



Storytelling as a Research Method for Developing a Plausible Knowledge Management (KM) Model for Rural Communities

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Introduction

A qualitative research approach can be addressed with several research methods to obtain complex phenomena of reality in order to emerge concepts or theories. Storytelling is one appropriate research method to obtain rich data from individuals' stories or experience. Storytelling allows researchers to deeply understand natural setting through three aspects: temporality, meaning and social context. Storytelling has been used as a research method for knowledge management (KM) research with qualitative research approach to deeply understand and identify knowledge processes and KM component. This article will address how to use storytelling to develop KM model or draw a plausible knowledge processes and their components. For this purpose, the paper will explicate steps and techniques to accomplish storytelling from respondents at research sites to presenting stories as research texts—a plausible KM model.

What is storytelling

Storytelling is associated with both a research method and a data collecting technique for qualitative research. Formally, storytelling is known as narrative analysis research which focuses on stories of individuals (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). In terms of data collecting technique, story-telling refers to narrative inquiry which is concerned with data collection through telling and listening to stories (Conle, 2000). With narrative analysis,



researchers obtain rich data through story-telling by respondents. Telling stories of past events seems to be a universal human activity (Czarniawska, 1998). It can encourage respondents to give data, because it can make them feel proud that their stories are important (Creswell, 2005). Narrative analysis allows researchers to deeply understand a natural setting through three main areas to explore: temporality, meaning and social contexts (Elliott, 2005).

First, a narrative presents stories of events and actions which include a temporal dimension (Agostino, 2005). Each event is affected by past experiences, and has future implications (Riessman, 1993). As a result, understanding past experiences can lead researchers to explore both present and future stories. Second, a story's meaning is concerned with understanding the past actions of narrators. Storytelling is normally performed in evaluation clauses in which tellers tell a story according to how they interpret actions (Riessman, 1993). Lastly, stories involve complex relationships between activities, resources and conditions. Narrative researchers understand and explain stories based on contexts and structures, and expect audiences to be aware of the meaning (Riessman, 1993).

In short, storytelling focuses on experience of individuals in connection with social events and other individual stories to create accounts of phenomena. The reasons for KM researchers employing storytelling are storytelling allows researchers to gain rich data, to understand social phenomena or organisation in depth, and to focus on naturalistic methods which will be discussed in following section.

Reasons to employ storytelling for KM research

Storytelling can be a tool for KM research which employs a qualitative approach. This is because storytelling allows researchers to gain insight into how organisational members make sense of activities (Patriotta, 2004). To extend understanding, storytelling is suitable for qualitative KM research with three main reasons: to gain rich data, to understand an organisation in depth and to focus on naturalistic methods.



First, storytelling allows researchers to gain rich data through the specific contexts and respondents' stories. Individual stories present insights into a social setting (Bertaux, 1981). Furthermore, stories integrate culture, person and changes (Daiute and Lightfoot, 2004) which are major components of KM models. Second, storytelling allows researchers to gain deep understanding of the case study organisation. This is because narratives provide three main strategies—temporality, meaning and context of stories—which form a basis for the researchers' understanding. The last issue that makes narrative research suitable for KM research is that it is based on naturalistic methods. Telling stories is a natural activity and all respondents have stories to tell of their experiences (Creswell, 2005). Gudmundsdottir (1996) found that story-telling is the most natural way to elicit data and enhance the understanding of researchers. Prominently, researchers have less control over the social setting—unlike a case study where researchers focus on particular events and situations, or variables and action research provides an opportunity to help the organisations with problem evaluation and solution development (Bryman, 2004).

Even though, narrative research allows researchers to gain rich data, despite the small numbers of respondents and limited timeframe of this study, respondents may be reluctant to talk about some topics, such as political issues and painful experiences (Elliott, 2005), or they may create stories in order to be more entertaining (Creswell, 2005). To address these issues, research design for storytelling should focus on access to a research site and respondents selection.

Conducting story-telling in rural communities

This section will present techniques of how to conduct storytelling in rural communities from selecting research sites and preparing before entering a research sites to completing stories and leaving research sites.

1. Research site selection

Regarding the characteristics and purposes of qualitative research-- focuses on exploration and discourse of data (Polkinghorne, 2005), researchers have to choose specific



groups or organizations to obtain in-depth understanding in order to address research questions. For instances the research of KM model development for rural enterprises and indigenous knowledge transfer model of rural communities, a rural community enterprise that had several activities related to knowledge processes and communities that focused on indigenous knowledge transfer to young generation were interested, respectively. This is because, members of those communities as research respondents would have stories related to research topics.

2. How to gain access and acceptance

After choosing a research site, the researchers require to gain access to the research site and acceptance from communities. There are some techniques including use of gatekeepers, field buddies, and being temporary a member of community.

1) Gatekeepers are the people who allow researchers to introduce their research projects to communities, and introduce their organisations and organisational members. In fact, researchers may need another person to introduce and vouch the researchers to gatekeepers (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). Gatekeepers can be directors or managers, and board committee members of particular organisations.

From my own experience, I as a researcher gained access to a community enterprise in rural of Thailand by the introduction of an advisory committee member of the enterprise, and to communities that focus on indigenous vegetable activities by a group leader and an NGO worker who worked with this group. Then, they forwarded the researcher's intentions and introduced the researcher to the group board committee of both organisations. After that the researcher told rough research objectives to the committee at monthly meetings, and gained acceptance to conduct the research at their organisations. The prominent factor for obtaining acceptance for this research is the introducers who trusted the researcher and were willing to introduce the researcher to the organisations. The good introducers and gatekeepers also help researchers to be familiar with the community and respondents and finding field buddies.



2) Field buddies would help researchers to get fast rapport with communities. This would help researchers to gain insight or in-depth data from respondents. At the beginning of being in the communities, researchers would obtain the first buddy by introducing of gatekeepers or key informants. After that researchers would find other field buddies who can support them in finding right respondents. Another strategy for choosing field buddies is researchers should select field buddies who easily understand research objectives and get along well with. Importantly, buddies should be people who have free time for researchers.

3) Being temporary member of community is an essential activity for field researchers to gain acceptance and get rich data. To be temporary members of community, researchers can establish common things between researchers and respondents (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984), and fully engage in the community's culture and phenomena (Delamont, 2004). This merit would help to reduce gaps between researchers and respondents, and increase trust of respondents to researchers. Generally, researchers can do partial immersion which they spend their time at research sites but they stay and relax at their homes in order to have time to review data and come back to collect more missing data.

In author's case, she became a temporary member of a community enterprise by doing partial immersion in villages and the enterprise office. She had some days away from the village for relaxing and checking the completeness of stories collected. During staying in the village, the author stayed with one member's family and acted as a member of the family by helping them housework, enterprise's and group activities, such as hand woven work for the community enterprise and vegetable harvesting for the indigenous vegetable promotion group, and other favours for community members. Doing homage and helping people in the community helps researchers gain fast rapport because they can avoid being arrogant (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984).

3. Respondent selection

For respondent selection, gatekeepers play an important role for this because they know well the community members. In author's case, the introducers and gatekeepers helped



the researcher finding respondents by introducing the author to the enterprise's committee members and key members of each village group and requested them to choose their members to be respondents for the author's research. For the indigenous vegetable promotion group, gatekeepers suggested respondents who were active members in each village members. This is because those members would have full of stories about indigenous vegetable knowledge transfer from previous generation to them and from them to young generation. However, the author had to selected respondents from those of them based on willingness of the members and completeness of stories for the research. Some chosen members declined to participate in the storytelling with several reasons. The author had to search for substitute respondents and select more respondents. Finding additional respondents is important for qualitative research in order to gain rich and inclusive account (Polkinghorne, 2005).

4. Telling stories

After researchers were familiar with some respondents, researchers would start storytelling. Who the first respondent for telling their stories would be, how researchers ask respondents to start telling stories, and how researchers help respondents telling all stories.

1) Who is the first respondent for storytelling

Researchers should start the storytelling with a respondent whom researchers are most familiar with, who helps researchers to be more rapport with communities, and who can introduce other respondents for researchers. I started storytelling with my first filed buddy who the author was most familiar with. Another reason to choose that person as the first respondent is she could suggest other respondents for the researcher because she had known well other members and organisations' background.

2) How respondents tell their stories

Storytelling is a natural way of telling stories or experience of people (Creswell, 2005). Storytelling would take place in natural life styles through natural conversation or discussion (Creswell, 2005) at home or work places while doing routine work. Respondents could talk about their experiences without the influence of researchers'



questions. However, researchers can ask some questions to respondents for initiative conversation and expanding stories for sufficient understanding of researchers.

From my own experience, I started storytelling of each respondent by asking them to tell their stories and experiences from the beginning of their involvement with the organisations until the present. Then, I asked every respondent for furthermore stories if they want to tell more at this time or re-visit them whenever respondents would be available. Multiple sessions for data collection or follow-up interview or telling stories can clarify and expand account and richness of data (Polkinghorne, 2005). The strorytelling took place at repondents' places with respondents' dialect—Isan dialect for the research site in Northeast of Thailand.

3) Completing stories

Researchers generally try to complete data collection for a period of time except they need to observe the communities for whole rank of seasons. Generally, field work takes place in remote areas or in strange places where researchers immerse themselves for sometime. As a result, researchers have to ensure that they obtain enough stories to render the communities' phenomena in order to answer their research questions. There are some techniques to ensure completing of stories as following.

First, researchers do not obtain new stories from any respondents when they revisit some respondents. Second, researchers should roughly check stories collected, even though the stories are still not transcribed. Then, researchers can revisit some particular respondents or new respondents to tell particular missing topics.

In short, in order to conduct storytelling, researchers have to gain access to research site and to be accepted from community members. Gatekeepers and field buddies are a crucial factor for these processes. Then, researchers select the first respondent for storytelling which should be conducted with natural conversation and natural sitting. Finally, researchers need to check completeness of stories before leaving research sites.



Developing a KM model from stories

Researchers would present the stories with several aspects including analytic stories in order to render particular emerged stories to answer research questions or emerged theories (Creswell, 2005). However, interpretive researchers should present research texts with minimal interpretation and conceptualisation. The research texts should contain feeling of walking in the research sites (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). According to the study of Merriam (2002), qualitative research reports can be presented in creative manner including drama, film and dance. In terms of writing report, he suggests to present enough data in the form of quotes of respondents, episodes from researchers' observation or documentary in order to adequate support and convincing findings. On this basis, the author presented the stories from the field texts in two forms: natural stories with major particular scenes and analytical stories to present emerged theories.

1. Natural story presentation

Storytelling is good to begin with phenomena exploration rather than story analysis with theory comparison (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). I presented the stories in the form of natural stories through particular scenes that show the major stories or events of communities. Each scene was presented with contexts through thick description. The author started writing each story with describing communities in the aspects of geographic, activities and culture. This can help readers in seeing the communities by their own and interpreting stories with their own perspective before they are involved with interpretive stories by researchers.

2. Analytical story presentation

Story analysis is concerned with sorting and classifying based on theoretical consideration and interpretation of researchers in order to present stories as research texts (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The author employed coding into themes for story analysis based on the three basics processes of qualitative data analysis— describing, classifying and connecting as the suggestions of Dey (1993) in order to find concepts of phenomena to draw a KM model and knowledge transfer model of the communities. The story analysis

comprises three steps: identifying themes, coding for themes, and presenting stories as research texts. Figure 1 shows overall story analysis in accordance with basic processes of qualitative data analysis.

1) Identifying themes is the process of carefully considering stories in order to understand insights and to find themes or categories of data (Creswell, 2005). The themes of this research were come up from both the stories and theoretical framework. The researcher read over the field texts several times in order to understand the stories and to emerge themes

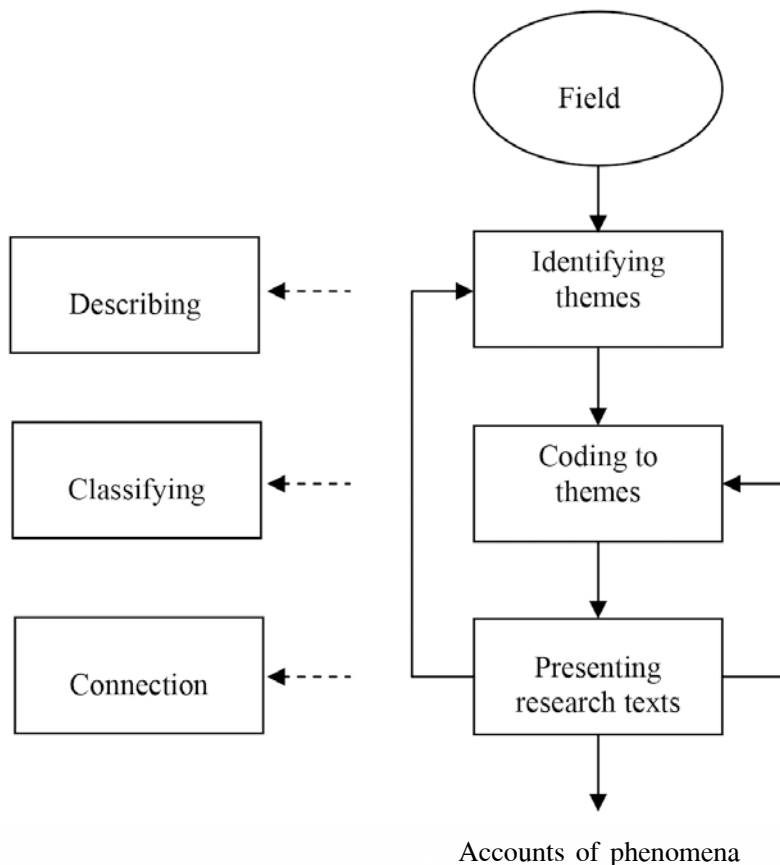


Figure 1 Story analysis framework based on basic processes of qualitative data analysis



2) Coding comprises four processes: extracting text, coding, classification, and refining codes (Gibbs, 2002). Codes have to represent concepts of each passage. Thus, field texts were extracted into small passages based on the themes, and assigned codes for each theme. Then, codes are assigned to each passage to represent classes and sub-classes. Lastly, codes had to be refined throughout the data reduction process in order to improve the accuracy of coding the passages of text, and to enhance overall understanding of the material.

3) Presenting stories as research texts which are the series of accounts that are connected small particular passages together based on categories or themes. In order to maintain grace, wit and felicity of qualitative research texts, the KM model or research texts were presented with less interpretation by the researcher and thick descriptions by including respondents' own words and contexts.

In short, the research texts for storytelling research comprises both natural stories with major particular scenes and analytical stories which are presented based on theoretical framework of the research in order to answer research questions. However, research texts should be started with natural stories in order to provide readers contexts and phenomena of stories for interpretation stories by themselves when reading the analytical stories in the later part.

Conclusion

In brief, storytelling is one method for qualitative research known as narrative analysis that obtains rich data through the most natural way of people—telling their own stories. Storytelling allows qualitative researchers to understand complex phenomena of natural setting through rich data of stories which enclose temporality, meaning and social contexts. As a result, storytelling would help KM researchers to deeply understand phenomena of organisations to draw KM models. There are several techniques including 'being there and being accepted', telling stories of respondents to acquire enough stories to draw conclusion of finding, and story analysis in order to developing of KM model—story presentation to readers.



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