Technological University Dublin

ARROW@TU Dublin

Conference papers

Dublin School of Architecture

2016

Arts-Based Education Research:a Critical Reflection from Two Irish Academics.

Eric Bates
Technological University Dublin, eric.bates@tudublin.ie

Karol Sadleir
Department of Education

Follow this and additional works at: https://arrow.tudublin.ie/bescharcon

Part of the Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons

Arts-Based Education Research – A Critical Reflection from Two Irish Academics.

Eric Bates [1][*]**, Karol Sadleir**[2]

[1]Dublin Institute of Technology, Bolton Street, Dublin 1, Ireland, eric.bates@dit.ie
[2]Department of Education, Dublin, Ireland

ABSTRACT

This paper details the experience of two Irish academics as they engaged in Arts-Based Education Research (ABER). Between them both they have explored the following areas; an autoethnographic exploration of how experience of assessment throughout educational life can shape professional life and identity; an autoethnographic exploration of the notion of inclusion; an autoethnographic exploration of the transition into leadership; an autoethnographic exploration of being an academic in the Irish education system. While ABER is an unorthodox approach to research which they both found challenging, they nevertheless conclude that it has potential to reveal insights into professional practice that conventional research may not.

Type of Paper: Reflective

Keywords: Arts-based Education Research; autoethnographic; image based research; reflective practitioners.

_____

Introduction

Both authors are educational professionals from the Republic of Ireland and met while undertaking an Arts-Based Education Research (ABER) module which formed part of a Doctor of Education programme in Queen's University, Belfast. Neither author had any previous experience of ABER. This reflective paper details the experience of both author's engagement with this type of research. The authors reflect on this type of research methodology to investigate their own professional practice. The paper will begin with an exploration of arts-based education research. Eric will then reflect on his experience, followed by Karol and the paper will finish with a general summary.

Arts-based education research

Barone and Eisner (2006) state that arts-based education research 'is an umbrella concept' (p98) and as such it sets out no specific procedures for the production of arts-based research output but rather it identifies a genre encompassing many different types of approaches. Arts-

---
[*] Corresponding author:
   E-mail: eric.bates@dit.ie
   Affiliation: Dublin School of Architecture, Dublin Institute of Technology.

based methods of research have emerged over the last number of decades as having great potential for innovation in the design of research and its dissemination (Lafreniere and Cox, 2012, p319). McNiff (2008) states that 'the defining aspect of knowing through art […] is the emanation of meaning through the process of creative expression' (p40). Lafreniere and Cox (2012) define arts-based work as 'a text, a theatrical and/or musical performance, or a visual created to depict the raw, coded or analyzed data and/or findings of a specific study' (p322). As such arts-based research method are seen as 'challenging the prevailing modes of discourse' (Derry, 2004, p40).

It should be noted from the outset that arts-based research is limited in its potential outputs. Finley (2003, p289) argues that in order to avoid comparison to or evaluation by science based standards arts-based researchers must 'undergo a radical break from science as a standpoint for understanding.' In their findings from an arts-based participatory research project using various methods of drawing, painting and text Yonas, Burke, Rak, Bennet, Kelly and Gielan (2009, p359) assert that their research provided valuable information and unique insights into the lived experience of the participants. They sound a cautious note however by stating 'Finally, like other qualitative data collection techniques, the generalizabilty of findings are limited' (ibid, p359).

Barone and Eisner (2006, p96) explain that arts-based education research does not aim for predictability. Rather it aims for 'enhancement of perspectives […] to broaden and deepen ongoing conversation about educational policy and practices by calling attention to seemingly common-sensical, taken for granted notions.' Bagley and Castro-Salaza (2012, p242) state the 'ultimate goal of critical arts-based research is through audience engagement and capture to raise consciousness and facilitate educational and social change.'

Auto-ethnography.

Ethnographic research approaches attempt to 'describe, interpret, analyse and illuminate phenomena in fieldwork studies' (Woodward, 2015, p 12). While auto ethnographical approaches sit on the ethnographic research continuum it is different in that the researcher, through a reflexive process, engages intrapersonally with their own life story. It can involve the researcher engaging in creative writing or arts-based methods. Auto ethnographical research embraces the fact that people are products and reflections of the culture and society that they occupy (Ellis, 2004). An auto ethnographical researcher explores the life of the researcher, interrogating and agitating the influences that shape their experiences and inform their responses in order to 'contest and disrupt views of the world' (Jones, 2005). This approach to research aspires to make a difference to the world (Renner, 2001).

Richardson (2001) contends that no research is 'untainted by human hands' and that notions of purity or objectivity do not stand up when it comes to generating knowledge. By exploring our lives through language in auto ethnography, we are creating or producing a social reality which can be unstable, contradictory, shifting and partial and that is because we as humans are constantly operating in multiple and competing narratives (ibid). The knowledge that we have of ourselves and of the world around us can change at different stages of our lives depending on our circumstances. Auto ethnography enables us to understand ourselves reflexively at a particular time from a particular position (Rose, 1992). This process can illuminate our understanding of ourselves and cause us to ask difficult questions. Pelias (2005) outlines that ethnographic writing is not an indiscriminate record of the sum total of all of our experiences. Rather he compares the process to a highly selective camera that is positioned in such a way as to achieve the only most arresting and significant shots.

Hamilton et al (2008) contend that the two biggest questions that any auto ethnographer needs to ask themselves is who will read the work and how will it change them or perpetuate the conversation? In our experience this approach has helped us to develop personally, has enhanced our professional effectiveness and perpetuated the conversation among other researchers.

Eric's reflections.

To begin I will consider the ethics of ABER. Ethical considerations relate to the rights of the participants taking part in research and are usually concerned with issues like informed consent, anonymity and care. While there are guidelines for social and educational researchers (see for example BERA, 2011) there are no codes of ethical practice that cover every possibility but rather they generally attempt to clarify major issues in research (Bell, 2005). Rose (2011, p328) would seem to agree and points out there are 'very few hard and fast rules about what constitutes ethical research in all circumstances.' While there are many guidelines for ethics in relation to written and spoken texts, there is a dearth in relation to visual methods in particular (Rose, 2011) however, visual research methods should nevertheless 'engage with principles of ethical research' (ibid, p329). Merriam (1998) asserts that the burden of conducting and disseminating research in an ethical manner lies firmly with the researcher. In carrying out my piece of ABER I was the researcher and the participant and considered carefully what I engaged in.

As I undertook my first attempt at ABER I reflected upon my professional practice. I moved into teaching from the construction industry where I had served an apprenticeship as a painter and decorator. Following a period as a self-employed sole trader I returned to education and obtained an honours and a Master's degree and through this began teaching in a higher education institute on a range of construction related courses. Both strands of my career have been populated with self-professional development. In my construction career I undertook night courses in an attempt to become better at my job. Those night courses were expensive, time consuming and difficult to manage on a part time basis. As a lecturer in a higher education institute I pursued formal qualifications at degree, Master's and now Doctoral level with the same drive in an attempt to be become better at what I do.

My academic career has been highlighted by several attempts to improve my professional practice (Bates, 2010; Bates, 2011; Bates, 2011a) while also actively engaging in self-reflection (Bates, 2015). I was one of those practitioners who, as Bell (2005) points out, engage in action research projects as I had identified a need for change within my practice. Throughout these small research projects I was investigating my own professional practice and attempting to improve it in order to improve the learning of my students. In doing so I position myself as a qualitative researcher as I attempted to investigate the individual experience of my participants, including myself, rather than attempting to quantify experiences. I have always identified with the idea that the 'key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in their interactions with their world' (Merriam, 2002, p3).

Engaging with ABER.

I was tasked with producing a piece of arts-based research. My topic for exploration was to represent how I saw myself in relation to my role and or my organisation. The facilitator had a vast array of materials on hand and there were opportunities to produce masks, collage, self-system drawings/paintings, and creative timelines. I chose the self-system image. I was drawn to this medium partly from my background as a craft painter and decorator.

Researchers moving to using images have been noted in the literature as Prosser (2011) points to a movement by some researchers away from traditional text based work to image-based research. Indeed, he argues that qualitative researchers are taking this challenge in response to 'a society increasingly dominated by visual rather than verbal and textual culture' (ibid: p479). Despite the novelty of this research for me personally Weber and Mitchell (1996, p304) point out that 'drawings have been used for decades as markers and mirrors of personal identity.' Given the subject matter of my relationship with my workplace a self-system picture seemed ideal and maybe ironic as I began teaching specialist painting crafts there.

During the workshop a large selection of art and craft materials were provided. I spent some time examining all the material on offer as I pondered upon what I would produce. I selected an A1 sheet of paper, which was the largest sheet of paper available, and a variety of water based paints and several different sized artist paint brushes similar to signwriting

brushes that I would use in craft classes. I removed myself to a separate room and worked in a quiet environment. This solitude was very productive as an image came to me very quickly and seemed to cause a cascade as I could imagine how the whole image would sit. It took about one hour and I had an image completed.

The next stage was to analyse the image. Leitch (2008, p5) sounds a warning note when she says 'Inherent to qualitative inquiry is the inevitable challenge of how best to analyse and represent creative data.' In the analysis part of the research Prosser (2011) points to the dangers of the researcher having too many preconceptions to effectively analyse the data (p484). In my case I attempted to question my own assumptions. A critical evaluation was important no matter how poorly it portrayed me. I analysed the image following guidelines from Rose (2012) specifically chapter 2 'Towards a critical visual methodology'. Rose (2012, p19) states that there are 'three sites at which the meaning of an image are made.' These are the site of production, the site of the image itself and the site(s) where the image is seen by various audiences.

The framework was an excellent method especially for a novice like me. It provided a structure that made the process more manageable. For the purpose of this paper I will not reproduce the image or the analysis. Suffice it to say that I engaged in the process as fully as possible and attempted to be honest and critical about myself. The resultant analysis uncovered aspects of my professional practice which were uncomfortable and which I am not yet ready to share.

Richardson (2001, p35) argues that 'writing is itself a method of discovery' and I have found that to be the case as I analysed my image. The writing part was illuminating although it did not provide traditional answers. At the beginning of the process there was no specific traditional research question. Rather this research was investigating a human relationship, that of me and my workplace. As Eisner (2001, p138) points out those 'researchers concerned with human relationships do not solve problems, they cope with situations.' For me, the insights and depth of my own reflections have not answered any questions but have rather left me with much thinking. Yonas, Burke, Rak, Bennet, Kelly and Gielan (2009) carried out research utilising creative arts with children in a community setting and make the point that although the Visual Voices method was used primarily as a research data collection tool, the approach can itself be viewed as an intervention (p358). I can identify with this as I now feel that this was an intervention. It did not simply collect data but was an agent of change causing me to reflect on my position.

Karol's reflections.

Over the course of the last three years I have engaged with autoethnography on three separate occasions. Like Eric, I was first introduced to this research approach as a module on our Ed. D. course under the guidance of Ruth Leitch. Leitch is a strong proponent of ABER as a research approach and urged me to put aside any scepticism that I may have of the approach and experiment; that is exactly what I did. Since then I have chosen autoethnography to explore two other areas and am considering using it as my research methodology for my doctorate. In my first paper I explored the extent to which my experience of assessment throughout my life shaped my personal and professional life.

Starhawk states that it is only 'when we know how we have been shaped by the structures of power in which we live that we, can we become shapers' (1987, p8). I have always known that my experience with education but particularly my experience of assessment played a role in why I choose education and why I do the job I do. I trained as a teacher, went on to become a film maker, returned to teaching for 11 years, became a guidance counsellor, left teaching and guidance counselling and joined the national teacher support service. I am currently deputy director for assessment with the new Junior Cycle for Teachers in the Republic of Ireland – a support service created to implement the reform of lower secondary education in Ireland (DES, 2013). In my role, I am responsible for creating teacher professional development in assessment. I wrote this first paper thinking it would be valuable for me to stop and reflect on 'how I was shaped' so that I may be a better 'shaper'. Palmer suggests that 'fear constitutes one of the most compelling barriers to change' (1983, p36). This auto ethnographic narrative paper required honesty and courage. It involved me

resurrecting many painful experiences that I buried and forced me to engage critically with how they shaped who I am and what I do. The experience helped me to see how the decisions that I make about assessment on a daily basis are shaped by my own experiences of it. It led to me taking greater cognisance of winning the 'hearts and minds' of teachers in the design of our professional development in assessment. In our workshops with teachers, we started tapping into their experience of assessment and how it shaped and formed their approaches. Teachers appreciated this opportunity and realised from a personal perspective the power assessment has to define who you are and what you are capable of doing.

Inspired by this first encounter with autoethnography, I wrote a second autoethnographic paper examining my experience of transitioning into a leadership position. I hoped that by exploring some of the incidents that I have experienced over the last two years, other people who are transitioning into leadership positions could benefit from reading it. It certainly heightened my awareness of where I am in relation to my own leadership journey. I identified several critical incidents that occurred which have caused me to question my approach to leadership and think about the impact my actions have on myself and on the people around me. I believed that by writing about this experience, it enabled me to reflect on where, why and how I was going right or wrong. Other new leaders in a similar position to me, could also benefit from my engagement with my experience.

I decided to use Adler's (1975) 'Transitional Experience Model' as a framework for my research. This model was created as a framework to understand people's emotional responses when immersed in a new culture. Alder recognises that a culture shock (which is largely associated with negative consequences) can be an opportunity for personal growth and self-development. Perl (1969) reinforces this idea believing that within the conflict and tension that is often experienced during the transitional experience 'lies the potential for authentic growth and development, the transcendence from environmental to self-support' (p.43). In this model Adler identifies five stages that can be experienced during a cultural, personal or professional transition; contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy and independence. I applied each stage to my own particular situation and learned more about myself over a period of three months than I have in the previous two years. Like my first paper, this was not an easy feat but the process enabled me to see myself through a clearer lens. I faced up to my imperfect self and saw new ways that I could improve as a leader both for myself and the people I work with.

My most recent paper was an autoethnographic exploration of my own understanding of educational inclusion. This was probably the most difficult one to write; I realized as I was engaging in the process of self-revelation, that my own rhetoric around the concept of inclusion did not marry with my practice or values. This epiphany enabled me to interrogate where my values came from and forced me to re-evaluate them. Autoethnography, when engaged with seriously, honestly and authentically has the transformative power to shift even the most deep seated beliefs and values. This methodology has enabled me to confront my vulnerabilities, to own some of my unsavory beliefs and to engage with my self in a way that I have never experienced before. What we think, feel and value shape how we act and influences the decisions we make, therefore it is vital to tap into our thoughts, feelings and values and reassess their origins and their validity. Autoethnography has enabled me to do just that and has had a lasting effect on me.

Autoethnography does however come with a health warning; there are some ethical dilemmas that need to be planned for when engaging in this type of research (Tolich, 2009). Our storied lives do not exist in a vacuum, there are other players who shape it and who are either visibly or invisibly present in our narratives (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994). These other players are filtered through the auto ethnographer's lens and therefore their depiction in the research may not be an ethically sound one. Ethics requires researchers to work from their hearts and minds, to engage with our changing relationships with the actors in our research and to work out what our ethical responsibilities are towards them (Ellis, 2004).

Having read many different auto ethnographies (Boelen, W. A. M.1992; Brooks, M. 2006; Ellis, 1986, 1993, 2001) I believe that it is possible be sensitive in the writing without necessarily compromising the integrity. I engaged in more critical scrutiny and role taking in my writing and constantly reflected on my ethical practices throughout. I sought advice and shared my writing with others as it developed (Ellis, 2007; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; 2004;

Mason, 1996). One can choose to leave out things, use composite characters, write fiction or perhaps choose not to publish. I took advice from Frank and remained "open to other people's responses to our moral maturity and emotional honesty…and engage in the unfinalised dialogue of seeking the good (2004, pp. 191-192).

In an effort to espouse 'moral maturity and emotional honesty,' I tried to be as reflexive as possible. McGraw, Zvonkovic, and Walker state that reflexivity is a process whereby 'researchers place themselves and their practices under scrutiny, acknowledging the ethical dilemmas that permeate the research process and impinge on the creation of knowledge' (2000, p. 68).

Summary

It is the author's contention that such insights generated from this research would not have been possible using more traditional research methods. Cole and Knowles (2008, p57) say that the traditional research methods fall short in 'its ability to capture and communicate the complexity of human diversity in all its diversity.' Bagley and Castro-Salaza (2012) argue that 'in encountering and striving to come to terms with the complex, changing and contested societal contexts of twenty-first century living, researchers are faced with significant and evolving methodological questions for undertaking research' (p240). The authors of this paper conclude ABER can be a process that pays dividends for the reflective practitioner.

Acknowledgements

References

Adler, P.S. (1975). The transitional experience: An alternative view of culture shock. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 15(4): 13–23.

Bagley, C. and Castro-Salazar, R. (2012). Critical arts-based research in education: performing undocumented historias. *British Educational Research Journal*, 38(2), pp. 239–260.

Barone, T. and Eisner, E. (2006) 'Arts based educational research', in Green, J. L., Camilli, G., and Elmore, P. B. (eds.) *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research*. United States: Routledge

Bates, E. (2010) *Changing the Traditional Lecture Format to Foster a Deep Approach to Learning*, ICERI2010 Proceedings conference, 3rd International Conference of Education, Research and Innovation, Hotel Melia Castilla, Madrid. November 15 – 17, 2010. CD ISBN: 978-84-614-2439-9, ISSN: 2340-1095.

Bates, E. (2011) *Engaging in an Action Research Cycle on the Irish Standards Based Apprenticeship to Provide Time for Learners' Engagement*. EDULEARN11 Proceedings, 3rd International Conference on Education and New Learning Technologies, Gran Hotel Princess Sofia Hotel, Barcelona, July 4 – 6, 2011.

Bates, E. (2011a) *Can Utilising Social Networks Deter Learners' Engagement?* Proceedings of The Future of Education conference, Mediterraneo Hotel, Florence. June 15 – 17, 2011.

Bell, J. (2005) Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-Time Researchers in Education, Health and Social Science. 4th edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press

BERA, (2011) British Educational Research Association. *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. Accessed March 30, 2015, from http://content.yudu.com/Library/A1t9gr/BERAEthicalGuideline/resources/1.htm

Boelen, W. A. M. (1992). Street corner society: Cornerville revisited. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography,* 21, 11-51.

Brooks, M. (2006). Man-to-man: A body talk between male friends. *Qualitative Inquiry,* 12, 185-207.

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (1994). 'Personal experience methods'. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 413-427). Thousand Oaks, CA:

Sage.

Cole, A. L. and Knowles, G. J. (2008). Arts-Informed Research, in *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Derry, C. (2004). Drawings as a research tool for self-study: an embodied method of exploring memories of childhood bullying. In Mitchell, C. (ed.) *Just who do we think we are? methodologies for autobiography and self-study in teaching.* London: RoutledgeFalmer,

DES (2013) A Framework for Junior Cycle, Dublin, DES

Eisner, E. W. (2001). Concerns and aspirations for qualitative research in the new millennium. *Qualitative Research,* 1(2), pp. 135–145.

Ellis, C. (1986*).* Fisher folk. Two communities on Chesapeake Bay. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

Ellis, C. (1993). "There are survivors": Telling a story of sudden death. *Sociological Quarterly,* 34, 711-730.

Ellis, C. (2001). With mother/with child: A true story. *Qualitative Inquiry,* 7, 598-616.

Ellis, C. (2004). The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Ellis, C. (2007). Telling Sercrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research With Intimate Others. *Qualitative Inquiry,* 13, 3-29

Finley, S. (2003). Arts-Based Inquiry in QI: Seven Years From Crisis to Guerrilla Warfare. *Qualitative Inquiry,* 9(2), pp. 281–296.

Frank, A. (2004). Moral non-fiction: Life writing and children's disability. In P. J. Eakin (Ed.), *The ethics of life writing (*pp. 174-194). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, reflexivity, and "ethically important moments" in research. *Qualitative Inquiry,* 10, 261-280.

Hamilton, M. L., Smith, L., & Worthington, K. (2008). Fitting the methodology with the research: An exploration of narrative, self-study and autoethnography. *Studying Teacher Education,* 4(1), 17–28.

Jones, S. H. (2005). Autoethnography: Making the personal political. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Book of Qualitative Research.* Thousand Oaks, C.A: Sage

Lafreniere, D. and Cox, S. M. (2012). "If you can call it a poem": toward a framework for the assessment of arts-based works. *Qualitative Research*, 13(3), pp. 318–336.

Leitch, R. (2008). Creatively researching children's narratives through images and drawings. In Thomson, P. (ed.) *Doing Visual Research with Children and Young People.* London: Routledge,

McNiff, S. (2008). Art-Based Research. In *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues.* pp. 29–41

Mason, J. (1996). Qualitative researching. London: Sage.

Merriam, S. B. (1998) Qualitative research and case study applications in education. 2nd edn. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers

Merriam, S. B. (2002) Qualitative research in practice: examples for discussion and analysis. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.,U.S.

McGraw, L., Zvonkovic, A., & Walker, A. (2000). Studying postmodern families: A feminist analysis of ethical tensions in work and family research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family,* 62(1), 68-77.

Palmer, P.J. (1983) To Know as We are Known. New York, Harper Collins

Pelias, (2007). Jarheads, girly men and the pleasures of violence. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(7) 945-959

Perls, F.(1969) Gestalt therapy verbatim. New York: Bantam Books

Prosser, J. (2011). Visual Methodology: Towards a More Seeing Research. In: Denzin, N., K. & Lincoln, Y., S. (eds.). *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (479-495). London: Sage Publications.

Renner, P. (2001). Vulnerable to the possibilities: A journey of self-knowing through personal narrative. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. Retrieved from http://ml.cust.ubc.ca:106080/Artography/data/phd/ Renner.pdf

Richardson, L. (2001). Getting personal: Writing-stories. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 14(1), pp. 33–38.

Rose, G. (2012) Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Starhawk, J. (1987) Truth or Dare: Encounters with power, authority and mystery. New York, Harper Collins.

Tolich, M. (2010). A Critique of Current Practice: Ten Foundational Guidelines for Autoethnographers. *Qualitative Health Research*. 20 (12) 1599-1610.

Weber, S. and Mitchell, C. (1996). Drawing ourselves into teaching: Studying the images that shape and distort teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education,* 12(3), pp. 303–313.

Woodward, A. (2015). *Tapestry of Tears: An Auto ethnography of Leadership, Personal Transformation and Music Therapy in Humanitarian Aid in Bosnia Herzegovina,* Dissertations and Theses. Paper 192. Retrieved February 2016 from http://aura.antioch.edu/etds/192

Yonas, M. A., Burke, J. G., Rak, K., Bennett, A., Kelly, V. and Gielen, A. C. (2009).'A Picture's Worth a Thousand Words: Engaging Youth in CBPR Using the Creative Arts. *Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action*, 3(4), pp. 349–358.