

MCCLAIN PERCY

3. SEEING LEARNING DISABILITY

A Re/claimed Book

Dear Reader,

Welcome into an experiment. The re/claimed book excerpted here is part of an on-going research project into experiences of and around learning disability in children. Stigma and communication challenges are just some of the potential reasons that experiences of learning disabled¹ individuals have traditionally been underrepresented within academic research and popular media (Chappell, 1998). Yet this is a global issue, affecting individuals irrespective of race, gender, nationality, or economic level. To me it is also a personal issue. As the parent of such a child, a professional, and also being learning disabled myself, I realize how complex, emotional, and isolating the experience can be. This project combines qualitative research practices with visual modes of exploration as a process of inquiring into and re/presenting learning disability. Altering a 1961 textbook and tracking the research and interview process within its pages simultaneously incorporates old knowledges with fresh perceptions, thus physically and metaphorically constructing new representations of this hidden disability.

Surprised? Perhaps after making such a grandiose claim of scholarship you'll expect something that looks more traditional, more scholarly, more like...well, real research. I ask you to temporarily suspend your misgivings and simply look, feel, question, and most importantly, think. You see, altering this book is my own version of quest(ion)ing (Leggo, 2008, p. 171) into how to voice the experience of learning disability. Like Smith's memorable *Food Truck* (1999), I hope to create a catalyst to trouble how people think and understand learning differences, including my own perceptions. The spaces within this book are dedicated to exploration, a "performative site of reflection" (Springgay et al., 2005, p. 902) using writing entwined with visual imagery in search of what Cixous calls "that mysterious but vital force, the 'leaven' that has the capacity to take the writer further than she would otherwise be able to go." (2004, p. viii). Reader, I want to know more and better than I already think I do.

Numerous qualitative researchers recognize the corporeal act of writing as integral to knowing (see, for example, Cixous, 2004; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; van Manen, 2006). Indeed, written is the traditional, privileged vehicle of scholarship. However, to me, writing is not the natural course of my thought-process. Instead, my visceral sense-making is visual; writing is the secondary output of logically arranging my thoughts. No matter how much I try to loosen up,

MCCLAIN PERCY

writing always feels like a translation of pictures of my head versus *version originale*. Combining reading, writing, and imagery attempts to access levels of thought below the synthesis that occurs when I write, allowing me a depth to examine and trouble my most basic assumptions and held knowledges. Springgay et al. discuss similar inquiries process combining art and writing:

[We] attend to the process of creativity and to the means through which one inquires into an educational phenomena through artistic and aesthetic means ... This displacement from what does it look like, which emphasizes a product driven representation of research, to an active participation of doing and meaning making within research texts, is a rupture that opens up new ways of conceiving of research as enactive space of living inquiry ... Through doubling, hegemonic categorizations of knowledge production are troubled, infusing both the art and the graphy with intention and attentiveness. This doubling is not a static rendering of two elements positioned as separate and distinct; but it is in the contiguous interaction and the movement between art and graphy that research becomes a lived endeavor. (2005, pp. 898-900)

Linking art with written inquiry can be seen as a version of Richardson and St. Pierre's CAP [creative analytical process] (2005, pp. 962-963). Simultaneously, it is creative and analytical, desirable and valid, and allows exploration into thorny issues like learning disabilities in all of their multiple complexities. "Trying out evocative forms, we relate differently to our material; we know it differently. We find ourselves attending to feelings, ambiguities, temporal sequences, blurred experiences ... we struggle to find a textual place of ourselves and our doubts and uncertainties (Richardson, 1994, p. 521).

Additionally, visuality allows viewers to access information in a different manner, potentially including diverse audiences and creating a space for populations underrepresented in academic research.

Now, reader, I've discussed why I am doing this project, perhaps you might be interested in how it evolves?

RE/CLAIMING A BOOK

Lord Brain's venerated 1961 textbook, *Speech Disorders*, serves as my textual playground, both physically and historically. Much of Lord Brain's research is still relevant today, whilst other thoughts and modes have been revised. For example, referencing children as "it" was a professional, objective writing standard during the 60s, but raises hackles on many levels in modern thought. First I read this text interactively, writing my notes and reactions atop its pages, regardless of text or illustrations. Simultaneously, I also read contemporary literature and likewise recorded my reactions by writing in the textbook, including rants, questions, follow-ups, lists, streams of consciousness. Form and content are not important; instead my intent is as van Manen describes:

It is in the act of reading and writing that insights emerge. The writing of work involves textual material that possesses hermeneutic and interpretive significance. It is precisely in the process of writing that the data of the research are gained as well as interpreted and that the fundamental nature of the research question is perceived. (2008, p. 715)

The process of writing, travelling with my thoughts in a linear fashion to put words to paper, is my intention; product is irrelevant. All writing is done on top of the printed text in the book. The resulting script is difficult to read and, by being virtually anonymous, allows me a freedom in writing without need for a finished, coherent product. Thus overwriting becomes both part of the fore and back/ground: Overwriting intermeshes thoughts, emotions, and insights alongside the original text and the result creates a new meta/physical space on which to build new meanings.

Separately, in a journal I record a brief synopsis of my overwriting sessions, jotting down main points, revelations, or ideas generated from my overwriting stints. These notes track of the progression of my thoughts and research.

Like sediment settling, my thoughts coalesce into a visual representation. As Lawrence-Lightfoot notes, “the translation of image is anything but literal. It was probing, layered, and interpretive” (2005, p. 6). The act of choosing how to re/represent my thoughts is the integrative pivot point between what I’ve read, my reactions to it, and how I think/need/feel I should approach a topic. Presenting visually forces me to ask questions from many angles and confront how I feel about it. For example, the physicality of choosing orientation on a page, size and shapes of different elements in relation to each other, even the textures, are all conscious choices requiring me to examine how I assign value to particular elements of an issue. Images are built on top of text, notes, and overwriting. The inquiry process underneath is often visible, yet it is the synthesis of the thought process (the picture) that stands out. No image or writing is ever finitely complete. Van Manen states:

[Q]ualitative method of inquiry constantly has to be invented anew and cannot be reduced to a general set of strategies or research techniques. Methodologically speaking, every notion has to be examined in terms of its assumptions, even the idea of method itself. (2008, p. 720)

Returning to readings regenerates the process. Inevitably a new reading or someone’s reaction sparks further strains of inquiry. For example, I found that including the re/claimed book in interviews often yielded interesting results, changing the tone and nature of our communications and sending our interactions in different directions, generating different perspectives. I make a conscious effort to listen heartfully and incorporate reactions.

Finally, the performative element of this project is one that I had not anticipated when starting this project. When creating images I sometimes find myself assuming an advocative role, requiring me to step outside of my introspection and interact publically. For example, when photographing people’s shoes for Fig. X or requesting samples of native language handwritings in Fig. Y, I was required to

MCCLAIN PERCY

articulate my project and why I wanted their participation. Very interesting conversations ensue. The resulting frictions, abradings, and bolsterings from the myriad of people I encounter, create ripples that permeate my images and perhaps flow outwardly too. My relationship to my subject is constantly in flux, and I am able to continuously re/examine my existing findings from new perspectives.

Reader, I am curious about your reaction to this. After all, I have made no claims of greater knowledge, drawn no definitive conclusions, nor pointed you toward new enlightenments. Eisner states, “What arts-based research should do is raise fresh questions” (2008, p. 22). Re/claiming this textbook attempts to generate and track new representations of learning disability whilst constantly reevaluating my and others’ relationship to the subject. I hope it is an on-going conversation that you can see; what it means is always in progress.

For now, I give you over to a few excerpts of the book itself. It is, in the words of Leggo, “... shaped out of citation, exposition, narration, poetry, and rumination in order to evoke a textual space for both invitation and provocation. It is my hope that ... by performing an artful work of words, will invite readers to ruminate on their conceptions of experience ... especially in the tangled complexity of each day’s demands” (2008, p. 166). So, reader, I give you my thoughts in physical form and ask in turn, what do you think?

NOTES

- ¹ Labels can be powerful, have varying cultural and ethical connotations, and are particularly hotly contested around learning disability. Here the term ‘learning disabled’ is chosen with respectful intention. It is used within the context of Disability Studies, with the intention to look beyond conventional and medical ideologies of disability as located within person’s physical or intellectual flaws, and instead examines disability as the complex way society acts upon a person to classify and enact ‘normality.’ Therefore, a person is disabled not by impairment, but by society’s inability to encompass a spectrum of differences.

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SEEING LEARNING DISABILITY

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