

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

<b>Institution:</b> University of Nottingham
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA32
<b>Title of case study:</b> Changing Minds Through Narrative
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b>  Currie’s <b>research into the role and nature of narrative and character</b> has brought about a <b>range of significant benefits</b> in the fields of <b>healthcare, education</b> and <b>public debate</b>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physicians working with mental health patients rely on Currie’s work to support a specific treatment programme</li> <li>• Training for more than 300 medical practitioners has been delivered, developed from materials in Currie’s research</li> <li>• Children’s confidence and attainment levels have been improved</li> <li>• Public debate has been stimulated</li> <li>• Schools have changed their curricula to teach some of the research findings</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b>  The philosophical research leading to the impacts described was carried out by Professor Gregory Currie (Nottingham 2000-13) between 2002 and 2010, and concerns the nature and effects of narrative and character in both fictional and non-fictional contexts.</p> <p>In collaboration with Professor Jon Jureidini (Child Psychiatrist, Department of Psychological Medicine Women’s and Children’s Hospital, Adelaide), research published in 2003-04 focused on narrative in issues concerning mental health. In particular, Currie and Jureidini considered what we might call pathologies of narrative; this includes the tendency to exaggerate the effect of a person’s character, and particularly their intentions, on the explanation of events.</p> <p>Reviewing earlier work on Munchausen by proxy syndrome, Currie and Jureidini [3.1] argue that the narrative form itself has a tendency to encourage this exaggeration due to its opportunities to “tell stories” about why things happen which have emotional appeal, coherence and intelligibility, rather than scientific-explanatory virtues of evidential support, theoretical parsimony, etc.</p> <p>They also [3.2] suggest that narrative modes of thinking are writ large in psychosis. Certain features normally present in a standard fictional story, such as unrealistic emphasis on the role of character and intention (and the assumption that everything that happens in the story is significant), are grossly exaggerated in psychosis. They hypothesised that certain psychotic states are therefore “disorders of narrative”.</p> <p>Building on the discussion of narrative found in [3.1] and [3.2], Currie [3.3 &amp; 3.4] then focuses on the way in which the construction of a fictional story is enhanced and enlivened through the use of character. Currie argues that character may add to the coherence of fictional narrative by enriching the connections between events as it helps generate the emotional appeal, coherence and intelligibility of the fictional narrative. Thus, the same factors vivid in the hypothesis that psychotic states are “disorders of narrative” are, Currie claims, those that play an active and important role in a compelling fictional narrative.</p> <p>Currie brings together and evaluates the literature and evidence from empirical psychology, drawing two findings from this work that trouble his hypothesis regarding fictional narratives: we tend to think that people’s behaviour justifies attributions of character when it does not; people behave in ways that are strongly determined by circumstances. Both findings suggest that <i>real</i> character is far less significant than one might imagine to how people behave in the world. That threatens the suggestion that character adds to narrative: if there is no such thing as <i>real</i> character, then it is hard to see what value <i>fictional</i> character will have in narrative.</p> <p>Against this threat, Currie suggests we view character, less as a psychological-explanatory tool, and more as a device for making vivid and coherent the interplay of other, psychologically real factors. So, Currie suggests, character adds a great deal to narrative, even in the absence of <i>real</i> character <i>in the world</i> itself. Fictional characters need not be (indeed, <i>should not be</i>) at all like <i>real</i> people in order to play the role required of them in successful narrative.</p>
<b>3. References to the research</b>

3.1: Currie, G. and Jureidini, J. 2004. 'Narrative and coherence', *Mind and Language*, 19, 409-27 [DOI: 10.1111/j.0268-1064.2004.00266.x]

3.2: Currie, G. and Jureidini, J. 2003. Art and Delusion, *Monist*, 86, 556-78  
PDF provided

3.3: Currie, G., 2010. *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories* Oxford University Press [DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199282609.001.0001]

3.4: Currie, G, 2009. 'Narrative and the psychology of character' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. 67, 61-71  
[DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-6245.2008.01335.x]

3.1, 3.2 & 3.4 were peer reviewed and each appears in a journal given top ranking by the *European Science Foundation*.

In a review of 3.3, for the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (2011, pp. 331-3), Wilson (p. 331) writes: 'Currie has written a lively, original, and strikingly instructive book on the theory of narrative'.

#### 4. Details of the impact

A broad range of beneficiaries, some from quite disparate domains, have engaged with the body of research described in section 2. In part this is a product of the pro-active approach taken to maximising the scope and depth of benefits generated by the unit's research, described in REF3a, section b; it also reflects the transformative nature of **Currie's** research into narrative and character.

Consequently, **mental health care** and **education** are two key domains to have benefited from the research, and we also note that the research has **stimulated public debate** to a significant degree. The different beneficiaries (in all we report 6; 4.1-4.6) indicate the far-reaching applications of the body of research.

##### Context: Mental Health Benefits

Since 2008, Staff at Adelaide Women's and Children's Hospital (AWCH) have used Currie's work in order to support an approach to the **treatment of mental health issues** which mental health practitioners believe to have beneficial outcomes for patients. The research has also influenced a training programme, the purpose of which is to educate mental health practitioners in the use of this treatment method. [5.1]

The approach taken to mental health issues emphasises building narratives as the most ethically responsible way to work with young people. To give some context: during the period 2008-2012 AWCH had 24,045 Outpatients and 1,812 Inpatients. [5.1]

##### 4.1 Benefits for Mental Health Care Patients

Research findings [3.1 & 3.2] were embedded into care programmes at AWCH, by Jureidini, where he continues to work in the area of Psychological medicine. This research suggests a different approach to treatment and patient care; the patient is encouraged to talk to their physician (or a confidante) about their feelings in order to challenge the dominant narrative. For example, a young patient with externalizing disorders (i.e., attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, conduct problems) might perceive their disruptive actions as products of their own characters (a story with emotional appeal and coherence), rather than seeing these actions as legitimate responses to particular circumstances (e.g., parental break-up). This treatment path trades upon the notion that certain psychotic states are "disorders of narrative". Where appropriate, this "narrative" that patients 'tell themselves' can be challenged. Currie's research has been integral to this: **"We rely on Currie's work to support our emphasis on building more authentic narratives as the most ethically responsible way to work with young people"** [5.1]

This approach to patient care, developed using Currie's collaborative research with Jureidini, is taken to have **very specific benefits**. According to the former Head of Psychological medicine at AWCH, there is no evidence in favour of medication or specific forms of psychotherapy as the best means with which to engage some types of patient. However, "[t]hrough a combination of 'watchful waiting' and physical and emotional rehabilitation, **physicians may be able to actively intervene without reliance on medication or formulaic psychotherapy**". [5.1]

#### 4.2 Training for Mental Health Care Professionals

Also since 2008, a **training unit has been developed, and it serves to help spread the influence of Currie's research**. The unit is the Paediatric Mental Health Training Unit (PMHTU); the training portfolio delivered there, and developed by Jureidini, uses findings from his collaborative research with Currie. As noted: 'PMHTU is quickly **building a strong profile meaning that narrative approaches developed with Currie are influencing a wide range of practitioners**'. [5.1]

More than 300 members of staff (including medical students, general practitioners, allied health professionals, teachers and counselors) have been trained (for at least 6 hours, each) in the use of a care model that seeks to explore young people's distress with the aim of developing a narrative that explains their predicament. [5.1]

#### Context: improving confidence and attainment for school children

Seeking to apply Currie's body of research in a different domain, in 2011 the unit used existing links with local schools to translate the research into workshops on narrative and character for primary school pupils. The workshops **helped develop children's understanding of character and story writing, improved their confidence, and instilled in them a desire to read**. Similar workshops for secondary-age pupils had **substantial effects upon student attainment at the IGCSE**.

#### 4.3 Primary School Improvement

Insight into character and its role in narrative was seen as especially valuable to children looking to construct compelling and vivid narratives for themselves. Workshops on narrative were designed. Their aim was to teach children about Currie's research findings: specifically, about the important role that character plays in narrative, by character adding to the coherence of the narrative and enriching the connections between events. The sessions also taught children that fictional characters need not be like real people to do this, and that it often aids the narrative if they are not.

Feedback from the sessions attests to their success in raising authorial confidence. A teacher notes that, '**[the] project has not only developed my children's understanding of character and story writing but, most importantly, instilled in them a love of literature and a desire to read**'.

[5.3] Children themselves reported benefits: most of those surveyed were **more confident that they understood why interesting characters are important** to stories than they were before, and they felt that they had **learned something that would help them to write a better story**. [5.4]

#### 4.4 Influencing School Curricula

Teacher-training sessions delivered to teachers from 5 schools in December 2012 led to three of the Primary schools feeling able to run the sessions—described as 'Thinking Space' sessions—in school straight away. Teachers from two special schools who attended also found the workshop valuable for further encouraging thinking skills and open ended thought. [5.2] The training sessions were designed to show-case to teachers how to deliver the workshops created by the unit, explaining how they were built around philosophical research, and looking to articulate the value of that research to the teachers.

#### 4.5 Secondary School Attainment

To help pupils prepare for their English IGCSE a more advanced version of the workshop on narrative was designed in collaboration with a local Secondary School—Nottingham University Samworth Academy (NUSA)—which had **substantial effects upon student attainment at the IGCSE** in June 2013. 26 of the students attending declared themselves **more confident** in their understanding of the role of character in narrative; 25 that responded that they had **learned something that would help them with their GCSE**. [5.4] Their teacher said that 'Results show that pupils had made **considerable achievement at this stage in their learning. The intervention ... played a significant role in this success**.' By using research to explain the benefits of creating unrealistic characters, the University of Nottingham staff enabled pupils to produce imaginative coursework that showed a greater level of maturity in their writing.' [5.5] NUSA have taken the decision to run the workshops on an annual basis, to support their students, such was the success of the programme. [5.5] This reflects a **substantive change to their curriculum**.

#### Context: The Influence on Public Debate

Issued by the University of Nottingham in 2011 [5.6], a press release used Currie's research to explain the appeal of the *Harry Potter* series and thereby **stimulated wider debate within the**

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**press, and provoked considerable social media engagement with Currie's research.**

Specifically, it drew on two of Currie's claims: that character adds a great deal to narrative, even in the absence of *real* character *in the world* itself, and that fictional characters need not be (indeed, *should not be*) at all like *real* people in order to play the role required of them in successful narrative. The press release builds on this insight in order to argue that it is Potter's character that ultimately drives the success of the franchise.

**4.6: Stimulating Public Debate**

The *Daily Telegraph* subsequently (2011) published a report on Currie's research. It was tweeted 47 times, linked to on Facebook 61 times and 'shared' a further 108 times [5.6]. Following on from this, a second article in the *Daily Telegraph* (2012) discusses Currie's view on the Potter series. This second article was tweeted 65 times, linked to on Facebook 356 times and 'shared' a total of 421 times. The latter piece is also cited in an article in the *Times Higher Education* during May 2012. [5.6]

Currie then also authored a piece ('Does Great Literature Make us Better?') that draws on his research to argue for skepticism about the claim that great literature makes us better people. In particular, Currie draws on his discussion of the fact that we regularly attribute our own failures to circumstance and the failures of others to bad character, to undermine the claim that great literature makes us better people. Published in June of 2013 by *The New York Times*, it attracted in excess of 500 comments. [5.6] Reply pieces specifically focused on Currie's article appeared during June 2013, published in *Time* and the *Christian Science Monitor*. [5.6] To give a flavour of their reach: the *Time Magazine* article was itself tweeted more than 2500 times and 'liked' on Facebook more than 35,000 times. [5.6] **The follow-up pieces and their very high uptake in social media circles demonstrate a clear contribution to public debate.**

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- 5.1: Email from former Head of Psychological medicine at AWCH; source is also current Child Psychiatrist, Department of Psychological Medicine Women's and Children's Hospital, Adelaide.
- 5.2: Email from Education in Partnership Manager, Nottingham City Council.
- 5.3: Quote from local teacher at Seagrave Primary School provided by the Academy Project Manager at the University of Nottingham
- 5.4: Summary of evaluation of events, available in a pdf (hard-copies of surveys with children can also be provided if required).
- 5.5: Email from English Teacher at NUSA
- 5.6: Summary of media impacts, available in a pdf