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Artful Portrayals in Qualitative Inquiry: The Road to Found Poetry and Beyond

In this article I examine the current context in which arts-based qualitative inquiry exists and then trace a personal journey into arts-based pedagogy, highlighting the process of creating found poetry with examples and suggestions for conducting this type of research.

I argue there is a need for supporting researchers interested in arts-based qualitative inquiry, but suggest it may be most helpful to explore and produce a variety of "artful portrayals" as analytic approaches that may or may not be included in final, public products. These approaches provide multiple ways of looking at research material and lead inevitably to new insights and understandings. They encourage the selection of a representational form that best suits the researcher and what is to be communicated.

Current Context for Arts-Based Work

Increasingly, educational research suggests that the more traditional, textual descriptions of qualitative findings do not adequately reflect the complexity of studying human behavior. Nor do they satisfy the ethical issues of voice and relationship to which researchers have become more sensitive, or permit the possibility of multiple interpretations that the postmodern world has come to accept. Many researchers have turned to narrative approaches advocated by Connelly and Clandinin (1990), Lawrence Lightfoot (1983), Reissman (1993), and Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992), positing that narrative is a human way of thinking, the way people make sense of their worlds and construct their identities (Bruner, 1987). This form of inquiry mandates that researchers situate themselves in their studies and work intimately with their participants. In so doing they create relationships that help to ensure that participant voices and perspectives are respected and reported.

Narrative inquirers use both contextualizing and categorizing analytic strategies (Maxwell & Miller, 1992) in their work. Contextualizing approaches discern the contiguous, storied dimensions of "field texts" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), in interviews in particular, to create the narratives (Reissman, 1993). Categorizing, on the other hand, is the search for patterns in interview, observational, and documentation field texts (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). It is not particularly helpful in identifying stories, but can be used to ascertain similarities or themes that occur across individual narratives. The veracity of a

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narrative is judged by its persuasiveness, whether the interpretation is reasonable and convincing (Riessman, 1993), rather than by tests of validity. The in-depth, context-specific work that this portrays allows others to take away from the particular (Donmoyer, 1990) what resonates (Conle, 1996) with their experiences and use these understandings to enhance educational practices in other settings.

In the last decade there has been a burgeoning interest in stretching the boundaries of narrative reporting to include other literary genres (reader's theatre, poetry, drama, musical drama, and hypertext), as well as nontextual or visual modes of representation (collage, quilts, portraits, drawings, photographs, film, and video). And although some visual modes of representation have been used extensively in other research areas, for example, visual anthropology, this trend is new in the area of educational inquiry (Banks, 1998).

The rationale for including arts-based representation in qualitative research is that form mediates understanding. Different forms can qualitatively change how we understand phenomena (Eisner, 1991; Langer, 1953). As well, these nontraditional forms help disrupt the hegemony inherent in traditional texts and evoke emotional responses that bring the reader/viewer closer to the work, permitting otherwise silenced voices to be heard (Denzin, 1997). There is growing consensus among many qualitative researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) that these new ways of doing inquiry will contribute positively to existing educational practices.

Elliot Eisner from Stanford University and Tom Barone from Arizona State University have been largely responsible for spearheading this movement now known as arts-based qualitative inquiry. In addition to their writing and numerous presentations across the continent and beyond, in the early 1990s they began the American Educational Research Association Research (AERA) Institute on Arts-based Qualitative Research and the Arts-based Special Interest Group (SIG) that meets and presents annually at the AERA conference. These initiatives helped to create a large network of researchers including those who are using arts-based approaches, as well as artists interested in qualitative work. They opened avenues and special formats for presenting work at what had been previously a very traditional conference. Interest in this kind of research has increased exponentially as these approaches have become accepted and legitimized. It is now the rule rather than the exception to have arts-based work presented as exhibitions and performance sessions, published in journals such as *Qualitative Inquiry* and the *Journal of Critical Inquiry into Curriculum and Instruction*, and produced as theses (Hussey, 2000). Increasingly, graduate students are looking for arts-based expertise, and departments are grappling with how to support and evaluate the work. Barone and Eisner (1997) have begun this discussion as it applies to literary genres, postulating that "arts-based research is defined by the presence of aesthetic qualities or design elements that infuse the inquiry and its writing" (p. 73). They go on to enumerate seven features of arts-based work. These include "The creation of a virtual reality," "The presence of ambiguity," "The use of expressive language," "The use of contextualized and vernacular language," "The promotion of empathic understanding," "The use of the personal signature of the author," and "The presence of aesthetic form" (pp. 73-83).

These qualities have the capacity to pull the reader/viewer into a world that is recognizable enough to be credible, but ambiguous enough to allow new insights and meanings to emerge. Through accessible language, and a product that promotes empathy and vicarious participation, the potential for positive change in education becomes possible.

A delicate balance must be struck between supporting and widening the exciting opportunities these approaches offer and making sure the inroads that have been gained in arts-based research are not lost because of inadequate work. On the other hand, there is the danger of creating elitism in the field if doors close for some and not others. With these issues in mind, Barone and Eisner (1997) have suggested that:

> researchers will need to develop both technical and artistic skills, and schools of education will need to make both human and material resources available to enable them to do so. Material resources pertain to both equipment and space-studios. Human resources refer to staff members or faculty who themselves are able to help students acquire such skills. Schools now provide such resources, of course, to develop the technical skills of statistics and computers. Computer laboratories are available in which students can refine the skills that they have acquired in their use. We are suggesting an expansion of what learning to do educational research requires. (p. 92)

These recommendations have serious practical and pedagogical implications for graduate studies throughout the country and merit close attention and further discussion. It is in this context of arts-based qualitative inquiry that I recount, and elaborate with some examples, the evolution of my work in the arts-based field.

Personal Involvement in Arts-Based Work

My first involvement in arts-based inquiry occurred when I was a beginning teacher in an elementary school. It was not called arts-based then, nor was it theory-driven research. It was rather a quest to find practical ways to help children experiencing difficulty to become engaged in project work. I encouraged them to use drawing, painting, building, acting, dancing, and singing to communicate their learning, and I began to see the power of this approach. It not only engaged all children, but it tapped into talents that were otherwise not apparent, particularly among those experiencing academic problems (Butler-Kisber, 1997). Later, when I began teaching at university, I continued these practices with teachers-to-be, hoping they would gain personally by doing assignments that took them beyond the more typical ways of representing their work and develop pedagogical approaches that would be helpful to the students they would ultimately teach. By that time Gardner's (1983) work on multiple intelligences provided a sound rationale for proceeding in this way.

It was Eisner's (1991) pivotal work, however, that gave me the impetus and "permission" to begin experimenting with poetic representation in my own research. I had always been attracted to the early artful ethnographies as in the work of Shostak (1981), and the portraiture of Lawrence Lightfoot (1983), but was aware of the criticism it endured as "soft" or inadequate research. The 1980s produced some interesting forays into narrative inquiry. Work such as that of Clandinin and Connelly (1988), Heath (1983), and the Personal Narra-

tives Group (1989) opened the doors for others to follow. Eisner's work expanded these horizons by arguing coherently and convincingly for using many different representational forms and effectively countering the nagging criticisms concerning validity and generalizability. What seems rather obvious now, but turned on a light for me then, was Eisner's explanation of how understanding is mediated by form. What we know and how we know are inextricably related. This notion, my previous pedagogical experiences, and a growing confidence of how to withstand criticism pushed me into arts-based work of my own.

I began to experiment with poetic representation. I chose this route because what was emerging in my research demanded an evocative portrayal. I was familiar with the work of Richardson (1994) in which she used found poetry to represent sociological interviews. In this approach, the researcher uses only the words of the participant(s) to create a poetic rendition of a story or phenomenon. Because I was most comfortable working with words rather than other alternative forms, I decided found poetry might offer a viable way of portraying what I was finding.

At the time, I was conducting a qualitative study of a graduate course I was teaching.[1] As part of this process, the classes, and weekly drop-in sessions where students discussed with me any questions or issues about their research projects, were videotaped and scripted by a research assistant. A collaborative partnership that developed between two students became one focus of my inquiry. As I analyzed their work together during the course, as well as their thoughts about the process in videotaped interviews several months later, an embedded story emerged that merited attention. One of the partners, Ann, had discovered the confidence to use her own voice and insights while conducting the inquiry, something she had never been able to do before in her graduate courses. This immediately interested me from both a research and a pedagogical perspective.

Her story was not one that she had consciously offered during one of our discussions. Bits and pieces of it were scattered over several transcripts, and it only became apparent after applying an adaptation of Mishler's (1992) "chained narrative" approach. In chained narrative, the researcher distills episodes of a participant's story from transcripts and then arranges these temporally from the origins, to its turning point, and conclusion. The resulting story provides an explanation for why something is so.

My analysis of Ann's embedded narrative produced a contiguous version of text that resulted in her story (see below). When I attempted to write up this work in the typical way by recounting the story interspersed with transcript excerpts, the result seemed very flat. It did not reveal the textures of Ann's personality so richly conveyed in the videotapes, or the poignancy of her story, or the empathy I hoped to portray because it resonated (Conle, 1996) with my—and what I imagined were other women's—experiences.

> Resonance is a process of dynamic, complex, metaphorical relations. It is not confined to one single strand of connections. It is a complex relationship among many aspects of a story … Associations can be made through its images, its mood, its moral associations, and more … The resonance process is complex and covers a wide range of cognitive and noncognitive elements. (p. 313)

Not wishing to venture too far from the transcripts for reasons of accountability, I decided to use found poetry, which, as mentioned above, takes the words of others and transforms them into poetic form "to re-create lived experience and evoke emotional responses" (Richardson, 1994, p. 521). Later I realized another feature of found poetry is that it limits the range of words from which one can choose. In retrospect, this was an advantage in this early stage of experimentation.

Creating found poetry is not a linear procedure. In this instance it required returning to the videotapes many times to get at the subtleties of Ann's gestures and speech to create a kind of "mental kaleidescope" of the sights and sounds of Ann present on film. This in turn brought back memories of other interactions with Ann that helped make these nuances more tangible. Simultaneously, I began to "nugget" words and phrases from the chained prose, a practice I have since learned is used extensively by poets (C. Hussey, personal communication, 1999). As I selected words and phrases from the chained narrative, I experimented with the words to create rhythms, pauses, emphasis, breath-points, syntax, and diction. I played with order and breaks in an attempt to portray the essence of her story while inherently "showing more." As in any type of writing, it was necessary to reshape it over time. Reading the work aloud many times facilitated changes. The result was the following.

Finding Voice

I'm not an authority you know
My experience is just MY experience
I go by feeling a lot
I do that for all kinds of things.

I grew up on a farm.
After milking
neighbours would drop in
and tell stories,
all these stories   there's hundreds of them.
I could sit up all night
listening.

I freeze in groups
cannot   cannot think.
I find it hard to use myself,
this small talk,
fly-by-night things.
What's awfully hard for me
is saying
I've got to write MY stuff
not somebody else's.

But when I'm driving
I think these great things   I mean,
I could be Einstein.

Reflections
Talk we often don't allow
little humorous things,
true stories

feeling and thinking,
all have power to build theory
help people get over things.
Helped me, too.

My experience IS my experience
Intense, messy, nervous
That's part of it   I think
as human beings, a natural evolution
So   I don't   worry
much
anymore.

To illustrate more fully the process of transforming the narrative to the poetic form, Figure 1 shows the chained narrative (Mishler, 1992) from which I chose the "found words" used in the poem. The use of ellipses in the text indicates the pauses Ann made as she spoke.

There is no question that this found poem is my interpretation of Ann's story. It was made possible, I believe, by the close nature of the relationship that evolved between us, and by the richness of human activity that the video-taping preserved. Ann was pleased with the product. She indicated the words selected from the narrative chain appropriately recreated her experiences, and she commented positively about the tone, the emphasis, and the way it ac-knowledged the importance of her early, rural days in the Maritimes. Qualita-tive researchers frequently discuss the appropriation of stories and question whether it is ethical for researchers to tell participants' stories. Contrary to this thinking, Ann wanted this story told for her. She thought it was an important one for others to hear, but not one she wanted to tell herself. She was gratified that I had spent time trying to understand and give voice to her experience.

Found poetry can also be a way of representing holistically what otherwise might go unnoticed. The following found poems are examples of the feelings and opinions of young grade 1 and 2 girls that were not apparent when I coded and categorized the videotaped material, but emerged when I revisited the work and analyzed it contextually. These examples are collective narratives built from individual comments made by the girls. The first illustrates how important their relationship was with their teacher, expressed quietly by them during a circle time event, but lost among the exuberant contributions from the boys. The second shows how some girls had very definite opinions about the value of collaborative work, contrary to the opinion of many other children in this class (Butler-Kisber, 2001, p. 36).

Whispering Angels

I missed you
When you weren't here.
  Me, too.
  Me, too.
I started
dreaming about you.
I was up all night.
Every night.
I was wishing on a star

That you would come back.
  Me, too.

Collaboration

I don't like
always
working with others.

I just don't
want
people interrupting.

I like to find
out
for myself.

And other people
in the class
just
don't like
that.

In the above experiences with found poetry and in subsequent ones (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 1999), certain ideas have emerged that might be useful to others.

1. Interview material is the easiest to work with because it most closely resembles natural, everyday talk that in turn can be portrayed in ways that evoke the reader.

2. Audiotaped material to a certain extent, and definitely videotaped field texts, make the task that much easier. Audiotapes retain dimensions of the interactions that help to get at the sensory elements not apparent in prose. Videotapes preserve both the auditory and the visual, making revisiting the material even more authentic.

3. Because poetry has a performance/auditory dimension, in the process of creating found poetry it is useful to read it aloud repeatedly in order to fine-tune the work. As in all qualitative work, getting a response from the participant(s) helps deal with ethical issues, but also contributes to crafting the product.

4. A working collaboration between the interviewer and interviewee that is built on trust and reciprocity over time is most conducive for producing a context in which interesting and important stories will emerge. The trust and reciprocity tend to produce symmetry in the relationship between the participant and researcher. This helps balance the power differential inherent in such work and encourages researcher reflexivity.

5. Whether found poetry is used as a public form of representation or as an analytic tool within the inquiry process, it will bring the researcher closer to the data in different and sometimes unusual ways that can yield new and important insights.

6. Reading poetry, and reading about poetry, and attending workshops or courses all help to develop and hone artistic skills.

1. *Origins*

    I, well, there … well, I don't know if this comes into it, but I grew up on a farm. And at night after milking and all of that stuff, neighbours would drop in and sit around the fire and tell stories. And I could sit up all night listening to those stories, just listening … to Dan stories. And old Hanna, she had a few drinks, you know, for medicinal purposes, and all of these stories. This guy, old people and all these old stories. And the horse ran away you know, somebody cut somebody's sleigh up, and there's hundreds of them. And I used to sit …

2. *Use others' words*

    That's like my problem. I, I'm so used to using all the books in the literature, I find it so hard to use myself … I'm so used to, everything I say, I have to back up because I can't use myself 'cause I'm not an authority. You know, that whole idea … my experience is just my experience and what's awfully hard for me is saying, "Well, I've got to write my stuff, and not somebody else's."

3. *Write what professors want*

    I don't care how great, you know, how wonderful the system is, what do they want? Well, this always worked before now, this … Well, there, what they want is this way, so that entered into my mind, too, 'cause I've done enough of them, you know, to know you do have to please professors.

4. *Recognizes her ideas are present but her voice is not valid*

    … And they're just fly-by-night things to me. I didn't see them as valuable for writing down, you know. Like I just go by feeling a lot … I do that for all kinds of things.

5. *Turning point*

    And it's nice when you get things that can break the ice, and, and get you in because I, I freeze in groups. Okay? And I cannot think. I just cannot think. But when I'm driving in the car, I mean, I could be Einstein. You know, I think of these great things … this, this, not senseless talk, this small talk that often we don't allow kids to do in the class, because they're just disturbing someone else or they're not doing what you want them to do … that could be detrimental to the rest of their lives maybe. Sometimes these little humorous things that … their true stories, also, are, are help to people to get over things. That helped me too, to see for my own personal … I find it very difficult to talk in groups. I mean, I can't believe I did the Springboards thing (the conference presentation), never mind … I just can't believe I did that.

6. *Personal reflections are valid*

    And then, how did we start writing our reflections? And how, why we decided to do that? I don't know, I have no clue … all of a sudden we just, that was a whole big thing, our … cooked notes and we had just as many reflections. And that was how we were feeling and thinking throughout the process … I went to those an awful lot for answers, I know that.

7. *Personal voice is acceptable and credible*

    Teachers all have their power to build their own theory based on fact. I see it as a natural evolution. So there's nothing wrong with being intense, and messy and nervous, and all that. That's part of it I think, as human beings. That's part of … so, I don't worry about that type of thing, that much anymore, even when I write other papers.

Figure 1.

Beyond Found Poetry

My work with found poetry has pushed me personally and pedagogically. Although not within the scope of this article, I have begun to use poetic representation in autobiographical work, moving away from found words of others to my own to represent the sights and sounds of educational experiences that I believe merit sharing.

More important, my practices in my qualitative research methods courses have evolved as a result of being involved in arts-based work. I have always encouraged graduate students who feel inclined to pursue arts-based inquiry. To date those who do tend to have an arts background of some kind and feel comfortable in their particular medium. For example, John Borgerson, one of my former graduate students who currently teaches grade 3, has a background in music and painting. He uses "life notes" (Butler-Kisber & Borgerson, 1998) as a reflective journal. He sketches what he sees around him, augments this with poetry and words from songs of his own and others, dialogues with himself about this during his inquiry, and incorporates these life notes into visual renderings (drawings and collages) that augment his written text (Borgerson, 1998).

Donna Davis, a recent master's graduate with whom I worked, is employed as a graphic artist while she teaches collage and exhibits in this area. She first began using collage as a form of analytic memoing in her qualitative work (Davis & Butler-Kisber, 1999), and then studied the collage process by teaching and making collages with a small group of peers. She was able to show in her analysis and final product the potential for using collage as an alternative methodology for self-study (Davis, 2001).

To encourage those who have an interest in arts-based work but no background, we have set up collage and poetry workshops and brought in guests to classes to present collage, poetry, and other image-based work. What I believe has been most useful and realistic, however, is a move to incorporate an array of artful portrayals as analytic processes in an advanced course on qualitative work (Butler-Kisber et al., 2002). Students who come to this course already have a background in qualitative research and are frequently well into their thesis work. In addition to theoretical articles, we read concise and explicit examples of qualitative studies in a variety of venues, and then work in small groups in class on common field texts, and individually outside class on individual field texts to produce short analyses that are shared. The results have been rewarding to date. The students are exposed to many different artful ways of working with the same material without a commitment to any one way. Insights abound as they experiment with the different ways of analyzing their work and hear how others are doing the same thing. Some decide they will pursue an arts-based approach that will become the thesis; more frequently others decide to remain within more traditional boundaries and incorporate certain artful portrayals to communicate their method and product more vividly and authentically. None of us leaves the course without new understandings. And perhaps equally important, no one becomes seduced into using an arts-based approach just for the sake of it. When artful portrayals are included in public work, they are chosen to serve a particular communicative purpose.

In summary, using the notion of artful portrayals as a pedagogical approach in qualitative inquiry encourages experimentation with a wide range of possibilities and perspectives and produces interesting insights in the process. After all, anyone and everyone can be artful, that is, can move out of the boundaries of more typical ways of conducting qualitative work while attending to the qualities of arts-based work that Eisner and Barone have delineated and are noted above. 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. They can help push the boundaries of qualitative work, but need not become part of the final representational form.

Note
1. An earlier version of this process was presented at AERA in 1998.

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