

DEV04054

Getting it out there: Exploring creative ways to present research

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This paper examines how educational research can be presented in a creative way through alternative modes of representation such as the short story. The rationale behind such representation is that there are many stakeholders involved in education who do not normally engage with educational research due to the way it is written and presented (i.e., in academic journals), therefore alternative modes of presentation may encourage stakeholders to engage with research if it is presented in a more user-friendly way.

This will be illustrated in the way research about male primary school teacher attrition was presented as a short story titled *Leaving Teaching*. The presentation will focus on the way two audiences, teachers and pre-service teachers, engaged with the text and reflected on the impact of male teacher attrition in schools today.

“Not research articles again – we get these in *every* subject, they’re so ... irrelevant, so not what it’s *really* like.”

This from a third year teacher education student in one of my music education classes.

“I mean,” she continues, “it’s not like all this stuff we read means anything when we’re actually out on prac [teaching practicum], and it’s not like we’ll remember what we read, or use it when we leave uni.”

“And it’s just so *boring* to read,” chimes in another student.

Others nod.

I realise something that I've never acknowledged to myself, even though I have suspected it in the past – my students simply do not like to read articles from scholarly journals or books. In fact they will only do this if the reading is part of an assessment task. Which saddens me, but then I think back to my own undergraduate – and for that matter, my own postgraduate – experiences in teacher education. I too held similar attitudes to “scholarly” writing. I remember being excited when reading Laurel Richardson (1997): “for thirty years I have yawned my way through numerous supposedly exemplary qualitative studies” (p. 87). This was like a revelation – somebody else out there, in this case a much published and admired scholar, just doesn't get overly excited by a lot of the scholarly writing that's out there. But back to my moment in class ...

... realising this moment is one of those pivotal moments in my tertiary teaching career. I want my students to understand the kinds of problems music teachers face in primary schools. I have selected three journal articles which report on research in this field. As part of an assessment task my students will need to reflect on these readings, readings which point to issues that I experienced as a primary school music teacher, and which I know past and present colleagues also experienced. I want my students to be aware of these issues, and be able to face the challenges that the teaching world will have for them as beginning teachers. And it's all there in these readings.

“It's all there in these readings,” I say. “It's up to you to exercise your brains and judgement to pick out the issues that are going to affect you as future music teachers.”

Unhappy body language ... unhappy murmurs ... I make out "... guess we've got to ..." and "... get it all done in a night ..." and "... can't wait to be out of this place and teaching for real ..."

These comments stay with me. They gnaw at me, make me realise *I have to really engage my students in issues raised in the scholarly literature*. But how?

FAST FORWARD A YEAR ...

Music education students. A new cohort. "Ladies and gentlemen," I say, "I'm going to read you a story called *Leaving Teaching*." And so I do ...

David was in his first year teaching when a middle-aged male colleague took him aside and said, "Get out."

"Of what?" said David.

"This," he said, with a sweep of his hand. They were in the staff room. "Teaching. Get out now while you still can."

"But I want to teach," said David.

His colleague snorted. "You say that now, but wait until you've been at it as long as I have. Do yourself a favour - get out now while you can. Take it from me, there is nothing in this life quite as bad as being a male primary school teacher."

At the time David could not comprehend what this veteran teacher was saying. But now, after nine years teaching, he kind of got it. Just one year shy of his long service leave, he had decided to quit his job. He had decided to say good bye to teaching.

“But why?” said his mother, a primary school teacher with just five more years until retirement. “It’s a regular pay check, the holidays are good, and male teachers are in high demand. You’ve got a job for life in the classroom.”

“It’s a lot of things,” David said. “This is not a sudden decision. I’ve been thinking about it for a couple of years now.”

This is a story about a primary school music teacher who leaves the profession. It’s a story – but it’s also research. It is my story as a music teacher - combined with the experiences/stories of two other male music teachers, who like me, left the profession. This story is not a fiction. Rather, our collective experiences were combined into the story of the one character, David. Why? As the writer I felt that our multiple experiences would enhance the possibility of the story touching universal chords with readers, readers like the pre-service teachers I was reading the story to.

Initially we individually wrote down dilemmas that we, as male primary teachers of music, had faced in schools. Not surprisingly, a number of the issues we individually identified overlapped. However, there were still certain issues that were only identified by one or two of us. I wanted to include all of these issues so that readers would get as broad a picture as possible of issues

affecting music teachers in the primary school, and specifically issues affecting male music teachers in primary schools. With these issues identified, I sat down to write the short story.

In writing the short story I adapted McMahon's (2000) criteria for judging an artistic account of teaching:

- 1) has an artistic mode of representation been used to capture the situation?
- 2) does the story have the capacity to elicit response? (e.g., is it aesthetic enough to warrant interpretation?)
- 3) does the writer's interrogation of the aesthetic rendering yield greater insights? (e.g., does the interpretation touch universal chords?) (p 138).

I tried to answer these criteria when writing and rewriting. I asked the two ex-teachers whose biographies informed the story to assess it according to McMahon's criteria, and subsequently made modifications based on their assessments.

In using the short story form I felt, as McMahon (2000) has indicated in using this form, that I was able to "investigate the problematic rather than reduce it to a more manageable explanation of what occurs in the classroom" (p. 441). And just as importantly, the format of the short story would allow others, like my students, to see the types of problems that occur in the teaching of music in Australian primary schools, and begin to identify possible solutions to the problems experienced by others.

As I read *Leaving Teaching* to my students I was aware that I had a captivated audience. No flipping through books, no furtive looking at text messages on mobile phones, no muted gossiping.

The story finished, I looked at the class. “So, what do you think?”

“That was so real.”

Nods of agreement.

“So,” I said, “what can we take out of this story, which, by the way, is based on the experiences of three music teachers ...”

The remainder of the lecture was devoted to discussing issues that were raised from the story. I had only planned to devote 15 minutes to discussion – not over an hour. But when you’re on a roll, you go with it ...

In looking at the future of qualitative research, in what they term the “seventh moment”, Lincoln & Denzin (2000, p. 1047) acknowledge that fictional narratives and performance texts are a way forward in addressing the crisis of representation in qualitative research, freeing up the author to “engage in a dialogue with those studied” (p. 1051). In *Leaving Teaching* liberties have been taken with so-called truth and reality. Not every piece of dialogue that is written was spoken by us, and in order to synthesise our respective experiences into the one character of David, the story became a fictional narrative, which freed me up, as the author, to frame our experiences in a way that I felt others would clearly engage with.

... and it did. These students used the story to discuss issues raised in the text, to situate themselves as soon-to-be-music-teachers.

FAST FORWARD ANOTHER YEAR ...

Another cohort of music education students. I bring out *Leaving Teaching* again. Only this time it's with six traditional scholarly articles from journals that address the dilemmas music teachers face in schools and why these may lead to teacher attrition. "Seven articles for you to read," I say. A little groaning, some uninterested faces. "They're all relatively short, so don't panic. In a fortnight's time we will discuss these articles and the issues being raised in them." I do not mention one of the articles is the story, or that I am the author of it.

2 weeks later:

We begin with small group discussions. I ask each group to list three issues raised in their readings that they believe will impact on their own teaching of music. I wander around as the discussions begin ...

Comments emerge, such as "I've seen teachers like David out on prac, I *know* that sort of teacher"; and "When I get my first teaching position I'll have to watch out for things that David had trouble with like managing his time between teaching and his personal life."

People are talking about the story, referring to "David." I ask one group why they are only referring to the short story. "It's real," said a student.

Other groups provided similar responses. “People, can we focus on some specific issues raised in the readings that you believe may effect you as future music teachers.”

More discussion. And again, discussion centres around the short story. Students identify a number of the dilemmas that David faced that they believe will effect them in schools. There is the devaluing of the arts by some teachers. Reference is made to David’s teaching partner, Bob, who believes music is a “frills subject ... like art and drama. They’ve got a place – the school concert at the end of the year, when we’ve finished with the real teaching.” This piece of dialogue is referred to by a number of students. From one student: “We’ve got to be advocates for the Arts so that our children *and* other teachers know how important they are in schools.”

Other issues raised from the story include avoiding becoming a complacent teacher. Student voice: “Teachers teaching the same things year after year like he [David] did. I’ve seen that out on prac. You hear about it all the time.”

And the issues of your life outside of school becoming so busy that your teaching suffers, as was the case with David when he was not only studying at night, but also working a second job at night and on the weekend. Student voice: “It’s a hard job. To just survive is hard enough. But to do a really good job you have to commit. No late nights during the week, work at home, work over the holidays to prepare and mark and stuff.”

At the conclusion of the discussion session, when students were asked which piece of writing – out of the six research articles and short story – they “got the most out of”, 100% of the cohort indicated the short story. When asked why, students indicated they could “relate” to it, it was easier to read than the research articles, “it was interesting”, and it “addressed lots of different issues.” In short, the pre-service teachers found it to be a relevant text that engaged them in the dilemmas facing music teachers, dilemmas that may lead to leaving the profession if not addressed.

The same year I was invited to present a brief paper focusing on male music teacher attrition to an audience of mainly practising music teachers. This was essentially a summary of recent research findings. However, half way through the presentation I sensed the audience was drifting away from me. I had intended to conclude the presentation with the first page of the short story. But that would be ten minutes away. I decided to cut my losses and presented the entire story. From the moment the story began the audience appeared to brighten. There were murmurs and nods as the story unfolded, and occasional laughter.

Bob was not a fan of music. “It’s a frills subject,” he’d once told David. “Like art and dance and drama. They’ve got a place – the school concert at the end of the year, when we’ve finished with the real teaching.”

It wasn’t the most sensitive thing to say to David, considering the amount of music teaching he did in the school. Although he had a grade five class, he only taught them two days a

week. The remaining three days he taught the rest of the school music; half an hour for each class. Meanwhile his grade five class was taught by two supply teachers on the three days he taught music. As much as David loved teaching music, he felt guilty about leaving his class in other hands for so long.

David moved to what his class called their “Music Space”, a corner of the room that was carpeted, with musical instruments in boxes and posters of musicians and musical instruments on the walls.

“Okay,” said David, “let’s warm up with ‘The Underwear Song’.”

It was a class favourite – a novelty song, an easy one to sing, great for warming the voice up.

The class sung it once. Requests came to sing it again. David complied. But half way through the second rendition the folding door opened and in strode Bob. David stopped strumming the guitar, but his class kept singing until they reached the end of the song.

“Mister Williams, I am trying to teach next door. Could you please have the courtesy not to indulge in music at this point in time. According to your teaching timetable your class’s music time is nine on a Wednesday morning. You may correct me if I’m wrong, but I do not think it is nine o’clock on a Wednesday morning.”

David went red in the face. His voice caught in his throat. And before he could find it, Bob had left the room.

He looked at his class. Some waited for him to speak. Others were looking at the departing Bob. David was awash with embarrassment and humiliation. He briefly closed his eyes. When he opened them his embarrassment had turned to anger – at Bob’s pettiness, at the

heat, at the lack of support he got from the administration team in trying to teach music in the school and run his own class.

It was at that moment when David first contemplated throwing it all in.

Sample comments:

“There’s a Bob in every school.” “Yeah, they’re a part of schools – unfortunately.” “But they’re often the teachers the boss gets along with, so trying to push music isn’t always easy.” “True.”

“So what do you do?”

The ultimate question. The kind of question you hope for when this kind of material-research is presented to an audience of practising teachers. And so a debate (albeit a brief one) on strategies to combat the “Bobs” began, so that music would remain a vital part of primary schooling and that music teachers would not think about leaving the profession.

Academic journal articles and books can be daunting beasts. Add to that the limited audience they have, and it becomes obvious that we have to look at alternative ways to engage those with a stake in education (and isn’t that everybody?) in current educational research. Of course there are other ways – through the mass media, for example, but the short story is one form of representation that has not been utilised to any great extent.

But the times they are a changing. It's not only the short story. No, educational research is being presented in all sorts of forms, from readers theatre (e.g., Adams et al., 1998) to photography (e.g., Preskill, 1995), poetry (e.g., Richardson, 1997) and dance (e.g., Coe & Strachan, 2002). But as these modes of representation are in their infancy, Richardson (2000) reminds us of "our continuing task to create new criteria and new criteria for choosing criteria." (p. 254). She goes on to list five criteria she uses to assess artistic accounts of teaching: substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact, expression of reality. From my experiences in writing *Leaving Teaching* and presenting it both pre-service and practising teachers, I see the last two as being the most challenging criteria. In terms of impact, Richardson asks "does the work affect me? Emotionally? Intellectually? Generate new questions? Move me to write? Move me to try new research practices? Move me to action?" (p. 254). It is this last question which I believe is the bottom line for justifying using the short story to present my experiences, and the experiences of two other primary school male music teachers. If a teacher reads a short story about teaching and can situate her/himself in that story, begin to question her/his actions, and act on what they have read to improve their practice, then surely this is research that is doing its job. This is research that is impacting on the way teachers think about their teaching.

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