School of Social and Political Science – PG Feedback Form

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<th>Course Instance</th>
<th>March 2014</th>
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<tr>
<td>Course Name</td>
<td>Creative Methods CPD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Component Name</td>
<td>Assignment 2</td>
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Please note that both the comments and the grade remain provisional until ratified by the external Exam Board in May and will be subject to change, moderation and review by our external examiners. This includes whether or not any penalties imposed are upheld.

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<th>Exam number</th>
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Overview

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<tr>
<th>Marking criterion</th>
<th>Comment</th>
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<tr>
<td>Critical/conceptual analysis</td>
<td>The assignment benefits considerably from its critical consideration of the method, and its implications, throughout. Certain additional points, as noted below, could be beneficial to consider.</td>
<td>B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strength/cohesion of argument</td>
<td>As above.</td>
<td>A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of sources/evidence</td>
<td>The assignment utilises very relevant references to good effect.</td>
<td>A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structure &amp; organisation</td>
<td>The assignment is structured very clearly and, through this, precisely meets the task requirements.</td>
<td>A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Breadth and relevance of reading</td>
<td>As above.</td>
<td>A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clarity of expression, presentation and referencing</td>
<td>The writing is extremely clear, the assignment is well presented and referenced.</td>
<td>A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suggestions for future work</td>
<td>The assignment precisely meets the task requirements and benefits considerably from its structured approach, clear writing styles, relevant reading, and analytical approach. It could be developed further by taking some points even further, in a testing manner, particularly in relation to the ‘prompt’ and analysis.</td>
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Susan Elsley and Kay Tisdall, as course convenors, maintain a file of anonymised assessments with feedbacks for further students to consult. If you would prefer to have your assignment not included within this file, please inform Kay Tisdall k.tisdall@ed.ac.uk.
Assessment 2: Critical Discussion of using a creative arts-based approach

Option 2: Research on Children’s Friendships
Research on Children’s Friendships

Introduction
Storytelling can be an appropriate creative research method for exploring what friendship means to children and young people. It is influenced by narrative approaches to social research. However, there are a range of ways to tell a story and when using creative methodologies it is important to consider how the specific method should be applied to a particular context in order to; answer the research question, ensure there is a reasonable way to analyse the data being produced and manage particular ethical issues when working with children and young people. This critical discussion focuses on using storytelling within individual interviews with children and young people and then as a medium for creating a collective series of stories about friendship.

Research Method
Phase One of the research involves using storytelling with all 30 children/young people in semi-structured interviews by asking them to ‘Tell me a story about friendship’. They could choose to narrate directly to the interviewer, use an audio recorder or write the ‘text’ (broadly defined to include any of these products) which is the unit of analysis. The researcher and participant child/young person then discuss the story together to reflect on the meanings of what they have constructed.

Phase Two is a focus group with each school group (five children/young people). This will help develop the children/young people’s thinking further on friendship and determine the key themes on the significance of friendship in their lives. Children/young people could present their previously narrated stories (where they were comfortable) to contribute to this discussion.

Phase three would see the use of the consultancy money on an experienced storyteller to engage with each school group, to create a collective story about one of the key themes identified in the focus group. Once again, children could choose in which format to present their collective story (maybe a digital story, comic strip, role play, or musical composition). The series of six stories from the six schools could be presented as a ‘story book collection’ on friendship told through one or more mediums.

How well does storytelling meet the aim?

Produces qualitative data and explores an issue
Storytelling privileges subjective perspectives and experiences and is based on a narrative approach to social research. Narrative approaches are seen as an effective and powerful method for transferring knowledge as they convey events linked chronologically in time to produce meaning. Phillips (2010) notes a large body of literature around how people make sense of the world by using stories. Children also use narratives for “…entertainment, building social intimacy…making sense of the world and solving problems and constructing and expressing a sense of self.” (Anderson and Balandin 2011, p286).

Therefore, the storytelling method yields qualitative data. The narratives are useful in exploratory qualitative research which aims to discover themes, patterns, what is common and what is unique. Storytelling is an open ended task that allows for expression of experience, conveys thoughts, and identities in the child’s own words, thereby providing ‘authentic information’ (Koch 1998; Davies 2007). “Storytelling also engages the child emotionally, and allows them to construct meaning on a
personal level” (Farmer 2004). The creation of a story also provides a safe space for giving information about sensitive topics. It is a method that can access a person’s unconscious thoughts and therefore is often used as a therapeutic tool (Cantor 2007; Ingemark 2013; Willis et al 2014).

However storytelling is a creative research method that privileges narrative but not necessarily the written word. The perspectives of children represented or documented in stories can be provided in a number of formats, for example, digital storytelling¹, audio-documentaries² or avatars in comics³. Storytelling in this sense can appeal to children and young people with a range of literacy skills but also their diverse interests in technology, visual mediums and artistic skills. Thereby, storytelling method allows us to focus on providing ways of communication that tap into children’s natural creativity and widens the potential for their genuine contribution.

**Suitable for children and young people aged 12-14yrs within a school context**

Storytelling is a familiar concept for children and young people because every culture and society uses stories (Farmer 2004). More specifically for children/young people aged 12 - 14 years, by this age/stage of development in Western society, children/young people have been exposed to stories through their lived experience in going to the movies, watching television (documentaries, sitcoms, and cartoons), reading books/comics, hearing verbal stories from parents/grandparents, seeing puppet shows/theatre productions and having completed comprehension exercises at school. In majority world countries, stories might be more commonly relayed in other ways like puppetry, verbal tales or dance.

Furthermore, children and young people acquire skill in telling stories between the ages of 2 and 7 (Ligeza 1997). This might predominantly be through their school experience of learning language (creative writing in English class,) or cultural engagement. Using storytelling in this research context is pertinent as the method lends itself to the topic of friendship where many stories are exchanged between children/young people about their peer relationships. This research project is being run through six schools and therefore the educational backdrop suggests the children/young people involved have a solid base of language and stories. Most children will have a ‘story’ to relate about friendship based on their school life – the environment in which the research is being conducted. It is also an ethically appropriate method to use because “…stories...play an instrumental role in developing their literacy skills.” (http://www.thestoryemporium.co.uk/oracy-to-writing/). Therefore, participation in the research process is likely to be congruent with their daily social and educational experiences.

**The practicalities of using the approach within a particular context and with particular children**

The small group size of five children/young people from each school is an ideal number in which to conduct all three phases of research; individual interviews, focus groups and workshops. The group size is conducive to in depth discussion and is a manageable forum to bringing together a range of views into an engaging story, with the basic elements of characters, plot, setting, conflict and resolution.

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1. See for example Storybank [http://e.iras.org.uk/storybank](http://e.iras.org.uk/storybank)
2. See for example Wordpress [http://creativeresearchmethods.wordpress.com/case-studies](http://creativeresearchmethods.wordpress.com/case-studies)
3. See for example [www.pixton.com](http://www.pixton.com)
4. It is important to note that this research is being conducted like the majority of research on children’s peer relations within a minority world country, within the school context (Konstantoni 2012). Therefore the author acknowledges that the proposed research design is not generalizable to other contexts.
Resources are fundamental to the success of creative methodologies. While storytelling may seem a simple method, the children/young people can have choice about the format of their story. They could produce a piece of creative writing, digital story, and visual or dramatic art form. However, choices around the format of stories will depend on (and maybe limited by) the given timeframe of 18 months, availability, cost and expertise of the experienced storyteller and access to resources such as computers and software.

It is imperative when using creative methodologies in research to ensure there is an expert available in the chosen creative method. It is not possible for the researcher to be fluent in all creative methodologies. Similarly, children and young people need to have access to quality materials so they are able to produce quality products. This shows respect for their creations, and positions their research data (stories) as valuable.

Using creative methods inevitably means providing adequate time for children and young people to work at their own pace, develop their skills, reflect and tap into their deeper emotions. In this project, a timeframe of 18 months will allow the children’s understanding and skill in storytelling to be scaffolded with each phase and the different activities over time. The activities also provide for individual and collective contribution and time for conversations about the stories. This is an equally important part of the process as creating the story itself.

The ethical issues associated with using the approach

**Consent**
It is assumed that formal consent would be sought from teachers, parents and the children/young people in order to satisfy the requirements of the ethics committee, but consent also begins to address the four broad considerations specific to children’s research. These consent processes assist the researcher to address any concerns that these adults as gatekeepers may have about the children being part of the research. However, informed and ongoing consent practices are essential in demonstrating respect for the child/young person’s competence to make a decision about their participation. This respect in turn addresses some of the differential power inherent in child-adult and participant-researcher relations and goes some way in reducing the chances of a child/young person being exploited.

**Ownership and Agency**
Storytelling as a method recognises the child as artist not a participant creating anonymous output. There is a shift in equilibrium from the researcher towards the storyteller who is leading the process, in this case the child/young person. The child/young person in the proposed methodology owns the story and is able to manipulate what is told, who tells it and how it is presented. Moreover, the child/young person determines what meaning is ascribed to the information in the story. Ironically, using creative methodologies that may assist in addressing the ethical considerations through children’s choice and agency are challenging to funders and ethics committees. The Ethics process can be tricky to manage if significant detail about research design is required but cannot be provided until children/young people are engaged in the research process. This is more often the case in more formal academic contexts such as the Research Council funding this project.

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5 There are four broad ethics considerations specific to children’s research; taking account of their competencies, children’s potential vulnerability to exploitation, addressing the differential power relationships and the role of adult gatekeepers in mediating access to children. See [http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk/Research-with-children-105](http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk/Research-with-children-105)
**Interpretation and Feedback**

Anderson and Balandin (2011) discuss their 'storybook method' as ensuring researchers have interpreted the meaning of friendship correctly from children's original interview data. In the proposed method, the focus groups aim to provide this data validation and follow-up with children and young people. The third phase of the research work where children create their own collective stories further ensures that the child/young people themselves have shaped the final message about friendship and that adult interpretation is minimised as much as possible. It also eliminates the need to provide feedback to children about the data that has been collected. The research results are evident as the 'storybook collection' and in so doing is accessible to participant children and young people.

**How would you propose to analyse what you find out, by using the approach, and the difficulties you might experience in such analysis?**

In Phase one, children/young people are interviewed individually and asked to relate a story about friendship. Similar to Bagnolia (2009, p.566), this is a broad instruction that enables children/young people to shape the task in their own way and the stories that result should provide an array of pattern about friendship. In using story, we understand that the child/young person selects particular components to convey the meaning they intend for the researcher (Riessman 2008). We suggest thematic narrative analysis of the 'text' of each story. The analysis would focus on the content and referential meanings, to identify implicit and explicit ideas within the data and produce a number of themes. This process could be obscured if the length of stories may differ, providing varying degrees of depth, and thus make it difficult to compare similar elements of story. There could be a lack of data if children/young people have difficulty with the task for a range of reasons because they are disinterested, have difficulties with literacy, or feel the topic is too sensitive.

Phase two is a focus group with the children/young people around the stories they have created to identify (and explore together) themes from their own narratives. This is a collective method that works to provide space for the children/young people to reflect further. It also uses peer narratives as stimulating material. However, analysis of focus group responses would be time-consuming. The comparative examination of aggregated focus group ‘text’ against individual stories within the interviews may rely on adult interpretations to a high degree. The results would need to be discussed further with children/young people to ensure their experiences have not been misrepresented. Nonetheless, it is considered best practice when using creative methodologies to combine task-based methods with traditional research methods. Punch (2002) suggests this ensures we treat children the same as adults; avoid children being patronized; and that they have a range of opportunities to display their competencies. A combination of methods that offers the triangulation of data provides increased validity (how well the methods answer the research questions). The focus group discussions are suggested here as a complimentary traditional research method.

Interestingly, (Konstantoni 2012) found that the age/competence, gender and ethnicity were the three most significant influences on young children when they chose their friends. It would be pertinent to analyse the data using these variables and interesting to determine if they remain constant for the children and young people in middle childhood in this research. The value of this analysis would depend on the demographic mix of children/young people recruited.

Phase three involves the children and young people creating a collective story about friendship. In asking children and young people to create a ‘storybook collection’ based on the themes they have identified (the results of the research), the storytelling method provides “Another way to ensure
that young participants engage in active and honest auditing of feedback data,... empowering them to “own their own data,... and explicitly define[s] the child’s right to alter this data as they wish.” (Anderson and Balandin, 2011, p286). In this sense children/young people are analysing their own data. Moreover, these collective stories could also be analysed thematically. Taking a grounded theory approach the themes from the interviews, focus groups and collective stories could be compared and contrasted to build theoretical models about the meaning of friendships.

Conclusion
Telling stories is an accessible research method for a range of participants as it accommodates a range of communication styles to produce valuable qualitative data. It is particularly useful in exploratory research and forms a solid base for thematic narrative analysis. Storytelling can be used creatively to shape the interests and skills of children/young people in research, taking on audio, visual or dramatic art forms. However, storytelling as a creative research method requires additional time, expert resources and thoughtful research design to ensure that the data produced in stories can be analysed to respond to the research question. The researcher must carefully deliberate on how children and young people’s stories can be respected and valued as research data. Storytelling is an appropriate way to creatively elicit the experiences of children/young people around friendship alongside other traditional approaches.
Bibliography


Punch, Samantha. (2002) ‘Research with Children: The same or Different from Research with Adults?’, in *Childhood*, 9,321-341.
