Building Multimodal Bridges: Formulating the Future of Education through Human Roots from the Present and the Past

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Abstract

The younger generation is frequently viewed by educators as disinterested in the past [1]. Debates often arise whether this happens because curricula whitewash history and present only limited perspectives of it [2] or because the younger pupils in class tend to only focus on the present contemporary times as the only valid experience due to its familiarity [3]. In this light, this paper follows the suggestion of Nokes [4] that educators should focus on the students' present realities while also aiming to build students' historical literacies, helping them to learn to read and reason critically with historical texts and evidence from the past. Therefore, this paper follows Zachrich et al, who suggest that a process should be initiated adopting the use of authentic human stories as pedagogic resources which can bridge the past of the nation with the contemporary situations familiar to the young adolescents in class [5]. After a sound literature review, this paper intends to contribute to the field of curricular development by focusing on insights learnt through a process where stories and narratives were collected aiming to bring students closer to their roots and instigate them to critically reflect on their roots. Adopting a thematic approach methodology [6], human stories transmitted during the local radio programme Fuq Fomm Kulħadd [7] will serve as data. As a conclusion of this paper, I intend to present ten practical multimodal suggestions through which other educators willing to embark on such a hands-on innovative pedagogical initiative may do so in a more informed way.

Keywords: *Pedagogical resource, use of authentic media texts, multimodality*

1. Introduction: The Power of Narratives

> Telling stories is as basic to human beings as eating. More so, in fact, for while food makes us live, stories are what make our lives worth living. They are what make our condition human [8, p.1].

Reflect on the last 24 hours. How many stories did you encounter along the way? If you read the latest news of the day, that is indeed a story being narrated. If, during your break, you watched one of the episodes of your favourite Netflix series, that is also another story. After a day at work, while sharing quality time with your partner or friends, what was shared about what happened to family members or at work also included at least (to mention the least) one story. While stuck in traffic, the advert on the billboard on the busy street also told you a story about a product being sold. And if a family member – parent, sibling or child – sent you a WhatsApp message about a school report, an unattained promotion or a just-received medical result, that is also another human story being narrated to you.

Now reflect on the same (last) 24 hours. How many stories did you narrate? If you spoke or even thought about your childhood years, that is a human story being narrated. And if before sleeping, you told your kids or nieces a bedtime story, that too is an activity which involves stories being told. And if you visited your best friend over coffee, or even a therapist during a psychotherapy session, and spoke about what you are going through right now, all you were narrating were very valid and insightful stories.

Jackson adds that 'whether they are religious stories or personal stories, or tall stories, or lies, or useful stories, we live by telling each other and telling ourselves the stories of ourselves' [9, p. 9]. This realisation might come as a taken-for-granted surprise to you. However, without being always aware, humans are indeed surrounded by stories in their everyday lives.

Chessler and Sneddon [10] view stories as very powerful sources of information. Even the most 'normal' neutral and mundane story frames, and thus selects one or several limited episodes from many others [11]. While narrating the story, the narrator relies on memory, which could be collective memory or personal memory, and eventually ends up including only selected details [12]. These

details are determined by the choice of words, which position the story (and eventually the narrator) in a certain field of discourse, therefore presenting several hidden, unmentioned biases and silent intentions, while omitting other equally valid voices and interpretations from the narrated story [13]. Linked to this element of unequal power in storytelling, Bhattacharya [14] suggests that to benefit fairly from stories and their use, one should embrace multiplicity and seek to listen to as many stories as possible.

The task of finding a great number of stories might appear easy due to the frequency of stories in human lives. However, Presser [15] advises that though stories continuously surround human lives, with those stories from mainstream cultures, there are also countless normal, unheard (and unseen) stories which eventually never end up narrated or retold. These include stories which come from family members such as parents, siblings and grandparents [16], neighbours and other members of the community [17]. Additionally, there are also stories coming from people living on the borderline, i.e. not from the mainstream segment of society [18].

2. Methodology: An Amalgamation of Narrative Inquiry and Self-study

Therefore, in this light, as a contribution to the field of knowledge, this paper intends to ask two pertinent research questions:

1. Which experiences do researchers working with unheard 'normal' stories encounter?
2. Based on these experiences, which suggestions can one formulate, serving as insights for other researchers and authors working with similar stories?

To answer these research questions, data will be taken from the three-year-long research journey, which led to the publication of the weekly radio series Fuq Fomm Kulħadd [7] published weekly on Calypso Radio Malta. This series, produced by the author of this paper himself, includes a weekly 3-hour radio programme, each presenting an unheard 'normal' story of a person living in Malta, narrated in the first person. Adopting narrative inquiry techniques [19], the author collected the human stories between 2023 and 2024, selecting the stories through snowball sampling [20]. Semi-structured interviews were the main data collection tool [21]. Each interview was recorded, transcribed and later edited with the help of a professional editor, who served as a critical friend of the author during the writing process.

These research questions will be answered through a self-study data analysis technique [22]. Adopting thematic analysis [23], the results will be based on insights from the narratives presented during the weekly radio production, on the responses of the listeners received through phone or sms, and also based on notes taken from the diary written by the author himself as fieldnotes. The latter also includes personal narratives as experienced during the data collection research venture. The amalgamation of these data sets ensured a level of self-criticality and therefore led to a multilayered self-study exercise, reducing biases as much as possible [24].

3. Findings and Discussion

The thematic analysis conducted leads to three sets of findings, namely:

- *Findings derived from to process of collecting the narratives*
- *Findings derived from the analysis of the narratives and their contents*
- *Findings derived from the evaluation based on self-study principles of the narratives as presented in the final version of the radio production.*

The paper will now include a section about each of the three abovementioned types of findings.

4. Findings Derived from the Process of Collecting the Narratives

The narrative collection exercise indicates that even the person appearing as the most common and ‘normal’ acquaintance has indeed a valid story to narrate. This finding resonates with the idea of Baxter [25], who suggests that even the most common person has a life story, waiting eagerly to be discovered and written by someone. The way the respondents answered when requested to narrate their story was, in most cases, an embracing one, accompanied by a sense of appreciation that their

story was finally being heard. While the author was collecting the narratives, he showed a great sense of gratitude that he was being told the particular story. On the other hand, the general feeling shared by the respondents was one of appreciation. They felt thankful that someone gave them space to narrate an untold story. This also counts in the case of respondents who were in their seventies and eighties and had never narrated their stories. Particularly interesting was the quote by the oldest participant in the narrative collection exercise, Maria, who at the time when the interview was done was a hundred and eleven years old. Right after the interview, Maria told the author, "I feel blessed that I had the opportunity to share this story. It revived my memories and gave me a voice to share them with you and with many others. I bless you for this' (Maria Farrugia – Interview Excerpt).

A second finding derived from the narrative collection process indicates that before people share their stories, they require an amount of trust in the person they are sharing their stories with. Similar to Wang [26] this trust is built gradually and needs consistency. In this aspect, the researcher was helped by the fact that for almost twenty-three years before the research exercise, he had been producing weekly award-winning radio programmes on national radio in Malta. Frequently, when participants were approached to tell their stories, they would mention the respectful way in which the researcher treated and presented stories throughout his media career. This increased the sense of trust in the respondents who had eventually listened to past programmes and therefore felt more at ease sharing their stories since they knew that the scope was purely educational and always avoided sensationalism. A case in point is Temi Zammit Jr, the nephew of doctor, archaeologist and author Temi Zammit. Temi Zammit Jr, who was past his 80s when the interview was done, had for years avoided any type of interview with other media houses. Similarly, this happened in the case of the wife of Tramps' lead singer Domenic Grech.

Another realisation serving as a finding throughout the data collection process is that when storytellers agree to say their story, it is not always a bed of roses for them. Revisiting and talking about past events may not always lead to positive emotions [27]. This was the case of the storyteller who was narrating how she was one of the last people to visit the Twin Towers before the 9/11 attacks. Even though she narrated the story around twenty years after the fall of the towers, she concludes the narrative by saying: even though years passed, now that I am narrating the story, I still feel the same turbulent emotions I felt on that day [28 and 29]. Similarly, the narrative of the mother who gave birth to quadruplets points again to this finding. This is evident in the way the mother narrates about the moment when she received the unexpected - somewhat shocking - news that she was giving birth to four babies, and the words she used when she explained how one of the babies due to premature birth, suffered a head thrombosis resulting in a cerebral palsy leaving her disabled for life. Even after twenty years had passed since the birth of the quadruplets, the mother still spoke in a very emotional way about the happenings. In two other separate stories, the narrators spoke about their parents, who they felt created some sort of pain they have carried since childhood. Though over sixty years had passed since the happenings and both parents were dead, the two narrators still felt a sense of pain, and they expressed that they could still not forgive their parents for what they had done. Because of these and other events, throughout the data collection and data analysis phase, as a sign of respect towards the narrator, where similar events were encountered, professional assistance was offered. This gave the storytellers the voluntary possibility to tackle these felt emotions in the best professional way possible. Throughout the research venture, advice and support were sought frequently. In all, this research venture involved the services of two psychotherapists, one sexologist, a nutritionist, two lawyers and a general practitioner. Through this measure, the sense of trust mentioned in the aforementioned finding increased, and storytellers felt more at ease and well-equipped throughout the data collection exercise.

One other finding derived from the narrative collection process indicates that the researcher should be flexible to accommodate the requests of the storytellers. Nicmanis [30] suggests that when dealing with human stories, rigidity might make the researcher lose good stories, which remain untold. In this data collection exercise, whereas the researcher planned to publish all the stories including the actual name of the narrator, in the case of the person who narrated how he refused to have a mobile phone, the researcher had to flexibly adapt to the will of the narrator who wanted to remain anonymous since he felt that people around him would see him as old-fashioned and could eventually end up judging him. Similarly, the researcher had to flexibly remove a strong and insightful story, even if already recorded and edited, since the narrator felt that he and his story were not as worthy as the other people the researcher usually includes in his media productions.

A last finding which emerges from the process of narrative collection is the one linked to the way questions should be set. At the beginning of the research venture, hoping not to lose any element of the narrated story, the researcher prepared a very detailed set of questions which he planned to ask

storytellers. However, over time, while still preparing a set of questions in advance, similar to Shotton [31] it was felt and observed that rather than pre-empting detail through questions, to help and encourage speakers to share their stories openly and at their pace, the interview should instead rely on a set of open questions inviting the narrator to freely retell his/her story. In between these open-ended questions, a set of follow-up questions should inquire for further details about incomplete information and missing details from the stories, which the researcher still has questions about.

5. Findings Derived from the Analysis of the Narratives and their Contents

Together with the findings derived from the process of data collection presented in the previous section, another set of findings comes from the thematic analysis of the narratives themselves.

To start with, a first finding is the compilation of frequently unnoticed or unheard-of details that the storytellers mention and which, without these narratives, could easily be missed, lost or forgotten forever [32]. A case in point was the narrative given by Ġorġ and Mary, who are amongst the last residents who lived all their lives in Mdina. They mention how in their childhood years, during the week of Our Lady tal-Karmnu feast, an annual race was organised, traditionally known as *it-tellieqa tax-xjuħ*. During this race, elderly people competed against each other, and the winner could win a belt or a hat. The same couple speaks about Nettu and his long-lost skill of making fruit-shaped ice cream. Those buying ice cream from him could, for example, buy a prickly pear or peach-shaped ice cream. Another example is the narrative of Leli tal-Melħ. The salt producer, who was in his late eighties when interviewed, mentioned another long-lost tradition he recalls from his childhood, when on the feast day of St. Anne i.e. the 26th of July, farmers from all localities in Gozo used to reach the saltpan area in Xwejni (Marsalforn) on their donkeys, and after waiting for long hours in a queue, they would buy large sacks of salt which would serve them for the whole year.

This compilation of frequently unnoticed or unheard-of details was also observed in narratives of stories which happened more recently. Gaia Cauchi – the first Maltese winner of a Junior Eurovision Song Contest in 2013 – had already given many interviews. However, on a different note, in this interview, because of the focus selected by the author, Gaia spoke for the first time about how she experienced the Festival, popularity and the victory, from the perspective of a child. She also mentions untold funny events, such as when she did not understand what the national Medalja tal-Qadi tar-Repubblika implied. She also points out that in hindsight, she would change the way she experienced her childhood, and if she could turn back time, she would prefer experiencing a more normal, playful childhood.

Similarly, a great deal had been previously written about the story of Salvu ta' Kemmuna (i.e. one of the only two residents living in Comino). However, in the case of this research venture, Salvu narrates his memoirs of an almost unheard-of Comino, when, back in the mid-1950s, a thriving community of 37 people used to inhabit the island. Therefore, this finding suggests that, when researchers are listening to storytellers of more recent and familiar situations, attention should still be given to untold or unmentioned details [33].

The data analysis phase of the narratives indicates that storytellers frequently feel that what they express through words would be fully comprehended by other aids, particularly through photos. A major turning point in the research venture was the decision to collect photos as a data set supporting the narratives. This decision was taken because the storytellers continuously mentioned that in their view, they would explain better if they could show at least a visual of what they were talking about [34]. When asked to complement the narrative through photos, storytellers had different reactions. In some situations, photos were available. For example, Ġorġ Cutajar iċ-Ċinell, who served as a bus driver in Malta for 60 years, gave the author a massive and heavy album full of photos [28, pg 137]. Others had sparse photos. Such was the case of Temi Zammit, who had only one photo showing his late grandfather working in his laboratory, which was never published [28, pg. 127]. This photo was hanging in a frame in the storyteller's sitting room and required an elaborate and delicate mission for the author to scan. In the case of the Wembley ice cream narrative [28, pg. 224], the storyteller remembered he had one photo in a broken frame, which he kept somewhere in a store. It took the storyteller three weeks to find the photo, which was then eventually scanned and published on the radio station's Facebook Page. Joe Cini, who played in the first-ever international football game of the Maltese National team, said he had a set of photos, which, however, he could not find because another interviewer had taken the photos and never returned them to him. In these cases, the researcher is encouraged not to lose hope and look for other possible sources which could have similar photos [35]. In this case, the Department of Information and the National Archives of Malta served as good sources which the author could contact. Other NGOs, such as the Malta Football

Association, could also serve as invaluable sources which might provide the required photos. On the other hand, unfortunately, other storytellers – such as Manuel Camilleri and his tea shop façade, Lina Debono and the xuwa oven, and Joseph Briffa with his 150-year family confectionery - had no photos at their disposal. These narratives remained with no original photos since they were not available anymore.

This lack of photographic evidence is also at times experienced in the case of more recent stories. Even though mobiles cameras today are very available at hand and many tend to take photos all the time, since the storyteller would probably never intend to capture the moment narrated in the story, photos are frequently either not easily accessible or they might be available in low-quality resolution and therefore still provide missing details when accompanying a narrative [36]. Furthermore, because of the globalised nature of the contemporary world, some of the needed photos were stored elsewhere around the globe (i.e. not in Malta). At times, thanks to technology and its advancements, storytellers from Canada [28, pg. 101 and 171], the Vatican [28. pg. 49], Switzerland [28, pg. 60], Alaska (28, pg. 174], the Philippines (28, pg. 210], New York [28, pg. 132 – 133] and Australia (28, pg. 107] managed to send their photos more quickly and at a faster pace than the Maltese storytellers residing in Malta.

Another finding derived from the analysis of the contents of the narratives indicates that storytellers feel a sense of responsibility. While trying to include as many details as possible, they also tried to present the story in the best, precise and most clear way possible [37]. For example, Carmel, the storyteller who has a War Museum at home, was adamant about making it clear that though he had these collectables related to war, he was 'totally against war. Not one hundred per cent, but two hundred per cent against war'. Similarly, Rachel, who shared her story about how in her childhood she was diagnosed with Diabetes type one, felt that she needed to remind the author to point out - at least twice in the recording - that whoever is listening the story, needs to consult his general practitioner with questions linked to her Diabetes story.

It is worth noting that at times, one observes incongruent, incomplete or unclear details included in the stories. These are then double-checked through the consultation of informed sources. However, the researcher should keep in mind that even the most prominent authority about the topic could lack the knowledge being shared in the narrative. A first reaction would be to discredit an unknown fact mentioned by the storyteller. However, when faced with such unknown details, further research could serve to confirm or negate what is being told. In some cases, expertise is destabilised by what the storyteller has to say [38]. This happened in the case when one of the interviewed storytellers proudly shared his story about how, in his teens, daily, he used to sell ricotta to the national Maltese poet Dun Karm Psaila, after the priest used to say the 8 am mass in Sliema. At first, to the researcher, this detail that the national poet used to frequent Sliema came as a surprise. Dun Karm Psaila is frequently associated with other Maltese localities such as Floriana and Valletta. When transcribing, analysing and editing the interview, to present a faithful, informed and true story, the author sought help from an academic professor specialising in Maltese literature, who, from his side, was also surprised - almost incredulous - to hear that Dun Karm used to frequent Sliema. However, when this detail was double-checked with official local council records, what the storyteller was saying turned out to be true and accurate. In fact, in the Sliema area where the national poet used to say mass and therefore buy the storyteller's ricotta, there is even a street called in his honour, i.e. Triq Dun Karm.

One last finding derived from the thematic analysis of the narratives hints that the researcher at times, needs to negotiate with the storyteller. At times, this negotiation leads to the actual inclusion of relevant details, which, according to the storyteller, at first are deemed as not important [39]. A case in point was the negotiation with Joe Tonna, who narrated a story about how when his young daughter passed away, a colleague approached him and asked for a lock of hair of Joe's demised daughter. To Joe's surprise, this colleague showed him his collection. This consisted of an album with hair locks of dead people. The storyteller felt at ease in narrating this story to the author; however, he preferred not to have it published. At first, the storyteller feared any consequences that this could have on the relatives of this collector. It took long hours of discussion and long phone calls to negotiate and to put Joe Tonna's mind at rest that, since the person he is mentioning is anonymous, the consequences he was thinking about would probably never materialise. Eventually, Joe Tonna, a few months before his death, agreed happily to have the story published.

In some cases, particularly where corporate organisations are involved, this negotiation includes both the storytellers and the company they represent. Such was the case of the story of Marjes Zammit, who works as a People's Consultant with Google. Once the interview was done and transcribed, the content was sent to the storyteller, and this was shown to the HR team at Google. None of the content was changed. However, before proceeding with the publication of the story content, the organisation's approval was required. Similarly, in the case of the story of the Maltese monsignor who served as an

assistant to three popes at the Vatican, the text was shared with the storyteller, who at the time represented the Vatican. Most of the text remained unchanged. However, a short paragraph which included a positive experience the priest had with the current pope (i.e. Pope Francis) was removed. This happened because the storyteller felt that since the Pope was still in office, a light personal experience could be interpreted as showing a lack of respect towards the office and authority of the Pope. Therefore, the storyteller preferred not to include this episode in the final version of the narrative.

At times, this scrutiny (sort of double-checking) came from the author himself. Particularly where negative episodes or health-related issues were mentioned, the author felt that double-checking with the storyteller was crucial. For example, when Patri Karm Aquilina mentioned how he was beaten and punished at school because of the dialect he speaks, the author asked him whether he would like to rephrase such a strong statement. The storyteller, however, confirmed that he wished the statement to be included and asked the author to add that this beating happened repeatedly. Similarly, this double-checking occurred when Ġorġ and Maria, the couple residing in Imdina, mentioned how a particular police officer used to gossip about people and how some residents used to receive anonymous letters, which created a lot of anxiety in the Imdina neighbourhood.

6. Findings Derived from the Evaluation Based on Self-study Principles of the Narratives as Presented in the Final Version of the Book, Published Based on the Content of the Radio Production

One final set of findings emerged from the evaluation of the narratives as presented in the published version of a book [28 and 29] published on the content of the radio production *Fuq Fomm Kulħadd* [7].

The first finding points out the importance played by the prologue of a book of narratives [40]. The author included a short opening narrative sharing how his grandmother Mari used to believe that every person has an almost unbelievable story waiting eagerly to be narrated. When the author was writing this prologue, it was included as an almost decorative entry to the book. However, feedback received by the editor and also by those reading the book does point out that these three initial pages serve more than just decorative ornaments. Through its contents, the prologue seems to set the tone and mood of the whole book, paving the way and putting the narratives following the prologue in context.

Another result indicates that when compiling similar narratives together, the order the stories are presented in impacts the reader [41]. The varied content amalgamating past and present events, narrated in the first person and including a rich variety of voices (i.e. from the youngest being 14 to the oldest being 111 years old), also amalgamating a myriad of various topics ranging from serious such as death and tragedy to lighter topics such as ice cream and jellyfish cooking, makes the collection a more reader-friendly one.

From an author's perspective, writing the introduction of each narrative was a much easier task than writing the chapter conclusion [42]. Equally challenging and time-consuming was establishing the final chapter order. The opening chapter (after the prologue) includes the narrative of the man who made three million teas, while the closing narrative includes the memories of the worker at the Wembley ice cream factory. The selection of these two chapters and all the chapters which came in between was determined by this sense of variety which runs throughout the volume. Chapters which do not have photos were placed between other chapters which include photos. This too created a sense of variety, order and balance throughout the book.

Readers preferred shorter narratives rather than longer ones [43]. Even if the length of each chapter was intentionally kept to a maximum of four pages, with only very sparse exceptions, the readers did point out that the latter could be shorter. Similarly, the readers spoke that they tended to prefer reading the chapters haphazardly (i.e. in their preferred order, skipping randomly from one chapter to the other) rather than following the order set by the author. This seems to be a postmodern reading trend which gives the reader more control over the narratives and leads to a more intimate, interactive experience of reading [44].

7. Contribution to Knowledge: A Set of Recommendations for Researchers Working with Narratives

After providing this comprehensive discussion serving as an answer to the first research question, as a proactive reaction derived from these findings, the paper will now answer the second research question through a set of practical recommendations aimed as aids for researchers working with narratives. These are the ten points serving as a contribution to knowledge:

1. In each ‘normal’ and at times taken for granted person, there is a story waiting eagerly to be narrated.
2. In the case of popular personalities whose story seems over-exposed, there is still an undiscovered, less-known side or aspect of the narrative that the researcher needs to explore.
3. While collecting narratives, researchers (and authors) should give the storyteller ample space to talk. This is possible through the selection of good, well-thought-out, open-ended questions which encourage the narrator to share his/her experiences.
4. Collecting stories from individuals requires trust, which is built gradually between the narrator and the researcher. This trust can be enhanced through respect, the author's flexibility and professional support in cases where the story involves pain or unaddressed emotions.
5. The researcher should distinguish between sensational gossip and narratives.
6. Where available, photos and other non-verbal audio-visual resources can complement narratives.
7. Experts in the field may be helpful to cross-check the mentioned details. However, at times, keep in mind that the storyteller may know details which experts have no clue of.
8. Readers tend to prefer shorter narratives.
9. The way the narratives are presented – specifically balancing and varying themes as well as the selected order designed by the author and editor - may impact the readers' interpretation.
10. Readers at times interact with narratives in different ways than those originally designed by the author. Therefore, allow space for reader interpretations and celebrate them.

8 Conclusion: An Embracing Invitation

As a reader, did you realise what just happened?
Indeed… through this paper, the author was – maybe without your full awareness – sharing with you his untold story of the insights obtained through the two-year-long research venture which led to the publication of the narrative collection included during the Fuq Fomm Kulħadd Radio series [7].

This story is the author's interpretation of the experienced events and encounters mentioned throughout the narrative. This exercise primarily served as a reflective self-study exercise evaluating the intensive but rich journey, which then led to the forthcoming *Fuq Fomm Kulħadd* publication [47].

However, this is not the end. On the contrary, this is just the beginning. Adopting Kress and Van Leeuwen's [46] stance, the discussion presented in this paper is a welcoming invitation willingly embracing other interpretations based on the experiences of readers of the collected narratives and of other researchers who in the past have been involved in similar data collection exercises involving narratives.
Why all this? Time is ticking. The Fuq Fomm Kulħadd series is still ongoing. Therefore, the insights which result from these discussions will serve as solid grounds for a more informed research experience, eventually leading to the continuation of the publication.
This is the end of the story, … but only for now.

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