

# Guidelines for Case Study Research and Teaching



## Association of African Planning Schools (AAPS) Case Research Toolkit

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This toolkit contains teaching and training material on the use of the case study research method in urban planning. It comprises this resource document and an interactive CD.



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# Building a narrative

View the file  
*Narrative\_1.ppt* on the CD

WHILE CASE STUDIES can be presented in various ways, this often involves ‘a substantial element of narrative’, which is necessary to adequately describe the complexity and ambiguity of real-world events and processes. ‘Good narratives typically approach the complexities and contradictions of real life. Accordingly, such narratives may be difficult or impossible to summarise in neat scientific formulae, general propositions, and theories’ (Flyvbjerg 2001: 84).

The narrative is a powerful way of presenting complex case study findings: it involves giving a detailed account of events as they actually happened. The essence of the narrative approach is to tell a valid and coherent story. To narrate is to tell a story, to give an account of incidents or events by combining qualitative and quantitative data. A good narrative makes it impossible for the reader to ask, ‘So what?’

A good narrative progresses from ‘harmony’ to ‘conflict’, and then to ‘harmony at a higher level’. Nearly all folk tales, regardless of cultural background, follow this basic structure. It arrests the attention of the audience or reader, and enables you to present your research findings in a common, understandable form.

## Basic characteristics of the narrative approach

The basic purpose of a narrative approach is to tell a valid and coherent story. Put differently, to narrate something is to tell a story in some detail.

- A ‘story’ is an account of a series of interlinked or mutually influential incidents or events; a process, or a range of facts pertinent to a situation in question.
- To ‘tell’ (in the academic context) is to count, to make known, to give an account of events which combines qualitative and quantitative data.
- To examine something ‘in detail’ is to cut it into pieces, to itemise it, and to pay extended attention to particular elements, keeping in mind their relation to the broader ‘whole’.

Producing a narrative always begins with empirical reality: actual events in a given set of circumstances.

The key questions underpinning a narrative are:

- How did a state of affairs come about?
- How were particular events and actions perceived and interpreted by relevant actors?
- How were subsequent actions affected as a result?

Answering these questions requires a detailed examination of real-world processes. Theoretical considerations then emerge in response to these empirical accounts; they do not pre-empt and predetermine the analysis, as is often the case with structuralist approaches.

Starting with a close examination of reality, and allowing theoretical considerations to emerge as the analysis proceeds, requires a particular sensibility on the part of the



researcher-narrator. Thus Flyvbjerg notes that, 'in order to stay close to the complexities and contradictions of existence, case researchers ... demur from the role of omniscient narrator and summariser in favour of gradually allowing the case narrative to unfold from the diverse, complex, and sometimes conflicting stories that people, documents, and other evidence tell them' (2001:86). Therefore, researchers conducting case studies must cultivate a patient, detached, and pre-conceptual perspective of events and processes. Such processes may seem incomprehensively complex at first glance. Producing a valid and coherent account of events means taking time to reflect on findings, deferring personal judgements, and giving the story space to emerge and achieve coherence on its own accord. The story is an open process, which changes as new facts and interpretations come to light.

Even when published, the case study should not be thought of as 'closed' or 'finished'. A good narrative does not seek to 'instruct' the reader about the meaning and value of a case in a unidirectional way; rather, it encourages a dialogical attitude by leaving room for the reader to develop his or her own interpretations and conclusions. It allows for the reader's 'voice' to enter the research, alongside the voices of case narrators and actors. The narrative approach is therefore a primary means of ensuring that case research involves a polyphony of voices.

### 'Don't tell me, show me ...'

In order to 'show,' good case study narrators make extensive use of direct quotes, yet avoid overanalysing their content. A general guide for researchers is to include direct quotations in a ratio of 1:3 with the main text. Refer to the quotes when necessary, but be wary of 'overstretching the facts' by imposing your interpretation. Observe the proposition, 'the best quotes don't need to be explained'.

Plot structure is a crucial aspect of any story. The account may be full of vivid detail, expressed in consummate language, emphatic rhythm, and visual metaphor, but if the overall plot is unsatisfactory, the story will have little meaning. Good stories take you on a journey; they unsettle and disturb at first, but gradually guide you towards a cathartic resolution. As such, case studies progress according to the same basic structure: from 'harmony' through 'conflict' to 'harmony at a higher level.'

- The beginning, a plateau that sets the scene: *harmony*;
- The introduction of a tension whose resolution is not obvious: *conflict*;
- The ending, a new plateau where the *conflict* is resolved or at least explained: *harmony at a higher level*.



## Elements of Plot 1

Time

Place / location

Actors

Actions

Consequences

Tension / conflict

Context

Questions to tease out the plot:

When?

Where?

Who?

What?

How?

Why?

With what consequences?

Who gains and who loses?

- Listen to Vanessa Watson telling her story; *Watson.mp3* on the CD

View the file

*Narrative\_2.ppt*  
on the CD

## The two plots

A case narrative involves two 'plots'. Plot 1 is concerned with actual sequences of actions and events. Plot 2 is the conceptual and theoretical plot, comprising all the theoretical propositions made in the course of the study. These plotlines are integrated within the narrative, and the researcher moves between the two as the story progresses.

Plot 1 is concerned with actual processes: sequences of actions and events. It is the story created in response to the questions: when, where, who, how, why, to what end, and for whose loss or benefit? Plot 2 is a conceptual and theoretical account, comprising all the propositions made by means of the case narrative. The task of the skilful narrator is to weave these plot lines together; to move between the 'real world' and the 'conceptual' world. It is sometimes suggested that the best case narratives rarely refer to Plot 2 through theoretical propositions – the 'propositions' are implicit in the 'real world' plot; they reveal themselves to the reader without need for explanation. This is no easy task; few people write well enough to artfully weave together complex events and insights into a clear and understandable form. Nevertheless, when done properly the case method is unparalleled in the interest and insight it can evoke.

## Feedback and verification

A good case narrative has been rigorously checked for validity and reliability. Effective feedback and validation procedures are therefore vital. They will give you confidence in the veracity of your account of events.

Feedback and validation can be achieved in different ways. Two particularly effective methods are as follows:

### A basic narrative progression

'Once upon a time there lived in a certain village a little country girl, the prettiest creature who was ever seen. Her mother was excessively fond of her; and her grandmother doted on her still more. This good woman had a little red riding hood made for her. It suited the girl so extremely well that everybody called her Little Red Riding Hood. One day her mother, having made some cakes, said to her, 'Go, my dear, and see how your grandmother is doing, for I hear she has been very ill. Take her a cake, and this little pot of butter.' Little Red Riding Hood set out immediately to go to her grandmother, who lived in another village. [HARMONY] As she was going through the wood, she met with a wolf, who had a very great mind to eat her up, [CONFLICT] but he dared not, because of some woodcutters working nearby in the forest' [HARMONY AT A HIGHER LEVEL] Nearly all folk stories, regardless of cultural context, follow this progression (think of famous children's stories, movies and books).

Send respondents your written account of your interviews with them. This will enable them to identify any omissions, discrepancies, and misinterpretations. If the interview was conducted in a different language, they will also be able to correct poor translations. This may also provide you with an opportunity for a second interview, in order to discuss problems and possible amendments.

## Structuring case narratives

Structure the narrative before data collection

Allow the structure to change

Use chronology to build the structure

Use actors to build the structure

Develop a good 'hook:' a particularly captivating event/problem or situation that leads into the main story

Develop a good 'tie:' a paragraph that sums up your study particularly well

Use small hooks to keep the reader interested, but not too many!

Select a group of relevant actors to sit together and discuss the narrative. Their combined reflection may help them to remember important events or influences.

Another way of representing the basic narrative structure is the progression from 'hook' to 'tie'. Creating a 'hook' involves presenting and describing a particularly captivating event or situation. The 'hook' is designed to capture the reader's attention; to set the scene and mood for the rest of the story. It may involve the entry or exit of an apparently significant actor, a tense meeting, an open conflict, or any other situation which the reader can sense as being atypical and extraordinary. 'Hooks' can be strategically used throughout the narrative (for example, at the beginning of chapters or sections) to maintain the reader's interest.

The 'tie,' on the other hand, is the story's harmonious, resolved conclusion. Not all endings are 'happy,' but at least they should provide some sort of explanation, a 'summing up,' of why events happened as they did.

Writing and presenting your case in this way arrests the attention of the audience or reader, and enables you to present your research findings in a common, understandable form.

## References

Flyvbjerg B (2001) *Making social science matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press

