The Interpretive Dimension of Narrative Inquiry

A Lecture and a Practical Illustration

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Biography
ROD EVANS is an Associate Professor at the University of South Florida. His doctoral dissertation entitled, Ministrative Insight: Educational Administration as Pedagogic Practice, was completed in 1989 after five years of full time study and three years part time study at The University of Alberta. Combining work in educational administration and curriculum studies, the dissertation was awarded Dissertation-of-the-Year in Canada (Victoria, 1990) and subsequently in the USA (Chicago, 1991). Rod teaches master’s courses at USF-Lakeland and is currently teaching a doctoral course on the Tampa campus. His latest book is, The Pedagogic Principal (2001).

Abstract
As a form or type of qualitative inquiry, NARRATIVE INQUIRY has reached a level of sophistication, acceptance and prestige that places it - in terms of reputation - alongside its more mathematical cousins and other analytic alternatives to educational inquiry. In this lecture-presentation I explore the interpretive dimension of narrative inquiry focusing on epistemological and methodological assumptions that guide this approach to research. My guides and philosophical compatriots in this endeavor will be selected representatives of the 19th and 20th century European existentialist tradition - in particular the work of philosophers Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer - and especially the work of the late German existentialist, Otto Bollnow. Practical illustrations of how the insights and assumptions of this complex philosophic tradition can be harnessed in the service of life-world educational inquiry will be given.

Discussion
The research on which this presentation is based is drawn from my own doctoral research which focused on the lifeworld of practicing school principals. “Lifeworld” is a phenomenological term and makes reference to the concrete world of lived experience prior to the fragmentation and isolation of that experience into discrete “variables” of one kind or another. In my study, the research technique called for a series of thoroughly open-ended, individual interviews (tape recorded and later transcribed) with a group of practicing school principals. However, it is important to point out that these interviews were not conceived as “information gathering” sessions—in the sense that I did not go into the interviews with a preset list of questions or set of predetermined topics to which the principals were to give answers, nor did I wish to limit their range of response by responding narrowly to the type of question asked. Following Gadamer’s work on the place of conversation (literally a speaking together) the interviews were an opportunity for the principals to talk about their work as principals in as natural, fluid and open a manner as possible. This meant that I became more of an interlocutor than “interviewer” in the strict sense. This role is more natural than the traditional interviewer role (“I ask the questions, you give me your answers”), but can be difficult in the sense that it requires someone versed in
the art of conversation—which is not something we practice much in most forms of educational research. Yet the ability to engage in authentic conversation seems integral and indeed essential to (my) definition of education (and what it means to be educated). Again, Gadamer’s work on the hermeneutical priority of the question seems central to this issue.

In any event (and abbreviating what was a much longer and more convoluted process), the interviews produced very rich “data” which had to be transcribed. It was at this point that slowly—at times painfully slowly—it became clear to me that as the principals talked about their work lives as principals they often talked in narrative fashion, that is they related concrete events (stories) which while they were often told in relation to this or that problem (with parents, with students etc.) nevertheless they had a life of their own such that it became clear to me that the principals’ work-lives possessed an event structure (i.e. this is how principals naturally talk about their work lives) which is not much recognized in most forms of qualitative or quantitative research. In any event, it became clearer and clearer that as these principals sought to explain this or that aspect of their work lives as principals, and as they sought to bring to speech the complexity of their work – they told stories. Hence, narrative (story) became – more or less accidentally – a central feature of my research. Now, I will add a few comments on the method utilized for this research.

Discussing method is difficult because it is a complex and much misunderstood issue. Of course, any research study requires you to do something. In one way or another your “data”—in whatever form it takes—has to be analyzed and/or interpreted in some fashion. Some educational researchers believe that this “analysis” has to abide by rules or canons of procedure laid down in advance of the research project. Others, (myself included), prefer to believe that what you do with your data (i.e. your method) must arise out of the type of data collected, and the purposes the researcher has for collecting it in the first place. (Note: the collection of data without a good reason, i.e. a clear sense of purpose or direction, seems to me to negate the whole purpose of scholarly inquiry from the outset). But I certainly do not believe we should accept the idea that there is a method, much less the method. Method is just a shorthand term for describing what you actually do to or with your data; it does not exist independent of the nature of the inquiry and the purposes one might have for engaging in it in the first place. I say this despite the earnest efforts of Descartes (1596-1650) and his followers to devise a method or the method – most often referred to as the scientific method. But back to more practical matters.

The interviews with the principals resulted in a number of intensely “real” stories - stories that in essence constituted the data of the study. And although it would have been possible to subject the stories to a variety of “treatments”—for instance, by engaging in content analysis (counting the frequency with which the principals said something), or thematic or pattern analysis—in the end I opted for none of these, preferring instead to do what I call a “strong reading” of the principal’s stories. In my (1989) dissertation I describe in detail what is involved in a “strong reading” and how and why the practice of “strong readings” contributes to our practical resourcefulness as educational practitioners.

At this point I would like to offer a brief example of the “method” I adopted for my research and what the methodology of the strong reading results in or produces (Latin, pro + ducere, meaning to bring forward or to lead forth). It should be noted that although the practice of engaging in a strong reading is really a unified process, a gestalt – I break the process apart here into 3 main moments or stages - primarily for explanatory and didactic purposes. In the first moment I offer for the reader’s consideration the unreconstructed principal’s “raw” story or transcribed text as told during the interview process. It is this story or text, precisely as told to the researcher that
becomes the occasion for the strong reading. The second phase involves “chunking” or segmenting the “raw text” into smaller, more manageable segments. The purpose of chunking the text is to produce more manageable and workable textual segments. At the end of each segment I insert an interpretive comment or question - which is my attempt to foreground and open up for questioning the practical pedagogical significance of the principal’s text in the segment in question. It is, however, important to point out that this insertion is far from a simple paraphrase or mere re-statement of the principal’s text—rather it is an opportunity to see “what can be said” about the text. It is the search for significance. In the move to see, “what can be said,” I act as an involved and interested researcher and in that moment bring the entire horizon of my own reflective understanding to bear on such matters - an act which is undoubtedly far removed from anything we normally regard as a neutral epistemological act. It is here at this point that this research diverges most strongly from value-free, epistemologically neutral (paradigmatic) research and allies itself with a post-cartesian (but perhaps also a pre-cartesian) interpretive tradition of educational research. I move now to the third—and in the case of the present research—final moment of the research process.

By far the most difficult phase or moment in the research process is the third phase in which I bring forth (produce) a sympathetic but at the same time critical reading of the principal’s stories. In writing about this process in my original dissertation (1989) and re-written and published in 2001 under the title, *The Pedagogic Principal*, I had this to say:

*Part of the rationale for doing an interrupted reading [i.e. the bold-face insertions at end of each segment of the principal’s text] was to provide a conceptual bridge or transitional moment between the “raw” stories on the one hand and the hermeneutic reading on the other. It was felt that, methodologically speaking, the jump from the anecdotal texts to interpretive readings was simply too great without providing an intermediate phase or stage in the proceedings. Thus, the interrupted readings stand as a kind of halfway house in the interpretive process between the initial stories and the strong readings that follow. But the interrupted readings are also more than this. In part, at least, they also aim to concretize (make visible) the secret movements of the mind that is the interpretive process. They are, if we like, the mind’s footprints, tracks in the sand that show that something passed this way. In this kind of research, there is no possibility of laying down rules or developing any kind of objective method for the one-best-way-to-interpret. The interpretive act is a deeply mysterious act that cannot be specified in advance or reduced to a logical system but can only be revealed in the doing, in the very practice of hermeneutics itself. This is both its challenge but also its value to us as educator-researchers. (p.47)*

So, after this brief overview what I will now provide is a concrete example of the research process as I have been discussing it so far. What follows is: (1) a transcribed interview (raw text) of the principal’s story, followed by (2) the principal’s story broken into segments with bold-face interpretive (researcher made) comments, followed by (3) a shortened version of the final hermeneutic reading of the story.

**Principal’s Story - First Phase:** (raw text - as told by the principal - needs a title)

*For a school this size we don’t get too much pilfering. I could tell you the three or four children we have to watch. And you have to realize their home situations too. Like this one gal, Leanne, I was telling you about—well we just plain didn’t know why and she needed some help. But the others that I know of are kids who don’t have much; they are really crying out for attention. Children in that category. Just the other day Leanne, one of our grade 3 girls, brought a brand new packet of felt pens to school for an art project the kids were going to work on. By noon when she went to check inside her desk, the felt pens were missing. So here we are stuck with a missing $12 package of felt pens that had disappeared from the classroom. The teacher came to me and asked what are we going to do? Anyway, I went into the class and talked to the kids, and I said that we’ll let you go home and think about it. We’d been talking about trust*
and friendship and caring, so I went over that with them and how even though we can’t be the best of friends with everyone we can treat them with respect and that’s respecting their property as well. And I gave them the opportunity of bringing the pens back the next day, and 99 times out of 100 things do show up—particularly at the elementary level. Anyway, that’s how I approached it, and I’d just love to say they’ve shown up, but they haven’t, and they were taken a week ago. It’s funny, though, because during our prayer time this morning—I always ask if there’s anything the kids would like to say as a thought for the day or as a prayer—and one kid says, “Well, I’d like you to think about my auntie who’s having a baby, and I hope everything goes well for her,” and we had some other things like that. And then this one kid chimes up, “And I really hope that Leanne’s felt show up before Easter.” So it’s not out of their heads yet either, and there is a change. Now if they don’t show up, I’ll get her some felts from the school budget or as I’ve done in the past, I’ll get them myself. I’ll find some way to help her—maybe not the same set of felts she had before but I’ll give her something to replace them. We have a gal here that I’ve been working with for a year and a half now and that includes working with her mom because we found out that she was a bit of a “taker,” a bit of a “klepto” [kleptomaniac]. We have referred her, and a doctor has been working with her over the last year. She’s in grade 6. You see that poster on the wall over there? Well, that one was brought to me by the little girl who was doing all the stealing. She and a friend brought it in for an Easter gift for me about this time last year—I didn’t question her where she got it from! You see those cars on the window ledge [principal points to 8 or 10 tiny model cars sitting on the window ledge in his office], those were all things that were stolen by kids, and when I went to return them at the store the owner told me to forget it. He’d written them off. So I brought them back, and from time to time I’ll use them as a special reward for a kid who has really made an effort. For a school this size, we don’t get too much pilfering. I could tell you the 3 or 4 children we have to watch. One of the things that we try to do here is to build a sense of trust in our school that we can leave something down. I’ll really compliment kids and I’ll tell them all the time, “That’s great, someone’s left a pencil in the library,” they’ll bring me the pencil rather than put it in their pocket. I’ll give the kid a hug and say, “Hey, I’m so pleased that you saw the right way to do it this way—rather than put it in your pocket or keep it or give it to someone else. Now we’ll make an effort to find out who it belongs to and if we can’t find out then you can have it.” And it’s happening. I’ve got a drawer full of watches. The only surprising thing is that no one has come to claim them!

The next turn in my “method” is to break apart the raw text into workable segments and begin the task of textual analysis (textual interpretation) by inserting bold-face interpretive comments and/or questions - the function of which is to open up the segment for additional dialogue and discussion-analysis. It is really the process of seeking out the pedagogic significancies embedded in the principal’s text.

Principal’s Story - Second Phase:  (interrupted reading - rupturing the text - searching out significancies)

SEGMENT ONE: For a school this size we don’t get too much pilfering. I could tell you the three or four children we have to watch. And you have to realize their home situations too. Like this one gal, Leanne, I was telling you about—well we just plain didn’t know why and she needed some help. But the others that I know of are kids who don’t have much; they are really crying out for attention. Children in that category. [The principal selects his story and places the events in a larger social context – this is what principals are expected to do.]

SEGMENT TWO: Just the other day Leanne, one of our grade 3 girls, brought a brand new packet of felt pens to school for an art project the kids were going to work on. By noon when she went to check inside her desk, the felt pens were missing. So here we are stuck with a missing $12 package of felt pens that had disappeared from the classroom. The teacher came to me and asked what are we going to do? [The principal sketches the bare outlines of the case – is this situation at all significant?]

SEGMENT THREE: Anyway, I went into the class and talked to the kids, and I said that we’ll let you go home and think about it. We’d been talking about trust and friendship and caring, so I went over that with them and how even though we can’t be the best of friends with everyone we can treat them with respect and
that’s respecting their property as well. And I gave them the opportunity of bringing the pens back the next
day, and 99 times out of 100 things do show up—particularly at the elementary level. Anyway, that’s how I
approached it, and I’d just love to say they’ve shown up, but they haven’t, and they were taken a week ago.
[Things don’t always work out as hoped – so has the principal failed?]

SEGMENT FOUR: It’s funny, though, because during our prayer time this morning—I always ask if
there’s anything the kids would like to say as a thought for the day or as a prayer—and one kid says,
“Well, I’d like you to think about my auntie who’s having a baby, and I hope everything goes well for her,”
and we had some other things like that. And then this one kid chimes up, “And I really hope that Leanne’s
felt pens show up before Easter.” So it’s not out of their heads yet either and there is a change. Now if they
don’t show up in the next few days, what I’ll do is I’ll get her some felts from the school budget or as I’ve
done in the past, I’ll get them myself. I’ll find some way to help her—maybe not the same set of felts she
had before but I’ll give her something to replace them. [The felt pens have not shown up – however the
principal feels something of value has occurred.]

SEGMENT FIVE: We have a gal here that I’ve been working with for a year and a half now and that
includes working with her mom because we found out that she was a bit of a “taker,” a bit of a “klepto”
[kleptomaniac]. We have referred her, and a doctor has been working with her over the last year. She’s in
grade 6. You see that poster on the wall over there? Well, that one was brought to me by the little girl who
was doing all the stealing. She and a friend brought it in for an Easter gift for me about this time last
year—I didn’t question her where she got it from! [The principal reveals a tactful quality – it would be
pedantic and destructive to ask the girl where she obtained the poster.]

SEGMENT SIX: You see those cars on the window ledge [principal points to 8 or 10 tiny model cars
sitting on the window ledge in his office], those were all things that were stolen by kids, and when I went to
return them at the store the owner told me to forget it. He’d written them off. So I brought them back, and
from time to time I’ll use them as a special reward for a kid who has really made an effort. For a school
this size, we don’t get too much pilfering. I could tell you the 3 or 4 children we have to watch. [Knowing
which children to keep an eye on is part of being a principal – he “knows” his students.]

SEGMENT SEVEN: One of the things that we try to do here is to build a sense of trust in our school that
we can leave something down. I’ll really compliment kids and I’ll tell them all the time, “That’s great,
someone’s left a pencil in the library,” they’ll bring me the pencil rather than put it in their pocket. I’ll
give the kid a hug and say, “Hey, I’m so pleased that you saw the right way to do it this way—rather than
put it in your pocket or keep it or give it to someone else. Now we’ll make an effort to find out who it
belongs to and if we can’t find out then you can have it.” And it’s happening. I’ve got a drawer full of
watches. The only surprising thing is that no one has come to claim them! [The principal understands
the importance of building trust and trusting relations – but does his hugging and praising of
students externalize the trust relation too much?]

I want to emphasize again that the bold-face insertions in the above segments are my research
insertions – usually in the form of encapsulating statements or questions – which are intended to
open up the textual segment for further dialogue and discussion. They do not claim to be
summative statements, much less final or conclusive statements. They do, however, claim (and
reveal) an interested and engaged stance rather than the removed, arms-length, disinterested
stance of empirical-analytic research. Obviously, a different researcher might see different things
– but this is precisely because there is not one reality we are dealing with here. It is precisely this
difference, and the possibility of (and for) different interpretations that enables conversation to
take place—and it is, as Gadamer points out, conversation that counts, that matters. It is not a
singular truth or a singular reality we are after. I turn now to the third and final phase of the
research process – the hermeneutic readings.
Principal’s Story - Third Phase  (the story of The Missing Felt Pens - a hermeneutic reading of the principal’s story)

In this story, the principal faces a situation that will be familiar to many, probably most principals. In schools, things go “missing” with a frequency that can be alarming at times, and knowing the right way to respond is never easy. For better or worse there are no rules to tell you the correct thing to do in such situations... [I]t is interesting in a way that the principal chooses to tell this story of the missing felt pens. At first glance, it would seem to be the most mundane of incidents, hardly worth repeating. It would not be hard to imagine how a busy principal might choose to ignore the whole thing. Principals, after all, are expected to deal with much more serious problems that this. Maybe the student has a history of being careless with her belongings; though hard, perhaps this is a valuable lesson for her and the children to learn. In the “real” world things also disappear; at least this time it is only a package of felt pens gone astray. And yet as the situation unfolds, something important seems to be at stake in the story.

The principal sketches only the barest outline of the story; still it would not be difficult to imagine the girl’s feelings at something she prized. Does the teacher have a feel for the child’s loss? At any rate, the teacher turns the problem over to the principal, who now finds himself encountering a situation to which he must respond. What will the principal do?

Of course, many avenues are open. Maybe the principal feels a sense of outrage that someone would dare steal from someone else. In the real world, there are serious consequences for people who steal. Children have to find out all about such things sooner or later. Maybe the children are encouraged to “tell on” their friends. Or perhaps somebody saw someone take the pens, in which case the correct thing to do is tell right away. And we could go on and on. But already we see that a range of ways of responding are possible. Which shall the principal choose?

First, what is noteworthy is what the principal does not do. We note from the story that there is no frantic searching of desks, school bags and so forth, no emptying of pockets in a vain attempt to recover the felt pens come what may. Instead, we see the principal engaging the children in quiet conversation about friendship, trust and sharing and, at the same time, tactfully opening up a space for the felt pens to be quietly returned. If someone has “borrowed” the pens, they will surely know the right thing to do. And, of course, the possibility also exists that the pens may have been simply lost. In any event, the felt pens are not returned, and so we can ask, “Has the principal failed?” Was he being naïve in his expectation that the missing pens would be found? Perhaps. And yet what the principal displays in this story is his understanding that “stealing” is experienced very differently in the lives of 8 year olds than in the world of more mature adults. So it is significant that he does not use the heavy word “theft.” Instead, he patiently talks to the children about friendship and caring and sensitively awakens in them a feeling for how the students who lost her pens is probably feeling right now. He expresses the hope that before long she will get her felt pens back. Although he does not say as much in words, he communicates a certain trustful expectation that the children will know what is right to do. His words and demeanor combine to express a certain faith and confidence in the children. His tone is affirming. What is mercifully absent is any note of cynicism or doubt that the children can or should be trusted. There is, instead, a confirming quality to the principal’s actions. Naturally, this is what educators should do. Pedagogic acting has an unmistakable confirming quality about it.

What would the opposite actions be like? Can we imagine a principal with a cynical or suspicious attitude going into this student’s classroom, determined to get to the bottom of this situation at all costs, having the children empty out their pockets, school bags and so forth? What would an experience of this kind be like for children? What would be learned? Even if the felt pens had been found, would anything educational have been accomplished.

For children, principals are important people. For many children, teachers and principals are their first “adult” encounters outside the immediate circle of family and friends; such people embody the adult
world. So the way a principal enters the lifeworld of a class of 3rd grade pupils is not without certain consequences. Children learn much from such encounters.

By his story, the principal expresses that to be a principal requires a certain kind of orientation to events. The goal is not merely to get the felt pens back, although that would be nice too, but something more is called for. First is the requirement for the principal to approach the situation pedagogically. The principal encounters this event not as policeman, not as judge, but first of all as an educator. We see [in the story] the kind of difference that this makes. (p. 54/55)

I want to emphasize that the above reading is but an illustrative extract taken from a longer (6 page) interpretive reading of the principal’s text. In the full interpretive text I explore different facets of the principal’s lifeworld story and point to implications for both the practice and the theory of educational administrative practice.

I also want to point out that the dissertation itself (taken as a whole) stands as an exemplification of a more original way of thinking about the meaning of dissertation writing. Our modern word, dissertation, is related etymologically to the French word, disserere, (dis + serere - meaning a speaking or joining together) - rather than the currently practiced meaning in many (perhaps most) North American universities in which writing a dissertation is more or less the “writing up” part of research project that has already been accomplished. In short, a type of report writing. This modern meaning of dissertation writing is encapsulated and reinforced in self-help books such as “How To Write a Research [Dissertation] Report.” I think it would be useful for those of us in the academy who are interested in such things, to revisit the earlier meaning of dissertation writing — especially as a way of distinguishing between Ph.D. and Ed.D. dissertations in education.

At the end of my 1989 study I attached a list of ten theses or propositional statements arising out of the conduct of the study. These are not—nor are they intended to be—the familiar empirical “findings” that are the usual outcome of research activity. When the study was first completed I had this to say - and believe it more strongly today than when it was first written.

In this final section, I offer a set of 10 theses or propositional statements arising out of this study. These synoptic statements represent the distillation of what has been learned and what I have come to understand as a result of doing this study. They are statements that gather together the precipitated insight gleaned from the conduct of this inquiry. In many respects, the collected theses offered here replace and replenish the more traditional “research findings” typically associated with empirical inquiry. We need to remember that these theses are not the type with which we can actually “do” anything or upon which a set of policy recommendations can be founded. They are not practical in that sense. But they are practical in a deeper, more important sense. They are practical in that they orient our thinking, set us on a new path, give us something to ponder. This is equally if not more practical, indeed the most valuable form of practicality. Taken seriously, these theses deepen our insight and thus our resourcefulness. The link between the theses offered here and practical worldly action may be less obvious and less directly observable than the prescriptions contained in conventional research “findings,” but like the river that for a spell winds its way secretly, silently underground emerging at a far different place and time, the link is certainly there. (p.137)

**Ten Theses**

1. When principals tell “stories” about their daily work as principals, then these anecdotal texts may be considered as narrative definitions of the “practical” meaning of being a principal or school administrator.

2. The task of research in the human sciences calls for maximum engagement and a form of disciplined subjectivity.
3. An engaged attitude is not simply a methodological device but rather a fundamental principle of knowledge in the human sciences.

4. The capacity to grasp meaning is what is decisive for practice; this is a phenomenological-hermeneutic activity from the ground up.

5. The normative basis of educational administration is located in the pedagogic ground of its vocation.

6. The intent of theory and research in educational administration lies in overcoming objectivity and in replacing all “objective” relations with the existential relations of pedagogy.

7. Reconstituting educational administration as a pedagogic practice does not yield a new or unknown practice; rather it cedes to the practice what was already there as its ground and first moment.

8. Strong practices are more obedient than masterful; this is as true in educational administration as elsewhere.

9. Strengthening a practice is a problem not of memorization but of memory

10. Remembering what belongs to a practice is a caring act; it is the act of making whole.