

Practicing Polyvocality: reflections on the ethical pragmatics of doing, writing and reporting collaborative research (0194)

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Outline

Title: Practicing Polyvocality: reflections on the ethical pragmatics of doing, writing and reporting collaborative research

This paper focuses a critical gaze on the research processes, practices and outcomes of a collaborative, participatory research project which used digital visual media and creative writing to explore student transitions to higher education and students' second year university experiences. The project design combined student voice and students-as-researchers dimensions within a six-stage research framework (Fielding, 2004; Taylor and Robinson, 2009). Participants included Education Studies undergraduate students, two members of lecturing staff and, in its later stages, a student researcher intern.

The origins of the paper lie in an excruciating moment during stage six of the project as unspoken disappointment filled the room when it became apparent that only one project participant, in addition to Carol, would be able to attend this conference. The proffering of 'acceptable' explanations (exigencies of budget, students' assignment deadlines) constituted this moment as emblematic of the instantiation of power relations, as an exclusionary academic practice, and as a challenge to the situational ethics (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) on which the project was founded. This tangible if momentary re-inscription of research as a micropolitical endeavour gave rise to subsequent reflections on the practices of the project and led to a series of broader theoretical considerations about the relations between ethics, power and authority in academic research, which provide a context for the paper.

Arising from these considerations, the paper experiments with putting polyvocality into practice in presenting and disseminating research findings. It explores innovative ways to reinstate the project's absent student participants as present collaborators in disseminating research which produced knowledge about their educational experience. It does so in three ways:

1. Through audio extracts which provide auditory access to students' creative writing accounts;
2. Through digital media extracts which provide viewing of visual accounts of students' transitions and learning journeys since then;
3. Through a joint vocal presentation in which Carol (as project lead) and Jenny (as student researcher intern) reflect on their implicated positionalities, power dynamics, and the politics of representation as they worked together on the project in its later stages.

In taking this approach, the paper contributes to developing a methodology of multisensory research practice which makes visible and, thereby, questions normative 'boundary-making and boundary keeping' (Hurdley, 2010) practices in qualitative research. This questioning is not driven by a naïve idea that audio and visual extracts count as 'raw data' which will disclose unmediated access to

participants' experiences. On the contrary, students' video and audio 'products' have already been constituted as narrative accounts through their participation in the project. Their accounts are re-tellings or practices of self-storying (Woodward, 2002). Indeed, the production of increasingly reflexive narratives was the explicit aim of stages two, five and six of the project (Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2008).

Experimenting with the consequences of practicing polyvocality has led us to author the above jointly and the following individually. Thus:

My (Carol's) concerns are, first, to draw attention to validity which, as Lather (2007, p128) rightly argues 'has always been the problem not the solution'. This is because validity is usually thought of as a 'validity of correspondence', in which the 'research' presented is presumed to be linked referentially to the presumed 'reality' of that which has 'been researched'. Instead, in 'practicing polyvocality' we consider how validity might be re-thought as a potentially transgressive research practice. Second, the paper works up Derrida's (1988) acknowledgement of the 'end of pure presence' into an instance of material practice in presenting research. We illustrate Derrida's (1988) point that the research text is not a 'presence' but a 'fabric of traces' (Ryle, 2003, p68); that it is produced and takes its place in relation to the marks and traces of other texts; and that it is these 'other texts', these absent voices, which guarantee the trace of presence in the current text (Derrida, 1990). Third, the politics of writing research is considered as an inevitably political activity, in which academic writing is posited as itself a mode of power, over and above other modes (e.g. 'creative' writing) and one which summons into being a particular writerly habitus and a specific relation with the institutional power of the academy (Schostak 2002; Dunne *et al.*, 2005). Thinking of writing as itself a method of inquiry, as a way of knowing, not simply a way of telling (Richardson, 2003) helps us navigate some of these tricky waters.

I (Jenny) will expand on Carol's third point, from my perspective as a 'student intern researcher'. Weeks after finishing my undergraduate degree I was back in the department and had to reposition myself quickly. On paper, my relationship to Carol had changed: whereas before she was my lecturer, now she was my colleague. Simultaneously, my new 'graduate' status and role of 'student researcher' marked me as 'different' from the second year students and, although I was the newest contributor to the project, they positioned me as 'expert'. It was not 'us' (students) and 'them' (lecturers) anymore; I was somewhere in the middle, wedged between the two. My job, to produce case studies of student transitions, gave me the power to represent the 'voices' of the students (Fielding, 2004). Used to the rigidity of undergraduate assignments, I fruitlessly probed Carol, but obtained little guidance. Not wanting herself positioned as lecturer, Carol's vagueness was a deliberate attempt to hand some power to me - there was no 'assignment criteria' anymore (Coghlan and Brannick, 2009). Or was there? Although unspoken, Carol and I both realised the importance of a 'quality' product. I was offered my role because it was assumed I could meet expected 'academic standards'. If unhappy with the result, Carol would (I guessed) have simply retracted my power, changed the case studies and reinstated a student/lecturer relationship. MacLure *et. al* (2010, p498) write of the significance of silence in qualitative enquiry, citing Visweswaran's take on silence as 'a form of agency that goes between "what goes without saying" and "what cannot be said"'. Our own silence seems pertinent to this: an unspoken and uncomfortable

recognition that Carol had ultimate authority to ensure outcomes met required academic standards. Airing our unspoken allegiance offers the chance to muse the question of what meaningful collaborative research within academia actually means.

In conclusion, we argue that practicing polyvocality helps us understand, practically and materially, that empirical research cannot provide unmediated access to truth, experience or being (Burman and MacLure, 2005); assists us in presenting research as a multi-centred complexity of perhaps incompatible parts; and helps us make visible the methodological frames which frame our seeing (Lather, 2007).

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