

The glow of unwork? Issues of portrayal in networked learning research

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Abstract

In this paper, we suggest that portrayal of research is often undervalued and seen as ‘unwork’ (Galloway, 2012). Portrayal is often seen as an issue that is relatively straight forward by qualitative researchers, and invariably refers to putting the findings of the study together with excerpts from participants and usually, but not always, some interpretation. It tends to be seen as the means by which the researcher has chosen to position people and their perspectives, and it is imbued with a sense of not only positioning but also a contextual painting of a person in a particular way. Yet there are an array of issues and challenges about what portrayal can or might mean in digital spaces. In this paper we argue that researching education in a digital age provides greater or different opportunities to represent and portray data differently and suggest that these ways are underutilised. For example, for many researchers legitimacy comes through the use of participants’ voices in the form of quotations. However, we argue that this stance towards plausibility and legitimacy is problematic and needs to be reconsidered in terms of understanding differences in types of portrayal, recognizing how researchers position themselves in relation to portrayal, and understanding decision-making in relation to portrayal. We suggest that there need to be new perspectives about portrayal and concept, and ideas are provided that offer a different view. Three key recommendations are made:

Portrayal should be reconceptualised as four overlapping concepts: mustering, folding, cartography, and portrayal. Adopting such an approach will enable audiences, researchers and other stakeholders to critique the assumptions that researchers on tour bring to portrayal and encourage reflexivity.

Researchers on tour should highlight the temporal, mutable and shifting nature of portrayed research findings, emphasising the need for continued and varied research to inform understanding.

There is a significant need for greater insight into the influence of portrayal, as well as the difference between representation and portrayal. Future studies should prioritise this, and ensure that portrayal is considered and critiqued from the outset.

Keywords

Portrayal, reflexivity, research, qualitative research, representation

Background

Portrayal of research findings has often been seen as unproblematic, yet authors such as St Pierre (2008, 2009) and Butler-Kisber (2002, 2008, 2010) indicate it is invariably much more troublesome than most researchers acknowledge. We suggest that there is often friction between the interfaces or boundaries between interpretation, representation, and portrayal Galloway (2012) argues that it is difficult to see friction at the interfaces – since for the most part they are designed to be invisible. Thus work done at an interface renders the interface invisible, in order to make it work effectively. It then appears that no work has or is taking place, and thus the interfaces cast what he calls ‘the glow of unwork’ (Galloway, 2012: 25). Perhaps when undertaking educational work in a digital age we need to give greater attention to what is occurring at the interfaces, particularly between representation and portrayal. There is a need to recognise that students and young people centre their lives on networked publics – spaces that are created, structured and restructured around networked technologies and that these are further sets of fractioned fractures and swirling interfaces that affect representation and portrayal of findings. Thus we need to explore what is privileged and what is missing, to examine what has been created and

crafted, and to recognise how frictions and fractures at these interfaces can improve our understandings and make us better, braver researchers. Portrayal is defined here as the contextual painting of a person or data set in a particular way. However, many research studies use the terms of representation and portrayal interchangeably. For example:

- Representation tends to refer to the way in which a researcher provides warranted accounts of data collected. Thus the main way the term representation is used is in the sense of a proxy, the researcher is (re) presenting the views of the participants. This is often seen or presented by the researcher as being unproblematic. Yet researchers need to acknowledge and voice that the research account they are providing does in fact reflect their own stance and position. We suggest that often personal stances and accounts are missing from research data and this is seen most often when undertaking qualitative research synthesis (Savin-Baden & Major, 2010)
- Portrayal invariably is seen as the means by which the researcher has chosen to position people and their perspectives. Portrayal tends to be imbued with a sense of not only positioning but also a contextual painting of a person in a particular way.

Those who do use 'portrayal' invariably are referring to media (mis) representation of particular groups: women, Muslims, black youth. We argue that research portrayal, and particularly qualitative research portrayal, should centre not only on how something is restated but also how they are depicted by researchers. Thus what is central to portrayal is in-depth interpretation which involves examining the subtext and exploring what is being argued for by those in the study by interpreting, for example, metaphors, metonymy and oppositional talk. There is no sense of quick coding and analysis in this process, but rather as St Pierre (2009, p. 221) has argued:

I believe we have burdened the voices of our participants with too much evidentiary weight. I suggest we put voice in its place as one data source among many from which we produce evidence to warrant our claims and focus for a time on other data we use to think about our projects that we've been ignoring for decades.

Jackson and Mazzei (2011) suggest that in the analytical process, the researcher and the researched are both subject to change, as is the audience or viewer, so that as the research data are transformed and offer something else, something new is made available; a new portrayal of the phenomena. This stance places portrayal as somehow less static and acknowledges the importance of the interaction between researcher and participants. Portrayal then needs to be seen as a process rather than an ending, as Butler Kisber suggests:

A portrayal presents the essence of a phenomenon at a certain time while retaining the signature of the creator. Artful portrayals mediate understanding, our own and that of others. (Butler-Kisber, 2002)

Yet the spaces in which research data is portrayed, are also important. Lefebvre (1991) has suggested that social space might be seen as comprising a conceptual triad of spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces. Spatial practice represents the way in which space is produced and reproduced in particular locations and social formations and we suggest it has strong links with portrayal. For example, Rose et al (2014) argue that computer generated images (CGI), particularly those used to market urban development, should not be seen as images in an urban space but rather 'interfaces circulating through a software-supported network space (p. 386). The authors propose that software is an infrastructure for the production of space. Rose et al seem to suggest that interfaces are to be seen as spaces of activity rather than as boundaries or affordances and perhaps reflects the work of Sheller. The term 'software supported spatiality' was coined by Sheller (2009) to describe the spaces structured by software codes that she believes are increasingly shaping place, territories and mobility. Her work essentially examines how software is used to create and portray space. Thus in terms of portrayal, software can be seen as an infrastructure for the production of spaces in which research is portrayed.

The work of Harrison (2013) is a useful example of a moving portrayal of space. He created a circus tent as a means of representation, performance and portrayal, he explained:

As an Artist-in-Residence in a Toronto District School Board high school I began my research. This involved setting up an open door studio through which students could come and go ongoing through the process of the research. An autoethnographic, arts informed project was begun in

which I would explore the narratives of my own life as a lens into growing up gay in rural Ontario in the 1960s and 1970s. The dissemination of the findings was achieved through painting on the walls of a small circus or freak show tent. Images on the outside of the tent were appropriated from Ringling and Barnum Bailey's circus and freak show advertisements and historical photographs (Jando et al, 2008) intertwined with self-portrait images of the more negative ways I am imagined as a gay man. On the inside walls of the tent autoethnographic images were painted which explore the formative years of my life and how I imagined myself. The painted freak show tent is the dissertation. An artist's catalogue was created documenting the studio, the research conducted to produce the narratives, the creation of the tent and the tent itself. It became the document that with the tent itself could be defended to conclude my doctoral research, for it both documented and contextualized the cultural artifact (Lyman & Kale, 1998) of the tent.

What is significant about Harrison's work is that the work is used to enhance understanding, and to reach multiple audiences. The interfaces of representation and portrayal interrupt ideas of data presentations as well as using media to make research findings accessible to a variety of people.

Concepts of Portrayal

However, whilst space is a significant consideration, the processes involved in 'portrayal creation' are also important. We suggest that portrayal can be delineated as four overlapping concepts: Folding, Mustering, Cartography and Assemblage:

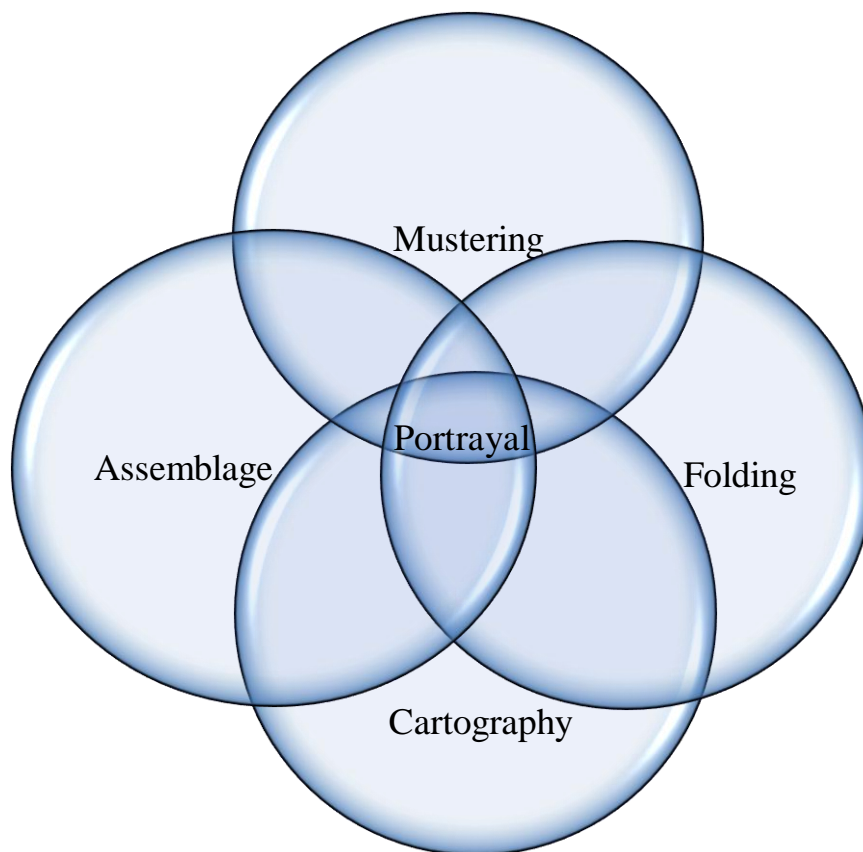


Figure 1: Concepts of Portrayal

Mustering

Mustering is a term often used to gather troops for battle and this has resonance here, in that researchers gather themselves, gird their thoughts and ideas and begin the portrayal process. Mustering then is the part of the portrayal process where data are brought together and decisions are made about how they will be used in the act of portrayal. It involves making decisions about voice, colour, text, what is to be included, and how to account for what is to be. There is a sense of living and working with order and chaos simultaneously. What emerges is an appreciation that what was once frayed meaning becomes an holistic depiction which is both fragile and portrayed. This mustering is influenced to a degree by the folding process.

Folding

The notion of folding (Deleuze, 1993) disrupts the idea of data being portrayed as straight forward and one dimensional. The idea of a fold helps us to see portrayal as a means of being and becoming part of the data and its the endings. Folding allows for a multiplicity of portrayal whilst helping readers see some kind of sense in the findings, as well as possible continuities and labyrinths with other research:

Thus a continuous labyrinth is not a line dissolving into independent points, as flowing sand might dissolve into grains, but resembles a sheet of paper divided into infinite folds or separated into bending movements, each one determined by the consistent or conspiring surrounding . . . A fold is always folded within a fold, like a cavern in a cavern. The unit of matter, the smallest element of the labyrinth, is the fold, not the point which is never a part, but a simple extremity of the line. (Deleuze, 1993: 6)

Folding means there is disruption between the idea of an inside and an outside so that inside and outside are both inside and outside; to reiterate: ‘a fold is always fold within a fold’ (Deleuze, 1993: 6). Thus there is recognition by the researcher that data, findings and interpretations are neither stable nor do they offer a singular view. In the context of portrayal using the concept of folding imbues the portrayal of findings with the idea that there are necessary complexities and complexities are necessary. What is seen and portrayed is not distinct or fixed but is complex, disrupting, changing, and fluid.

Cartography

Cartography is defined as the study and practice of making maps. The process and action involved in cartography has similarities with the ways data are managed and especially portrayed in qualitative research, in that cartographers must make decisions about how to portray geographical data. The changes in technology have meant that cartography has a role both in the creation of physical maps as well as in the graphical presentation of geospatial information about the environment and people. For de Certeau (1984) maps are static and fixed, used by us to denote representations of how we live, tours on the other hand portray how we live, how we move about within the spaces in which we live. Yet the digital age we argue has resulted in a merger of maps and tours as portrayed by de Certeau We suggest instead that, at a number of different levels researchers are cartographers on tour who collect, co-construct, represent and then portray data – sometimes in ways that are troublesome and messy, and at other times that are tidy, manageable and managed. One way of viewing cartography in relation to portrayal in research is exemplified in the work of Lammes. Lammes reviewed real time strategy games in which players explore and master environments through digital mapping. The player becomes an imaginary cartographer while creating a spatial story around environments:

According to de Certeau these two conceptions of spatiality (maps and tours) are both incongruous dimensions of contemporary culture: we are confronted with a static representation of the world we live in, while at the same time sensing our space in a dynamic and more personal way. As place and space, maps and tours necessitate one another and come into being through two-way movement. Even more, a map always presupposes a tour, since one first needs to go somewhere to give an objective spatial account of it (de Certeau 1984 117-21) (Lammes, 2008, p. 87-88; piece in parenthesis added)

Lammes suggests that these games help to improve spatial awareness, and draws on the work of Fuller and Jenkins (1995), who suggest that digital games and new media should be seen as spatial stories, since players construct a narrative by travelling through space. We suggest that games portray space, positioning it in particular ways. In the past, spaces and tours have been seen as relatively fluid and changeable, whereas places

and maps are seen as stable. Thus portrayal extends not only to the way data are assembled and folded, but also to the ways they are seen in terms of mobilities. For example there is invariably an assumption that data and meaning is 'portable property' (Spivak, 1974, p. lvii) and that meaning can necessarily be transported and transposed across contexts, interviews and continents:

The notion of "communication" (a "function" of human structures), important to structuralism as a tool of investigation, also carries with it the notion of unified subjects, of meaning as portable property: "... communication, which, in fact, implies the transmission charged with passing, from one subject to the other, the identity of a signified object of a meaning or a concept in principle separable from the process of passage and of the signifying operation. (Spivak, 1974: lvii)

Texts are like maps, they can be interpreted in a myriad of ways and researchers must not 'just map' but understand who, what and how the mapping portrays in particular ways, ways that might be, sometimes, portable across contexts and cultures, but often may not be.

Assemblage

This notion of portrayal is the idea that data are collected and constructed from different sources and points in time in order to assemble relatively whole (rather than partial) depictions of participants and their lives, contexts and stories. Assemblage then is not some kind of snapshot, something that is cut from data and recreated from data. Rather assemblage is the creation of an holistic description of the research and the people involved as possible. Assemblage includes the assembling of words, pictures, reflections from theorists, friends, tweets, ideas. Portrayal in this sense is the bringing together of all the influences that have an impact on the researcher as they saw, interpreted and created the portrayal of the findings of the study.

Portrayal of networked learning data

In order to portray data from networked learning spaces, researchers muster themselves to consider what it is they wish to portray, acknowledging that data are folded. Further, they also need to acknowledge that in choosing to portray data means also choosing to exclude data; even if that portrayal of data is an assemblage from multiple sources. This process, from a 'researcher on tour', can be likened to the creation of a liquid map. The researcher on tour takes with them their subtextual assumptions and inferences, often presenting the illusion of a reflexive stance whilst portraying findings as static and immutable. It is that illusion which we wish to challenge.

The issue of data portrayal in the digital domain has gained increasing traction in recent years. For example, the AHRC-funded Seeing Data Project is currently examining public responses to data visualisations and especially the effectiveness of 'big data' visualisations. Whilst there are many different forms of data visualizations, the company, Daden, UK has created Datascape that provides an easy to use immersive 3D environment in which you can visualise and interact with data from almost any source, Datascape is designed to maximise human analysis by optimising the display of data, whether structured or unstructured, enabling a wide variety of viewpoints to be taken from both inside and outside the data. Another example can be seen in the Seeing Data project. Seeing Data is a research project which aims to understand how people make sense of data visualizations. There are more and more data around us, and data are increasingly used to explain our social world. One of the main ways that people get access to data (big and small) is through visualizations, like those on the pages of this website. Visualizations are visual representations of data. They are used to help people make sense of data or to allow people to explore data. They take the form of graphs, charts and other more complex or less familiar diagrams.

Visualizations appear in newspapers, on television (especially in documentaries and news programmes), and on the Internet in social media like Facebook. What we don't know is how people make sense of visualizations. How do we interact with them? How do we interpret them? Do they help us make sense of data? Do different people interact with visualizations in different ways? What messages do we take away from visualizations? On the Seeing Data project we have been exploring these questions and finding out what skills people need to help them to make sense of visualizations. Other forms of data visualization include SUPREME(2013-14): Simple Unified Pollen and Spore Release Model. Funded by the Danish Research Council. <http://www.worc.ac.uk/discover/supreme-nparu.html>

These visualisations, as Yau (2013) has suggested, are not just tools to present data but also entirely new visual mediums. Such visualisations ‘offer the means to see data as a material able to exist at many different levels of granularity with different levels of depth and resolution’ (Thrift, 2014, p. 8). Studies in the field of education have paid particular attention to visualising ‘big data’ and learning analytics data, and portraying it in a manner which is most helpful to students (Duval, 2011; Olmos & Corrin, 2012), although less attention has been paid to the ways in which data is portrayed in public research findings. Techniques such as Wordles, social network diagrams, tag clouds, tweets portrayed using Storify, and infographics are also popularised across the sector, and it therefore seems likely that mobile social media tools which convey connections across individuals and groups might increasingly be used to portray networked learning research data. Cochrane (2015), for example, has argued for the use of mobile social media tools such as TagsExplorer in collaborative research and thus potentially data portrayal.

Such tools still require researchers to consider the four concepts of portrayal, however. For example, social network diagrams can portray connections across and within groups but do not account for the quality or content of those connections – if this is important to the data, how can this best be portrayed to be considered equally important by the audience? Similarly, Wordle has been found to be useful for analysis but lacking context essential for interpretation and portrayal (McNaught & Lam, 2010). Storify is a tool which is used to curate Twitter conversations, but requires its users to make decisions about which tweets to use, which to exclude, and how to present networked conversations – in essence, to muster themselves and their data. Where digital portrayal is different, however, is in its vast potential to allow audiences to interact with data. Digital portrayals of data such as the OECD Better Life Index (OECD, 2015) can be personalised for the audience, challenging the notion that data is static and immovable and highlighting the mutable, folded, and situated nature of research findings.

Recommendations

We suggest that in order for portrayal to be acknowledged as key in the understanding of networked learning research findings, the following recommendations should be considered:

- 1 Portrayal should be reconceptualised as four overlapping concepts: mustering, folding, cartography, and portrayal. Adopting such an approach will enable audiences, researchers and other stakeholders to critique the assumptions that researchers on tour bring to portrayal and encourage reflexivity.
- 2 Researchers on tour should highlight the temporal, mutable and shifting nature of portrayed research findings, emphasising the need for continued and varied research to inform understanding.
- 3 There is a significant need for greater insight into the influence of portrayal, as well as the difference between representation and portrayal. Future studies should prioritise this, and ensure that portrayal is considered and critiqued from the outset.

Conclusion

Whilst portrayal in network learning is often seen as ‘unwork’ we suggest the need for more candid forms of portrayal; forms in which researchers are unable to not hide behind the subtext of their own agendas, comfort zones and biases. By using mustering, folding, cartography and assemblage the portrayal of our research findings may be more unconformable and messy but possibly more honest. Representation and portrayal are processes and practices that tend to leave behind trails of earlier versions. Most of these are hidden in the dustbins of our homes and computers, and ignored as no longer valuable, even if they have been central to the mustering and assemblages of our findings. If we are to be researchers who wish to present plausible accounts of our findings, we need to examine these trails, particularly exploring what has been cast aside or missed. At the same time researchers need to be aware of the importance of the interfaces between interpretation of data and the ways they are subsequently (over) managed, represented and portrayed.

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