Going against the grain? Exploring EdD students' engagement with arts-based research

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Despite growing interest in the potential value of arts-based research (ABR) for educational inquiry (Siegesmund & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2018), limited consideration exists regarding its accessibility, and relevance, to practice-based professional doctorate in education (EdD) researchers. This is significant, given the potential for conflict between ABR's affordances for social impact (Dobson & Clark, 2024) and institutional regulations and structures which may restrict the creative potential of practice-based research (Vaughan, 2021). In response, this study explores the contexts, motivations and challenges surrounding a group of EdD students' experiences of engaging with ABR in their studies. Applying Glaveneau's (2013) 5A's model to position creativity as 'embedded in social relations', the study utilised narrative interviews and group action learning (Revans, 1982) to explore the methodological decision-making of 9 EdD students using ABR across 2 post-1992 universities in England. Its findings illustrate the complex entanglement between the related audiences, artifacts, actors, actions and affordances and the significance of enabling resistance to academic 'hierarchies of legitimacy' (Vaughan, 2021).

Full paper

Arts-based research (ABR) is understood as research which draws on arts informed practices as "methodological tools … during any or all phases of research" (Leavy, 2018). Despite growing interest in its potential value for educational inquiry (Siegesmund & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2018), limited consideration exists regarding its accessibility for, and relevance to, practice-based professional doctorate in education (EdD) researchers. This is significant, given that the associated institutional regulations and structures, which are typically designed for traditional models of PhD research, have previously been positioned as limiting the creative potential of practice-based research (Vaughan, 2021). Whilst emerging international evidence suggests that ABR may have enhanced potential for enabling social change and impact through EdD research (e.g. Kramer, 2022) - particularly given the EdD's inherent relational, reflexive and contextual nature, and broad and diverse audiences (Dobson & Clark, 2024)- this potential is premised on a model which carefully considers how design, practice and regulations support students' identity-development and agency (Savva and Nygaard, 2021). In the context of this consideration, this paper, which is informed by a project which sought to investigate the affordances of ABR for EdD research in the UK, considers the contexts and perspectives of a group of

EdD students who were engaging with aspects of ABR in their doctoral research. Its originality and significance here are premised on its role as a provocation in considering the tensions for academics and institutions in the production of, and resistance to, potentially unhelpful 'hierarchies of legitimacy' (Vaughan, 2021) in relation to methodology and 'outputs'.

Informed by learning arising from an initial scoping review and theoretical mapping of the ABR and the EdD (Dobson & Clark, 2024), the study investigated 9 EdD students' perceptions of the context, motivations and challenges associated with their decisions to adopt aspects of ABR within their research and workplace. Employing narrative interviews, followed by 6 group sessions based on an approach informed by action learning sets (Revans, 1982), the work, which took place across two post-1992 universities, sought to take a participatory and exploratory approaching to understanding the students' experiences and methodological decision making. This included attempts to embody many of the principles of ABR by supporting creative methods of inquiry and communication within the action learning sets themselves, for example in visually representing tensions and challenges.

In analysing the learning from the project, Glăveanu's 5A's theory of creativity (2013) was adopted as an underpinning theoretical framework. This theory draws attention to "the underlying structure of how creativity is operationalized" (Kaufman and Glăveanu, 2019, p.28) by taking an ecological approach where creativity is "embedded in the field of social relations specific for any community and society" (Glăveanu, 2013, p.72). The 5A's theory, therefore, involves: actors, who have "personal attributes in relation to a societal context"; actions, which are "coordinated psychological and behavioural manifestations"; artifacts, which are produced by the actors and which include the "cultural context of artifact production and evaluation"; and audiences and affordances, which are "the interdependence between creators and a social and material world" (Glăveanu, 2013, p.71) This theory enabled us to illuminate how students felt as actors engaging with ABR informed actions and artifacts in the context of an EdD.

 The findings of the study revealed that often the selection of ABR was informed by an entanglement between the students' identities as both professional and academic 'actors', with the taught phase of the EdD supporting their ability to express, and illustrate, a growing axiological and epistemological rationale for its relevance. This included many examples where ABR was positioned as an 'action' of resistance or activism in relation to perceived social injustices or pedagogical conflicts in their professional contexts – with its affordances including research giving 'voice' to underrepresented groups and/or communicating with a wider range of stakeholders. At the same time, for many of the students there was also a perceived challenge in the ways in which ABR was seen to be (de)valued and/or (mis)understood by the 'audiences' in both their academic and professional communities of practice. This included anxieties relating to expectations of the production of traditional research 'artifacts' which, in following the 'rules' of IMRaD (Introduction, Methodology, Results and Discussion) held the potential to prioritise academic conventions over maximising contributions to practice. In exploring understandings of students' rationale for, and experiences of, seeking to 'go against the grain', this paper has potential value for academic staff and leadership involved in doctoral research, both in supporting reflection on supervisory relationships and in relation to the enactment of institutional regulations and design of professional doctorates.

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