

Kusserow re-written:

A dialogue about the research potential of storied poems

Darrell Johncox, Natasha G. Wiebe, & Cornelia Hoogland

Setting: An online Master's in Education course on narrative inquiry.¹

Discussion question²: Choose a stanza from Kusserow's poem, "Lost Boy" (2008, p. 75+). In one or two sentences, rewrite the stanza in conventional scholarly prose (i.e., the kind of writing you might find in a traditional research article). You will likely have to use your imagination here; that is, to make up some statistics or generalize about the Lost Boys of Sudan under study, and so on. (See the sample rewrite below.) What was lost in the rewriting? What was gained?

Sample

I chose the 12th stanza of Kusserow's poem:

Later he stumbles into the bathroom
to brush his teeth. Groggy Africa
flinches at the neon light, paces
then settles in the corner
of its den, paws pushing into the walls
of his chest with a dull pain. (2008, p. 77)

¹ The discussion question and dialogue between Darrell and Natasha is excerpted and adapted, with permission, from the website for 9576 Narrative Inquiry (Winter 2009 semester), a M.Ed. course offered by the Faculty of Education, University of Western Ontario, London. The dialogue was revised to include a response from Dr. Cornelia Hoogland, who was not a participant in the course although she is represented as one here.

² The discussion question was developed by Natasha G. Wiebe, 2009, and excerpted from Wiebe, N., & Noel, K. (2009, Jan 19). Introduction to Week 3: The "literary turn" in qualitative inquiry: Arts-based educational research. Course document posted to <https://owl.uwo.ca/webct/urw/lc5116011.tp0/cobaltMainFrame.dowebct> as part of 9576 Narrative Inquiry, Faculty of Education, University of Western Ontario, London.

My rewrite:

Two years after immigrating to the United States, the majority of the Lost Boys sampled for this study continued to experience some sense of dislocation or unease with their new “American” identities and lifestyles. Seventy percent preferred not to revisit their traumatic experiences during the second year follow-up interview, although nearly all of the participants used words or phrases, or body language, that suggested feelings of unresolved loss and grief (see Table 1).

Topic: WEEK 3 DISCUSSION (Class)

Subject: Re: Kusserow Re-written

Author: Darrell Johncox

Date: January 23, 2009 7:55 PM

Let me take a stab at this--a fascinating assignment.

Here are the stanzas I chose from Kusserow:

Now he looks like a too tall gangster,
all gold-chained and baggy-trousered.
He's channel surfing,
listening to Bob Marley on his walkman,
his long legs awkwardly pulled out
to each side, the way giraffes
split their stilts
to drink of water.

Africa's moved inside him,
all cramped and bored, sleeping a lot. (2008, p. 77)

My rewrite:

It has become apparent that most of the subjects have chosen to adopt Americana as their cultural touchstone in order to cope with their dislocation and immigration from their native land. Their adoption of this particular look is indicative of their desire to both assimilate into the culture and intimidate. One "lost boy" came dressed in clothing that is usually attributed to those who are either a part of or admire gang culture--baggy jeans, heavy gold jewellery. Studies have indicated that survival is paramount for such refugees and a quick adoption of the dominant culture allows for an easier integration into the community fabric. Also, the adoption of the gangland subculture makes these "lost boys" feel more secure and safe as their appearance seems to deter strangers from approaching them and isolates them socially from other cultural groups. Emotionally, it is easier to cope with their move to America through assimilation than it is to struggle to keep their previous culture and traditions alive in this new land. Studies have indicated that this "melting pot" philosophy to American immigration has served the country well as it encourages immigrants to embrace American culture and to set aside previous lifestyle considerations that were dominant in their home countries. While the physical appearance of the "Lost Boys" indicates a desire to assimilate, their posture and faces reveal an ennui and emotional fatigue experienced from the jarring transition from one culture to another.

Reflection:

So what was lost in the rewrite? An investment in the character, in the plight of the Lost Boys. It is difficult to describe the emotions of this pseudo-gangster academically when, really, the short stanza of the poem said all that needed to be said. The awkward boredom that he is experiencing as he tries to pull his life together is best left to the poem as my own attempt to describe it sounds cold and disconnected from the object of my study.

What was gained? Well, my appreciation for including such narratives in cultural studies. And, perhaps, my appreciation for people who do have to write about these people lives in academic ways as it must prove difficult to do this and keep the humanity within the text of the research. Also, it forced me to think carefully about the text and consider what it meant, what was being communicated by the writer. I was compelled to rewrite my own interpretation several times since I was unsure whether I was interpreting the text correctly. It forced me to be more insightful and to think about not just the subject of the poem, but also the words the poet chose to use to shape the text before I began to write my own clinical response.

This was a little harder than I thought... :) Darrell

Topic: WEEK 3 DISCUSSION (Class)

Subject: Re: Kusserow Re-written

Author: Natasha Gay Wiebe

Date: January 24, 2009, 1:15 PM

Great rewrite and reflection, Darrell. I want to build on your comment: "So what was lost in the rewrite? An investment in the character, in the plight of the Lost Boys. It is difficult to describe the emotions of this pseudo-gangster academically when, really, the short stanza of the poem said all that needed to be said."

I'm learning that a strength of good poetry (and well-written creative, imaginative writing in general) is that it invites readers to respond with their bodies, with their emotions, as well as their intellect. Kusserow's poem doesn't make an argument and then give us statistics as evidence to support that argument. Instead, it re-presents the experience of one of the Lost Boys of Sudan; it invites us to walk inside his skin with him. As Kusserow observes about her poetry, "Humans, in all their stickiness, chaos and confusion, their fluidity and subtlety, their unpredictability and color, were suddenly three-dimensional again, through images, smells, looks and metaphors" (2008, p. 74). If narrative inquiry investigates life experience, then it seems to me that creative, imaginative writing, like poetry, is *one* possible tool that researchers choose from in order to try to get inside of and think through that experience and to re-present it for their readers.

Many narrative researchers borrow literary conventions such as plot, dialogue, descriptions that "show not tell," and genres like poetry and short story, to try to re-create the complexity, the "messiness" of human experience. These devices help place readers in the moment of the experience; they put readers in the participant's shoes. Why might this be important? Evocative writing, I think, can help to push readers out of complacency (cf. Chase, 2005, p. 671) regarding the experience in question and even compel readers to take action (Chase; Richardson, 2000). [←We'll be reading Richardson next week; she suggests some additional ways that poetic writing can be useful for qualitative researchers.]

Best,
Natasha

Topic: WEEK 3 DISCUSSION (Class)

Subject: Re: Kusserow Re-written

Author: Darrell Johncox

Date: January 24, 2009 3 PM

Hi Natasha,

I think the value of narrative inquiry rests in its ability to be what the writer needs it to be--its flexibility and creative nature help the researcher delve into topics and personalities that otherwise are neglected or, at the very least, under-represented in the traditional academic paper. When I was an undergraduate in the arts, I was introduced to academic papers that included passages that embraced story-telling in order to diversify the text or, in some cases, explain something that could not simply be reasoned and proven within the body of the text. The choice to use narrative as a means of communicating one's research is unconventional, but effective--a case of "less is more" as it brings the reader into the body of research through character, not format. Will this work in every study or discipline? I think it is better suited to the less "scientific" research projects, but it would be interesting to see if it could ever be applied to the "pure" sciences.

Darrell

Topic: WEEK 3 DISCUSSION (Class)

Subject: Re: Kusserow Re-written

Author: Cornelia Hoogland

Date: January 24, 2009 5 PM

Hi Darrell and Natasha,

Interesting discussion! Darrell, your statement, “The awkward boredom that he is experiencing as he tries to pull his life together is best left to the poem” reminds me that the poem calls on the reader’s *imagination* to supply the context for the character of the poem. The reader can imagine him (where? In a motel room) all dressed up with nowhere to go. Although he may have the trappings, he may be unable to access the social contexts (community) for his new wardrobe (this is the greater task). In fact, the poem suggests the impoverished American culture into which the young man arrives is a stark contrast to the culturally and communally rich life from which he comes. The poem shows up the gaps by encouraging the reader’s imaginative setting for the character, in a way that the prose version does not. Creative genres (poetry, fiction and plays, for example) ask the reader to let the imagination lead in decoding or understanding. Conventional research asks the reader to let linear, rational forms--ideas or thought--lead in understanding.

Your concluding statement that this exercise “forced me to...think about not just the subject of the poem, but also the words the poet chose to use to shape the text” is well observed. I agree, we need to encourage our reading acuity. Poetry looks deceptively simple, but each word is carefully and consciously chosen. Poetry is the most heightened of all forms of discourse, and as you show us, can help us become better, careful readers.

Cheers,

Cornelia

References

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