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**Narrative Inquiry and the problem of representation: 'giving voice', making meaning.**

**Abstract**

In this article the author argues that the exploration of alternative forms of research representation can result in new possibilities for making meaning in educational research. Narrative inquiry as a methodology has become established as an approach in education but remains contested in many ways. How we come to an understanding of such research findings and in particular how the issues of voice and representation are resolved are subject to much debate. Here the author proposes that using fictive methods of representation of research, particularly poetry, can have implications for the ways in which meaning is made and therefore the possible meanings that can be made. Further, this article argues that the poetic form allows for the inclusion of many voices and stories in a non-hierarchical manner, making the author's influence explicit without it being dominant. Researchers have argued for poetic representations of research data as a means to evoke the participants' experience whilst making the author's influence explicit, here it is argued that poetry can be utilised to provide a fuller representation of the research, placing the voice of the participants, the researcher and literature on an equal level within the whole story of the research project. This article firstly details narrative inquiry as a methodological approach and its particular application to Educational Research before discussing the issues surrounding voice and representation. Subsequently, fictive forms of representation are explored as a means of addressing these issues.

**Keywords:** Narrative inquiry, voice, representation, poetry.

## **Introduction**

Narrative inquiry is used extensively in education but remains contested in many ways. The meaning that is made from such research and in particular issues of voice and representation are debated extensively in the literature (Mulkay 1985; Tyler 1986; Lather 1991; Sandelowski 1994; Sparkes 1995; Denzin 1997; Glesne 1997; St. Pierre 1997; Stronach and MacLure 1997; Garratt and Hodkinson 1998; Clough 1999; Foley 2002; Percer 2002; Piirto 2002<sup>a</sup>; Piirto 2002<sup>b</sup>; MacLure 2003; Pillow 2003; Springgay, Irwin and Kind 2005; Sinner et al 2006; Berridge 2008; Jevic and Springgay 2008; Leavy 2009; MacLure 2009; Leavy 2010; Saavedra 2011; Guttorm 2012). Traditional forms of research writing Lather (1991, 91) argues are flawed as they claim to be straightforward representations of reality whilst ‘conceal[ing] the artifice that produces the appearance of objectivity’. Further to this Gallagher (2011, 51) argues that ‘in empirical education research, too often, “[the] reality syndrome”, a kind of interpretatively closed or over-explained story as illustrative “case” – is devoid of the imagination and theoretical probing necessary to produce new knowledge in the field’. Here I discuss alternative ways that researchers represented their research, which, I argue, have implications for the ways in which meaning is made and therefore the possible meanings that can be made. Firstly, I detail narrative as an approach and its particular application to Educational Research before discussing the issues surrounding voice and representation. I then explore alternative forms of representation as a means of addressing these issues. This is done with reference to a recent research project I conducted with a group of UK and International students. This narrative inquiry sought to understand their individual journeys to autonomy in their learning. It is not my intention to present the findings of this study here but to use this research as an example in my exploration of the issues I raise.

## **Narrative approaches to research**

The increasing number of international students on UK campuses has changed the dynamics of our classrooms and the nature of a university experience for all students. In conducting my research I was interested in exploring how students from a range of educational cultural backgrounds developed their academic skills and, in particular, autonomy in learning in the UK HE environment. In seeking to explore the students’ development as independent learners I was attempting to access and record a space and a process that educators do not usually see explicitly. This is not a process that takes place

neatly within the confines of the classroom. I needed access to the students' thoughts, shared experience and discussions. Narrative inquiry provided the access I required and a space for constructive discourse to take place between the students. The participants I worked with were both UK and international (there were fourteen in total; all Accountancy undergraduates; eight Chinese direct entrants on to year two in the UK; two Saudis also direct entrants; one Pakistani who was continuing from year one in the UK and three UK also continuing). I interviewed the participants at the beginning of year two and at the end of year three. Additionally, they met weekly and I recorded their discussions.

McIssac Bruce (2008, 323) suggests that narrative inquiry is a valuable methodological approach as '[s]tories describe human knowledge regarding experience and action'. He echoes many when he states we naturally talk about ourselves and our lives in a storied way and can learn much about our lives from these stories (McIssac Bruce 2008; Mattingly and Lawlor 2000; Coulter and Smith 2009; Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Adams 2008; Savin-Baden and Van Niekerk 2007). The approach was developed in response to dissatisfaction with positivism's ability to describe lived experience (Riessman 1993) and thus is an interpretivist approach that sees all knowledge as socially constructed (Sparkes 1992). It embraces many different approaches to data collection, analysis and representation (Trahar 2008) and notions of 'purpose', 'ethics, and validity' remain contested (Coulter and Smith 2009, 577). Narrative inquiry, as a methodology, is not just about collecting stories or telling them, the narrative approach is an overarching principle where data, analysis and representation are all narrative in form (Conle 2000). As a methodological approach it is particularly congruent with the purposes of educational research as '[e]ducators are interested in life. Life, to borrow John Dewey's metaphor, *is* education' (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, xxii).

Using Dewey's concept of experience, in particular in terms of situation, continuity, and interaction, Clandinin and Connelly (2000, 50) developed 'a *three dimensional narrative inquiry space*' the dimensions being: 'temporality', the 'personal/social' and 'place' between which the researcher moves. When combined with the contention of Trahar (2011) that the researcher must and can move from inside to outside the research space, narrative inquiry, as a methodology, becomes the spaces between which researchers move during data collection, analysis and representation. As researchers we are always in relation to the various narratives and the participants as they are in relation to each other, place and time. This narrative view

of experience and of research activity permeates all levels of the process and is at once a unifying force and a challenge to maintain throughout.

How narrative researchers tell the stories of their participants is not unproblematic. Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002, 332) offer an approach where participant stories are analysed and retold by the researcher through a process which seeks to identify 'time, place, plot, and scene' and reproduce this in a 'chronological sequence' which can often be missing from the original telling. The researcher adds 'rich detail' and makes 'causal links' and identifies 'themes' to provide a fuller narrative (Ollerenshaw and Creswell 2002, 332). This process of restorying inevitably produces a new story. However, through participant verification Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) argue that authenticity is maintained. This, notion of authenticity is however problematic as it implies that a single 'true' representation is achievable. I consider this in more detail later in the paper. In a similar way Rhodes (2000) offers the metaphor of the ghost writer; he is as much a part of the story as the research participant. These processes highlight the challenges that representation presents.

### **Voice, representation and the ways we make meaning**

The issue of representation and language use is often seen to be problematic within interpretive research as, it is argued, language is not neutral and thus when we as writers create a representation of the world it is value-laden (Garratt and Hodkinson 1998; Sparkes 1995; Denzin 1997; MacLure 2009; Pillow 2003). As the instigator and author of the research story it is unavoidable that the text produced will be as much that of the researcher as the participants. However, it is the researcher's responsibility to tell the story of the research, to analyse and interpret in order to seek and convey its significant messages. Lather (1991, 91) questions whether the author's voice can 'be anything but ... intrusive? How do we explore our own reasons for doing the research without putting ourselves back at the centre?'; a view echoed by Clough (1999, 445) when he says 'having incorporated myself into this work, there is a parallel and paradoxical task now of how to make that self less intrusive'. The crisis of representation is however multidimensional. Not only do we question how the research can represent the experience of others without the researcher placing themselves at the centre of the research story, but also the very possibility that language can ever accurately reflect experience (Denzin 1997; MacLure 2009) and thus Pillow (2003, 176) asks: 'How do I do representation knowing that I can never quite get it right?' Lather's (1991) solution is to explore ways in which a range of interpretations can be presented equally. In *The Word and*

*the World* Mulkay (1985) includes the interpretations of others in his text blurring the ‘boundaries between “fact” and “fiction”’ and in doing so ‘he demonstrates that the facts of knowledge, like truth, objectivity and reason, are *the effects of power*’ (Lather 1991, 99). If as researchers we cannot avoid the problems inherent in the representation of others we can at least seek to make our influence explicit and provide space for the inclusion of other interpretations non-hierarchically.

In thinking about how educational narrative research can make meaning from the narratives collected I have been influenced by examples of “messy” texts which offer alternative approaches to writing and presenting research (Clough 1999; Saavedra 2011; Guttorm 2012; Stronach and MacLure 1997; MacLure 2003; Berridge 2008; Piirto 2002<sup>a</sup>; Piirto 2002<sup>b</sup>; Jevic and Springgay 2008; Leavy 2009; Leavy 2010). Such texts Denzin (1997, 225) suggests ‘make the writer part of the writing project’ but attempt to provide more than ‘just subjective accounts of experience’ making space for the perspectives, voices and interpretations of others non-hierarchically. In doing so they ‘move back and forth between description, interpretation, and voice’ (Denzin 1997, 225). These could be described as postmodern, poststructuralist texts which attempt to ‘[interweave] the personal, political, historical, and cultural’ (Saavedra 2011, 286).

Clough (1999) takes Marcus’s (1994) concept of a “messy” text and creates ‘performance texts’ (Denzin 1997, 90); art informed ethnography. Clough researches and writes as a former student and teacher of literature who has turned to ethnography rather than an ethnographer who has taken a literary turn. I too am firstly a student and teacher of literature who, because of that experience, turned to narrative inquiry as a research approach and so feel that draw of the literary; art informs not merely reflects. Sandelowski (1994, 60) reveals her own preference for ‘a research report that reads like a novel’ insisting that ‘scholarship can be both rigorous and imaginative, true and beautifully rendered’. She wants a ‘good story that is coherent, consistent, and believable but that is also aesthetically and intellectually satisfying’ (60). For Sandelowski (1994) her research writing is a matter of invention from data whilst remaining truthful. This is not an easy thing to achieve, her demands and goals of research representation are challenging but inspire in me a desire to produce something that I feel does justice to the stories that are in my research data. Exploration of new ways to present research will, I sense, open up new ways of thinking that will enable discovery and invention, not of ‘lies’ (61) about but new truths in my data. The

role of reflexivity here is crucial where '[s]uch writing refuses to impose meaning on the reader; the text becomes a place where multiple interpretive experiences occur' (Denzin 1997, 224-225).

St. Pierre (1997, 179) also writes of her 'trouble with data' in that they 'must be translated into words so that they can be accounted for and interpreted' and yet she senses that within her research there are other forms of data – 'emotional data, dream data, ...sensual data and ...response data'. I understand and can empathise with what she says and recognise these 'data' as the thought processes we go through during the research process. But I feel that they see expression in the reflective and reflexive act of research and writing and also in the exploration of artistic forms of representation.

St. Pierre (180) also complains that the process of research methodology is linear and so often does not fit with how she feels research actually happens with 'data collection, analysis, and interpretation..[happening] simultaneously'. Thus she 'had no idea how to link some of the data with the knowledge that was produced' (St. Pierre 1997). She suggests that 'we should seriously rethink the organisation of the conventional qualitative research report because it artificially isolates those data (literature and voices of participants) in different sections and thus contributes to weak analysis – too many voices, too little analysis' (St. Pierre 2009, 231-232). Similarly, Guttorm (2012) suggests that conventional representations with distinct literature, methodology and data chapters are often reductive of the complexity of the research subject and limiting in terms of her struggle to represent the multifaceted nature of her data. She becomes stuck and what frees her are poetic representations which allow her:

'[t]o cross boundaries and dichotomous concepts, and to refrain from sureness and producing freezing metaphors. For example, to be surely unsure. And that it is important/significant/even reasonable to write from this partial, nomadic place, where I am and where I travel, still not meaning I have to write an autobiography, but just to take this place and stop thinking about whether this specific writing is this or that in some pre-existing category' (600).

These ideas freed me to think deconstructively about the traditional text and in more creative ways about the possibilities for interpretation, representation, making and communicating meaning. Guttorm (2012, 600) offers a kind of representation that 'can break

the form and structure and change the way of writing'. MacLure (2003, 81) also aims 'to interrupt, or disrupt, the processes by which research knowledge is customarily produced, and treated by those who read it as self-evident' (MacLure 2003, 81). She (MacLure 2003, 81) argues that '[t]exts cannot be reduced to singular meanings. But they can be unsettled – shaken up, breached, disturbed, torn – so that new questions and meanings are generated'. This deconstruction relates firstly to ways of reading but in turn informs ways of writing. It 'proposes that the methodological policing and purification of language, to make it behave properly with respect to its superiors (meaning, truth, reality, etc), can never succeed. There is no transparent writing' (169). In practice this has meant a search for and exploration of ways of writing that 'baffle the boundaries between literature and science, self and other, data and analysis, fact and fiction, mastery and surrender' (172).

This notion of lack of containment has been explored previously by Stronach and MacLure (1997) drawing on Derrida's concept of a multidisciplinary literary theory whereby they suggest educational research can also draw on multiple fields of theory. For them this is a 'methodology ...of disappointment' (4) a 'strategic uncertainty' used 'in the (uncertain) hope that this will generate possibilities for things to happen that are closed off by the epistemologies of certainty' (5). Such readings inevitably and valuably deny 'a final resolution of meaning' (83).

### **Representation in practice**

Searching for a solution to these issues of how to represent the experiences of others, to re-tell, re-story, to fully represent, to make explicit the influence of the researcher, to allow for multi-interpretations in a non-hierarchical way, led me to a consideration of literary methods. Leavy (2010) suggests that the outcomes of narrative research be represented through arts-based writings and has herself used poetry extensively in her work. Research and art for Sinner et al (2006, 1224) combine in the methodology of a/r/tography where art and writing are 'interconnected and woven through each other to create additional and/or enhanced meanings'. This Springgay, Irwin and Kind (2005, 889) argue is empowering enabling different approaches to research that are emergent and flexible, resisting 'specific criteria' and instead allowing the researcher to discover their terms of engagement. It is clear that there are overlapping elements between narrative inquiry, arts-based research and a/r/tography in that narrative itself is an art form and very often the outcomes of such a study

are represented in numerous forms including prose, drama, poetry, performative and visual art. It is also a lived experience for both researcher and participant. It may be that it is distinct from autoethnography and arts-based research where art is central to the research. In exploring these ideas in my own research I did not set out to produce an art work, but included art forms in the representation of my research and so am informed by both methodologies/concepts.

Poetry has been used as a method to represent data in educational research for some time having been first written about by Laurel Richardson in *Fields of Play* (1997). The argument for poetry centres on its ability to represent richly the voices of others whilst making explicit the influence of the researcher.

‘Poems, surrounded by space and weighted by silence, break through the noise to present an essence. Sensory scenes created with skilfully placed words and purposeful pauses, poems push feelings to the fore-front capturing heightened moments of social reality as if under a magnifying glass’ (Leavy 2009, 63).

Rather than making meaning obscure Pelias (2004, 9 as quoted in Leavy 2010, 240) suggests otherwise arguing that it is science which fails to see things as they are:

‘Science is the act of looking at a tree and seeing lumber. Poetry is the act of looking at a tree and seeing a tree.

The alchemy that separates the head from the heart finds no gold.’

Percer (2002, 1) argues ‘poetic language results in a richly textured, insightful, and complex means by which to make sense of the world and that the educational community will greatly benefit from scholarship that brings this to light’. Further she (1) suggests more ‘traditional research is limiting in its narrow scope of articulation and its formal demands for demonstration’. Arguments against the use of poetry to represent research claim that it stands outside the rules, is not easily understood, and, as it is attempted by amateurs, can often result in bad poetry (Percer 2002; Piirto 2002a). Percer (5) suggests the first two of these are only problematic if the poetry is to be read as something other than poetic; ‘as long as poetry is not thought to be adhering to the standard rules of research, it will not violate them’. In terms of craft she is clear that great works of literary art are not necessary or possible but researchers need to be aware of language and technique (Percer 2002). Significantly, on this point she

argues that researchers' use of poetry is usually not motivated by a desire to develop poetry writing skills but to find alternative ways in which to research (Percher 2002). Foley (2002) argues however that the common resistance to make 'evidentiary claims' leaves only the artistic merit of the text and that not all researchers are skilled literary writers (Foley 2002). The challenge of amateurism makes exploration difficult and leaves no space for alternative approaches to representation. To say that educational researchers cannot use poetry in their research because they are not poets is to misinterpret their intent. The primary intent of researchers is to represent their data in alternative ways. Poetry is not their aim but a means. Having said that this "means" must be meaningful and so some knowledge of poetic technique is necessary. But the expectation cannot be great art. When writing using only the words of the participants there are challenges as metaphor, rhythm, rhyme, onomatopoeia, imagery, the poet's tools of the trade, are missing and, without taking huge poetic licence with the words of others, difficult to manufacture. The process of writing poetry from data is therefore distinct from that of the poet who may take any inspiration as a starting point and use any words they choose.

Glesne (1997, 205) describes a process of research representation she terms 'poetic transcription', making a distinction between her technique and traditional notions of poetry. After a process of coding and thematic analysis she writes using only the participant's words aiming to express 'the essences that I understood', which combine the voices of the research and participant (Glesne 1997, 206). Langer and Furman (2004, 7) point to a similar condensed form that 'leads to a more powerful presentation of data'. It may be argued that all qualitative data representation includes both the researcher and participant voice however Glesne (1997) argues that creating poetry from the data reveals the researchers' involvement more clearly. Further, experimental ways of representing research provide opportunities for different ways of knowing inspiring creativity on the part of the researcher and the reader (Glesne 1997). In Tyler's (1986) conception of poetic writing the reader is enabled to and responsible for making the text meaningful as, rather than presenting, replicating or representing, it evokes. Thus research writing is a 'cooperative story making that, in one of its ideal forms, would result in a polyphonic text, none of whose participants would have the final word...' (Tyler 1986, 126)

## **Poetic transcription/analysis/interpretation – ways to make meaning**

Seeking to produce a polyphonic text as Tyler (1986) suggests has led me to explore how poetry can be utilised as a means of representing the multiple voices inherent in my research and the layers of meaning. Such representations do not produce final interpretations but allow for multiple readings of the data inviting critical engagement by the reader who is free to add their own meaning. Many researchers have used poetry as a means of representing data, but here I was seeking a method of representation of not just data, but my reflective notes and the literature I had read. All of these voices compete for attention in a traditional research paper and often the participants' voices are the lowest in a hierarchical structure which privileges the voice of the author who must make editorial choices and those of published theorists who are represented in a literature review.

I did not begin with poetic representation but explored story writing and drama first. Following the approaches of Savin-Baden (2004) and Riessman (1993) I kept the integrity of the narrative intact throughout the analysis and interpretation stage and so replaced a process of chunking and coding with repeated listening to the audio files combined with the production of reflective field notes. Using Savin-Baden's (2004) combined analysis and interpretation approach I created individual stories of each participant. I then compared these with the audio files and field notes checking for omissions. Using a reiterative process I refined these stories making reflective notes of my editorial decisions. I then undertook a thematic analysis of the stories aiming to identify connections across each story (Savin-Baden 2004; Riessman 1993; Clandinin and Connelly 2000). I repeated this process with the group recordings with the aim of producing a shared story of experience. This was a gradual process and slowly a narrative emerged with a recognisable chronological development and a semblance of a plot. In this process I was informed by Ollerenshaw and Creswell's (2002) restorying process and Rhodes' (2000) ghostwriter metaphor.

I wrote the stories in the first person because although I had re-created them I still saw them as belonging to the participants. The group stories are collective, and I included many voices as a means of expressing the collective experiences and the multiple voices that collaboratively inform them. The results are vignettes of conversations and captured drama. I asked the participants to authenticate the individual stories to ensure trustworthiness and a negotiated "truth" (Butler-Kisber 2010; Polkinghorne 2007; Savin-Baden 2004). For Clandinin and Connelly (2000) ethics is a thread that goes through the whole process of

conducting a narrative inquiry and as such impacts on the relationships the researcher has with the participants. Participant authentication implies a moral obligation to make any changes requested (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). I asked the students if they recognised the events and themselves within these stories. I also gave them complete freedom to remove anything with which they were not completely comfortable. All the students who responded to this request were happy with *my* version of events. However, not everyone responded therefore, despite my best efforts to produce something that was otherwise, I feel I can only claim that what I have written is, indeed, *my* version of events. This was challenging for me and illuminating. The words in the representation I had produced were those of my participants, some of them had authenticated the resulting texts as such, and some had not. I had taken editorial control, I had offered to share that control but with limited success. In seeking to include the voices of others equally I had to admit that those voices were now disembodied. I had taken them, chosen some, discarded others and represented them as I remembered. Recognisable as they were to the participants, as a researcher, I had still produced a representation. Whatever I did I left my mark. I could not pretend that the text I produced was anything other than my own. For Clandinin and Connolly (2000) ethics are about the relationships which are established in the field and further how those participants' stories are then told. Both these issues relate to the power dynamics that exist between researcher and participant. My participants' reluctance to edit the narrative I had produced may well have been due to my position as a member of staff, although I did not teach any of the participants and so did not hold a position of authority in relation to their course outcome. Adams (2008) also suggests the narrative inquirer must be aware of their power to tell the story. The stories I had produced *did* use *only* the participants' words and I had sought a way to represent their words that evoked their experience but I needed a way to interpret and represent the data which explicitly revealed my influence as a researcher. Thus, as a further process of interpretation of the data and in order to find a means of representing the research that including both my experience, the participants' and left room for the readers' own interpretation I then used the data, the literature and my reflective notes to write poetry.

The process of poetic transcription/analysis/interpretation I developed takes as its starting point data, reflective notes, field notes and the literature. These are combined into stanzas which place the participants' words alongside those of my own reflections, interpretations and the voices that come from the literature.

In turning to poetry I was seeking an alternative way in which to present the data to that of using disembodied extracts of data that could only ever be a partial representation of the participants' experience and the research process. I was also seeking another level of interpretation that included my experience and that would therefore tell a more expansive story of the research journey. However, I did not want my experience to emerge as the dominant story and so I sought a method of representation that would also allow the reader to make the text meaningful. Further, I needed a method that was economical with language. I could not give the reader the whole unedited text including every word spoken and all my reflective notes. I had to edit the data and subtract, but in the gaps between the words I chose I could provide space for other voices. St. Pierre (1997) writes of other forms of data all of which form part of the experience of conducting a research project. Poetry allowed me to include those forms of data and provide a fuller representation as the poems are an expression of not only the data collected but the literature I read and the reflective notes I made. In this way the economical form of poetry allows space for many voices and stories. Denzin (1997), MacLure (2003) and Pillow (2003) struggle with representation and the balance between the writer's voice and the inclusion of others. Clough (1999) and Lather (1991) express concerns about the intrusive power of the authorial voice. In writing poetry rather than representing my data in a more traditional manner I could tell more stories and include more voices. All researchers make editorial choices; data is reduced to a form which can be represented in a readable way. A story is chosen and told. Poetry is personal and the author's influence is explicit rather than hidden, but it is also economical and here I have used that virtue to not only represent the participants' experience but to include my own, my interpretation and to allow the reader theirs. Thus I see the method I have used as not just poetic transcription or representation of data but a simultaneous transcription/analysis/interpretation process.

### **The Poetic Turn**

This poetry seeks to tell a more complete story of the research than traditional forms of representation by including both poetic interpretation of the data, the literature and poems inspired by the reflective diary I kept during the research process. Thus I reveal my position as a researcher and make explicit my influence on the research process through evoking those reflections in poetic form. Poetry is a distillation, rather than a fragmentation of language, into its purest form. The traditional research form allows little space for reflective accounts and yet the influence we have as researchers on the process of research and our reflexive

stance is fundamentally important. *Dragon's Breath* reveals the trepidation I felt in the early stage of data collection; it is written in free verse form and was inspired by the reflective notes I made at the start of the data collection process.

### **Dragon's Breath**

My study begins in the year of the dragon.

Fortune favours the brave they say.

Do I feel brave as I begin this journey?

No clear path opens up before me,

I story my way.

This is a land of legend.

Are you feeling lucky?

Who will luck be tonight?

Lady or punk?

Dare I presume to ask?

I quicken my pace and stumble,

I must tread carefully.

I feel the dragon's breath on my neck,

My skin prickles as the warm air rises.

Will I be lucky and ride those thermals?

The poem *The idea of narrative* came early on in the research process when I was thinking about methodology; it is also expressed in free verse form. It was inspired by a conversation with my research mentor and reveals the struggle I was having in finding a way to interpret and represent my data.

### **The idea of narrative**

I am sitting in a cafe not drinking coffee with a woman I have not really spoken to before. She isn't drinking coffee either. We talk animatedly for over an hour, the subject ...narrative research.

Two things become clear to me – I am a narrative researcher in spite of myself, because of myself.

I just am. Because I believe it is the right way to go about this.

I am an amateur feeling around the edges of this.

She sets me a challenge. Gifting me words I can use to fortify me on my way.

If it feels right it probably is right. Trust your instincts.

The challenge is to see what is under the polished sheen of the stories I have created.

What if.....?

This reminds me of my days as an art student challenged to charcoal over my careful pencil drawings.

Do not be precious.

Something greater may come of the energy you put in now, not reckless energy but disruptive in its own way.

Shaken or stirred?

Who cares, as long as something comes out of the mix?

Maybe we should have ordered cocktails.

The poems attempt to say in ‘essence’ (Richardson 1997, 150) what the students recounted in their talk, what Leavy (2009, 64) terms a ‘*feeling-picture*’. I chose to write some poems using traditional Chinese verse forms as Chinese students made up the largest group in my participant cohort. The Jueju is a quatrain made up of two couplets each line having five characters. The Qijue has a similar form but each line has seven characters. I have taken some liberties with these forms in that I have two quatrains in some poems and I have taken a character to mean a syllable and so each line is either a five or seven syllabic form and in some cases these run on rather than being end stopped. There is perhaps a large degree of poetic licence here then but there is also a nod to the traditional forms. The following extract is an example of poetic representation of participant data:

Table 1. Writing.

Huan - It is difficult for Chinese people to answer essay questions, some essay questions you have to think about and they expect you to find the point you should focus on and to hit the heart of the question. I can't catch the knowledge, the point, the principles that match the question to the answer. Hasan - Have you tried to make a little plan? Huan - Yeah, I just look at the question but I don't know which point I should... Haan - So you have the knowledge but you don't know which one you should use? Huan - Yeah, I have no idea how to write about	<b>Writing</b> It's so hard to write I can't catch the words That fit the question They float out of reach  Slipping from my grasp Grey birds blurring in Misty air their calls Distant; they vanish  What alternative? The best and the worst
--	--

<p>this. Hasan - The next thing is to read. Li - The text, the exam, alternative approaches? What is it about? Alternative approaches or something? Some of the words used do not specify how to do it. Hasan - So alternative would be like different options. Huan - In my honest opinion I think “alternative approaches” means they want you to talk about, the best and the worst. Hasan - I think the best thing to do is just to read as much as you can; it doesn’t need to be all accountancy stuff, just read. Huan - I have read word by word and I have covered every corner of this book, but I still cannot. Li - Remembering is not easy. Huan - She gave me the question but I don’t know how to answer it properly and I can’t catch the relevant knowledge to match with this.</p>	<p>Read, read, read, read, read Words spin out of reach</p>
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Poetry, rather than the disembodied voices of data extracts, evokes the participants’ experience adding value to the data whilst leaving space for and also inspiring the readers’ interpretation. By its very personal nature the researcher reveals herself through the creative process. The use of fictional forms composed from the words of the participants gives access to the lived experience in time and space. Cultural, social, political, historical influences can all be brought into play. The researcher is at once within and outside the research field and data whilst also inviting the reader in. The opportunity for multiple interpretations remains open, in contrast to more final representations of data which tend to close these possibilities off. Allowing for the interpretation of others, for other ‘truths’, means relinquishing some control but not all responsibility. The researcher leaves her mark on the data but does so in a much more explicit and transparent way through the production of fictive forms of representation.

Poetry that combines the participant voice, literature and the researcher’s response denies certainty and challenges the authority of the privileged authorial voice. A separate literature review, albeit critiqued, underlines the power of the empowered academic expert and places that debate foremost in the reader’s mind. The participant voice more often than not is inevitably relegated in this hierarchical structure of the traditional research paper. In

choosing to combine these voices within the poetic form, that privileging of voice is challenged. “Intercultural Communication” was written in response to reading Brown’s (2009) extensive literature review, which suggests positive outcomes for both UK and international students in terms of language competency, cultural awareness and satisfaction as a result of interaction with home students. Other literature that reports a lack of such interaction (Hyland et al 2008; Merrick 2004; Montgomery 2009; Ramburuth and Tani’s 2009), Sanderson’s (2004) ideas on the challenges of globalisation and the participants’ stories, which tell of their experiences, were also integrated into this poem.

### **Intercultural Communication**

‘We assume/presume,  
The nature of interaction with the ‘cultural other’  
Is the challenge and test for globalisation’ (Sanderson 2004, 7).  
‘It is about who *we* are  
And who *they* are  
And what happens when the two meet.  
“We don’t talk much.”  
It is about *our* world  
And *their* world  
And what happens when they both collide.  
“We have an international life.”  
It is about me and you,  
The colonists and the colonised,  
The cultured and the barbarian,  
The familiar and the strange,  
“We are strange here.”  
The in-group and out-group,  
A-groupers and B-groupers,  
The North and the South’ (Sanderson 2004, 7).  
‘Family and foreigners,  
Native and exile,  
Friend and foe’ (Zachary 2000, 278 as quoted in Sanderson 2004),  
‘Us and them’ (Said 1995, 43 as quoted in Sanderson 2004),  
‘Insiders and outsiders’ (Singh 2002, 5 as quoted in Sanderson 2004),

'The West and the Rest' (Mahbubani 2002, as quoted in Sanderson 2004).

"They are brave."

We start with the self (Sanderson 2004).

"I talk to everyone".

Academic engagement on an equal basis,

"We are all students together",

"One group."

Not a privileging of the host nation's 'knowledge and ethics' (Appadurai 2001 as quoted in Tian and Lowe 2009, 663).

"We help each other".

When the voices of the participants and the literature are juxtaposed in the poetic form a direct conversation between them becomes very apparent. The participants are able to directly answer the challenges of the literature and respond with their own experience. Their experience therefore becomes as significant a voice in the academic discussion as that of the literature. Whereas often in research writing the disembodied excerpts of participants' stories do not attain that equality, as they can be lost within masses of literature; lone voices not directly speaking to the reader. Poetry gives the participants voices immediacy and an impact that is rarely present in traditional representations of data. The experiences of the students as they negotiate both their newly emerging sense of self and relationships with others within a different educational culture and environment can be clearly seen. The students make a journey from segregation to integration and form a supportive intercultural community rising to the challenge presented by Sanderson.

### **The Act of Reading**

When Pillow (2003, 176) asks: 'How do I do representation knowing that I can never quite get it right?' she points to a tension that exists between the theoretical positions of New Materialism and arts-based research. Bolt (2004, 171) attempts to bridge that gap through Deleuze's concept of performativity arguing that 'in process, the body becomes language rather than merely inscribes language'. Thus Bolt (2004, 172) 'envisag[es] representation as an act of concurrent actual production' (172) (see Barrett, E. and Bolt, B. eds. 2012. *Carnal Knowledge. Towards a 'New Materialism' through the arts*. London: I.B. Tauris for further

discussion). That is not to suggest that this is an easy task, when in dominant western thought '[r]epresentation is reduced to the (Saussurian) sign, the play of signifiers' (173), however, Bolt (2004, 171) points to the example of indigenous Australian culture for whom 'ritual activities produce reality'. Bolt's (2004) main focus here is art but does not exclude literature and her argument points to a dynamic relationship between author, text and reader. The main focus of this paper is that of text production rather than reception, however, the latter cannot be ignored. How readers respond to a text is, of course, a primary concern of any author. Reader-response theory firmly places the reader as one of the co-collaborators in the production of a text's meaning. Both Rosenblatt (1994, 24) and Iser (1978, 21) with their 'efferent' and 'aesthetic reading' and 'artistic' and 'aesthetic poles' respectively contend that reading is a process of 'actualisation' (Iser 1978, 21) in which the reader fills in the gaps that the indeterminate nature of the literary text leaves (Iser 1978). Thus in Fish's (1980, 42) 'affective fallacy fallacy' the reader's affective response to the text is valued and the reader becomes a co-producer of meaning alongside the author. 'Traditional research reports' tend to be written with a greater degree of 'determinacy' than literary texts (Atkinson and Rosiek 2009, 181). The 'indeterminacy' of literary texts allow the reader 'to bring his own faculties' to bare in the interpretation of their meaning although may 'exceed...limits to the reader's willingness to participate' (Iser 1978, 108). The creation of poetry from data/reflective notes/literature makes explicit the many co-collaborators in its production; further it aims to produce a polyphonic and heteroglossic text. The variety of world views and languages of the co-collaborators resist a fixed representation. Bakhtin's assertion that poetry could only ever be monologic has been challenged by contemporary literary criticism and the emergence of modern and post-modern poetry (Pauls 2014). Bakhtin's questioning of a unified authorial intent is acknowledged by poetry which has actively sought to disrupt the monologic unity of traditional poetry, creating open texts that include many voices, views, languages in use and thus denying a final authorial resolution (Pauls 2014). The possibility is that 'the relative indeterminacy of [such a] text allows a spectrum of actualizations' (24). However, Fish (1980) suggests that although individual responses producing polyvocal interpretations can be the result of the reading process, communities of shared experience may produce monovocal readings (See Atkinson and Rosiek 2009 for an example of this). How academics, students or the general reader may well respond to the poetic representations produced in my research goes beyond the scope of this paper. Rosenblatt (1994) suggests that in reality all readers are placed somewhere on a continuum between the efferent and aesthetic and that positioning is influenced by the readers' resources, previous experiences and the text itself.

## Conclusion

The multiplicity of meaning and the layers and folds of the research story that alternative forms of representation provide may enable educational research ‘to produce [the] new knowledge in the field’ for which Gallagher (2011, 51) calls. Conceivably we have to write ‘messy’ texts if we are to have a hope of understanding the messiness of human life. We also need to explore the ways in which we can represent data and the voices of others that are honest, authentic and meaningful. Here I argue that the researcher’s influence is unavoidable, that we cannot claim to have represented, untouched, the voices of others leaving them somehow to speak for themselves. Poetry makes the representation of data a personal process of meaning making. It evokes the experience of the participants, makes explicit the researcher’s influence, acknowledging the many co-collaborators in its production including that of the reader. It must be acknowledged, that although polyvocal readings of the text are a possibility they are not guaranteed, however the indeterminacy of such texts encourages such readings. Thus poetic representation makes space for multiple voices, layers of stories and multiple interpretations in a non-hierarchical manner. Here the direct juxtaposition of the data with literature in poetic form serves to produce a direct conversation between the participants and academia. These juxtapositions create an emphasis highlighting for the reader the experiences of the participants creating insights and extending our knowledge. It also serves to give the participants’ voices equality in that process of knowledge making.

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