

DOING RESEARCH DIFFERENTLY: BRINGING ART AND SCIENCE TOGETHER

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Abstract: *Historically and traditionally, art and science have been considered two separate methods of inquiry, with science taking precedence over the arts. In this article, I offer a critically reflective look at my PhD study and posit that the use of drama is a “valid” method by which a researcher can gain easier access to the participants. A script was developed which captured the concerns about the behaviour of high school students in Barbados and presented to seven student focus groups. This resulted in students who were more comfortable about sharing their perspectives and producing an “authentic” student voice. In this autoethnographic approach, I discovered that drama can be used as a method for breaking the ice when utilizing focus groups to collect data from students. In fact, the drama became an integral part of the research process. This has implications for the traditional way in which research is perceived and conducted.*

Keywords: *drama, art, science, research process, authentic student voice, focus groups*

INTRODUCTION

Throughout this reflective paper, I discuss one aspect of my PhD research and my discovery of the way that art and science work together in ways that are complementary and qualitatively “valid”. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) conclude that the research process for the qualitative researcher conjures up “scientist, naturalist, field-worker, journalist, social critic, artist, performer, jazz musician, filmmaker, quiltmaker, essayist” (p. 5). However, even though I had spent most of my professional life working in the Creative and Performing Arts, I decided to pursue an area that was in my view more “academic”. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) also posit that the research process is an interactive one which is shaped by one’s history and biography. Yet I embarked on the PhD in Education, ignoring both my history and biography.

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Adams et al. (2017) suggest that autoethnography is an open and honest reflection of self that allows the researcher to “call on memory and hindsight to reflect on past experiences” (p. 2). In this paper, I reflect on, and describe the journey towards a re/defining of the word “academic” and my acceptance that “art” is and can be “science”.

If I were to define the term *academic*, we would probably find such words and phrases as “scholarly”, “objective”, “evidence-based arguments”, “deductive reasoning”, “formal voice”, and “scientific”. On the other hand, we describe *art* with words such as “produced for beauty”, “originality”, “novel”, “creative skill and imagination”, “emotional” and “personal”. Science, of course, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is the “systematic study of the nature and behaviour of the material and physical universe, based on observation, experiment, and measurement, and the formulation of the laws to describe these facts in general terms”. This paper provides, through an autoethnographic approach, a way in which these elements can be examined to evoke new knowledge and provide meaning in a PhD study.

LOOKING BACK

Adams et al. (2017) posit that autoethnography is the way in which researchers “speak against or provide alternatives to dominant, taken for granted and harmful cultural scripts, stories, and stereotypes” (p. 3). One day, I write the word “painful” on a page and this is where I am now, retelling my journey as a story of a once frustrated PhD student, to reflect and make meaning of the experience. As I go back and forth, the moments of reflection reveal the academy’s bias towards what it defines as “scientific rigour”. I am framing my reflection within the work of Homi Bhabha (1992). I believe I am the hybrid of whom he speaks. I agree with Bhabha’s post-colonial discourse about the way we as African people have imitated the cultural attitude of the dominant oppressor. That “attitude”, I contend, lies in how we allow a western methodology (*taken for granted*) of how to conduct research in our academy, attempting to make our own voice null. I had in effect embraced a way of thinking about research that placed a “positivistic sense of rationality” (Bhabha, 1992) as the highest form of knowing, excluding art [*an alternative*] and subsequently myself.

I am reminded of the Trinidadian calypsonian the Mighty Doula who was concerned about “being split into two” because he was of both Indian and African descent. I had virtually done the same thing to myself. Isn’t it incredible that I would choose to split myself into this kind of “schizophrenia”? This rhetorical question is not surprising

Doing Research Differently

given the epistemological emphasis in the academy which sets up scientific knowledge as superior [*dominant*]. I set up myself as a scientist and diminished the role that art plays in how we know. This epistemological “schizophrenia” may well confront other artistes/students who are desirous of doing a PhD in certain academies. For years, I have been understanding the world, making meaning of knowledge through drama. The PhD journey forced me to re-examine my own notions of who I was.

I was not just a drama person or an Arts educator. I was a researcher who had all the tools—both art and science—to make my research process live. My own way of seeing the world was inextricably linked to seeing the world as a dynamic and evolving space. Yet, I had both consciously and unconsciously created an internal narrative that the research process of education did not require art. I had in fact placed the science as the pinnacle of knowledge, thereby diminishing myself. I had “marginalized” myself. I had ignored my own personal epistemology, placing my art as “low” (Bhabha, p. 57). There is a need for me to “revise” the version of myself that I had allowed the academy, and perhaps even the society, to impose on me, including what is meant by “academic”.

THE ISSUE

The central question of my PhD research was to determine what strategies schools should implement to promote more effective levels of self-regulation among secondary schools in Barbados (Weekes, 2016). The perspectives of teachers, guidance counsellors, administrators and students were being sought across the specific themes which I was investigating. These themes were reculturing schools, restructuring schools, curriculum interventions, school-community partnerships, and student leadership. Kaushik and Walsh (2019) speak to the fact that pragmatism is an “inclusive framework of inquiry” that provides stakeholders who are generally “marginalized” with opportunities to reflect on their “oppressive conditions” (p. 12). While Clarke and Visser (2019) highlight the fact that pragmatism offers a range of strategies to researchers which enables them to answer educational questions, pragmatism appeared to open a creative door for me. Yet I am aware in looking back that I remained reluctant and fearful to enter that creative door; I needed an “academic” solution.

I had already administered a questionnaire capturing the perspectives of teachers, guidance counsellors and administrators and wished to collect data from students whose schools had showed, after analysis of the quantitative data, either a high or a low orientation towards student leadership. I agreed with Fielding (2010) that

researchers needed to create spaces in which students themselves are able “to re-see and re-engage with others in creative, holistic and potentially transformational ways” (p. 61)–essential in improving schools. Kane and Chimwayange (2013), too, believed that students’ voice enables teachers and researchers to take into consideration students’ unique perspectives which can be transformative and emancipatory. I wanted to provide the students in my study with a pathway to releasing their “authentic” voice. I use the term “authentic” in much the same way as Mazzei and Jackson (2012) have identified authenticity, that is, one in which students can “speak the truth of consciousness and experience” (p. 745).

What was the best way to include student voices for this PhD research? At every turn of the PhD process, I was constantly reminded that I had come from an artistic background and that a PhD was about scholarly writing, demanding scientific rigour. Bhabha (1992) contends that it is entirely possible to exist “in-between plurality of practices that are different and yet must occupy the same space of adjudication and articulation” (p. 57). In this self-reflective paper, I find myself in a dialogic process that shows the tension that exists between drama and science. Indeed, this paper shows that drama could be artistic and rational, aesthetic and epistemologically sound, as well as articulate and scientific.

THE CHALLENGE

Shortly after my upgrade seminar, I happened to be speaking to a PhD colleague who had indicated that the student focus groups that she had been conducting resulted sometimes in no more than monosyllabic responses and even silence. On reflection, I was already anxious about going into schools since I had not taught in a secondary school for over twenty years. I was seeking the students’ perspectives from eight focus groups from four secondary schools to determine what strategies the students themselves believed would be the most effective methods of promoting more effective levels of self-regulation. This paper therefore is my looking back at one specific area of the methodology utilized in seeking the perspectives of children (students) and in which I was able to bring drama (my first love) and science (the distinct demand of academia) together: the development of a drama script to animate discussion.

I was asking the same questions in the focus groups as those I had previously asked of the teachers and administrators in the quantitative phase of the study. I wanted to ensure that the students understood the key issues, the themes under investigation and to present to them some of my findings from the earlier quantitative research

Doing Research Differently

process. Both Mienczakowski (2000) and Saldaña (2005, 2009) supported the use of drama to provide stimulus in a discussion forum. Mienczakowski (2000) developed critical ethno-dramas based on his research with health professionals in seeking to determine their attitudes towards individuals who were schizophrenic or alcohol dependent. Saldaña (2005, 2009) conducted extensive work in which he transformed human experiences into drama while working with what may be considered by some researchers to be “hard to reach” groups of individuals, including the homeless and female sex workers. His work incorporates the use of dramatic presentation to illustrate data. According to Saldaña (2009), “ethnodrama is the written script which consists of dramatized, significant selections of narrative collected through interviews, participant observation, field notes, journal entries, and/or print or media artefacts such as diaries, television broadcasts, newspaper articles, and court proceedings” (p. 2). It was my reading of Saldaña, in that specific moment, that led to my decision to present drama to the students in a format that would be engaging as well as informative without being didactic. However, I remained confused and uncertain about how to discuss my decision with my advisor.

FOCUS GROUPS

According to Johl and Renganathan (2009), “one of the greatest pitfalls in conducting research successfully is the inability to obtain access to the research field” (p. 42). In the context of this paper, I do not refer to “access” as the permission granted to me by the Education Authority, by the principals or even the parents. By “access” I mean, I wanted to have the students willing to open their hearts and minds in ways that showed trust and rapport over this short period of just forty minutes. Focus groups are unique in that the group interaction itself can produce a rich source of data on a particular topic (Adler, Salanterä & Zumstein-Shaha, 2019). Indeed, Glitz et al. (2003) posit that often comments by one member of the focus group may spark a new idea or perspective. Orvik and Berland (2013) further reiterated the need for researchers to be aware of the situational factors when conducting focus groups, such as the level of comfort and the extent to which the area being used is separated from others. These can promote an atmosphere conducive to disclosure in which people can share their ideas, experiences, and attitudes about a topic. My intention was to engage the students in such a way as to create an environment by which students would speak “their truth” by empowering them to speak without constraint with a researcher who is in fact a stranger.

It is quite easy to find guidelines on how to conduct focus group interviews (Feldman, 2011; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). Groups ought to be designed according to age (Adler et al., 2019) and familiarity (Fielden et al., 2011). So, for example, there was a small English class and two classes which did a course called Health and Family Life Education. All the focus group interviews took place in the morning as I did not want to have either tired or restless students. However, I could find no research which specifically outlined some of the challenges that I might face conducting focus groups with students or children. Adler et al. (2019) posit that “there are no current summaries of the most important issues to consider” (p. 1) when conducting research with children. While the term “breaking the ice” is used in research which discusses focus groups, I could find no researcher of focus groups who spoke about the use of drama to conduct focus group interviews with students.

THE SCRIPT (See Appendix A)

I wrote the script in secret, barely referencing it. I was careful not to bring too much attention to it during my advising sessions. At any rate, it was my thesis and I had to believe in its power to provide the students with the engagement and agency that I needed for the frank discussions. I brought to the script my understanding of Saldana’s work, the data which I had collected with my one-on-one conversations with twelve stakeholders at the initial research stage and a review of the literature in which I teased out the five areas for investigation. It was structured around two scenes. Scene One presented an incident in which two students discuss what has happened to one of them who is suspended from school. Scene Two presented some perspectives through the eyes of two elders. The four characters were played by two trained actors in their early twenties. The script “At the Bus Stop” lasted seven (7) minutes and was presented by the actors completely in Barbadian dialect.

I anxiously and nervously presented the play to the focus groups at the four schools. I did recognize that I was working against the status quo. I acknowledge that the performance of the 7-minute play particularly within the Caribbean context reflects the way in which we decode and learn about who we are as people and, in that regard, I argue for a hybrid discipline that celebrates both the analytic and the artistic. In the context of qualitative research methodology, I now see the performance as “intervention” and “transgressive”; it puts into “motion” a way of knowing that challenges colonial and traditional epistemologies. We recognize the tensions which exist for us as qualitative researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, 2011).

Doing Research Differently

The students quickly settled in all instances once I had read the assent procedures. They watched attentively, chuckling at times, nodding agreement, commenting “yes ah (it is) true” at points in the play which they found amusing or poignant. I barely referenced the interview questions which I had developed for the focus groups to ensure the themes were addressed. I recognize that there was a cyclical exchange between myself and the students. The students’ responses to the drama addressed all the themes. The discussions went smoothly and there were two groups who wanted to know if I would come back the following week and present another play. The students corroborated research, suggested new strategies, disagreed with previously collected data and often expressed contradictory views within their focus groups. The transcribed interviews resulted in 45 single-spaced pages of written text in which students identified across all the themes under investigation the strategies which they themselves wished to see implemented.

How might my use of drama have affected what the students said? Could the script have presented a bias? Perhaps, even the fact that I chose to use a drama might be considered manipulative. How might the drama have affected the students’ thoughts and words? Did it in fact trigger difficult experiences? Even having given them the ammunition to speak in the unrestrained way they did, did they in fact tell “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth”? I left the last focus group feeling emancipated and transformed, smiling quietly.

REFLECTION AND LAST WORDS

The presentation of the performances provided students with a transformative experience in which they were able to use their authentic and vulnerable voices telling their stories about bullying, the physical and emotional abuse as well the challenges of being in schools with the behaviour which they experienced there. Indeed, many of the students spoke without restraint about the kind of strategies they wished to see implemented in their schools. Freire (1982) was concerned about students being given the opportunity to “express their own consciousness” and a belief that research needed to value partnership between teachers and students, “reciprocal” and “dialogical”.

Following on Freire’s concept, the students’ focus groups (the oppressed) and myself the researcher (leadership), were involved and represented “the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge” (p. 69). The script created the backdrop for that reciprocal and dialogical

response of the students, in which I, the researcher, through the presentation of the drama, acted as the “catalyst” and the students responded as those with the “expert knowledge”. Also, in keeping with Freire’s idea of research, the presentation of the script produced “an arousal effect”. In their offering of critical suggestions on the issues of students’ behaviour, they were creating “a new situation” and one which makes possible the pursuit which Freire believed was so critical to the pursuit of a fuller humanity (p. 47). I listened to the students make meaning of what was happening to them in schools across the five paradigms, and to their responses to the drama. There was clarity, insight, and wisdom; there were also many offerings by the students which could have come straight out of a textbook on how to improve schools!

The fact is that my Caribbean colleagues have used art to explore a multiplicity of issues. The impact of slavery in Dennis Scott’s *An Echo in the Bone*; stigma and discrimination within HIV/AIDS by The Performing Arts Company, Ashe, of Jamaica; and the memorializing of the death of 167 women who died in an alms house fire by Sistren’s theatrical production “*QPH*” are just a few. Issues of race, injustice, and inequality have been illuminated through the lyrics of reggae artists like Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Chronixx, and through the writings of Erna Brodber, Sylvia Winter and Kamau Brathwaite, to name a few. How might Caribbean researchers embrace these artistic and creative ways of knowing in research to find solutions to educational problems? I suggest that we must be particularly mindful of acknowledging our oral histories and rich performances as ways of knowing and that we should critically interrogate the monolithic ways of knowledge that we have inherited from the colonial hegemony. There is need for us to experiment and research our other cultural experiences in the pursuit of capturing data within the academy. What if we stepped outside the traditional philosophical paradigms and comfort zone to discover new metaphors, symbols, realities that help us reveal new data about difficult educational issues?

Finally, I share this reflection of my PhD journey, reflecting my own evolving attitudes to what defines as “academic”. Saldaña (2018) asserts that theatre is “an art form usually perceived by university administrators as a field not as worthy as the hard sciences”; and he too acknowledges the “lesser than statuses” (p. 2) ascribed to him by the academy. I had accepted that status and allowed those attitudes to permeate my own view of how we come to know and to understand truth, thereby not accepting my “hybrid” self (Bhabha, 1992). It is hoped that this paper shows that it is possible to provide data through drama and that it is possible to utilize the drama to provide the

Doing Research Differently

enabling environment which ensures that students speak, openly and without constraint, their truth; and that the script is the thing that is the science.

It has been five years since I completed this PhD. I share this experience so that future researchers may feel empowered to face the “spectre” of what Harris (cited in Bhabha) calls “self-righteous moral privilege” (p. 60) which forces us in academies to use methodologies which “drive wedges” between art and science. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) caution qualitative researchers not to ignore the “new ways of looking, interpreting, arguing, and writing” and our academies must understand and, moreover, respect that “research [is] a multi-cultural process” (p. 28). I have come to understand that position and recognize that I had almost lost myself as well as the possibility of doing research differently.

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Doing Research Differently

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APPENDIX A

THE SCRIPT

Extract 1: Fighting, Underage Drinking and Suspension

Actor 1: I just here. You could imagine dat de Principal give me a letter to give to my mother and play he sending me home? 'Cause a little freak Bostick in class come in my face and I push he (pushed him).

Actor 2: What wrong(s) wid (with) you? You push de teacher? You can't go around treating people like that.

Actor 1: And why not? My father tell me, never let nobody boss me bout. Don't let nobody mess with me.

Actor 2: You don't know a mature person walks away. Next thing, something worse happens.

Actor 1: Well, I walk away. After I broke off a chair leg and hit dis boy 'cross he head wid (with) it.

Actor 2: You ain't 'fraid you get kick out of school, boy?

Actor 2: I tear up de letter de (the) Principal give me.

Actor 1: But the school is still going to call your parents.

Actor 1: I don't care. I leaving school dis afternoon and go down de van stand and drink some beers with my boys.

Actor 2: Drink alcohol? How old are you? Barely 14 years old? My mummy barely allows me to drink a little twist then. There's a reason there's a legal age for drinking. What kind of studying you could be doing when you drinking alcohol?

Doing Research Differently

Extract 2: Indiscipline in and out of School

Actor 1: The government is out to arrest the growing incidence of violence among Barbadian youth before it spirals out of control.

Actor 2: Dat is why I don't want to be here at dis bus stop when de school children get out of school. What time it is?

Actor 1: It's nearly 2 o'clock. I surprise dat you here at de bus stop at this time of de day.

Actor 2: Oh yes. I had to collect some things from de market. But you could bet your life I would be off de road before the school children get on de road start dey cursing, swearing and fighting. And the rudeness to old people and their conduct on the bus, does be terrible.

Extract 3: The Carter Report (1995)

Actor 1: You wid dat all the time. Man, I tell you already not all de school children like dat. And besides dey have different agencies working wid de schools. According to this report by a man name Carter is only about 13% of school children who feel dat violence is ok you know. But is to make sure that things don't get worse in secondary schools here in Barbados.

Extract 4: Parents/Guardians Role

Actor 2: My grandchildren can't behave so. Dem (they) have discipline, self-control and dem mother train dem dat (that) they must think about the consequences of their actions. And dey (they) know when dey (they) get on de road dat dey (they) got to behave themselves in a manner dat show dey (they) have respect for themselves, and de (the) people on de (the) road.

Actor 1: Well Clarissa, dat (that) is commendable. But remember not every child have a grandparent like you.

Extract 5: School-Community Partnerships

Actor 2: Parents need parenting classes, dat (that) is what.

Actor 1: But Clarissa dat (that) is a good idea. De Schools should really look into that. Schools need to do that. A lot of de children not really bad. De just need someone to listen to them.

Extract 6: School Size and Teachers

Actor 2: What about the teachers too?

Actor 1: Man don't go there. The teachers have their own problems. It can't be easy. You could imagine having to work in some of those schools dat (that) have over 800 students. How they learn all the children names? How dem little children does survive? It must be hard. But if everyone just respect(s) each other. It will trickle down. And have respect for each other.

Extract 7: This affects some students only

Man, every school have good children. Look at Miss Sergeant grandchildren. Both de (the) girl and de (the) boy, get good CXC's. They got children doing good. Doing good things all the time.

Extract 8: Role Models from the Community

Actor 1: I heard that calypso fellow was talking to boys in a school. Who he name?

Actor 2: You mean RPB?

Actor 1: I hear he going into the schools and talking to the children.

Actor 2: Well, they need more positive people like that go into the schools. Teach them. Dem like role models.

Extract 9: Incidents lead to more serious crime

Actor 1: But dat (that is) going happen. We need to talk to de children. Cooperation and communication between the school and the community; among parent, teachers and students.

Actor 2: I understand. But they need to understand. Dey need to realise that this bad behaviour could lead to more serious crime. Like murders...end dem in prison. Mess up dey (their) education for life. Hurt dey (their) parents, bring shame own dey (their) family.

Doing Research Differently

Extract 10: Giving Students a Voice

Actor 1: I believe something good could happen if we ask the students. They might have some solutions to the problems that we never think of.

Actor 2: Well, look at that this, we asking the children? But (it) is dem (their) school!

Actor 1: Children got opinion.