

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

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Novel methodological approaches: 'messy methods' in education research.

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

**Abstract:**

Cogenerative learning, whereby the co-researcher and co-participants collaborate to co-create knowledge and learning is an established methodological approach in qualitative research. My doctoral thesis explored the possibilities of employing novel and creative ways to undertake fieldwork, analysis, and interpretation of qualitative research. My principle aim was to collaboratively cogenerate data and thereby new knowledge, whilst simultaneously exploring and challenging the boundaries of collaborative, co-creative action research (Bradbury and Reason (2003). Utilising key theories including those of Mezirow (1978a, b), Transformative Learning, Mason (2014), communicative exchange, Ekman (2015), critical and compassionate interviewing, and Kara (2015), creative methods, allowed me to develop and propose in this paper a novel method of data collection, Critical Compassionate Communicative Exchanges. The 'messy' method (e.g., Mellor 2001) I employed involved the analysis and interpretations of the data in collaboration with one of my co-participants as co-researcher. Challenges, which were met, included ethical issues and power balance.

**Keywords:** Action Research; Research Methods; Challenging Methodology

**Paper:**

Undertaking doctoral research offers researchers opportunities to explore and challenge methodological approaches. Having previously adopted creative action methods in my own research (Bradbury and Reason 2003; Kara 2015) I built on these experiences and developed a 'messy method' (Mellor 2001) of data collection and analysis, incorporating conversational, critical, and compassionate communication (Mason 2014; Ekman 2015). I conceptualise and propose this technique as Critical, Compassionate Communicative Exchanges (CCCE) (Mayer 2020).

Mason (2014) describes [communicative exchanges](#) as being informal, focused on the interviewee and conversational as opposed to being interrogative. According to Mason (2014) communicative exchanges can be creative, urging researchers to think "beyond the dialogue" thereby generating rich, nuanced data allowing interpretive understandings. Mason (2014) proposes that conversational communicative exchanges, which whilst not described as participant-centred does incorporate humanist person-centred principles, places, in this instance, the co-participant actively, and purposefully at the centre of the exchange (Rogers et al. 2013). It is important to note that ethical

considerations were met by adopting Palaiologou's (2016) ethical praxis. Communicative exchanges generate rich data about the complexities and connections between experiences, importantly, facilitating ways to interpret how meaning is contextualised: this is closely aligned with the concept of 'mean-making' as proposed by Mezirow's (1978a, b) Transformative Learning theory (TL). As my research focused on the possibilities of transformative learning in neoliberal Post 92 Higher Education in England, Mason's (1996; 2014) theories offered rich exploration of the question.

Critical compassionate interviewing focuses on the lived experience of co-participants and the structures within which research is taking place. These, Ekman (2015, p.125) refers to as "micro level experiences and macro level structures". Of relevance to my research is Ekman's contention that data can be gained that is highly critical of an organisation, whilst "asking until it makes sense" (Ekman (2015, p.125) allows for uncritical exploration of issues in ways that generate understandings of the experiences of co-participants that may facilitate or hinder TL. Furthermore, I was able to gain understandings of my co-participant's mean-makings of negative and positive experiences, which facilitated the identification and resolution of ambiguities in interpretations of the data. Combining Mason (2014) and Ekman's (2015) data collection methods facilitated exploration of my research question more fully than any single or fixed position could. This approach also aligns with Abes (2009) claim that the incompleteness of theories can be met through working within the 'borderlands' of theories.

### **The Messy Method.**

The data collection took the form of reiterative and reciprocal CCCEs over a period of 6 weeks, in order to gain understandings of the lived experiences of my co-participants. I recorded the reflections and accounts of my co-participants' undergraduate experiences using an iPad app, this allowed me to email the exchanges directly to each co-participant for their review, as we had established when drawing up the data collection protocol. As agreed each exchange was reviewed, we returned to themes identified from previous communications, further exchanges were based on emerging themes or my critical reflections and those of the co-participants. Whilst the reiterative CCCEs were time-consuming and occasionally painstaking, combining Mason's (2014) communicative exchanges with Ekman's (2015) critical compassionate interviewing approach allowed me to gain rich and thick understandings and interpretations of my co-participant's student experiences (Holloway and Wheeler 2010).

### **Analysis, [interpretations, and understandings.](#)**

An important aspect of the overall research design included the triangulation of analysis between me and my co-participants and the interpretations, and understandings. During the thematic analysis stage (based on Braun and Clarke (2006)) one of the co-participants adopted the role of co-researcher offering multiple, layered, rich interpretations of the co-participant's narratives. This arose as it was important that I truthfully reflected the voices of my co-participants. During the fieldwork phase I asked the remaining co-participants for their agreement and consent to allow this adaptation to the data analysis process (Kaiser 2009). Analysing the data in this way provided valuable insights, which both challenged methodological approaches and confirmed and contrasted my own interpretations of the 'messy' data collection process and analysis, interpretations, and understandings of the data. It is important to note that where minor differences in our interpretations arose, my co-researcher and I adopted a reflexive stance in our mean-making.

Notwithstanding our agreed commitment to mutual recognition of each other's analysis, my co-researcher accepted that decision-making 'power' ultimately lay with me as the doctoral researcher (Kirby and Gibbs 2006).

The process was indeed 'messy'; however, I argue that my research co-participants and co-researcher and I have designed a replicable novel method whereby researchers can facilitate newly found ideas, thus allowing research practices to evolve (Clark et al. 2007; Cook 2009). And, as Blaxter et al. (2010) note, in any event, analysis is a messy business.

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