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**Becoming a Researcher:
An arts-based aesthetic approach**

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Abstract

The experience of post-graduate research involves engagement, struggle and growth. There are many roles that can be played within it, such as apprentice, fieldworker, pilgrim and pioneer. Different degrees of complexity, depth and autonomy are revealed in these roles.

The journey of post-graduate research is a quest to become. It involves actions and places, helpers and hinderers. At times, there is uncertainty, danger and fear. There are things to embrace and to resist. There are many choices to be made.

Post-graduate research can be both a frightening and transformative experience. It brings with it the potential to paralyse and to liberate us. It can, at times, be so overwhelming, it renders us silent. Sometimes, it can help us find our deepest and most powerful voice.

These are some of the findings emerging from a current research project, which is exploring the personal and emotional experiences of becoming a researcher. We have been working on this project for about nine months now. As our project has evolved, we have also become interested in the ways in which our different perspectives and methodological approaches can be woven together to create a multi-layered perspective of the phenomenon we are researching.

When we conducted a focus group with the research participants, we presented our findings through these three different lenses. From the feedback from the participants, and from own experience as presenters, we realised we had created a multi-layered tapestry of perspectives which acknowledged multiple realities and which reflected and illuminated the rich texture of the original data.

Introduction

In this paper, I will consciously use two different voices. One is the academic voice, underpinned by theoretical perspectives. I will also include an analysis of the data using an aesthetic approach. I invite you to be awake to what different responses may be stirred in you when you engage with the different voices. I'll begin with some conceptual exploration, move to the aesthetic analysis, and then conclude with a brief overview of the implications for research supervisors.

My hope is that there will be something interesting for you in the different voices. My hope is also, that you will engage with the ideas in this paper, with a consciousness of the perspectives and insights Elaine and Barbara's approaches also bring to this inquiry. In that way, you can be welcomed into the community of practice that we have co-created as a group of three researchers, and which also includes the doctoral students who made this research possible.

Theoretical Perspectives on the Research Experience

There is a range of literature which explores the experience of research. Some of it advises students on how to complete successful academic research. Some of this literature recognises the range of methodological, theoretical, ontological and epistemological approaches from which students can choose (Glesne 1999; Mauch & Birch 1998; Lewins 1993; Nickerson 1993; Denzin & Lincoln 2000). This work encompasses perspectives such as the cross-cultural (Geertz, 1979, Kalantzis & Cope 2000), feminist (Maynard & Purvis 1994), systems theory (Bateson 1972), critical theory (Habermas 1987) and deconstructive approaches (Derrida 1981). Other texts in this genre do not acknowledge the existence of a range of paradigms and are written from the scientific empirical orientation of 'Keep values out...Objectivity is essential in research writing. Be factual' (van Wagenen (1991: p.133).

Another body of literature explores the experience of research from a subjective rather than a procedural perspective. This includes literature on issues of voice and identity (Richardson 2000; Brew 2001; Meloy 2002; Rhedding-Jones 1997; Leonard 2001) and literature on the relational dimensions of the research (Lee & Green 1999; Broder 1984; Hattauer & Broder 1993). Another body of literature which focuses on the emotional nature of the experience of qualitative research from ethnographic, phenomenological and feminist perspectives, (Ellis & Bochner 1996; Gilbert 2001; Jaggar 1992, 1994; Rosenblatt 2001; Harris & Huntington 2001; Wincup 2001). These writers contend that our understanding of the world is enriched by integrating emotional and cognitive dimensions in research.

Theories of learning and knowledge creation provide another perspective on the experience of undertaking research. This includes literature which explores the transformation of experience into knowledge (Merriam & Clark 1991, 2000; Jarvis 1987; Habermas 1987), the inter-relationship of learning to the construct of self (Rogers 1951; Mezirow 1981, 1990), the range of potential responses to experience, including non-learning, reflective learning (Usher 1996; Jarvis 1987; Kolb 1980), problem solving approaches (Dewey 1938, Kolb 1984), instrumental and expressive responses (Houle 1961, and the learning experience as a transformation of meaning (Mezirow 1981, 1990; Gould 1980).

Changing Nature of Research

The nature of research itself is changing. Researchers now have more choices and this is impacting on the nature of the research experience itself, as well as on the kind of supervision needed.

A growing body of literature is challenging the voice of the researcher as omniscient academic observer and advocates for greater reflexivity and subjectivity within research. The epistemological underpinnings of this exploration come from the literature of representation, from ethnographic (Richardson 1997: 2000; Haarsager 1998; Banks & Banks 1998; Morgan 1996; Tierney & Lincoln 1997; Jipson & Paley 1997), phenomenological perspectives, van Manen 1997; Ellis & Flaherty 1992; Ellis 1997), as well as from the field of educational research (Barone & Eisner 1997; Eisner 1998; Lather 1991, 1997). These writers are exploring creative forms of representation which reflect richness and complexity of data and invite new and multiple levels of engagement that are both cognitive and emotional.

The use of alternative discourses is predicated on the notion that there are many different ways in which the world can be experienced and represented (Barone & Eisner 1997). It also reflects the idea that some human experiences are so complex and intensely emotional, that multiple voices may be needed to evoke the texture of the experience.

Distilling the Data into Poetic Text

In my analysis of the interviews with the research students, I adopted an approach which distils the data of the transcripts to poetic text. The intention of developing poetic text in this way is to be true to the data, to invite active engagement with the data and to enrich our understanding of an experience. My hope is to use transcripts of interviews to create new forms where content can become both thicker and leaner.

Technical aspects of using poetic text

There is a technical aspect of writing poetry in the context of research. I can articulate that in terms of editorial techniques. There is another component of creating poetry which is more difficult, and maybe impossible, to describe in words. This is the creative dimension that comes from a deeper place than the technical domain. Things like:

The choices I make

The words that are included

Or not

The spaces I choose to leave
The sequence in which ideas are ordered
And the appearance on the page

The juxtapositions that jolt
And the ideas that reach out
And connect

The different shades of colour in the text
The contrasts
The blendings

The elegance of a complex idea unfolding itself.

In describing the creative aspects of writing poetry, I need to call on metaphors of light, space, rhythm, colour, substance, texture and flow. Metaphors can hint at the possibilities that lie latent beneath the words, in the spaces, between the lines. At best, metaphors call on a sensual language to describe the abstractions and complexities of the creative process. At worst, they sound fluffy and pretentious. Metaphors are not the experience itself. They are the descriptive shadows of a direct experience.

I develop the poetic text by pulling out strong ideas from the transcripts and stripping the language down to its essence. The transcripts of the interviews contain moments of magic when there is a special charge to the research participants' story. A key concept emerges that encapsulates a particular aspect of experience. Sometimes it might be directly related to a symbol or concept within a metaphor used to describe the research. Sometimes, it emerges from a narrative about their experience.

The technical process of getting from the transcript of the interview to the poetic form is initially a process of editing. The participants' transcripts contain the normal meanderings of verbal speech, the unfinished sentences and the tangential leaps as ideas took form and crystallised. After the interview and the transcription, I scan for ideas or experiences that are concentrated or contained quintessential insights.

When a transcript contains an idea that feels important, I begin an editing process with the language, to heighten and simplify the concept. Wherever possible, I keep the original words and delete words that seem to clutter, rather than magnify, the core idea. I make decisions about including, excluding, juxtaposing, foregrounding and backgrounding data. The analysis process has already begun at this stage.

Poems as Invitations

Poetic text will be experienced in different ways by different readers. They are an invitation to let the ideas take root in you and become your own. In engaging with the poetic text, possibilities for new meaning may emerge. My hope is that readers will be welcomed into the experiences to engage with them and to reflect on what it all might mean.

If we take Bruner's concept of meaning being radically plural, open and political, there is room for many forms, formats, voices, shapes and styles (Bruner 1993). Poetry has the capacity to combine the lyrical and the mundane, and to invite engagement with both complex and simple ideas.

Poetry has been a key to my exploration of evoking rather than describing experience within research. A different kind of reading is required when we read with poetry with feeling. Something goes on in us that does not go on when we merely skim the lines for information (Wittgenstein 1968). Bachelard (1964) refers to it as the phenomenological reverberation. Any work of art makes one very simple demand on anyone who genuinely wants to get in touch with it and that is to stop. We are asked to stop what we're doing, thinking and expecting (Merwin cited in Moyers 1996).

The image offered to us by reading a poem can take root in us and become our own. It can be a becoming of our own being (Bachelard 1964). When this happens, language can touch us in the soul (Gadamer 1996) and we can become part of conversation with the world, with the words on the page and with ourselves (Nye cited in Moyers 1995).

Poetic Text in the Phenomenological Tradition

The use of poetry as a medium to explore the lived experience, draws on the phenomenological tradition which claims that within human reality, there are phenomena which reach us so deeply that the poetic language is the only adequate way through which to point to and make present a meaning (Kockelmans 1987).

This tradition recognises that the seeing of meaning is not purely a cognitive affair. Poetry is seen as the thickening of meaning, which invites us into the experience of another and straddles the tension between the particular and transcendent meaning. Phenomenological understanding is described as existential, emotive, and situational which has the potential to open us to see something in a way which enriches our understanding of everyday life experience (van Manen 1990, 1997).

The Poetry of Becoming a Researcher

The form of poetic text highlights essential ideas and their relationship to each other. Embedded in these essential ideas are the key themes of an exploration which vary in intensity and complexity. The complex nature of the experience of becoming a researcher prevented me from using an analytic frame which separated out distinct aspects of the experience. The emotional, and at times, existential dimensions of the experience were profoundly inter-related. What emerged from the data, from my subjective perspective was a full spectrum of emotional responses around a central dialectic.

For example, the sense of doubt that anything useful would emerge from the research was deeply connected to the emergence of something worth paying attention to. When the doubt as taken to its extreme, it became fear. When what was nascent emerged, it brought with it, the potential for transformation at a transcendent level. This continuum of emotional response predicated around an inherent dialectic within the experience can be described in the depicted this way:

Fear	Doubt	Emergence	Transformation
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Other continua that emerged within this research were:

Paralysis	Weight	Wonder	Liberation
Silence	Lostness	Discovery	Voice

It feels time now to move from describing this experience in an academic way, as I am attempting to do now, to giving a taste of how it might be experienced in an aesthetic way. The aesthetic experience is deeply shaped by the context in which we find ourselves at the time. When Elaine, Barbara and I presented this material to the research participants in a focus group, a feeling of connectedness and recognition began to grow in the room. It's a refreshing feeling in an academic context when an adversarial approach is so often promoted in the name of rigour and scholarship.

Here are some examples of creative texts which have emerged from the data. At the presentation itself, I will present these texts, and others, in an aesthetic way, using images and a consciousness of how the words appear on the page. For now, though, in the form permitted within the context of an academic paper, here is some poetic text.

Getting Lost

The questions are tough

The search is chaotic

Overwhelming

All over the place

You read irrelevant stuff

You can't find what matters

You have doubts about the topic

You think you're doing it wrong

It's a wonderful part of the journey

Hard Times

Treated like a baby ... sometimes

Huge expectations ... other times

Swimming through mud ... often

Liberation

I remember my fear and vulnerability

The weight of the university

The weight of the supervisors

And the weight of my own determination

I remember when I decided

I wasn't going to be afraid any more

I remember the moment

When I realised I had lost my fear

Enlivening the Institution

We need to look at creative ways
Of bringing the warmth of the day
Into the university

Between Worlds

Writing is a political act
How do you represent what can't be represented?
What does it mean to make women's lives visible?

I think narratively and I work in an academic framework
I know the vulnerability between artist and theorist
I am still negotiating that relationship in myself

Questioning Our Knowing

What we know
And how we come to know it
Are big questions

To know how others might know
Is important and humbling
And usually difficult

Authenticity

For a long time I felt like a fraud
Then I became part of the dialogue
And could tell people were listening

I began to trust myself as a researcher
I felt I was part of making something real
I was becoming real too

The Need to Become

I wanted to become a writer
I wanted to be authoritative and credible

I knew I had this ability
And I had to develop it before I went crazy

Finding Your Voice

Research is a passion
And a privilege

It's reaching out
Pushing your boundaries

Expanding yourself
Peering over the edge

Finding your voice
And the wisdom of knowing from the inside

Implications of this Research for Supervisors

What might we learn from this research about the experience of supervision? The act of supervision is a generative process involving productivity, maturity and creativity. Supervision involves mastery of a set of skills and knowledge and the capacity to pass these on to students, along with a sense of agency. It also requires an awareness of the emotional and existential dimensions of the research experience and its potential to be both transformative and traumatic. Acknowledging the multi-layered nature of the research experience requires knowledge, sensitivity and self-awareness

The research experience can be fertile ground for learning about self, context, identity and values clarification. The experience can be both liberating and crushing at a personal level. It can lead to a greater sense of internal freedom and power (Gould 1980) and an openness to experience, and an increased capacity to discriminate and to integrate experience (Mezirow 1990). It can also be damaging. We need to be able to read the verbal and non-verbal cues from students and provide appropriate supervisory interventions.

We need to have an understanding of the ways in which the research experience can be connected to the structure of the self, in ourselves as supervisors, and in our students. We need to be awake to our own ways of interpreting experience to help frame our supervisory practice. This requires an awareness of our own strengths and limitations and a willingness to be reflexive about our own practice.

I think much of supervision is about acknowledging and managing complexity and paradox. It is about supporting and challenging, being present and leaving space. It is about providing useful guidance, and opening a way for a student's own learning. It is also about knowing the difference between providing emotional support and therapy, and making referrals when necessary.

Ideally, we need to develop collaborative communities of practice which foster reflective learning and mutual support, which enable us to walk alongside our post-graduate research students on their epic journeys.

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