

Narrative Inquiry and Food-Based Community for International Students at Conestoga

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***Original Research Papers** are papers that report on original empirical research with a focus on teaching and learning. Papers may be qualitative or quantitative and include an Abstract, Introduction, Method, Results, Discussion, and Reference section, as well as any tables and/or figures.

Abstract

This article explores how narrative inquiry, as a research method, can elicit rich qualitative data that contributes in significant ways to understanding feelings of belonging among post-secondary international students. More specifically, the article describes a 2025 mixed-methods study (funded by an internal grant) on the relationship between food, identity, and community for international students enrolled at Conestoga College, not to analyze the findings of that publication, but rather the narrative-based aspects of its methodology. The study included community consultations, a student survey ($N = 332$), and a series of writing events during which researchers solicited student narratives ($N = 164$). Research was conducted in the context of unprecedented internationalization at the college that resulted in a substantial population of students at an elevated risk of food insecurity and its concomitant problems. The narrative inquiry component of the study demonstrated that food plays an important role in the lives of Conestoga's international students as a representation of cultural heritage, a connection to family, and a potential pathway to community belonging. Here, we discuss how inviting students to share stories about their own experiences via narrative inquiry is a research approach that not only resulted in a more thorough understanding of their concerns than traditional research methods typically allow, but also one that expressed to students the value of their voices. This article highlights the benefits and reflects on the inherent challenges of narrative inquiry as a meaningful avenue for pursuing social justice research, using our own 2025 project as a case study.

Introduction

This article details a 2025 study on the relationship between food and belonging for international students at Conestoga College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning following a period of unprecedented and relatively sudden internationalization.¹ Our research team employed narrative inquiry as its primary method to identify the extent to which food practices impacted the sense of

1 Between 2019 and 2023, international study permit holders at Conestoga increased by 187% (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada) before beginning to decline in 2024; by Winter 2025, according to Conestoga Institutional Research (2025), international students still accounted for approximately 66% of enrolment.

community belonging experienced by international students enrolled at the college. While the findings related to that question will be briefly discussed below, our principal aim in this article is to analyze the potential for narrative inquiry as a research methodology in the interdisciplinary field of food justice. Throughout this paper, we are following Dixon's (2019) use of the term "food justice" to denote a focus on food practices that enhance our capacity to identify ethical issues related to the food system (p. 2), in this case the distribution of (or access to) affordable and culturally familiar food to international students at Conestoga. *Narrative inquiry*, as we discuss in our Method section, for us refers to a process of collecting data through brief written narratives that respond to prompts about food-related practices, including grocery shopping, cooking, eating, sharing, and remembering.

The capacity for narrative inquiry to reveal systemic food inequity while amplifying marginalized voices renders it a particularly useful method for exploring food justice issues. However, the ethical implications associated with soliciting and framing student narratives—particularly when participants are food insecure or otherwise vulnerable—also make it a complex and somewhat risky approach. Our objective, then, is to locate practical uses of narrative inquiry that acknowledge and mitigate ethical dilemmas in food justice research.

Method

Our research employed mixed methods such that our findings synthesize data from three distinct phases of research: community consultations, a student survey, and, most significant to this article, writing prompts. The study relied on contextual data and quantitative survey data to discover food practices among a particular demographic at the college, but it also used qualitative narrative data to enhance our understanding of student priorities and challenges related to food, identity, and belonging.

Community Consultations

We first consulted with community stakeholders (both internal and external to the college) with a vested interest in food and belonging: Conestoga Students Inc.; campus managers; the Conestoga Food Security Collective (a group of faculty and staff doing research related to food security); the Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition (GNSC), where neighbourhood groups in Guelph share resources in support of various social causes; Community FEWD (Chef Yasi Zorlutuna), or Food Equity with Dignity, a group that partners with GNSC

to assist with processing perishables along with local food support agencies; and Distro, a Waterloo organization that provides food support to students at Wilfrid Laurier University the form of free groceries and essentials.

Student Survey

We also administered a 32-question online survey that was made available to all students enrolled in program-required Level 1 communications courses (degree, diploma, and graduate certificate). The survey asked students to anonymously respond to a range of food and community related questions: for example, to identify where they purchase or obtain food on and off campus; to rate their level of satisfaction with the availability and affordability of culturally appropriate ingredients and prepared foods; and how the extent to which their food practices contribute to and/or serve as a barrier to their sense of community and belonging. We had 332 respondents over two semesters (Fall 2024 and Winter 2025), 61% of whom identified as international students.

Writing Pop-up Events

We then synthesized our survey results with narrative data we collected from a series of writing pop-up events on three Conestoga campuses (Guelph, Kitchener, and Waterloo). We also held an additional writing pop-up at an off-campus event in downtown Guelph where students were invited to a free dinner for conversation about their experiences with community and food. During each pop-up event, students were invited to write a response to one of three prompts:

- A. Do you think there is a relationship between food and feeling a sense of belonging in a new place? Share a story about a time when food either contributed to or diminished your sense of belonging.
- B. When, where, and how do you most often come together with friends and/or family to share food? Share a story about a memorable meal with friends and/or family.
- C. What are your food traditions, and why are they important to you? Share a memory of how you have practiced traditions around food.

There was a total of 164 respondents from the narrative inquiry portion of the project: 67 from the Doon campus, 48 from the Waterloo campus, 29 from the Guelph campus, and 20 from the Guelph off-campus event.

Narrative Inquiry

As we progressed in our narrative-based research, we became explicitly concerned with the value of narrative in decoding and addressing food justice issues for post-secondary students. Because our methods became a site of interrogation themselves, our process required consistent reflection, which we will detail in the Discussion section below.

Narrative inquiry is an approach to research that describes, in general terms, the complex process of analyzing relationships to systems through narrative responses. Bochner and Riggs (2014) provide a useful lineage of narrative inquiry, tracing it back to developments in psychology, particularly Spence's (1982) claim that psychoanalysis entails the creation of a life narrative based on recalled events and impressions (p. 197). They also credit Sarbin (1986) with directing focus onto narrative psychology, and note that, by the early 1990s, critics such as Krieswirth (1992) could identify a "narrative turn" in the social sciences more generally, one that continued to flourish and privilege narrative as a mode of understanding human life well into the 21st century (p. 198). An increasing distrust of objective evidence and the scientific method led to the emergence of new research methods, among them "story-based forms of inquiry" (p. 199).

Barkhuizen and Consoli (2021) wisely note that studies using narrative inquiry ought to first explain how they are defining narrative itself (para. 7). We are accordingly defining narrative through specific parameters, following Squire et al. (2015), who view it as "a set of signs, which may involve writing, verbal or other sounds, or visual, acted, built or made elements that similarly convey meaning" (p. 20). For them, narrative must involve the progression of these signs to produce some form of meaning, and this meaning must be explanatory rather than merely descriptive (p. 21). Narrative is further defined by its particularity; because narrative is bound to the unique circumstances and conditions faced by its generator(s), the meaning created by narrative is, in some respects, narrower than theory or scientific observation or objective truth (p. 20).

Squire et al. (2015) identify three primary approaches to narrative inquiry (pp. 23–25):

- **structural:** the relationship between structure, grammar, and/or organization and the creation of sentiment or meaning.;

- **content-focused:** the details and themes within individual narratives and across multiple narratives; and
- **context-focused:** the relationship between narrative and broader context, such as the way a narrative might reflect or respond to a social situation.

Our own approach, in which we prompted post-secondary students to write about traditions, memories, and opinions that we anticipated would lead to the generation of narratives, emphasized content (over structure) while inevitably considering context at the same time. For Barkhuizen and Consoli (2021), narrative inquiry focuses on what the content of narrative can "tell us about the narrators and about their experiences" (para. 18). Considering narrative inquiry in this way thereby requires us to consider the contexts and relationships in which research participants—and researchers—are situated (para. 18).

For us, then, narrative inquiry is quite simply the study of narrative as described above, with the caveat that we are exploring what narrative reveals about a particular social situation: how food intersects with community and belonging. According to Jones (2016), we need to "move away from considering social justice issues on a purely descriptive level toward research and pedagogy that promotes agency and advocacy and fosters collaboration for and about social change across disciplines, domains, and communities while engaging critical cultural concerns within and outside of the academy" (p. 357). This sentiment informs the present study and its examination of narrative inquiry as an interdisciplinary research methodology.

Narrative inquiry is an effective way to conduct social justice research generally because it attends to the stories of individual participants while allowing researchers to identify common themes. Insofar as our narrative-based research was primarily conducted through community engagement events (including free snacks and shared meals), it was also a form of community building in and of itself. This method is particularly germane to food justice studies because it constitutes a form of storytelling that can provide the "particularity, accuracy, and emotional engagement" that reveals unjust food circumstances and what ought to change in order to end them (Dixon, 2019, p. 3).

Participants

With eight campuses in Southern Ontario (Kitchener, Cambridge, Waterloo, Guelph, Stratford, Ingersoll, Brantford, and Milton), Conestoga had a total enrolment of 34,422 in Fall 2024, and 30,411 in Winter 2025 (Conestoga Institutional Research). Of these 64,833 students, 43,933 were international students, which means that 68% of Conestoga students for the 2024-2025 academic year were international. According to a 2023 report by Conestoga Students Inc. (an independent non-profit student association at the college), international students face “severe” food insecurity and are one of the school’s most vulnerable groups as a result of financial barriers such as high tuition and limited options for employment (p. 23). Because students facing food insecurity are more likely to experience poor physical health (Corkum, 2020; Bruening et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2012), poor mental health (Men et al., 2021; Phillips et al., 2018; Hattangadi et al., 2019), declining academic performance (Farahbakhsh et al., 2017; Hattangadi et al., 2019; Maroto, 2015) and withdrawal from school (Wood & Harris, 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018), the importance of enhancing food-based community at the college had become increasingly important, particularly among the international student demographic.

As such, our study explored a selection of Conestoga’s campuses and their surrounding communities to identify the unique needs of international students in these areas. We focused on three campuses: Kitchener (Doon), because it is the largest of Conestoga’s campuses (68% International); Waterloo, because it houses Conestoga’s culinary programs and thus a robust population of students with vested interests in food and community (74% International); and Guelph, because our community partner for this project, Kuwait Aid Network, was aiming to increase food supports in downtown Guelph, where a new campus was, at the time, expected to open in Fall 2026 (83% International).

Food Issues for International Students

The complexities of the relationship between food and community for newcomers are well documented. Schermuly and Forbes-Mewett (2016) point to the negative impact that “unfamiliar tastes” can have on newcomers’ sense of belonging (p. 2440). Sharing traditional food, however, can be a way for migrants to contribute to a new community in a way that supports both their integration and the upholding of their cultural identities (p. 2439). They accordingly

position food sharing as central to a necessary “balancing of assimilation and cultural diversity” (p. 2441). Bailey (2017) echoes this sentiment, arguing that, for many newcomers, traditional food practices contribute to both integration into new locations and the persistence of cultural practices (p. 58). Food can serve as a medium through which to identify shared cultural norms, thus providing a way to integrate into a new environment while grounding such exchanges in cultural identity. Moreover, Bailey notes that the availability of culturally specific foods for newcomers can signal acceptance of their culture and relieve a “sense of dislocation” (p. 58). At the same time, Kwon (2023) contends that barriers to community and integration, such as lacking familiarity with the ingredients and eating practices in their new community, unemployment or underemployment, and financial hardship, often impact food choices negatively (para. 12). So, although food and food practices have great potential to improve one’s sense of belonging in a new community, there are considerable threats to this potential as well.

There is also contemporary research that examines this phenomenon in post-secondary settings in particular. Lordly et al. (2020) acknowledge that international students are subject to the barriers to food-based integration described above:

As a result of the cultural shift in food intake, international students experienced many changes that included a deterioration of well-being, cultural and social affiliation and connection. Student identity articulated through the values, beliefs and traditions associated with culturally relevant foods are positive but at the same time created barriers to integration with other cultures. Food insecurity and lack of culturally appropriate foods were related to the loss of community and feelings of isolation. This loss of connection impacted well-being, identity and integration. (p. 27)

Similarly, Pilli and Slater (2021) find that international students often struggle with food practices in Canada, particularly because they consume fewer healthy fruits, vegetables, and dairy products when they arrive. In Pilli and Slater’s study, students cited lack of time, lack of food-preparation skills with new ingredients, and prohibitive costs as reasons for this struggle (pp. 4-6). They conclude that improved access to traditional foods for international students can improve their overall physical health and

wellbeing (p. 2), echoing Entz et al. (2016) and Olason et al. (2018). Wright et al. (2021) point out that cultural food insecurity can lead to declining mental and emotional health for international students when they are unable to maintain cultural food practices (para. 4).

Results

While existing criticism is valuable to the extent that it explores the ways in which food intersects with newcomers' capacity to sustain community while affirming traditions and cultural identities, it does not address the unique circumstances faced by international students at Conestoga College, specifically, nor does it address how narrative inquiry might illuminate or enhance opportunities for community, belonging, and/or overall well-being.

Overall, our student survey provided useful quantitative data in this respect, suggesting that international students at Conestoga are vulnerable to food insecurity, that Conestoga students are generally less satisfied with the availability of culturally appropriate food items and ingredients on-campus than off-campus, and that international students at Conestoga are more likely than domestic students to eat in community or report that their eating habits enhance their sense of community and belonging (Pratt & Rintoul, 2025). Our consultations revealed that Conestoga students are using food supports in the wider community and that these programs are an avenue for community building, particularly for international students (Pratt & Rintoul, 2025).

The narrative inquiry component of our research corroborates much of the existing scholarship on food and community for newcomers in general and international students in particular. For example, some of the stories we collected express a fear of cooking and eating in a new place (due to a lack of skills, a lack of appropriate ingredients, or a concern over being judged about food preferences and practices). A few respondents noted that they find healthy food to be too costly in Canada; others articulated a connection between food and mental health (reporting that lack of access to culturally appropriate food exacerbates stress and loneliness). The narratives also contain (implicit and explicit) expressions of homesickness and nostalgia connected to both cooking and eating.

Despite these more negative responses, our respondents' stories are notably positive overall. A general openness to

food diversity emerged across the stories: some respondents referred to the joy to be had in cooking for others; many mentioned the joy of sharing meals more broadly (with expressions of both love and community here); and eating or cooking together were regularly discussed as bonding experiences (with either friends or family). Given that two of the three writing prompts we provided were framed in positive terms (with a third prompt that allowed for both positive and negative responses), this result was unsurprising, which, upon reflection, also served to illustrate our own assumptions as researchers around food and its importance to identity and community belonging, as will be discussed below.

The average response length of the 164 narratives we collected was 88 words, and of the 143 respondents who provided optional demographic information, 95% identified as international students. Upon careful (independent) review of the narratives we gathered by each member of the research team, five common themes emerged, four of them broadly positive and one of them more notably mixed, with some overlap between them:

1. food as a representation of cultural heritage;
2. cooking (and/or learning to cook) cultural foods as a connection to family;
3. sharing food as a pathway to community and/or belonging;
4. accessing cultural foods in Canada as a pathway to community and/or belonging; and
5. food as a potential barrier to community and/or belonging.

The stories we gathered collectively highlight the emotional complexity of food in relation to community and belonging by revealing its impact on students' lives. Taken together, the narratives showcase a combination of cultural pride, longing, and love of family; a desire to adapt familial and cultural traditions in Canada to retain both a sense of self and an attachment to home; a direct association between locating cultural foods in community and/or learning to prepare cultural foods and feeling emotionally connected to family; and an understanding that shared meals can nurture cultural ties while also acting as a bridge between cultures and a means to finding or establishing community. All of this aligns with the findings of Schermuly and Forbes-Mewett (2016), who emphasize the importance of food sharing to both assimilation and the maintenance of cultural identity,

as noted above (p. 2441). Thus, as our narrative inquiry shows², and as Bailey (2017) suggests, there is a direct relationship between cultural foods and belonging, especially for newcomers navigating what it means to find a sense of community in a new place (p. 58).

Discussion

Unsurprisingly, several ethical issues attend the process of narrative inquiry itself. Smith and Luke (2023) note that a researcher's objectivity can and should be called into question when engaging in narrative inquiry as an inherently relational process; narrative-based researchers, then, are ethically obligated to acknowledge this relationality, especially how our own subjectivity can impact the way we frame, interpret, and analyze stories (p. 459–61). In terms of the present study, our assumptions that food would be important to students in specific ways shaped not only the writing prompts we provided to participants, but also the nature of the stories they generated.

Other challenges with narrative-based research include researcher assumptions around the authenticity and singularity of narrative voice: romanticizing the “narrative subject” as an authoritative “generator of meaning,” for example, ignores the inherently fragmented nature of first-person narratives that rely largely on memory; it can also overlook the presence of a “social desirability bias” that might subconsciously inform the subject's output as a performance that presumes the presence of an audience (Squire et al., 2015, p. 70). Squire et al. point out that, although narrative research relies on the notion that language is central to understanding the world, it must adhere to the assumption that narrators are a “variably reliable witness to their social reality” (2015, p. 74). They further maintain that uncritically relying on the authenticity of narrative voice, especially among marginalized subjects, can ultimately result in cementing (rather than ameliorating) various forms of exclusion: analyzing the narratives of subjects through the lens of their presumed exclusion potentially reinforces—or even intensifies—their marginality (p. 70).

For Squire et al. (2015), the flaws or risks of narrative-

based research can be at least partially overcome by embracing a “self-critical approach”: anticipating and openly acknowledging criticisms (as we have endeavoured to do here) not only serves to make them a meaningful part of the findings but also contributes to enhancing the ethical behaviour of the researchers themselves (p. 71). Pino Gavidia and Adu (2022) similarly argue that the reflexive demands of narrative inquiry can be used to challenge and deconstruct assumptions. These assumptions pertain not just to individual identities and biases but to the values of knowledge-making that underpin public policy. So, not only does narrative inquiry help to build engagement, empathy, listening, and valuing, as O’Kane and Pamphilon (2016) argue, but it also enhances insights related to the conditions and positionalities we occupy as researchers and subjects, and thus to the frameworks we exist within and can imagine.

While our focus was primarily on the content of the narrative responses we gathered, we are (following Barkhuizen and Consoli, 2021) acutely aware of the complex interplay among content, context, and structure with any narrative-based methodology. These elements are inextricably connected in our study for several reasons. For example, we solicited narrative responses targeting students who were often writing to us in a non-native language. Although we emphasized a free-writing approach in our instructions to students wherein vocabulary and grammar would not be evaluated, many students could have been intimidated by the process of writing in English, particularly since we identified ourselves not just as researchers but as Communications professors. In turn, as professors who teach and assess vocabulary and grammar, it stands to reason that we may have had particular impressions of submissions owing to their formal qualities. We can see, then, that the content of submissions cannot be evaluated without consideration of structure and its relationship to the professor-student context.

Given the interrelatedness of structure, content, and context, we agree with Barkhuizen and Consoli (2021) argument that narrative inquiry ought to include “detailed descriptions of the data analytical procedures” (para. 7). Such process description could, they argue, help individual researchers and research institutions understand the validity of narrative inquiry as a methodology and lend credibility to the rigour of story-based research (para. 13). It also requires us to acknowledge what Barkhuizen and Consoli (2021) refer to as the “human dimensions” of our research (para. 14); as

2 Pratt and Rintoul (2025) includes significant selections of the raw data gathered via the narrative inquiry component of our study, along with a detailed discussion of the complexities of representing narrative data in traditional academic publication venues (pp. 17–28).

discussed above, we need to reflect on our own positions as researchers, our relationships to our research subjects, the ways that relationship might impact their responses, as well as the ways in which we project meaning into interactions and narratives. To this end, we have carefully mapped our methods onto a table of “core issues” in narrative inquiry created by Barkhuizen and Consoli to offer guidance to researchers undertaking what they refer to as this “messy” form of research (para. 14-16). (See [Table 1](#).)

Impact

The impact of this research relates both to food justice initiatives and to the support that narrative inquiry can provide through contextualizing students’ relationships to food. For example, data from this research has already been shared in an internal report published through Conestoga Research, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship with the goal of informing and supporting college initiatives that serve food insecure students, such as the Student Nutritional Access Program (operated by Conestoga Students Inc.), the Wellness and Health Promotion resources offered by Student Success (including *The Great Conestoga Cookbook*), or the ongoing food security projects sponsored by the Conestoga Food Research & Innovation Lab. Information about how our students perceive the availability and affordability of culturally specific food, and about how food practices impact their sense of belonging, can help inform current and future efforts to reduce vulnerability and build community at the college.

In fact, our research itself served as a set of community-building experiences. Our pop-ups and off-campus dinner event brought together diverse groups of students to share perspectives and memories about food, enhancing mutual understanding while fostering communication skills and the confidence required to tackle some of the barriers they face related to their capacity to make healthy and sustaining food choices.

Finally, our analysis of narrative inquiry specifically as a means of exploring food justice issues can have further impact insofar as it contributes to a growing body of evidence that stories constitute valuable sites of information for social justice research and practice. As we have been suggesting, narrative inquiry is well-positioned for researching sensitive topics, not least because it allows space for subjects to openly tell their stories to an engaged and supportive audience (Squire et al., 2015, p. 81). In a broader sense,

narrative inquiry is a useful approach to qualitative research because human participants, as “natural storytellers,” are both willing to provide their personal stories and inclined to offer detailed descriptions in doing so, resulting in a rich data pool (Butina, 2015, p. 191). The wonderfully varied stories we received from willing students confirm this sentiment. We thus encourage researchers to take up the self-reflexive narrative inquiry methods we describe here to explore equity issues in Ontario post-secondary institutions and to further interrogate these methods and our responsibilities as ethical researchers of vulnerable populations.

Conclusion

Narrative inquiry is broadly understood as a useful method across disciplines as varied as business, education, language acquisition, law, medicine, and psychology (see Kim, 2016); its capacity as an *interdisciplinary* approach to food-related social justice research, however, has yet to be established, despite the inherently multifaceted nature of this avenue of study (see Long, 2017). The purpose of this article has thus been to advocate for narrative inquiry as a research approach to the interdisciplinary field of food studies, with extensions to other social justice topics as well.

As we have been arguing here, narrative inquiry, as a research methodology, readily aligns with social justice issues: because it is “as much about the *possible* as it is about the actual,” this approach is well suited to researchers and participants who want to “imagine, discover, or create new and better ways of living” (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 198). For Johnston et al. (2023), “narratives have the power to affect change in society by enhancing the transferability of research findings, presenting research findings with impact because they are engaging and memorable” for readers and researchers alike (p. 109). Our narrative inquiry allowed us to truly see the myriad ways in which the financial, social, and cultural barriers faced by international students impact their food choices and, subsequently, their well-being, which echoes data indicating that international students are overwhelmingly more susceptible to food insecurity in Ontario (Ghosh et al., 2022; Kwon, 2023). The individual stories we gathered, and their collective themes, provided context and framed experience in ways that purely quantitative data could not have achieved, in part because of the richness that comes from engaging with such varied voices and narrative details (as per Butina, 2015).

Table 1: Addressing core issues in narrative inquiry research (as per Barkhuizen and Consoli, 2021)

Critical issues in narrative inquiry	Guiding questions with answers
Researcher engagement: resources	What resources are available to the researcher to investigate a topic through the rubric of story and storytelling? In our case, in addition to secondary research sources on narrative inquiry (many of which are in the references list for the present article), we had physical access to high-traffic social spaces on Conestoga's campuses where students tend to congregate and eat. Our research grant meant that we were able to set up tables with signage and offer free snacks and drinks to students passing by. We were also able to encourage student participation with the offer of being entered into a draw for a grocery gift card. Finally, we had access to an off-campus community space (thanks to our community partner) during a catered event that students pre-registered for.
Researcher engagement: approach	Why does a researcher select a specific approach to retrieve and highlight the stories embedded in their research practice? We set up in or near cafeterias on Conestoga's campuses because students were already likely to spend time between classes studying, socializing, and eating. We planned pop-ups as opposed to formal events because we assumed it would allow us to interact with more students than a planned event for which students had to register. We did not ask professors to solicit responses during classes (as we did with the survey) because we did not want to ask them to give up too much valuable teaching time, and we did not want the writing task to feel like an assignment for student participants. We asked students to share stories or memories in an effort to generate narratives rather than short sentence-length responses. We publicized the project and its results on the Community-Engaged Writing Initiative website (as part of the college's Social Innovation Lab) to make our work accessible to both internal and external stakeholders.
Researcher positionality: influence	How aware is the researcher of their influence over their participants, their methods, the data, and ultimate research claims? We were aware that we are in a position of authority in relation to students at the college. Understanding the power dynamic of a classroom, we decided against administering the writing activities during class (not even as optional tasks) so that students would not feel a sense of obligation to 1) complete the task 2) complete the task in a particular fashion. By soliciting prompts in and near cafeterias, we diminished this impact somewhat, though not entirely. We did attempt to further mitigate this dynamic by emphasizing both verbally and in writing that "there is no wrong answer," that we were not assessing the subjective quality of the response, that students could write as much or as little as they wanted, and that the point of the activity was for them to foreground their own voices and experiences. We also worked closely with two Conestoga Research Students who were able to solicit stories from students as peers.

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Critical issues in narrative inquiry	Guiding questions with answers
Researcher positionality: interactions	Does the researcher recognise their contributions in the data they co-construct and (re)present through dialectical interactions with their participants and the actual data? We do recognize that our interactions with research participants may impact the nature of their responses, and we recognize that our interpretations of the data we collect risk impacting the authenticity of the data to some extent. We acknowledge that many of the responses we received from participants are likely impacted by the styles of writing taught at the college and/or a desire to please professors, even if we are not their professors. We recognize that the prompts we constructed could likewise shape the nature of the data collected. For example, asking students to comment on memories or traditions evokes different responses than prompts that ask students to predict or imagine.
Messy data collection and analysis: challenges	Does the researcher accept and honestly reveal the complex dilemmas, challenges, and surprises involved in narrative data gathering and analysis? As per Squire et al. (2015), there are a range of issues that must be considered when selecting, preparing, and analysing narrative data, including carefully determining the “content categories or themes that the stories focus on” and reflecting on the means by which the narratives were constructed in the first place (p. 86). One unexpected issue we encountered, in the age of Generative Artificial Intelligence, was verifying the authenticity of stories that were submitted digitally. In an effort to make the writing activity fully accessible, we provided student participants with the option to compose their stories online via Microsoft Forms rather than handwriting them on the spot, which also allowed students to write and submit their stories off site (thereby disrupting the chain of custody for the data); however, of the 164 stories we collected, less than 10% chose to write and submit digitally.
Messy data collection and analysis: interpretation	Does the researcher take clear and systematic steps to unravel the stories embedded in their datasets? The stories from our respondents were transcribed by a single member of our research team. Each member of the research team then read all of the stories we gathered in their entirety, looking for common themes along the way (guided by our overarching research question). We then discussed our interpretations as a group and collectively settled on five broad themes that emerged from the narrative data. The transcriptions were coded by theme, and stories were selected for inclusion in our internal report based on the degree to which they exemplified one (or more) of the themes.
Complex representation of data	What steps does the researcher take to preserve the integrity of the stories told and retrieved to answer their research questions? The relative newness of narrative inquiry and analysis (along with its reach across disciplines) means that there is still no standardized method of representing narrative data, as noted by Barkhuizen and Consoli (2021) themselves. Squire et al. (2015) openly acknowledge the ethical and aesthetic challenges of conveying narrative research findings to various audiences, especially when it comes to balancing the presentation and interpretation of data (pp. 88-89). In recognition of this need for balance, we adopted a modified composite narrative approach for our internal report by quoting representative selections from the students’ stories (grouped by theme) exactly as written, without standardizing grammar. For the purposes of the present article and its stated objective—to outline the ways in which narrative inquiry can address and mitigate ethical dilemmas in food justice research—we have chosen to describe and analyse the process of conducting narrative-based research rather than represent the data directly.

Given the benefits of self-reflexivity and relationality that come with narrative inquiry, including the capacity to build empathy and the obligation to consider bias, assumptions, and identity, it provides not just an appropriate methodology for studying the relationships between food and community belonging, but a necessary one. In its privileging of participants' stories about their own lived experiences, narrative inquiry can be especially useful in giving voice and agency to marginalized populations who may not be adequately or accurately represented in mainstream culture. Students experiencing food insecurity, many of whom are newcomers, clearly fall within this category. The nuances of their individual food stories, as well as the commonalities among them, are best expressed through narrative as a mode of understanding human experience by giving it both shape and meaning. Student participants in our narrative inquiry reported on their literal and figurative journeys, thus providing them with a means of simultaneously articulating and reflecting on their own experiences.

Narrative inquiry clearly has the potential not only to help us understand a problem as complex as food injustice, but to frame it from multiple perspectives and express potential solutions in ways that emphasize both autonomy and diversity. Broadly speaking, the goals of narrative inquiry are “to keep the conversation going (about matters crucial to living well); to activate subjectivity, feeling, and identification in readers or listeners; to raise consciousness; to promote empathy and social justice; and to encourage activism—in short, to show what it can mean to live a good life and create a just society” (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 201). The end results of narrative inquiry as a meaningful approach to food justice research thus make it worth the associated risks and inherent challenges.

Conflict of Interest

Some data from this study has been previously published by the Conestoga Social Innovation Lab in an internal report entitled *Food Stories: A Narrative-Based Approach to Analyzing International Students, Food, and Community* (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2016.12.013>). This report focused more on presenting and analyzing the raw data and less on assessing the methodology itself.

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