

A Creative Nonfiction Narrative Inquiry into an EFL online learning community during the COVID-19 Pandemic¹

Una investigación narrativa creativa
de no ficción en una comunidad de
aprendizaje en línea de EFL durante la
pandemia de COVID-19

Angeliki Ypsilanti, Ioannis Karras²

Ionian University, Greece

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² angypsilanti@ionio.gr, karrasid@ionio.gr

Abstract

University libraries globally launch coronavirus memory archival projects inviting the documentation of personal experience. Elicitations such as journal entries and oral history interviews fall under the category of life-writing. This Narrative Inquiry focuses on creative nonfiction stories produced by an online high school community and edited by the EFL teacher during the first full lockdown in Greece. The shift to distance education caused students to use ELF as a means of contrasting their local archival endeavors with global ones. The EFL teacher as researcher used mentor texts, collected the coronavirus stories on e-me online platform, engaged the online members in a peer-reviewing process and reauthored a collective narrative. Narrative writing analysis was employed to reflect the teacher's initiative to commemorate a student community's physical disconnectedness from onsite learning. The use of e-me for this collaborative venture offers practical implications for EFL practitioners such as going beyond the bounds of the traditional curriculum whilst identifying self-regulation as indication of resilience among students experiencing unprecedented circumstances.

Keywords: Creative Nonfiction, Narrative Inquiry, Memory Archive, Coronavirus, EFL, E-me

Resumen

Las bibliotecas universitarias lanzan a nivel mundial proyectos de archivo de memoria de coronavirus que invitan a la documentación de la experiencia personal. Las elicitaciones como las entradas de diarios y las entrevistas de historia oral caen dentro de la categoría de escritura de vida. Esta investigación narrativa se centra en historias creativas de no ficción producidas por una comunidad de secundaria en línea y editadas por el profesor de EFL durante el primer cierre total en Grecia. El cambio a la educación a distancia hizo que los estudiantes usaran ELF como un medio para contrastar sus esfuerzos de archivo locales con los globales. El profesor de EFL como investigador utilizó textos de mentores, recopiló las historias de coronavirus en la plataforma en línea e-me, involucró a los miembros en línea en un proceso de revisión por pares y reescribió una narrativa colectiva. Se empleó el análisis de escritura narrativa para reflejar la iniciativa del profesor de conmemorar la desconexión física de una comunidad estudiantil del aprendizaje en el sitio. El uso de e-me para esta empresa colaborativa ofrece implicaciones prácticas para los profesionales de EFL, como ir más allá de los límites del plan de estudios tradicional e identificar la autorregulación como una indicación de resiliencia entre los estudiantes que experimentan circunstancias sin precedentes.

Palabras clave: No ficción creativa, Investigación narrativa, Archivo de memoria, Coronavirus, EFL, E-yo

Resumo:

As bibliotecas universitárias lançam ao nível mundial projetos de arquivo de memória de coronavírus que convidam à documentação da experiência pessoal. As eliciações como as entradas de jornais e as entrevistas de história oral caem dentro da categoria de escritura de vida. Esta pesquisa narrativa centra-se em histórias criativas de não ficção produzidas por uma comunidade de secundária em linha e editadas pelo mestre de EFL durante o primeiro encerre total na Grécia. A mudança à educação a distância fez que os estudantes usassem ELF como um meio para contrastar seus esforços de arquivo locais com os globais. O professor de EFL como pesquisador utilizou textos de mentores, recopilou as histórias de coronavírus na plataforma em linha e-me, envolveu os membros em linha em um processo de revisão por pares e reescreveu uma narrativa coletiva. Empregou-se a análise de escritura narrativa para refletir a iniciativa do mestre de comemorar a desconexão física de uma comunidade estudantil da aprendizagem no lugar. O uso de e-me para esta empresa colaborativa e implicações práticas para os profissionais de EFL, como ir mais além dos limites do plano de estudos tradicional e identificar a auto regulação como uma indicação de resiliência entre os estudantes que experimentam circunstancias sem precedentes.

Palavras chave: Não ficção criativa, Pesquisa narrativa, Arquivo de memória, Coronavírus, EFL, E-eu

Introduction

University libraries in England and the USA have launched COVID-19 archival projects for public submissions of personal experiences. Most of them tend to address either the student or the wider local communities. A different in scope COVID-19 archival project targeting a global audience is that of the Oxford Center for Life-Writing (OCLW) which runs a project with writing prompts related to people's experiences of the coronavirus outbreak. Oxford University's OCLW as well as the Penn State University with its Viral Imaginations: COVID-19 project favor creative nonfiction (CNF) submissions, thus giving emphasis to the creativity factor in the documentation of living history in the making.

During the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, students of a Greek Lyceum tried to improve their intercultural skills by making their local stories globally known. Buchanan (2020, p. 4) explains that during the lockdown period students were "in need of community" and that they relied on writing "to communicate, create community, and remain connected" as well as "find their voices and share their experiences." Under the guidance of their English teacher, Greek students had analogous recourse to writing through the hive blog on the e-me platform where they shared their coronavirus experiences in response to writing prompts aimed at facilitating "reflections on identity" as "inevitably fluctuating in response to changing contexts" (Bennett, 2015, p. 577).

Taking into consideration that individuals in times of crisis tend to coalesce around issues of common concern, documenting and archiving ongoing experience in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) can play a leading role in the intercultural training of a specific online student community. The students' recourse to creative nonfiction (CNF) writing constitutes both a guided practice and a creative impulse that is further reinforced by the prospect of exchanging feedback through the e-blogging service of the e-me platform.

For the benefit of a bigger "emplotted narrative" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 7), the research question that guided the present study is as follows:

How can creative nonfiction be used as both a narrative research method and an object of narrative research in an EFL online context?

Literature Review

Background to Creative Nonfiction

Lott (2000) views the investment in “the self as the creative element of creative nonfiction” (p. 195). In other words, the self in CNF reshapes the factual reality from a participatory point of view thus becoming the bridge of communication between the writer and the reader. Gerard (2010, p. 22) explains that “every story is about the reader, so it must matter to the reader” which entails that the story must heighten the levels of emotional appeal and provide a confluence of mediating stimuli. To achieve this, it all depends on the writers’ perception and support of the emotion-specific content of their story.

Regarding issues of authorship and readership, CNF acquires a different dimension within a pedagogical context. As regards authorship, Silverberg (2019) explains how he integrated CNF into his creative writing courses imbuing ESL students with a sense of purpose through the practice of “automatic writing” (p. 256). Students engaged in writing personal experience essays that were pooled for feedback exchange in the “peer workshop” (Silverberg, 2019, p. 255). As regards readership, Gutkind (2012) points out that “the driving force behind creative nonfiction has everything to do with attracting and keeping the reader interested” (p. 74). According to him, if writers choose to tackle a “public subject with a personal and intimate spin,” they stand a good chance of “establishing a universal chord” with a wider reading audience (Gutkind, 2012, p. 74).

The Tele-educational Framework for ELT in Greece

The learners’ home space has been inadvertently transformed into a public one while attending the Webex online classes as replacement for face-to-face instruction. More specifically, the Greek Ministry of Education has put at the disposal of the educational community two platforms: the Webex synchronous platform which connects students to their teachers in real time and the Open eClass which is its asynchronous counterpart functioning as an open-source Learning Management System (LMS) that supports resources and assignment management. An alternative suggestion is that of the e-me platform which is an advanced example of a Personal Learning Environment (PLE) “driven by the learner needs and based on sharing rather than controlling” (Megalou et al., 2015, p. 2). The availability of such a virtual space is important, especially during the Covid-19 crisis, because it can “support both formal and informal learning experiences” (Megalou et al., 2015, p. 3).

When envisioning distance education on a macro-level, it might be useful to contemplate integrating its communicative aspects into an associated framework of informed action. Megalou et al. (2015) point towards the “social networking services”

as well as the “file sharing, blogs, wikis, messaging, and conferencing” tools provided by e-me “to ensure collaboration and communication” (p. 3). Nikiforos et al. (2020) argue that “virtual learning during the pandemic can significantly reshape and innovate teaching, as well as allow the continuation of fostering a sense of community” (p. 2). By encouraging localized attempts at writing about the coronavirus pandemic through any online education platform provided, students are not only encouraged in hosting their memories but also facilitated in using the co-occurring archives as open channels of communication with the outside world.

Models for Narrative Inquiry within an EFL Context

On the uniqueness of the CNF genre, Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) provides author guidelines on how incorporating reflection in one’s personal account of events can prevent the end result from being an intentless “collection of scenes open to reader interpretation.” For the teaching of the writing skill within an EFL context, certain narrative models for communicating personal experience co-serve the purposes of Narrative Inquiry. For example, Doman (2015) explores Language Learning Histories (LLHs) as student-generated accounts of their individual history of language learning, while Barkhuizen and Wette (2008) propose the collection of students’ reflections on their learning experience via “narrative frames” because they “provide guidance and support in terms of both the structure and content of what is to be written” via “starters, connectives and sentence modifiers” (pp. 375-376). Although both models are employable for data collection in the field of Narrative Inquiry, none of them use writing prompts on life events to trigger memory and reflection. CNF story writing could co-serve as an alternative collection model, but it has not attracted much research attention because it is considered less associated with the personal reflection essay in the context of ELT and more relevant to autoethnography in the context of anthropological methodology (Kim, 2016).

Narrative Smoothing in Qualitative Research

Kim (2016) espouses the idea that “narrative inquiry is a way of understanding human experience through stories that, in turn, help us understand better the human phenomena and human existence” (p. 190). He then goes on to assert Polkinghorne’s (1988) “equation of narrative inquiry with the study of narrative meaning” (in Kim, 2016, p. 190). According to Polkinghorne, the extraction of meaning from narrative data analysis is essential to drawing conclusions on their value. The proposed means of drawing meaningful conclusions is “narrative smoothing” which according to Spence (1986) “masks subjective interpretation as explanation” and “presents a good story that is not necessarily a faithful account” with a view to providing not only short-

term gratification but also long-term thoughtfulness (as cited in Kim, 2016, p. 192). The method of narrative smoothing is used in the context of Polkinghorne's "narrative mode of analysis" which "helps the reader understand how and why things happened the way they did and why and how participants acted the way they did" (as cited in Kim, 2016, p. 197).

From an educational standpoint, Creswell (2015) points out that narrative research is mainly aligned with "teacher reflection" (p. 505), hence the derived need for rearranging the collected types of narrative research forms (i.e., student personal narratives) in a meaningful and impactful way. Naturally, the question that arises here is "who provides the story" since teachers' and students' voices are often intertwined depending on what is at stake (Creswell, 2015, p. 506). If the teacher is both narrative researcher and co-participant in a story involving school life, then it becomes obvious that the resulting narrative will be a dynamic synthesis highly convergent in terms of theme and scope.

Similar Studies

While Downey and Clandinin (2010) explore the intersections between narrative and reflective inquiry to assess the dynamics of "unexpectedness" in retrospect, other narrative studies identify the coronavirus pandemic as the key variable in the way narrative inquiry handles the ongoing memory of events. While- and post-COVID-19 narrative studies tend to evaluate the pandemic's effects with a view to predicting its future impactability on collective memory either centering on concepts such as "narrative coherence" or on theories such as the "transition theory". More specifically, narrative coherence was used by Vanaken et al. (2021) in the form of an autobiographical writing task on coronavirus to predetermine the activation of positive or negative memories during students' exposure to stressful events. Likewise, the transition theory, as applied by Brown (2021), viewed the COVID pandemic as a dominant event that over time is anticipated to become an adjustable unit in autobiographical recollection. In both indicative cases, narrative inquiry into the memory of the coronavirus pandemic assumes the characteristics of an evaluative report that disregards the documentation of the individual voice as participatory at all levels of the inquiry process.

On the flip side, Kim (2016) cites representative examples of narrative inquiry as "phenomenon and method," "oral history," "life story," "creative nonfiction," and "fiction" (pp. 269-297). While in most of Kim's (2016) narrative inquiry cases the data collection methods involve field observation and tape-recorded interviews of a (semi-) structured nature, the example of "life story" stands out in that several participants have formed a writing group that contributes personal writing samples around a specific topic for intergroup discussion (Kim, 2016, p. 279). Although one might have expected

of the “creative nonfiction” example to constitute a similar case of narrative inquiry based on firsthand written accounts of a specific topic, the suggested documentation of “multiple voices” based on the “Bakhtinian novelness of polyphony” has been subjected to Polkinghorne’s (1995) mode of analysis to improve the readability impact (Kim, 2016, p. 287).

A polyphonic perspective on life narratives, where creative nonfiction as reflection takes the lead, has been conducted by Peters et al. (2020) who offer a compilation of 15 autoethnographical pieces detailing student experiences as active participants of China’s current IHE under the Covid-19 pandemic. More specifically, as autoethnographic accounts written from the point of view of each student-contributor, they are “honest, reflexive, and often emotional discussions of personal human experience” (Peters et al., 2020, p. 985). For this reason, they are considered empowered narrative pieces to be used for qualitative research purposes.

CODA in CNF Narrative Inquiry

The above-mentioned narrative inquiry example of CNF has a strong storytelling element that makes all the difference to the reader who according to Caulley (2008) has had enough of reading “boring qualitative research reports” (p. 424). Apart from the creative writing techniques that can be employed to achieve a less boring effect on the reader, Caulley borrows Burroway’s (2003) words to explain that the main thing is to invest in the truth even if its verbal recasting may end up “revealing new insights” into the lived experience of a specific event (as cited in Caulley, 2008, p. 447). It is this transfigured truth that Kim (2016) baptizes as “coda” highlighting that it “can bring the research a notch up, as the researcher evaluates what the researched stories might mean, after finding ways to transfigure the story’s commonplace to illuminate the larger society and bringing the readers together with the now of the research phenomenon” (p. 229).

Research Design

The present study relied on the characteristics of narrative research insofar as the core concept of story was sustained throughout to act as a point of liaison for the provision of a chronological framework. From the outset, the research problem rested upon the elicitation of the learners’ personal experience stories, which has been occasioned by the Covid-19 outbreak, inaugurating a mosaic collection of field texts written by students. The intent was to engage learners in writing down their memories under the auspices of an approved online platform, namely e-me, for the storage and longitudinal diffusion of a specific meaning-making process. Engagement

was premised upon the stance that there must be mutual consent on the shapeshifted alliance between the teacher and the student when it comes to recovering the sense of learning community in an online environment. My endeavor was to transform the virtual capacity of e-me into a critical and imaginative storage space by using the written responses submitted through e-me assignments as archival material in need of spatiotemporal specificity before recasting it “in a flexible storytelling mode” (Creswell, 2015, p. 508).

Steps in Conducting the Narrative Research

The collection and interpretation of the qualitative data of this study were derived following Creswell’s (2015, pp. 515-518) steps in the conducting of narrative research with the linearity factor adjusting to a multivariate explanatory framework.

“Step 1. Identify a Phenomenon to Explore that Addresses an Educational Problem”

The Covid-19 pandemic outbreak enforced a new set of operational realities to which everyone was required to conform. Further exploration of the vicissitudes of the educational reality, both inside and outside of school, led to the definition of the implications of the educational impact of online teaching and learning with the aid of the platforms provided by the Greek Ministry of Education. The issue of the new coronavirus as a debunker of social norms became the general subject of a reflection essay to count as a term assignment submittable via e-me assignments on e-me platform. Reflection was construed as a combination of recounting a personal experience and forging an unforgettable memory of it, the result of which was a compilation of individualized stories.

“Step 2. Purposefully Select Individuals From Whom you Can Learn About the Phenomenon”

This narrative study made a purposeful selection of 17 participants from the third grade of a Greek Lyceum on a North Aegean island. Students were assigned to contribute a personal experience essay for the school’s memory archive. Submission to the e-me digital platform received teacher and peer feedback through blogging during the second school closure in Greece (from November 9 to February 15, 2021).

“Step 3. Collect the Stories From Those Individuals”

The stories collected through e-me platform as assignments were handled as field texts that contained the students’ memories of what constituted their individual experience of a globally impactful event. Although students were allowed reasonable freedom to respond appropriately to a wide range of relevant prompts, it was agreed

that they keep within the bounds of the creative non-fiction writing genre. As a result, they came up with different forms of creative non-fiction writing such as letters, diary entries and personal essays.

“Step 4. Restory or Retell the Individuals’ Stories”

After the collection of the students’ field texts followed the processing and organization of the stories into a narrative structure. To prevent the possibility of methodically trying to arrange disparate reflections, connected by no discernible motif, retelling the individuals’ stories became the tactic choice to achieve chronological and causal sequence. Consequently, the students’ storied memories of coronavirus were logically sequenced, contextualized and assembled for the purposes of a *metastory* that was selectively reconstructed from extracts of the field texts by the narrative researcher-teacher.

“Step 5. Collaborate With the Participants-Storytellers”

The collaboration with the participating students-storytellers was carried out through the blogging facilities provided by the e-me platform. Students were invited to join the e-me blogs as active members in the role of peer-reviewers. As estimators of each other’s intended content, they came to the realization that their common concerns had to be broached by providing an evaluative commentary. It should be noted that students were advised against indulging in proofreading or reediting each other’s texts because the original stories constituted indispensable resources to the re-teller. Only at a later stage were the 17 stories redrafted by the teacher for the purposes of long-term storage of their final version.

“Step 6. Write a Story About the Participants’ Experiences”

Step 6 was more of a combination of Steps 4 and 5 since the “metastory” or metanarrative which was an essential component in the collaborative design process became an integral part of the final narrative report. The outcome did not only reflect the outgrowth of the participants’ coronavirus experiences but also the synthesis “procedures involved in” the strengthening of the intermediate spatiotemporal links (Creswell, 2015, p. 518). The hallmark of this step was the use of the first pronoun in the narration of the end story as a regulatory practice for preventing the development of a reader-unfriendly narrative.

“Step 7. Validate the Accuracy of the Report”

As regards the validation of the accuracy of the narrative report, provisions had already been made for coping with any discrepancies between real-life accounts and made-up stories by directing students towards CNF for emotional release. Furthermore, the choice of an officially approved online platform to operate as a long-life repository of knowledge, information-provider and social forum warranted the

objectivity of the report. The internal peer-review process reflected the development of student-directed collaborative work through content-sharing in a way that the idea of researcher involvement matured naturally over time.

“Narrative Analysis” of Data

The analysis of the collected data followed Polkinghorne’s (1995, as cited in Barkhuizen et al., 2014, p. 73) “narrative analysis” of “non-narrative data,” that is data that were not yet “in story form” but were carefully crafted by the narrative researcher who undertook the task of reconstructing a piece of “narrative writing” to tell the inbuilt evolutionary story. The end narrative was an example of “how storytelling can be used as a data analysis strategy” while the findings coincided with their “well-crafted, subjective interpretation by the researcher” (Barkhuizen et al., 2014, p. 89).

Findings

Narrative Thinking

I first came up with the idea of urging my students to record their coronavirus experiences when, during the school closure over the course of the first COVID-19 lockdown (from March 11 to May 11, 2020), I stumbled upon New York Times’ Learning Network whose Picture Prompts feature invited students to “strengthen their literacy skills” based on image-driven prompts, while the Student Opinion Questions feature gave students the opportunity to “practice writing for an authentic audience.” The picture prompt “Social Distancing” (Gamlen, 2020) and the question prompt “How Is the Coronavirus Outbreak Affecting Your Life?” (Engle, 2020) were ideal opportunities for an EFL teacher who was on the lookout for homework ideas to implement her asynchronous online teaching carried out by email. In fact, the question prompt was developed into a digital writing practice idea using Google Docs where students were required to enter their personal experience with a view to contributing to the creation of a digital archive.

During the second school closure from November 9, 2020 to February 15, 2021, my school gave teachers the asynchronous option to use either the e-class or the e-me online platform to support their teaching. I opted for e-me because of its additional use as a social networking platform. Even more appealing was presenting my own counter proposal to the capacity planning of an educational platform. This time, my inspiration was traceable to another project to which I became a regular contributor as from May 2020 responding to creative prompts about my own coronavirus experiences. “A Change in Morning Habits” was one of my contributions (Author, 2020). A further Writing Corona-assignment that became a bond between my personal continued process of self-reflection and my professional acknowledgement of the potential

for guided self-reflection came from Malmö University where I was registered as a Creative Writing student during the Autumn term of 2020. An optional assignment to reflect on the effects of the coronavirus led me to my submission which was published at Malmö University's website as part of a related project (Land, 2021).

The idea of a British and a Swedish University storing coronavirus memories using writing prompts led me to the realization that this was the best time for an EFL teacher to activate the hidden curriculum. To this end, after carefully sifting through a wide range of archival projects about coronavirus experiences run by University Libraries in USA and Great Britain, I settled on my own plan of action to give a meaningful purpose to online classes by engaging students in building their own memory archive using ELF.

For the purposes of the coronavirus memory archive construction, the 17 third graders of the Lyceum were asked to complete a term assignment based on a questionnaire which was meant to operate as a prompting guide to unlock their thoughts and feelings. The result was a personal narrative essay which was composed after receiving preliminary training in narrative writing through a selection of mentor texts from the above-mentioned projects. Having had the previous experience with a similar question prompt task, it was not difficult for them to respond, only that this time they had a longer word limit as well as the extra requirement to register on e-me platform. Other than that, they were allowed reasonable writing freedom to leave their mark on the world bearing the prior knowledge of what was expected of them and keeping in mind that they would have to create connection with other people in the world.

The process of organizing different life stories but also synchronizing parallel reflections depicted the philosophy behind this endeavor to weave past, present and future into the taut telling of a globally familiar story that cohered through everyone's contribution. In other words, my "prior knowledge and experience" generated the "narrative schema" that ordered students' writing activity which was supplemented by the activation of further sub-schemas about content development. In this respect, although I cued the students with authentic texts and an open questionnaire that incentivized them to establish their own narrative form, I was pleasantly surprised to find out that they developed their own cognitive strategies. My only aid to them was the presentation of the NYT Learning Network's narrative writing criteria (e.g., telling a story about a small but memorable event or moment in your life; using details to show, not tell; writing in your real voice; dropping the reader into a scene; reflecting on the experience and giving the reader a take-away, etc.) from which they selected almost in complete unison the one that pointed towards "reflecting on the experience and giving the reader a take-away" judging it to be the end point that came close to the global minimum of the target function of the coronavirus memory archive (Schulten, 2019).

I present Stratos' (one of the student-participants) "take-away" for the global reader which encapsulates yielding meaning from human experience and life.

I believe that the Coronavirus came to change the whole world and our society. It made us think about our future. It came to teach us that money has no value when it comes to health. It is here to show us that we need to love one another and to stop the lies and hypocrisy. We need to stop injustice, war, and conflict. We should see our future differently without hating others or chasing wealth. We ought to love nature and protect it, value friendship and family. We need to become better people!

Meaning-Making

From the students' point of view, coronavirus was identified as the memorable event that lent life new meaning constitution. Given that shared perception of reality prompts feelings of solidarity, students developed the need to participate in the compositional process of an enduring legacy because sharing memories gave them a sense of agency, a sense of personal power to make a statement. During the coronavirus lockdowns, students underwent adjustments of considerable proportions which compelled them to develop emotion regulation strategies. Writing down their personal experience of life during the coronavirus lockdowns precipitated catharsis which sprang from the sense of oneness with the impact of the crisis event and the larger historical picture within which the crisis event became inscribed.

Polkinghorne (1988) explains that the extraction of meaning from narrative writing constitutes a way of recognizing the implications of human experience in a specific time and place (as cited in Kim, 2016). This kind of meaning is the inquirer's distilment of different stories around the same theme with a view to giving orientation to the reader's impressions. The question that Polkinghorne (1988) raised was whether the inquiry subjects were left "at the mercy of the storyteller's recollection or introspection" (as cited in Kim, 2016, p. 190). My question is whether my students could have been involuntarily downgraded to a subaltern position by me given that I became their spokesperson to the rest of the reading world through authoritative selection of opportune pieces. The answer, complicated as it might be, is dependent on the extent to which empowerment constitutes a prime motivating force behind the writers' disposition.

The role of the creative self in the perception of an accepted truth, viz. the impact of coronavirus on a person's life, remains to be clarified. On the one hand, Lott talks about the self as a large container of "smaller selves" which enclose the truth of the whole of humanity in his attempt to prioritize the importance of subjective interpretation of factual truth (Lott, 2000, p. 198). On the other hand, Patwell (2021, p. 4) refers to

one's "Use-of-Self" as a defense mechanism in dealing with the turbulence of change brought on by the coronavirus pandemic.

Because the students' reflection essays have an inherent cognitive schema, I treat them as both field and interim research texts in my attempt to critically acclaim Kim's "Example of Narrative Inquiry as Creative Nonfiction" whereby multiple voices are documented in order "to create a virtual reality where stories seem real to the reader" (Kim, 2016, p. 286). Based on Bakhtin's "theory of novelness," Kim explains how a "dialogic truth can be derived from unmerged voices" "creating the open-endedness of a story that connects a participant or a reader to another and one story to another" (Kim, 2016, p. 73).

By allowing my storytellers to speak for themselves and resisting the temptation to link the disparate strands of the narration into a unified whole, I have succeeded in laying the foundations for a constructive dialogue among us.

Narrative Smoothing

Sacrilegious as it might have been regarded as in the first place to succumb to Bakhtin's (1981) "*official* monologism" (in Kim, 2016, p. 75) as opposed to the dialogic exchange that promotes the co-construction of the narrative, it felt like I would not have been doing justice to the students' narratives were I not to specify the spatiotemporal context within which the self would enter into dialogue with the others. To achieve this, I stepped into the role of the narrative smoother who either selected parts of the participants' stories or deliberated the confluent content to make up for the asymmetries for the sake of a *better* narrative account that made sense and appealed to the global reader.

"Chronotope"

Kim explains that Bakhtin's (1981) "chronotope" refers to the way time is interlinked with space and that "time is always historical and biographical," while "space is always social" (in Kim, 2016, p. 75) In the seventeen narratives of my students, time and space were either directly addressed to in background support of their account or were hinted at through their social sphere activity.

Apostolis' (one of the student-participants) account of how coronavirus entered his life is indicative of how an unexpected event intersected with his routinized use of time and place.

...three times a week I would train with the basketball team, playing basketball games every Saturday. We would also gather with my friends in the cafeteria every Saturday night. I learned about the pandemic in early December 2019, from the news on the internet. More specifically, I read that a deadly virus broke out in Yuhan, a city in central China.

If the first news of the coronavirus in early December 2019 provoked uneasiness and uncertainty about the imminent transfer of one “chronotope” to the other, it was not until early March 2020 that students became aware of the pandemic’s direct effects on their own lives as well.

Stratos resumed the development of the story by focusing on the first COVID-19 case that invaded his public sphere.

...it never occurred to me that it would affect Europe and especially Greece. Then, one day, a young woman in my town became sick from the coronavirus. She had just returned from a trip to the Holy Land with a group of people who brought this virus to our country. From that moment on everything changed! Our schools closed and within a few hours the whole country locked down as this virus transmitted uncontrollably.

After the historical and biographical reality followed the social realities of the coronavirus pandemic which included new social norms nesting within our familiar space with social distancing becoming the prevalent rule.

Myrto (one of the student-participants) pointed out how protected she felt thanks to the government’s measures.

Prior to the school closing, the pandemic was discussed in classes. Most of the teachers tried to give us tips for our safety and to keep us calm. I felt protected after the school’s decision making, because in that way we could follow better the government’s instructions for social distancing.

As from the beginning of November 2020 schools closed again which made Taxiarchis (one of the student-participants) write about the recurrent measures to which we were expected to conform.

And then by the beginning of November we went back to quarantine because of Covid-19 and we started again to wash our hands frequently and for first time we started online courses.

After almost two months of online classes, Christos (one of the student-participants) expressed his pessimism about going back to normal referring to the vaccines which were yet to arrive to our country.

Right now, I am definitely more cautious compared to the time before the virus hit us, I think that is the case for a lot of people. Unfortunately, it will be a while before things get back to normal again, as there are hundreds of new COVID cases every day in my country, and we are still far from a vaccine.

“The significance of the chronotope is that it allows the lived experiences of our research participants to be illuminated from historical, biographical, spatial, and social perspectives while providing a vicarious experience for the reader” (Kim, 2016, p. 2016).

The Self and the Others

Although I argued in favor of Bakhtin’s “polyphony” to show that individual voices should be kept uncut and heard on an equal basis, I explained how Bakhtin’s definition of space and time stands in need of a structured dialogue among the emergent voices. The fact that I have applied the narrative smoothing strategy to the presentation of a multi-authored story seems not to detract from the retainment of personal autonomy. In fact, my aim was to reduce the emotional distance between the different authorial voices by integrating them into a semblance of temporally and causally structured reality.

My decision to include the uncorrected assignments of students construed as field texts (data) for the purposes of the current narrative research was consistent with my intention to preserve each student’s employability of self, as this was depicted in each one’s emergent cognitive schema, intact. However, the positionality of the documented self in a fluid and mutable time and place is depicted as liable to transformation depending on social conditions.

Kostas (one of the student-participants) recounted his lived experience of the new social norms which changed not only his general social behavior but also his view of himself in relation to others. His self-criticism demonstrated his non-resistance to adopting a new stance towards life. His own self became the vehicle for recruiting likewise believers.

Honestly, I am happy that I’ve gotten more time to spend with my family. I’m connecting with them more than I had ever before since it was rare for all of us to spend time together. I’ve also learned some things about myself. There are some things I’m not proud of, but I’m happy I got to know what they were. Now, I can improve myself and my character to be a better person.

The concept of investing in the self as a rationale for showing the antithesis between the structured and the fluid self is analogous to the construction and the re- or co-construction of a usable narrative that renders its individual and collective services to authors and readers.

Good-Faith Interpretation

What has been left unsaid is how students were expected to read each other's submitted assignment and feel part of an online learning community with a dual communication purpose: to monitor each other's narrative of coronavirus experiences and provide peer feedback. The virtual space used for this purpose was e-me blogs where I created a blog addressed to the third grade of the Lyceum. There, I compiled all student submissions and asked students to peer review each other by leaving a comment.

The preparatory stage involved initiating students into positive feedback practices which was analogous to that of aiding them through mentor texts. Only that this time the texts on which they were supposed to model their own feedback was my own tutor's feedback. Kennette and Chapman (2021, p. 2) argue that "given the social isolation related to online learning, exacerbated by a global pandemic, positive feedback provides an excellent opportunity to create connection and community." In line with the above view, I proceeded with caution with my well-motivated reviewers by nurturing the right kind of critical attitude **and** customs for the preservation of an orderly freedom of speech. To this end, I found recourse to the following guidelines about feedback coming from Malmö University's *Creative Writing I - HT20-EN212A-02303 Course*:

Ground rules for feedback (Malmö University, 2020):

Respect. We are not here to show off, but to be helpful. In each moment we exist for the writers around us.

Patience. Writing is a communal and individual journey where everyone will be at different stages.

Open mind. There are no rights or wrongs, just process. The personal expression is important.

Consequently, my feedback based upon the above rules had both an evaluative and an instructive role which made students feel that by engaging themselves in peer feedback they would not only have a chance to communicate their own ideas to their fellow classmates but also operate as co-evaluators of a shared content. As far as the present narrative study goes, I adopted Josselson's (2004) "hermeneutics of restoration (faith)" approach according to which a mutual understanding was developed between the researcher and the participants that they be reciprocally committed to the implementation of the archival project (as cited in Kim, 2016, p. 193).

Discussion

Considering that both the researcher and the participants were assigned the role of the meaning carriers, it becomes self-evident that the field text represents the heterogeneous raw material on which narrative meaning extraction rests depending on the varying respondent perceptions.

In essence, the students' assignments have been used for different interpretation purposes, either from an external point of view in which case that would be the researcher's looking for the overall emphasis or in terms of internal coherence in which case that would be the content development emphasized by each contributor. During the negotiation stage between the researcher and the participants as to the best technique of handling the core narrative, each field text is initially decided upon as archivable in its primary form because of its historical significance. Therefore, the seventeen submitted assignments are deemed of storable validity because they are guided autobiographical pieces of legacy value. By acknowledging and showcasing each contribution on its own merits, the researcher has opted out of superimposed views on the participants' ones.

As regards the researcher, the qualitative features of a narrative inquiry based on the polyphonic nature of the field texts constitute what counts as "Creative Nonfiction Inquiry" because the participants have been acknowledged as equal research partners (Kim, 2016, p. 286). As regards the participants, their texts represent voices expressing their own truth based on real events and as such they are valuable if they are preserved unalterable. What is at issue here is to what extent prompting can function both ways for reciprocal fairness and awareness reasons. The mere act of entrusting one's truth to the other's venture of faith through the creative venue reinforces the cognitive engagement in creating a new model of dialoguing consciousness while it makes justice to the use of CNF by both sides involved.

The findings reflect the researcher's need to smooth non-uniformity in the participants' personal narratives or put differently, to re-narrate the immanent story. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) identify this need of filling the spatiotemporal gaps by contextualizing the narrated within a social framework as the Narrative Inquirer's problem-solving mission to make sense of the personal, practical and social implications of the bigger story for the sake of the "participants, the imagined reading audiences and the researcher" (as cited in Kim, 2016, p. 232). Kim (2016, p. 229) joins forces with the latter by pointing out that it is not just a matter of bringing the immanent story to the surface but also a matter of "transfiguring the commonplace in a broader context" as a way of inviting the reader's response and involvement in the final composition. More specifically, the researcher's responsibility to bring all pieces together so that readers can have access to a space where genuine dialogue is plausible is Kim's definition of "coda."

“Coda” is also what Barone and Eisner (1997, as cited in Kim, 2016, p. 230) refer to as the “researcher’s signature” on the final denouement because according to them the researcher is responsible for activating reader response. Whichever the motives behind extracting and synthesizing a “coda” at the end of the narrative research, the fact remains that contextualization provides empowering qualities to personal stories. In other words, the researcher’s narrative coda offers both individual and collective self-empowerment which should be proof enough that the advancement from field to final research text becomes a moral imperative that raises the standards of the final research report.

The results of this study supported the hypothesis that narrative research can fulfil its primary goal if guides and participants alternate roles along the way. More specifically, students were guided into engaging with prompt-based CNF writing as part of their asynchronous term-work responsibilities. Their registration on e-me marked their acceptance of the oral agreement between them and the teacher that alongside their reflective essay on their coronavirus memories they would also be compiling a memory archive paralleled to its global counterparts. The raising of a global consciousness through mentor texts as a precondition for contributing a local version of a memory archive has aided students in responding to a task-based personal narrative that ripened into an overarching story with beginning and middle leaving the end to be sorted out by the audience. In between the contemplatable “take-aways” for the reader and the imparted need for closure on the coronavirus narrative, the still occurring memories passed down from the authorship to the readership have expanded the roles of the researcher and the participants into collaborators accountable not only for making sense of the shared globalizing practice in ELF but also for setting up a model blogging community.

Conclusions

Practical Implications

From a practical point of view, the students’ personal narratives can be used as quarries for information concerning the hands-on experiences of a learning community. The concomitant development of a sense of local history is underscored by the teacher’s narrative account which serves as a temporal repository for future readers to consult. In essence, the derived story is the product of a constructive partnership between teacher and students from design to development. Of course, it should be noted that each party had a personal stake in this joint enterprise. More specifically, the teacher-researcher seized the golden opportunity to activate aspects of the official curriculum that may have lain dormant in government circulars for long periods of time. Sameshima (2007) explains how the curriculum can be re-narrated

by remolding the student and teacher identities as additional input. According to her “the use of writing inquiry enables teachers to ford connections between students and curriculum, students and teacher, and teacher with curriculum” (Sameshima, 2007, p. 9). As for the students-participants, they not only co-authored their learning plight via e-me, but they also offered comparable insight into the dynamics of self-representation across countries.

Methodological Concerns

In the case of Narrative studies, the difficulty of producing reliable data is a potential stumbling block for narrative researchers whose findings are frequently regarded as “the product of their subjectivity” (Barkhuizen et al., 2014, p. 88). Further criticisms might be that while “there is a detailed description of the data collection, there is no description of the analysis that leads to the published findings” (Barkhuizen et al., 2014, p. 86). Bearing in mind alike reliability lapses in the monitoring of the narrative writing’s reasoning, the present study draws on “Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) view of narrative both as a “social phenomenon (storied experience)” and as a “method of data analysis (restorying)” (as cited in Barkhuizen et al., 2014, p. 87) which is practically an outgrowth of Polkinghorne’s (1995) narrative analysis where “the narrative itself becomes an analytical tool that is brought to bear through narrative writing” (as cited in Barkhuizen et al., 2014, p. 84). For the purposes of the present study, storied experience and restorying are interpreted as constituting a dual-capacity analysis framework for the use of the CNF genre by both the participant and the researcher.

Directions for Further Research

The scope of Narrative Inquiry can be widened to include the experiences of the narrative researcher so that the result is a joint memory archive instead of simply a joint collaborative effort. To this end, the contribution of creative writing to the written form of the archival outcome could be further explored by organizing writing workshops for students to delve into the mechanics of specific sub-genres of CNF. From an ethics perspective, the co-narrator becomes as much susceptible to the prospective academic critique as the conductor of the study which automatically leads to the question of administering official capacity to students as authority voices to be accorded referential caliber in a narrative report. These criteria could be pre-specified as consultable guidelines to disallow the possibility of deviation from the expected norm. Given the fact that a memory archive is an official term for recording history the student-generated archive could be treated accordingly by specifying the receiving official body.

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Authors:

Angeliki Ypsilanti is an English teacher in Secondary Education. She has been teaching English (as well as History and Greek and European Culture) since 2003. She holds two B.A. degrees, one in English Language and Literature from the University of Athens, Greece and the other in Hispanic Language and Civilization Studies from the Hellenic Open University, Greece as well as an M.Ed. in TEFL/TEIL from the Hellenic Open University. She is currently a PhD candidate in Foreign Languages, Translation and Interpreting at Ionian University, Greece. She has a keen interest in learning foreign languages. She is a fluent speaker of English, Spanish, French, Portuguese and Italian while she has an elementary knowledge of German and Swedish. She has participated as a regular contributor of creative writing responses to the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing's Immeasurable Events project.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8333-4169>

Ioannis Karras is Associate Professor in Applied Linguistics & Intercultural Communication at Ionian University, Greece. He has lectured at universities around the world, has delivered talks at international conferences and has conducted seminars/workshops with international audiences. He has authored a book, a number of edited book chapters and articles in journals and conference proceedings.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1635-8192>

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