

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

**0180**

**PANEL L7** | Denbigh 2

Chaired by Jennifer Leigh

Thu 12 Dec 2019

14:15 - 15:30

"Playing" with research

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**Research Domain:** Academic practice ,work, careers and cultures (AP)

**Abstract:** This panel will include Jennifer Leigh (University of Kent), Nicole Brown (UCL Institute of Education) and Kelly Pickard-Smith (University of Manchester) who have all purposefully used creative research methods such as film, Lego, arts-based, objects, identity boxes, embodied methods and stand-up.

We seem to like positioning ourselves at the 'bleeding edge' of research, pushing and transgressing boundaries. In this panel we want to address questions including:

- Just what is creative research?
- What makes it novel?
- Why is it so popular?
- What do you aim to achieve with the approach?

We think that HE research should not be constrained by disciplinary norms and conventions, but that we should be playful and experimental and learn from others in the arts, anthropology and across the academy.

We think that HE is ready to become more playful in its approaches. Do you want to join in and play with us?

**Paper:** Research comes in many forms: investigation, fact-finding, experimentation, analysis and work. There are many different ways to carry out research, or to use the dictionary definition, "to

systematically investigate and study materials in order to establish new facts and reach new conclusions". In HE, and more generally in Social Sciences, whilst qualitative methods are common, they often rely heavily on interviews and focus groups. Where such research purports to be 'creative' and 'cutting edge', it is actually not that revolutionary, in that it often uses creative methods tentatively hoping for fruitful outcomes and as a stimulus for interviews (see eg. Guell and Ogilvie, 2015; Nind and Vinha, 2016)

This panel will include Jennifer Leigh (University of Kent), Nicole Brown (UCL Institute of Education) and Kelly Pickard-Smith (University of Manchester) who all have purposefully used creative research methods such as film, Lego, arts-based, objects, identity boxes, embodied methods and stand-up. We seem to like positioning ourselves at the 'bleeding edge' of research, pushing and transgressing boundaries. In this panel we want to address questions including:

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The popularity of creative methods presentations at conferences implies that interest in this approach is growing. We think that if researchers adopt a more playful attitude to research and embrace less conventional, "messier" methods, then they could reap the benefits (Brown & Leigh, 2019).

What might this look like?

Jennifer held 'playdates' in studio spaces, with cushions, paper, pastels, graffiti pens and collage bits and used film to explore how academics experienced their work and understood their identity (Leigh, 2019a; 2019b).

Nicole asked trainee teachers to 'show and tell' by asking them to build models with Lego in order to respond to questions like "who are you as a teacher?" and "what does your learning journey look like?" (Brown and Collins, 2018; Brown and Leigh, 2019; Brown, 2018; Brown, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c)

Kelly uses 'playbuilding' which is a structured drama process to engage students in HE studying mathematical components, to reflect on their learning and play with those experiences as dramatic performance (Pickard-Smith, 2017). She also plays with performance as research dissemination,

developing a stand-up comedy routine as an alternative to the standard academic conference presentation (Pickard-Smith, 2015).

We realised that our participants found the process of representing their experiences through a drawing, and object or a model that they then reflected on and explained made them think more deeply and express themselves more honestly. Participants told us that they were able to make connections that they wouldn't have seen had they just been talking in an interview or telling us their stories. We saw that the light-hearted, playful work let them develop their thoughts as they went along, rather than feeling as though they had to give us an immediate, and perhaps more superficial answer as in a traditional interview.

However, even play is not all fun and games. Researchers who want to use this approach need to be aware of risks.

On one hand, we are introducing what are essentially primary school tasks and methods that have only ever been associated with the creative, performance-based disciplines within the soft sciences, such as drama and dance. This might be considered non-scientific, or odd. The risk of our research not being taken seriously increases with the pressures of REF, peer review processes for journal publications and the need to publish or perish. Anything unusual or out of the ordinary might be judged more harshly, or be less understood.

On the other hand, there is also risk for the participants. The fun, playful activities within non-judgemental environments make participants feel more open to share their experiences, feelings and emotions, which they might otherwise perhaps keep to themselves. This means that we can gather rich data, but researchers have to be able to contain what will very likely become an emotionally charged room, and to ensure that the participants do not make themselves unnecessarily vulnerable. Linked to this is the impact on the researchers who do this containing. In order to avoid issues of burnout, transference and the like, they need to make sure that they have support and a way to process what they hear and see.

Given these challenges, is it worth pursuing creative methods? Using more unconventional methods provides people with the means and tools to express what they might otherwise find difficult to share. The models, images, and words they do this with are often more emotionally charged, more haunting, than you might expect. Film and stand-up allow our audiences to connect emotionally with the material, and let it 'haunt' them (Wilson, 2018).

Even when our participants are academics, people who you might think of as privileged and eloquent,

they benefited from these playful modes of expression. In this sense creative approaches can be used to hear a wider range of voices, including those of the vulnerable and marginalised.

We think that HE research should not be constrained by disciplinary norms and conventions, but that we should be playful and experimental and learn from others in the arts, anthropology and across the academy.

When we talk about playful research, we don't just share what we have found out. We get people involved in play, and let them experience some of our work. We ask them to think about the importance of ethics, the boundaries of what makes research, and the implications, consequences and rewards of choosing to find things out through playful methods.

We have presented across the UK and internationally, exhibited in art galleries and shown films. We want to push the boundary of what HE research looks like. We showcased our approach at the NCRM Research Methods Festival to a standing room only audience keen to explore innovation.

We think HE is ready to become more playful. We will bring LEGO and arts-materials to instigate a discussion and exploration of these questions, and invite you to join us.

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