

Methodological perspectives on composite narrative cases in action research

Søren Frimann, Jan Rohwedder, Anne-Birgitte Nyhus Rohwedder, Deidre Le Fevre

Abstract: This article examines the methodological possibilities and tensions of using composite narrative cases (CNC) within action research. Building on a Scandinavian, dialogically oriented research tradition, we demonstrate how CNC can support collaborative inquiry and shared meaning-making, thereby fostering participant engagement and a sense of shared ownership. The article argues that CNC can distill complex empirical material into accessible narratives while preserving anonymity and practice-based relevance. At the same time, it highlights key methodological and ethical tensions related to power dynamics, and validation. The findings suggest that, when used reflexively and dialogically, CNC can strengthen the communicative reach, future-forming potential, and participatory quality of action research beyond single-case studies, and we call for further research exploring the role of CNC in diverse communities of practice.

Keywords: composite narrative cases, action research, dialogical inquiry, methodological reflexivity, participatory methods

Perspectivas metodológicas sobre composite narrative cases en la investigación-acción

Resumen: Este artículo examina las posibilidades y tensiones metodológicas del uso de *composite narrative cases* (CNC) en la investigación-acción. Basándonos en la tradición de investigación escandinava, orientada al diálogo, demostramos cómo los CNC pueden apoyar la indagación colaborativa y la construcción compartida de significados, fomentando así la participación de los participantes y un sentido de pertenencia compartida. El artículo argumenta que los CNC pueden destilar material empírico complejo en narrativas accesibles, preservando al mismo tiempo el anonimato y la relevancia práctica. Al mismo tiempo, destaca las tensiones metodológicas y éticas clave relacionadas con las dinámicas de poder y la validación. Los hallazgos sugieren que, cuando se utilizan de forma reflexiva y dialógica, los CNC pueden fortalecer el alcance comunicativo, el potencial de formación de futuro y la calidad participativa de la investigación-acción más allá de los estudios de caso individuales, y hacemos un llamado a que se siga investigando el papel de los CNC en diferentes comunidades de práctica.

Palabras clave: composite narrative cases, investigación-acción, indagación dialógica, flexibilidad metodológica, métodos participativos

1. Introduction

This article explores the methodological opportunities and tensions that arise when engaging with empirical material in action research in ways that balance scientific integrity with meaningful contributions to practice development. More specifically, we draw on empirical experiences to explore the advantages and demands encountered when using composite narrative cases (CNC) in an action research project.

Despite having worked with action research for several years, gaining substantial experience in designing and conducting research projects, we still struggle to engage in action research processes that aim to foster learning, development, and change, while simultaneously distilling empirical material in ways that both hold scientific integrity and are accessible and relatable for the participants. Hence, we have become increasingly interested in methods that allow for both analytical depth and practical relevance. Specifically, we seek strategies to communicate empirical material with participants in ways that enhance ownership and make the research process tangible and actionable. At the same time, we face the challenge of communicating these situated insights into narratives that are accessible and meaningful to broader audiences, including practitioners, colleagues, and scholarly readers. One methodological approach that holds promise in this regard is the use of CNC.

The call for this special issue invites contributions that explore how action research can extend its reach – connecting “microworlds,” bridging communities of practice, and creating actionable knowledge that contributes to systemic change. In this context, we propose CNC as a methodological pathway for scaling out action research beyond the single case while preserving its participatory, practice-based essence. By weaving together situated experiences into collective narratives, composite cases enhance communicability, enable ethical dissemination, and democratise access to knowledge co-created within action research processes. In doing so, the paper contributes to current discussions on enhancing the reach and scope of action research by offering a methodological approach that upholds scientific relevance and ethical integrity, and strengthens the communicative scope of participatory research.

In action research, questions of reach and scope have long been associated with the challenge of moving beyond single, context-bound cases without sacrificing the action element (Gustavsen, 2003). CNC offer a way of addressing this tension by enabling patterns across situated experiences to be woven into communicable narratives that preserve practice-based grounding. Moreover, the method provides an ethically responsible strategy for sharing practice insights in ways that reduce risks of identification, thereby allowing action researchers to disseminate findings that might otherwise remain unpublished.

CNC are narrative accounts constructed from multiple participants’ experiences, which are interwoven into a single storyline that integrates authentic data with the researcher’s interpretive insights and reflections (Johnston et al., 2023; McElhinney & Kennedy, 2022; Willis, 2019). CNC combine authentic empirical elements, such as quotes, paraphrases, and thematic patterns, with the researcher’s interpretive reflections. In doing so, they offer a way to represent collective experience while preserving anonymity and contextual nuance (Duffy, 2010; Johnston, 2024; Johnston et al., 2023; Willis, 2019). Although CNC remain under-explored in action research, they appear to hold methodological potential for addressing the challenges commonly faced by action researchers.

This leads us to the following research question: