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Developing as a Researcher: Mess and Method: Researching Others' Realities

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**Developing as a Researcher:
Mess and Method: Researching Others' Realities
Siân Etherington**

Mess and Method: Researching others' realities

Imagine a huge, multi-coloured pile of wool in each corner of a room. Each pile is so big that you could jump right into it like a huge cushion. Different colours and textures of wool intertwine and spiral around each other. A line- or perhaps many lines - from each is snaking over the floor towards me. As the first thread comes into my hands I take up my knitting needles and very slowly, painfully and with many mistakes start to knit the wool together. My knitting is not very good, so there are some areas of over-tension, dropped stitches and holes- and the colours do not come together into the wonderful rainbow I had planned. However, after a period of labour I have a short scarf – something new that I've created from the tangled heaps of threads laid out before me. My feeling is one of relief and some pride at my creation – but I have some questions and some disquiet too. I've changed the threads and tangles into something else; the original has been lost and my ordered, but truncated, output doesn't capture the glorious spirit of the mess and disorder that had existed before.

For me, this is what doing a piece of research can be like. I take up the threads of stories and lives of others and make them into something new of my own. I turn the messiness of those lives into something more regular and organized. I put my own focus and interpretation on the experiences of others and produce an explanation or description from it which they themselves may not recognise.

From this starting point some further questions developed:

- How do we maintain a sense of real life in our research? A sense of messiness? Should we?
- What happens when we impose theoretically informed interpretations on participants' stories? The question 'whose story is it anyway?' has been asked by other researchers too (Pavlenko 2002).

Thinking about life and research we could see the two as contradictory in several ways. Life is messy, unplanned, experienced by individuals, with dynamic, changing and multiple realities existing for people throughout their lives. Research on the other hand, could be viewed from a certain perspective, as ordered, systematic, concerned with representation of some kind, and focusing on single realities. How can we reconcile these two things in the research we produce?

The nature of the research process may also lead to the marginalization of participants. The centrality of the researcher in the research process and the finality of the status of a research report may mean that the voices of the

participants become heard only through the researcher's words. As Canagarajah writes,

"Because the subjects exist in the report only through the voice of the researcher, there is a natural tendency for their complexity to be suppressed and their identity to be generalized (or essentialized) to fit the dominant assumptions and theoretical constructs of the researcher and the disciplinary community."
(Canagarajah 1996:324)

I explored these questions and dilemmas through the work of several qualitative researchers from the social sciences. Ideas from postmodern approaches to qualitative research indicate that viewing the researcher as 'bricoleur' or kind of 'craft creator' who constructs research using tools and materials that are to hand, is a useful perspective. The act of bricolage creates something from materials which are present, while keeping alive the possibility of other representations or combinations of elements. The work of Ellingson (2013) was particularly thought-provoking for me. She asks that researchers move on from *triangulation* of data, which uses complementary pieces of data to support each other and thus close down possibilities of meaning, to *crystallization*, where connections and meanings are kept more partial and open. She suggests that researchers need to expand their continuum of possible research paradigms to embrace the 'Art-Impressionist'. This lies beyond both the Realist /Post-positivist views of research and what she calls the 'Middle -Ground', essentially an Interpretivist approach encompassing questions regarding understanding and co-construction of personal worlds. The Art-Impressionist stance brings the artistic and creative within research into greater focus; suggesting that one of the outputs of research may be artistic endeavor and that art may be a way of representing the findings of research in a more open and meaningful way. Since our expectations of art are that there is more than one interpretation can come to bear on it and that each viewer or user of art will bring and take away something different from the experience, framing research in this way allows the messiness of our research areas and the voices of the research participants to remain more present in our outputs.

So, how might the Art -Impressionist stance and TESOL research interact? Within EFL/ TESOL research there has been a recent rise in narrative approaches as methodology (e.g. Barkhuizen *et al* 2014). However, others have taken this further moving to more deliberate crafting of research outputs as art. Nelson (2011) for example has written poems, plays and short story fiction as ways of representing her research. Her view is that narrative accounts of research can serve to democratize the knowledge making process by including a much wider range of voices and experiences in a deliberately non-academic representation. Such artworks make research more creative and also more inclusive through 'grass roots knowledge work' (p.470).

This brings me back to my opening dilemmas. Can research capture messiness? Can research keep the voice of participants central, clearly heard and unimpeded by academic 'rigour' in writing? I think the possibilities discussed by Nelson and Ellingson provide some answers, although they are clear challenges in implementation. Nelson herself recognizes the issues relating to tensions

between implicit, open meanings and the 'academic' wish for more explicit and authoritative answers. The act of fictionalizing itself may also be seen as a move away from the mess of real life, through 'narrative smoothing' (p. 476) and re-storying.

However, as the HE academy itself moves towards alternative ways of conceptualizing research (for example, current PhDs in creative practice disciplines now include performance, art, fiction as major elements) it is possible that more space is opening up for this sort of approach. The necessity of showing 'impact' of research within the UK HE research evaluation framework has also brought more artistic representations of research into being (e.g. an impact project for stem cell research used children's milk teeth to build a tooth fairy palace for display in galleries and public spaces <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2011/oct/10/childrens-teeth-stem-cell-research>) It will be interesting to see how such moves further influence discipline areas outside the creative arts.

I concluded my poster by posing two questions for participants:

- What story could you craft about our experiences today?
- What art could you make?

If I had been braver or more artistically confident, I would have tried to present the poster itself as a piece of art. Indeed that is something that I have attempted in the opening section of this paper. My aim for the poster was to provoke some thinking in participants about my dilemmas and to resolve my own thinking around these long-held questions. I think I achieved one of these aims, in that PCE participants were enthused to discuss these ideas with me. As for the second aim, I think I've reconfirmed for myself that, in the spirit of art and creation, opening up a question does not need to lead to immediate or clear-cut answers: a state of continual interpretation is a valuable and acceptable place to be.

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