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Ludecke, Michelle 2014, The voices in my head, Journal of artistic & creative education, vol. 8, no. 1, Special edition on performed research, pp. 36-46.

Available from Deakin Research Online

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THE VOICES IN MY HEAD

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Dr Michelle Ludecke's research centres on notions of becoming a teacher. Her PhD investigated first-year teachers' experiences in their transition to teaching. Michelle employed a theatre-based research approach to analysing and representing participants' *firsts* as moments of identity transformation. Michelle has a background in secondary dance and drama teaching, and is a lecturer in Pedagogy and Curriculum in the Faculty of Arts and Education at Deakin University. Her work aims to promote the complementary dimensions of performance and education.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This piece outlines my practice of performed research investigating first-year teachers' experiences of identity transformation. The processes of framing the inquiry, analysing the data, and presenting the findings were enacted through the processes of scripting, rehearsal and performance. A discussion of these processes is framed around vignettes of the voices in my head.

The voices in my head

My experience of performed research was initiated, strengthened, and sustained through a variety of voices in my head during my research journey.

SUPERVISOR 1

Performed research – what’s that?

ACADEMIC

How does that turn into a PhD? How do you ‘write that up?’

PERFORMING ARTS TECHNICIAN

Are you from the faculty of performing arts? Is it a performance and exegesis?

CONFERENCE ATTENDEE

Where’s the rigour?

ACADEMIC

Are you one of those drama-types?

SUPERVISOR 1

How are you going to frame your research? What lens are you using? What’s your methodology?

ACADEMIC

How did you get ethics approval for that?

CONFERENCE ATTENDEE

What’s the theatre-based method you’re using called?

PhD STUDENT

What are your findings?

ACADEMIC

That’s different...you’re very brave!

Performed research to frame the inquiry

These voices, while seeming brutal, dismissive or arrogant, actually caused me to clarify how performed research would work in my inquiry. Over time, the voices took on abstracted personas – Commedia-like stock characters. They questioned, taunted, encouraged, enlightened, frightened and congratulated me throughout my journey. During periods of denial, self-deprecation, and a kind of flat-line where literally nothing would happen, the difficult questions actually drove me forward, leading to moments where I felt as though everything ‘just clicked’. At moments such as these I recognised my tacit knowledge, shaped by my background in the performing arts, influenced me to make seemingly ‘instinctive’ decisions. Analysing these decisions helped me to explain why performed research was an appropriate method for me to frame the research, analyse the data, and present my findings. Making connections between these processes and scripting, rehearsing, and performing assisted to justify the method for myself, and others – particularly other researchers who tended to ask the tricky questions.

SUPERVISOR 1

And what about the idea you had a while ago, about the drama side of things? How might that fit in?

ME

Um, I thought you didn’t like that idea, so I’ve given up on that.

SUPERVISOR 1

No - I never said that. It’s just not my area of expertise, so I’m unclear as to how it might play out.

ME

Oh! I thought you were steering me away from all of that...so maybe I’ll send you my thoughts...I was thinking of a script...

Scripting as data analysis

I came to understand and appreciate that ‘tricky’ questions were often based on people’s unfamiliarity with performed research as a methodology. The voices of my supervisors taught me that I needed to explain in order for others to understand..and that’s the tricky bit. I can’t just say ‘trust me and I’ll show you’. Through the processes of performing my research I learnt to justify, be clear, and make connections to the audiences’ understandings. My audiences needed information presented to them with enough clarity to be understandable, and enough ambiguity to allow them to feel like they’d had a revelation they could own.

Scripting as a process of analysis also allowed me (and other readers) to view the data from a critical distance. The process of inquiry in this instance occurred within the process of composition and vice versa. The purpose of undertaking performed research was more than the creation of an aesthetic object; it was employed as a method of inquiry in itself. Performed research as a method of inquiry involved experimenting with ways of analysing and presenting, or representing, the interview texts.

When I was grappling with analysing masses of interview data many voices swirled around in my mind to the point where I couldn’t focus. Shaping the data into a playscript allowed me to hone in on the essence of the data. I stripped back the layers of each participant’s interview to their defining *first*. These *firsts* were revelations in multiple senses. They were the epiphanic moments (Denzin, 2003) belonging to each participant that revealed aspects of their practice and identity. *Firsts* are also temporal, frozen in a particular moment in time and place. They are highly dramatic anticipated or unpredictable liminal moments. I noticed that the *firsts* fractured time and identity into a before and after. As such I shaped the script through the use of a trio of Interviewee characters to represent the ‘after’ as the ‘before’ plays out in front of them. This captured what the participants said, and how they recreated their *firsts* in the interviews.

All the text in the original play script was verbatim data. In working with strictly verbatim data I had little influence over the choice of words to form the text. However, I employed several rhetorical strategies in the shaping of the verbatim data by considering the intended audience, the selection of thematics, and the juxtaposition of stories both within the scenes and between the scenes. My main intention was to compare and contrast in order to discover, analyse, and express meaning. When making decisions about what verbatim data could be transformed into stage direction and action additional evocative rhetorical devices such as body language, facial expression, gesture, movement and stillness were employed.

SUPERVISOR 2

I am trying to think of a supervisorial way to say this...but I can't.
I LOVE THIS SCRIPT!

PLAYWRIGHT

I just wanted to let you know how much I enjoyed reading the script. I am intrigued by the proposal that you put together as the framework and impetus for creating this piece. What you have has absolutely no fat on it. There is a truthfulness to the characters and their experience that exists on the page (a clichéd line I know but true nonetheless!).

TEACHER-ACTOR

Oh my God - it's me all over again!

Scripting as an analytical framework

The voices made the process of scripting, and later rehearsal and performance a joyous and exciting framework for analysis. Framing the script within a phenomenographic paradigm assisted me to explore and explain the experiences of the first-year teachers' identity transformation. The scenes were logically related through the ordering, in a deliberately parsimonious manner, from first days, to first experiences, then first reflections. I employed theatrical conventions and devices that I believed would enhance the portrayal of the experiences

of the participants being represented, while attempting to stay true to each situation – to take the audience far enough away from reality in order to allow new ways of seeing. I refrained from including unifying dialogue within and between scenes unless it could be found in the interview data. I judiciously selected scenes that represented different discourses surrounding first-year teachers in general while maintaining the personal experiences of each participant as an individual. In these ways I attempted to avoid one of the performative stance pitfalls of the performance ethnographer – the ‘custodian’s rip-off’ (Conquergood, 1985, p.5), that selfish stand where the researcher’s aim is simply to find some good performance material. If I am honest I was tempted to create extra dialogue, and embellish some accounts in order to create a more theatrical piece. At these times I reminded myself that the purpose was to analyse the participants’ experiences in an ethical and accessible manner, not just to create a performance as a finished piece.

Rehearsing to theorise and discuss

The participants all knew at the outset of the research that their data would be formed into a theatrical representation of some kind. Initially I was thinking of holding a Forum Theatre event, but over time I became more conscious of my responsibility to represent faithfully and ethically the participants’ experiences.

PARTICIPANT 1

So do I have to perform in the play?

PARTICIPANT 2

I don’t have to be in the play do I?

PARTICIPANT 3

Can I be in the play?

PARTICIPANT 4

Who is going to be me in the play?

PARTICIPANT 5

Did I say that? I can't remember now, it was so long ago, and so much has happened.

PARTICIPANT 6

Um...can we change that? I don't want my colleagues finding out that I said that...they won't know who I am will they?

PARTICIPANT 7

I don't wear those sort of clothes!

PARTICIPANT 8

How come my scene was the shortest!

PARTICIPANT 9

Why did you pick that bit for my scene?

PARTICIPANT 10

Can I bring 15 people to the play?

PARTICIPANT 11

I don't want to come to the play - I just don't want to think about school or teaching at all any more.

PARTICIPANT 12

I couldn't believe it but after the play I was really excited to teach the next day!

The participants' voices emerged as they read, discussed and observed the play and performance. Their words assisted me to consider the range of responses people have to performance in general and performed research in particular, in the transition from page to stage. The participants responded to the script, rehearsals and performance in a variety of ways, including fear of having to perform, misconceptions regarding their representation, and despair or sheer joy at being reminded of events that had shaped who they were becoming. Performance can be feared, provocative, uncomfortable, confusing, and uplifting all at once. Individuals bring their own

histories to their understanding of performance. With such thoughts in mind I considered carefully the implications of employing actors to portray the teacher characters in the performance. I decided against employing actors to portray the participants' characters, and instead employed teachers with an understanding of performance. I encouraged the teacher-actors to bring their own personal histories to the performance and offer suggestions as to the interpretation of their characters. I wanted the experience for the audience to be as authentic as possible, to move their experience beyond enjoyment to something that would speak to teachers from teachers, and to counter the pitfalls experienced when employing actors who know little about those they are representing (Ackroyd & O'Toole, 2010, pp. 14-15).

During rehearsal it became more important that I maintained an ethical and moral commitment to the participants' voices, yet I was also conscious that I was creating a piece of theatre – a virtual reality. This is one of the tensions many performance ethnographers face (Ackroyd & O'Toole, 2010; Anderson, 2007; Denzin, 2003; Mienczakowski, 2001; Saldaña, 1999), and I found myself meticulously self-justifying every intricate decision I made in shaping the text into performance. Ethical considerations emerged during the validation rehearsal where a participant voiced her discomfort at the way her colleagues were portrayed, and that she may be identifiable. This example also draws attention to the power and problem of vernacular language when interpreted by another. In encouraging audiences (including the teacher-actor portraying this character) to bring their own personal meaning to the text the reader or audience member may attribute a different tone or emphasis than the one intended.

Performing to present findings

The 'expert' audiences of 'The First Time' – those who had an investment in the phenomena, and to whom the research was relevant – voiced their responses to the work in a variety of ways.

CANADIAN ACADEMIC

Our group saw the video [and] we found it very interesting that new teachers half a world away, who would have had different teacher education experiences, seemed to have such similar experiences to our new teachers.

COLLEAGUE

It was just great - how do you keep your actors so engaged?

SUPERVISOR 2

I too am amazed with the actors' commitment - it was brilliant - and I feel like the event took the work forward in ways we will unravel over the months ahead. I can't stop thinking about the lunch box scene - having the play performed so close up was great.

PRE-SERVICE TEACHER

I went for coffee afterwards with a couple of other pre-service teachers who also attended, and it provided a great stimulus for discussions about our perceptions, fears and expectations about beginning teaching.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE OFFICER

Congratulations on the wonderful performance last Thursday night. It was very rich and meaningful.

PRINCIPAL

Just amazing how many real classroom/teacher/school admin issues were revealed within the space of 45 minutes - and you could tell by the sighs from the audience how pertinent they were, like the 'keys' issue for instance.

PRE-SERVICE TEACHER

It was just so awesome, great to see something real and relevant and something I'm sure I'll remember next year when I'm in my own school as a grad!

These post-performance voices demonstrated the play was more significant than I had anticipated, and each performance brings new insight – both an understanding of the experiences of beginning teachers, and of the methodology. For me performed research is not only about the ‘end result’ or performance. The processes of framing the research, data analysis, theorising, discussion and presenting findings were all ‘performed’ through scripting, rehearsing and performance. By ‘performed’ I not only mean presenting a finished product. The research was also ‘performed’ by engaging with, doing justice to, and listening to all the voices in my head.

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