

Critical Education

Volume 16 Number 4 November 30, 2025 ISSN 1920-4175

The Emergence of Narrative and the Discovery of Humanism Curriculum and Research Lessons from the Italian Renaissance

Saville Kushner
Drew University

Kushner, S. (2025). The emergence of narrative and the discovery of humanism: Curriculum and research lessons from the Italian Renaissance. *Critical Education*, 16(4), 103-128.
<https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v16i4.187170>

Abstract

This paper returns to the roots of European Humanism to rediscover the moral and political base for contemporary narrative inquiry. A brief analytical review is conducted of forms of artistic representation from C15th/C16th Florentine painting to reveal steps taken to use narrative form in the pursuit and advocacy of humanist method. This is placed within the frame of a Ricoeur (1989) four-stage typology for narrative method. The paper closes with an argument that social and educational research should be guided by Humanist principles in its aims, but also in its method – Humanist in intent, Humanist in substance.



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Introduction and Summary

At the time of writing, the UK has a new, Centre-Left, Labour government. It recently announced a national review of curriculum and assessment. In England we have a National Curriculum – a centrally prescribed curriculum with a punitive inspection system to enforce it. Unaware or unconcerned with the ideological underpinnings of a school curriculum based on historical subject disciplines and made up of ‘hard’ (objective knowledge) content, the Labour government limits the review to improvements on what exists. There is no acknowledgement that all curriculum design has an ideological structuring, that there are ‘right-wing’ and ‘left-wing’ constructions of the relationship between knowledge and the learner, and that all curriculum is embedded within a view of human rights and social justice. There is no awareness of the incongruity of a State-prescribed, technocratic curriculum under a Labour administration.

This paper tackles the issue – not from a Right- and Left-wing duality, though there are good arguments to be had, here – but from a Humanist position. I will argue that the relentless march of Western society towards Liberalism and Humanism as argued by Rorty (1998) – for sure, with significant periodic backtracking, as we witness right now in the USA – demands that curriculum falls into line with social change. As we will see, our guides to a Humanist shift in curriculum are, principally, John Dewey, Joseph Schwab and (in the UK) Lawrence Stenhouse. However, the focus of the paper is on the emergence of Humanism and its principal methodological outlier, Narrative. We will look at Renaissance (mostly, Florentine) art, which constituted little less than a public education curriculum, and how it used Narrative and the personalisation of knowledge to batter down the protective walls of authority and to create the freedoms we enjoy today. This is what Humanism brings to critical education: questioning the authority of knowledge, passing intellectual control of curriculum inquiry to the student and the teacher.

As I argue for the use of Narrative I do so in relation to both curriculum and its enquiry. That we need to become more comfortable than we often are with the narrative portrayal of classroom realities, but also with the uncertainties and ambiguities brought to curriculum itself with narrative (storied) approaches. Under this approach, within the frame of this paper, curriculum and curriculum inquiry merge into the same search for meaning, the same research endeavour. They are, together, an inquiry into the human condition. The Renaissance movement will be our ‘Virgil’ who served with dignity and insight as Dante’s accompanist in his research journey through Hell, Purgatory and into the doorway to Paradise.

Draining the ‘Pool of Ignorance’

What follows is a dabbler’s account – of Renaissance art. I claim no expertise - I was not introduced to this richest of fields during my schooling.¹ I regard this as the deepest of the many pools of neglect and ignorance that characterised my formal education. The ideals for which we strive in the modern world, the underpinning of the great tradition of Philosophical Pragmatism, the moral underlay to liberal society so casually being ripped up in a modern world that finds a command-and-control approach to educational governance attractive – these found their roots in

¹ Since copyright issues are too demanding to reproduce the images I will refer to, I will give the appropriate Google access commands along with the URL.

the rediscovery of Humanism so energetically forced by Italian artists and poets in the 15th and 16th centuries. In my school curriculum there was no convenient ‘knowledge-box’ in which to place Dante’s early exploration of Romanticism, Masaccio’s democratisation of the visual image, Leonardo’s pre-invention of psychology. The attempts of curriculum theorists like Jerome Bruner (1965), Joseph Schwab (1969) and Lawrence Stenhouse (see Elliott, 1983) to develop an integrated Humanities curriculum came too late for me and, as it turned out, failed to breach the stolid walls of a discipline-obsessed curriculum. An integrated Humanities Curriculum as proposed by Bruner and Stenhouse was to be the means by which we explored what it is to be human and social - it retains a body of advocates (Summit, 2012). It is no accident that the Humanities curriculum breeds narrative (story) representations – as this paper will show.

So, I missed the emergence of European Humanism. Along with it would have come narrative portrayal of the kind pioneered in Renaissance Florence, as I will explore. This, too, was unaddressed at school, though we were taught the scientific method and hypothetico-deductive reasoning. So what possible sense might I have made of Humanism, had it been taught, without the parallel learning of humanist methodology – i.e.. narrative?

One of the reasons for today’s widespread scepticism about qualitative and narrative enquiry is, I believe, that we are schooled in its alternatives, and by pedagogues who have greater confidence in those alternatives – objective knowledge, norm-based reasoning and assessment (justification), ‘Grand Theory’ and the scientific method. Of course, this is not true of all schooling, and certainly not of all teachers. The early years are saturated with narrative, but not the middle and later years where more disciplinary approaches are introduced. Maths dominates, as does an algorithmic approach to the study of language, literature and the arts.

The theme of this paper, then, is to tell one story – my telling – of how the narrative method emerged in Florentine art and was used as an exploration of humanist principles. Its point is to remind ourselves (a) of the humanist aetiology of narrative enquiry, (b) those elements of narrative representation which we need to address in order to most effectively make the case for Humanism (Cahill, 2013) in inquiry and in curriculum. Streuver (2016) raises questions about what has been mooted as an imbalance between visual and literary explorations of Humanism in the Renaissance period:

“My question – what are the useful connections, or lack of connection, between art historical and intellectual historical investigations of the Renaissance? Or, what can we learn from the visual arts, what is their evidence? This question poses another – how do pictures intrude? What is art’s effect? In short, how do aesthetic interests intrude in Italian Humanists’ inquiries?” (p. 147)

This defines the research scope of this article– the narrative journey from aesthetics to morality, from, as it were, portrayal to freedom. I will look at some aspects of a ‘grammar’ of narrative: methods of portrayal, use of context, dynamic interaction, the importance of detail in observation, the indeterminacy of the object, and the use of rhetorical devices. If you can associate my analysis of visual representation with the tools we use in social and educational inquiry, and with how we approach curriculum as an enquiry in itself, then you achieve what I hope for this paper.

The Humanist turn in Renaissance Art: From appreciation to Engagement

Pre-Renaissance (e.g., Byzantine) art used the image to stimulate recall and respect. Religious images were presented for the purpose of appreciation, recalling significant moments in the religio-historical canon: the Annunciation, the Crucifixion, Madonna with child. These were operative themes chosen to stimulate those emotions that reinforced religious authority: awe, submission, yearning, fear. Christianity, as an intercessory religion, relies on an anointed representative to intercede on our behalf with prayer. This puts a distance between the lay person (the citizen) and the priest (*'lesser than god, greater than man'*) – not to overstate the case, but, perhaps, just as the teacher intercedes between knowledge and the child. At least in those authoritarian curricula arrangements I talk about above. Religious paintings under the Roman Empire depicted and insisted upon that separation – dualism was an essential element of the early monotheistic religions so as to make the metaphysical inaccessible to the worldly (Frankopan, 2015). There was little attempt in art, for example, to represent lived context and, in its early manifestations, there was some resistance to the use of perspective – both of which invited the observer to think about earthly references for the image and to position themselves with it. Faces and postures were stylised and were rarely taken from life models. Realistic representation would have to have represented potentially flawed images, and would invite the observer to make a judgement: 'that divine figure is not so good-looking', 'that's not what a Cypress looks like'. Dualisms break down. There is a narrative, but it is delivered intact to the observer to passively appreciate. Look, for example, at a painting that straddled the Gothic and early Renaissance, by Duccio de Buoninsegna – *Madonna and Child*:

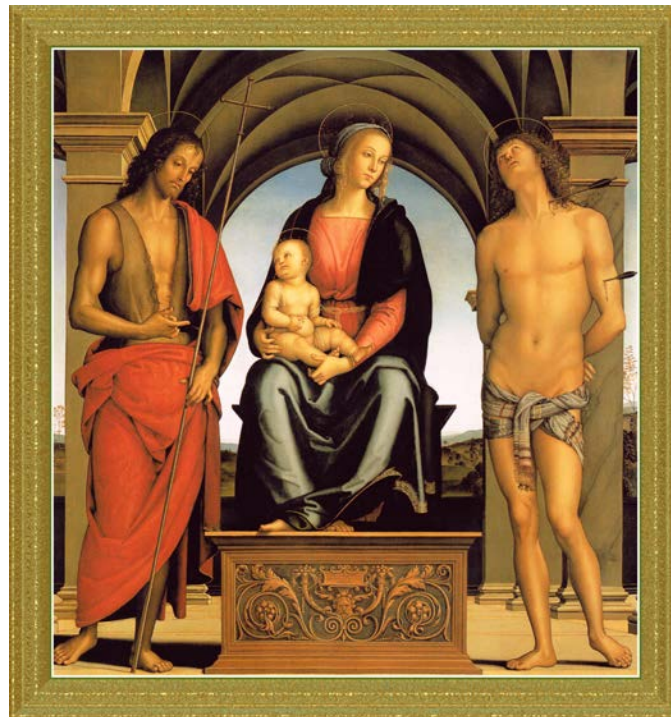


Duccio de Buoninsegna, *Madonna and Child*,

[https://www.paintinghere.com/painting/duccio_di_buoninsegna_madonna_and_child_\(no_593\)_22769.html](https://www.paintinghere.com/painting/duccio_di_buoninsegna_madonna_and_child_(no_593)_22769.html)

– and compare it with the following image of a *Virgin and Child Enthroned* by Pietro Perugino, which gives the familiar context of a Tuscan (or Umbrian) landscape, clearly uses life models,

introduces a complex psychological scene with slight nuances of sexuality (St. Sebastian to the right, the Madonna's dreamy gaze; St. John to the left with disappointment) – or, at least, sentiment - and invites us into the scene with the use of perspective.



Virgin and Child Enthroned by Pietro Perugino, <http://www.catholictradition.org/Galleries/gallery2-32a.jpg>

Just as the bible was not to be translated into the vernacular, so iconographic images were withheld from democratic engagement.

Is there a similarity with the way we deal with theory in our educational and social research? How and when do we use narrative enquiry to subject educational theory to the (vernacular) scrutiny of practitioners and citizens – to invite engagement rather than passive appreciation of knowledge?

As we move through the Renaissance and into narrative humanism we see images of the Madonna changing and developing like milestones along the way. Look, for example, at one of Raphael's (the *Small Cowper*) Madonna images:



Raphael's *The Small Cowper*, <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/raphael-the-small-cowper-madonna>

Here, the Madonna is modelled on a true-to-life woman, the baby is a true, chubby infant (though the head is, perhaps, older than the body). The setting is a Tuscan landscape, inviting the onlooker to try to recognise it – the background to the divinity of the image is accessible. There is a divine but also human, womanly look on the Madonna's face – divine but tired and enduring. The traditional blue robe of the 'Mother of Heaven' is slung casually over her knee.

Keep in mind that Florence, the home of these painters and of Renaissance development, was a highly literate society with around 75% literacy and some homes holding books. Art was accessible, displayed, sought after, as their sponsors look for public approval and reaffirmation of status. We should look at these paintings as a public education curriculum, not as sterile exhibitions in gallery. Many of these paintings were widely observed and discussed – often argued about. Like us, now, their authors worked in a context of political approval and disapproval. For much of the Quattrocento period (apart from a disastrous interlude with the hard-faced religious fanatic, Savonarola) the Medici family ruled as mostly benign despots, experimenting with municipal democracy, sufficiently confident of their power to sponsor and revel in iconoclasts like Da Vinci². So that not only was art (including poetry and sculpture) a curriculum, but it was also an engaging, critical education. A 'Critical' public curriculum? In the specific sense that it brought authority to public scrutiny and, as we shall see, demanded that authority justify itself to the citizen. (Remember, Dewey saw young people in classrooms, not as preparing for citizenship, but *as* citizens with rights.) Renaissance art did not preach anarchy and the collapse of authority. In fact,

² The story, here is, admittedly, more complex. Not all Medici were as politically astute as Cosimo, to their cost, and even he was prudent enough to build an escape route from his offices (Uffizi) in the event of public disorder.

it did preach order, control and aesthetic principle. But it introduced the citizen to a form of autonomous reasoning as a base for making judgements about authority – just as a critical curriculum ought to be doing. These were the radical roots of emergent Humanism, and its primary methodology was *narrative*. For example, look at Caravaggio's representation of the *Madonna of the Pilgrims*:



Caravaggio's representation of the Madonna of the Pilgrims,
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madonna_di_Loreto_%28Caravaggio%29#/media/File:Madonna_di_Loreto-Caravaggio_\(c.1604-6\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madonna_di_Loreto_%28Caravaggio%29#/media/File:Madonna_di_Loreto-Caravaggio_(c.1604-6).jpg)

Here is the placing of divinity firmly at street level, a glimpse into an evolving domestic situation – working, interruption, coming to the door, dealing with the pilgrims, retreating inside and back to work. The painting draws a narrative arc, from the moments before what we see, to the consequences and successions that follow. This painting provoked considerable public discussion and was as controversial as was intended. The Madonna in bare feet, with a cloth over her arm, coming to the door from house-chores, busy, hassled. She confronts pilgrims who seek her charity and her blessing, but the whole context is one in which divinity cannot be conferred, it has to be earned. The message? At the heart of Humanism, and the challenge it brings to critical education, one is both liberated and burdened by the responsibility for one's own spirituality. There is no intercession here.

And, finally, the ultimate democratic engagement for women (and husbands who are sufficiently aware), look at Artemisia Gentileschi's representation:



Artemisia Gentileschi's *Madonna and Child*, https://arthive.com/es/artemisiagentileschi/works/552647~Madonna_y_nio

Again the Madonna is barefoot. She sits casually on her 'mother of heaven' robe. She is indulgent of but exhausted by the child who reaches out intrusively to her face as she tries to suckle him. No image could be more inviting of mutual understanding for women. Many, most, women would place themselves spontaneously in the position of the Madonna. The narrative is one represented here, but forged in the mind of the onlooker. A woman observing this would build her own narrative around the image, easily imagining a moment before and after, the baby finally sleeping and giving some rest to the mother. The realism of the chair, the chiaroscuro shadows, even the ugly, naked feet of the Madonna – all draw in the observer in the subtlest use of perspective.

We can, with just a small cognitive shift, translate these terms into research method. The use of context (perspective) as a background to action, the importance of descriptive detail to allow access to the reader, the lack of restraint in presenting ambiguity to the observer, providing questions before solutions. How do we, in curriculum and curriculum research and evaluation, accomplish the same transfer of intellectual authority from ourselves to the subjects and observers of the events we portray? Indeed, it is fair to ask whether a critical education is feasible without such a transfer.

Let us move to the scene of *The Last Supper*. What we will see in the following three paintings is the coming into focus of social man and woman, the gradual revelation of intent, disposition, difference, sentiment – a similar journey into complex narrative as the Madonna images. Leonardo, in particular, as we will see, strived to express inner dispositions and the texture

of interactions through gestures and body language. He was less interested in realism than he was fascinated by the transient, the ephemeral. How do we portray the dynamics of change, for only there lies a path to Humanism. Who are we boils down to how we interrelate, how we respond to changing contexts, how we fashion a social identity from experience. The overriding question that I will focus on is how we arrive at – or construct – a sense of coherence that binds together a fragmented scenario. Curriculum in school is fragmented: History, Biology, Maths, Language, and there is no additional subject we might call *'How Do I Make Sense of all This?'*. Perhaps sometimes too easily, our research and evaluation into curriculum assumes that what we are looking at has either an inherent coherence (well...it's all about teaching and learning, isn't it?) or else coherence is overlaid by a theory (Constructivism, Behaviourism, and so on). The question, again, lies at the heart of Humanism – who controls what stands as coherence, and how do they do so?



The Last Supper, Ugolino, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/459131>



The Last Supper, Leonardo da Vinc, <https://news.italy-museum.com/the-last-supper-by-leonardo-vinci/>



The Last Supper, Tintoretto <https://www.wikiart.org/en/tintoretto/the-last-supper-1594>

The first example is of an eminent pre-Renaissance painter, Ugolino di Nerio. The painting was commissioned for the chapel of Santa Croce in Florence, a long-standing place of prominence for high art. It was painted in the early 1300s – advanced for its time, almost 100 years before Masaccio’s work, but contemporary with Giotto and Cimabue – two of the most influential precursors of Renaissance art.

Ugolino’s work portrays the moment Jesus has declared to his disciples that one of them will betray him. Judas is portrayed lacking the halo that accompanies his colleagues. The figures are stylised, though there is already an attempt here to portray dynamic reaction: disciples look at each other in surprise, one (John) nestles protectively into Jesus. Judas, himself, is insouciant. The disciples, while not modelled directly on life, are individualised and their robes make them distinct. The artist struggles with perspective and context, though a prayer-shawl hung casually over a rail at the back gives a hint of life’s routine. In place of a flat, context-denying gold background typical of pre-Renaissance art, the walls have true plaster colour and texture. These are fleeting glimpses of what lay ahead as painting invited the observer into the scene. This picture, though, is not structured to lead us in – where there is line-of-sight it takes us randomly to the central figure on the back row – Jesus (the centre of the narrative) is barely in focus; there is no foreshortening, no positioning of foreground with context. The lack of physical dimensionality gives a sense of absence of dimensionality in the subjects of the painting. Aesthetically, physically, psychologically this *Last Supper* is a ‘two-dimensional’ event. It refers to a narrative – the biblical story – but does no embellish or deconstruct it, much less make it accessible for interpretation. It condenses a complex series of events into a frozen moment.

And yet, it moves in the direction which leads us, almost 150 years later, to Da Vinci’s masterpiece. In Da Vinci’s *Last Supper*, the disciples (portrayed in dynamic groups of three) are highly individualised in terms of their reaction, indicated by body and facial gesture. It has been noted (Isaacson, 2017) that reactions “ripple out” from Jesus. Implied in these reactions are a prior and a following moment, the portrayal is dynamic – in its chronology and in the fluid interactions

between the subjects. Indeed, it is not so much the event that is being portrayed as the psychological complexity it provokes. The highly worked and refined use of perspective and line of sight carry us into the scene – in fact, we are required to be *in* the scene in the sense that it demands our interpretation and emotional response – we, the observers, have to resolve the complexities shown. Through the rear windows we have a sense of the worldliness of the moment – we see a hint of landscape, and this, too, is welcoming of our presence. The perspectival focus on Jesus with the observer's eye moving between that and the groups of disciples suggests an internal interaction – the relationships among the men – and gives a sense of plot to a highly 'plotted' moment.

In Da Vinci's Last Supper there is both a sociology and a psychology being portrayed as part of the dynamic (now think of our narrative strivings in research). More than this, there is a subtle, but powerful, further dynamic interaction. As we shift from the indignation of Peter and the saddened resignation of John to the disbelief of Matthew we draw back into an understanding of how narrative can reveal the nature of groups and the tension between the individual and the collective – in fact, we can shift between individual and social psychology, as we should in curriculum and its inquiry. It was this, above all, to which Leonardo strove throughout his career in painting. The forensic portrayal of humans gave way to an equally forensic portrayal of humanity. In this painting we ourselves are laid bare in our reaction to destiny, betrayal, faith, allegiance and dismay. There are multiple narratives being related here and we are invited/required to engage with them.

The final image comes another 100 years later at the hand of Tintoretto, when Renaissance art gave way to Mannerism and the Baroque. The narrative grammar, lifted to its highest level by Leonardo, was overthrown with the chaotic use of perspective and the equally (especially in Tintoretto) chaotic approach to storying. Tintoretto takes us beyond worldliness into what the Surrealists 250 years later would lionise as the dream-world – or, rather, the world of nightmares. Tintoretto was to inspire Giorgio De Chirico.

Tintoretto's *Last Supper* lifts narrative into a liminal space between the metaphysical and the worldly. This is a canonical moment, but it takes place in the hurly-burly of a seedy pub. Where we tend to use narratives to make our readers feel comfortable with accounts being rendered, here, Tintoretto is out to destabilise us. The focal point of the painting is lost in the uncertain gloom of the interior, but the woman delving into a tub captures the attention of the two figures in the foreground and dominates over the image of Jesus. Again, there are varied reactions from the disciples (Judas keeps his head down and is on the other side of the table, again with no divine halo), but the scene has non-divine characters in it who overhear the commotion and are unconnected to it. Momentous events are taking place – and beer and bread are still being served, kibitzers ear-holing private dramas, waiters and servants scurrying there and back. There is a bustle. The disciple at the near end of the table is asking the woman servant to wait a moment while he appraises himself of just what is going on.

Tintoretto lifts the Humanism of art into another dimension, into the mix of despair and longing, into that place where the highest forms of experience are reduced to the hum-drum and the inevitable. Our narrative focus in educational research is too often the sanctified image of the classroom, laundered of its daily grime. Most unsettling of all, here, is the absence of order. Even the body of Jesus is tensed up in his effort to assert some order, to persuade and assuage his resistant

disciple to his right. The host of angels writhes in helpless chaos in the darkness of the tavern's vaults. Spirituality struggles to get its hearing as even divine purpose looks fragile. In fact, for the onlooker, the message is clear – the divine has to find its place in the quotidian world of ordinary people.

Narrative Grammar

What is there in these works that may inform our own struggles with humanist narrative?

Ricoeur et al (1989) draws from Umberto Eco to outline four stages in the development of “narrativization” and the emergence of a narrative grammar. We choose Ricoeur merely as a device. There are many other narrative analyses we might have used. If you are comfortable making the parallels between the visual representations I offer and the narrative portrayals we use in our research then you may skip this section.

So – to the four stages:

1. Fundamental grammar, where we introduce for the first time the notion of “narrativization”
2. “Surface narrative grammar,” here the author introduces the notion of “doing,” then “wanting to do” and “being able to do.” (intentionality)
3. A ‘polemical’ factor, which shapes the notion of ‘performance’ (interpretation)
4. The fourth grammatical move is where the exchange structure provides the author with a “topological” way of representing narrative phenomena (layering)

My reading of this scheme is a shift from ‘description’ to ‘intentionality’, to ‘interpretation’ and finally to ‘layering’. These are the shifts that we see in the paintings and which we choose to adopt or deny in our own narratives of social and educational life. Ugolino works at the level where the basic idea of narrative is introduced – there is a moment here that has a preceding and a proceeding moment – there is movement in time, albeit embryonic. But he tells us that there is a story to be told here, not just an iconic image to be appreciated. There is an element of performance – the ‘polemical’ factor – in that there are traces of dynamic tension among the disciples and between the disciples and the event – again, at a simple and basic level. It is not until Leonardo that we focus in on intentionality and motive, human difference, and psychology. Context is introduced – there is a landscape beyond the window at the back – this takes place in a tangible ‘somewhere’. But it is the polemic which dominates, the freedom given to the observer to enter into dispute with the events being depicted, to engage their own interpretive judgement. The observer is inducted into the narrative. Our narratives always have observers. We do not always invite them in. This has something to do with Barthes (1998) distinction between ‘readerly’ texts (those that make no demands on the reader) and ‘writerly’ texts (those that insist on the efforts of the reader to make sense of the text). They are the latter which lend themselves to humanist intent and which derive from the pedagogical obligations we have as narrative researchers.

It is Tintoretto who revels in the layering of narrative portrayal. He leads us into giddy movement between the divine and the secular, plumbing the depths of gloomy ordinariness and then elevating us to the sublime – but for just a moment before we slide back again. The pub and the godly event at the table interact, not to deny spirituality, but ground spirituality in the daily routine, and to elevate the daily routine into spiritual experience. This is the movement into the

‘topography’ of the narrative in Eco’s scheme. The portrayal evokes our own cognitive layering as we shift from perceiving events to questioning and interpreting them, feeling ourselves being drawn into the subterranean meanings and consequences of life. This painting pre-figures existentialism – the collapse of the past and the future into the here-and-now. The topography is made up of emotional, spiritual and psychological landscapes. It reaches its highest point as we move into the metaphysical.

How and how far can we move across these grammatical moves as we portray people and events?

Our curriculum research work is more prosaic. Whether because it is pretentious, beyond our skill or frowned upon as frivolity, such explorations rarely touch our research narratives. We are aware and sometimes responsive to the need to look at the interplay between context and action; to document, not just individual views of, say, educational programme actors, but the dynamic exchange among actors. And, for sure, research narratives often explore psychological conditions hinted at by postures and actions as among Leonardo’s disciples. Less often, perhaps, we reach Eco’s third level of ‘polemic’, that is to say, using our research narratives to both represent and provoke argument and interpretations of events. How apposite to our study of contested educational programmes is Leonardo’s portrayal of that vital moment when Jesus reveals that he will be betrayed, a moment deeply embedded in the confusion between individual and group psychology. We may or may not portray responses in such rich and elaborate ways among, let us say, teachers, educational managers and parents – that same interplay of personal and social psychologies – but in schools they are lived and real and felt. Educational innovations touch people in professional ways, of course, but no less in moral and psychological ways (MacDonald & Walker, 1976). Sometimes we reach for that.

More rarely have I engaged or seen others engage at the metaphysical level. Certainly, the spiritual dimension of everyday educational action seldom surfaces in our narratives, so often displaced by institutional dimensions. But it does occasionally surface, as in the ground-breaking work of Smith & Keith (1971), where the authors achieve a transcendental understanding of educational innovation through the forensic analysis of the interaction between religious belief, personal commitment and educational change; and in Wolcott’s (2003) equally ground-breaking narrative study of a school principal, and how we come to understand his approach to school management through learning of his family relationships and his religious beliefs.

This is not to say that our ethnographies and biographies do not touch on these matters, but that we too often miss the opportunity to make causal connections between metaphysical, emotional and psychological states with social and educational change. This is precisely the theme of Schon’s (1971) analysis of our moral and psychological investment in ‘stable states’, and our resistance to innovation. And yet, without these perspectives we are poorly equipped to address Humanism in our work. What linked Ugolino, Leonardo and Tintoretto was the Renaissance preoccupation with the rediscovery of Humanism: the exploration of the nature and consequences of our being autonomously ‘human’. Here, a final image in this segment, brings together all of those grammatical moves – from description to complex layering. Here we see the devices we have visited so far: exploration of spirituality, narrative engagement, the portrayal of human complexity, bringing the metaphysical down to earth and the challenge to conventional orthodoxies. First is this – surely feminist - image by Mariotto Albertinelli:



Visitation of St. Elizabeth, by Albertinelli,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariotto_Albertinelli#/media/File:Albertinelli_Visitation.jpg

Mary pregnant with Jesus visits Elizabeth, also pregnant with John (to become St. John the Baptist). Mary is on the left (dressed in the conventional blue robe as ‘mother of heaven’). The many renderings of this event, from the earliest Gothic images, show an intense moment of feminine sharing and celebration of motherhood. But Albertinelli takes this a step further. Elizabeth is consoling Mary, but reassuring her, too. The interpretation is of the awful burden placed on a clearly anxious Mary and the sense of solidarity between the two women. “*what have they done to me – can I go through with this?*” – “*don’t worry – it will turn out fine – I’ll be here...*”. The scene is in a loggia, in a real place. In a more subdued and nuanced way, Albertinelli expands the narrative of the visit to humanise the divine event, to look at the human impact of divine interventions. Do we sense reluctance in Mary to carry the child? The moment is saturated with spirituality, but a spirituality grounded, not in metaphysical belief, but in immediate, human experience – of women as the object of men’s schemes. In the end, the painting raises more questions than it answers, but it gives us access to address those questions for ourselves.

This is a good moment to pause and to consider the extent to which this revolution in representation of the human condition is yet to be mounted in curriculum. What Renaissance artists, poets, Humanists were doing was not the reproduction of given knowledge – and its associated forms of authority (divinity) – but stimulating the generation of new knowledge, personal knowledge, grounded in the authority of experience. With the notable exceptions of Summerhill School, the Reggio Emilia Schools and the International Baccalaureate, the school curriculum rarely engages the lived experience of the student – much less subjecting knowledge

to the judgement of the student. Dewey lamented this as a failure of democracy in the classroom, but, here, we see it as the resistance of schooling to Humanist principles. We are not without those critical theorists who locate the source of this resistance in power and political economy. Schooling emerged from the industrial revolution as a potent tool for generating a compliant, skilled workforce, and that value has never been lost.

However, to attribute the resistance to a refusal to bend to the demands of humanism leads us into a more educational analysis, which is the point of this paper.

Democratization of the Narrative

The democratisation of the image is one of the more prominent themes in my grammar of narrative, and this is the first, essential, step towards conceiving a Humanist curriculum. Nowhere is this democratising tendency more marked and purposeful than in the foundational work of Masaccio. Consider his frescos in the Brancacci Chapel – especially, *The Crucifixion of St. Peter* and *the Dispute with Simon Magus*:



Disputation with Simon Magus and Crucifixion of St Peter, *Filippino Lippi*

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brancacci_Chapel#/media/File:Filippino_lippi_crocifissione_di_san_pietro_cappella_brancacci_1482-85.jpg

Here is a visual image (started by Masaccio and completed years later by Filippino Lippi) of the full potential of narrative accounts of social and educational situations to stimulate argument and, therefore, democratic exchange. The first thing we notice is that there are two separate narratives being recounted: the crucifixion and the ‘dispute’ – a multi-narrative. They are linked, in that it was Peter who confronted Simon Magus (the ‘magician’) in front of Nero, disputing his heretical magic powers. All narratives overlap because they are all part of the same tapestry of the times. The point is not to bind them together in a causal, linear form of rationality, but to explore their contingencies. The *study of contingency* is one way of describing narrative case study (Kushner, 2017) – how coherence emerges from the study of how people and events interact (rather than superimposing coherence artificially with, say, a theory or a political rationale).

Here, there are many levels of contingent relationships wound together in a complex way. The topography of the scene has a familiar Tuscan background as context – these events have an immediate and real significance. We, the observers, are implicated – not least by the figure on the far right (thought by some to be Botticelli) who looks directly at us questioningly. Once in the

scene we are part of the audience in the right-hand narrative, the dispute. The figures are modelled on known individuals. They have facial and body gestures which show diverse allegiances and reactions. St. Peter is indignant, Nero seems almost to be poking at a man's nose. There is a dynamic here which will surely lead to an outcome. In a way that curriculum too often fails to achieve, we are invited to position ourselves in this argument. Here is the generation of personal knowledge.

At the highest level of polemic and topography we can generalise from the particularities of this story to the historic clash between metaphysics and science, between religion and empiricism. This was a period in history of great turmoil in ideas, on the brink of the Reformation, with Copernicus and Galileo waiting in the wings. The narrative in this fresco is being used to create space for dialogue, and it is no accident that the dialogue invited concerns liturgical events. Even the ever-present Medici family were aware that their success as bankers was not enough to maintain their dynasty, that frequent offerings to the most enduring political power system were necessary – i.e.. to the Church. Not least, the Pope himself was often, particularly in the case of Julius II, a warrior-king. The church was the principal arena in which politics was played out, and painting religious themes was a way of engaging directly with power.

In this light, Masaccio has to be seen to be creating a political dialogue about power in the here and now. Another of the Brancacci Chapel frescos, brings this most immediately to the fore: *The Tribute Money*.



Masaccio, The Tribute Money,

https://www.artble.com/artists/tommaso_cassai_masaccio/paintings/tribute_money/more_information/story-theme

The theme of the painting is Jesus having to pay money to enter the city – an entry tax. He instructs Peter to find money in the mouth of a fish. The issue was controversial at the time as tax reforms were on the agenda in Florence (not least to pay for constant city-state warring). The theme itself has biblical significance in raising the issue of religious versus secular power....'render unto Caesar'...and so on. Peter argues with Jesus in the centre, surrounded by disciples of varying emotions, he retrieves the money at the left and dutifully hands it over on the right – again, a 'multiplex' narrative. Once again, the context envelopes the action and gives it meaning. The

menacing storm clouds, the looming mountain range and the barrenness of the trees suggest a wilderness from which the city – the secular home – is sanctuary. But there is a price to be paid. Not to overstate the theme, religious authority is being brought down to earth. What is shocking in Masaccio's choice of theme is that it shows the limits of religious authority.

Without such questioning of authority that rests on a metaphysical base there is little hope for Humanism – which, in any event, is partly defined by its opposition to religious authority. The Brancacci frescos – each of them addressing these issues – were widely viewed and admired. Far more so than my written narratives. These were times when Humanism and democracy were live issues as even the Medici family were exploring, depending on which particular Medici was in ascendance, the ethic and the utility of sharing power. There was, to an extent, a rebirth of Greek city-state democracy in play. The birth of Humanism and its survival today demands narratives that question and explore power systems.

In methodological terms this points to the use of case study – i.e.. to the challenge of generalising from the particular. Local events portrayed here and in other works we will see implicate larger social and political themes and invite us into dialogue. There is more than a sense in which our research endeavours are modelled on civic action – localised and intimate exchange. Curriculum that acknowledges student experience, and from which the authority of knowledge is derived is almost inevitably rooted in civic action. Though critical theorists often talk confidently about 'speaking truth to power', the reality is that power is little interested in listening, and generally too aloof and distant from my narrative pleading. But the means of exchange that our methods imply are those of conversation and intimacy. We are best off working on a civic model in which the combination of proximity and persuasion give us half a chance to be heard. Here is where a radical, Humanist curriculum (and its associated enquiry) is most effectively located.

Fluidity in Narrative

One of Leonardo's obsessions throughout life was with fluidity, running water – expressed directly in his landscapes and nature drawings, but most effectively in his continuous exploration of how curls fall from the head like eddies and spurts, catching and losing the light as they flow. It was this attention to detail, so frequently demanded in narrative portrayals, that allowed him to capture dynamic movement. Look at this detail of an angel:



Leonardo: angel in The Virgin of the Rocks,
<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/426082814717050943/?lp=true>

If there is one aspect of case-based narrative accounts that is a *sine qua non* it is the inclusion of detailed description (Kushner, 2017). What we researchers are generating are ‘proxy’ accounts, surrogates, descriptions of ‘what you might see if you were here’ – yes, of course, given all the caveats about subjectivity, relativity, social constructions of reality and so forth. Our job is to provide sufficient access to our readers to enable them to make their own judgement about events – again, with all the caveats.

Hence, the necessity for detail. What makes this all the more challenging is that we may not know what detail might be important for the reader to focus on, and so we need to go beyond that which catches our attention and look for what might well be extraneous detail (for us).

But this is just one function for detailed description. The other reflects the role of the artist, not just to portray and describe, but to induct (Eisner, 2017; Flinders & Eisner, 1994). Here, we are in more difficult terrain, for the pedagogical role of inquiry leads us to the edges of validity. Eisner casts the role of the narrative researcher as that of “*connoisseur*”, the ‘enlightened eye’ – likening the researcher to the art critic whose job is to “*educate the perceptions*”. This places much authority in the researcher and is an alternative to a neutral or impartial position. This is not a position I share, but a position I too often find myself in as I use well-rehearsed educational vocabularies and formulaic analyses.

Nowhere more than in Leonardo's work do we see the attempt to portray three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface, and to represent change in a static image, the latter somewhat dependent on the former. He was not alone in developing perspective and 'line-of-sight' geometry to painting, but he was its master. We see this in the geometric complexity of his *Last Supper*. His early, typically unfinished, work, *The Adoration of the Magi* is a reference point for those interested in the relation of depth in Renaissance art, and the unfolding of narrative layering, the fourth stage of narrative given by Eco.



Leonardo, Adoration of the Magi

<https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/adoration-of-the-magi-13fb2318-44ca-4a84-a36d-e41dd12e8181>

The effects of this portrayal of topography are to sharpen our focus on the foreground, to make us aware of where that foreground derives meaning, but also to remind us that events grow out of contexts – that even the most portentous moments are contingent and not given – the abandoned temple, the war being waged at the back. The contingency has to be worked out by the observer. The topography is not just physical, but, once again, psychological and social – those two areas of perception in which our narratives inevitably function. In many of these Renaissance and pre-Renaissance works we see attempts to portray sociologies.

One subtle form of authority that is being eroded here is that of 'the literal', a denial of nuanced, multi-faceted aspects of human experience (Kushner, 2015). When we conduct research on classrooms we see 'teachers' and 'students' and we focus on pedagogical activities and

exchanges. This is to ignore many other aspects of social experience that are happening at the same time. In fact, it was Philip Jackson (1968) who reminded us that schools are rarely what we assume them to be about, that the singular experience of learning is just a minor element of schooling, dominated by, for example, the challenge of managing 'crowds' (i.e.. relatively large numbers of people crammed into small spaces) and the realities of negotiating co-existence. Such uncertain realities would be more prominent in our narrative accounts if we were less seduced by the focus of our contractual briefs or research questions. The fluidity of social realities, their shifting in and out of focus, speaks of the need for our narrative research to allow for the *emergence* of meaning, rather than its pre-assumption.

Leonardo da Vinci mastered the technique of *sfumato*. In simple terms this is the blurring of outlines - to most accurately represent how we see. *"Between light and darkness there is infinite variation, because their quantity is continuous...The line has in itself neither matter nor substance and may rather be called an imaginary idea than a real object - it occupies no space."* The 'enigma' that is the Mona Lisa was carefully crafted by Leonardo as an 'effect'. Here, above all, lies the animosity between him and Michelangelo whose own paintings were influenced by his much-preferred sculpture - with sharp outlines signifying solid substance and certainty of form. Both were masters of narrative humanism and engrossed with how we represent nuance. Each in their own way pioneered exploration of how the eye both sees and interprets – these are two alternative approaches to constructing and writing narratives. But it was *sfumato* that allowed art to truly represent the struggle we have to delineate, to discern the inner qualities of who we are. Uncertainty and ambiguity lay at the heart of Leonardo's precision in representing humanity. It is worth taking out time to consider the role and nature of *sfumato* in our written portrayals.

But look at Leonardo's late-in-life portrayal of St. John the Baptist, a rendering perhaps only made possible by his own indeterminate sexuality, his flamboyant living across sexual boundaries. The *sfumato* is elevated into the blurring of the 'lines' of our perceptions.



Leonardo, *St. John the Baptist*,

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._John_the_Baptist_\(Leonardo\)#/media/File:Leonardo_da_Vinci_-_Saint_John_the_Baptist_C2RMF_retouched.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._John_the_Baptist_(Leonardo)#/media/File:Leonardo_da_Vinci_-_Saint_John_the_Baptist_C2RMF_retouched.jpg)

The painting is underpinned with a deep and complex narrative which envelopes the observer. We have to take various positions on this in terms of sexuality, religious authority, the nature of youth, mortality and more. Its androgyny is nothing if not provocative. St. John's smile is far from reassuring – it is almost goading. The conventional finger pointing to heaven, which features in many of Leonardo's works as a reminder of god in heaven, is made personally beguiling, at best, but maybe even mocking of mortality (Leonardo, like Michelangelo, was greatly preoccupied and dismayed by ageing).

This plasticity in the portrayal of iconic and exalted figures was shocking at the time, but nonetheless permissible. The wealthy merchants and bishops of Florence were more forgiving and more interested in the advancement of art than are today's sponsors. Michelangelo's *David* plucked at similar strings to those being pulled by Leonardo's androgen, but reflected, too, the intense interest shown at the time to Graeco-Roman ethics and philosophies. But Donatello's *David*, takes a step even beyond Michelangelo's.



Donatello, *David*,
<https://www.italianrenaissance.org/donatellos-david/>

Of course, there is a strong narrative around the image of David (he props a leg up on the severed head of Goliath), and this portrayal plays with and distorts that narrative in ways some would find uncomfortable. But think of a modern equivalent (i.e.. a major public commission) and the intolerant outcry it might produce: a homoerotic image of Winston Churchill....? A statue of Lady Diana with a provocative pose...? If we are to free ourselves from the metaphysical authority of our own modern icons we need to be at least as permissive and courageous as were the Medici, the bishops and the artists of the Renaissance. Complex research narratives require complex relationships with research sponsors – perhaps more complex than contemporary conditions often permit.

Challenging the Narrative Form

The final step in the polemical layering of narrative grammar, rising to a higher political challenge in our use of narrative, is to question the very form of the narrative. This is what was happening with Tintoretto's *Last Supper* and Leonardo's *St. John*. The late-Renaissance gave way to what is widely known as 'Mannerism'. Here, the painter sought freedom from the straitjacket of convention: geometric composition, visual realism. Here are two examples of the same scene, the *deposition* of Jesus from the cross. The first is by Perugino, firmly in the Renaissance tradition complete with geometric symmetry, realistic portraits, context, fluidity and movement. The focal point is the distressed Jesus with pale, spindly legs and a sagging belly.



Deposition, Perugino, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annunziata_Polyptych#/media/File:Pietro_Perugino_cat74a.jpg

The next is of Rosso Fiorentino, artistic iconoclast and controversial painter in his time. The same event, the same construction. But look at the geometrical confusion, the irreverent chaos of those retrieving the body which overwhelms the almost incidental grief of the women at the foot of the cross – given the absence of a focal point. It is the breaking up of the narrative form that allows Fiorentino to portray an experience we all recognise when our highest ideals and preoccupations are dashed by the prosaic. Mary Magdalene's sobs are drowned out by workmen bellowing conflicting instructions at each other – we are more worried about one of them falling off a ladder in the confusion. The faces are abstractions – even abstract – so as not to distract from the sociology of the portrayal. The disordered narrative is essential to represent the disorder of the moment.



Deposition, Fiorentino

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosso_Fiorentino#/media/File:Rosso_Fiorentino_002.jpg

Playing with narratives at this higher level again points to validity challenges. When House (1980) wrote his seminal work on validity in enquiry he was responding to the need for qualitative narrative-based research to develop for itself its own tests of validity. He settled for three such tests, mimicking the poet: *Truth* (plausibility), *Beauty* (coherence) and *Justice* (fairness). Of these, ‘coherence’ was to pay attention to the licence granted us by the narrative form – and to our lack of immediate competence at dealing with it (few of us are writers of any training or accomplishment). Narratives demand the safe cladding of structure: proper attention to context, explanation, chronology and so on. To break into the narrative form has great potential (for example, in reflecting the chaos and fractures of contemporary politics and public action), but clearly carries risks – not least, lack of respect for audiences. Zygmund Bauman’s ‘*liquefaction*’ of (post)modern structures can apply just as easily to narrative forms of enquiry – the frustration of custom and expectation, the break with pre-existing institutional habits - but should they?

Or, rather, under what circumstances might they?

Perhaps we are coming to the end of a cycle of political immorality and absurdity, ready for a return to the onward march of moral progress – Richard Rorty’s (1998) belief that moral achievement is part of the natural evolution of society. If so, and if (at the time of writing) Donald Trump in the USA and the extreme Right-wing government in the UK, the brutal wars in Ukraine and Gaza represent the high point of the right-wing ‘Icarus’, then we are bound to look ahead to a period of renewal and reconstruction - a return to Humanism. This would be a period in which we question the vocabularies and structures that brought us the neoliberal turn: we should reject the monickers of the recent past – ‘stakeholder’, ‘client’, ‘human resource’, ‘consumer’ – and seek out

citizen identities and relationships that reflect something more moral and democratically wholesome (until the field of Economics rediscovers its roots in moral philosophy!).

Moral Progress

In fact, what Rorty argued was that moral progress was assured in that it is defined by growth of the imagination, and a decreasing preoccupation with human difference. “*Our Western liberal picture of a global democratic utopia is that of a planet on which all members of the species are concerned about the fates of all the other members*” (p. 12). The xenophobia and racism provoked by Trump, Putin and Netanyahu are, in terms of social evolution, just as unsustainable as a human ear grown on the back of a mouse. Or ‘intelligence’ that is announced as ‘artificial’.

A simple precis of this essay would be that renaissance artists gave a bump-start to the growth of modern imagination, and the dissolution of those differences so ardently promoted by moral authorities of the day. The result was a great leap forward in moral awareness and the erosion of unwarranted authority. Perhaps the most insidious difference that has permeated every literate society we know of is that of dualism (e.g. spiritual/material; good/evil): most notably the duality of appearance and reality. This dismal retreat from common agency – Plato’s and Karl Marx’s self-serving assertion of scholastic privilege in seeing, not ‘what is happening here’, but ‘what is *really* happening here’ – still thrives in social and educational inquiry (Social Realism), and to clear the ground for human agency we need constantly to be challenging it – as did the great Florentines and the Humanists that were liberated by their work and that of Reformation thinkers. Reality, understanding, is available to all. It is accessible and empirically verifiable.

For social and education research to rise to such a challenge requires that we adopt what Renaissance artists captured, and which is reflected in the few examples offered above – ‘disciplined idealism’. ‘Idealism’, in the sense that we identify shortcomings in human endeavour in order to plot reference points for betterment. ‘Idealism’, in the sense that we need an enduring vision, not as a destination, but as a direction of travel. But ‘disciplined’ in the sense that it is pointless for us to conjure this up – rather, that it must be discovered and shaped by the inquiry itself, suppressing the preferences and priorities of the research team. It is pointless and undisciplined for us to theorise an equitable social state and use inquiry to implement it. Just as the renaissance artists needed the observer to fully realise the Humanist act – to fully articulate moral agency – so we need our respondents and audiences to collaborate with us to complete the picture, as it were. This is what MacDonald (1976), in arguing for the ‘portrayal of persons’ to be placed at the centre of inquiry, urged as a shift of “*the locus of generalisation*” – i.e.. passing interpretive control to the subject – and then to the reader. In order to serve Humanism, our research narratives need to be humanistic in themselves.

Whither (or wither) narrative humanism?

Robert Stake, in a comment on a draft of this paper, wrote the following in a private communication – not long after he had shared with me and others one of his characteristic <500-word methodological notes, arguing for ‘freedom from the algorithm’:

But for us in educational inquiry the displacement of narrativization has been ordination, standardization, symbolization, not mannerism and flight from

convention. So the barrage is not finished. So where do you go? Much informal pedagogical and curricular discourse has narrative tapestry. Documentaries and big screen movies are narrative opponents of the canonical texts. Whither?

So here are conflicting interpretations: Stake seeing the contemporary demise of narrative understanding with the imposition of algorithmic order; my account seemingly placing the blame on the breakdown of order. I am more persuaded by Stake. But perhaps our two accounts coincide in the sense that algorithms bring disorder in that they detach us from the guidelines of our experience.

I always have advised my students to read methodological texts, yes, but also to binge-watch television soap operas – *telenovelas* – and movies: the “narrative opponents” of the canon, scholastic authority. It is here, as in Florentine art, that we see mastery of the art of narrative applied to the representation of the human condition. It is here that we see masterful characterisation, clashes between interests and values, the politics and sentiments of relationships and, frequently, the institutional struggles waged by people. The methodological explorations in those fields have been extensive and creative, much less encumbered with the canonical weight of validity issues that we confront.

And, of course, they get the viewing figures that we can only dream of...

We will not stop researching and writing our narratives – until AI puts us out of business. They will be read by tiny audiences and have just as tiny an influence. This does not undermine the value of our work – the most it can do is to give us realistic expectations. At the margins we will make advances – sometimes by making alliances with painters, dramatists, film-makers and soap-opera writers. In the meantime, we have a lot of ground to catch up as we enter into the challenges of narrative enquiry. Surely, given the age we live in, one of the leading of these challenges is the part we must play in a ‘renaissance’ of Humanism.

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Author

Saville Kushner is a long-standing advocate of case study and narrative inquiry, having published two single-authored books on the subject and various other books on Program Evaluation, Education and political ethics. His previous posts were as Professor of Educational Evaluation at the University of Auckland, NZ and Professor of Public Evaluation at the University of the West of England, UK. He served a two-year secondment as a UN Regional Officer for M&E. This paper reflects the extension of his interest into the Renaissance roots of European Humanism, and the methodology of preference for Renaissance Humanists, narrative.

Critical Education

criticaleducation.org

ISSN 1920-4175

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