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Practice-Based Reflections of Enabling Agency through Arts-Based Methodological Ir/Responsibility

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Abstract

Arts-based methods are well-placed to enable disruptions to normative positioning of researcher, respondent and subject. This chapter draws on the author's reflections of opening the research processes to the possibilities of methodological ir/responsibility. It focuses on a selection of mixed-method projects where a significant contribution to the *validity* of the empirical research emerged from the arts-based methods employed, including the use of journal writing, story-telling, metaphoric and visual imagery. The discussion is structured around the validity of the methods for the purposes of generating data to inform the evaluation of and research on that which is often difficult and elusive to analyse in higher education. A particular contribution of the chapter is the discussion of how the construction of research participants informed both the data generation processes, and the analytic approach to the texts they authored. An argument is made for the importance of establishing conditions which enable the possibilities of participants' agency.

7.1 Disrupting Positionality in Educational Research

Informed by the post-colonial, post-apartheid context in which most of my consultation and research has been situated; my concern has been to try to do justice to the subject of my research, while bearing witness to the

incommensurability of diverse perspectives and experiences within the fraught terrain of higher education (HE). Although informed by the critical tradition of educational research, I have found myself increasingly discomfited by a propensity of researchers to unwittingly speak for, and possibly silence, those we represent (Roberts, 2007). As such, I have sought to create ways in which the boundaries of educational research conventions and practices, as with pedagogies of possibility (Giroux, 1988), can be permeated to enable more conducive conditions for the agency of my research participants. In attempt to acknowledge and open my practices as a researcher beyond such complicity, I have used the pages of this chapter to reflect on my some of my own explorations of what might be loosely considered ‘arts-based methods’.

When producing singular research reports, as we most often do as academics, the alterity of the individual account and ‘little narratives’ are often consumed because “the power-relation of subject and object reduces the world to categories and concepts” with the result that “the concept is privileged over the actuality it pre- rather than de-scribes” (Miles, 2006, p. 94). Constraining academic conventions extend from the technical, such as word-limits, to the conceptual and ideological, including the legitimacy of the dispassionate academic tone over affective, personal narratives; reliability privileged over validity; statistical rigour and generalisability over lived, contextualised experience. This is because education research has most dominantly been viewed in modernist terms, grounded in highly individualistic assumptions based on subject-centred reason and enlightenment ideals (Peters, 1995). The methodologies dominant in HE Studies for the most part continue this modernist drive, with a “will to certainty and clarity of vision” embodied in the narrative realism of its preferred writing style (Stronach & MacLure, 1997, p. 4).

Over time I found more challenge afforded to my own positionality by those research orientations which aim for an inversion (and subversion) of the traditional ontology-epistemology hierarchy, to a relationship between knowledge and ways of understanding the world which attempt to enact an ethical, liminal relationship between self and other. Heteronomy has been described as ‘a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression’ (Foucault, 1984, p. 45) of limits. The attempt is to subvert conventions of consoling certitude which impose regulations of ‘truth’, and to allow for recontextualizing ourselves with a sense of responsibility to imagine and represent differently (Bain, 1995). To resist the desire for closure, in this chapter I reflect on how arts-based methods have enabled me to mobilize meaning and explore significance *with* my participants. I believe that the

inclusion of participants in various interpretative processes, and the emphasis placed on metaphor, storytelling and narrative, have further mobilised the methodological processes to rub against homogenising regulations and representations.

7.1.1 The Possibilities for Methodological Ir/Responsibility

My experience has been that arts-based methods enable opportunities and conditions to open up research conventions and methodological choices to participants during the research process, and, later for readers of the research which may not fit the received mould of ‘responsible’ research.

The anxiety, for correct compliance to ethical conduct in my initial ventures as a researcher, has increasingly become supplanted by the more important desire to find ways to put the principles I held dear into practice. Although that initial accent on ‘warranted assertability’ (Bleakley, 1999) – the sense that the study is of value and is a trustworthy representation that allows the reader access to my thinking, rationale, analysis, interpretations – was assured, it felt insufficient. Perhaps due to a context where the decolonisation of authority and positionality of the academic/researcher were being actively questioned, I increasingly moved towards including my participants to unearth, be critical, challenge and communicate my reflexivity on an epistemological level as a researcher. Such critical consideration of what frames my vision as a researcher, as ‘epistemological reflexivity’ (Hickman, 2008), involved being open about how my assumptions fed into the construction of knowledge generated within the report, which I tried to hold in balance with fulfilling my obligation to do justice to the subject being researched.

While I crossed my t’s and dotted my i’s, trying to be certain the process and product was ‘correct’, I felt that aspects of the research became stultified and reified, in particular for the actors involved. I began, without quite realising it at first, to desire methodological irresponsibility. And so I began to seek out those researchers and practices who looked for ways in which one may create possibilities and opportunities for transgression. Some of these practical opportunities included, explicitly inviting participants to shred the questions posed, to re-write or circle that which they felt was not representative; to annotate in the margins; to reject my summarized accounts where they were insufficient; and to tell their stories as and how they saw fit. In such moments, I described these disruptions to participants as a form of anti-authoritarian and playful graffiti. While the power dynamics between us cannot be entirely negated, such ‘transgressive validity’ (Lather, 1993)

works to provide participants *the opportunity* to move from being passive respondents towards being active agents in quite pragmatic ways.

I sought ways in which to shift the conventional positions of power and meaning between me as a researcher and the person sharing insights – my ‘respondent’, as embedded within this term is a linear relationship. Informed by traditions of critical analysis, I wanted to commence from the experiences of those oppressed or those aspects repressed in order to understand the dynamics of structural power relations (Leonardo, 2004). It was important to disrupted received acceptance of being the one in power, or the one who knew more – in the hope that as authority would be shared, and both the processes of authoring and interpretation of stories would be more just. Over time, reciprocity, between meaning and power, researched and researcher, proved an important principle to transition beyond conventional normative objectification of the subject/object dualism which typify much educational research (Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011; Lather, 1991). The desire has been to find ways for active liminality, neither over-identification nor over-objectification. My approach was informed by grappling with Derrida’s (1981) notion of ethical relationships.

The object of research cannot be closed because representation is subject to contingency and the historical moment of that reading – this acknowledgement enabled productive elements of self-doubt and scepticism in my thinking to translate into material possibilities of opening to participants in my research process, and to contest, in my representations. However, such openness is a difficult concept to practice in current educational research, with the conventions which valorise closure (‘conclusions’) and certainty (‘findings’) I thereby exerting power in its interpretations and constructing a consoling metaphysics of presence (Stronach & MacLure, 1997).

The validity of an uncertain methodological approach is echoed in recent studies on the negotiated space of the uncertain curriculum (Kalin & Barney, 2014; Wallin, 2008) in addition to the uncertainty in education in a super-complex world (Barnett, 2000). Arts-based methods are often inclusive of idiosyncratic, pluralistic and individual contributions, and thus are characterised by such tentativeness and uncertainty (Stewart, 2008). Similarly, the pages in this chapter serve as sketches and interwoven reflections on my use of arts-based methods in education research. Although uncommon in the practice of HE researchers (Tight, 2004), I outline the methodological choices I have made within this chapter to be openly ideological about the development of my philosophical orientations to arts-based approaches.

This is to enable both my own reflexivity while in process, and to create openings for choice, interpretation and scepticism in your reading of this text.

7.2 Methodology

Acknowledging that the processes of research involve construction rather than passive discovery, in this section I discuss how I have attempted to be practically and morally careful of the ways in which the ‘reality’ of this chapter is constructed and the way I respond to the criteria with which it is judged by the editors and by you, my imagined reader. Although I cannot determine its reception, I see it as my authorial responsibility to take my intentionality and its potential consequences seriously. A sense of obligation and moral responsibility of an ethical imagination has, and continues to, weigh on me, perhaps due to ‘historical melancholia’ (Belluigi, 2001) of my generation of post-colonial artists and academics.

Over the past decade and a half, through some of the various research projects which I touch on in this chapter, I have wrestled with the identity politics of researcher, academic, teacher, artist, mother and ‘white’ woman, who until recently lived and worked in a so-called developing country in the global South. Added to this, is my pluralistic background in fine arts visual practice and in staff educational development. At the time of writing this chapter, I am negotiating how these identity threads and experiential knowledge(s) might fruitfully come to bare on international networks of HE Studies from a Northern Ireland location. In many senses I am operating with the privileged uncertainty of an ‘émigré consciousness’ (Said, 1993) which allows for a critical yet sensitive eye of politics, problematics and possibilities.

Excluding the practice-based research of my art making, my Master of Fine Art research began a search into understanding how to ethically relate to the other (both outside and within oneself); the difficulties of living as an artist under the weight of history; and the responsibilities of representation (Belluigi, 2001). Despite the wealth of this content, my methods of data generation remained firmly boxed within conventional academic approaches. A different lens through which to consider the human experience was developed through my Master of HE Studies, where I engaged with a more critical methodological orientation. Here I began playing with a dialogical relation between form and content (Belluigi, 2008a), where the form of my data generations methods diversified in response to my heteronomical orientation, and extended to include journal-writing and storytelling. I then began to advice and provide support for the exploration of alternative methods of

data generation for teaching staff, when acting in the role of educational developer, and to model the use of such methods to those academics who were participants of my formal courses on teaching and learning. For instance, when looking for methods which recognised the significance of the affect on learning, I supported the design of maps, drawings, free writing and the integration of visual imagery.

Progressing through various research projects and evaluation approaches, including art making and practice-based research, I have found myself opening more profoundly to the interactional complexities of research. As discussed in 3.2, the possibilities for transgression and creativity came to fruition in my PhD research project, where I utilised various hybrid methods, including report and respond questionnaires, interviews and small group discussions; and visual narratives focus group discussions. In a current research project, I have continued such emergent data generation approaches, including metaphors and postcards.

Extending beyond the benevolence of the critical tradition are approaches falling under the umbrella of ‘postmodernisms of resistance’ which seek “to deconstruct modernism and resist the status quo” (Foster, 1985, pp. xi–xii) to open up potentially totalising narratives to difference, and so traces of the emancipatory intent of the Enlightenment were sceptically maintained. This nonfoundational tradition of research holds that, instead of metaphysical or epistemological bases, when a pursuit of knowledge has ethical implications, it should have an ethical basis and require justification (Smith, 2004). For this reason, you will find my reflections in this text often involves assertion, and sometimes backtracking – as I reconsider the decisions made and reflect on participants’ feedback and experiences of such methods. When it comes to analysis, instead of being dictated to or grounded by a dominant framework of understanding or operating within its context of expectations and values, I see the analytical tools I utilize as ‘openings’ resisting the closure and surety of generalizable conclusions. As I have often explored problems rather than prescribed solutions, such an emergent approach has stimulated thought and generated problems around and about the ‘the field of disputed meaning’ (Stronach & MacLure, 1997, p. 113).

As this chapter focuses on how arts-based approaches have enabled participants’ agency, I will focus here on a discussion of the analytical construction of structure, culture and agency in my attempt to grapple with that which is espoused in HE, and the significance of that which is experienced. To do so, I most often utilized critical discourse analysis when looking at representation, asserting a distinction between discourse and narrative.

The understanding I have held is that discourses do not determine identity but provide the conditions within which they are negotiated (Foucault, 1979, 1980). The person is understood as a psycho-social subject (Davies & Hare, 1990) shaped by and shaping him/herself through shifting identifications with the various discursive positions in which s/he is situated.

Of the many distinct orientations to narrative in research, there are two which I find helpful to distinguish: the self as constructed or revealed by the representations, or the self as concealed by them (Sclater, 2003, p. 318). In the former, narratives are central to identify-formation, through which significance is ascribed to experience and the self is constituted. Researchers in this intentionalist model analyze narratives as stories of an individuals' autobiography which enables privileged access to the author's view of him/herself. This understanding of narrative is underpinned by a metaphysics of presence, where an authentic, autonomous self creates a representation as a private object which is the most correct or close version of that person's meanings (Parker, 1997). A more critical view is that narrative should not be taken on face value – the researcher should be sceptical, partly because of aspects of the self that are beyond the bounds of conscious discourse, and partly acknowledging that the 'defended subject' may unconsciously or consciously alter or manipulate the stories s/he tells to defend against the 'real' self (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000). Both approaches recognise that there are complex connections between narrative and identity, and thus the study of narrative is epistemological (Stewart, 2008).

There are elements and layers of subjectivity intrinsic to the narrative and the act of narration itself, that are important to consider when constructing the narrative 'self' and analyzing the narrative. These include the speaking subject (the 'actual' person) who invites or addresses 'the subject' of the speech or text (the imagined reader), and creates a 'narrating subject' (the narrator), construct the subject of narration (the character) to speak about the narrated subject (the thing to which the narrator refers but cannot get there because of language – the signified) (Sclater, 2003). In my analytical processes I have used these differentiations to acknowledge the agency of my participants, in how they choose to describe their experiences and the 'self' they construct in the text, particularly in how they respond to, resist, manipulate, or collude with larger discourses, my own presence as researcher, and their imagined audience. This notion, of the many subjectivities in narrative, has freed me from the notion that the layers will correspond. However, I have not found extreme anti-intentionalist constructions, of narrative as pure fiction, productive.

Stories both help us understand the social and cultural context within which the person is situated, and reveal idiosyncratic characteristics, in a way that echoes the neither/nor of ethical self/other relations to which Derrida (1981) refers. In the space between neither/nor is the ‘always-becoming’ which is psycho-social and involves ongoing ‘identity work’ when negotiating the politics of belonging as a human agent. Narrative is a dynamic practice of active, intentional and embodied agents which is simultaneously individual and relational to social, cultural and interpersonal locations. Narrative acts as a ‘potential’ or ‘transitional’ space where the self is created or transformed in relationship with others and within the matrices of culture (Winnicott, 1971).

These narratives are located within or contribute to the larger discourses, which as artefacts of culture, can be ‘read’ for both meaning and significance. Informed by Foucault and Critical Theory, I have utilised critical discourse analysis to explore rhetorical power-plays in HE which de/legitimize narratives, regulate meaning and determine criteria which are used for judgment. While analysing, I seek to make explicit discourses, often within participants’ teaching and learning interactions or larger aspects of institutional culture, that were otherwise implicit or invisible, and thereby more powerful, with the intention of exploring the political, social, cognitive and affective *significance* of such discourses. Cultivating a sensitivity to or awareness of discourses within research relationships is a means of consciousness-raising in the hope of demystifying their ‘taken for granted’ nature within narratives and on the power of their positioning of subjectivity.

Against conventional representations of the individual researcher as ‘ideal knower’ detached from history, affiliation or cultural bias, for my participants and my readers. In this section, I have sought to make visible the factors and practices which shape my choices of arts-based methods as a researcher. In the sections following, I discuss the challenges and rewards of the arts-based methods with which I have worked, the analytical approaches I have found most fruitful, and some of the dominant limitations, concerns and cautions of such methods.

7.3 Practice-Based Reflections on the Purposive Validity of Arts-Based Methods

I have shaped this discussion of arts-based methods in relation to the central purposes of the projects within which they were utilised: staff educational development, institutional evaluation research, and research on assessment

in HE. Within my educational development role, my influence was positioned as that of an advisor or informed critical friend. However, I was able to develop and thereby model more divergent approaches within the evaluation practices adopted in my teaching of formal HE Studies courses, in addition to utilizing arts-based methods in my research involving student and staff participants as I discuss in the next section.

7.3.1 Creating the Conditions to ‘Listen’ to Participants’ Experiences in and of HE for Evaluation Purposes

The institution, in which my educational development work was situated, had adopted a formative approach to evaluation which enabled autonomy in how academic staff determined their own evaluation agendas, methods and approaches. While some used this latitude to avoid accountability, others explored methods which generated rich insights into their practice and their students’ lived experiences. Of importance in that rapidly transforming and contested HE context was to develop evaluation methods towards transforming curricula responsively; to enable student voice and increase student ownership; to create opportunities for inherent teaching and learning practices to be challenged (Belluigi, 2013b). I curated an anthology of selected case studies of such approaches (Belluigi, 2016). In this section, I focus particularly on the arts-based methods used by such staff whose evaluation practices I had directly informed, through the emphasis I asserted during workshops, formal qualifications, and individual consultations. One of the currents within the institutional milieu was to foster a culture appreciative of multiculturalism within the context of inherited troubled history and inequality (Jansen, 2008). Informed by the critical tradition in adult education, the formal courses broadened the focus on the individual teacher and narrow understandings of curriculum design to exploring the contexts, circumstances and conditions most likely to encourage and maintain student involvement and investment. The underpinning impetus of such attempts were to engage with the experiences and desires of members of groups who had previously or who were suffering forms of oppression within the politics of belonging in the teaching-learning space or institutional culture; to uncover mechanisms of domination; and to support struggles and innovations against inequality.

Learning engagement, as inclusive of cognitive, affective, connotative and relational aspects of learning, should extended the horizon of how data is collected and feedback generated. Due to an awareness of the nuances involved in accessing affective aspects, such as experiences of alienation and

engagement (Mann, 2001), in my interactions with staff I encouraged that the generation of such participant insights be approached in more unconventional and exploratory ways than the conventions of summative measurement often permits. As such, free writing activities, metaphor, word descriptors, journal writing and imagery, amongst others, were introduced in the content of formal courses in addition to being engaged with experientially as data generation processes by the academics who were participants of my courses. Such experiential knowledge gave participants a tangible sense of how enabling 'voice' and legitimising lived experience may empower participants as agents within teaching and learning cultures and structures, and allow for learning experiences that are reciprocal. By recognising the importance of the student investing and exploring his/her personal stance in the learning process, a number of academics in turn created opportunities in their own curricula for increased student ownership, responsibility and co-production in teaching-learning processes (Belluigi, 2016).

In my formal courses, I actively facilitated such a shift in conceptualising evaluation instruments as integral to teaching-learning interactions. According to Shor (Brookfield, 1995, p. 93), the 'first responsibility of critical reflective teachers is to research what students know, speak, experience, and feel, as starting points from which an empowering curriculum is developed'. The data generated then allows academics the possibility of comprehending the complexity of learning experiences from the 'other' side, to challenge how our practice might create environments and activities more conducive to encouraging engaged and committed experiences for participants in their contexts (Belluigi, 2008b). While qualitative responses are most valid for these purposes, I have often suggested that quantitative responses are often generated or deduced too so as to ensure the strategic impact value for external stakeholders, or as an indicator of extreme responses requiring further probing. Of import, is that such instruments and approaches were designed in a contextually responsive manner (Nygaard & Belluigi, 2011).

The rich validity of literal and metaphoric imagery was demonstrated to academics while participating in my course evaluation processes or in my own research. In response, a number of my peers utilised visual aspects in their data generation methods for evaluation purposes. For instance, the inclusion of such elements as emoticons (Van der Poel, 2016) and the construction of African American quilts (Seddon, 2014) are not conventional in academic research (Ptaszynski, Rzepka, Araki, & Momouchi, 2011). Whilst the utilisation of such visual elements has varied in terms of sophistication, it is important to bear in mind that the purpose has been the process they elicit

and conditions they create, rather than the mastery of form or their slickness as a product.

The writing of narrative has long been recognised in educational development as a powerful way for participants to express their experiences, to engage in a process that may enable them to reflect on their learning journey. I encouraged my academic peers to be cognisant that for narrative to be more than a response, it should be given the space to operate as a story. Stories require listening, sharing understandings, empathy, rather than measurement. Because absolute, definite conclusions as ‘evidence’ cannot be drawn from responses to such ambiguous stimuli, there are those who are critical and dubious of such methods, particularly those concerned with summative evaluation for tenure, promotion or QA purposes rather than development or enhancement. My emphasis has been to ensure (and gather evidence to support) the *validity* of the instrument in terms of helping the students, and in turn academics, to engage meaningfully with the conceptual criteria of the course and with students’ experiences and engagement with their teaching and learning culture, rather than overemphasizing claims of the reliability or objectivity of the instrument. In fact, such stories may act as Lyotardian ‘little narratives’ where both the act of telling and the implicit pragmatics of narrative transmission function to displace the scientific claims of narrative realism. Drawing from such stories adds an inbuilt mechanism to prevent claims of absolute certainty about the quality of the course or teaching, but to rather keep active ongoing dialogue which,

engages the student not simply as an active rather than passive ‘receiver’ of knowledge, but rather as an active creator of knowledge with the teacher (Grundy, 1987, p. 101).

Particularly in a context where machinations of domination and prejudice are both overt and covert, insights from those who are less powerful are the most valid catalysts for informed rupture of teaching, learning and assessment practices which replicate hidden curricula.

7.3.2 Creating the Conditions for Participants to Author their Stories of HE

Similar to what I encouraged in my courses and educational development role, I have actively sought to develop my own hybrid and contextualised research approaches. In this section, I discuss the arts-based methods utilised in three research projects as illustrative of my approach. To do so, I outline

the research subject, the data generation instruments utilised, focusing in particular on the arts-based approaches.

The first is a project which explored the disjunctions between the espoused and practiced curriculum of a creative arts discipline by excavating the formative assessment method, the 'Critique' (Belluigi, 2008a). When it came to deciding sources and methods of data collection, I aimed to gather data positioned in gaps between theories espoused and in-use, and which would allow insights the significance for student learning. Multiple sources and methods were required to explore both declared aims of the curriculum and the underlying, non-observable processes of teaching-learning interactions. I drew data from academic literature; various 'texts' produced by the institution; interviews, discussions and questionnaires with participating academic staff; participating students' journal and stories; and my observations of the assessments events. Using critical discourse analysis, data collected and generated about and during the event of the formative assessment was analysed to unlock the unexamined assumptions and beliefs of the teachers (Belluigi, 2009), and the experiences and approaches of students. What emerged was that the dominant discourses in the case studied constructed a negative dialectic of the artist-student that denied student agency and authorial responsibility (Belluigi, 2011). Students experienced this as alienating, to the extent that to preserve their sense of self, they adopted surface and strategic approaches to learning.

The richest data was generated through the arts-based methods of journal writing and third-person storytelling. I designed a hardcopy daily journal in which students were asked to write/draw/express their experiences of their learning process before and after an assessment event (see Figure 7.1). Feedback on the design had been elicited from teachers of multi-disciplinary backgrounds, including educational development, psychology and fine art, informing refinements. Visual elements of the journals differed according to the subjects the students' studied, to create a more contextual aesthetic and identity for each participant. At that period of time, hardcopy journals were more inclusive of variations in participants' socio-economic backgrounds.

Following the event, the student participants were invited to a synchronous meeting to write stories of their experience over that given period of time. Participants drew from the reflections-in-process they had recorded in their journals to construct their own stories, and in this way actively directed the first step of the analytical process. I suggested they write about their experiences in the third-person, and some created names for themselves. To ask such disclosure and enable their stories to grow, required that I temporarily

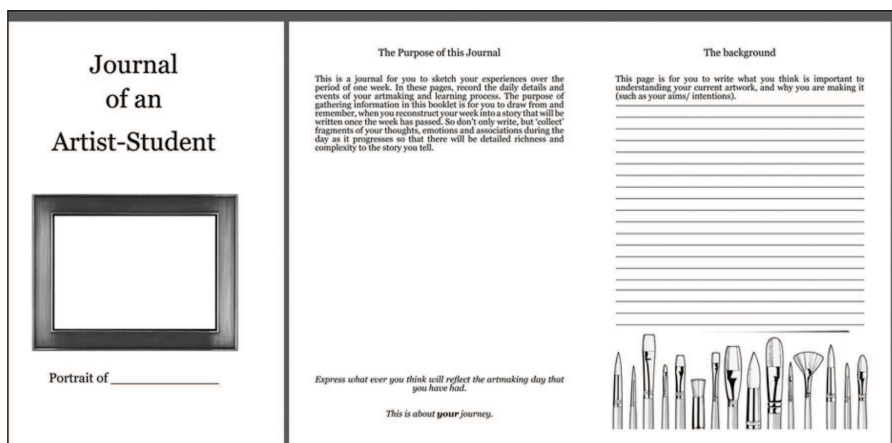


Figure 7.1 The first three pages of a journal designed for this project.

forgo the role of researcher for an appreciative listener who exhibits sincere interest (Silverman, 2007) in all the difficulties and details. In this shift, such approaches seemed more ethical in avoiding objectifying the participant. Derrida (1981) argues that by elevating its own record, the group in power de-stabilizes and threatens to extinguish the value of individual memory. By privileging such acts of representation, I explicitly acknowledge postmodern uncertainties about what constitutes an adequate signifier of social reality.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, a fruitful way to facilitate participants' reflexivity to unearth the assumptions which underlie practices is to approach them as if foreign, as discussed in 7.2. This notion was communicated when I suggested students compose stories in the third person to create aesthetic and contemplative distance. Whilst I would not claim that this project had the potential of 'consciousness raising' of the Women's Movement or 'conscientisation' of Freire (1972), I did intend the process to increase participants' awareness of how,

hidden below the surface narrative of stories are the assumptions, models, expectations and beliefs that guide people's decisions and behaviours... stories about real or imagined situations tend to capture these underlying assumptions (Silverman, 2007, pp. 34–41).

For instance, the research process a number of participants came to realise they had developed a 'false self' to survive the assessment practices (Winnicott, 1971). The excerpts below indicated that they had learnt to approach

the formative event strategically rather than as an opportunity for honest disclosure.

It is Wednesday, the day before Beatrice's long-dreaded crit... Is she to invent a whole new string of fiction that justifies her work or is she to re-tell her previous concoction (Beatrice's story).

Personally, I'm learning the fine art (pun intended) of crits. I treat it like a performance, or a presentation, even a lecture. I spend a lot of time scripting what I am going to say, which is great because I can just read the script in the crit and not look at anyone's face (Penny's email).

What such data enabled me to access were the contributions of the affect to how the student-instructor relationship was constructed. Such studies widen the focus beyond the product of the learning engagement, to recognise 'what they *experience* while a student: the life of a scholar in a community practicing its discipline' (Parker, 2003, p. 539). Believing in the importance of experience and the process of students developing as critical beings, I drew from Mann's (2001) seven perspectives of alienation to analyze the student data. Alienation in HE is not necessarily inevitable, however critical examinations of these conditions is necessary to inform radical changes to educational interactions.

As I shifted from a strongly critical orientation to research, towards opening myself up to heteronomical possibilities, I began to find ways in which instruments not only generated but also disseminated information. This was to progress participation to action – asking participations to further interpret, extend, supplement or problematize my interpretations. I enabled this shift explicitly in one particular research project, concerned with how differing interpretative approaches play out within referential frameworks in teaching, learning and assessment interactions in HE (Belluigi, 2017a). As with the project discussed above, I collected data from course documentation and generated rich data utilising a variety of hybrid methods, including observations of assessments, questionnaires and interviews with staff. However, at various points during such researcher-participant interactions, I explicitly and purposefully created possibilities for reciprocity, transgression and challenge of interpretations, as I discussed in 1.2.

In addition to data generated from students' responses to questionnaires, I further developed an arts-based method which had been designed specifically to generate data on student experiences for evaluation purposes

(Meistre & Belluigi, 2010) in a bid to extend the boundaries of the potential of imagery to explore the dark spaces of HE (Bengtsen & Barnett, 2017). Participating students constructed visual stories which they then discussed in small group discussions, facilitated by myself as a person external to the teaching-learning relationship. The instrument engaged students with mimetic activities as they played with their relationship and the meaning created in their stories; which, in turn, would better enable the course coordinator's reception of the particularity and diversity of each story. This was in the tradition of art making processes where

one is neither exclusively subjectifyingly inside one's own creative experience, nor objectifyingly looking in from outside the field or territory of work... on the boundary, wrestling relationally with the various conditions, inner and outer, practical and theoretical, creative and imitative, biographical and analytical (Dallow, 2003, p. 61).

As this method proved particularly powerful in the richness of data elicited and the positive reception to the process by participants involved, I developed it further and utilised it considerably for research purposes. In what I have since called 'visual narrative focus group interviews', participants author their own stories using found images and text, which they then explain in small group discussions with their peers. These insights were triangulated with data from other methods and sources in relation to the optimal conditions for creativity in this domain (Belluigi, 2013a). Schema of the environment, relationships and curricula were then sketched, indicating the significance of interpretative approaches on students' emotional, critical and reflective engagement with themselves and the process and product of their learning (Belluigi, 2017b).

Because imagery has been used in healing and psychotherapy since before antiquity, data generation methods which utilize images are often informed by psychoanalytic approaches (Cabrera & Guarln, 2012; Prosser & Prosser, 1998). Such use of imagery is 'based on the principle that change of emotional and physical symptoms could be achieved by effecting a change in the imagination' (Edwards, 2011, p. 11). The contemporary psychoanalytic term 'imagery rescripting' encompasses a range of methods which utilize imagery to both assess and address a person's underlying emotions and meaning-making. Images are seen to emerge within consciousness and lie behind emotions acting as gateways to surface deep-seated issues and concerns evoked through experiences.

[The] image can, when properly understood, foster a deeper sense of the underlying meaning that [an interaction] holds for my sense of self within this particular sociocultural context (Dirkx, 2001, pp. 65–66).

The cultural theorist Roland Barthes (1984) made much of the division between those images which contained informational and aesthetic value (a *studium*) and those where a shock, thrill or emotion is elicited (a *punctum*). The latter has the potential to activate the reader who is then drawn beyond that which is easily readable or received to a second level of meaning, as a *punctum* triggers ‘a succession of personal memories and unconscious associations, many of which are indescribable by the individual’ (Cronin, 1989, p. 72). While it can be argued that such a dichotomous psychoanalytic conception imposes artificial separations between the ‘public’ or overt message, and ‘private’ or personal interpretation, a constructionist understanding of the social nature of meaning-making can be applied to the participant’s relationship with imagery. More textualist approaches to imagery acknowledge the mimetic moments which transcend ‘the non-conceptual affinity of a subjective creation with its objective and unposited other’ (Adorno, 2004, p. 80), enabling unintelligible and mysterious aspects of the world and ‘the other’ to emerge (Gebauer & Wulf, 1995). Advocates of projective testing have utilised purposefully ambiguous imagery so that the reader projects his/her interpretation to reflect their feelings, experiences, prior conditioning, thought processes et cetera (Kaplan & Saccuzzo, 2012). Informed by such notions, a postgraduate student of mine recently probed the identity positioning of first generation students (Alcock, 2017) by asking them to construct photographs which represented them ‘at home’ and ‘on campus’.

While most arts-based research methods are similarly informed by concerns with what the imagery conceals or reveals of unconscious impulses (Edwards, 2007; Shorr, 1983), visual pedagogy that is informed by critical theory, considers *the tactics of reading and writing* in the construction of visual narratives (Rifà-Valls, 2011).

A fact of primary social importance is that the photograph is a place of work, a structured and structuring space within which the reader deploys, and is deployed by, what codes he or she is familiar with in order to make sense (Burgin, 1982, p. 153).

The design of the visual narrative instrument in my study was informed both by imaginative constructions and by projective psychoanalytic approaches,

purposefully utilising ambiguous photographic imagery, so that the person could project and re-imagine him/herself into the situation to create a story. Participants construct a sequence of images, chosen from an image bank of ambiguous images devoid of human subjects, alongside their own written captions, in response to a posed statement or phrase to create a story. The found images were selected from an art archive (Meistre, 1998) which had been utilised used in a cross-disciplinary collaborative project between an artist and psychologist (Meistre & Knoetze, 2005), to both reference and upset the format of psychological projective tests. A sense of play and experimentation inverted the conventions of power, placing interpretative agency of these 'stories' with the participant.

Once the visual narratives were constructed, the participant shared it with his/her peers and me in a small group discussion, discussing the choice of images and text as well as the experiences they intended to evoke. This discussion of the participants' actual intentionality was the first act of interpretation of the visual narratives, which although organized by the intellect, took its impetus and meaning from the affect (Shorr, 1983). I asked further probing questions to comprehend the significance of such experiences, and to ascertain whether and in what ways such experiences extended to others. The discussions were audio recorded, transcribed and then after analyses, sent to the participants for further discussion (see Figures 7.2 and 7.3). These processes actively engaged participants with the 'polysemic' character of imagery, where each new discourse situation appropriates and generates differing sets of meaning.

In a project exploring the reception of equity-agenda staff development programmes (Belluigi & Thondhlana, 2016), postcards were utilized to probe academic staff members' experiences of institutional culture. As with the other projects discussed above, this was not the sole instrument of data generation. It was incorporated at an important juncture in the research process – at the closure of small group discussions in which we presented for further deliberation our interpretations of those participants' responses to a seven-page online questionnaire. The participants were handed an envelope of pseudo postcards, each printed with a metaphor which had emerged in the questionnaire responses: 'talk show'; 'alien space'; 'training the dog'; 'elastic skin'; 'poster child'; 'put into a pot'; 'gatekeeping'; 'window-dressing'. In this method, we capitalized on how metaphor accesses a different way of thinking to conventional research methods, wherein participants contrast, negotiate and manipulate imagery rather than rely on the linear, logical structure of language.

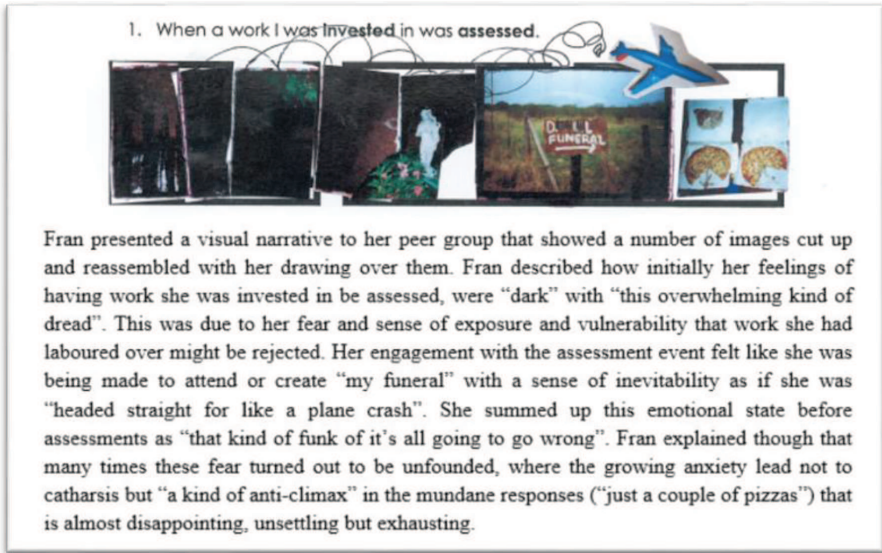


Figure 7.2 A reproduction of Fran’s visual narrative with my analysis including excerpts from the audio recording of her description which she articulated to her peers in the focus group discussion.

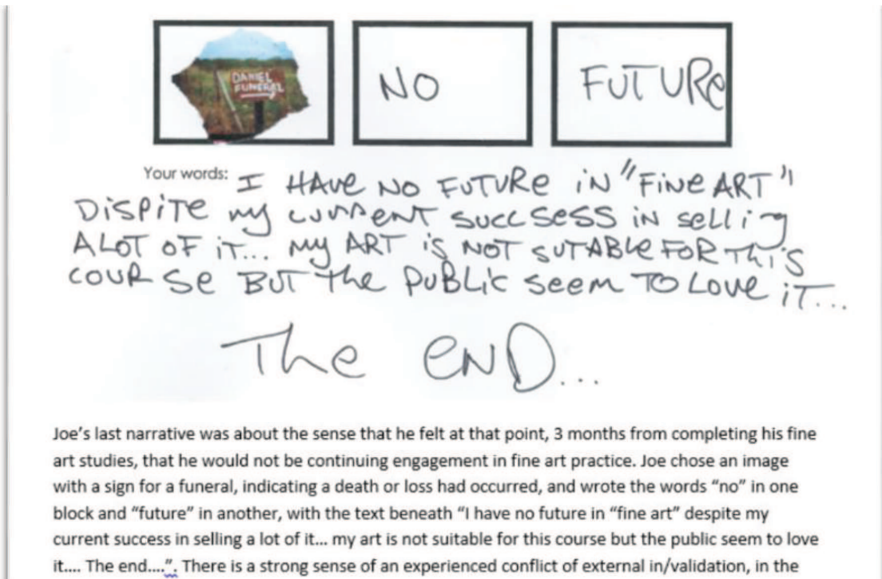


Figure 7.3 A reproduction of Joe’s visual narrative with my analysis.

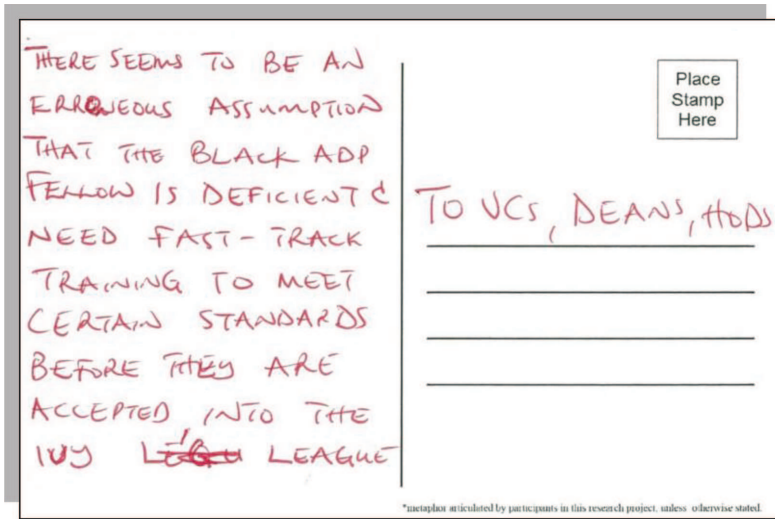


Figure 7.4 A postcard in response to the metaphor ‘training the dog’ addressed to those in the management structure of the institution.

The metaphors, in this project, acted both as emergent products of the initial research process and a way to deepen our relational processes with the participants and each other. We were most interested in the potential of ‘the contingent, multiple and intertwined processes of visualising metaphors’ to open up and deterritorialise identity (Boulton, Grauer, & Irwin, 2017, p. 210). This was integrally related to the content of the research subject, which was about the subtleties of personal and group-based identity and diversity, and its relation to perception, experience and performance in the evaluation of academic staff.

The information on the envelope indicated to participants the main reason for our inclusion of this method:

Choose postcards.

Write on the back.

Address it to whomever you would most like to ‘hear’ what you have to say.*

**This will help us decide the intended audience of the papers.*

By selecting their imagined target audience, the participants participated in deciding whom the readership of the dissemination of the findings should be.

Particularly with that research project, which considered the impact of societal asymmetries in the assessment of individual's performance on affirmative action programmes, this act positioned participants powerfully. Our decision was formulated as a response to the debate around the appropriateness of choices of readership in the politics of representation is pressing and pertinent (Leonardo, 2004).

With varying levels of intensity required from participants and preparation from the researchers, these three projects indicate a concern for utilising arts-based methods to explore the parameters of the authorship of the participants and the readership of the findings.

7.3.3 Concerns, Limitations and Improvement

There are those who raise questions about the reliability of arts-based methods which have a nonlinear relationship of representational narrative to the real (Chappell, Rhodes, Solomon, Tennant, & Yates, 2003). While some question the reliability of such methods and the currency of alternate approaches to research in our neoliberalist times, I have found that such methods are valid as they enable engagement with that which is tacit, nuanced and difficult to measure in educational practices. As I have discussed in this chapter, I have found them useful to explore the hidden curriculum, the gaps between what is espoused, the theory-in-use and what is practiced in teaching and learning, in addition to what is experienced by students. To combat perceptions of partiality in such methods, the triangulation of methods and sources have served to ensure warranted assertability by demonstrating that dependable conclusions are being drawn. I have found 'report-and-respond' approaches (Stronach & MacLure, 1997), in particular, ensures rigor through their transparent and inclusive role of generating, disseminating, supplementing and problematizing data and interpretations of the subject being studied. For instance, in the last two projects discussed, the initial questionnaires were composed of statements explicitly based on notions from relevant hyperlinked published literature, with the intention of eliciting participants' informed and considered responses.

As they are creative in and of themselves, methods which appreciate the critical role of the visual (Sullivan, 2007), such as arts-based strategies (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Diamond & Mullen, 1999) reinforce the interpretivist notion that research creates rather than discovers. This is because imagery, whether literal or metaphoric, can be 'compared with a complex sentence [rather] than a single word. Its meanings are multiple, concrete and,

most important, constructed' (Tagg, 1988, p. 187). In their form, such methods embody the notion that 'the self' is constructed rather than discovered within structures such as education. Arts-based approaches can encourage participants to experiment and reflect by 'playing with, trying out, discarding identity, purpose, shape' (Parker, 2003, p. 541), as they actively engage with creating, shaping and interpreting their responses. Such approaches trouble the binary of constructs of cognition and emotion in binary opposition (Besnier, 1990) rather than positioning the affect as integral to ways of knowing the relationships between the self and the broader social world. The nuanced insights yielded by such innovation warrants the emphasis on process (Prosser & Schwartz, 1998). Arts-based methods hold the potential to provide more engagement with "deeper understanding of the emotional, affective, and spiritual dimensions that are often associated with profoundly meaningful experiences in adult learning" (Dirkx, 2001, p. 70). Because of the emotional effect of the metaphor, story or found image, there is more chance that it will break those sophisticated cognitive resistances to and conscious censorship of inter-relational dialogue and verbal and written transactions (Shorr, 1983) which typify conventional research approaches.

In addition to their validity for generating rich data, arts-based methods create conditions for powerful transformational learning experiences. They jolt the discursive familiarity of educational practices that are the focus of such research, disrobing their "mythical immediacy" (Buck-Morss, 1997, p. x). Such disruption serves to force both participants, and in turn readers, to look again or more slowly and carefully, at that which is often taken for granted by each perspective (MacLure, 2003). This is an important consideration for educational development, where building the capacity for reflexivity of teaching staff and students who may carry with them troubled histories or reproduce problematic traditions of adult education which replicate inequalities. One way to unearth the assumptions that underlie practice and experience, as well as how one constructs oneself in relation to discourses, is to approach them as if foreign. My understanding of such processes of making the familiar strange are heavily influenced by the argument that the experience of repressed strangeness or the uncanny is central to the enlargement of political imagination (Kristeva, 1991).

Some of the challenges of such instruments were to create safe-enough space for participants to share their experiences, and to 'buy in' to such alternative processes. Whether for evaluation or research purposes, by ensuring that the processes were low stakes, were informed by transparent ethical principles, and where I demonstrated a sincere stance of listening, created

a climate encouraging of trust, play and transgression. However, removing social pressures and credit-bearing incentives definitely impacted on the participation rates, as indicated in the response rate of 11 of 40 invited students in the storytelling project and 26 of 81 invited students in the visual narratives project discussed in this section. When utilised as a way of formatively evaluating curricula, and thus with structured time for such interactions within contact time, participation rates have been far higher.

Another factor is that the quality of what participants ‘produce’ may differ in the initial interactions, particularly for those participants who start off by feeling intimidated by their abilities to express themselves creatively. With visual narratives, it important to build trust in the process, and to emphasise that mastery of the final product is not the point, but rather that participants understand that the visual aspects are only a part of their expression. I have found that responses have varied in effort and approach, with the process mostly appreciated as playful and engaging. Across the eight focus group interviews of the visual narratives project, for instance, only two out of twenty-six participants articulated concern that the images complicated the clarity of what they hoped to communicate. They exercised their agency to engage with the narrative as they felt best representative. As there were opportunities to describe the narratives within the focus groups, and to further add to my analysis later on in the process, all the participants strongly agreed that their stories were represented as they intended.

A litmus test of the validity of the method utilised is how participants experience their engagement. In such contexts, I have found that students, more so than staff, have responded favourably to such methods. For instance, in a questionnaire asking about their reception of the visual narrative evaluation method (discussed in 3.2), all the participating students indicated it was preferable to any other method of evaluation they had experienced, because its reflective component incorporated the affect. The majority of those students indicated that their participation in the process increased their intrinsic motivation in their studies (Meistre & Belluigi, 2010).

In terms of the more open, dialogical manner of the research methods employed in 3.2, staff participants appreciated the opportunities to reflect on and debate a problematic central to their own internal conundrums in their professional and teaching practice. A minority (2 of the 14 participating staff) noted fatigue in the intensive nature of the interactions during the process, even though one later emailed that it had been “like a learning curve, demanding but ultimately good”. Similarly, student participants were appreciative of having more ownership of the process, requesting I share the

various ways in which the research was disseminated, to which many have continued to responded with questions, comments and further additions.

7.4 Conclusion

Both in my own research and teaching practice, and in what I have encouraged in the evaluation practice of my peers, the impetus has been to go beyond “describe the parts. . . but also to understand relational and contextual factors” of the problematics at hand, a feature characteristic of arts-based educational research practices (Sullivan, 2014, p. 9). The approaches described in this chapter are drawn from and across a diversity of research methods and sources, much like a *bricoleur* (Hickman, 2008). Such eclectic methodological triangulation has been to develop multi-perspectival, dimensional and layered representations of the significance of approaches to teaching, learning and assessment in HE. In this process, warranted assertability of the research process was ensured.

Moreover, in this chapter I have the concerted efforts I continue to make in an endeavour to create conditions for transgression of traditional positioning in research processes, with deliberate opportunities for participants to utilise their agency to not only author their own stories, but have considerable power over how these stories are negotiated during the processes of formation and interpretation, and increasingly the ways in which they were ultimately represented when disseminated. It is this concern with subjectivity and enabling agency within representations of experience, particularly of those oppressed, which I believe is more important than the ongoing debate about the legitimacy of arts-based methods, and it is this ethical obligation which spurs me on to consider ever more diverse approaches.

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