

## Exemplification and deconstructive writing: Dancing with Massumi, Derrida, and others

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### Abstract

I am experimenting with ‘exemplification’ (Massumi, 2002) and ‘deconstructive writing’ (Maclure, 2010) by applying them to selected data from research for my doctoral thesis. Central to both is the power of examples to expose detail and divergence that lead to new and different possibilities and connections. I have been inspired by Derrida’s (Maclure, 2003; Spitzer, 2011) notion of the fabric of a text with ‘tears’, ‘cuts’, ‘knots or *aporias*’. Therefore, I have created a fabric of text with tears and *aporias*: one that encourages readers to think and read doubly (Derrida, cited in Spitzer, 2011). I write in an ‘inattentive’ way (Massumi, 2002): juxtaposing examples (narratives) with the identities of the narrators, my responses to their narratives, and theoretical and other musings to play with the ambiguity of reality and identity. The interplay of inattention, exemplification, and deconstructive writing allows for interpretation, reinterpretation, affective responses, and new and different impressions and possibilities. My aim in writing this paper is threefold: (1) to explore the application of a Derridean perspective to some of my research, (2) to practise exemplification and deconstructive writing, and (3) to write in an inattentive and creative way.

**Keywords:** Exemplification, deconstructive writing, qualitative research, narrative, identity

### Dancing with Massumi, Derrida, Maclure, and others

Dancing with the feet, with ideas, with words, and need I add that one must also be able to dance with the pen – that one must learn how to write (Nietzsche, cited in Derrida, 1982, 29).

I am interested in “‘exemplification’ as a writing practice” (Massumi, 2002, cited in Maclure, 2010, p.282). Massumi (2002, 18) asserts that ‘exemplification activates detail’, and that ‘[e]very example harbors terrible powers of deviation and digression’. The movement of the text tends to mobilise detours, leading to new and different possibilities and connections. Examples also have an ‘*affective*’ dimension, ‘generat[ing] sensations resonating in the body [and] brain’ (Maclure, 2010, p. 282, emphasis in original), which intertwine with emotions.

There is a tendency in research to write with an outcome in mind. Massumi (2002, p.18) argues that with such an approach you know where you are going before you begin and essentially, ‘nothing has happened in the meantime’; there are no surprises. Maclure (2003, p.114, emphasis in original) supports this argument in her comparison of the ‘*puritan*’ versus the ‘*vernacular*’ strategy of writing qualitative research. Coherence and deference to ‘the sovereignty of meaning or reality’ underscore the former, while the latter is ‘spontaneous, authentic... close to lived experience... imbued with feeling’. Therefore, there is ‘wonder’ in qualitative research, the power of which ‘does not... reside “in” the example itself’ (Maclure, 2010, p.284), but in how it affects and challenges others’ thinking and practice: ‘leav[ing] others with a *problem*’ (Massumi, 2002, p.19), a question, a fresh idea, a different connection. Or, as Massumi (2002, p.19, emphasis in original) proposes, leaving others with a ‘special gift – the gift of a *headache*’.

Comparable to exemplification is ‘deconstructive writing’ (Maclure, 2010, p.118, emphasis in original), which eschews clarity in writing and, instead, ‘...seek[s] to engage readers... catching them up in the movements of the text’. Or, as Derrida (cited in Spitzer, 2011, p.37) asserts the fabric of the text with ‘tears’ or ‘cuts’, which, when retied, become ‘knots’ that interrupt and disrupt the meaning and reading of the examples and text. Integral to this is the understanding within deconstruction that ‘[e]very text is at least two texts’, and, therefore, has extended or multiple meaning (Derrida, cited in Spitzer, 2011, p.47). One text or reading conveys the ‘author’s intentions’, the other text or reading is ‘attentive to the tears and knots or *aporias*’ (i.e., doubtful matters), suspending and unsettling ‘the first reading’ (Spitzer, 2011, p.47, emphasis in original). Hence, Derrida (Spitzer, 2011, p.52) proposes ‘reading doubly and thinking doubly’. Maclure (2003, pp.128-129) draws on this, arguing for revealing the fluctuations and uncertainties of identity and resisting ‘one-way reading’ (and writing) of identity.

Massumi (2002, p.18) proposes writing in an inattentive way. He argues that this allows the examples to proliferate and create their own energy and substance. However, he warns of the risks of ‘inattention’: ‘failure’, ‘silliness ... or even outbreaks of stupidity’ (Massumi, 2002, p.18). As I write these words, I am reminded of the gendered stereotypes within the traditions of theory and research generally, but especially in qualitative research: the ‘masculinist discourse’ that is ‘linked to the (continuing) erasure of women’s writing’ (Maclure, 2003, p.135). At the risk of being perceived as silly, stupid and/or failing, I am going to practise exemplification and deconstructive writing with selected data from research for my doctoral thesis.

I have been inspired by a number of authors who argue the value of Derrida’s work and apply his notions of deconstruction, *differance*, dissemination to educational research specifically and qualitative research generally (Biesta 2010; Biesta & Stams 2001; Garrison 2004; Johnson 1981; Lather 1996, 2003; Maclure 2003, 2006, 2010; Peters & Biesta 2009; Rambo-Ronai 1998, 1999; Trifonas 2000; 2004). I want to think about and write examples (i.e., experience-centred narratives), play with the narrators’ identities and my responses to their narratives in a way that permits a double reading, stimulates affective responses, and creates wonder through new and different insights, impressions, problems, questions, possibilities; even a ‘*headache*’ (Massumi 2002, p.19, emphasis in original). My challenge to you: ‘...reading doubly, paying attention to the [tears and] *aporias* within the text’ (Derrida, cited in Spitzer, 2011, p.52, emphasis in original).

## Dancing inattentively with the pen

Bob: “It was like being on the moon. They may as well have sent me to the moon. It was a massive job...pretty bloody stressful... I was dispatched at three o’clock in the morning... I just finished a shift. It was in a very, very remote area... It was fine but it was freezing... I was driving along, but not knowing where I was going... When I got there, it was unbelievable... I thought “Oh, shit”... A group of thirty kids, four wheel driving, drunk, late at night, got bogged, and in trying to snag the car out, a freakish type of thing happened and one kid died... There was just me and the ambo [ambulance officer]... and a good volunteer ambo... we had no comms [communication]... to make a phone call, I stood about 200 metres from the scene on top of a little grassy knoll, with my hand above my head and my phone on speaker... There were things that I should have done, didn’t do, and should’ve got a kick in the arse for.”

The moon's man stands in his shell,  
Bent under a bundle  
Of sticks...  
His teeth are chattering among the leprous  
Peaks and craters of those extinct volcanoes... (Plath, 1981, p.62).

Alone in the darkness where no one can hear,  
Sitting on a stool of isolation,  
Looking up, afraid to get up,  
You may lose your chair to the darkness... (Borkan, n.d.).

Bruner (2002, p.93) claims that in developing and sharing narratives ‘memory and imagination fuse’, enabling ‘yesterday and tomorrow’ to be ‘construct[ed], reconstruct[ed], in some ways reinvent[ed]’. Narratives can therefore be seen to connote ‘imperfect “practical wisdom”’ (Ricoeur, cited in Squire, 2008, p.45).

Bob is short, stocky build, with a shaved head. He is very much a bloke. He is self-assured, confident, at times, overly confident: cocky even. “I was a big man in a small town, which I really quite enjoyed.”

Bob is “black and white”. He has a line, like a ‘line of tolerance’, step over it, and that’s it, action is taken. “I love locking up naughty people.” There are no grey areas or what if’s or wasting a lot of time on things. He doesn’t suffer fools. Communicates in a direct manner – straight to the point – and, sometimes, without thought for others and the situation.

Bob is bumptious. He has a high opinion of himself and his abilities. He can be very critical and intolerant of people and things. But if he “bitches” he has the gumption to put it in writing, and, wherever possible, offer solutions, palatable and realistic or not.

Bob has a sense of responsibility. He persists with things and deals with the unexpected and, sometimes, complicated situations to the best of his ability. He admits making mistakes, but he acknowledges that when the training doesn’t “kick in”, the responsibility does.

Texts, like identities, are ‘incomplete and fragmentary’ (Maclure, 2003, p.128), being constantly made, unmade, remade. Identities are ‘equally diffuse and mutable... the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web’ (Barthes, 1990, p.64). Identity is never fully present. It is in a state of flux and indistinct (Maclure, 2003), and is therefore challenging to interpret. Bob’s identity shifts and alters. There is no one Bob. He can mean different things to different people. A tear, an *aporia*?

As I interview Bob and listen to his experience-centred narrative about a job that was difficult or challenging, I experience a number of emotions and images. I feel concerned for him in this situation, sorry for him. He suddenly seems fragile and vulnerable. He is isolated, struggling to communicate with those “on earth” whose help he needs. He is dealing with this situation essentially on his own,

having to take control, trying to understand who is involved, what happened, and then making decisions. At the same time, being aware that the decisions he makes and the actions he takes may well be inadequate or procedurally incorrect, and that he could get into trouble afterwards.

Images of complete darkness, uneven terrain with grass, trees, a gully and a car down in the gully come to mind. Confusion and people fumbling around with their arms out stretched, bumping into, stumbling onto and tripping over things. As Bob talks about driving to and arriving at the scene, I remember, as a child, looking out the back window of my parents' car as we drove along isolated country, gravel roads late at night. I wondered what lay in the darkness beyond the narrow shaft of light of the headlights. What was out there in the grass and trees? 'Perceptions are like the shadows on the wall that delude the cave dweller...' (Fernández-Armesto, 2000, p.424).

These are my 'resonance-type reactions' (Conle, 2007, p.19) to the images in Bob's narrative. They are an amalgam of my memories and imagination. Conle's (2007, p.14) studies of the role memory and imagination play in encounters with experience-centred narratives reveal 'interaction between the narrative world offered by a speaker and the existing imaginative repertoire of a listener'. Listening to, or reading a narrative elicits emotions, feelings, images and 'strengths and weaknesses' of the narrator (Booth, 1988, cited in Conle, 2007, p.12).

Are you reading and thinking doubly?  
Do you think I'm being silly?

Bruce: "It was a really weird experience, actually... It was one of those situations where you didn't think of what you were doing... It was almost like you were on automatic pilot... I was the first on the scene... it was horrific... I took control of the scene... and I just shut it down... you've got to control who you want to go in there... expose as few people to the scene... My very first feeling was, "Crap, this is not good"... A person hit and killed by a train... I saw a hand, and at that stage I didn't know how bad it was, but I thought, "This is not good"... then I found the rest... I managed to keep my lunch down... I'm a weird person, I can take things like that and they don't seem to worry me, but watching Funniest Home Videos and a little baby with snot coming out of its nose, I'm nearly throwing up... It's not a case of tuning out... this person is a victim and has to be treated with courtesy... Everyone was calm... it just felt right... then there was a crow dragging a foot away... so I actually did crow patrol... walked up and down the tracks for the next three hours, shooing the crows away... It's the unknowns... the little things that jump up at you... and you think, "Fuck, why didn't I think of that?"

Yellow feet and beak.  
Black eyes.  
Black feathers.  
Harsh cries.  
Carrión eater (Kingsley, 2012).

Rambo-Ronai (1999, pp.126-127) discusses how new situations or experiences are often challenging and can instil a sense of disequilibrium or 'decenter[ing]', accompanied by a strong emotional response. She (1999, p.127) argues that this 'decentering' and associated emotions prompt individuals to refer to past experiences, and to '...draw and erase their pictures of reality' in order to create a temporary reality based on a narrative with which they are comfortable. As Rambo-Ronai (1999,

p.127) writes: ‘We grasp at the appearance of the real or the present only to...’ grapple with the shadowy likeness of an illusion, a nightmare, a figment of imagination.

Are you feeling decentred?  
What have you drawn upon and erased?

Bruce has short cropped, dark hair, is quietly spoken, and is a bit pudgy around his face and waistline. He wears a thumb ring and a bracelet. He likes the diversity that the job offers because he doesn’t like doing the same thing day in, day out.

Bruce is reactive. He struggles to maintain the ‘public’, controlled façade he was taught. Instead, he lets his façade slip sometimes, reacting to “smart arse” comments, letting his ego get in the way, and inflaming situations. Bruce excuses this, in part, as not dropping the “hard style of practice” he previously used in a specialist squad.

Bruce appears confident. He says he has a lot of confidence in his ability, adding that he “hasn’t got tickets” on himself, but knows he “can do this job and do it well.” He likes to get positive feedback. But he views correction as criticism. He describes himself as “very self-critical”. He hesitates to make decisions without asking his supervisor’s opinion before taking action. He acknowledges that he needs to rid himself of self-doubt and just make decisions.

Bruce makes mistakes. The first scene he went to, early on in the job, he had no idea of what he was doing and he parked his car over where the accident had occurred. Another time, he admits to being “jaded” while working in a specialist squad. He was in charge of a search but said he “couldn’t be bothered” doing it himself and asked a colleague to do the search and things went literally and procedurally wrong. He was given the “cold shoulder” for a few days afterwards. On another occasion, he didn’t control the situation because he got “distracted”, reacted, and the “crooks” got away.

‘Différance does not unify, but rather, disbands... *cuts*’ (Derrida, cited in Spitzer, 2011, p.16, emphasis in original). In applying Derrida’s (1982, cited in Rambo-Ronai, 1998, p.411) ‘non-concept of différance’ to identity the implication is that ‘meaning exists in reference to other meanings’. Therefore, identity (its meaning) is ‘deferred, never to arrive in the present’... hanging in the unresolved vacuum of ‘the past and the future’. Bruce’s identity is neither definite nor unified. In fact, each identity tends to shed doubt on the other (Rambo-Ronai, 1998, p.419). A tear and an *aporia*?

Bruce’s narrative about a situation that went well occurred in the afternoon, but, as I listened, images of low-light bordering on darkness – an eerie scene – came to mind. I felt scared for Bruce walking into a scene, knowing yet not knowing what he would encounter. When he mentioned the hand and the foot, I visualised a scene from a movie: a body off to the side of a railway track as if tossed like a rag doll, the person’s shoe on the railway track, and the train driver being distraught and in shock. I felt a little squeamish at the thought of human debris. While Bruce struggles with a child’s snot on Funniest Home Videos, I struggle with details (words and/or images) of blood, guts and gore. So I was thinking that I could not do what Bruce was doing.

The mention of crows reminded me of Alfred Hitchcock's movie *The Birds*. I remember watching it as a teenager, curled up into a ball on the couch with my head in my hands. It was terrifying. Yet I quite admire crows' intelligence, keen judgement and intuitive agility, avoiding their fate as road kill on busy highways. But the crow's actions – dragging away a foot – seemed wrong. But I knew it wasn't. It just felt dishonest and immoral. But then, carrion is their staple food and carrion is carrion regardless of what it is, where it is, or what it once was.

Finally, I felt happy for Bruce and relieved that he had not made any mistakes and that he seemed to handle the situation competently and responsibly. He wasn't distracted, he adhered to procedures, and his decisions and actions seemed to be appropriate: keeping people out of the scene, assessing the scene, and preserving it with his three hour crow patrol. I visualised a lonely figure pacing up and down 600 metres or so of railway track with the crows perched in the surrounding trees, heckling him with their harsh, brash calls. It was a lonely, horrible, but necessary job to do.

Conle (2007, p.21) asserts that a 'virtual reality' is created when one listens to someone else's narrative. '[E]thical practices' can become embedded in the virtual reality – [d]esires and the practice of admiration, disgust, or compassion...' (Conle, 2007, p.23), which reflect the listener's core beliefs and characteristics. In connecting images and 'physical, bodily responses' of a listener to a narrative, Sarbin (2004, cited in Conle 2007, p.20) argues that imagination involves both the mind and the body in taking on roles and essentially 'becom[ing] an actor in a virtual world'. Booth (1988, cited in Conle 2007, p.22) proposes that the listener is 'colonized', adopting a temporary identity 'for the duration of the experience'.

What does your virtual reality feel like, look like, sound like?  
What wonder have you found?

Bea: "I went with a senior constable to this Maori lady... her husband was working down the mines... it was really late, after midnight and she found her little fellow... umm... passed away. It was quite emotional... Then she started singing him a goodbye song in her Maori tongue and we're bawling. We're all bawling and I'm thinkin', "Oh, my Gawd, how can we cope with this?" It was horrible... When I eventually came away from it... I rang my husband early in the morning and I couldn't talk. I just could not physically talk... Then the second cot death I went to, I was in tears even before I got there... I was thinkin', "Oh, I do not want to do this"... the tears were rollin' down my face... it was drainin'... Cot deaths are one of the worst things you can go to... But you're human and it doesn't matter how hard you try to put these sort of emotions aside, you're gonna cry, and there's nothing you can do about it... Another time, we had to deliver death messages... there was a double fatality, couple of kids, boys going surfing and hit a tree... The first mum's hitting me, saying she didn't believe it... It was drainin' and exhaustin', and we were continually in tears that day... afterwards we just had a beer and sat in silence... you feel like shit... you feel horrible... It's like watching a movie... you don't know the people, but you still get involved in it and you still feel things... smile at the happy bits, cry at the sad bits... These [jobs] never went well emotionally."

Emotions are feelings forced into actions,  
Mental conditions that control who we are...  
Sadness is an empty room  
You wish was filled...

Emotions are like a new box of crayons,  
Colourful and bold (Sudlow, 2009)

Conle (2007, p.26) found that ‘oral’ and ‘media narratives’ appeared to have the potential to ‘modify prior imaginative repertoires and expand what is imaginable and ‘feelable’’. The significance of media on imagination resonates with Bea’s comments when she compares her emotional responses in her work to feeling happy and sad in response to a movie and the characters. As I listened to Bea’s experience-centred narrative I felt like I was watching a movie with Bea as the central figure, and I connected with her fragility and emotions. An *aporia*?

Are you sensing a problem, or do you have the beginnings of a headache?  
Do you think this is stupid?

Bea is a fit, strong and feminine woman. She laughs a lot, especially at herself, in a hearty, infectious way. She likes the job and shift work, even with a family. She enjoys mentoring “new ones” and having the time to go to the gym and run.

Bea is a helper. She especially likes helping victims or people who have been taken advantage of, such as the elderly and children. She enjoys balancing things out when people do wrong. She finds it rewarding to “restore people’s faith” in the community, society, and the system.

Bea displays her feelings. She admits getting emotional, crying and “bawling” in response to particular jobs. She finds these jobs “drainin’ and horrible”. She acknowledges that others “in the job” struggle “with it” [the emotional side of work], but they can’t say that they struggle. She perceives her open displays of emotions as a weakness, a flaw.

Bea is macho. She’s strong, fit, and swears, but not constantly, and within context. She has a tendency to drop the “ing” from words. She swaggers a bit when she walks and sits with her feet up on the table and one thumb in her belt. She’s worked with men for years and admits it takes efforts to “build relationships”. She’s able to talk about “football, V8s, and racing, and... pick out a good perv for the guys.” She describes herself as “a good chick worth workin’ with.” She can “pack a punch” and she’d never “run out” on a partner.

Deconstruction and deconstructive writing necessitates ‘think[ing] and writ[ing]’ in a way that displaces accepted ‘images of identity and reality’ (Rambo-Ronai, 1998, p.419). Adding texture to this is Derrida’s (cited in Maclure, 2003, p.103) concept of ‘dissemination’, which stresses the inevitability of meanings tearing or splintering and scattering; ‘never in the precise place where you first thought they were’. Bea’s emotions and identity/ties are lost in a quagmire of tears, knots, and meanings (Rambo-Ronai, 1998, p.411). They cannot be sewn together in one neat piece of fabric.

What detours have you taken?  
What insights have you gained?

As I sit with Bea, listening to her narrative, I immediately become emotional. Tears in my eyes, and I feel for her, and everyone involved. I could hear, as if in the distance, a voice singing, and see Bea standing close to the Maori mother in a very small lounge room, looking at the “little fellow” in his cot, and crying while his mother sang. I felt very sad thinking about the mother being on her own after Bea and others had left, waiting for her husband to return from the mines.

Bea’s description of the “first mum” hitting her and denying her message was really powerful. It reminded me of so many scenes from movies and serials on television: extreme outpouring of emotion and the vulnerability of the messenger. To some degree, I sensed Bea’s pain, dealing with such heightened emotion and denial. I admired her strength and compassion. But I was concerned how numb and emotionally drained she would feel afterwards, what she would do when she went home to her family, and days afterwards when images and feelings resurfaced.

I liked Bea. I liked her honesty, compassion, and her strength. I felt very privileged and humbled that she shared these narratives with me. From her perspective, getting emotional on the job was a failing, and, yet, she acknowledged that she’s human and it’s natural to show emotion. I see and think of her as physically and emotionally strong, but real in the sense of showing true emotion, sharing others’ grief, and not maintaining an impersonal façade, as per her training and expectations of the culture, job, and her peers.

Whilst there is a strong ‘desire for *presence*’ (Derrida, cited in Maclure 2003, p.115, emphasis in original) – describing people, objects, experiences in definitive terms – there is no presence because ‘*différance*’ moves backwards and forwards between presence and absence (Spitzer, 2011, p.16). For as soon as we reflect on something, it has gone (Rambo-Ronai, 1998, p.411). Its full meaning eludes us. We can glimpse it again, but it will be in an altered state or image. Another way of understanding this is through Derrida’s (1976, cited in Rambo-Ronai, 1999, p.126, emphasis in original) assertion that identity involves a process of ‘*sous rature*, under erasure, being erased, adjusted and readjusted...’ in response to particular situations, experiences, and environments. There is no definitive presence for Bea’s identity. The meaning of her identity is torn, splintered, scattered, and under erasure.

Have I failed?

## Taking the last dance

I have applied Massumi’s (2002, p.18) ‘exemplification’ and Maclure’s (2010, p.118) notion of ‘deconstructive writing’ to selected data from research for my doctoral thesis. As I indicated, I wanted to think about and write examples (experience-centred narratives), and play with Bob’s, Bruce’s, and Bea’s identities and my ‘resonance-type reactions’ (Conle, 2007, p.19) to their narratives. As ‘*différance*’ (Derrida, cited in Spitzer, 2011, p.16) and ‘dissemination’ (Derrida, cited in Maclure, 2003, p.103) coalesce, the meaning of identity is deferred, suspended between the past and the future, and torn and scattered. Identity is never fully in the present (Derrida, 1982, cited in Rambo-Ronai, 1998, p.411).

Listening to Bob's, Bruce's, and Bea's narratives and playing with their identities, I realised they were under erasure ('*sous rature*') (Derrida, 1976, cited in Rambo-Ronai, 1999, p.126, emphasis in original) and 'correction', not in terms of 'right or wrong' or (re)producing reality and the truth, but adjusting to particular 'lived experience[s]' (Rambo-Ronai, 1999, p.115). For when we clutch at what appears to be 'the real and the present', we're grappling with shadowy likenesses and figments of our imagination (Rambo-Ronai, 1999, p.127). Narratives are products of memory and imagination, dallying with reality, truth, and identity, but never quite capturing them (Conle, 2007). Ricoeur (cited in Squire, 2008, p.45) believed narratives produce 'imperfect "practical wisdom"', and Bruner (2002, p.93) argues they provide false or embellished accounts of accomplishments, desires, mistakes, and 'construct[ing], reconstruct[ing]... reivent[ing]' the past and future.

I have taken a risk and written in an inattentive way (Massumi 2002), creating a fabric of text that I hope has stimulated affective responses and produced wonder through new and different possibilities and connections. Whilst this has been a personal, intellectual, creative, and experimental endeavour for me, I hope you have been caught up in the movement and texture of the text (tears and *aporias*), 'reading doubly and thinking doubly' (Derrida, cited in Spitzer, 2011), and taking detours.

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