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Researcher Decisions in Presentation: Using a Painting Scheme to Stage Research Poetry

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Abstract

Even when we use participants' words, we as researchers, craft and (re)present those words in the dissemination of the research. Laurel Richardson terms this "staging". She writes "when we write social science, we use our authority and privileges to talk about the people we study. No matter how we stage the text, we—the authors—are doing the staging" (1992: 131). Decisions surrounding how we stage the text are our responsibility. Researcher decisions, about the crafting of research poems, are therefore deliberate and intentional for the purpose of communicating our research in certain ways. On what basis do we make decisions in crafting research poetry and how are they linked to our analyses? One of the reasons a researcher determines to use research poetry is to seek to engage the "listener's body" and make an empathic connection to research participants (Richardson, 1993: 705). In this article, I present a scheme from Chinese brush painting, as one possible way to guide decisions in the crafting of poetic participant 'portraits' illustrated using a study involving school principals.

Keywords

Research Poetry, Analysis to Crafting Decisions, Research Presentation, Participant 'Portraits'

Researcher Decisions in Presentation

Researchers have been questioned when they present participants' words to be 'taken as read' as if to suggest there was no selection and no interpretation. MacLure, for example, protested the conventional use of fragmented quotations as that "which categorises and judges the world through the administration of good sense and common sense, dispensed by the autonomous, rational and well-intentioned individual, according to principles of truth and error" (2013: 659). Thus, it follows that a researcher cannot suggest participants' words written verbatim in a research text are 'exact' and therefore convey a speaker's meaning clearly. This would leave out an awareness of responsibility that is the researchers' (MacLure, 2013; St Pierre, 2013). Mazzei and Jackson (2009) have also argued that "letting readers 'hear' participant voices and presenting their 'exact words' as if they are transparent is a move that fails to consider how as researchers we are always shaping those 'exact words'" (2009: 2). These authors point out that attempts to provide voice evidence may leave out who was listening, how content decisions were made and who is making the decisions. In other words, to use selected quotations as 'exact' representation disguises the power relations at work in the research process.



Representation characterises a researcher's evidence according to choices she or he makes. Choices made, ideally, by a responsible, ethical, and reflexive person who, having sought answers to his or her research questions, communicates these insights, at some point, in written form. Different forms of representation may draw attention to complexity, feeling, and new ways of seeing (Eisner, 1997). The ways or forms our writing takes may affect our sensibilities, with poetry being a tool that bridges a gap between personal experience and a discussion of public issues (Rinehart, 2010).

I researched how the work of school principals is judged. I used educational assessment research as a disciplinary perspective—specifically classroom-based formative assessment—to (re)consider aspects of appraisal through the experience of six school principals in small rural primary schools. My overarching research question was, *how does principals' appraisal reflect the purposes and practices of quality assessment, recognise the complexity of formal and informal expectations in school settings, and give consideration to the human being undertaking this work?* Judgement of principalship is not confined to formal appraisal but is ongoing and integral to principal work.

Consideration of judgement at the informal and 'self' levels highlighted the significance of the community in which the principal works, their management/relational activities and degree of self-knowledge. My decisions regarding representation in the study (see Earl Rinehart, 2017) were deliberate and strategic: I intended to use poetry to foster reader engagement with the principals who participated in this study and the issues that were raised. I wanted space for the reader to co-create their story, as well as respectfully and responsibly draw these principals to be visible. I also wanted to position myself very obviously as the researcher (as craftsman).

Poetry can be used in one or more stages within the research process. Lahman, Geist, Rodriguez, Graglia, Richard, and Schendel (2010) identified in literature six major ways poetry was used in qualitative research and noted that 'new' ways were being adopted. I am utilising broad groupings in posing just three here: Poetry may be used as the subject of study, as a process of analysis, and/or as a form of representation. Although the crafting of the poems in this study did mean ongoing analysis, my focus was on representation of evidence. In this research, I considered the way each principal in this study judges what he or she does, and their self-knowledge. This is a more personal and individual 'appraisal' than could be represented through fragmented quotations or stories. I made the decision to use poetry precisely as Faulkner (2009) suggested, when researchers "feel that other modes of representation will not capture what they desire to show about their work and the research participants" (17). Poetic representation would allow more than words to be conveyed: what was said but also what was unsaid or implied, and even that possibly unrealised by participants (perhaps until they read the transcript or research report for themselves). I aimed to convey what has emerged from analysis particularly to do with 'self-appraisal' and, if I could, a sensitivity to the human being and the lived work experiences of each principal. In short, I used research poems because of what I wanted to communicate and because of how poetry may communicate with the reader.

The Use of Research Poetry

A researcher's use of poetic form opens up space for the reader to gather impressions and make an emotive, empathic connection to the research participants. The space in poetic forms invites readers to engage and respond with the personal, one's own feelings and reflections (Glesne, 1997). Glesne (1997) writes, "through accessing the senses, poetry makes one pause, reflect, [and] feel" (213). A reader's connection with others, through their response to poetry, can reach more than the mind. As Richardson explains, "because of its rhythms, silences, spaces, breath points, poetry engages the listener's body, even when the mind resists and denies it" (Richardson, 1993: 704-705). Prendergast (2009) discusses how poetry in research should be concerned with affect as well as intellect; these are not separate in poetry's power to engage and connect. Faulkner (2009) and Hill (2005) suggest that poetry connects with human experience and what it is to be human. Faulkner (2009) views poetry as "a means to enlarge understanding, resist clear undemanding interpretations, and move closer to what it means to be human" (16). Hill (2005) suggests that poems capture richness, complexity, dynamics and subtlety of human experience (in this case the judgment of principals' work) and can make feelings, events, and perspectives more vivid to a reader.

How ‘good’ research poetry needs to be—as poetry—is one of the debates around the use of poetry in research presentation. Lahman and Richard (2014) state that research poems “are accepted in the field of qualitative research as a valid representation of research participants’ experiences” (3). These authors support the use of ‘good enough’ research poetry while researcher skill in the craft of poetry is developed. Others call for researcher ‘training’ in poetic writing (e.g. Barone & Eisner, 1997; Cahnmann, 2003). Whether trained or not, using ‘poem-like compositions’ (the term used by Glesne, 1997) reinforces reader’ awareness of the researcher’s judgement and craft in decisions regarding what is included and what has been left out in representation: because “poetry makes writing conspicuous” (Faulkner, 2009: 25). However, once the researcher determines that research poetry would suit the communication of insights based on the gathered evidence, subsequent decisions arise.

The researcher decides what to call the poetry presented as part of the research, what is used to craft these texts and what will be their features. I consider the poems presented here as *research poems* because they are part of research and I crafted them using transcribed participants’ words (Faulkner, 2009; Lahman & Richard, 2014). I used participant’s words from transcripts to illustrate emerging knowledge from *all* the evidence, not just the transcripts. Cahnmann (2003) and Richardson (1994) speak specifically of honouring their participants through the accuracy of participant speech in representation.

Hill (2005) proposes participant descriptions and field note entries on their environments as two essential features of what she terms *portraiture*. My field note entries will have influenced what stood out for me in the transcripts and how each poem became crafted but I did not explicitly add these elements into the poems crafted from the words of each of the principals as recorded. Even using pseudonyms, one of my first concerns was to maintain what anonymity I could (see Earl Rinehart, 2018). I struggled with the inclusion of any signature phrases an individual might use as I crafted individual poems as ‘portraits’, except where these might influence meaning and message. Instead, I used different visual and rhythmic layouts to convey individual qualities.

Poetic ‘portraiture’ provides a multidimensional and more accessible way of ‘seeing, hearing and feeling’ participants and contexts (Hill, 2005). These portraits are, of course, incomplete, designed to illustrate something of each individual in order to share aspects of their self-knowledge and their individual views of principal work. Although there was deliberation and intentionality in my decision-making process in crafting these poetic representations, there was also something unexamined and intuitive going on. The main point is that no matter how good poetry might get, a researcher’s ‘work’ is their message and the connection between their audience and the broader issue(s) (Rinehart, 2010).

Wolcott (2009) proposes that research is not complete until it is disseminated and Cahnmann (2003) writes, “we must assume an audience for our work, an audience that longs for fresh language to describe ... experiences” (35). It was the audience reaction that concerned Nicol (2008). She warns how research authors might both gain and lose something in readership through the use of poetic compositions, commenting: “readers have expectations of texts, particularly research texts, and if the expectation is disrupted, readers may no longer be willing to read and engage with the text” (Nicol, 2008: 328).

In following Faulkner’s (2009) advice that researchers “make transparent the creation and evaluation of poetry” (9), I sought to write with ‘more engagement and connection’—to communicate to ‘diverse audiences’—in order to approach deeper understandings of the principals’ experience. I did not intend to be experimental, cutting-edge or even artistic (Bochner & Ellis, 2003) in using poetry. However, I acknowledge that presentation is a product of my crafting and I have the desire for the evidence to “reflect the thickness of living” through a “systematic, credible and transparent process” (Galvin & Prendergast, 2015: xi). An explanation of my crafting of the poems is the focus of this paper in order to be transparent and to ensure my methods can be followed and evaluated.

Using a Painting Scheme to Stage Research Poetry

Poetic representation allowed me to draw closer attention to the individuals who participated in this study. As such I present my interpretation *of* evidence *with* evidence with a more overt researcher craft. Through the following poems, I put at the centre of the presentation the person—the human

being—whose work is being judged, including being judged by themselves. In drawing a 'portrait' of the participants, I use an analogy to plastic arts, specifically painting.

Rather than suggest I had enough evidence and skill to paint an 'oil painting' poem-portrait to represent the principals with many layers of colour for each, I chose to write poems that echo the lighter touch of Chinese brush painting (Rae, 2008). Rae explains:

Chinese brush painting is meant to be more than a representation of an object; it is also a symbolic expression. This is why a full plant is never painted, but rather a few blossoms which will represent the plant in it's [sic] entirety, and, in fact, all of life—a TAO principle. Rather than looking at the subject as you paint, you're bringing it forth from your mind and heart and becoming part of nature. (2008: 1)

In other words, the painter-author suggests their object in the representation, leaving space between strokes (brush or key) for the viewer-reader to bring their own meaning-making and understanding to the subject: the reader "comes to them by their own way" (Graglia, cited in Lahman et al., 2011: 893). I aimed to retain something of the complexity and ambiguity of human experience through the use of 'brush strokes' leaving room for reader's own impressions and connections, while at the same time suggesting the uniqueness of each participant involved in this study.

My analysis using abductive processes of the evidence in this study—interview recordings and transcripts—was based on one research question looking for principal practices that could be called 'self-appraisal'. That is, participants, talk revealing reflective practice, self-awareness, strategies for resilience, sources of support for them as school principal and as an individual, and family and life outside of work responsibilities. The kinds of themes that stood out were the extent of expectations directed at principals officially and locally, their diverse and demanding daily work, and the importance of self-care.

Through my deliberations, I developed a strong sense, or impression, of two other things about these principals. Firstly, there was the quality of each person's talk—the tone or sensibility in their presentation of self as school principal—and secondly, a theme/key message of each person's talk became the reoccurring 'note' or expressed purpose of each person. A descriptor of one quality of their presentation in the research interviews came from time spent with my fieldnotes (recorded after each interview) and from listening to the interview recordings. A key message or core to each one's talk came from my deliberation on the interview transcripts. My intention, then, was to craft each person's poem to convey something of my sense of these two things, as well as the relevant content I needed to convey to address the research concerns of the self-appraisal aspect of the study.

Having determined to adopt a Chinese brush painting 'approach' to the crafting of my research poems, to address this sense of quality and note in principal talk during the interviews, I turned to two features of composition in Chinese brush painting, 'host' and 'guest':

. . . in Chinese art, the major form in a composition is referred to as the "host," and the "guests" play a secondary role, mainly to balance that major point of interest. However, the guests are not insignificant; on the contrary, they are necessary, as essential as the leaves are to a flower. (Da-Wei, 1990: 69)

A painting of a dragonfly might include a twig of bamboo. A picture of a koi carp may be accompanied by a simple pole and line, and a heron might be balanced by the suggestion of land. Along with aspects of scale and presence, the two subjects—host and guest—suggest a relationship, which adds life to the work. I identified a *host* and *guest* element for each poem.

Each principal's talk could be said to have a quality I identified as the *host*, and a discernible note or running theme of his or her conversation became the secondary role of *guest* in their poem. Both the host and the guest elements arose from analysis and are not necessarily stated explicitly in the poems but are able to be 'seen' or read implicitly. For example, Doug came across in our talks as very organised and capable (capable is the *host*). Through much of his conversation, he spoke of opportunities for students—such as sports and outdoors, arts, social development, and contributing to school life. I identified, therefore, 'opportunities' as the *guest* in the poem composed of Doug's words.

By using the idea of host and guest elements my aim was to signal that these poems are both a representation and a symbolic expression of the individual.

Writing the Poems

When a researcher decides to use clipped quotations, the focus is on content and messages. Decisions about form when using quotations are about word count, font and indentation. When the researcher decides to use research poetry content and message decisions lead to subsequent decisions about form including layout (visual appearance), line length, line breaks, rhythms, and spaces or pauses when read or spoken aloud—a number of decisions regarding the staging of participant talk.

Regarding the content, the principals in this study were all different, at different ages and stages in both life and career. They lived and worked in somewhat different situations and settings at home and at school. They had different ways of relaxing and accessing professional learning yet they all had ways of relaxing and of continuing their professional growth. In trying to show this individual difference through research poems, common threads were revealed: a sense of isolation (not by distance but as the only principal); the importance of ‘well oiled’ school operations and tone, or vibe; an emphasis on student growth and a valuing of teachers; and an awareness of the significance of the community in which the school operates.

In addition, all principals in the study felt that as the only principal in their school they were in some way separated from the school’s other groups and community. I wanted to signal my perception of the significance of this comment so I included each person’s version into her or his poem. These principals all portrayed a highly-developed sense of responsibility and were active decision-makers as school leaders. They were self-directed and self-aware. Each principal expressed a depth of knowledge (and familiarity) with what they identified as what are the ‘need to knows’ and the ‘good to knows’ about their schools (as communities) and of the wider community in which the school operated. Such capabilities involved concepts of self (as a professional and as a member of a family), an ability to manage emotions, and an understanding of work expectations (formal and informal). They conveyed their understanding of the importance of relationships, a strong sense of purpose, and the autonomy (and burden) of their responsibility as principal.

These poems begin and end with a line or two of each principal’s words in italics. These lines direct the reader to certain salient points and act as a frame for each person’s ‘portrait’ as represented in their poem. The opening and closing italicised lines also provide the poems with an element of consistency to signal a set of poems. The order of the poems is also an important decision in the presentation of a number of portraits. The italicised lines were the basis of my decisions regarding this order. I have included three of the poems in this piece—those of Doug, Nate and Sydney. Despite aiming for a light touch, my approach nevertheless resulted in quite long poems in order to serve the purposes of the research.

Writing Doug’s Poem

Doug’s poem was the most difficult to craft. In the interview sessions (reflected in the recordings), he spoke fluently and I was struck by his presentation and his confidence. It had been hard for me to take notes during our interviews as Doug had spoken with such pace and assurance. Using the transcripts, I could read more slowly what he had said. Doug came across as someone always looking for improvement. For Doug, the host feature became ‘capability’ and the guest feature ‘opportunities’. I was tempted to structure Doug’s poem as a running paragraph with no breaks but decided against this in order to be clear that this poem is an assemblage from the evidence of three interviews. His poem does have long lines with short phrases to get a faster-paced read intended to convey a sense of Doug’s ability to instil confidence.

Writing Sydney's Poem

By dividing Sydney's poem into two columns and framed boxes I intended to provide the reader with a 'hopscotch' alternating between, on the one hand, comments that express his confidence and, on the other, comments that express his doubts and musings. The use of boxes reflects something of Sydney's 'straight-forward' approach and, as intended, these boxes of text can be read in any order as pieces of a whole. The host element in this poem is 'self-confidence' and the guest is 'action' to highlight Sydney's sense of momentum for change.

Writing Nate's Poem

In the research evidence gathered with Nate, I saw his acknowledgement of other people's experience and strengths, and his willingness to encourage the use and development of these strengths. This did not lessen his 'backbone'—evident in his sense of responsibility as the school's principal. He felt trusted by others in the school community and saw himself as fully involved, but he also had clear boundaries around his private life. The host feature for Nate is 'respect' and the guest feature is 'growth'.

A first version of the content of Nate's poem came readily from my immersion in and review of the interview evidence, using poetic writing in the form of pairs of lines. However, through further cycles of analysis, I made the decision to use sets of three interrupted lines and droplines, where the left side stanza has a fourth line but the right-hand side does not. The droplines reflect stronger points. My idea is that these points are followed by a pause for the reader in space left blank and reading each stanza would highlight Nate's openness, composure, and also his reflexivity. I realised that a reader could read across the page or down the two sides. This warranted more editing to ensure the sense and flow of each stanza as a block or unit so that Nate's poem could be read either way. In this most recent version of Nate's poem, the last stanza is not paired to slow the reader for the final italicised line.

The Poems

Doug's Poem

What I do works for me and I enjoy it. It's a complex thing.

People get a read off you about how things are going. The board want a confident principal. Staff want a confident principal. Children want a confident principal. They want to know they made the right decision to come here.

Be informed, organised, close to learning, have a good sense of humour, be connected as an important part of the community. It's an expectation.

Get a feel for what's happening.

I encourage talents and strengths, give people opportunities to engage and show their skills. Develop strengths in others then acknowledge and appreciate it, publicly. The job is way too big for one.

You can't afford to be out of your school for two days a week. Tight teaching team, real team effort. Staff support staff, go above and beyond. Rural schools run on good feelings. Good times. Good laughs.

This can be a lonely job. You're different from other people. The group on the board. The group of staff. I need to maintain strong networks. The concept of critical friend. 'Hey what would you do about this?'

There are not many careers really where you can give it a bit of a twist. That sort of thing is a lot of fun—a creative outlet. I do enjoy the job and I think it's quite a good fit for my skill set and personality.

There's just so much flexibility around it. We are doing an awful lot of interesting and different things. We are working a lot harder than we used to and the expectations have risen a lot.

Principal styles differ, what suits one wouldn't suit another. How do you pick up the journey? In this particular place, what the particular aspirations are, the teaching strengths and culture. Can we all drum to the same beat?

Keeping the wheels of the machinery running, well-oiled and working.

Sydney's Poem

I am pretty sure we are on the right track.

<p>I'd like somewhere bigger To be honest. I am not as good a teacher as I used to be. As a teaching principal I am Doing neither to the best I could do, You know</p>	<p>I've a passion for Running a team. Raising achievement for all kids I like the responsibility The team get the credit when things go well You get the blame all the time! To be driving the ship—</p>
<p>I have been in education less than 10 years I have a different perspective Different background Wife and family I am self-constrained about location</p>	<p>It's a different thing Staff, pupils, challenges Different leaders for different circumstances You've got to find the match Different schools Different times</p>
<p>I can accept that After a good think I do a lot of running around Making sure School moving forward</p>	<p>We'll take advice We'll do our research We come up with ideas We make things happen By and large it works</p>
<p>If you are meek and mild You're just going to get shredded You've got to be pretty resilient Fairly reflective Stay in touch, talk regularly</p>	<p>I confer with a variety of people I make time for them Usually that is for the better Take it seriously, take time Usually complicated Sort it all out</p>
<p>Parents on the phone They'll text, come in to see me "Not happy about this" You are in the firing line. Pick your battles, fight them Win them, and move on</p>	<p>I'd like to hear about that Being informed is important You don't have to charge ahead You take your staff, the community, The kids with you</p>
<p>You can be down in the weeds No clue about what is happening The daily grind You have to have thinking time Running a school</p>	<p>You are always visible Out there at the front You are at every outing In every class It's still you</p>
<p>Do we need it? Would it improve our outcomes? Would parents understand it? It will happen in our time In our way, a way That suits us</p>	<p>Regular things Strategic things Things that pop up You get done what you can Generally more positive than otherwise So, there you go</p>
<p>When you are the principal It's not a one-man band</p>	<p>Staff changes, Disruption—</p>

But the buck stops with the principal.	Just another thing to manage— Quite exciting!
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Obviously, there is more improvement to be made. What's next?

Nate's Poem

*As I grow I can see changes are happening within the school,
It's the two growing together.*

Go with ebbs and flows
Draw lines in the sand
It's no fun lying awake at 4am
Thinking about stuff

Be aware of work-life balance
Know yourself, manage yourself
Sleep is very important

If we neglect ourselves
What's the point to it all?
We are not running a sprint
Be a real person

Neglect our families
I'd be failing as a person, as a parent
It's a marathon

As leader of the school,
Pull things together
Overall the buck stops with me,
Constantly looking forward

It's diverse work,
That's what I really enjoy about it.
Can be a lonely job.

Pressure—
Person as principal—
With status, with answers
Sacrificing themselves for the job

Phone calls I don't take,
Just so many interruptions..
A lot of things I don't do.

My role is to grow my teachers
I don't try and micromanage
I don't want to be overbearing
I make suggestions

It's also about staff being protected—
It's my job to say 'not now'
'Not going down that road'

Communities change
Changes the community
A change of people
Principals have a unique view

Long-term residents
Those who are key or influential,
It's not just parents

When relationships are going well,
That is the strength in a small school.
Community, staff and children,
Very much like a family

In small schools little issues
Can become big
Mountains really quickly

Seeing children achieve,
Seeing children grow,
Motivates me.
It's why we are here
We are all humans at the end of the day

Closing comments

The decision to turn to Chinese brush painting as a conceptual scheme for the writing and editing of research poems in this instance proved highly significant. From this decision, my method developed based on the pattern features of host and guest in Chinese brush painting.

When representing participant voice, it is important to be transparent about the choices we make as researchers in crafting a particular presentation. The use of research poetry is a form of presentation that helps reveal the researcher's role—as decision maker and craftsman—to the audience as well as to open up space for the reader to connect with the individual participant and the relevant public issues. The sense-ations able to be conveyed using poetic forms can engage and connect the reader to the research message(s) in powerful ways.

Representational style then influences the communication of the content, the connection the reader makes to the work, and the types of claims researchers can make. Cahnmann (2003) explains “just as the microscope and camera have allowed different ways for us to see what would otherwise be invisible, so too poetry and prose are different mediums that give rise to ways of saying what might not otherwise be expressed” (31). A way of seeing is also a way of not seeing (Berger, 1972); therefore “each form of representation has its own boundaries, its own constraints, and its own possibilities” (Eisner, 1988: 16). In Eisner's words, “since all forms of representation constrain what can be represented, they can only partially represent what we know” (1988: 15). Thus, each participant experience is certainly not fixed. Seen as a snapshot, what is recorded and present in representation is only momentarily ‘still’ and not ‘forever’ (MacLure, 2013: 659). In the end, having given representation the consideration explained above, what we might learn from this study is only part of what there is to be learned as forms of representation limit what can be claimed and what is communicated.

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