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'... But we are academics!' a reflection on using arts-based research activities with university colleagues

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Abstract

Arts-based practices, although familiar in some areas of educational research have the capacity to surprise and to shock: they hold promise but also pose risks. In this essay we introduce arts-based research practices and in particular cut-up and collage. We invite readers to reflect on our experiences of arts-based educational research activities with a group of academic colleagues. We describe what we did, what went wrong, what went right and what we learned.

Keywords

Tutors; arts-based research methods; academic staff; development

What have arts-based researchers done?

Arts-based research practices take inspiration from activities and artefacts usually associated with the creative arts. Researchers from a wide range of disciplines work with poems, film, photography, music-making, storytelling, drama, dance, painting and collage in order to investigate experiences and disseminate ideas. Not only the products and processes, but also the assumptions and concerns of the arts are apparent in their research: they bring into play imagination, subjectivity, creativity and voice. All phases of their research may be infused with artistry, including data generation, analysis, interpretation and representation (Leavy 2015).

There is a strong tradition of arts-based practices in research with schoolteachers and their pupils (see, for example, Black 2002; Hanley and View 2014; Marshall and Gibbons 2015; McCormick-Davis 2005; Ryan 2005; Taylor 2002; Weber and Mitchell 1996). This may be because of their association with research participants who face linguistic and other barriers to communication such as children, people with learning difficulties or mental health issues, or those who are socially excluded. Such approaches are less commonly found in the literature on teaching and learning in higher education. Bagnoli (2009) suggests that arts-based communication could usefully be employed with wider populations and Silverstone (1999, 9) goes further in stating that arts-based communications may have particular value for verbally sophisticated communicators who 'can use words to distract, defend and delay'. Nevertheless, in qualitative studies with groups usually seen as highly articulate, such as university lecturers, interviews and thematic analysis are often seen as the default mode.

Two rare examples of arts-based research in higher education are Jones (2010) and Loads (2009, 2010). In her exploration of the experiences of university teachers and the range of influences that shape the ways in which they teach, Jones (2010) used poetic transcription both as a method of analysis and as a way of representing and disseminating her findings. She reproduced interview transcripts in distilled form, paying attention to the emphasis, rhythm and nuance of speech. She found that this arts-based approach to analysis allowed her to explore aspects of teaching that are often overlooked or undervalued; it honoured the complexity and richness of a university teacher's life and 'allowed for the emotional, ambiguous, contradictory and elusive as well as the analytical' (Jones 2010, 594). As a means of representing her findings to an audience, the use of poetry 'invite(d) participation in the lives of others through providing a window into the academic experience' (Jones 2010, 591).

It was at the data generation stage that Loads (2009, 2010), drew on arts-based activities, inviting university lecturers to create magazine collages, masks and small-scale sculptures in response to the question, 'What does teaching mean to me?'. She found that these activities encouraged participants to explore unfamiliar metaphors and to respond to unexpected juxtapositions: the workshops were characterised by a sense of surprise, leading to insights and deep reflection.

Why are arts-based practices valuable?

One of the hallmarks of artistry, according to Eisner (2003), is the pursuit of surprise. He advocates this active seeking out of the unexpected as a counterbalance to current preoccupations in education with standardisation and control. He associates the pursuit of surprise with Dewey's (1938) notion of flexible purposing – a readiness to change our plans in the light of what we are learning from our current experiences. Greene's (1995) notion of releasing the imagination is relevant here. She too is interested in the unexpected, and also draws on Dewey, proposing surprise as a remedy for the inertia of habit. She goes further than Eisner, in making explicit links with action for social justice. She sees engagement with the arts as a way of breaking through habitual ways of seeing, thinking and acting. Such engagement, she claims, may bring about empathy with others' experiences, allowing us to move beyond the preoccupations of our own private worlds. The startling insights we gain may lead us to reconsider what we had understood as settled certainties, and this may be the first step towards acting for social change. More recently, Leavy (2015) has claimed that arts-based research practices are desirable because of their capacity for immediacy and accessibility and for giving voice to subjugated perspectives.

Both of the above examples reflect the value of what Eisner (1997, 4) identified as 'new ways of seeing and saying' that have so much (still untapped) potential for bringing research to life. They do

this, he claims, by fostering empathy, providing a sense of particularity, giving rise to productive ambiguity, increasing the range of possible questions and exploiting individual aptitudes. The poem-like writings published by Jones (2010) engender empathy for her interviewees that a terse, impersonal report could not. The particularity of the photographs of collages presented by Loads (2010) offer a more authentic sense of teacher identity than any table of categories. Productive ambiguity and complexity is evident in the findings of both researchers which are more 'evocative than denotative... increas(ing) the probability that multiple interpretations will emerge' (Loads 2010, 8) and that readers will respond by asking a wider range of questions. In both cases, researchers and participants were able to call on a diverse array of aesthetic and analytical skills, or as Leavy (2015, 3) puts it, to 'merge their scholar-self with their artist-self'.

How can arts-based practices be problematic?

Despite such alluring possibilities, it is important to point out that these alternative means of investigation and representation can also pose problems. First, participants recruited into arts-based studies may feel put out or alienated by unfamiliar media. Second, those who are skilled in critiquing conventional academic texts may be baffled by research findings in the form of photographs, sculptures, music or multimedia. Third, it is not always easy for even conventionally presented research into university teaching to be taken seriously, and studies that stand outside the mainstream may simply not be taken on board. Finally, arts-based research methods often produce imprecise findings, while many practitioners and policy-makers insist on precision. They require clear guidance, and do not welcome ambiguity, which is one of the trademarks of arts-based research. More fundamentally, the use of alternative forms of investigation and representation have the potential to trouble settled worldviews and values by posing questions about who has the power to speak, how they should use that power and whether they are taken seriously. Eisner (1997) warns that this subversive quality of arts-based research may provoke a backlash from those who are shocked by it, particularly from those who fear that they have something to lose. He encourages researchers not to be intimidated if people are taken aback: 'Their amazement is not a good reason for not exploring the edges of possibility' (Eisner 1997, 9). In a similar vein, Brearley (2008, 4) counsels arts-based researchers to work sensitively with the tensions between: 'knowing the rules AND challenging assumptions being creative AND maintaining rigour honouring content AND exploring form'.

Cut-up and collage

For our research we specifically used cut-up and collage, for reasons outlined below. The term collage usually refers to the bringing together of a number of elements displaced from their usual context and the sticking of these together to produce an artefact.

Collage is a non-threatening medium where an individual does not need to feel 'artistic' in producing their piece of work. The parts of the pictures have already been created – the individual now takes these and transforms them into new meaning which can then be shared with others. (Williams 2000, 274)

Cut-up is a technique for encouraging deep engagement with a text: 'In its simplest form the cut-up technique takes a page of text, cuts it into pieces and rearranges the words and phrases to make new combinations' (Colderley 2013).

Cut-up may be thought of as the writing equivalent of collage in the visual arts. Cut-up is also associated with aleatory poetry, where an element of chance is introduced into the process of writing, throwing a new light on the author and reader, their agency and choice. Cut-up was famously used by David Bowie to come up with creative lyrics (Canning 2013) and by William Burroughs in his novels. Both cut-up and collage can be disturbing bringing with them associations with the subversive. For example, Burroughs' experiments with cut-up novels in the 1960s left readers 'confused, disgusted or simply drenched in puzzled silence' (Walters 1962 as quoted in Cran 2013, 301), while in the visual arts, Picasso and Braque used collage provocatively to question political and social agendas (Butler-Kisber 2010).

Cut-up and collage introduce unexpected juxtapositions which can upset our assumptions, making the familiar seem uncomfortably strange, and in a wider sense politically challenging. An explanation for its power may be that it reminds us of the bewildering disorder of our everyday perceptions:

cut-ups replicate what the eye sees during a short walk around the block: a view of a person may be truncated by a passing car, images are reflected in shop windows, all images are cut up and interlaced according to your moving viewpoint. (Cran 2013, 302)

In our study we set out to exploit some of the positive characteristics of arts-based methods. We wanted to promote empathy between staff and tutors, produce findings that were vivid in their particularity and authentic in their ambiguity. We wanted to promote questioning and deeper engagement with the topics under investigation. We particularly hoped to cultivate a sense of openness to surprise. We worked with cut-up and collage in particular because we wanted participants to engage with a policy text, and to do this in a way that encouraged unfamiliar perspectives and fresh thinking. We also wanted these events to have a developmental purpose: we wanted our participants to learn about themselves and each other. We were aware of the risks of alienating our participants, and of the need to weigh up creativity against rigour.

What we did

We were at the beginning of a year-long project to investigate how tutors (also known as sessional teachers, teaching assistants and adjuncts) perceive their professional development needs. We also

wanted to find out how academic and support staff at our university saw their role in supporting tutors' development. Researchers have investigated sessional tutors using a range of methodologies from small qualitative studies with an autobiographical flavour (e.g. Bieber and Worley 2006) to large-scale projects using automated software to increase 'accuracy' and 'credibility' (e.g. Logan et al. 2014, 36). We chose an arts-based method because we wanted to bring to our project the characteristics highlighted above.

We had a bold idea. Leaving surveys and interview schedules in the stationery cupboard we would bring out the glitter and the coloured card, sticky stars, chubby crayons and a box full of odds and ends. We would take a university policy document – the university's *Code of Practice on Tutoring and Demonstrating* (University of Edinburgh 2012) – and cut it up into pieces. Then, we would ask tutors to take words and phrases from the document and put them together again in visual ways that made sense to them. To find out more about how they felt and what they thought, we would get them to add colourful, meaningful embellishments. Then, we would ask the staff who supported them to look at these artefacts and in turn to express their responses with more glitter, glue and stickers, so that we could gain insight into the interaction between tutors and the staff who support them. We imagined that this would be enlightening, enjoyable and developmental. It would be also be fun. What could possibly go wrong?

What went wrong

It should be noted that although participants gave consent for their comments to be published, we do not present them here as 'data' but as prompts to further reflection.

Although we received strongly positive feedback from most of the participants (see below), at least one of our research participants felt that their time had been wasted and their intelligence insulted:

I'm afraid I felt patronised by the methods. Creative or visual materials are useful for those research populations who struggle to express themselves verbally or to uncover different levels of response which cannot easily be captured in traditional ways. But we are academics and words are our most effective medium.

One explanation for this response may be that we had failed to fully brief participants. Ironically, drawing on arts-based methods that are prized for their participatory potential (e.g. Leavy 2015), we had left them out of the research conversation. In our excitement we had not explained our rationale for exploring alternative methods of research for this project. We had omitted to share with them our hopes for empathy, particularity, productive ambiguity, multiple questions and surprise. We had not communicated our belief that artwork can be understood as a way for articulate individuals to by-pass familiar, routinised ways of expression. During the event, they had not raised any concerns with us,

despite repeated invitations. Perhaps they did not feel they could. As one sobering piece of feedback put it: 'The instructor treated us as if we were 5.'

There may be other explanations for this resistance. Many adults have memories of school days when they felt themselves to be judged as 'not good at art'. Art activities can subsequently bring with them discomfort, perhaps from buried feelings of shame and vulnerability. Colleagues may feel that their status as adults and as experts is at risk if they are put in a situation where they are asked to express themselves in unfamiliar ways.

One participant highlighted the fact that during the research workshops we had missed an opportunity for tutors and senior staff to explain and discuss their different perspectives:

As a participant, I can tell you that I found it almost impossible to interpret what tutors meant by their collages. How am I supposed to understand what the use of a few yellow stars mean, for example? And if I found something to express, I didn't know how to express it through the use of feathers.

On reflection, we feel we missed a step; getting colleagues to 'explain' their artefacts more fully to each other and to us may have resulted in richer data, although not necessarily clearer or more accurate accounts.

What went right

In many ways, the research was a success. Several of the participants said that they enjoyed creating and discussing artefacts, finding it fun and liberating, and productive of valuable insights into their work. The tutors engaged actively and critically with the policy document, paying close attention to words and phrases. Instead of the more usual statement and counter-statement, both tutors and senior staff asked themselves questions and expressed feelings. The unfamiliar method of representation seemed to give them pause for thought: we observed them pondering, hesitating and examining assumptions instead of repeating familiar viewpoints or quickly coming to settled conclusions. They came up with visual and verbal metaphors to express fresh insights. Cut-up and collage helped us to access tutors' and senior staff perceptions in ways that surveys and interviews might not have done. We were able to examine many levels of data – visual and verbal, metaphorical and literal. It was evident that for many participants and for us, as researchers, cut-up proved to be good for thinking with.

What we learned

We found that although by no means new, arts-based research approaches have the ability to shock and surprise in both helpful and unhelpful ways. The cut-up and collage activities encouraged fresh ways of thinking and gave rise to new insights as participants engaged in fresh ways with familiar

situations, finding unexpected meanings in conventional texts. However, these methods not only opened up spaces for enquiry; they also revealed cracks in the edifice of research orthodoxy: for example, undermining assumptions about who can and cannot take part in arts-based enquiry. What appeared to be a simple activity designed to promote engagement with a dry policy text seems to have been experienced by some as 'an assault on academicism' (Cran 2013, 303).

We were reminded that university colleagues, many of whom have strong researcher identities, bring with them assumptions about what is appropriate, and fears about losing their dignity and authority. We also realised that as passionate researchers we may become enamoured of an approach without stopping to critically reflect on its implications. Research methods bring with them a host of conscious and unconscious associations, for example, childhood experiences and historical references. But they do not automatically deliver their promised advantages: activities that are prized for their immediacy and accessibility may be experienced as excluding and opaque; researchers who value partnership and respect may end up alienating and humiliating research participants. We suggest that researchers be explicit about the possibility that these connotations may emerge in uncomfortable ways throughout the research process. It is important to engage participants fully and respectfully with the rationale for the methods chosen. This may be more important when researching with experienced academics than it is for those who are less entrenched in more traditional research conventions.

Once embraced, arts-based research methods can lead to fresh insights and new knowledge. We obtained interesting findings which will be reported elsewhere. For academics, who are only too familiar with speaking and writing, alternative ways of representing their ideas and experiences are well worth exploring, but we should take heed of Eisner's (1997, 9) wise warning: 'We...need to be sure, if we can be, that we are not substituting novelty and cleverness for substance. In other words, we need to be our own toughest critics.'

Afterword

Since this event, the researchers have brought our learning to bear in the design and delivery of a short course entitled 'Teaching outside the box: Using creativity in your teaching.' The course was sensitively facilitated and well-received, and has become an established and oversubscribed regular in our programme of tutor support.

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