

JANE SPEEDY AND SUE PORTER

## 1. INTRODUCTION TO ‘CREATIVE PRACTITIONER INQUIRY IN THE HELPING PROFESSIONS’

Slippage between fact and fiction, a commonplace feature of arts-based inquiries, is exemplified in the use of science fiction in this chapter, which is presented ‘as if’ extracted from the field blog of the twenty-ninth century Zelotzgian archaeologist and historian of academic systems of thought, Gregorius Corbilsohn. Perhaps it was.

BLOG ENTRY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2924

Our excavations in Wessex have unearthed sheaves of notes taken about various paper books and a single folder of written work in ancient twenty-first century British English. These latter writings appear to be some form of correspondence between two British academics in the process of writing what looks like a beginning chapter to some kind of conjoint piece of work: a work inquiring into the social and emotional events and circumstances that occur betwixt and between humans. The human belief systems and customs of the time in ancient Britain, made manifest in the texts we found, included an extraordinarily overarching belief in the boundaried insularity and separatedness of all human beings. There was no understanding in these times as to how to communicate with each other except by using spoken, written or visual images and texts—quite literally in a linear chronological form! The texts you see below are not inscriptions from thought-meldings; indeed, there was no knowledge at the time (although this was the century of major discoveries about inter- and intra-global interconnectedness) of communication via either microbiological or mind-melding methods and technologies. What you see below is the actual written correspondence that two academics were engaged in as they constructed their introductory chapter in 2013:

*Sue to Jane, 31/3/13*

Jane and I are late with our chapter for this book, and as a result I find myself writing the opening section of the chapter on Easter Sunday 2013, the day before major changes are introduced in the British welfare state, turning it from a compact between citizens designed to support us all at the most vulnerable times of our lives (childhood, unemployment, sickness, disability and old age) into a vehicle/mechanism for reproach, exacting a toll of

humiliation from those too weak to resist. Branding the weakest as thieves and scroungers, as stealing the country's future from those deemed 'hard working,' it typifies a particular sort of distraction from criticism of those who steal it away in their huge bonuses, along with any hope of decency, fairness and justice.

Ancient British society at this time was on its way into the decline of the second feudal period (see Amthorbusdottir, 2021). The divisions in early 21st century society were between the two social groups known broadly as the 'toffs' and the 'plebs.' The bonuses that the writer refers to were financial handouts that those toffs involved in the banking industry had handed out to themselves, having first stolen the monies from the coffers of the poorer plebs.

What better time to be embarking on a chapter that celebrates what arts-based research practice (ABRP), and creative approaches more generally, can bring to our practice as researchers, practitioners and activists, I ask myself. In a time of increasing social inequity and division it could be argued that it is timely to revisit the potential of creativity and arts based methods for practice. What teachers, counsellors, social workers, nurses and community workers share is a need, and hopefully a commitment to enabling 'voice' for frequently silenced groups and individuals.

See what I mean about this belief in individuality and insularity? Groups with voice and groups who are silenced—separated out rather than conjoined aspects of each other? Although during this historical period there were some social/emotional scholars trying to uncover the voices that inhabited the silences (Mazzei, 2007) and vice-versa, for the most part this was a period of firmly delineated boundaries and borders between peoples, and between people and contexts and environments.

Creative approaches offer effective methods for enabling subjugated knowledges to be explored and made visible/vocal. Like action research, ABRPs have a history of being used in community and pedagogical settings ... and both are disruptive and subversive approaches. (I (Sue) notice that the student groups I teach tend to divide into two groups; those who are excited by the idea of subversive methodologies, and those who are disturbed by the idea. The former are generally made up of student social workers and social care professionals working in the context of personalisation and co-production, the latter are more interested in academic careers.)

Like action research, ABRP seeks to connect theory with practice, for as Kurt Lewin has said, there is nothing so practical as a good theory (Lewin, 1951, p. 169). Also like action research, an arts-based approach is more than a method, it's a way of understanding that comes with its own principles and values. (It is a mistake, according to McTaggart (1996, p. 248) "to think that following the action research spiral constitutes 'doing action research.'" He continues, "Action research is not a 'method' or a 'procedure' for research

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but a series of commitments to observe and problematise through practice, a series of principles for conducting social enquiry.”

Theory and practice were separated out into different categories of thought and activity during this period. It was thought that theories were foundational to practice, rather than vice-versa and action research’s thinking and learning was relatively radical for the times.

However, socially useful research does not need to be ‘worthy’ in a dry, joyless sense. For those of us struggling to keep the different aspects of our lives connected then what Leavy calls “emergent methods” (2009, p. vii) offer a way to honour our creative selves, engage our social activist selves and all within an academic context; linking the self that knows through making and writing to the self that theorises (even if the space for this socially engaged arts based academic practice needs to be fought for), and again to the self that acts. We can be scholar activists, taking our creative methodologies into the daily practice of social work, teaching, counselling, nursing and other forms of health and community work.

*Jane to Sue 4/4/13*

What we share as practitioner researchers in applied fields such as teaching and social work is our ongoing commitment to our practice and to the process, as well as the product of our work. This commitment to the process (the making of) as well as the outcomes (or results of) of inquiries is equally evident amongst arts-based practitioner-scholars and fits well with our professional, participatory values. The artist/scholar Barbara Bolt (Bolt & Barrett, 2010, pp. 29-34) extols her commitment to the process and materials she uses as an arts-based researcher by proclaiming the “magic is in the handling,” which somewhat echoes the literary scholar Helene Cixous’s (2004, p. iv) faith in the agency of the writing process: “when I write what happens continuously are happy accidents that I don’t chase away.” Thus the ‘fit’ of arts-based methods for practitioner-scholars is held in the process/practice-orientated and active qualities of this kind of work.

Note the distinction between arts-based scholars and others. Although these particular academics considered themselves radicals who did not agree with (or adhere to) government policy, they still distinguished between arts-based work (their own) and work that adhered to policies that privileged science technology engineering and maths (STEM) studies. They were still working within the bi-partheid assumptions of their day and had not jettisoned these distinctions. We believe that they were nonetheless atypical of social researchers at the time and the ‘experts’ they are citing: an Australian arts educator and a French poststructuralist philosopher and novelist were not really foundational to social forms of scholarship, although both had links to second wave feminist research at the time.

It is also held in the choice to engage with ‘inquiry’ rather than other forms of scholarship. To ‘inquire’ according to Oxford dictionaries online (2013) is to

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ask for information, which also speaks to engagement in a process, rather than outcome; whereas to research is to glean information in order to “establish facts and reach new conclusions.” To ‘inquire’ implies a more modest and curious stance in the face of that which is unknown and uncertain, whereas ‘research’ seems a harsher word, imbued with intentions to ‘get to the bottom of things’ and ‘excavate all the facts.’ Inquire is a gentler word, speaking of an endeavour forged within a more participatory and collaborative world of scholarship.

Humility and modesty in scholarship was not a claim included in research ethics guidelines and codes of the twenty-first century: this came in later after the nuclear holocausts of the twenty-third century. Twenty-first century scholars seem manifestly arrogant to our ears and did not really regard themselves as providing a public and community service like any other.

*Sue writes to Jane 21.4.13:*

Visual methods have the ability to get to different sorts of knowledge, for groups of people who may be different from those who are most often well served by more ‘traditional’ research and practice. I am thinking of members of communities whose more tacit, experience-based knowledge is often undervalued in comparison with more intellectual, theoretical knowledge.

The above passage delineates clearly between “toff” and ‘pleb’ knowledges and demonstrates the established thinking of the times

Liamputtong and Rumbold argue that the experience of using arts-based methods enables experiential knowing, which names “the essence of our ‘pre-sense making’ encounter with the world,” and that “presentational knowing emerges from such encounters” (Liamputtong & Rumbold, 2008, p. 11). In this way knowledge that is otherwise tacit “becomes known and expressed through symbolic forms” (Leavy, 2009, p. 241) using the arts as a medium. I think that we can extend this argument for the efficacy of arts-based practice to enable the expression of different knowledges differently by making a case that for groups whose knowledge is disrespected or disregarded, arts-based practice can support voicing sorts of knowing that are or have become tacit through this sense of being devalued. And, if practised in a liberatory way, by making the knowledge explicit arts-based practice can support the raising of consciousness and so contribute to self-actualisation and emancipation.

Notice the assumptions of this period set the context yet again for this exchange. The emails were written in a time shortly after a period when a university education was valued over any craft-based learning, the polytechnics having long since been converted into aspiring universities, and further education colleges were at this time under pressure to offer foundation degrees and modules that could be strung together to make higher qualifications, despite the absurd inappropriateness of this in many instances. Academic degrees were created in a number of

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disciplines where a more rigorous, craft-based apprenticeship would have been more appropriate.

BLOG ENTRY, SEPTEMBER 26TH, 2024.

Back to the last few pages of our findings. These last pages may have been part of the same introductory chapter or part of another section of the same work. This section distinguishes in various ways between ‘lifewriting’ and other forms of writing:

Quoting the North American performance studies scholar, Tami Spry (2001, p. 708): “I have begun creating a self in and out of academe that allows expression of passion and spirit I have long suppressed. However academically heretical this performance of selves may be, I have learned that heresy is greatly maligned and, when put to good use, can begin a robust dance of agency in one’s personal/political/professional life. So, in seeking to dis-(re)-cover my body and voice in all parts of my life, I began writing and performing autoethnography, concentrating on the body as the site from which the story is generated, thus beginning the methodological praxis of reintegrating my body and mind into my scholarship.”

Note shared assumptions, despite the implicit critique, about separations between body and mind, between embodied, performed writing and academic (mind) writing, and between personal/professional and political ‘selves.’ During this period, ‘science’ was thought better expressed in isolation from life context and life writing or its performance was considered a form of academic heresy, as expressed in the above early 21st century quote from Spry, a distinguished scholar in her field. To engage in academic endeavour explicitly through the filter of the scholar’s ‘embodied life’ (as if there was such a thing as a disembodied life!). This whole era of the history of human thought is exemplified by dualistic (either/or) thinking. Even such burgeoning dissension as was shown by our two (mildly) radical scholars (albeit eminently employable in a respected mainstream university) was fuelled by dualistic forms of argument: plebs versus toffs; arts versus sciences; theory versus practice; inquiry versus research; academic versus life writing. These scholars lived and breathed division; they lived in a divided, not interconnected world and failed to grasp the echoes and connections in their own arguments with the traditions they rejected.

During the early 21st century, early research on agential realism by scholars such as Barad (2007), was being published, but because of the divisions cited above between arts and science, most arts/social science scholars were not abreast of the new physics and so in their well established versions of how the world worked the agency and movement of material objects and environments was solely dependent on human agencies. In this era humanity was paramount, all things divine and magical from previous eras had been subsumed under human-centred schema and to inquire was an entirely human activity; an inquiring planet had scarcely been imagined.

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From a modern viewpoint the lack of entanglement or entangled knowledges and technologies demonstrated by these ancient scholars demonstrates just how insular and removed from the realities of life on their planet and the mess they were making of it even dissenting scholars had become.

Sue, have you seen my recent email concerning our introductory chapter? We are getting in a real tangle here, I'm not sure how, or even whether to end it?

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*Jane Speedy*  
*Graduate School of Education*  
*University of Bristol*

*Sue Porter*  
*Norah Fry Research Centre, School for Policy Studies*  
*University of Bristol*