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Unleashing the Artist Within: New Directions for Research in Adult Education

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Abstract: *The potential for using various art forms (drama, poetry, music, literature, visual art) in the collection and analysis of data, and in the expression of research findings is explored in this roundtable discussion.*

The purpose of this session is to give voice to alternative ways of knowing through artistic expressions of research thus extending the boundaries of what we have come to know as reality. While there has been a shift in adult education research in recent years from traditional positivistic methodologies to varied qualitative approaches, the primary method of disseminating findings is still textual. Forms of expression that represent other ways of knowing remain on the margins of what is considered legitimate knowledge. Popular theatre, or more specifically theatre of the oppressed (Boal, 1979) is one noted exception; however it is rarely seen in adult education research conferences. Qualitative data is typically collected by means of interviews, surveys and observation. Researchers need to consider ways of knowing that transcend cultures and expand worldviews. When knowledge is expressed through photography, artwork, music, poetry, drama, or stories, both the researcher and reader open themselves up to a rich potential for epistemological and ontological insights.

When one views a work of art, he or she is drawn to make an interpretation of the work beyond what is presented at the surface level. Emotional, experiential and visceral responses are commonly evoked. The researcher, like the artist, can be a 'provocateur of understanding' (Stake and Kerr, 1995) compelling the reader to access and consider deeper levels of meaning. Artistic forms of collecting data assist the research participants in accessing knowledge that cannot be expressed in mere words. Artistic forms of disseminating findings engage the audience beyond the cognitive level. Knowledge is constructed through the interpretation of the "reader" as well as the researcher (Van Manen, 1990). Through artistic expression of research, opportunities are made available to enter into the life-world of the researcher and the research participants by tapping into affective and spiritual domains.

The annual Qualitative Research Conference in Athens Georgia (QUIG) promotes development of new methodologies by selecting methodological and theoretical papers and presentations which examine new paradigm research, some of which involves use of artistic forms of expression. Our colleagues in K-12 education are beginning to incorporate art into research through the work of Eisner (1995) and others. The AERA has a special interest group focusing on arts based research. What implications does this movement have for adult education?

Examples of Art in Data Collection, Analysis and Dissemination

Poetry

Sullivan and Commeyras (1999) created poems out of empirical and textual data both as a process of meaning making and as a means for representing their findings. Similarly, Reissman (1993) used poetic structures in communicating the results of narrative analysis in a study of how people make meaning out of marriage and divorce.

Literature

Ebron and Tsing (1995) read and discussed fictional narratives of African American and Chinese American identity. They explored issues of marginalization by race, gender, ethnicity and class through their collaborative inquiry and analysis.

Storytelling

Mealman and Lawrence (1999) developed a collaborative research methodology, which frequently employs storytelling and metaphor. Stories are shared and metaphors are created in the data collection process, which are then analyzed and interpreted collaboratively by the co-researchers. These forms of expression are also used in the reporting of findings. Concentric storying, "telling stories about

research experiences and collaboratively reflecting on these stories through discussions” has been used extensively by Drake, Elliott and Castle (1993, p. 291) as a collaborative inquiry process. They employed this research process to deepen their understanding of themselves as women researchers.

Drama

Plazas-Lane (1999) wrote and directed a play titled *Esperanza*, to give voice to her research findings about the obstacles and struggles experienced by Hispanics in higher education. *Esperanza*, a moving drama, inspired Hispanic learners, and educators of all cultures, to consider the issues and realities of these learners. Presenting research findings on stage allows the audience to interact with the data in ways that are not possible with text only. Donmoyer and Donmoyer (1995), when confronted with a way to accurately represent the voices of 8th grade students, found creating and staging a readers theatre production an authentic way to tell their stories. “We feared these voices would lose their resonance if they were transported to the discourse structures of social science” (p. 409)

Photography

Lawrence and Mealman (1996) used photographic imagery to access knowledge, and as a dialectical process to interpret experience. Their research findings were expressed through a photographic slide presentation, which allowed members of the audience to enter into the interpretive process. Armstrong’s (1997) data collection included asking research participants to view photographic images as a way to stimulate self-reflection. They then wrote autobiographical narratives about oppression, which were shared and discussed as a group.

Film

The anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (Frank, 1995) drew on her own experiences and conducted field research in various Jewish communities. She cre-

ated and produced films as an expression of her fieldwork involving Jewish culture, stories, symbols and rituals that brought the experiences of her research participants to life.

Questions for Consideration

In this session, we will share how art has played roles in both our own research, and in encouraging graduate students to extend the limits of what is possible in theses and dissertations. Our goal is to engage the conference participants in a discussion exploring the potential for using the arts in research as well as ways to move these modes of expression from the margins to the center.

- In what ways have you utilized art forms for conceptualizing, collecting, analyzing and expressing research and research processes?
- Art is intended to provoke or stimulate thinking by appealing to all of our senses. What implications does this have for research?
- Can doctoral dissertations using artistic modes of expression be legitimized in the academy? What can we do to encourage and support such research?
- What implications does artistic expression have for conducting and disseminating research across cultural boundaries?
- In what ways can arts-based research open dialogues across the borders of east and west, north and south and among diverse cultural groups in shared communities?
- What are the ethical concerns related to probing the affective and spiritual domains of research participants through artistic modes of expression?

References

Available from the authors or from the AERC
Web site: <http://www.edst.educ.ubc.ca/aerc/>