Troubling Experience Through an Arts-Informed Research Process

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by

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Nine women, including me as participant researcher, met over the course of a year to explore experiences of fear and pain in teaching through writing, through various artistic media, and through conversation. The study was my doctoral research (Walsh, 2003). We shared our stories and responded to one another through painting, drawing, sculpture, fabric collage, written language, talk, and even, at one point, through a movement exploration that ended in tableaux. Our purpose was to use our experiences of fear and pain in teaching as transformational moments, opportunities to foreground and to thereby ‘trouble’ our taken-for-granted beliefs. What were our blind spots, personally and collectively? Could we move beyond our habit-formed ways of interpreting our experiences through a resymbolization process that included writing and other artistic media? I use the term ‘resymbolization’ here to help frame the process through which we came to reinterpret our experiences.

The arts have long been acknowledged as ways of knowing and of being in the world differently (see, for example, Abbs, 1987; Eisner, 1988, 1997; Kenny, 1998). In recent years, too, a proliferation of arts-informed research has shown how various visual, dramatic, and textual practices can be productive in terms of exploring issues during inquiry as well as providing divergent ways of interpreting and re-presenting the research process (see, for example, Bach, 1998; Crawford, 1997; Edgar, 1999; Hawkins, 1988; Norris, 2000; Richardson, 1992, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2001; Neilsen, 2002; Neilsen, Cole, & Knowles, 2001). In this paper, I will highlight two distinct aspects of the resymbolization process—first, during the exploration phase of the inquiry where we shared experiences of fear and pain in teaching and second, during the interpretation phase where I created found poetry from the transcripts. I also include an excerpt from a theme that emerged in the study—that of space and safety—in an attempt to exemplify how these two aspects of the resymbolization process intertwined in the resultant text.

Underlying the process of resymbolization is the belief that ‘experience’ itself must be troubled—or made problematic. As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) note, “qualitative researchers can no longer directly capture lived experience” (p. 17)—we cannot accept
uncritically what participants or even researchers say about their experiences. Poststructuralism has shown us that experience is contextually written, changeable (see, for example, Hutcheon, 1989; Weedon, 1997). Like subjectivity, experience itself is a site of intersecting discourses, some of which conflict with one another. There is no one clear explanation of experience that can be rendered immutable, nor is there a rational and self-conscious individual who exists to read experience and present it in an impartial way. We can no longer simply appeal to the “authority of [our] experience” to validate our claims and also to silence others, disregard difference (hooks, 1994). We can, however, attempt to disrupt our usual readings of experience and to question why we have ‘agreed’ to such readings. To this end, in our research about fear and pain in teaching, we worked to resymbolize experience and thereby provide ourselves with the space for reinterpretation.

In the initial aspect of the resymbolization process, the work of the group, visual art, spontaneous writing, and conversation provided us with ways of unsettling how we usually read our difficult teaching experiences. We were ‘witnesses’ to and responders for one another; we worked in community, and shared our thoughts and feelings using various media (see Anderson & Gold, 1998). Group meetings often began with brainstorming or with me reading aloud a piece about teaching. Next, we wrote spontaneously, following the work of Goldberg (1986, 1990, 1993) and Turner Vesselago (1995). One participant would then read her writing aloud. The others responded to the story using media such as watercolors, pastels, felt pens, crayons, building blocks, playdough, and fabric. Written language in the forms of poetry and prose were also possible forms of response. Discussion followed. Our process was modeled initially on the work of Haug et al (1987) who, in the context of a women’s collective, used memory writing and the responses of others as research process to interrogate how women’s bodies come to be sexualized. A crucial aspect of Haug’s work was to examine experience and to look for the ways that we are complicit in the shaping of our gendered identities—research as intervention and as transformative process (see pp. 34-36). The transformative dimension—coming to read experience in a different way—is particularly
pertinent to our work. Our research method differed from Haug’s in that we wrote spontaneously during our group meetings, and we responded in a variety of media instead of writing separately from the group, circulating the pieces, then discussing and responding in written language only. Some of the artifacts that emerged from our collective included transcripts of the group meetings, photographs of the visual responses, participant writing, and my field notes.

In the second aspect of the resymbolization process, when I was working to interpret what had happened in the group, I created found poetry from the transcripts.¹ (Found poetry is poetry that is found in the environment, in this case, the transcripts.) In moving back and forth between the transcripts and the artwork that had been produced—in a recursive sort of way—I was able to concentrate, both in the sense of being present and mindful to these artifacts as well as in the sense of creating succinct forms of representation. Various researchers have used found poetry as a way of re-presenting what emerges in their research as well as a way of processing, of working with phenomena (see Butler-Kisber, 1998, 2000-2001, 2002; Graveline, 2000; Luce-Kapler, 1997; Richardson, 1992; Stewart & Butler-Kisber, 1999). To create found poetry, I read and reread the transcripts, made notes, and delineated a number of recurring themes. I culled words and cut and pasted segments of conversation into specifically labelled files, then played poetically with the segments of conversation in an attempt to distill themes and write succinct versions of them. I tried to stay as true as possible to the original words of the women. I did, however, make choices that were both academic and artistic. I included only those phrases that I saw as pertinent to the theme that was emerging. I reordered phrases at times to improve clarity for the reader. I wrote, walked away, rewrote, and revised in an ongoing recursive process. The use of poetry situates me too as poet, and reminds the reader through its very form that, as poet, I too am the poem. I resymbolize what occurred in the group according to my own life and experiences. I cannot do otherwise. There is no one ‘true’ account of what happened and how it affected each, or any, of us. As Lather (1991) notes, in a poststructuralist view of research, “attention shifts away from efforts to represent what is ‘really’ there and shifts,
instead, toward the productivity of language” (p. 112). We are called to foreground too the shifting subjectivity of the researcher.

In the excerpt that follows, I demonstrate how the two aspects of the resymbolization process—the work in the group and the creation of found poetry from the transcripts—intertwine in a textual re-presentation. The theme of this particular piece is that of space and safety.

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coming home from vacations lots of times I wonder what's going to be on the front of my garage this week we threw a kid out kicked him out of my office he's in for assault with a weapon robbery with a weapon and I'm thinking I'll be coming home and this guy will be on my front lawn

I went to a meeting at the board office and I'm just sitting there from our board office you can see our school someone had done vandalism on the wall (at the school) Mrs. K. is a f-ing witch we're talking it was really heavy and then I look over and—

how do other people perceive you how does it look from the outside at first it was eggs what a mess we have cedar siding on our house we were out there scrubbing for a long time we're pissed off but besides that what do the neighbors think ? we kept it quiet kept it to ourselves it's a source of shame really
it's one thing when it happens on school property it's another when it happens at your home that's a different ball game it changes it becomes personal then there is no place to go no place to be safe

houses always stand as a metaphor for ourselves a house being mucked about with abused

it's a safety net and a prison too you retreat into it to keep yourself safe you can't go out there

you don't have any rules to live by you thought you were safe but you're not
she wakes from a fitful sleep walks
around the house it is 2 am or thereabouts
a June evening cool calm quiet she goes
downstairs to the living room as she always does
when she wakes in the night it is her
place to think to stare out at the night sky the street
the streetlights the houses across the way but tonight
on entering the living room she is
disoriented that feeling you get when something is
wrong something is amiss the front window is it
broken? no. but white marks are all
across it her heart pounds suddenly
very awake she races to the front window looks out
her flower garden destroyed pansies
pulled out by the roots shades of purple all
over the sidewalk a sidewalk full of dirt and
green and purple and those marks on the window
words? they're backwards to her what do
they say? she can't remember now
or can she?
and you're crying white lines
the word BITCH
your image now to the people
who live around

you're walking down the hallway thinking
okay does everybody in this school except
me know who this is? is it you? is it you? is
it you? or I saw you do this or that--maybe it
is you how can you teach when you can't
trust people? and it got to the point where
whenever we were away from the house
we'd come back and we’d think is something
going to be wrong? is something going to
have happened to our house?

the remnants of what
people had left death
weird and bizarre they
were right there but more importantly
they'd come inside left their marks and
where were they? what
was going to happen after that?
when you walked down the stairs it was
peaceful quiet pink in my mind pink represents
safety I had to physically cut this paper because I
think of the barrier between what was and suddenly
within a split second something happens changes
your whole perception the perception that you have
from inside and the perception that it gives from
outside but what clouds this whole issue is the
confusion the questions that it brings
confusion pain darkness

the inside is no longer pristine
comfortable cozy a haven suddenly
there is a not a great deal of differentiation between
in and out

*suddenly there is a not a great deal of differentiation between in and out*
the house a comfy home cottage with
the flowers growing up flowers
being chopped off they're headless
now they're all on the sidewalk
the window pane as a barricade between you
being able to go out and do something about
this it's a safety net but it's a prison too
you retreat into it to keep yourself safe but
you can't go out there you can't go out and
get this person

you don't have any rules
to live by you thought you were safe
but you're not

your line where your perceived personal
space is and basically you have the feeling that
when you leave work your home is your
castle you leave work behind and
when you go home it doesn't affect you
you don’t have your phone number
listed as a teacher things like that because
you don't want to be phoned at home by
kids the breaks in it the breaks and the orange
represents your fear and the red is the beating of
your heart and the blue is where you knew
your personal space of safety was but you don't
know quite where it is now and where it is
going to form again or how much
you have after that
just protecting your own personal space that whole idea of the boundaries and stuff we don't talk with the students about we don't even think about you just think oh well you just go out and do this job but it isn't like that teaching is a very vulnerable thing public it's a public act

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In the preceding excerpt, I have highlighted one theme—that of space and safety—that emerged for us in the course of our research. The found poetry from the transcripts and the images from the collective work together to exemplify the two aspects of the resymbolization process. Writing, drawing, painting and so on in the group served to
foreground issues that had previously been hazy, nebulous, internalized, or maybe just avoided. Through sharing stories and responding in various artistic ways to one another, we were able to disrupt what we had previously taken for granted in terms of our difficult teaching experiences. Further, as I culled found poetry from the transcripts and worked recursively between it and the visual artwork created in the group, I became aware of themes that arose for individuals as well as for the collective. Together, then, these two aspects of the resymbolization process functioned to create possibilities for troubling the ways we had previously interpreted our difficult teaching experiences.

Note

1. I wish to emphasize that the found poetry that I created in the course of this research is only one aspect of a larger writing-as-inquiry approach to interpreting what happened in the group. Specifically, I used writing as process of further resymbolizing the experiences that were highlighted through the explorations of the group. In addition to creating found poetry, I included some of original poetry and wrote expressively in first and third person to highlight my own shifting subjectivity as researcher. I also wrote large chunks of traditional academic expository writing, some of which was juxtaposed with images, found poetry, and expressive writing, and some of which was footnoted. Playing with language—and traditional forms of re-presentation of research—in this way enabled me to further resymbolize and thus reread what happened in the group. Further, such play with re-presentational practices problematizes how the reader situates herself/himself in relation to what appears on the page. Little can be taken for granted.
References


Walsh. BERA 2004


