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An emotional, physical and humanistic response to performed data

Abstract:

How we reach, engage with, and inform/transform our research audience depends on the medium of communication we employ. This article demonstrates that theatrically performed narrative data can humanise an audience's engagement and response to research data and encourage personal change. In particular, it discusses how verbatim theatre was used to share the stories of women casual academics in Australia, and describes an emotional, fully embodied, and humanistic response from the audience. The reaction of the audience, a professional gathering of scholars (Denzin 2000), reveals that the dramatic re-presentation of narrative data can act as a voice for Others 'yet to be voiced' (Arnot and Reay 2007) and prompt reflection, and the possibility of personal change. Therefore, if the communication medium we employ is integral to the reach and impact of our research, it should be central to our research planning and practice and not consigned to a post-research dissemination phase.

Biographical note:

Dr Gail Crimmins is an Early Career Researcher at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia. Prior to moving to Australia, Gail was a UK-based actor, director and casting director and taught Drama at universities and conservatoires. Gail's research combines the arts with narrative inquiry in arts-informed research projects which explore the lived experiences of various groups of marginalised women, or women whose experience is yet to be voiced.

Keywords:

Creative Writing – Writing research – Verbatim drama – Narrative research – Personcentred research – Casual academics

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Introduction

How we reach, engage with, and inform/transform our research audience can depend on the medium of communication we employ. This may sound axiomatic to a writer, or a scholar of writing. Yet, for most academic researchers, steeped in the tradition of discipline specific academic communication, little consideration is given to the form of research communication employed. Tradition and ritual has determined that academic research communication is, if considered at all, decided upon within a post-research phase of 'dissemination activity' (McNiff 2013). Conversely, as writers and/or writing teachers we understand that form ought to be congruent with content; and more so, that it shapes a reader's engagement and response to the content of a work. Furthermore, the ideological framework adopted by a researcher determines the relationship the researcher wishes to have with her/his research audience. That is, the form of our work should be shaped by its content, the relationship we would like to have with our audience, and how we would like our audience to engage with the work. Applied to academic research this means that the reason/s and processes with which we engage and the findings we elicit, should inform how we communicate our research process and outcomes.

Correspondingly, the communication of humanistic, person-centred scholarship ought to be designed to affirm the humanity of both research participants and research audiences. Yet Hughes, Bullock and Coplan (2013) identify that there is currently little scholarship that considers humanistic, person-centred research communication. In addition, there is a paucity of research that evaluates how an academic audience engage with non-traditional forms of research communication. To address these gaps in our knowledge, I discuss a person-centred, humanist approach to eliciting and re-presenting the narratives of lived experience and detail an audience's response to a theatrical form of a narrative re-presentation. In particular, I report on the audience's emotional and physical response to a verbatim theatre performance that re-presented the personal stories of women causal academics. In doing so, I reveal that the dramatic re-presentation of narrative data can have a humanising effect and promote personal reflection and change. I finally suggest that the form of research communication is central to research planning and practice and should not, therefore, only be considered within the post-research phase of research dissemination.

Background and context

Casual academics who are employed on short-term, usually semester-based employment contracts, are often known as sessional staff, adjuncts, contingent staff or non-tenured academics. There is an increasing reliance on casual staff to teach undergraduate students both in Australia and in most developed countries (May Strachan, Broadbent and Peetz 2011). Indeed, May et al. (2011) identify that 61 percent of academics in Australia are employed on casual contracts, the majority of whom are women (May et al. 2011). Even so, very little is known about the lived experience of casual academics (Coates et al. 2009). Brown, Goodman and Yasukawa suggest that this is because the scant information that informs the discourses around casualization of academia is gathered through the use of large-scale surveys (2010); a form of data

gathering that has been criticised for homogenising and universalising respondents by ignoring the uniqueness of experience and the importance of situational context (Mills 2000). Thus, current academic discourses on the casualization of academia fail to focus on, or embrace, the unique person-hoods, including the sex, of casual academic staff.

Conversely, Schmid promotes the use of person-centred research which takes into account that 'persons exist as women and men, not as neutrals', and conceives persons contributing to research outcomes not as subjects or objects but as equal partners in research. Dewing likewise advocates a person-centred approach to research wherein 'attention is given to the subjective and experiential realities of persons beings' (2002: 5). Person-centred research is also essentially 'participatory' as all research decisions are negotiated between researcher/s and research participants and is based on contextually situated relationships (Dewing 2002). Finally, Post identifies that person-centred research resists the strong tendencies in quantitative research to exclude the emotional, relational, aesthetic and spiritual aspects of research participants (1995). Person-centred approaches to research therefore differ from the traditional and hierarchical research relationships and processes adopted within the quantitative research that has been used to inform current scholarship on the casualization of academia.

Research approach

In order to address the lack of understanding relating to the lived experience of casual academics, I undertook a person-centred narrative inquiry designed to elicit the individual stories and perspectives of six women casual academics from across three Australian universities. I employed narrative inquiry in order to unearth and re-present the stories people construct to understand and communicate their lived experience (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Narrative inquiry also provides an opportunity for participants to articulate their emotional, relational, aesthetic and spiritual experience – a process which aligns with the tenets of person-centred research (Post 1995: 35). In addition, person-centred narrative inquiry acknowledges and validates the sex and gender of participants. Moreover, it provides an opportunity those "at the bottom" to speak alongside their more recognized, and published, colleagues' (Davis and Skilton-Sylvester 2004: 389). Duff and Bell concur that narrative inquiry functions democratically by offering 'opportunity for marginalized groups to participate in knowledge construction in the academy' (2002: 209). In addition to the democratising exposure of knowledge and voice by marginalised peoples, narrative inquiry is also congruent with a person centred approach to research as it employs collaborative research relationships that can be reciprocally educative and emancipatory (Connelly and Clandinin 1990).

In November 2013, I invited six women casual academics from across three universities in Australia to share their lived experience of academia through whichever media or medium they chose. This invitation was in line with a person-centred approach to research which is based on an ethic of negotiation (Dewing 2002). The women chose to engage in interviews and email and phone conversations that extended over a twelvemonth period. I initially engaged with each of the women participants through a

narrative interview in order to resist the restrictions and inherent bias of structured and formal interviews; to support what Fontana and Frey described as the development of 'negotiated texts' (2005); and to allow attention to be given to the 'subjective and experiential realities of persons' beings' (Dewing 2002: 5).

Once the women's stories were collected, I undertook a process of narrative interpretation or narrative re-storying. I selected this process because, as Gould (1996) and Etherington (2004) identify, human life and agency cannot be 'explained' through traditional data analysis, and because human experience and narrative require 'interpretation' not explanation (Hendry 2010). Re-storying narrative data also afforded me the opportunity to capture, in content and in form, the experiences and communications of women casual academics. I specifically re-storied the women's interview, phone and email transcripts into a verbatim drama, a form of theatre which privileges participant action, emotion and insight and allows significant amounts of the actual communications – verbatim – to be re-presented within a public performance of the research.

Verbatim drama is a form of documentary theatre that privileges the words and experiences of the participants, without classification, judgment or political intent. Indeed, it is generally defined as a form of drama whose texts develop from narratives unearthed by a researcher/dramatist. This process contrasts with the traditional practice of constructing drama texts out of the pre-existing ideas, perspectives or theories of the playwright. The term 'verbatim drama' was first employed by Derek Paget in 1987 in a paper for New Theatre Quarterly in which he attempted to identify methodologies in documentary theatre, and more specifically categorise the scripting of text from everyday people's conversation and perspective. Moreover, the term 'verbatim' is used to describe a genre of drama that aims to give a public voice to individuals and communities (Andersen and Wilkinson 2007). Another feature of verbatim drama is that it provides a platform for silent or marginalised people within communities and seeks to authentically capture and feedback the life stories and oral history of a local community (Paget 1987). Verbatim drama also supports collaboration between researcher/s and participants who negotiate the constituent elements of the final narrative that is publicly communicated (Brown and Wake 2010). Thus, verbatim theatre is created collaboratively and combines documentary narrative with community identity, self-esteem, self-expression and empowerment (Gibson 2011). In this case, verbatim theatre was also used to re-present the women's stories as a dramatic performance as the inherent narrativity of experience and aesthetic quality of stories are congruent with artistic representation. Indeed, Bruner (1990) and Barone and Eisner (1997) argue that narratives possess aesthetic and evocative qualities that can be used towards reaching audiences, emotionally and cognitively, within and beyond the academy (Sikes and Gale 2006: ch.2).

The main preoccupations within the participants' stories that were collated and merged into short verbatim drama were the academics' love of teaching, lack of financial security, precarious collegial relationships, a lack of voice within academia, and hopes for ongoing academic work opportunities. The drama was then performed in front of 150 academics within a university research conference; an audience Denzin describes as a 'professional gathering of scholars' (2000). The audience was invited to complete

a short survey, with a few closed questions designed to gather brief information on their demographics, and open questions designed to capture how they experienced the verbatim drama as a research text. The responses to these questions were then thematically organised, described in detail and interpreted (Braun and Clark 2006). The thematic analysis provided an understanding of how audience members' engaged with the content and form of the research communication and this paper specifically discusses the audience's emotional and physical engagement with the performed data. Congruent with the person-centred approach to the research project, I present large sections of the survey respondent's communication below. Finally, even fuller excerpts from the women participants' stories can be viewed in the filmed dramatization of the verbatim performance.¹

Research findings

The survey, designed to evaluate how an audience of scholars (Denzin 2000) reported their engagement with the content and form of an arts-informed narrative inquiry into the lived experience of women casual academics, resulted in 27 responses by 22 women and five male participants. All but two respondents were employed by one regional university in Australia. Even so, the employment status of respondents was somewhat diverse: there were tenured and casual academics including those employed on ongoing academic contracts and others on fixed term academic contracts. Others were employed in a professional/administrative capacity within the same university, one respondent was retired, and one a full time postgraduate student.

The central themes to emerge from the thematic analysis were the audience's emotional engagement, their physical engagement, and descriptions of the humanising impact of the drama.

Emotional engagement with the drama

When asked how they engaged with the performed data the overwhelming majority of survey respondents, 22 out of 27, described how the performance impacted them emotionally, using words such as 'feeling' 'moved' and 'excited' to describe their response to the drama. 'Emotion was the key, as some elements stuck without opportunity for release', is how one respondent discussed the impact of the performed data. A second respondent reflected, 'I felt moved by the stories and surprised by the depth of their pain', whilst a third agreed, 'I think the form of the presentation provided a space to explore the emotive aspects and to humanise the stories'. Yet, it appears that the emotional engagement of the audience did not necessarily undermine a cognitive or rational engagement with the stories: 'It was emotive and intellectual', identified one respondent, while a second participant reflected, 'I think the drama was a powerful force that forced us to engage our hearts and minds and drew out a humane response'. This response was echoed by many others who claimed to have engaged with the drama both emotionally and rationally. The main findings of the type of audience engagement were summed up by one audience member who suggested that the verbatim drama was

'compellingly emotive and intellectual, my engagement was full and my empathy elevated'.

Several survey participants reported to have experienced specific emotions in response to the performance. For instance, one participant claimed: 'My emotion was mainly admiration although I did feel angry to the persons undermining the casual teachers'. Other emotional responses identified by the audience suggested that the audience shared the women casual academics' emotions expressed in the drama. They identified sharing the women's insecurity, worry, fear, anxiety, frustration, lack of worth, lack of confidence, hurt, hopelessness and exhaustion. Notably, positive feelings expressed by the audience were in a minority and included: feeling a sense of pride, privilege and happiness when teaching. In addition, one respondent identified experiencing a wide range of emotions:

Hearing the women express the love they have for teaching articulated my own feelings from the outset, but I also felt a full range of emotions throughout the drama: fear, frustration, indignation, exhaustion and disappointment. I felt very proud too, because I know the people I work with are motivated to make a positive difference in the world.

This was supported by a participant who said: 'The verbatim drama presentation was an all-encompassing emotional experience – one that I could fully relate to'.

Physical engagement with the drama

Over half the respondents identified corporeal reactions to the narrative re-presentation. Indeed, 15 participants described their emotional engagement with the verbatim drama in physical terms. In particular, almost a third of respondents (8) advised that they had cried or been close to tears during the performance. One respondent concurred that she/he was so engulfed in the authenticity of the drama that it caused her/him to cry: 'There was a clarity and authenticity which resonated deeply. I was totally absorbed – at one point I cried'. Several respondents identified that it was the recognisability of the women's situation that provoked a physically emotional response: 'Some sections were so close to home that it brought me to tears'. Another respondent concurred: 'I related completely with the women in the drama. I actually cried a few times. It was very raw and emotive' Another specified: 'I had to fight back tears as I heard one after the other of my fears and frustrations voiced'.

Other audience members were physically moved by the drama for different reasons: 'It made me cry to think we treat these intelligent strong women as if they are almost worthless' stated one respondent, while another elaborated:

I was in tears at points in the presentation; it was difficult to see these women's personal experiences exposed, but affirming, too, because they were familiar. I think the emotions raised were fear and anger: I shared the women's fear of speaking up and, and anger at the injustice of this.

Other corporeal reactions include: 'It made me cry and laugh and actually gave me goose bumps', 'I felt it in my gut', while a third participant: 'I don't think I moved for the whole show and the drama has stayed with me since'.

Impact of the re-presentation of stories of lived experience on the audience

Fifteen respondents described the impact of the drama re-presentation on them and/or other members of the audience. Within this number, eight identified that the play had a lasting effect. One respondent claimed that 'It triggered lots of inner emotions which left me thinking about the drama for days afterwards – replaying aspects in my head'. Another stated that the performed data caused her to reflect on her own experience and prompted discussion and debate amongst colleagues:'I thought about the drama a lot and it sparked debate and discussion for days'. A third audience member stated that the performed data 'was compelling to watch and engaged all my senses and has stayed with me since'.

Similarly, the respondents advised that re-presentation spurred permanent academics within the audience to reflect on their behaviour towards casual staff within their institution. One permanent academic stated: 'I am pondering how I can engage with sessional staff more humanely – with more kindness and humanity. The performance had a profound impact on me', whilst another stated: 'I never before considered how my sessionals felt about their work ... I'll certainly take how they feel into account in all my encounters with them from now on'. These comments highlighted that the impact on individual audience members is likely to lead to some personal change. Correspondingly, one participant advised: 'The only way to improve conditions for sessional academics is to find ways to increase understanding and empathy: not meaning to draw crude analogies but this is similar to the way documentaries can save whales; film and drama can plant a seed for social change'.

Similarly, seven audience members who completed the survey identified a humanising impact of the dramatic re-presentation of stories of lived experience. For instance, one commented that 'the lived experiences came to life because the actors made them 'real'. Research data in written form would not have generated empathy to this extent', and a second stated that the drama seemed to 'to engage our hearts and minds and draw out a humane response'. Moreover, one respondent claimed: 'I am pondering how I can engage with sessional staff more humanely – with more kindness and humanity'.

The function of stories and storytelling, more generally, were identified as stimulating and enhancing the audience members' engagement, empathy and humanity. One audience member commented that: 'Stories need to be told and I believe oral tradition is at the heart of how human beings understand themselves, other people and the wider community and world in which we live'. A second commented that, 'seeing a face and hearing a voice helps the stories to become more identifiable and the emotional element of that connects you to the stories and connects you to the people in the stories'. Finally, a third respondent claimed: 'I think the form of the presentation provided a space to explore the emotive aspects and to humanise the stories'.

Finally, four respondents claimed that performed drama provided a 'voice' for the research participants and challenged existing power relations within academia. In particular, one respondent observed that the dramatic representation 'made the stories more poignant, and the use of humour in parts made it permissible to challenge perceived authority'; whilst a second observed: 'It was a very useful way to present the

research – to provide voice of a large group that are muted'. In addition to the survey respondents' views, one of the women casual academics who shared her story of lived experience but did not complete a survey, emailed to me her thoughts on the impact of the performance:

It was simply amazing. Hearing my story – and the story of thousands of other sessionals ... made me think of how court jesters and political cartoons have been used in the past to deliver difficult messages. Presenting what we have always been far too frightened to express ourselves.

Discussion

Only 18 per cent of audience members completed a survey to identify how they engaged with the re-presentation of the lived experience of casual academics. It is possible that because the verbatim drama lasted for the full 50 minutes allocated to the research presentation, and I was unable to introduce the survey or request participation, relatively few audience members were aware of the of the research survey. It is also possible that the some of the audience did not find time to complete the survey as the research conference had presentations scheduled all day, without scheduled time for survey completion. As a result of the relatively low percentage of survey completion, the findings cannot be considered reflective of an entire audience population. Yet, notwithstanding the low response rate, the elicitation of audience response or feedback more generally creates a unique opportunity for peer review and data collection. Audience feedback can be used to validate, critique or even trouble the research findings presented through non-traditional forms. It can also be used to inform further research projects or trajectories and, if gathered and analysed by the researcher audience feedback can act as a second stage of research findings. Thus, outside of the main focus of this research project and discussion, audiences' response to research informed theatre is a valuable and as yet relatively untapped process of peer review and potential research data.

In particular reference to this project, the overwhelming majority of audience members who completed the survey described their engagement as emotional and empathetic. This finding reinforced the person-centred conceptualisation on which this research project was founded, that people engage with the world emotionally and relationally (Post 1995). It is also likely that the familiar context of the re-presentation of an academic setting enhanced the respondents' sense of emotional connection with the stories re-presented, as recognisability and identification are central pre-cursers to the development of empathy and emotional contagion (Asada 2014).

Furthermore, it is probable that the narrative form of the communication encouraged the respondents' empathy because as Bruner (1990) recognised, narratives encompass rich descriptions of character, emotion, context and action which help to stimulate a sense of inter-relationality and empathy. Audience emotion was possibly elicited also through the use of a dramatized re-presentation as drama is designed to both reflect and enhance the emotional connection of humans, to 'open our senses' to others (Sikes and Gale 2006: ch.2). Finally, stories of lived experience that are re-presented within artistic forms can evoke a fully embodied, emotional experience. Therefore, it appears that the

employment of a verbatim drama based on the rich and individualised narratives of casual academics both reflected and enhanced survey respondents' emotional and empathetic being.

A second feature of the respondents' engagement with the dramatic re-presentation of the lived experience of women casual academics was a physical response. The respondents' identification of a physical reaction, in conjunction with the previously discussed emotional response, corroborate with Merleau-Ponty's (1962) claim that physicality and emotionality inter-penetrate and co-exist to create a 'fully embodied' person-hood. Over half of the respondents identified a specific corporeal reaction to the drama, the majority of whom identified that they cried or came close to crying whilst engaging with the drama. Such a strong response reflected the compassion of the respondents and their ability to engage physically and emotionally with the women and the stories presented. It also served to legitimise dramatized narratives as a form of humanistic, person-centred research communication wherein 'attention is given to the subjective and experiential realities of persons' beings' (Dewing 2002: 5).

Furthermore, the identified tendency to physically respond to a performed drama reinforces the theory of embodied simulation – the notion that human beings primarily connect with others through a feeling of body (Wojciehowski and Gallese 2011). According to Gallese (2007), inter-subjectivity is first and foremost created through 'embodied cognition' and that embodied simulation, where we internally simulate the physicality of others, is a mandatory, pre-rational, non-introspective process. Wojciehowski and Gallese (2011) also suggest that our capacity to engage humanely and empathise with others is stimulated by embodied simulation. They specifically suggest that, empathy is the outcome of 'our natural tendency to experience interpersonal relations first and foremost at the implicit level of intercorporeity' (Wojciehowski and Gallese 2011: 17).

Several of the audience members who completed the survey also reported that the performance 'gave voice' to other casual academics, stimulated their humanity, and prompted personal reflection and change. Indeed, the terms humanity, humane and humanism were identified nine times in survey responses. Yet none of the respondents explicitly stated what they understood the terms 'humanity' or 'a humane response' to mean. It is probable that they used the term in line with the popular notion that a humane response is one of compassion and care. However, given that respondents discussed how the verbatim drama gave voice to 'a large group that are muted', reflected on how their personal behaviour would change as a result of engaging with the lived experience of women casual academics, and identified that the form of presentation 'made it permissible to challenge perceived authority', the respondents also seemed to recognise that the re-presentation had provoked a desire to create personal and potential organisational change. It is also likely, then, that their humane response to the representations of women casual academics was also related to humanism's concern with meeting human needs and answering human problems – for both the individual and society (Rogers, Lyon and Tausch 2013). In other words, it is possible that some members of the audience identified that the humanising effect of the research communication was the mobilisation of personal and/or organisational change. As Edwords claims, 'Humanists are committed to civil liberties, human rights ... [and] the extension of participatory democracy not only in government but in the workplace and education' (1998, 2008).

Thus, although they did not state what specific aspect of humanism the re-presentation evoked in them, the respondents did identify that they engaged with the re-presentation with compassion, care, empathy and the recognition that a verbatim drama based on the lived experience can provoke personal reflection, personal change and thus organisational transformation. Therefore, the respondents seem to support Alexander's (2005) claim that the power and potential of performance resides in its potential to incite an empathic and embodied engagement which heightens the possibility of acting upon the humanistic impulse to transform the world.

Conclusion

In order to elicit and make known the personal and contextualised experience of women casual academics in Australia, and to address the paucity of scholarship around the actualisation of humanistic principles within and through research communication, I represented the stories of women casual academics in a verbatim drama and invited an audience to explain how they engaged with the performed data. The three main preoccupations that were identified, through a data analysis of 27 completed surveys, were: the emotional response to the re-presentation of women casual academics' lived experience; a physical engagement with the re-presentation; and, the impact of the representation on the respondents.

The overwhelming majority of respondents communicated an emotional engagement with the theatre re-presentation and stated that they felt empathy with the women and their stories. This illuminated a person-centeredness and emotional connectivity of the survey respondents which demonstrated that performed data is a congruent form of person-centred research which can both present and evoke an emotional experience. Most respondents also identified a physical connection or engagement with the representation. Many of them cried, or came close to it, whilst some were rendered motionless, had goose-bumps or experienced the drama in their gut. This finding corroborates Merleau-Ponty's (1962) claim that humans are 'fully embodied' who experience the world physically, emotionally and spiritually and aligns to Gallese's (2007) theory of 'embodied cognition', whereby we connect with others through a 'feeling of body'. The final theme to emerge from the survey responses was that the representation had a humanising effect on them. Although the respondents did not identify what they understood this to mean, some claimed that the drama caused them to reflect on their actions and attitudes, others suggested that it gave voice to the 'yet to be voiced' (Arnot and Reay 2007), for some it prompted a planned change to future behaviour, and for a few respondents the humanising effect may, and could, be used to support future organisational change. It appears, then, that the affordance of intersubjectively that drama offers, supported respondents' compassion and care. Their responses also reflect the power and potential of performed data to stimulate an empathic and embodied engagement with others which heightens the possibility of acting upon the humanistic impulse to transform the world (Alexander 2005).

More specifically, a verbatim drama based on the lived experience of women casual academics evoked an emotional, physical and humanistic response in audience members. This finding reflects the fully embodied intersubjective nature of research audiences and identifies performed data as a congruent form for person-centred research which conceptualises a research audience as 'emotional, relational, aesthetic and spiritual' beings (Post 1995: 35), not merely recipients of a research text. Finally, the outcomes from the small scale research suggest that how we reach, engage with, and inform/transform our research audience is impacted by the medium of communication we employ.

Therefore, the medium of communication we employ as researchers, and indeed as writers more generally, should reflect our philosophical/ideological stance, the content of our work, and the relationship we would wish our readers to have with the work. As these constituent elements will be unique to us and the particular project/s with which we engage, each communication should have its own shape. As an ex-teacher of mine, Professor Chris McCulloch, explained, we need to create 'new bottles for new wine'. When we have something new to present, and every piece of research should contribute new knowledge, we need to create a congruent and new form with which to embody and communicate it. Consequently, I contend that academic communication should be central to both research planning and practice, and not merely a post-research afterthought.

Endnote

1. These can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHit41xcFRE;

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46UySViATSg;

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIIwif-cNsI;

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBrIndD4Uus;

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNWzLxGZrGE; and,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxO0PRz8cOI.

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