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**Torn Between Expectations and Imagination:
Alternative Forms of Communicating Educational Research (a short
discussion paper reflecting on a workshop).**

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Abstract

The following is the abstract for this workshop and as such it also serves as the abstract for this paper. This paper is a record of our reflections on this workshop.

Selena and James are both enticed by the promise of communicating educational research in creative ways. They will each bring into this discussion their perspectives, informed respectively by arts-based methodologies and practitioner research, as they briefly talk about existing examples of alternative forms of communicating master's and doctoral level studies in the field of education (ranging from drama, fiction, film and design projects). All participants are then invited to engage in a group-work activity to try out presenting their research in a poem, or a play or a picture, followed by a collective reflection session to discuss how we can communicate educational research in alternative forms while still producing high-quality research. * Selena and James will bring a bag of objects as props. They promise to deliver an exploratory, experimental, collaborative and participatory workshop.

NB: Consent forms were signed asking for permission to take these photos and to make them publicly available.

Introduction

We presented this workshop at the Kaleidoscope Conference at Cambridge University 2015: Many Paths, Same Goal—Multimodality in Educational Research. This paper should be read in conjunction with the Powerpoint slides that have also been published here on this site. The reason we are presenting a short paper, as a document for discussion and reflection following the workshop, is in order to generate and facilitate conversation and debate around the areas that were introduced during the workshop. This paper therefore consists of a short description of the workshop – how it was structured and run, followed by each of our reflections.

A short description of the workshop

The workshop began with us, the two workshop leaders, introducing ourselves, followed by a brief explanation of the motivation behind the theme: inspirations from arts-based methodology and practitioner research respectively.

Selena opened by describing how in her PhD she had explored visitors' imaginative responses towards cultural object in museums and how she had integrated a self-narrative approach and arts-informed methods. She also described how she was interested in 'honesty' and sincerity in terms of conducting and presenting research. Selena introduced the driving forces behind arts-based methodologies and presented a few examples of communicating research in the form of a: performance, poem, visual arts, and exhibition, with all these potentially being a conference presentation, data presentation and even an essential part of a doctoral 'thesis'. Such forms extend the boundaries set by conventional academic writing and they encourage readers, audiences and visitors to interact with the researcher and the research product in order to participate in the meaning-making process.

James explained that he is particularly interested in practitioner research. This is an area of research that can seem to be deeply grounded in practicalities. However, he explained that alternative methods can be useful for reaching audiences that do not access conventional research. He identified that non-conventional forms of dissemination may help to break down two perceived barriers. One of these is the barrier between researchers and practitioners in areas such as education. The second is the barrier between practitioner research and the conversations that take place in the university-based academic world. It was also explained that the production of this short paper itself, a written piece featuring personal reflections that does not fit the usual paradigms of academic writing, would be illustrative of the various

ways in which academic work can be disseminated. Indeed, as would be discussed in this workshop, three forms of publication would emerge from the workshop itself: the Powerpoint presentation prepared beforehand, the art work produced during the workshop and this paper produced one week later. All these would be produced in a far faster timescale than would be involved in the publication of a conventional conference paper.

A further colleague Ningfen Wang was introduced. On this occasion she is not involved in the production or publication of this paper. However, as someone who is particularly interested in activist research around work place conditions, it illustrated how alternative methods of dissemination could be relevant to academics from a range of perspectives. Ningfen kindly offered to take photos some of which are included here as additional resources accompanying this paper¹.

Following this introduction the main task for the session was explained and introduced. Participants were asked to produce a presentation of their research, a mini and temporary publication, working in groups and based on the following rules, as quoted from the Powerpoint slide:

- “Must Incorporate (at least 1 element) Each Group Member’s Research (suggestions include: research topic, methodological, theoretical framework, range of participants)
- Must Involve the ‘Object’ (any creative ways that you might come up with)
- Presentation must be within 2 minutes
- In the form of a Play/Poem/Picture”

The group of 15 people on tables with five on each immediately got to work. A representative from each group drew an item out of the bag of objects that Selena brought, which contained a number of everyday and curious objects (e.g. beach shell, necklace, bookmark, key ring). The object served as a prompt and needed to be involved in the presentation, for which all the groups had 20 minutes to prepare.

¹ 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.



(Photo 1: Participants began to work as a group)

The atmosphere was positive but issues regarding the difficulty of this challenge immediately emerged. The hardest of these to solve were finding creative solutions to the challenge of including everybody's research and deciding on the exact form of presentation. Once this had been resolved, all groups worked quickly and produced three pieces for public display.



(Photo 2 & 3: Groups delved into brainstorming)

- **Group 1: A Poster**

Group 1 presented a poster that they drew. Their object was a brown bookmark illustrated with a white five-pointed star.

The group redesigned a big research project, pulling together one element from each member's research, which was drawn next to each point of a star. Their intended audience is colleagues (the academic community).



(Photo 4 & 5: Group 1's poster and object, and their presentation)

- **Group 2: A Song**

Group 2 performed a poetic song. Their object was a key ring, featuring a small pair of ceramic shoes. At the beginning, they sang 'carry them with you, step into their shoes' as a chorus. The phrase was then repeated by each group member, followed by answering one question posed by the group, as follows:

-- What can you see?

--What can you hear?

--What can you play?

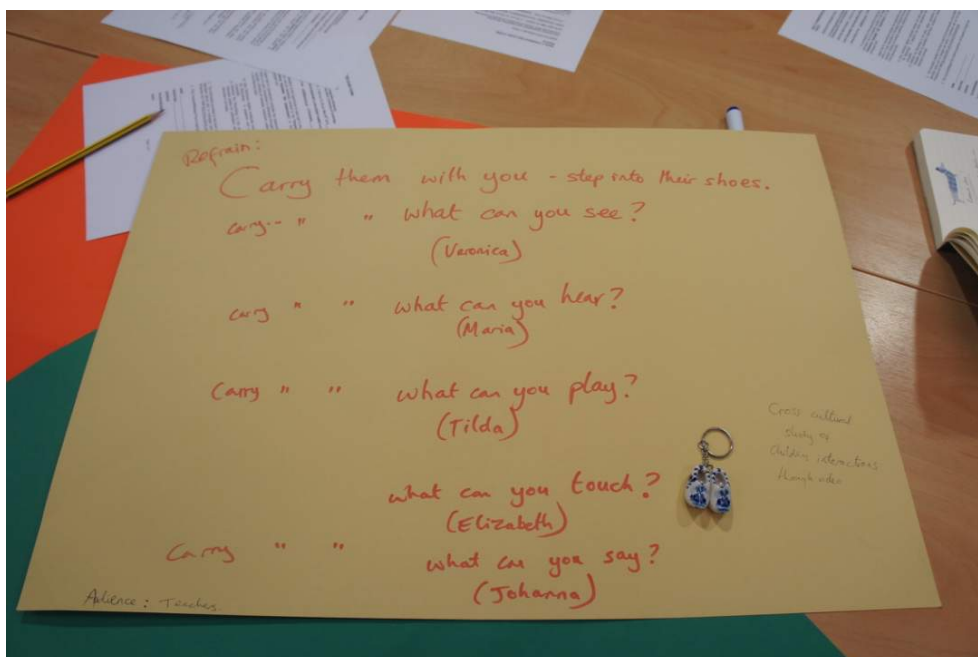
--What can you touch?

--What can you say?



(Photo 6: Group 2 presenting their song)

Their intended audience is children, as this is who most of them are working with in their own research, so they wanted to bring children's perspective into their presentation.



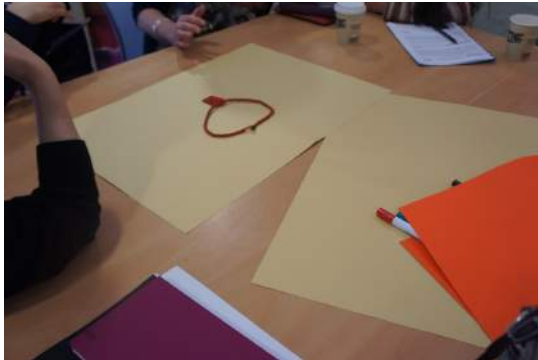
(Photo 7: Group 2's object and notes taken during group discussion)

- **Group 3: A Play**

Group 3 presented a short play. Their object was a red necklace.

The play can be outlined in the paragraph below:

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 praised her idea. After the class, she gave the gift to her teacher, expressed her gratitude and they had a big hug.



(Photo 8 & 9: Group 3's object and a scene from their play)

The group explained that they intended to show how teachers play a pivotal role in one's education. Their intended audience is teachers and students.

A 10-minute reflective discussion was then held, in which Selena and James invited all participants to talk about the challenges of this group work and what they enjoyed most. Some of these reflections are included below.

James' reflections

Four thoughts came to mind to me during this workshop and they are as follows.

- Firstly academics just like artists need an audience for their work and they need to know who this audience may be. However, it may often be the case that we cannot quite 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.

- Secondly, there is an ongoing tension between the need to find a space of one's own to write (and the independence and isolation that can in such times be a positive) and the risk that isolation can become excessive and unhealthy. Alternative forms of publication or dissemination can break down these barriers and can be a natural moment in the research process at which to work collaboratively and in a social environment.
- Third, that there is a need when choosing a method for presentation to an alternative audience to break out of academic conventions and avoid complex language. This process can help clarify thoughts and synthesise arguments. Trying to explain one's thesis or article to children in a way that they will be able to follow can be a very useful challenge to have to face.
- Finally, that academics find it hard to regard alternative forms of publication as 'publication' and therefore those who do put effort into such things too often fail; to celebrate this. Of course it would be unethical to claim that one had written journal articles, when the form of dissemination was a photograph with a short commentary or a poem. However, equally I fear it may be overly modest to fail to mention alternative publications on one's CV at all, especially as the photograph or poem may have required time and skill to produce. My advice would be to make it clear what they are but to also celebrate such things by referring to them.

Selena's reflections

I was surprised and even amazed by how all the groups could put such a presentation together given such short preparation time. While the workshop itself was only a 'taste' of what alternative forms of communicating research can be, it seemed to achieve the goal of prompting the participants to think about the potential and consequences of such attempts. I want to highlight the following aspects of my reflections.

- Firstly, the workshop exemplifies the capacity of learning by doing. The group work is an essential part of the workshop, which prompts the participants to think about the challenges and merits of communicating research in alternative forms by plunging into the exercise themselves. As if reinforcing the theme of the workshop, I find it hard and even impossible to simply communicate such a proposal effectively by hosting a discussion. I believe that our reflections on the 'practical' element will enrich our ideas over the theoretical part.

- Secondly, the collaborative element in group work is a big challenge, but it also stimulates me to think about how involving a wider range of research projects can help diversify discussions about the rationale and promises of communicating educational research in alternative ways. One participant commented that trying to explain everyone's research in a very short period of time was almost like an academic speed-date. This hints towards the need for honing our skills of talking about and communicating our own research to other people and making ourselves understood under limited time, which might often be the case in real-life situations.
- Thirdly, even though it is an experimental workshop, the feedback (even though informal) from the participants convinces us that more can be and probably should be done in higher education to provide support and guidance in terms of encouraging research students and even staff to collaborate and communicate their research through a diverse range of channels and in various forms.
- Finally, this paper as a reflective writing exercise has helped us to further explore our thoughts and organise our reflections on the workshop, which would otherwise be left as an 'one-off' event. We hope it will prompt more discussions from colleagues and people who care about this issue. This aligns with our 'philosophy' that the purpose of publishing research is for generating dialogue rather than simply reporting one's own thought or achievement.

Concluding remarks

As this brief paper illustrates there are many academic conventions involved in the dissemination of research. Many of these are important and we are not iconoclasts looking for the end of the paper format peer reviewed journal. However, the world is rapidly changing and there are significant pressures on the academic community to engage in this wider world and to ensure that the wider professional world engages with us. Alternative arts based forms of dissemination and publication can be part of enriching and varying the academic conversation. They can also simultaneously be powerful reflective tools. The purpose of this paper is to enable and create discussion. We would welcome comment, feedback and reflections.