

EDITORIAL: WHAT LIES BENEATH... CONFESSIONAL NARRATIVES; LESSONS FROM RESEARCH

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Most published research is presented as polished, systematic, error-free, illuminating and significant. Sections dedicated to limitations are often brief. Yet research is invariably complex, dynamic and unpredictable. Researchers are required to be responsive to the unexpected and the surprising and methodologies can be found to be ill-fitting to the enquiry at hand despite careful preparation. As educational research inevitably involves the study of people and ideas, the tools of analysis and data collection can enhance, detract or even miss capturing the essence of the subject of study. The subtle nuance and ambiguity of language and culture that inevitably emerge in human interaction affects research that attempts to capture what people mean, value and believe. Given all this complexity, education researchers use a myriad of approaches in an attempt to capture the nature of the enquiry of concern. Research questions change as the study evolves and feedback (or lack of) from participants and/or documents can alter substantially the direction of a study and the methodology adopted.

What then, are the lessons learnt from undertaking research? The papers in this special issue scrutinise the research process and reveal what was learnt during a study. Such narratives inform us about the humility and responsiveness required to develop substantive research and the struggles involved in creating order and meaning when both seem elusive.

Educational research suffers from a problem of familiarity as we struggle to surprise ourselves in landscapes we know all too well (McWilliam, 2004). The lead paper in this special issue attempts to shake us out of familiarity with contexts and methods not normally associated with what happens in schools and education generally. Sara Delamont takes us further into a theme she highlighted at the 2003 NZARE/AARE conference during her keynote speech on the *Four great gates* of educational research (since published in 2005). Her paper which leads this special issue provides valuable insights into how autobiography in academic writing can be a powerful analytic tool. In particular she mentions the controversial issue of boys' achievement and engagement in education. Her description of the culture, protocols and training regimes in *capoeira* (a Brazilian dance and martial art) enable a fresh analysis of boys in education. Here is a context that fully engages young men and instils the qualities of self-discipline, perseverance, excellence and concentration – the very qualities educators want for all their students.

At the same time, however, she warns about the seductions and traps of employing autobiography when it lapses into self-indulgence, and ethnography when it lapses into the Stockholm syndrome. Holding the tension of both empathy

and dispassionate critique involves a paradoxical approach that is neither static nor straightforward. Nevertheless, her story provides us with some rich possibilities and some pitfalls of which to be mindful.

Ethnography also features in Tom Cavanagh's paper as he negotiates the insider-outsider tensions that emerge when researching restorative practices in a bicultural school. Tom undertook this study as a visiting American Fulbright fellow and his passion for ethnography drew him to the challenge of building authentic relationships with the staff and students at the school. The process was not without its tensions and involved Tom in a range of moving, illuminating and sometimes amusing situations. His need to unobtrusively blend with the school culture and routines and yet his obvious "difference" is something he appears to negotiate well given the stories participants offered him.

Fieldnotes, journal entries and personal reflections feature in many of the papers in this special issue as we are invited into the personal worlds of the researchers dealing with the inevitable messiness and challenges in their respective fields of study. These provide unique and often highly revealing insights of much use to researchers grappling with similar problems (Yates, 2004). Such notes are seldom for public scrutiny yet contribute greatly to the behind-the-scenes feelings, observations, anxieties and delights of the researchers. In the third paper by Carol Mutch and Marge Wong, journal entries and recollected conversations feature strongly as they share with us the bicultural partnership they negotiated as co-researchers working with Maori. This personal data enables us to scrutinize the actual process of how they negotiated respectful and appropriate ways of working. The mentoring relationship they develop is reciprocal, with Marge providing the necessary expertise regarding tikanga, kawa and reo and Carol providing experience in research methodologies. Further complexity emerged as Carol learnt to adapt her familiar research approaches to ensure they were culturally appropriate. Marge also had to negotiate what was culturally appropriate when interacting with Maori with all the responsibility of building relationships as an insider. Through their mutually negotiated relationship the process aspects of tuakana-teina (with interchangeable roles) became patently evident.

The rights of children in research is the focus of Brian Finch's paper which underlines that children are "active participants and competent interpreters of their own worlds" (Danby & Farrell, 2004, p. 38) and that they can make decisions regarding their involvement or otherwise in research projects that involve them – decisions that should be respected. Throughout the consent process and the project itself the aim was to make decisions with children and not just for them. As much of what happens in schools and homes involves adults making decision for children, his paper provides a valuable counter to the assumption that adults are omnipotent when it comes to decisions concerning children. His innovative methodology ensures that children are active and informed decision-makers and his consent process is both engaging and educative.

Children are also the focus of Judy Moreland and Bronwen Cowie's paper on auto-photography and photo-interviews as tools for exploring ideas in technology and science. This innovative approach to research methods captures a range of data chosen by children for their express purposes and their choices reveal much about

what they regard as significant in their lives. It is no surprise that family, friends and pets feature alongside concrete examples of various technological or scientific devices. As with the previous paper, Judy and Bronwen's methods affirm that children can make their own decisions and have opinions that matter. Moreover, the methods provide a liberating way in which children could sample, collect, choose, discard and discuss what they felt was important.

The last three papers are by researchers who are doctoral students and teaching staff of tertiary institutions. They range in experience as teachers and as researchers and these aspects of their identities are revealed somewhat in their confessional narratives. Beverley Norsworthy takes the reader through the maze of her doctoral study, which changed direction in unexpected and unpredictable ways. As she points out, there is no preparation that inures or protects a researcher from such unpredictability and indeed, no preparation could or should provide a buffer from what is the essence of the process, where the reality of research is uncovered in all its messy complexity. The move to reflexivity by many researchers emphasizes the importance of self-criticism (Yates, 2004) so that as much as possible, theories are used impartially, methods are closely scrutinized for strengths and flaws, and limits are made clear for self and others. Bev makes a crucial about-turn in her study, questioning both her own assumptions about students and teaching, and the culture of tertiary institutions. This forces a substantial change to her theorizing, which becomes more critical and reflexive.

Self-reflection is a theme in Kirsten Petrie's paper as she outlines the subtle challenges inherent in the interview process. Again, no amount of careful reading about interviews and indepth discussions in methods' classes fully prepares researchers for the intricacies of this temporal and interactive medium. Taping interviews only helps to capture what was said. It does not provide the opportunity to revisit and change the direction of discussion or probe more deeply at something that may have been glossed over in the actual interview. It is often when we play back our interviews that we register the moment lost or the lead not taken. Kirsten examines the complexity of this issue where the interviewer needs to develop the duality of being both present and meta-present in order to listen carefully in the moment and simultaneously consider and respond to the fruitful leads that emerge.

For Christopher Schmidt, letting go is a central theme as he comes to terms with phenomenology and his role within this methodology. Journal entries and poetry feature and provide insights into his personal doubts and aspects of his professional training in order to fully immerse himself in a process that requires respect for *not* knowing. He comes to appreciate the way in which the methodology created, indeed demanded, that his study was a personal journey of engagement and discovery.

This collection has not focused on tidy findings to any great extent (and readers may wish to contact authors for these) but, rather, has revealed what lies beneath the polished reports that comprise the published outcomes of most studies. What lies beneath are the raw tensions, doubts and struggles that comprise reflexivity. This is especially the case when studies take the Lebanon gate (Delamont, 2005), the road less travelled, where the risks are great and the gains even greater.

We are invited inside to scrutinize personal and professional struggles alongside breakthroughs and insights, and these invitations inform and enrich what it means to undertake research.

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