

Torn Between Expectations and Imagination: Alternative Forms of Communicating Educational Research

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Abstract

This paper is based on a workshop delivered at the 2015 Annual Kaleidoscope Conference, Cambridge, with an aim to introduce as well as inspire ways of communicating educational research in creative ways. We start with an overview of the theoretical frameworks and our rationale. We then discuss alternative approaches to communicating educational research and how these are informed by arts-based methodologies and practitioner research. After a short description of the workshop (how it was structured and run and its outcomes), we proceed to present our reflections, and suggest possible directions for future research concerning the imperative of communicating academic research to a wider audience. The workshop was successful in terms of stimulating participants to think about the challenges of presenting research to different audiences as well as enabling them to explore and reflect upon possible approaches. Nonetheless, we believe that further research is needed to examine and address the tension between forms of reporting and presenting research that are generally accepted and celebrated in academia and the need to present research to different audiences using different styles. We argue that researchers can be more proactive in affirming the value of alternative forms of presenting research and seeking support from both within and outside their institutions. We also foresee the prospect of more collaborative and participatory models of presenting research, along with further reflexive critique of the established framework of reporting and communicating academic research.

Keywords: communicating educational research; alternative ways, arts-based research, practitioner based research

Introduction

This paper is based on a workshop that we delivered on May 28, 2015, at the annual Kaleidoscope Conference at the University of Cambridge, titled “Many Paths, Same Goal: Multimodality in Educational Research”. The main aim of the workshop was to explore alternative methods of presenting academic research through discussion and group work. The workshop originated from our common interest in communicating research in creative and effective ways. With the goal of delivering an exploratory, experimental, collaborative and participatory workshop, we structured it in such a way as to leave time and space for all participants to try out ideas in groups.

We facilitated and observed the teamwork that took place. Given the time limit, only a few participants had the chance to express immediate reaction, during the discussion section at the end of the workshop. Based on our desire to write a first iteration based on fresh memories, we published a short reflective paper online¹ five days after the workshop. By doing so, we were able to retain our immediate thoughts whilst we hoped that our ideas could possibly generate further discussion. This article is based on our original reflective paper, but in addition the four-month gap has allowed us to add another layer of reflection and further contemplate on the implications of the workshop.

1. Perspectives from Arts-Based Methodology and Practitioner Research

As a novice researcher, Yanyue’s doctoral research explores visitors’ imaginative responses towards cultural objects in museums. To tap into the subjective, fleeting and ineffable nature of imagination, Yanyue integrated poetic writing into her research, inspired by arts-based methodology. James has had rich teaching experience in schools and his research has been largely influenced by his teaching background. He has worked extensively with teacher researchers and also with practitioner researchers in other professions. James is interested in the potential that reflective and arts-based methodologies have for bridging the gap between academic research and practice.

1.1 Arts-Based Methodology

Arts-based methodologies only began to emerge in the field of education in the 1980s. The term “Arts-Based Educational Research” (ABER) was officially used in 1993 when

¹ We both have our profile pages on researchgate.net and academia.edu. The two sites offer researchers across the world a platform to upload papers, and network with other researchers.

Elliot Eisner, together with his graduate students, proposed the idea to members of the American Educational Research Association at the Arts-Based Research Institute, Stanford University (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008; Eisner, 2006). The fundamental belief of ABER is that “the arts have the ability to contribute particular insights into, and enhance understandings of phenomena that are of interest to educational researchers” (Donoghue, 2009, p. 352). Within the last two decades, many experimental and exploratory efforts have been made to integrate features of arts-based methodologies in educational research, especially in the stage of communicating research.

A wide range of art forms have been employed in research, including poetry, fiction, music, visual arts, exhibition, drama and other types of performances. For example, during a session at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in 1997 a group of researchers *performed* their ethnographic data, which culminated in a collection entitled “dancing the data”. Their work was published in a book accompanied by a CD-ROM that documented the performative presentations. The book exemplifies how stories collected in educational research can be transformed into music, drama, poetry, dance and other artistic performances. More recently, Leavy (2013) makes a case for fiction as research practice and maps out various ways of creating fiction to synthesise and present research data. Doctoral students have also been actively trying out new methods and experimenting with new ways to present their work. One example is Loi’s multimedia PhD thesis (2005) displayed in suitcases (containing her abstract, papers, CDs, artworks, objects, etc.). Corresponding to her thesis topic of collaborative design tools and methods, the suitcases were made to encourage participants to join the participatory design activities.

1.2 Practitioner Research

Practitioner research is a type of research that is deeply grounded in the practicalities of the workplace. The simplest definition of practitioner research is that it is research conducted by people who also work within the profession and context that they are researching (Taber, 2013). This may be teachers conducting research into their own teaching or that of their colleagues although it could refer to any professional conducting research into their own context. Practitioner research has an established history, yet still to some extent sits outside the conventional academic discourse. This history includes the dominance of an action research paradigm in the 1980s (McNiff, 2013) and the development of this further into nuanced but related forms, such as research conducted within the framework of non-positional teacher leadership (Frost, 2008). However, there is also research conducted by

practitioners which is positioned as ethnography, case study or auto-ethnography. Therefore, practitioner research is a term which spans across a range of methodological positions (Taber, 2013).

The term practitioner research is useful though, as almost all practitioner research tends to have significant commonalities, which include an acknowledged subjectivity on behalf of the researcher and a goal of achieving a concrete change in classroom or workplace strategy for oneself and for one's colleagues (Frost, 2015). Methods of dissemination are also distinct and sit outside usual academic conventions. These modes of dissemination may be via forms of workplace communication: training days, internal or semi-formal publications or forms of peer support and mentoring. Non-conventional forms of dissemination may therefore help to break down the barriers between practitioner research and the conversations that take place in the university-based academic world.

2. A Brief Overview of the Workshop

The workshop was divided into three parts, which can be briefly termed as: orientation, group work, and reflection.

The focus of the workshop lay in the interactive group work. Participants were asked to produce a group presentation and were given 20-minutes of preparation time to do so, based on the following rules:

- The project must incorporate (at least one element of) each group member's research (suggestions included: research topic, methodology, theoretical framework, range of participants);
- It must involve the object that the group were given (by any creative means that the group decided on);
- Presentation must be within two minutes;
- It needed to be in the form of a *play* or *poem* or *picture*.

Yanyue brought a bag of random objects to the workshop (including a number of everyday and curious objects, e.g., beach shell, necklace, bookmark, key ring). We hoped that the objects could serve as a creative stimulus to inspire free association and creative approaches. A representative from each group was invited to draw an item out of the bag of objects. Before the group work began, we stressed the importance of bearing in mind our audience when we communicate our research. We thus encouraged the participants to describe their intended audience when presenting their project.

The 15 participants were mainly attendees of the conference (along with a few research staff at the faculty), most of whom were postgraduate research students in the UK. The participants were split into three groups of five, with each group sitting around the same table. Each group had a few materials to assist their preparation and presentation, including: coloured poster paper, colouring pens, scissors, and glues. As workshop facilitators, we observed how things went on and approached each group to make sure that they understood the task (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Participants begin to work as a group

The atmosphere was positive, but during the first few minutes a number of participants told us they found it challenging to identify a particular way of including everybody's research and deciding on the exact form of presentation. Once this had been resolved, all groups delved into heated discussions in order to prepare for the presentation of a presentable piece.



Figure 2. Groups delved into brainstorming

2.1 Description of Three Group Presentations

As it is difficult to re-enact the presentations in textual form given their performative nature, we have illustrated each group's presentation through photos. The following summary is a descriptive account illustrated by seven photos. In this section we have kept our comments and interpretation to a minimum, as this gives the reader a better idea of what came out of the workshop.

2.1.1 Group One: A Research Proposal around a Five-Pointed Star



Figure 3. Group One's poster

Group One demonstrated their object: a brown bookmark illustrated with a white five-pointed star. Their intended audience was colleagues within the academic community.

Inspired by the five-pointed star on the bookmark, Group One designed a collaborative research project into a comparative study of young people's reading experiences of Japanese manga in China and the UK. Together, they drew a poster with a big five-pointed star in the middle, with five elements at each corner.



Figure 4. Group One demonstrating their poster

2.1.2 Group Two: A Song for Children

The object that Group Two obtained was a key ring, featuring a small pair of ceramic shoes. They prepared a poetic song, with the phrase “Carry them with you, step into their shoes” as the chorus. They explained that since most of them were working with children in their research, they hoped to bring the children’s perspective into their presentation. The presentation itself was dedicated to children who were their imaginative audience.



Figure 5. Group Two's object and their notes

Each group member started with the chorus “Carry them with you step into their shoes”, followed by their answers to one of the following questions that the rest of the group members posed:

- What can you see?
- What can you hear?
- What can you play?
- What can you touch?

- What can you say?



Figure 6. Group Two presenting their song

2.1.3 Group Three: A Gift to My Teacher

Group Three presented a short play, and used their object - a red necklace - as the key prop. Their intended audience was students and teachers. The main plot of their play went as follows:

The protagonist, a young female student, had just received a birthday gift from her mum: a necklace that her mum bought during a trip. She expressed the idea of giving the gift to her teacher, to whom she was truly grateful. Her mum agreed and thought it was a good idea. She then met her classmates on her way to school and they all sent her birthday wishes and encouraged her to do so. After the class, she gave the gift to her teacher and expressed her gratitude by giving her a hug.

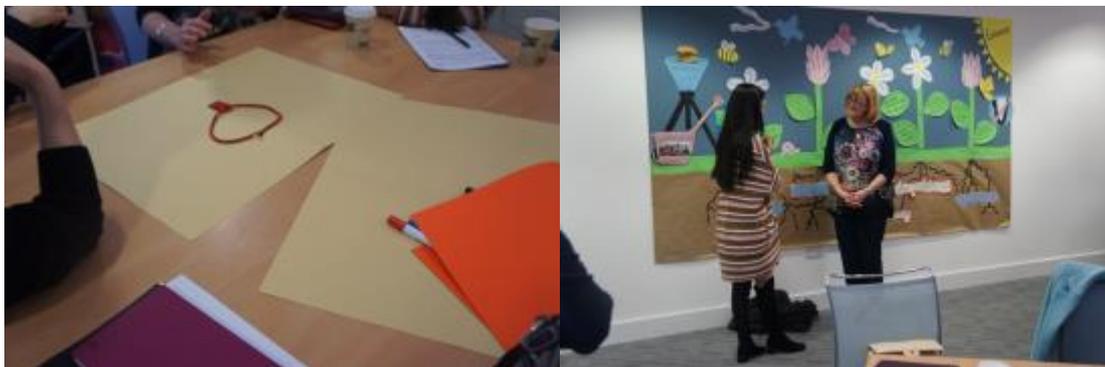


Figure 7. Group Three's object and a scene from their short play

2.2 Concluding Reflections

We reserved ten minutes towards the end of the one-hour workshop for discussion. We invited all participants to talk about the challenges of this group work and what they enjoyed

most. Given the time limit, not all participants had the chance to speak about their experience. Most of the participants who did speak, however, considered the collaborative element to have been the biggest challenge. They mentioned the difficulty of working out a group presentation within twenty minutes. On the other hand, they were surprised by their productivity. Some participants mentioned how they were inspired by what they had experienced during the workshop and would consider alternative forms of presenting and communicating their own research in the future.

3. Reflective Remarks

As we mentioned, we wrote an informal reflective paper shortly after the workshop. Workshops are platforms that inspire and retain collective wisdom. Without other forms of dissemination, our workshop at the conference would only have been a short experience witnessed by the 15 participants. The one-off experience may soon fade away and the learning experience could not be taken much farther. Schön (1983) has critically challenged the “dichotomy of thought and action” (p. 280) and she calls attention to “reflection-in-action” that entails “the outcomes of action, the action itself, and the intuitive knowing implicit in action” (p. 56). The value of “reflection-in-action”, however, can be supplemented by “reflection-on-action” and the time gap between “action” and “reflection” can help freshen our perspectives. Therefore, this paper edited four months after the workshop further crystalizes our ongoing reflections.

First and foremost, the workshop reaffirmed our belief in the diverse choices and opportunities that academic researchers have when communicating research. As academics we need an audience for our work and we need to know who this audience may be. However, we can often find it hard to picture who we are writing for. Presenting our work to varied audiences can enable us to find multiple audiences and therefore can make the long journey to formal publication in a journal or the production of an examined thesis more tolerable. The process of trialling alternative ways of presenting research can bring multiple benefits:

1. When choosing a method for presentation to an alternative audience, we often need to avoid complex language, which demands us to clarify thoughts and synthesise arguments. For instance, trying to explain one’s thesis or article to children in a way that they will follow can be a challenge as well as an opportunity to learn how to communicate our theories and findings in more engaging and creative ways.

2. Alternative forms of publication or dissemination often require collaboration, which can reduce the risk of being too isolated as researchers as a result of needing to find a

space of our own to write. Collaborating with our colleagues and those outside the academic community can help us to establish social relations that can add dynamism to our academic research experience.

The theme of collaboration seemed to emerge as another implicit aspect of workshop. One participant commented that trying to explain everyone's research in a very short period of time was almost like an "academic speed-date". Considering the busy schedule of people working in other sectors, we believe academics now need to seriously consider honing our abilities at communicating our own research to other people and making ourselves understood within a limited time.

In addition, the workshop itself exemplified the capacity for learning by doing. Without the group exercise, we might find it extremely hard to articulate what we mean by the potential for communicating research in alternative forms. With the group exercise, the participants could have a real experience of what it might be like when they needed to communicate their research in ways other than those forms that they were familiar with. The exercise was a prompt that might stimulate further thinking about the rationale, consequences and challenges around communicating academic research in various ways to different audiences.

The workshop inspired us to think carefully about the tensions that exist when thinking about alternative ways of presenting research. To deal with our concerns, we believe that we need to take initiatives to build up our confidence and to take steps in celebrating and encouraging such possibilities. We tend to often prioritise written reports as the most legitimate form of dissemination. This is most likely inculcated in us by the current accountability culture in higher education in terms of judging and assessing academic research for defining excellence and distributing funding. However, we can already discern an increasing awareness of the wide range of approaches towards "publishing" research. In the UK, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the nationwide system for assessing the quality of research in all UK higher education institutions. The most recent document published on the REF website on guidance and submission states explicitly that the system takes into account various forms of academic work:

In addition to printed academic work, research outputs may include, but are not limited to: new materials, devices, images, artefacts, products and buildings; confidential or technical reports; intellectual property, whether in patents or other

forms; performances, exhibits or events; work published in non-print media (REF, 2011, p. 22).

What remains to be explored is: should we apply different criteria when assessing research output in different forms? and to what extent are conventional written forms be given more credit considering the implicit hierarchy of forms of research dissemination? Following this inquiry, why? Should this be changed?

As researchers, we might also be caught up in our habitual thinking of confining our academic achievements within academic papers. We suggest that a critical attitude should be adopted to challenge the embedded hierarchy. We might, for example, celebrate our output in forms of photographs, or poems, or performances on our academic CV, as we can often dedicate equal, if not more, effort and time to such creations. Collectively, our celebrative stance might help to initiate a paradigmatic change. Meanwhile, reflecting on our own efforts in making a case for this initiative, we want to call for further support within higher education to offer guidance to research students and even research staff. We would argue that just as novice researchers need practice and guidance when learning how to write academically, they also need equal, if not more, support when it comes to presenting our research through a diverse range of channels.

4. Implications

In this paper, we have introduced our research background and the theoretical frameworks underpinning our design of the workshop. We reviewed the structure and the main content of the workshop, including the outcomes of the group work. Most importantly, we reflected upon the nature of the workshop itself and the challenges that researchers need to overcome when communicating research in forms other than the written academic paper. We encourage researchers to take on a more positive attitude towards alternative forms of expressing ideas and actively seek help and support. While we acknowledge the importance of ensuring the quality of academic research by means of learning to report our research in academic writing, we also believe that the world is rapidly changing. There are significant pressures for the academic community to engage in this wider world and to ensure that the wider professional world engages with us.

Both the workshop and this paper conform to our philosophy that the purpose of publishing research is for generating dialogue rather than simply reporting one's own thought or achievement. Our ideas are situated in scholarly discussions over the role of higher education institutions. Researchers have called attention to the importance of examining and

improving the “engagement model” of universities (Furco, 2010; Weerts, 2007; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010) as higher institutions need to address civic duty and transparency. At a macro level, Byrne (2000) argues that universities “are critically important to the development of civil societies” (p. 16). Moreover, a responsibility for considering the needs of our audiences and participants is a crucial ethical element. In this paper, we have argued that alternative arts-based forms of dissemination and publication can be one type of effort towards enriching and varying academic conversations. At the same time, these endeavours can simultaneously provide a reflective space, demanding us to experiment, practise and improvise ways of articulating and presenting our research to different audience on different occasions.

In the long run, we believe that this new agenda would demand an accompanying set of criteria for judging the quality of different forms of presentation. This would, arguably, prompt us to think about the hierarchy within research institutions. Take Group Two’s reflections for example, how and to what extent can we rely on children’s perspectives and comments when our research is about children? What role(s) can children and will children be allowed to play when judging the presentation of the research outcomes based on their experience? This leads us to a paramount mission, as communicating research would then indicate the launch of relational and responsible communication. Our workshop has only touched upon a small corner of the vast territory of communicating research in alternative forms. We believe that our effort has, to some extent, proved the worthiness and urgency of further exploration into this theme.

It is noted that the current climate in higher institutions does not seem to be in full support of the engagement mode (Driscoll & Sandmann, 2010). The agenda of further fostering engagement and collaboration requires us to creatively tackle challenges at different levels. Enders (2005) proposes that PhD training needs to move from “an academic-disciplinary model” to “a hybrid model that crosses disciplinary and organizational borders” (p. 119). For individual researchers, we want to suggest the following two imperatives: (a) seeking and ensuring collaboration with research participants as well as those whose life might be influenced by our research. This would mean shifting the top-down dissemination model into a collaborative and participatory framework during the stage of presenting academic research; (b) further deconstructing the established status of academic writing and firming up the ground of creative forms of conducting and communicating research by reinvigorating practice-informed theory. We share Byrne’s (2000) optimistic prediction that

engagement will be a defining characteristic of the university of tomorrow, and we are aware that this requires courage, creativity, a caring attitude, and intellectual input.

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² Consent forms for taking and publishing photos were placed on each table during the workshop and the participants were asked to sign the forms or otherwise indicate their unwillingness to be photographed.

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