Author’s response to reviews

Title: How medical teachers use narratives in lectures: a qualitative study

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Responses to reviewers (in red in attached file)

Reviewer reports:

Reviewer #1: I found this a really fascinating read. It is quite apposite that research about narratives seemed to tell a story, was well written and represented a compelling read from beginning to end. I have considered it against COREQ requirements and think it meets these relatively well. Thank you

It is long. At times potentially over-long. I agree. (I have tried to balance the cuts, and the additions that all the different reviewers have suggested – but I am aware that in the end this has not shortened the paper overall).

The background presented is lengthy and I wonder whether the author might economise on some of the history there to make the piece as a whole briefer and more readable. Thank you; I have cut this section

The methodology as well as methods is presented in some considerable depth. In one respect this is good - in that there is certainly sufficient information there to ensure that the piece meets COREQ requirements. In another respect it reads a bit like a thesis which has been insufficiently abridged prior to publication. I am, however, for the most part more content to see such lengthiness in the methodology section.
The results are really very well presented. Quotes are well used. Their interpretation is well justified through triangulation. I would not recommend any changes to this part of the manuscript. Thank you

The most disappointing part, I think, is the discussion. I would have been keen to see the author adopt a more conventional structure here - starting by highlighting his main findings, moving on to discuss how these add to, emulate and differ from the existing literature, followed by a discussion of major limitations and strengths, and then the conclusions section. Agree, thanks for suggestion see below

I would suggest:

- The author abbreviates some of the background/introduction by taking out references to related studies that they can then reflect upon in their discussion. Thank you for this suggestion. I have removed the paragraphs about the history of stories in medicine, and attitudes to stories and anecdotes and have transposed them later in the discussion.

- That they restructure their discussion around a more conventional template, particularly spending some time reflecting, for the benefit of the reader on what their piece of work adds to the existing global literature on the topic. Thank you, I have adopted this more traditional structure where possible and in my view it has clarified and strengthened this part of the paper.

I think with those amendments it would hold together better as a piece and would seem more final and ready for publication.

I am happy to look at this again with those amendments.

Reviewer #2: The background while interesting is a bit long and repetitive. I would ask the authors to provide a more concise outline of the pedagogical theory for using narrative and why it is an important construct for their paper. As above, I have now made this section more concise, clarified the narrative theory section.
Typo page 7 Categorize corrected, thank you

Page 7 should be written in prose as a purpose of the paper and not as aims and in outline form. I have written this out in prose now.

Page 8, the author uses a first person narrative that is atypical for medical journals, it is also not clear what the person's position has to do with the methods. Use the Author instead of "I". I have altered this so that I now refer to myself in the third person as “The Author”, or “he”. (I confess I am uncomfortable with this style as it seems less authentic, and I do believe that my position is relevant in this qualitative study – but I will be guided by the editors).

The author did not comment on how they might have or participated in "data checking" ie using a triangulation approach to determine if the analysis made "sense" to the participants. The process is not clear on the top of page 12...how persuasive the author was....did the author discuss their analysis with the participants? What was the content of the discussion? Did the process "taint" the data by co-constructing meaning? I have added a more detailed description of the nature of the focus group discussion/triangulation on p12

“During interviews and focus groups, the author presented some examples of narratives he had identified to lecturers and students and asked them whether they agreed this was a type of “story”. The author then went on to ask what lecturers’ intended meanings were, and what students’ understanding of the stories was. Further questioning explored the lecturers’ reasons for telling the story, why it was told in a certain way, and whether students found it helpful for learning and if so in what ways. Finally, the author would reveal his own analysis of the story in question, describing its place within the constructed typology – its dominant theme – and ask students and lecturers if they felt that this analysis made sense to them”.

Page 13. the use of colors...Labov's model is not clear to the novice reader...it makes the authors findings confusion and difficult to read. I think the colours should make more sense when the colour-coded Labov model illustration is eventually inserted at that point in the text. If not, I am happy to add further clarification in the text, or just revert simply to black and white text.

It is not clear Labov's model relates to the typology of narratives and vice versa. The Labov model does not relate to the typology of narratives or vice versa. I have now made this clearer in the text.
The result section should be much more concise it is presented in away that does not "develop a story" for the reader…it feels a bit haphazard in its approach to what appears to be interesting and intriguing findings

I have chosen to leave this as it is for now, given reviewer 1 comments on this section. I will be guided by editors if further changes required

The conclusion does not clearly tie into the abstract . I have re-written the conclusion, and reflected this in the abstract. See below.

Reviewer #3: It was a pleasure to review the article. Thank you

It needs a few changes that I am describing below.

The background is written with a focus on displaying the importance of narrative learning in medicine. The research is focused on how narratives are used by lecturers and students in the teaching learning process. Hence the reviewer suggests that the background be restructured to reflect the goal of the study. The author may make his point about the importance of the narrative in teaching learning process with 1-2 paragraphs and utilize the rest of the paragraphs in background to shed light on lecturers and learners and how often they use the narrative in learning. To be fair, there are a few examples already but there needs to be a better case made for usage of narrative in basic clinical sciences. Thanks. I have added several sentences in the background addressing the widespread use of lectures in undergraduate medicine, the pedagogical limitations of lectures as a learning tool, and the theoretical benefits of using stories in lectures.

The author may consider including research which shows that students in these situations learn better by narratives and hence justify the need for narrative based teaching in basic sciences. Thank you for the suggestion. My rationale for the study rests on the theoretical benefits of stories in learning/teaching; and the lack of any existing empirical research in this area - I have not been able to find any further literature on the use of narratives in lectures. I have tried to make this point clearer.

It may also be pertinent to reference studies across the globe rather than only UK based literature. I am fully in favour of reporting studies from around the globe. My searches have not been restricted to UK databases or studies – my literature search reflects the range of studies I have been able to find.
Methods: This is a well written section.

However I didn't find a focus group guide or a set of questions that were made for in-depth interviews. Also how were these questions decided? Were they based on previous work or on literature review? I have the question guide for interviews with lecturers and students; it is available to publish if requested. I have added the following text:

“One-to-one semi-structured interviews with the three respective lecturers were guided by a semi-structured interview guide. They explored their perspectives on the use of narratives in general, their views on the author’s analysis of their lecture in terms of narratives they told, their views on a few specific narratives and the meanings they were intending to convey, and their potential role in teaching and learning”.

“I used a mixture of key questions with subsequent items depending on responses; some suggestions for prompts including reading them relevant passages of their lecture in which they used narrative; and used mainly open-ended questions (see question guide)”.

“The [student] interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview guide, designed to explore students’ thoughts on how any stories might have influenced their learning”.

The questions were decided based on the theoretical benefits in the literature of using narratives in lectures/teaching. I wanted to start without reference to stories, to see whether elements of the lecture that I had identified as stories had stood out for either group. I then developed my question line focusing on the stories which I had already identified, to triangulate the views of lecturers, students and myself, For example:

• Whether they agreed with me in the Labov analysis that it was a story
• Why the teacher told that particular story – the meaning, or message they hoped to convey/students received
• If students found it helpful to their learning and if so, in what ways
• See earlier for explanation of analysis in more detail
It may also be interesting to find out how many students were invited and how many agreed to come for the focus group discussion. If the invitation described the goal of the FGD in terms of narrative, it is possible that those students who were interested in narratives where signed up for the FGD and hence the results would be extremely biased. It is extremely pertinent for the reader to understand the process of invitation and informed consent to rule out seeing a selection bias. Agreed. I have added information about numbers of students and the nature of the invitation, to the methods section.

“The sign-up sheet and consent forms explained that the study would explore the teaching approaches used during the lecture with neutral reference to the use of narratives”. The decision to make this clear was driven by ethical considerations.

“Approximately 20-30 students signed up from each lecture”.

[I agree this has a bearing on potential bias in terms of the students’ attitudes to use of stories – as outlined in limitations section. But I don’t agree that it necessarily follows that if they had an interest in stories, this would greatly influence my findings on how stories might affect the learning process. In the same way that deliberately choosing lecturers who used stories in their lectures allowed me to study the phenomenon in depth, interviewing students drawn to narratives might offer more thoughtful insights on their use in learning. The wording of the invite did not suggest a bias of the study one way or the other towards narratives, merely that narratives would be the focus. Perhaps most reassuring is that fact that students felt very able to make negative comments about the use of narratives in the lectures, as demonstrated in the results section].

Results are written in a lucid manner.

Discussion needs to be more elaborative.

The author sets out to identify various parts of the learning process. But it does not find much place in the discussion which is mainly focused on the memory aspect of learning process. I have tried to expand more on the meaning-making process in discussion

Meaning-making is an important part which is described well in results but needs more attention in discussion. How can it be improved by narratives? What was done in the interactions to find out more about these learning processes?
The author has the opportunity to discuss various themes and learning process. He may also venture to discuss how including the narrative process can strengthen the learning process and if there are other studies that have demonstrated this. Again, there is limited literature in this area, already outlined in my literature review.

It may also be pertinent to discuss what obstacles need to be overcome or what initiatives and/or incentives need to be undertaken, so that lecturers are enticed to include more narrative based teaching in their lectures. Will it require a major upheaval of training of lecturers or will it require workshops and training courses for them. Since the manuscript discusses the use of narratives by lecturers on a positive note, it becomes necessary to suggest steps to improve its use. Thank you. I have added a suggestion on this in the conclusion section. I am reluctant on the basis of this research to advise that lecturers should use narratives more in their teaching - I don’t think my study has that power.

“More research is needed to provide evidence of the impact of narratives or stories on learning outcomes for students. However, for lecturers or faculty interested in using narratives – especially stories - as a teaching tool, this study may offer greater awareness of their potential and some guidance in how to use them in a more focused way”.

The conclusion that "Greater awareness by lecturers of the range of possible narrative types, and the nuanced differences in the messages that each type conveys may augment the benefits of using narratives in lectures" is not based on any evidence or results of the study. Thank you. On reading this through again, I agree. I have re-written the conclusions of the study:

“The findings support existing literature in this area which suggests that narratives may be a useful tool for learning in medicine. This study suggests that narratives tap into several key learning processes including providing a relevant context for understanding, engaging learners, and promoting memory. For medical students in basic science lectures, narratives or stories may be particularly relevant in promoting the “softer” aspects of medicine, including professional identity, and empathy.. More research is needed to provide evidence of the impact of narratives or stories on learning outcomes for students. However, for lecturers or faculty interested in using narratives – especially stories - as a teaching tool, this study may offer greater awareness of their potential and some guidance in how to use them in a more focused way”.
Overall the manuscript achieves what it set out to do, but there is scope for further improvement (there always is!) and it would be a pleasure to read the manuscript again if these changes are made. Thank you

Reviewer #5: This article brought an interesting subject in an original article. I could not find fresh articles about it. Thank you