiger's reflection, and said, "You've got the face of a tiger, you're like me. Be like me!"

Reinforcing the message, which seemed to get across to the little tiger, the big tiger next brought the little tiger to his den, where there were remains of a

recently slaughtered gazelle. Despite the resistance put up by the little tiger that he was a vegetarian, the big tiger shoved a chunk of bloody meat down the little tiger's throat. Stimulated by the proper food, the little tiger finally gave his first tiger roar.

## References

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