

Telling stories of research

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Abstract

Experimental narrative forms of writing research can offer empowering representations for adult education and feminist researchers. This article presents a selection of academic storytelling in the form of scanned transcript poems or 'Learning stories', produced through interviews with women who participated in a special access program in rural New South Wales, Australia. I suggest that such forms can allow the 'voices' of those researched to express both individual and collective experience in concise and unique ways, cutting across arbitrary divisions between public and private, objective and subjective. The form not only offers wider audiences for academic writing about the education of adults, but is also potentially liberating for those within the academic context who wish to read and produce research in different but representative ways. Finally I discuss some of the controversial questions raised by poetic narratives as academic writing, proposing that their production is a form of analysis, which does not overwhelm the data with the researcher's narrative, and that they are indeed a legitimate form of research that generates knowledge. I propose that the potential applications for such research writing methods are still emerging in adult education and beyond.

Keywords academic storytelling; feminism; voice; poetic narratives; research; experimental writing

Introduction

In this article I share parts of my personal quest to supplement the academic discourse of adult education by representing the learning experiences of a group of women students who participated in an Australian special access program. I first discuss how emerging experimental forms of writing research can offer feminists and other researchers in adult education concerned with social justice ways of empowering those who are researched, as well as the researcher. Second, I argue that narrative is a form of research and representation, which is inherently educational. I propose that a hybrid form of academic poetic storytelling is capable of conveying both the subtleties of individual subjective experience and collective aspects of experience in concise and unique ways. Third, I propose that exploration of new forms of academic writing offers adult education researchers potential for producing academic writing suitable for a variety of audiences. Fourth, I suggest that the narratives presented allow academic readers possibilities of experiencing their own responses to the research, not as a substitute for analysis but in the sense of allowing for the 'hearing' and 'seeing' of the stories, without the overwhelming intervention of the researcher as narrator. I present for the readers' consideration sections of three of the learning stories I have produced through interviews with students and conclude with a discussion of adversarial questions the work may provoke: How is narrative poetry more representative than traditional academic analysis? When are such writing methods useful and appropriate? Is the analysis left to the reader? Are these stories research?

A journey toward telling academic tales

Adult education, as both practice and discipline, has historically been associated with issues of social justice. Feminist theories of social sciences have similarly been concerned with overcoming oppression. Yet as a practitioner and post-graduate student of adult education I have been struck for some time by how relatively sparse the representation of women's programmes and feminist theory is within the academic discipline. Despite significant feminist academic contributions to adult education, as outlined, for example,

by Leicester (2001), these remain somewhat sidelined, as displayed by successive content analyses of adult learning journals by Hayes and Smith (1994), Sissel (1993) and Taylor (2001).

This sidelining of feminist issues is particularly noticeable in relation to my own work in adult education, where the majority of students in all the courses on which I teach are women. As part of this work I have taught for over 13 years on a women's access programme entitled 'Career Education and Employment for Women' (CEEW)(n1) in two rural towns of different sizes approximately an hour's drive apart on the coast of New South Wales. Like a number of my colleagues, it is one of my most rewarding experiences as an adult educator. The programme is specifically designed for mature age women, run by the state government Technical and Further Education Commission (TAFE), which has offered the programme in various forms and contexts across the state for longer than my years of employment on the course. Yet very little has been written academically about the programme, or the women who participate in it. The small number of studies on women's access programmes conducted in Australia over the years focus largely on programme evaluation (Binns, 1989; Jenkins, 1984; Rawsthorne, 1988; Richards, 1987; Ritchie, 1998; Scott et al, 1995). This partially reflects the paucity of practitioner research in adult education (Rose, 2000), as well as the relatively low profile of women.

When embarking on my own research project it thus seemed a worthwhile enterprise to investigate and represent the experiences of learners in these courses, which in my observation were tremendously successful at stimulating the women to pursue and achieve their personal, study and employment goals. I wanted to deepen my understanding of the learning processes the women experienced in the course and how this learning subsequently affected them.

My observations as an adult educator provoked a number of research questions that seemed worthy of exploration. What did women learn from the course and how did they value this learning? What helped or hindered the women's learning? What did a women-only environment mean to participants? What factors brought the women to the course and did they perceive their previous experiences as influencing their learning? So I began with a fairly traditional feminist urge to add women's voices to the academic discourse on adult education, so succinctly criticised by Johnson-Riordan (1994, p 12): 'adult educators have tended to engage in a universalising masculinist discourse, speaking about (but not to or with) "adults", as though the conditions of "our" existence, "our" life experiences are the same for every body everywhere.'

An important corollary to these research questions was always the issue of methodology: how might I conduct the research in ways that were respectful of the women who agreed to participate? In my dual role as course coordinator and teacher I try to work with learners in ways that are empowering, allowing them voice and space. In the CEEW programme this is crucial. From the first contact I have with each group, and increasingly as the students become more comfortable and confident as adult learners, I try to structure my teaching to share 'ownership' of the classroom and learning activities with the women. When first researching, it was not difficult to continue in this mode. I offered the option of voluntary participation in the research project to the group of students I was working with at the time. They had some months to consider whether they wished or were able to contribute, given their interest, future plans and other commitments. The eight women who decided they would be involved asked questions and made suggestions for the ways they could contribute, both before and during the research process. My already established mentoring relationship influenced the relative ease of meeting with the women, taping group discussions and individual interviews, despite the unfamiliarity imposed by recording equipment and the research situation.

However, as I sought ways to write about my research there seemed to be serious constrictions on how I could meet the requirements of writing for an academic audience and at the same time maintain this relationship. As my study developed I became increasingly concerned with the issue of how to represent my research data in ways that were compatible with my beliefs as an adult educator and feminist. Minh-ha (1989, p 67) critically encapsulates this research dilemma: 'A conversation of "us" with "us" about "them" is a conversation in which "them" is silenced. "Them" always stands on the other side of the hill, naked and speechless, barely present in its absence.'

The nature of my research was framed by my own purposes, not those of the students, yet I had no wish to silence or diminish them. How could I foreground the voices of the women I researched and thus empower their interpretations of their learning experiences, to sit alongside mine, within the traditional modes of academic research representation, which tend to present the researched only within the framework of the researcher's analysis? Eventually, emerging experimental forms of writing academic research seemed to offer a pathway through these straits. Initial inspiration arose in a journal article where Maori educator Nora Rameka discusses her work in a fascinating edited interview transcript (Rameka and Stalker, 1996). 'Nora's voice' not only gave me great insight into the context of another adult educator's work but also reminded me that narrative forms are inherently educational: 'Narrative has never been merely entertainment for me. It is, I believe, one of the principal ways in which we absorb knowledge' (Morrison, 1994, p 7).

I was further guided toward narrative forms by the embodiment writing of my postgraduate supervisor at the University of New England, Margaret Somerville (Davies et al, forthcoming), who pointed me toward other experimental text forms. One such was the work of American sociologist Laurel Richardson (1992, 2000), who provided models of narrative possibility for writing research. In particular, her presentation of "'Louisa May's Story of Her Life", a transcript masquerading as a poem/a poem masquerading as a transcript' (Richardson, 1992, p 127) offered a conceptual challenge, breaching the norms governing sociological interview writing: 'Why did I not simply paraphrase Louisa May's life, write it as a case study, or quote her words as evidentiary text?' (Richardson, 1992, p 130).

Like myself, Laurel Richardson felt dissatisfaction with the usual representation of lives in social science writing and a lack of faith in the deadening nature of much academic prose. She found this experiment a compelling method to push through not only the narrow boundaries of academic writing conventions but also to break through a writing block imposed by these. Her method was to unite her two voices, the poetic and the sociological (Richardson, 1992, pp 130-32).

Similarly, as I 'played' poetically with my own first interview transcript, I began to see that this hybrid form of writing, bred of academic research and poetic storytelling, was capable of conveying experience in concise and unique ways. The concentrated language of the poetic form was particularly appealing from a practical viewpoint, since I wanted to represent the stories of eight individual women, rather than one, as in 'Nora's voice' (Rameka and Stalker, 1996). By reading, re-reading and highlighting my printed transcripts, then word processing to peel away connecting non-essential words and hesitations, I began to reveal key meanings. I listened and looked for the women's perceptions, thoughts, feelings, the ways in which they grouped meanings. I followed the rhythms, stresses and intonations of the women's everyday language. What was revealed to me was a distilled essence of each woman's experiences of learning and their response to the research process. I began to perceive some beauty in this poetic narrative: its conciseness, and its ability to portray- both individual experience as well as infinitely subtle shades of similarity and difference between individual experiences, yet simultaneously represent experiences which, through my observations over the years, I knew were shared by many women who undertake the program.(n2)

A further appeal in this experiment with form was that it might allow me to write both for an academic audience and a less traditional audience. As Laurel Richardson (1992, p 136) points out: 'Louisa May's life takes me to poetry bars, literature conventions, women's studies classes, social work spaces, and policy making settings.'

The possible audiences for the women's learning stories in the form of scanned transcripts highlighting the prose poetry embodied in their words, have yet to be fully explored. They may be accessible to audiences beyond academia, for although the stories are poetic in form, the language is everyday, immediate and the poetic form brings conciseness and clarity. The poetic narratives may be read with interest by the women themselves, by other women who have participated in the course or will do so in the future, by other adult educators or students of adult education, by administrators, or by a variety of wider audiences.

A growing number of people in the traditional academic audience are also interested in changing forms of representing research. In a previous edition of this journal Stalker (1998, p 200) from New Zealand explains: 'I have struggled to change the way in which I write as an academic, to break away from the

formula so often required for publications. I am trying to bring together more comfortably my heart, my passions and my intellect.' Tom Griffiths (2000, p 129) expresses similar concerns from an Australian context: 'What do we need to do to make writing a significant and meaningful part of our scholarly lives? How might we confront and subvert the disabling conventions of writing in universities?' In an article on 'creative analytical practice ethnography' Richardson (1999, pp 2-4) cites examples of a variety of experimental forms of research representation arising in diverse contexts around the world, from Chichen Itza to Canada, from France to Mexico.

For readers interested in adult education, feminism and the lived experiences of adult learners, scanned transcripts in the form of poetic stories may allow for new understandings. Stalker (1998, p 202) argues that poetry blurs the lines between the arbitrary divisions of public and private, objective and subjective spheres that support male bias. She suggests that poetry complements the notion of a third sphere of intimacy, which cuts across these dualities, by 'integrating the dislikes, desires, and aversions with the remote, standardized and neutral... through the common base of experience' (Stalker, 1998, p 202).

I believe that the poetic stories of the women's learning that follow also allow both for the subtlety of individual experience and meaning to be voiced by the women themselves, and for the reader to 'negotiate their own reading' of these as academic texts, in the sense proposed by Hall (1990, pp 32-34). Although I have crafted the poems from the transcripts, the process is largely one of paring. The words are not mine, my voice does 'narrate' the women's comments: 'Writing in a way, is listening to the others' language and reading with the others' eyes. The more ears I am able to hear with, the farther I see the plurality of meaning and the less I lend myself to the illusion of a single message' (Minh-ha, 1989, p 30).

In this article I ask you, the reader, to test my justifications. I introduce sections of three of the women's learning stories which explore the question of what the women learnt and demonstrate how they valued that learning. I have chosen to present three students' stories since two stories placed together seems to immediately invite less complex comparisons. The stories represented are chosen randomly, in the order in which the women were interviewed and are offered in the sequence in which they appeared in the original transcripts, to allow the women's own emphases to remain apparent. However, interspersed stories which relate more closely to other research questions asked such as 'How did you learn?' are omitted. Thus I invite you to consider what knowledge of adult learning is gained through the women's stories, while 'listening to the others' language and reading with the others' eyes'.

GAI'S LEARNING STORIES about going for a job

how to use past skills Don's son came his girlfriend was applying in the bank she didn't have experience but worked in retail and I said 'Didn't she do the till, make up the money at the end of day? That's banking!' To be more confident like you taught us ask anyway if they say no they say no so what write your resume stuff like that I didn't know nothing about them

Academic wise

was real good and computers was whole purpose learnt heaps in that enough to go home start playing same with the other girls not to be scared of this machinery

dealing with people

dealing with those women one-on-one don't think I've ever really had to all these years worked with a heap but you're at work doing a job it was every day then lunchtime had to learn how to interact have patience know when don't say anything different personalities hard sometimes I nearly dropped out

when we got into that discussion

um sex and incest and that thinking well I didn't come here for this do I want to keep going pull out? After I sat back thought these women really needed to do that didn't really hurt me ...just upsetting... another woman made it hard trying to pull me down overbearing but I thought No I'm stronger than that

just had four years all men

basically on my own they'd come and go yeah men are a lot different talk about different things they're not real in-depth then all of a sudden this heavy talk even the old peer pressure couldn't go sit by yourself everyone would want to know what's wrong with you good in the end glad I stuck it out

Study again

enjoy it again even when we had to do portfolios Science I thought 'Oh shit Bloody women's health' but we had to investigate down to the women's health place up to the hospital talked to them got all my paperwork sorted it all out sort of work the brain up read put words on paper again long time since I had to do that ... twenty years ago

Just brilliant when we went

Career Reference Centre had to pick two areas investigate started to look seriously at Welfare then when we went into it I said 'No, that's not for me' would take too much on board emotionally administration have to take it home with you that careers place was mind-blowing don't know why it's not known for the kids down here

And Isobel's

Learnt lots, which I didn't think I would The history of this country I never knew But that first class was Bad Kooris started everyone's back up just BANG really heated Good you saw her explained we started getting into it schools are now too cause we didn't learn nothing at school Nothing Ail the butchering... Just Captain Cook landed here Didn't like history but that was...

interesting history

got the video 'Destination Australia' wrote my own notes So I could learn more what the hell was going on in this place why the Aborigines are where they are

Pat O'Shane

she's great should be Prime Minister coming through being Koori sticking up for women a different type of Judge doesn't go by the letter of the law applies the law to today not what standards were when they were made

at the end

didn't want to get stuck I'd go to the library on weekends lot of time going through books liked that not doing enough now only half as much want more writing up on the fridge all the things we'd need started doing my ironing in the mornings seven o'clock getting up at six going for a walk I've kept that going working in a club odd hours organising kids had to re-arrange it with the course as in a day I have heaps more time

JO'S LEARNING STORIES most positive thing

was to be positive about myself have more self esteem be a little bit more aggressive in things I want to do Thought 'Oh, I'm basically stupid' Realised I'm not I can do a lot of things if I put my mind to it Assertive - -aggressive—

Well it works In my course if I didn't like anything I could just speak up 'Can you explain it more?' or 'Can you help?' before, I'd just sit back 'Oh, don't worry, I'll get to it myself'.

how well I could write

when I sat down thought about it Marie showed us to proof-read She'd say, 'Hey put in your punctuation marks' explain 'go through read them again so you know you are right' quite surprised how well I was doing

clammed up with maths

but Leslie would draw diagrams make it really easy with decimals put numbers on a see-saw if tipped that way this would fall off would become this really helped me thought 'I don't know what the heck you're on about' but when she did these diagrams I could understand much better

careers like

didn't realise what I wanted to do work with children or travel I think that children won't been wanting to for a long time going to the Careers Centre made me look then I decided to go for it started the Child Care course

children magnet

loved that work experience pre-school soon as I walked in swamped with children had fun got on the floor played in the sand pit helped with lunches had a ball kids absolutely thought I was wonderful didn't want me to go must have been something special

trouble with that survey

self-esteem quiz thing before I was thinking 'what do I put for this?' doing it again now just breezed through so easy

KATH'S LEARNING STORIES class of women

big in beginning being nervous first coming not knowing what it's going to be finding lot in common really helpful to relate comfortable class it was so easy to make friends

how others perceive you

wrote down good points about someone else found that interesting figured no-one would lie good to see things about me that are okay sometimes it's hard to see my own good qualities actually surprised at a couple of things people wrote never thought I was but they said it so must be right I just believed them 'always smiling having a laugh' class was like that isn't me all the time I didn't know I was funny 'A good listener' was surprised they picked that up

self-esteem lesson

especially assertiveness something I needed 'cause I was the total opposite am trying to put into practice everyday don't always get it right but always remember it found I can be assertive some people not others ones I feel comfortable with I've been laying it on thick but gee it feels good when I'm able to do it

job interviews

confidence builder mock panels putting together resume learnt a lot about myself once I put it on paper

on academic level

only subject learnt was maths other lessons refreshed what was there didn't really learn anything new but did really enjoy the work we did

goal setting

difficult I'm not sure why guess I never had to being married young becoming dependent husband to provide everything had no need to be a goal setter when I found myself on my own I realised how important that was had to learn how find my own space time at home has been difficult impossible actually managed to get by without it still get things done that I have to do I've probably got a space up there in my head to switch on or off and somehow it works

forgot to mention

computers I learnt a lot probably will do more next year you can forget if not using everyday don't have one at home now I'm doing medical terminology looking at being receptionist in medical field somewhere so I'll have that certificate just need computer next one up

Can demonstrate

computer skills spreadsheets was something a flier a layout a border use desktop publishing draw pictures really fun business letters set out properly really useful really fun

wanted something different

maths we did biorhythms thought 'oh this is really good' but you never use it never ever use it yet interesting learning

hated timelines

I thought 'look what I've done with my life' you've got it so clear in black and white hated it hated my life got to do something about it got to change

just loved

my rights going to write up bigger something I can stick up look at keep learning all things I actually believe but no one has said you can have these things you should have them

Stereotypes

to think about the way women can be other than how they have been in the past how I'd like to be a non-stereotype

victory

in the court case surprised myself thought I was going to crumble but I didn't did a lot of self-esteem stuff just before sure that helped his lawyer tried get me tongue tied to catch me out say wrong thing and I didn't don't know how but I stumped him instead of him stumping me someone said to me this particular lawyer never ever seen him stumped in court what to say next that day I did it!

Angle

he was coming from I'd planned something to get an AVO on my husband I made this occur tripped him up 'Of course everything's always my fault 'cause all ever got was that things were my fault'

had started to see

in assertiveness things weren't always my fault I wasn't always one in the wrong started to see wrong things in him his behaviour in a different way in a different light but that's because I see myself in a different light

Discussing controversy about telling such tales

Making academic room for women to speak about their experiences as they do in these learning stories seems particularly important given the findings of feminist researchers in the United States, who in interviews with 135 women from diverse backgrounds and different educational settings discovered how 'again and again women spoke of "gaining voice"' (Belenky et al, 1986, p 16). My belief is that these poetic learning stories give voice to the research participants as well as provide readers with windows of knowledge into the experiences of the women who undertake the Career Education and Employment for Women course. The women's stories also give insights into the nature of the programme itself, as a particular contextualised instance of adult education. I would suggest that these poetic narratives offer readers information, interest, resonance and reflection.

However, since the form of research and representation are 'different', I also anticipate a range of reactions including some scepticism, controversy, even outright rejection. I am grateful to Pat Bazeley,⁽ⁿ³⁾ for providing me with sufficient provocation to consider the adversarial questions in this concluding discussion. First, how is narrative poetry more representative than traditional academic analysis? Second, when would such writing methods be appropriate and useful? Third, is the analysis left to the reader? Finally, and perhaps most significantly, do these stories qualify as research?

Some readers may question how the form of narrative prose poetry is more representative than traditional academic analysis. I would argue that all research representation is just that, and no form has any claim to being absolutely more representative. That is, I would support 'the (noncontroversial) claim that no interpretive account can ever directly or completely capture lived experience' (Schwandt, 2001, pp 41-42), while maintaining 'an optimistic response' that acknowledges 'the importance of the rhetoric of representation' but does not dissolve 'the responsibility of the social scientist to describe and explain the social world' (Schwandt, 2001, p 42). The question then is not whether poetic narrative forms are more representative than traditional forms of academic analysis, but whether they provide possibilities for different, yet representative analysis.

Patton (2002, pp 17-20), in demonstrating the power of qualitative research, offers a wonderful example of how useful knowledge is sometimes produced by the detail of individual voices. He outlines how the negative results of a standardized questionnaire to teachers about a new accountability system were at first dismissed by school administrative officials as union-influenced, biased and inaccurate. By contrast, the personal comments in the responses to two open-ended questions included in the questionnaire could not be so easily dismissed, as they displayed the depth of anguish, fear and concern felt by individual teachers working in the atmosphere created by the accountability system. In this case the researchers provided direct quotes in the body of their report to provide such detail.

I would argue that the academic form of narrative poetry offers some useful variations on this method. Narrative form allows for the expression of individual, personal stories, as well as the knowledge that individual stories also represent shared elements of collective experience, which in turn interact with and modify our individual and collective knowledge, as Clandinin and Connelly (1994, p 415) explain:

In effect, stories are the closest we can come to experience as we and others tell of our experience. A story has a sense of being full, a sense of coming out of a personal and social history... Experience, in this view, is the stories people live. People live stories, and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them and create new ones... Stories such as these, lived and told, educate the self and others.

The poetic form also enables a conciseness and concentration of language, which conveys meaning in a way not exactly replicated by direct quotes, case studies or even other narrative forms. As Ely et al (1997, p 137) point out and illustrate, 'the intensity and compression of poetry' emphasizes 'the vividness' of experience. This combination of story-telling and concentration facilitates comparison without overshadowing similarities, differences and shades of contrast in a modicum of words. Richardson (1994, p 522) goes so far as to argue that poetic form may actually better represent the speaker than the practice of quoting snippets of prose, since it 'honors the speaker's pauses, repetitions, alliterations, narrative strategies, rhythms, and so on'.

In presenting sections of the learning stories I am asking my audience to test my claims, so pose my own questions for your consideration. Does the form empower the researched to have voice and visibility? Does the form allow freely for expressing lived experience and emotion? Does the form enable the crossing of arbitrarily imposed divides between private and public, subjective and objective? Does the form empower researchers, writers and readers who wish to respond in ways that meld both their mental and empathic powers?

Also, some adult educators and researchers may question where the use of such poetic narratives is appropriate and useful. It is not my wish to prescribe or proscribe the use of poetic narratives as research method and representation, as I do not choose to make such universal claims. Like the women in the learning stories, I prefer to voice my own experiences and perceptions.

I have found this research technique particularly harmonious with the skills required by my work as an adult educator. Daily in classrooms I 'listen and see with multiple ears and eyes', continuously measuring and blending an awareness of spoken language and non-verbal cues: expression, tone, gesture, posture; as I initiate with and respond to shifting sets of individual humans, groupings and sub-groupings. The production of the learning stories, listening and seeing and paring down the student's meanings, seems a natural progression from this work.

In addition, I am a teacher of English and Communication, a lover of language and literature, a writer. The production and representation of research in ways which may be pleasurable and educative to those who have contributed to the research, as well as to a variety of academic and non-academic audiences, is particularly appealing. I share the vision of academic writing held by Griffiths (2000, p 131):

We mustn't be less thorough in our research or less humble in the face of our subject. But we do have to avoid using language and status to intimidate, obfuscate or exclude. We do have to acknowledge, and stop feeling embarrassed by, the power of stories. We do have to stop seeing passion and objectivity as mutually exclusive. And we do have to see writing as an essential and primary part of our work.

In regards to the usefulness of this technique, the qualitative study I have undertaken has involved in-depth interactions with a relatively small number of participants exploring significant aspects of their lived experience. The women in the CEEW course have spent four days every week for 18 weeks together, and I have taught them for at least five hours of each of those weeks, spending additional time with them both individually and in groups, either formally or informally. In this research situation, I found poetic narratives a useful approach which maintains the integrity of these relationships, and my values as an adult educator and feminist. I see the poetic learning stories as a means of empowering the women who participated by giving primacy to their voiced interpretations of their experience. I also see each poetic story as a 'gift' I can give back to the women, in the hope that this recorded reflection of their experience is useful to them in ways which one of the participants, Kate, indicates when asked about her response to the interview process:

feel okay it's interesting I guess... what you're looking at is making me stop look back think 'Oh, look how far I've come'

I can only guess whether, for example, other researchers may find this technique equally useful for smaller or larger numbers of participants in different research situations. I trust that the presentation of poetic narratives may stimulate other researchers to find appropriate contexts for the technique, or create further thought and discussion about this and other forms of representing research, both in adult education and beyond.

Third, still others who contest such representations may argue that the reader is given only data and must do their own analysis. My reply to this contention is twofold. I agree that the reader is given data, to which they will bring their own perceptions and interpretations, but would argue that this is the case in relation to any text, any representation of research, including data framed within academic analysis. It could also be seen that this method in fact empowers the reader to bring their own responses to the data, without the overwhelming intervention of my own analysis as narrator of 'truth'. On the other hand, I would suggest

that significant analysis of the data has already been done during the writing process. The data have been grouped and issues foregrounded for the reader through the selection and paring of language.

The learning stories may or may not replace further analysis. In my own case, I wish to allow the stories first to speak for themselves, but intend in my complete study to complement them with analysis separately, as I believe this will yield further knowledge for me as an adult educator and enable me to theorise these representations in a variety of useful ways. For example, I would like to explore issues of experiential learning, since a number of the women highly value instances of this, whether through excursions or work experience, yet this form of learning has become increasingly devalued and difficult to provide in a competency-based system focused on narrow learning outcomes and affected by successive cuts to funding. I expect that my readers will be able to consider any such analysis in light of their own experience and reading of the data represented in the learning stories. Richardson, on the other hand, chooses to allow Laura May's story to represent the research solely. Similarly, since this article focuses on method rather than content, I also allow the stories to stand on their own in this context.

Finally, and perhaps the most serious opposition to this form of representation I expect, is that some may contest whether poetic story-telling is in fact research at all. Yet I could rephrase this question to ask: Does poetic story-telling produce knowledge, is it educative? As readers you will have your own replies, based on your own responses to the learning stories. Academics who support only a scientific, empirical tradition may no doubt still state a resounding: 'No'.

Conversely, my answer would be a definite 'Yes'. Through reading and re-reading and paring down the language of the interviews, I have highlighted key issues, perceptions, emotions and experiences conveyed by each woman about her adult learning in this particular programme. The lengthy, painstaking yet equally pleasurable process of hearing, reading, selecting, editing, empathising, thinking, further paring and shaping language in search of the kernels of meaning in the women's words, is arguably a form of research in itself.

Through this research process, I have entered into a new analytical relationship with my research data, and conveyed my findings in a way that I believe is accessible and inherently educational. The writing process allows a re-connection with the research subjects, an immersion in the interview material that is not exactly replicated in my experience of other methods of qualitative analysis, which tend to overemphasize the objective sphere.

Richardson (1992, pp 134-36) points out how her production of Laura May's story created new knowledge and ways of being for her. Similarly, the production of the learning stories has entered my life and practice as a teacher in a deeply integrated way. The research writing process has so imbued the women's learning stories into my being that I regularly make connections between a segment of a story and current situations in my classroom and workplace. For example, when I am once again battling frustration through administrative and funding minefields to organize an excursion, about to swear 'never again', I am reminded of Gai's 'Just brilliant when we went'. In the staffroom I have pulled out a poem from Jo's stories to discuss the experience of maths fear and successful maths teaching methods (an area in which I have no prior expertise) with a head teacher of the discipline. Talking about building self-esteem recently with a student undergoing a difficult divorce settlement, I was instantly reminded of Kath's 'victory'. The audiences and applications for the knowledge produced by the poetic stories as research are only beginning to emerge.

The understandings produced by researching-writing the learning stories is not a finished, finite product but something still developing and evolving. Clandinin and Collely (1994, p 425) point out that personal experience methods are inevitably relationship methods:

As researchers we cannot work with participants without sensing the fundamental human connection among us; nor can we create research texts without imagining a relationship to you, our audiences... It is in the research relationships among participants and researchers, and among researchers and audiences, through research texts that we see the possibility for individual and social change.

The women's stories of learning continue to resonate, evoking each individual, but also connecting with collective experiences of courses both past and current. My research work, the poetic narratives the women have created with me, make satisfying links with a tradition inspired by empowerment, in keeping with my profession as an adult educator and my passion as a feminist. The women's learning stories are thus, for me, one form of 'research as re-vision', as coined by Rich (1972, p 18): 'Re-vision -- the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction', and extended by Helen Callaway (1981, p 457):

taking up and continuing the poet's play on meanings: 'revision' in the standard sense of correcting or completing the record; then, 're-vision' as looking again, a deliberate critical act to see through the stereotypes of our society as these are taken for granted in daily life and deeply embedded in academic tradition; and, finally, 're-vision' in its extended sense as the imaginative power of sighting possibilities and thus helping to bring about what is not (or not yet) visible, a new ordering of human relations.

Glossary

AVO: An Apprehended Violence Order from the courts to protect people from threats or attacks of violence.

Koori: Person, the traditional name used by Aboriginal people from particular parts of Australia, including most of New South Wales.

Notes

(n1) The course was previously known as 'Career Education for Women' (CEW). The name change reflects changes in the course structure, which allowed more vocationally oriented training options to be included.

(n2) Thank you to the reviewer who pointed out that the forthcoming work by Morwenna Griffiths on Social Justice discusses such notions of the social construction of knowledge more fully.

(n3) I am indebted to Pat Bazeley who not only provided provocative mentoring but also a wonderful space for working on this article at the Bowral Research Farm, not to mention company over delightful, home cooked sustenance when it was 'time for a break'.

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