

On the (Re)presentation of Educational Research Through the Medium of the Creative Arts

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The paper seeks to unpick and examine a number of related claims for the role of the arts or, more specifically, the creative arts, in educational research. It considers and evaluates ways in which artistic creativity might itself be thought of as either based on research or itself a form of inquiry which might claim to be research. Such claims are entirely plausible, though they perhaps force artistic creativity into a particular mould that not all artists would appreciate. Artistic work may also constitute data conveying information about a particular setting or the events from which they were produced, signs and symbols for the observer or researcher to interpret. The claim that art might be used to represent educational practice, policy or experience receives the fullest treatment, and this requires consideration of both the general claim (which runs counter to the ambitions of many artists, choreographers and musicians) and more particular claims for, for example research-based narrative fiction, which is treated somewhat sceptically.

THE PROBLEM – AND SOME DISTINCTIONS

I bestowed thy purposes with words, that made them known.
Prospero to Caliban in *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare

If I could have said it in words I would have.
Composer John Cage in his book *Silence* (Cage, 1968, p. 20)

What follows is an attempt to clarify, understand and evaluate the claims made for the role of artistic creativity in educational research, to see, in particular, to what extent the *representation* of educational research in the form of, for example a dance performance, an installation or a photomontage can stand up to more orthodox expectations for research expressed in the language of, for example systematic and sustained inquiry, rigour and the provision of warrant for belief. Do such principles play a part in the

representation of research through art? Or do artistic forms of representation of research require different expectations and evaluative criteria?

This paper was prompted by an exuberant multimedia seminar presentation on arts-based research by my Cambridge colleague, Professor Pam Burnard, herself a multi-talented artist and arts educator as well as an educational researcher. Some present at the seminar described it as ‘inspiring’ and ‘inspired’: for this researcher trained in the analytic tradition of philosophy it was also confusing and possibly confused! I take some comfort in my confusion from the acknowledgement that Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund make in their introduction to their book on *arts-based research in education* that ‘There is a great deal of mystery surrounding what is meant by arts-based research in education, some suspicion, and a good deal of intrigue’ (2008, p. 1). In seeking to penetrate the mystery I have referred to, in particular this collection of papers edited by Cahnman-Taylor and Siegesmund and *arts-based research* by Tom Barone and Elliott Eisner (2012) – the latter, a former President of AERA, being regarded as one of the founders of arts-based research, at least in the field of education.

Part of the difficulty for someone coming to arts based from other research traditions is that it functions somewhat as a portmanteau concept for a wide variety of rather distinct projects and aspirations, most of which are not *sui generis* to the arts and characterise some but not all types of artistic endeavour. For example, Pam Burnard herself attaches importance to the ‘social engagement’ of arts-based research, and of course some arts-based research is thus socially engaged, but clearly this is not a necessary feature of arts-based research, nor is social engagement only a feature of arts-based research: social science based action research had its roots in community engagement before it became associated with classroom research (see Adelman, 1993); MacDonald’s (1974) ‘democratic programme evaluation’ was distinctively about the engagement of all stakeholders; and a whole raft of sociologically and ethnographically based post-colonial research was posited on the same principle.

Burnard *et al.* (2018) cite with favour a definition of arts-based practices provided by the feminist sociologist Leavy in her *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice*:

[...] a set of methodological tools used by researchers across disciplines during all phases of social research, including data generation, analysis, interpretation, and representation. These emerging tools adapt the tenets of the creative arts in order to address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined. (2009, pp. 2–3)

Tools, yes, but this last sentence could equally well be describing social science based applied research in education. Burnard *et al.* again write in terms that associate arts-based inquiry with pedagogy, about what they call ‘the generative capacity of arts-based methods’:

This is about being-in-relation in classrooms which become spaces for possibilities derived from the alternative approaches employed. These

are subjective, interdisciplinary, embodied spaces in which a type of translation occurs, where experience can be deconstructed and where other ways of being can be created; where boundaries can be dissolved between self and other. (2018, p. 5)

Again, there is nothing that is peculiar to arts-based research in being concerned with the subjective (what else is phenomenography?); interdisciplinarity is embraced in every corner of the educational research domain and is readily understood in terms of any academic disciplinary context; deconstruction has long become a methodological cliché; and the dissolution of boundaries (as distinct from barriers) between the self and other, which may or may not be so psychologically desirable, seems to me to be a project which may or may not be an aspiration of either art or educational research.

However, I am reminded of the old saying that ‘those who dance are thought mad by those who cannot hear the music’. This paper is my, possibly misguided, attempt to re-construct what the music might be and – even more misguidedly – to formulate in more analytic terms some of what ‘arts-based researchers’ are perhaps saying through their ‘music’.

I shall not be trying to offer a comprehensive evaluation of the claims of either the arts or of arts-based research – both way beyond my scope and competence. My focus is, much more narrowly, on the idea of that arts-based research can offer something distinctive and worthwhile in terms of the *representation* of educational experience, practice or policy. I suggest that it may help to focus this discussion if I start by drawing a few distinctions. To begin with, I need to distinguish between the ‘arts’ in the broader sense that encompasses the humanities and ‘qualitative’ forms of social science research (including history, philosophy, biography and ethnography) and the creative arts (such as painting, music, dance, poetry and drama). This is a distinction which is frequently blurred (or unobserved) in the literature. In Barone and Eisner (2012), for example the authors contrast the ‘arts’ with science, and they then present the ‘arts’ as a sub-set of qualitative inquiry which would include, for example history, biography, ethnography and a lot more. Cahnmann-Taylor writes of ‘blurred genres between the arts and sciences’ (2008, p. 8) but the examples she gives are recognisably locatable within the humanities and social science (in particular ethnography and auto-ethnography) albeit in some cases employing interesting literary devices for their presentation.

For the purposes of this paper, I will set aside educational research rooted in the humanities and qualitative social sciences to which I have no great difficulty in applying fairly conventional criteria of research assessment. I can see, for example how the inquiry might be ‘systematic and sustained’; I can see what the ‘rigorous’ conduct of the inquiry might look like; I can see how the research report might be tested against the author’s own data and against other evidence that is in principle available in the public domain; I can see how the work might be theoretically framed and analysed; I can see how other researchers might set about contradicting or challenging what is offered by the researcher. With research rooted in the humanities,

I suggest, all these are intelligible, and I have repeatedly argued for the centrality of such contributions to educational research (see Bridges, 2011, 2012, 2017).

But if, like Blumenfeld-Jones (2016), for example you want to *dance* your research, if you want to represent it through music or sculpture, these conventional expectations of research are not only more difficult to apply but perhaps inappropriately applied – because art is not like that. So, I suggest, the key divide is not between Snow's *Two Cultures* to which Barone and Eisner (2006) refer (Snow, 1956, 1959; and see discussion in Bridges, 2011, 2017); nor, as they suggest elsewhere, between those who seek to reduce educational research to what can be measured and those who seek more humanistic arts-based research, for example. The more significant divide between different forms of inquiry in this context is between on the one hand research conducted in the form of social science (in which I include, for example ethnography, semiology, psycho-analytic studies and phenomenography) and the humanities (including biography and autobiography, linguistics and literary analysis, and art criticism), and, on the other hand, that conducted through the modes of expressive or creative arts. The more challenging claims for arts-based research are made on behalf of this second group of approaches, that is, the expressive arts, and perhaps Eisner recognises this, for he acknowledges 'I did not expect arts-based research to culminate in the creation of paintings, poems, or pirouettes' (2008, p. 18) – but it has.

The second set of distinctions that I think is helpful to observe is between (i) artistic work as itself a form of research; (ii) artistic work as data for research and (iii) the representation of research in the form of art – and I shall explore each of these in the following sections.

ART AS RESEARCH

All good art is an enquiry and an experiment. (Stenhouse, 1988, p. 47)

Stenhouse's claim (which also provided the basis for his claiming that teaching was an art) is perhaps a little over-extended. Even the most cursory review of accounts of the processes of artistic creativity will show that different artists (I use this as a collective term to cover all forms of artistic expression) approach their work in different ways, including with different levels of spontaneity or careful preparation. For some artists, their work is based on what can properly be described as scholarly research. Programme notes for an opera or theatrical production will often show how the producer or director or costume or set designer has researched the production and show how the production itself is richly informed by this research. Many historical novels, like Hilary Mantel's celebrated trilogy, *Wolf Hall*, are based on deep understanding of the worlds in which they are set. Barone and Eisner write of this practice as 'research-based art', which is 'the use of research in any modality that will serve as a basis for creating a work of art' (2012, p. 9). But the difference between a work of history and an historical novel is that, though one might admire the latter's historical

scholarship, it is primarily judged against appropriate aesthetic and literary criteria. By contrast, though one might admire the literary qualities of the work of history (and Churchill's *History of the English Speaking People*, after all, won him a Nobel Prize for *literature*), it is ultimately judged in terms of its historical scholarship.

So, some artistic work is preceded by research that is rooted in other academic or scholarly practices and which informs the final product. But one might also describe artistic creativity in ways which make the idea of research more central to the whole process. Visual artists, for example may investigate a subject or theme that interests them; they may gather ideas, symbols, designs and materials (data?) from various sources; they may do preliminary sketches or trials of ideas and effects; they may reflect on these, play around with them, organise them, searching perhaps for a particular effect or satisfaction; they may make several attempts at a finished output and evaluate these before settling on one or more finished 'outputs' (to use the terms of the UK Research Excellence Framework). The process may be extended over a long period of time during which the artist continues to refine or develop his or her original idea. The work produced may be curated (reviewed?) before being put in the public domain in an exhibition or carefully scrutinised before being chosen for public presentation in a concert hall or theatre. These are elements of *art as research*.

The UK Higher Education Funding Councils accommodate the arts in very much these terms, and this is especially important in a context in which, for example art colleges have been absorbed into the higher education system and are dependent for a proportion of their funding on the outcomes of a *research* assessment exercise. The UK Research Excellence Framework (www.REF.ac.uk) evaluates all forms of research in higher education institutions as a basis for determining their funding for a subsequent period of years. This assessment treats artistic production on a par with other forms of research rooted in the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities and appears to have had no difficulty in applying to all forms of creative arts the same generic criteria of research quality that are applied to other forms of research – originality, significance and rigour (HEFCE, 2012, para. 78). Sub Panel 34 included Art and Design in its remit and Sub Panel 35 was devoted to Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts.

The sub-panel will assess research from all areas of music, drama, dance, theatre, performance, live art, film and television studies, and anticipates that outputs will span a range of writings, edited publications and *research-led creative practices, as well as artefacts and curatorial outputs*. The sub-panel expects to evaluate research that encompasses analytical, applied, ethnographical, historical, pedagogical, practice-led, scientific, technological and theoretical approaches to the widest domains of dance, drama, music, performing and screen arts, and covers the broadest understanding of the subject disciplines within any cultural, geographical or historical context. (HEFCE, 2012, para. 28, my italics)

Some of the work submitted to the panel was in a form that more closely resembled other research publications, but in music, for example some 42% of work submitted was in non-text media, primarily compositions, performances and other forms of creative practice (para. 11) Other work was in the form of, for example video recordings, curated exhibitions, film and artefacts. These were required nevertheless to satisfy *research* criteria. The report by Panel D on its experience of the assessment shows its appreciation of submitted work that assisted its understanding of the research process that underpinned the artistic practice:

A significant proportion of projects ... also offered insightful additional documentation of process and/or outcomes, which was at its best well-edited, or annotated, to further facilitate access to the research inquiry. Rigorous ... work across UOA 35 explicitly articulated a research imperative, methods by which it was explored, and how these related to previous work on this topic by others. This approach often helped in making the case for the originality and significance of the findings and was often enhanced by analytical or reflective contextualising writing, though the inclusion of such portfolio materials did not necessarily raise the quality of the research enquiry of the practice itself. The most successful portfolios helped the assessors by providing a pathway through the material submitted so it was clear what the research contribution was and why specific pieces of evidence were provided. (HEFCE, 2015, para. 36)

In short, or is this too crude, the products of artistic creativity can be considered as research in so far as they show or are accompanied by evidence that indicates processes akin to those conventionally expected of research in other fields. (See also on this the 2016 Arts and Humanities Research Council report discussed below.)

On some accounts this is not a problem for the creative artist. Barone and Eisner, for example argue that works of art do not stand alone; they are not self-explanatory. They describe, for example a theatre production, but they refer to the ‘play itself’ as ‘the meat in the sandwich’ of which, for example programme notes provide context and preceding explanation and a post-play discussion provides a way of exploring the play’s meaning and contribution to the field. The art in this arts-based research encompasses all three components (Barone and Eisner, 2006, p. 60).

Some examples of arts-based inquiry in the literature present a complex picture of a practice which they seem to be happy to describe as an inquiry if not quite as research. Gouzouasis and Leggo co-create and perform poetry and music in a way which constitutes the inquiry. The inquiry is integral to the performance – or at least this appears to be the claim in a piece of writing (not untypical of the arts-based research literature) marked by only loosely connected ideas and assertions.

I contemplate what we are doing, as scholarly activity, embodied not only in the performative nature of arts-based research, but the activity of composing and notating music and lyrics (poetry), in the same

way that academic colleagues who are composers and poets are considered as scholars. Surely, Carl and I are playing and enjoying our performances, but we are engaged with *téchne* (τέχνη) and *poiesis* (ποίησις) at a level where education and arts scholars can recognize the quality of our craftsmanship and aesthetic decision-making. When we interpret our inquiry through this lens, and consider that the primary definition of *téchne* is *art* (Oxford Greek Dictionary, p. 185) and *poiesis* is the *making* (i.e., production) of art and other useful things (i.e., artistic productions, poetry, recordings, performances), we have created a new praxis – arts song-based inquiry – that emanates from a fusion of poetry and music. (Gouzouasis and Leggo, 2016, p. 456)

I would be reasonably confident, however, in suggesting that for other artists the art does indeed have to ‘stand alone’ and speak for itself and that, for these, the apparatus required by the research evaluation framework or the bread in the ‘sandwich’ are irrelevant distractions. (I recently heard a mature art student explain that she had dropped out of a printing course because she was fed up with all the paperwork students had to produce as an accompaniment to the actual artwork.) There are many examples of artistic practice and works of art that celebrate not so much ‘systematic and sustained inquiry’ (yawn!) but spontaneity, improvisation and instinct or intuition. A 2017 exhibition at the Barbican Gallery in London featured the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat, described in the catalogue (with perhaps some excess) as ‘one of the most significant artists of the 20th century’. In his review of the exhibition, the art critic Januszczak describes how

Basquiat would absorb fragments of information from myriad sources and then regurgitate them in furiously improvised cascades of words, colour and cartoon imagery. Painted quickly with instantly drying acrylics, the torrent of stuff would be released with barely an organisational thought...’ (2017, p. 11).

I was going to suggest that this process was a far cry from what we might look for in research, though I confess that I can think of more than one piece of research writing which might well be described in similar terms.

We may, nevertheless, think of (*some* forms of) artistic work as *research* (where the inquiry is intrinsic to the process of artistic creativity) or as *research based* (where the inquiry informs and perhaps precedes the artistic creativity).

I am, however, talking here about research-based arts rather than about arts-based research and we are still short of the claim that such art might represent educational experience or research. Art may of course take anything as its starting point: a profound religious or spiritual encounter or ... a tin of soup; a luminous landscape or the song of a bird; so why not a tedious classroom or and unjust educational system? It perhaps says something about educational practice and policy that neither seem to have inspired many artists, except perhaps, their fearsome treatment in the hands of Dickens or in Jean Vigo’s *Zéro de Conduite* or Truffaut’s *Les quatre cents coups*). But note that, in terms of what I am discussing in this section, what

issues from the inquiry, exploration or ‘research’ is primarily conceived as art and is appropriately judged as such. Further, the relationship is a very loose one between the final ‘product’ and its source – in Vigo’s case, primarily his own boarding school experience (he had no pretensions to be engaged in educational research!); there is no requirement for the artist to be bound by evidence from the source or even the most elementary touchstones of reality. Shakespeare saw no problem about satisfying his dramatic requirement for a shipwreck in *The Winter’s Tale* even though his character was arriving on the ‘shores’ of a landlocked country, Bohemia. Rather success is judged more in terms of the wonders that the creative imagination works in moving beyond the source. Escher’s staircase travels on infinitely, defying gravity and re-joining its starting point in a way that would defeat the most skilful carpenter and confound our own perception. Little art seeks simply to ‘represent’ least of all in a faithful literal manner; rather it seeks to transform to imagine things differently – if anything, to re-present in ways which will sometimes bear little recognisable relationship with their source.

ARTISTIC WORK AS RESEARCH DATA

There are some rather different things that fall under this heading.

First, there is the study of what one might call the passive iconography of, for example the school of classroom – the cross on the wall, the flag, the picture of the president, the selection of children’s work which is put up for display, the planted environment of the school, the dress worn by staff and students, the ‘dance’ of students around the teacher’s desk or the playground furniture. All of these might be taken as evidence for a piece of ethnographic research perhaps or some other form of research, and I require no persuading that this might be both rigorous and richly illuminating.

Secondly, art might be used as a stimulus to trigger spoken or written responses by students or teachers. One doctoral thesis (Rogers, 2001) describes how the author, himself a poet as well as a teacher of literature, observed teachers in classrooms, and then wrote poems full of metaphor and simile as a device to encourage teachers to reflect more profoundly on the nature of their teaching. In one classroom project on which I worked photographs of children engaged in group discussion taken in the classroom were mounted on the wall as a stimulus for pupils to talk about and write short descriptions of what was going on in their group at that point in time. In both cases the stimulus seemed to have the desired effect in prompting (but not substituting for) the articulation of participants’ experience in words, but this application of artistic creativity is still several steps removed from the more ambitious claims.

Thirdly, people might be encouraged to produce their responses to their educational experience in artistic forms rather than in the form of, for example boxes ticked in a survey or a discursive response to interviews. In one study designed to test the rhetoric of ‘research led teaching and learning in higher education’ (Zamorski, 2002) university undergraduates were given cameras and encouraged to go round the university capturing their

own images of what they saw as ‘research’ – images that included not just someone in a white coat in a laboratory but of a tutor’s door bearing a notice explaining that he was away for the next six months on ‘research leave’ and another on the door of some research laboratories indicating ‘no undergraduates beyond this point’. These were presented in a provocative exhibition in the students’ union, which was a partner in the research. In this case the (curated) photographs themselves were one research output, though the research report, which was also based on interviews, etc., took a more conventional analytic form.

In these examples the images were fairly easy to interpret and report on, though I suspect that the images told their own story more powerfully than the written report. Perhaps, too, as we move, fourthly, towards a more unambiguously ‘artistic’ expression, the translation of the meaning into a written report becomes more problematic. Suppose students are invited to represent their feelings about their school using paint on canvas or in the form of a dance. The educational researcher has ‘data’ but data of which the significance is deeply ambiguous, buried perhaps in the personal psyche of the creator – and data that are certainly not easy to translate into words, let alone argument. Perhaps one should accept the image, with all its ambiguity, as both the data and the (unprocessed) report. In other words the image, the dance, the installation would constitute both the research data and the research outcome or report. This would have some analogy with a decision in a different mode of research to offer the reader simply a box full of recordings and observations – the ‘case data’ – without any attempt at selection, editing and rendering as a coherent picture or narrative in a ‘case study’.

I am not sure that many would find this a very acceptable version of ‘research’. For most purposes the acts of analysis and interpretation, the development and defence of an argument or hypothesis – these are not just optional extras to a research endeavour but a *sine qua non* of its qualification as research (see below on the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s emphasis on hermeneutics as a key to arts-based research). Does, then, the presentation of an unanalysed artwork in some form as the outcome of a piece of educational research represent an incomplete piece of research? Or is it enough that it stands there in all its ambiguity awaiting possible interpretation by its ‘audience’.

ARTS-BASED RESEARCH AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE SOCIAL PRACTICE OF EDUCATION

At this point, then, we have moved from consideration of artistic work as data, which the researcher may or may not attempt to analyse or use as evidence to support an argument in a more conventional research mode, to artistic work as the chosen form of representation of research. My last example showed artwork as both the data and as the research ‘report’ or outcome. But some researchers choose to conduct their research employing more traditional forms of inquiry resting perhaps on surveys, interview data or observation, but then to *represent* the outcome through the medium of

art in some form. Such research is, then, *about* something – in this context about the social practice of education, though there is also a substantial literature on, for example arts-based research in the health sector (Boydell *et al.*, 2012, Tulinius *et al.*, 2013) – and it seeks to inform, illuminate, extend our understanding of this practice. It may do other things as well: it may amuse us or inspire us or disturb us, but it does these things through the way in which it contributes to our understanding. What are we to make of this possibility, this claim?

A General Problem

This understanding of the functions of research throws the emphasis in arts-based research onto the role of the arts as *representation*. Artists may *express* their darkest fears or their most sublime vision, and this may provide wonderful insight into the imagination of the artist, but it does not tell us much about the social practice of education. If art is to represent, then it has to represent something, a referent, which stands outside of and independent of the artist and of the art itself – in this instance in the form of educational practice, policy or experience. For Brecht, of course, this separation and this distance between (in his case) the dramatic representation and reality was something of which he was at pains to remind his audience by every possible dramatic device – the *Verfremdungseffekt* (the alienation effect) – in order that they could see more clearly through the artifice of the art to the reality that was being represented. Art is successful in such representation in so far as it achieves some kind of correspondence, some symmetry, between the external object of its attention and the work itself. Not only this, but ‘representation’ takes an indirect as well as a direct object: one represents something *to someone*, so part of the challenge to the representative function of art is in its success or failure as a form of communication of what is being represented.

From this point of view the creative arts are problematic. Eisner acknowledges:

Surely one of the functions of educational research in general, and arts based research in particular is to make vivid certain qualities encountered by the researcher normally, but not necessarily, in the context of schools. Will the images made through arts based research possess a sufficient degree of referential clarity to engender a common understanding of the situation being addressed, or is a common understanding of the situation through arts based research an appropriate expectation? If so, what are we to make of the well-crafted but ambiguous poem or painting, for example the expressive painting that we want to connect to the situation that we intend to render but which works more like a Rorschach test? Put another way, how do we deal with referentiality when we do not have a means that enables us to make the needed connections? (2008, pp. 19–20)

‘Should we worry about that?’ Eisner concludes. Well, I think we should – at least in so far as we hope for music, painting, sculpture or dance,

for example to represent some aspect of educational practice or policy to an audience. We may be challenged by any of these to think about education, though the challenge may be too great for many of us who, however admiring of the performance or presentation in aesthetic terms, may nevertheless be defeated by the invitation to come up with its educational significance: the disconnect between the outcome of the arts-based research and the phenomenon it purports to represent is simply too great, and the multiple ambiguity in the meaning of the art object ('it means whatever you want it to mean' says the artist) carries an acknowledgement that it has abandoned the responsibility to communicate something (particular) to someone – so, whatever else there is, there is no 'representation'.

This is not a problem for art, though it may be for those who aspire to have research 'represented' by art, because relatively few artists are actually concerned with such representation. In an introduction to their curated exhibition of nineteenth century French Art at the Copenhagen Glyptoteket, Pederson and Tommerup write of Degas and Gauguin, for example (by no means the most abstract of artists):

'[they]were preoccupied with making art different from, and more than, a picture of what was observed. Painting was not supposed to be an illustration or a reflection of the world's phenomena, just as it was not supposed to be a mere depiction of history or the ideas of novelists. It should be turned into an independent art-form with its wholly own, peculiar possibilities of expression. (2017, p. 3)

And then, they continue, with Miro, Ray and Poliakoff 'the observed world disappears in favour of a pure preoccupation with colour and form and inner phenomena' (ibid.).

In short, if arts-based research is asking for art to function to 'represent' research, it is flying in the face of over one hundred years of artistic determination to fulfil no such role!

Barone and Eisner seem to think that they have to show what the arts can contribute to the *representation* of educational research in order to reaffirm their importance. I do not think that their significance rests at all on their ability to fulfil this particular function. Not only this: one might argue that submitting art to such an instrumental regime offends the creative and liberating power of what properly requires no such external purpose.

Dance, Sculpture, Argument and Refutation

There is a need for some clarification here. Of course any set of data, whether it is in the form of statistical tables, interview transcripts or artistic production, is amenable to different interpretation. In one intriguing project in which I participated, scholars from a variety of different disciplines were provided with the same data (in this case transcripts of classroom discussion in a number of US classrooms) and invited to offer their own interpretation of the data. Of course, they came up with different but not necessarily incompatible readings (Dillon, 1988). By analogy, people looking at a dance or piece of sculpture created in response to an educational

experience or set of observations might predictably come up with different understandings of what the sculpture was seeking to convey (*if* indeed it was seeking to ‘convey’ anything) or what response it in fact elicited in the observer. But one difference, I suggest, is that in the first case it was quite possible to challenge the reading of the classroom discussion provided by reference to the data (in so far as sufficient data were available). It is much more difficult to see how an argument about the interpretation of educational experience provided by the sculpture or dance would proceed. In vigorous argument about the discussion project, colleagues challenged a psycho-dynamic reading of the events by demanding reference to the evidence in the transcript (of which there was precious little), but this was possible because it was at least clear what was being claimed and how this might be refuted. Could one make the same claim for the sculpture?

Art-based educational researchers do wrestle with this problem. The following extract is from a piece by Blumenfeld-Jones about his work with dance and with poetry:

‘I do leave it to the receiver to sew the elements together in ways that might help him or her. Even with me I do not know what the meaning is ... And if I did I would not and could not impose it on the receiver.

‘This is not to suggest that every meaning is acceptable. Certainly there must be some resonance between the presented images and the meaning. Otherwise, what’s the point, for me, of presenting work at all? My initial meanings offer the possibility, through a particular constellation of meanings of the receiver making meaning. So not any interpretation will do, but there are many meaningful experiences that are not mine and cannot be mine’. (2016, p. 96)

Let me try to get clear what is going on in this account. To start with we have the artist’s engagement with some kind of educational observation or experience. The artist/researcher then seeks to represent this observation or experience in the form of, let us say, a piece of choreography or a dance. Now we might expect in a research context that there would be features of this dance that communicate to an audience something about the initial experience that provided the stimulus for it. And would it be too much to expect too that the artist researcher exercised some kind of control (this does not have to be ‘impositional’) over what it communicated so that what an audience took from the artwork had some relationship with its referent, that is, the original educational observation or experience? Blumenfeld-Jones does nod in this direction by his reference to ‘resonance’ between the presented images and their meaning, but note that the ‘resonance’ has already become detached from its referent and is attached to the secondary level of interpretation, the meaning which is attached to the dance. He wants to cling on to the idea that not every meaning is acceptable, but this is in effect only a resonance between the dance and an interpretation of the dance: he offers no basis for testing the resonance of the dance – let alone the interpretation of the dance – with the educational experience. In effect, this means that there is no way of knowing whether the dance

bears any relationship to the educational experience (to which we have no independent access): it might have come from anywhere. So the idea that the dance can somehow 'represent' the educational experience evaporates. The dance can still stand as a work of art to which we may attach all sorts of meaning and to which we may respond in other ways, but this is something well removed from its claim to 'represent' research.

Barone and Eisner's response to this sort of critique is along the following lines:

One might well ask how a symbol system without clear connections to a codified array of referents can be useful in doing something as precise as a research study is intended to be.... [But] The clear specification of a referent by a symbol is not a necessary condition for meaning. In the arts symbols adumbrate; they do not denote (2012, p. 2).

However the choice here of a verb, 'adumbrate', that has at its centre the notion of shade or shadow does not promise much by way of a clearance of obscurity. More important, perhaps, it does not contribute towards that testing of a proposed meaning (however sketchily 'adumbrated') and its referent – the possibility for which seems to be close to a defining condition of 'research'.

One report that, from my perspective anyway, comes close to resolving this problem is also a rather authoritative one, because it comes from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council which is an important channel for government funding for, as its title suggests, the arts and humanities (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016). In a section of the report devoted to 'arts-based research and hermeneutics' it begins by acknowledging that:

Recent years have seen growing interest in a more systematic approach to using artistic materials and processes as a means of inquiry The term arts-based methods refers to instances where music, performance, dance, the visual arts, poetry, and so on are used to elicit, convey and/or analyse information as part of inquiry. (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016, p. 143).

But such artistic production has to be interpreted, and so:

There has been a concomitant search for interpretative methods suited to making sense of something as rich and open-ended as art ... and this has led to renewed interest in the older tradition of hermeneutics' which is defined as: 'an umbrella term for a range of interpretative methods which acknowledge the mediated nature of human understanding: its location, historicity, the role of language and the context more broadly. (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016, p. 144)

On this account, then, the meaning or significance of artistic products of arts-based educational research is not transparent but requires interpretation, and hermeneutics furnishes a range of 'methods' that can be used for this purpose.

From this it is only a short step into territory which has a familiar ring in terms of the expectations one has of 'research'. For 'research' is an honorific concept that implies not just some form of inquiry but something systematic, something transparent (and hence exposed to critical consideration) and something rigorous. This Crossick and Kaszynska plainly acknowledge:

The way to ensure methodological rigour using arts- and hermeneutics-based methods will be the same as with methods in many other areas, that is to say through ensuring good research practice resting on the principles of multi-modality (cross-tabulating different techniques and approaches) and iterability (verifying one's findings through seeking other opinions and modifying in this light). A form of iterability is at the heart of the hermeneutic circle method, where rigour is ensured by introducing fresh insights in successive cycles, while continuously testing against the original data. (2016, p. 144)

As an account of what arts-based educational research might look like I find this pretty satisfactory, It recognises the intrinsic requirement of art for interpretation; offers a source of 'methods' for such interpretation and indicates how the rigour which is a hallmark of good research might be understood and applied. All this comes at a price, however. The price is that this account shifts the focus of evaluation of the research from the art object (the painting, sculpture, dance or music) to what is offered by way of warranted interpretation of that object. Or, at least, the object in itself is insufficient without such interpretation. Is this right – and if so, is this a price that the arts community is prepared to pay for a place at the educational research table? (I suppose that the number of applications for funding received by the AHRC is an indication that such willingness is widespread.)

Research-Based Narrative Fiction

Where educational criticism called on the researcher to function as a connoisseur to see deeply into a situation and to reveal details that the casual observer would miss, narrative story telling casts the researcher as *raconteur*, who – if necessary – created facts to fill the holes in the story. (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008, p. 6)

In discussing the possible functions of, for example painting, music, sculpture and dance in the representation of educational research I have so far taken what I acknowledge to be some of the tougher examples, in part because they are so much more open to different interpretations than more standard verbal accounts of educational experience (which of course are not without their own ambiguities). Let me take a different example – that of narrative story telling – which one might expect to be more easily employed in the representation of research. The reliance on language, more specifically on words, albeit with an additional creative or artistic

purpose, brings it after all into closer proximity to more conventional research products.

The work of Clough and Nixon (1998) and Clough (1999) prompted my earlier excursion into this territory (Bridges, 2003) from which I will also draw here. The particular piece of work that interested me was a paper under the title *Crises of schooling and 'the crisis of representation': The story of Rob*. This was based on research in schools, but also drew on the author's wider experience and imagination. Central to the paper is a narrative 'fiction' of events in what might be described as a failing school. The style is that of a novel, or, as Clough prefers almost a radio script – dialogue features very strongly – because he sees it as something which is best performed rather than read silently. Having attended his presentation of some of the material, I agree that the performance is very compelling. In these terms I think it qualifies as an artistic representation of educational research. The process is illuminated in the second part of the paper by a discussion of the process of its production. Something of the flavour of the account may be provided by this opening section: Here is the beginning of the story as he told it to a BERA conference (and as it was subsequently published).

When Rob Joyson was 43 years old, he came into school on a Tuesday morning much as usual, and passing at 10:40 by a maths class taken by Michelle G – a probationer of 23 – and hearing terrible noise, and seeing through the window a boy at the back fetch a fat gob on Michelle's back as she walked down the aisle smiling, smiling too, too nervously, her hands doing 'down, please: down, down' at the noise; seeing this marbled yellow gob on Michelle's ordinary blouse on her decent body, Rob Joyson rushed into the room and to the back and took the boy – Mark something – by the ears, both ears, and pulled him up out of – through almost – his desk and repeatedly smashed his head against a chart of tessellations on the wall. And Michelle pulled at him from behind and screamed, and he twisted the boy down by his ears and pushed at him with his foot, kicking until he was quite under the desk. Then Rob started to cry and there was terrible silence – where there had been terrible noise – but for Rob searching for breath to fuel the small fearful wails that broke from him. When – thank god – someone laughed finally, unable to stay with the pain a moment longer, Rob fled the room.

By 11:30 he was at home, his wife and GP were expected shortly, and he was carefully drying the pots on the draining board. Rosemary Thorpe, the head-teacher, was putting the mugs on the hooks beneath the wall-cupboards. Rob had not spoken – not a word – since Rosemary had fetched him from the caretaker's 'den'; the caretaker had run to the office to say that RJ – as most people knew him in the school – was crying, no wailing in the den; was, well: barmy.

Rob ... Rob, you know you shouldn't ... O Rob, Rob, dear Rob. Look, let me ...

And she made to wipe his nose with kitchen roll but – though he offered no resistance – she stopped at his smile that excluded her so clearly from his occupation.

I had this one – holding a mug celebrating the Miners' Strike of '84.

Rosemary is very short, short and quite round. When finally she feels she must, on pain of rebuke, must touch him, she reaches up to his face quite as he is launched into a gesture – actually the first expression of his presence – turning both hands outward at the wrist, and she walks each of her breasts into his hands. And then they laugh, and then hold – close – and then Rosemary is crying and Rob is calm.

The first words from Rob, each as flat as the next, an even pause between each: What/ever/shall/I/do/Rose ... (Clough, 1999, pp. 429–430)

The particular merits of this piece of work as literature is something that might be discussed, but let me, at least for current purposes, suggest that it displays many good qualities. The narrative is attention grabbing and fast moving. The central characters are sympathetically drawn. The story has considerable emotional impact. It is also a credible narrative: whether it actually happened or happened as it was portrayed – or not – one can believe that events could have unfolded as they are portrayed. It is truth-like, even if not true. So is it then a successful representation of the research?

There are several obstacles to this conclusion.

On the author's own account its sources are not limited to those gathered in the course of the research or under the kind of discipline that research imposes on the manner in which data are gathered. This carries certain advantages to the roundedness of the account. For example, the author can follow or, more accurately, take the account imaginatively into private and indeed intimate places that the ordinary researcher could not access; the story can be embellished with detail that contributes to mood or drama, even if such detail was never observed; characters can be introduced to represent a perspective absent from the research data; and any other devices that serve the literary and dramatic purpose of the author can be brought into creative service, but at a cost.

Most obviously the reader rapidly loses track of what actually happened in the noise of the author's creative invention. Interestingly, in museology, archaeologists will use their wider knowledge and experience to reconstruct a full skeleton out of the fossilised remains of a dinosaur incorporating the authentic materials that they have. This helps the visitor to get a fuller picture of the object in question. But the museologist does not pretend that the reconstruction and the inserted pieces are anything other than that, and they are usually rendered in a way that makes them clearly distinguishable from the authentic material. Fellow scholars and visitors are thus enabled to question such reconstruction and to make their own assessment of its authenticity. In Clough's story, this opportunity is completely obscured. Indeed, by rendering the project an aesthetic one (rather than a scholarly one)

it is almost required that one should not as a reader be aware of the joins in the source material.

Bennett's (2000) *The Lady in the Van* offers an interesting twist on this discussion. The story/stage play/film is based on Bennett's real-life experience of an eccentric old lady who lived in a van in the driveway to his house for 15 years. The trailer for the BBC film describes it as 'a mostly true story' (I wonder how a reviewer for an educational journal would respond to a 'mostly true' research report!). Bennett kept notes about what 'the lady in the van' said and did and his relationship with her, as was his habit, and the film shows him in discussion with himself as to whether he will ever use these as a source for some future writing, which of course he eventually did. But it also shows him from time to time 'inventing' things that she or he might have said or which he wished he had said but did not – and then in a self-conscious reflexive turn pointing out to himself that he had now strayed into such invention. After one outburst to a social worker featured in the film, Bennet's alter ego, Alan Bennett 2 as he is indicated in the script, observes 'But of course you did not say any of that'. The play has 'the lady in the van' scolding Bennet for using his mother in one of his dramatic presentations but then Bennet observing 'she never said this' and then his alter ego observing 'No, but why shouldn't she?' (Bennett, 2000, p. 40). Bennet does not quite condemn himself for this departure but he is clearly uncomfortably self-aware that he has strayed from one kind of writing into another – and he seems unsure as to whether he may or may not enjoy such 'narrative freedom' as he refers to it.

If one turns one gaze from Clough's story to consider the 'so what?' question one is left with a good deal of uncertainty. Is one to suppose that the way events are described here is how things actually are in schools or how they could be (in so far as the account is persuasive)? If the story strikes what one feels to be a false note, does this mean that the fiction is implausible or that my assumptions need revising? How would one decide if there is no way of checking back to what 'really' happened? If one wanted to ask different questions about the school than those asked by the author, would the answer lie in further observation of the school or interrogation of the artist's imagination? Part of the interest of real objects in a museum is that real objects can be examined in years to come for answers to hitherto unasked questions whereas the data that provide the answers is unlikely to have been factored into the simulated objects. (When, e.g. carbon dating became a possibility it would have been no use applying this form of interrogation to a facsimile of an ancient carving.) The deliberate and systematic ambivalence of the composite fact/fiction makes it difficult to know what is actually being 'represented' and difficult to know what to make of its 'representation'. None of which is to deny that it might make for a good read.

The Magic of the Real

Though works of art can certainly conjure their own magic, there is also 'the magic of the real' (Bridges. 2003, 2017) which gets lost when one

obscures the difference between, for example what someone said or did in my imaginative construction of events and what they really – yes, really – did say or do. This was brought home to me by another presentation at the same conference in which I first heard Peter Clough's presentation. In this Melanie Walker presented another narrative – about the educational experience under the apartheid regime of a young South African girl, Lily Moya, and her relationship with a White European woman, Mable Palmer. But this was based on a scholarly study of the correspondence between them; there was an evidential basis for the account which could be checked and revisited by the sceptical; and it was this that provided the warrant for the claim at the end of her poignant and compelling account: 'It all happened, it all happened, it all happened' (Walker, 1998, 1999).

There is something magical about the real and the way it connects us to the past or to others. This is why museum educators attach importance to taking into schools, for example not reproductions of historical artefacts, not facsimiles, but the real thing. It is this belief in the almost talismanic power of the real (in the research report or the museum exhibition) to link us to another person, another world – to provide what Honan refers to as 'present-ness' or 'sense of experience-in-events' (Honan, 1979) – which leads us to place special store on the narrative which features and rests upon identifiable real material as distinct from one in which the real is lost in the invented, in the fiction. To regard or relate to the real in this way is to return or attribute to it (or at least some of its representatives) a power which goes beyond the power to inform or even to validate or confirm: it is a power to draw the reader into a relationship with the object of cognition, a power to entrance. (Note how one gets drawn here into the kind of language which is more commonly employed in claims for the arts.)

The processes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa provided some especially graphic examples of the power of 'real' objects to give materiality to people's stories and a conviction that the fictional could never convey:

The physical markings of violence and trauma that were identified held up and displayed provided tangible evidence of the individualised acts of history on each dismembered body: 'That hand, I want it back. That hand is said to be in the bottle in Port Elizabeth. I would like it back.' This kind of utterance is repeated again and again within the TRC process, identified body parts as sites of torture, physically recovering and re-mem-bering the hidden past and uncovering and locating its source. Physical remains like those brought to a hearing by Joyce Mtimkulu and held up to be seen – scraps of her son's hair attached to parts of his scalp – envisioned these separate stories of remembrance with material life, truth's 'real' testimony. The physicality of mutilation was seen to embody the materiality of apartheid. (Ras-sool *et al.*, 2000, p. 126)

It really happened: it really, really happened. The creative arts can make almost magical connections, but they are not alone in this, so can hard,

material evidence; and by trying to do two things at once, the creative arts may fall between both stools.

CONCLUSION

There is far more that needs to be said than I can deal with in what is already an over-extended essay. In particular I have been recurrently uncomfortable about generalising about the possibilities and limitations of ‘the creative arts’ in all their diverse and internally contested forms. Given the problems in providing an even half acceptable account of what the arts are (and are not) or set out to do (or do not), the chances of progressing to an acceptable account of whether or how they might represent educational research are pretty slim.

I am, however, left sceptical about how successful the arts can be in *representing* educational research to an audience in a way that can inform their understanding of educational policy or practice. In part this is precisely because of the creativity and imagination that is the hallmark of the arts and the artist and which gives free reign to individual expression and invention unshackled by the need to limit oneself to, to represent and to communicate what ‘really, really happened’. But it is also because in a context in which one is looking for the research representation to represent A (educational policy or practice) through B (the work of art) to C (the audience) there is such profound ambivalence of meaning in B and such a dearth of intermediary data that it is extremely difficult to review the fidelity or otherwise of the relationship between B and A or even to know what one would be looking for.

I have perhaps hinted that the expectations laid onto the arts to function in a research-like way, may have more to do with the instrumental requirements generated by their incorporation into the bureaucratic nightmare that is contemporary higher education than an authentic reflection of the real dynamic of artistic expression, but that is perhaps for another paper.

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