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Beyond Univocal Authority: An Exploration of Creative Voices in Academic Research

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Data might be better conceived as the material for telling a story where the challenge becomes to generate a polyvalent database that is used to vivify interpretation as opposed to 'support' or 'prove'. Turning the text into a display and interaction among perspectives and presenting material rich enough to bear re-analysis in different ways bring the reader into the analysis via a dispersive impulse which fragments univocal authority.

Patti Lather 1991

Abstract

The experience of transition in organizational life has been the focus of my doctoral research. Over a two-year period, I tracked the experiences of ten middle and senior managers while their organization merged with two others, to form a new corporate entity. The amalgamation was government driven, with none of the three merging organizations wanting the amalgamation to occur. For the managers, it was a protracted and intense experience of job spills and restructures.

In this paper, I will describe my exploration of creative forms of data representation which attempt to do justice to the texture and complexity of the managers' experiences. The original research data were in the form of images drawn by the managers in response to trigger questions. In my research, I have used these images and the managers' stories to develop a range of different forms to represent their experience, such as poetic text, songs and multi-media tracks. This paper describes my experiences of working with the original data to develop these creative forms of representation and also describes the rationale for exploring alternative forms of representation.

Alternative Abstract

It began with an amalgamation

With job spills and restructures

With chaos and confusion

Dislocation and distrust

It began with a content question about transition
And managers and meaning making

It began with managers drawing images
And telling me stories about their drawings

Ten middle and senior managers
Caught up in the changes that twist lives around

It began me with me straining for respectability
As I learned the trade of academic writing

I wanted to do well
But my early writing was derivative and dull

The research was so rich and multi-layered
Full of emotion

The data spoke in its own creative voice
My early writing squeezed the life out of it

Managers were describing how it felt
To have to apply for their own job

To compete with their friends
To feel unsafe and unsupported

The managers were happy to talk to me

They needed it even

Their stories were intense and alive

Their images rich with metaphors and symbols

I felt privileged to be told the stories

I wanted to do them honour

So I began playing with the creative voices of

Poetry, songs and multi-media

The creative forms had enough ambiguity to live beyond the specific

Enough substance to invite engagement

I showed some multi-media tracks to people and they connected

Thought it was about their own organisations

When groups of people watched them together

They would talk about things that mattered, quietly, profoundly

I was introduced to the academic literature

About alternative forms of representation

I'd had no idea others were experimenting too

It was exciting, permission-giving, liberating

And so I played on

Following creative trails to see where they might take the work

Another question emerged

The 'so what' question

How might this work be used?

How might this work be useful?

I began exploring ways to engage with the research

Which could give voice to our humanity

I made a mandala and filled it with data

A circle of fabrics two metres wide

Colourful and sensual

You could walk around it, touch it, sit next to it

I made patterns on the mandala of images and quotes

Linking ideas and making symbolic connections

I packed the mandala into a suitcase and took it to a conference

On the other side of the world

It was a conference on alternative forms of data representation

I needed to meet fellow travellers

I set the mandala up in a room near the main entrance

Where it stayed for the whole conference

People sat around it

They talked and listened to each other

We told stories about transition

The managers and shared stories from our own worlds

A mandala fills a space

And opens it up at the same time

A mandala creates a place

Into which people can talk and reflect

Like sitting around a campfire

Like being part of a ritual

Research as a ritual of invitation, engagement and connection

Now there's a creative trail to follow

Introduction

The process of undertaking my PhD has been both an inner and outer journey. This is the story of how my doctoral research came to be what it is. It is also my story. It is the story of my journey to find my creative voice within academia.

The story began with an exploration of how managers made meaning of significant experiences of transition in organizational life. The research participants were ten middle and senior managers undergoing an amalgamation in which all of their jobs were spilled. My research was based on two inter-related questions:

1. In what ways do managers make meaning of the experience of transition in organisational change?

2. In what ways can creative forms of representation evoke the nature of the managers' experiences of transition?

The original research data were in the form of images which managers drew in response to trigger questions. They would then tell me about their drawings, the emotions behind them and the symbols they contained. The images and accompanying stories were an evocative short-cut into their experiences of transition.

I wanted to do justice to the richness of the data being generated by the managers, but I struggled to find an appropriate voice in my writing to reflect the texture of their experiences. The use of images and stories as the primary source of data had generated powerful data, and I wanted to find a form and a style that could reflect the emotional intensity of the content. I wanted to be able to evoke the experiences of transition as fully as possible and invite active engagement with the material.

I also wanted the work to be rigorous. The challenge was to explore the boundaries between scholarship and self-indulgence. I did not want to write in a narcissistic way. Nor did I want to reduce the rich data to thematic descriptions that lacked soul or emotional substance. At the heart of my work was the intention to be true to the managers' data, to invite active engagement with the data and to enrich our understanding of the experience of transition.

I wanted to be able to present this invitation within my research. I began experimenting with writing poetic text and songs, based on the research data. I also began designing multi-media tracks that drew on the data and combined the creative forms of art, music, poetry, story and video.

Examples of some of these forms of creative representation of data can be found on the CD-ROM and audio CD which accompany this paper.

Underpinning principles of alternative forms of representation of data

The use of alternative forms of representation in my research has been predicated on three ideas. Firstly, there are many different ways in which the world can be experienced and represented (Barone & Eisner 1997). Secondly, some human experiences are so complex and intensely emotional, that creative forms of representation can reflect their texture more evocatively than traditional academic text. Creative forms invite us to develop insights that would otherwise be inaccessible and they invite us to see more clearly and feel more deeply (Bjorkvold 1992; Ellis 1997; Richardson 1997; Banks & Banks 1998). Thirdly, each person who chooses to engage and make meaning of the data, breathes new life into the texts (Jipson & Paley 1997).

Problematisation of Representation

The problematisation of representation in research is central to an academic debate which has emerged from ethnographic and phenomenological perspectives as well as from the field of educational research (Richardson 1997; Haarsager 1998; Banks & Banks 1998; Morgan 1996; Ellis & Flaherty 1992; Ellis 1997; Tierney & Lincoln 1997; van Manen 1997; Barone & Eisner 1997; Eisner 1998; Lather 1991, 1997; Jipson & Paley 1997; Bruner 1993). These researchers are challenging the voice of the omniscient academic observer and are exploring creative forms of representation which reflect richness and complexity of data and invite new and multiple levels of engagement that are both cognitive and emotional.

Jipson and Paley (1997), describe the significance of this debate in this way:

At the moment, questions about the terms and propositions of research, and about ways of encoding experience in analytic form are currently attracting as much attention as any other issue in contemporary educational study.

(Jipson & Paley 1997 p. 3)

This debate has emerged from postmodernism, which has at its core, the doubt and mistrust that any single method or theory has a universal claim as the correct or privileged form of authoritative knowledge (Richardson 1994).

Writers in this tradition are challenging the traditional role of the researcher who hides behind data and a neutral, supposedly value-free, passive voice. Some writers are even challenging the use of densely referenced text (Coyle 1998; Berger 1998), preferring to present data in fictionalised or poetic form and letting the text speak for itself. They choose to forego adherence to the recognised academic form which lends a legitimacy to a line of argument and provides a form of protection too.

One of the greatest risks in experimenting with new forms of representing lived experience in research is the lack of definitive rules to differentiate between narcissism and authentic self-expression. A number of shifting variables influence how the text is interpreted, such as context and degree of comfort of the reader. The same material may appear self-indulgent to one reader and profoundly moving and revealing to another. At different times and in different contexts, even the same reader may experience the same content very differently.

It is a tough undertaking to find workable boundaries. Given the adversarial context of academic life, exploring this territory is an exposing exercise for a researcher. Nevertheless, I have been encouraged by my supervisors to trust my instincts. I did not know initially that my instinctive approach had led me to the post-modern debate about representation. The theorisation has followed the instinctive directions of my exploration.

Until I did the reading, I did not know that other people were challenging the gatekeepers of the academy. That has helped me to feel braver.

Exploring Creative Forms

Winnicott (1982) frames the creative act as a political one, claiming that without the creative links between inner and outer, we can become submissive and resigned to the demands of our environment (Winnicott 1982). My exploration of the creative voice in an academic context is a consciously political act. The work has combined a questioning of the authoritative academic voice with the principles and aesthetics of creative expression.

According to Bastian (1988), creative forms are the long, thin feelers through which we can touch the world. The use of creative expression as a medium to explore the lived experience, draws on the notion that within human reality, there are phenomena which reach us so deeply that creative forms are the only adequate way through which to point to and make present a meaning (Kockelmans 1987). The critical task, according to Wilfrid Mellers, is to discover the amount of felt life in a creative form (Mellers 1964).

Creative forms of representation can transform the sensuous and the intellectual into one aesthetic continuum (Anyanwu 1987 cited in Bjorkvold 1992). Gourlay (1984), the music anthropologist, writes that we create new forms of expression when speech is inadequate and we want communication to attain a new level of intensity (Gourlay 1984). Creative expression can even make something intense out of experiences which are seen to be mundane. We can see and experience the ordinary in new ways.

The exploration of creative forms to evoke the managers' stories was driven by the emotional intensity and depth of their experiences. The responses from others to the poems, songs and multi-media tracks have indicated that the managers' stories have struck a chord with many people. Because of their evocative and imaginative nature, creative forms extend an invitation to engage and connect. Many people have been convinced that the stories have been about their own organisation.

Research Findings

The managers in this study experienced a complex mixture of emotions during this transitional period. The prospect of job losses during the transitional period engendered high anxiety and a sense of dread in the managers. They found themselves competing with colleagues in a shrinking pool of available positions, facing the prospect of public humiliation. Safe places to share their feelings of vulnerability shrank, as people who used to be collaborative co-workers became competitors. Increases in work-load, ambiguous job roles and the frustrations of ill-defined or non-existent new systems led to exhaustion and despair, at times.

The managers made meaning of their experiences of transition in different ways. The intensity and range of emotional responses were significantly mediated by how much the managers stood to lose or gain from the change events. For many of the managers, the intensity of the experience generated a deep questioning about issues of identity, belonging, responsibility and meaning. Many managers questioned the meaning of work and its place in their lives. These existential questions, at times, dissolved the boundaries between personal and professional worlds: 'Who am I?', 'How might I live?', 'What really matters?'

During the transitional period, the managers sometimes experienced contradictory feelings concurrently. Feelings of loss were felt at the same time as a sense of opportunity, along with feelings of despair and hope, dread and excitement. The dynamic interplay between these dialectics was complex and difficult to hold.

In describing the individual and organisational damage caused by the amalgamation, the managers experienced reduced levels of trust in the new organisation. Their willingness to contribute to the organisation was significantly reduced. The managers felt a deep sense of loss for the people and the organisational culture in which they had invested time and emotional energy. The language around their sense of loss was described by some in metaphors of grief and mourning. Other managers responded with high levels of cynicism and black humour.

Engagement with Poetic Text as a Form of Analysis

The creative forms in the research reflect Lather's (1991) notion of 'turning the text into a display and interaction among perspectives and presenting material rich enough to bear re-analysis in different ways' (Lather 1991: 91). The multiple voices bring with them an open invitation. There is no right response. It may be meaningful or not. There are simply possibilities that can emerge from the invitation, the engagement and the connections made.

One of the creative voices which I have used within the research to evoke the managers' experiences has been through the form of poetic text. Making meaning of research data in the form of poetic text blurs the boundaries between research findings and analysis. A poem has the potential to be both.

A different kind of reading is required when we read with poetry with feeling. Something goes on in us that does not go on when we merely skim the lines for information (Wittgenstein 1968). Bachelard (1964) refers to it as the phenomenological reverberation. A work of art makes one very simple demand on anyone who genuinely wants to get in touch with it and that is to stop. We are asked to stop what we're doing, thinking and expecting (Merwin cited in Moyers 1996).

The image offered to us by reading a poem can take root in us and become our own. It can be a becoming of our own being (Bachelard 1964). When this happens, language can touch us in the soul (Gadamer 1996) and we can become part of conversation with the world, with the words on the page and with ourselves (Nye cited in Moyers 1995).

The use of poetry as a medium to explore the lived experience, draws on the phenomenological tradition which claims that within human reality, there are phenomena which reach us so deeply that the poetic language is the only adequate way through which to point to and make present a meaning (Kockelmans 1987).

This tradition recognises that the seeing of meaning is not purely a cognitive affair. Poetry is seen as the thickening of meaning, which invites us into the experience of another and straddles the tension between the particular and transcendent meaning (Van Manen 1990, 1997).

Creative of Technical Aspects of Writing Poetry

At the heart of my development of the poems was the intention to be true to the managers' data, to invite active engagement with the data and to enrich our understanding of the experience of transition. My objective was to use the transcripts of interviews to create new forms where the content could become both thicker and leaner.

There is a technical aspect of writing poetry in the context of research. I can articulate that in terms of editorial techniques. There is another component of creating poetry which is more difficult, and maybe impossible, to describe in words. This is the creative dimension that comes from a deeper place than the technical domain. Things like:

The choices I make

The words that are included

Or not

The spaces I choose to leave

The sequence in which ideas are ordered

And the appearance on the page

The juxtapositions that jolt

And the ideas that reach out

And connect

The different shades of colour in the text

The contrasts, the blendings

The elegance of a complex idea unfolding itself.

In describing the creative aspects of writing poetry, I need to call on metaphors of light, space, rhythm, colour, substance, texture and flow. Metaphors can hint at the possibilities that lie latent beneath the words, in the spaces, between the lines. At best, metaphors call on a sensual language to describe the abstractions and complexities of the creative process. At worst, they sound fluffy and pretentious. Metaphors are not the experience itself. They are the descriptive shadows of a direct experience.

I developed the poems by pulling out strong ideas from the transcripts and stripping the language down to its essence. The transcripts of the interviews contained moments of magic when there was a special charge to the managers' story. A key concept would emerge that encapsulated a particular aspect of their experience. Sometimes it might be directly related to a symbol or concept within an image they had drawn. Sometimes, it emerged from a narrative about their response to a specific organisational event.

During the interview itself, I could generally tell when something of poetic potential was being said. I remember it as a feeling of excitement, followed by a wave of anxiety that the tape recorder may not be working and that I might lose the precious words. (Luckily, that only happened to me once, when I was so enthralled by a manager's story, I didn't see that the tape had run out and stopped).

The technical process of getting from the transcript of the interview to the poetic form was initially a process of editing. The managers' transcripts contained the normal meanderings of verbal speech, the unfinished sentences and the tangential leaps as ideas took form and crystallised. After the interview and the transcription, I would scan for ideas or experiences that were concentrated or contained quintessential insights.

When the interview contained an idea that felt important, I would begin an editing process with the language, to heighten and simplify the concept. Wherever possible, I kept the original words and deleted words that seemed to clutter, rather than magnify, the core idea.

Examples of Development of Poetic Text

Here are some examples of poems developed in four different ways from transcripts of interviews undertaken with the managers. The interviews were based on images that the managers had drawn. In the first approach we will explore, the poem captures every idea in a section of transcript, virtually word for word (eg 'The Formless Future'). In the second approach, the word order may be changed for stylistic purposes, but every idea in that section of the transcript is still present (eg 'Uncertain Road'). The third approach

requires more selective editing. This technique is used if the spoken language has clouded rather than clarified the content or if the speaker has needed a few attempts to crystallise an idea (eg 'Self-Absorption'). A fourth approach combines a number of different managers' voices who express sentiments on a similar theme (eg 'Mourning', 'Image-Making'). This last approach requires the greatest degree of mediation on my part.

First Approach: Transcript-Based with Minimal Editing

In this example, Ruby is describing a very faint, blue circle, which she had drawn in response to the question: 'What image best describes what the impending amalgamation means to you at the moment?'

Excerpt from Transcript

Laura

What does the circle represent to you? Is that you or is that you and the organization?

Ruby

My future. That means yeah ...

Laura

That is the future?

Ruby

It's my future.

Laura

What's the emotion when you see the circle?

Ruby

Well I'd like to say that I was pleased that it was there. It's nice to have a future, even if it's not, it's a very pale one and doesn't have much form or very recognizable, or something or the other like that, but when I drew it I felt satisfied that that represented what the impending amalgamation means...

Laura

When you look at that future how do you feel?

Ruby

Oh I would think mostly things like disappointment and
insecurity and goodness me.

Ruby's language was evocative and poignant. To capture the directness and simplicity with which she answered the questions, I chose to leave the question and answer format in the body of the poetic text itself.

The Formless Future

What does the circle represent to you?

It's my future

What's the emotion when you see the circle?

I'm pleased that it's there

It's nice to have a future

Even if it's pale and doesn't have much form

When you look at that future how do you feel?

Mostly things like disappointment

And insecurity

And goodness me

The Second Approach: Transcript-Based with Changed Word Order

Robert was feeling disillusioned and disenfranchised at the time of the first round of data collection. He drew an image of a path leading up to a wall. This is how he described it:

Excerpt from Transcript

Robert

And what I've drawn is a wall with the gate locked and a sign that says "No entry." And on the other side of the wall is the bright future. But there's a little tunnel and it says "Only enter if prepared to perform set tricks." And leading away from the gate is a pathway and there's a standing zone there. I was going to call it a

waiting zone. The path is also one-way. Once I'm past that I can only turn to the exit, and I don't know what to do.

There are some changes in the word order, but the poem 'The Uncertain Road' reflects all of the key ideas from this section of the transcript.

The Uncertain Road

The future lies on the other side of the wall
The gate in the wall is locked
It says 'No entry'
There's a tunnel under the wall
It says 'Only enter if prepared to perform set tricks'
Leading away from the gate is a pathway
A one-way path
Once I pass through the gate
I can only leave
I wait
I don't know what to do

Third Approach: Transcript-Based with Selective Editing

In the same pre-amalgamation period, Leon drew a powerful image in response to the trigger question:

What image best describes the tensions, contradictions or opposing forces you are experiencing at the moment?

Leon's image contains a number of strong symbols. At the centre of the drawing is a long, thrusting sword, which he describes as the government who had initiated the amalgamation. Poised precariously on the sword are the three organisations, curling and squirming around each other like caterpillars. At the other end of the sword is a snake, with its tail in its mouth. An eagle, with its claws out, hovers above the snake.

Excerpt from Transcript

Leon

This is a snake with its tail in its mouth, and in some ways, the overall organization is a bit, in some ways like a snake with its tail in its mouth. Thinks it's got hold of something, but in fact it's just done, engaged in a pursuit of itself, which really isn't what it needs to do, but it can't do anything else for the moment. It doesn't know how to let go, and it feels it's got to do this. But it's unaware of the fact that there's a predatory creature hovering overhead and waiting to pounce. And that could be a competitor, or some threat if the snake fails to let go of its tail and stays in this fairly vulnerable exposed situation that makes it sort of get wriggly.

Here is the poem, 'Self-Absorption' which I developed from the transcript. The repetitions have gone, and the words have been reduced down to their essence. There is a more pronounced intervention with the language itself, but the key ideas are all present. The last three lines of the poem are reduced down a spareness that has the quality of 'haiku'.

Self-Absorption

The organisation is a snake with its tail in its mouth

It thinks it's got hold of something

But it's just engaged in a pursuit of itself

It's not what it needs to do

But it doesn't know how to let go

It can't do anything else right now

Overhead

A bird of prey hovers

Waiting to pounce

Fourth Approach: Thematic Compilation of Quotes from Different Managers

At times, common themes would emerge strongly from the managers' data. Here is an example of a poem using the compilation approach, which captures the sense of grief and loss in the early days of the amalgamation.

Excerpts from Transcripts

Alison

I just think we had so much going for us, you know.

Esther

I mean we're supposed to be going into the twenty-first century and ... everything just seems to be cracking up

Robert

I'm mourning the loss of (Avalon), and I'm mourning what we had here, as a champion team, not a team of champions, but a team - a champion team. With its faults and with its idiosyncrasies. And the fact that that's gone.

Alison

And then really I just felt that what I was trying to show here was that I feel as it's just going splat, you know, we just forget all of that, just squash all of that, and so I sort of wanted to show this flat bit... It's as though everyone just sort of says we throw everything out and just start again from nothing..

Graeme

I didn't understand what would happen to management so quickly... I didn't think there would be the drop in morale... I didn't believe the impact would be so great so soon.

Alison

We're spoiling what we've got. It's all going and what a waste, the wastage, they're going to throw out everything that's good that's happened.

Esther

We've been pushed backwards by about ten years I feel at the moment.

Melanie

I've realized how precious working with Steven (the director) has been, and how supportive of me he has been, and how encouraging, and his attitude is get out there and do it and grow and I'll help you. And I think that really is something I mourn the loss of.

Here is the poem, 'Mourning', that I developed from these ideas.

Mourning

Everything's cracking up
It's all going to waste
They're throwing everything out
And starting again from nothing
What we did was good, you know
And it's spoilt and gone
We had so much going, you see
And I grieve for what we had
Didn't see it could happen so quickly
Didn't think morale could drop so low
Didn't know the impact could be
So great so soon
I'm mourning what we had here

The poem weaves ideas into a coherent whole, to create a shared voice that also captures the diverse responses. My mediation in this process is much greater than in the previous examples. The intention to remain true to the spirit of the words still underpins the work.

The Shape of Poetic Text

Even the shape of poetry on the page has an impact on the eye. In the space between the lines and between the couplets or verses, there is room for a momentary pause, which feels quite different from solid text. I have used couplets in many of the poems because I found the relationship between the two lines, a dynamic and interesting one.

The lines sit together, and enrich and inform each other, as in the opening of 'Loss of Faith':

The changes are deeply disturbing

They're difficult and exhausting and the people are angry

Like an endangered species

They have been through a bushfire and only just survived

There is a sense of defeat in the air

An atmosphere of quiet despair

People have moved into self-preservation

Wariness and weariness

The stuffing has been kicked out of them

The people have gone a bit quiet now.

Songs as a Form of Representing Experience

The representation of the managers' experiences through songs provides a different perspective from the poetic form. While songs and poetic text share some characteristics, there are important differences as well. To me, the songs feel even more exposing than the poetic text, because I have had to take greater creative risks to develop them. I am present in the PhD songs in three ways.

Firstly, I am in the songs because of my proximity to the managers. I have keenly felt the manager's sense of grief and disorientation because I care about them and I feel the loss of the organisation too. I believe that my genuine empathy with the managers contributed to their openness during the research process and to the subsequent richness of the data. I have represented a safe place for them to talk, and I know that my proximity to their pain has affected me.

Secondly, I have been going through a great deal of transition myself in the three year period in which I have been undertaking the research. In this time, I left my job in the organisation that was my research site at the beginning of the study. In my new workplace, I have undertaken three completely different job-roles within the three-year period of this doctorate. I have also lost my mother from cancer, my only child has left home, I have moved house and I have become menopausal. I know the experience of transition well. I am sure my interest in studying the topic was fuelled by my need to understand it more.

The third reason that I am very closely linked to these songs, is that I use my voice and my breath to sing the songs. That also feels deeply personal.

Germinating Ideas for Songs

When I feel there is a song in me, waiting to be written, I feel overcome with a sense of urgency. I have learned over the years that the urgency needs to be attended to. To do that, I need time and space and privacy. I also need some paper, a pen, my guitar, a tape recorder and lots of glasses of water. A creative fire seems to burn inside me during these times and it has the effect of making me feel very thirsty. While the process is happening, I feel very alive. Afterwards, I am often deeply tired.

The ideas for songs are born in different ways. Sometimes the seeds of an idea come from fooling around with the guitar, exploring chord progressions and seeing where my voice might fit. Sometimes, the ideas emerge from words or metaphors and I shape the music to fit the lyrics. For me, there is a point when the music and the words start to blend, each shaping and informing the other, hopefully into a coherent whole.

There is a craft in writing a song, but my experience of it is non-linear. When an idea is germinating, I need to drop down beneath what is emerging in order to feel its substance and its source. I also need to rise up above it at the same time, to see it as a whole, to sense if there is a unifying idea, which might determine its form or its content. I am not only below it and above it, I am right in it, swimming around, completely immersed. There are so many possible combinations of words and melodies, rhythms and tones, ideas and emotions. All possibilities need to be present before creative choices can be made.

In the song-writing process, there is not always a birth. Sometimes, the substance isn't there or what is emerging may feel derivative or uninteresting. This happens quite a lot. It's disappointing, when the sense of possibility evaporates and there is nothing there. It's part of the process, however, of discerning and making choices.

Giving Form to a Song

If an idea does emerge that feels substantial enough to pursue, I drink more water, begin scribbling down lyrics and start the tape recorder rolling. This stage of the process usually takes several hours. Some songs seem to slide out quite easily. Others are more of a struggle. There is an important point of release when a key idea or structure crystallises out of the pool of possibilities. It can then be a focus around which the rest of the song is built. Things can be discarded or included around that idea or structure. That moment, when it comes, is a great relief. That is the substance of the song, the reason for it to be given life.

I usually do several drafts, at this early stage, with whole chunks of lyrics being moved around quite liberally. Sometimes, juxtaposing lyrics in different ways can give birth to a new creative pattern that might be containable in the same song.

I capture the song on tape, raw and quivering, with the tune still forming and changing from verse to verse. Sometimes I might experiment with arranging harmonies over the original melody. At this point, I might find that a harmony could make a better melody than the original one. Everything is still loose. I capture as many possibilities on tape as I can, so I don't forget.

Over the next few days, there is generally some fluidity around the words and the musical arrangement. It sits with me as I move through my days, whirring away quietly beneath my other activities. I am aware of its presence, somewhere inside me, and when I return to the song after a few days, I usually do refine it and tighten it.

Determining If a Song Has a Future

In its early days of inception, a song is fresh and vulnerable. Even at this point, after a song has been alive for a few days, I may realise that it has no future. As I listen to it again, it may sound ridiculous or corny. It can take a few days to know this. It makes the first performance of a song a very exposing exercise, but having the song witnessed by another person is an important part of its development. It is a test for me and for the song. Generally people are polite and gentle, but I listen carefully to my own feelings in response to it. It takes several performances and refinements before I feel the song is separate from me and can stand alone, with its own life.

I am keenly aware of how inadequate this process of describing my song-writing is sounding. I'm worried that these metaphors of birth and death may sound grandiose and pretentious. It is, however, as close as I can get to describing my creative process in a general sense.

Development of the First Song, 'Neutral Zone'

I'll try now to be more specific about the creation of some of the songs in this project. In this project, I drew heavily on the transcripts of interviews and on the managers' images. The first song I wrote for this project was 'Neutral Zone.' I had made a list of all of the metaphors that had been used in the first round of data collection, both visual and verbal. I also had another list, which the managers had written in response to a question:

'What key words or feelings do you associate with the impending amalgamation?'

They were both interesting lists on one level, but they were still only lists and there is something rather arid about a list. After the fifth or sixth item on a list, I usually shift into a scanning mode of reading. It is something I think I've learned from skimming shopping lists and contents pages of books. I began searching for a form that could link the lists of metaphors and feelings in a more dynamic way.

My experience of having conducted the first round of interviews had been very intense. The managers were shaken and disturbed about what was happening in their organisation.

Their jobs had all been spilled. The organisation was in chaos and they were angry. Visions for the future sounded like empty rhetoric in the face of the immediate turmoil.

Most of the managers were familiar with William Bridges' concept of the 'neutral zone', in which people find themselves caught between endings and new beginnings. As I searched for a way to bring the metaphors and the feelings together, the 'neutral zone' became an organising principle. The idea to use a song to evoke the manager's experiences of the 'neutral zone' emerged from somewhere inside of me that had lain dormant for almost a decade. I used to use my singing and song-writing earlier in my career when I was an adult educator and when I worked with people with cancer. When I had become a manager, I had stopped playing music and writing songs. As I took on more senior roles, it became unthinkable to bring my music into the corridors of power.

Something about my own experiences of transition, of growing older and of leaving my management role to become a researcher, liberated me at a deep level. The research felt like an opportunity to explore a process of integrating my intellectual, emotional, vocational and creative worlds.

I experimented with combining the metaphors and emotions, described by the managers, into the lyrics of a song. With the chorus as the centre-piece of the song, I blended Bridges' construct of transition with the managers' images and words. The metaphor of the road appeared frequently in the managers' images and this became the last line of the chorus:

And I'm caught somewhere between the land
Of the living and the dead
Wounded and weary
I'm looking for a road ahead

Metaphors from the managers' images are laced throughout the song. The managers had drawn images of dark clouds, storm damage and broken trees:

The mist lies heavy on the land
It seems I've lost my way

and

The stormy night is over
All the trees are stripped and bare

Some of the managers' drawings had depicted the sun trying to come out and shine:

I'm waiting for the sun to rise

and

The mist will rise, the sap will flow

The sunlight will return

Metaphors of a battlefield and the sense of damage to life were also common in the transcripts:

I see the people bleeding

And exhausted from the fight

and

I hear the voices of the dead

Their cries hang in the air

The time in which I was writing this song was about six months after my mother's death. I felt caught between the land of the living and the dead myself, so my own experiences of transition are in there too. The song is a blend of the managers' metaphors, symbols and feelings, Bridges' theoretical construct of transition and my own understanding of transitional experience. They are all in there, weaving in and around each other.

Reflecting the Particular and the General

Each of the songs in this project is a mix of the particular and the general. Some lyrics emerged from an overall sense of the data at that time, while others were drawn verbatim from the transcripts. 'So Long' and 'Turning of the Wheel' have a more general tone and reflect a mood which was expressed in the managers' images and stories, for example:

Loss is everywhere

More than I can bear

I've been holding on for so long

and

Won't forget where I have been

But I can see my way once again.

The song, 'Reflections', on the other hand, is full of direct quotes. This song was written in a more deliberate way than some of the others. I had finished collecting the last round of data. I was emotionally full of the managers' experiences and I had the sense that a song was brewing.

In the last round of interviews, I had encouraged the managers to reflect back over the two-year period in which the research had taken place. Consequently, many of their comments had a reflective perspective and pulled the threads together of their experiences of transition up to that point. It could not be said that the cycle of transition was complete. The organisation was still not settled and another restructure was imminent. Nevertheless, the last interview had a perspective made possible by the passage of time and from the knowledge that it was, in fact, the final interview.

I set aside a morning and brought together all of the poems that I had written at that stage, about fifty in all. As I went through the poems, which included the poetic text from the last round of data, I looked for ideas that had a reflective quality and that expressed some of the memories of that period. I chose to have one key idea for each verse: the sense that no-one is safe, the pain of saying goodbye and the recognition that it was time to leave.

I remember when I realised
That even when we're good
Committed and connected
There is no protection
We try so hard to make it safe
But can't control the outcomes

and

I remember how when people left
We'd gather for goodbyes
So many things we couldn't say
A silent devastation
I saw the fear in others' eyes
I'd feel it inside me

and

I remember when I recognised
There was no place for me
I simply had to walk away
A frightening liberation
To stay would mean I'd break my heart

Against the icy coldness.

I introduced some unifying devices into the song, such as the repeating of lines at the end of each verse:

These things are never far away

I think about them still

I also repeated a sound pattern in each of the verses, and again in the last line:

There is no protection

and

A silent devastation

and

A frightening liberation

and

To live without illusions.

I consciously worked at unifying the lyrics within this song, because the lyrics emerged from the stories of several different managers blended throughout the song, and I wanted to give it a sense of connectedness and continuity.

The song, 'Who I Might Be' was also written about the experiences of different managers, but in this case, each verse uses the words of only one manager. The lyrics in the first verse came from the managers' description of his image of people being blown around and around in a tunnel.

These are his words from the transcript:

I do have a sense of, sort of like a whole lot of people who are sort of holding onto each other, and they're in this sort of tunnel, and there's this big wind going through the tunnel. And maybe it's threatening to blow them apart, and if they keep holding on to each other, yeah they're holding on and their arms will tear off or something, but if they let go they don't know where the wind's going to sort of blow them. But it's sort of that kind.

In the song, I have edited some of the language in order to clarify the strength of the image itself. From the transcripts, the lyrics became:

Feels like the winds of change are ripping through our lives

We're in a tunnel holding on tight

Looks like our arms might be torn right off

As we hang on in our fright

Seems if we hold on we're sure to get hurt, but if we don't

We'll be blown into the night

In the next verse, a different manager is speaking. The first two lines of this verse were drawn from a section of the transcript, where she was describing one of her images:

I thought before about how things are at the moment, and the bit about not feeling like I can contribute much, that's not new, but this one about what the impending amalgamation means at the moment, but that's such a formless, weak-looking, floating bit of nothing, I guess that surprised me.'

The phrase, 'formless, weak-looking, floating bit of nothing' is devastatingly clear. For the song to scan at that point, I needed another two syllables, and chose to insert the word 'fragile', which is how I would have described both her image and her mood at that time. The second verse opens with the words:

I feel like a formless, fragile, weak-looking

Floating bit of nothing

When the form or the rhythm of a song required it, as in this situation, I would take the creative licence to add or subtract words, always guided by the underlying principle of staying true to the spirit within the managers' stories.

While the three verses of this song are drawn from three different managers, the chorus has a more general perspective. It reflects the major themes of meaning and identity which emerged through so many of the managers' images and stories, throughout the amalgamation.

And I wonder what's in store for me

And does anyone care about me?

I wonder what this all might mean

And I wonder, most of all, who I might be?

The need for courage

The bridge that connects creative expression and academic rigour is even harder to cross when I sing and have a guitar in my hands. Taking my guitar into a presentation scares me. Even taking it into the Business Faculty of the university building where I work, is a challenge. I worry that I will be judged as light-weight or unscholarly, simply by holding a guitar.

I'm doing it anyway though. As with all of this work, I continue to feel more confident every time I do it. When I have taken the risk, the feedback I've had has been good. It's not always appropriate to sing in a presentation, but I am learning to discern more accurately, what kind of creative expression might be appropriate.

Creative collaboration with research participants

As I attempted to do justice to the richness of the data being generated by the managers, I found that others, when hearing about it or seeing the images, strongly identified with the emotional content. There was something about the experience of transition which was shared, even though the content and context of the experiences were profoundly different.

The feedback from others, particularly, the research participants, has been crucial in the development of the project.

One of the managers, Leon, has written poetry himself, in response to poetic text which I developed on the basis of one of our interviews. These are his words:

They Weep in My Office

They evade the counting of the dead
The perpetually insecure
The tight of throat and exhausted faint at heart

They drink the poison chalice of the bonus
The seductive recognition and reward
The soothing lies and greed

Irony the cooler face
Of institutional contempt

Offered as cover for the contradictions

They weep in my office

The women of a certain age

Whose wrists can no longer flutter their fans at requisite speed

They weep poor losers

Corralled off from Win

And instead with me they share

The loud snap

Or the wearing thin

The hollowing out or the thickening in

Another of the managers, Ruby, has also played an active role throughout the research. She has attended editing sessions of video material and has watched as multi-media tracks on the CD-ROM evolved. In one of the tracks, 'Making the Links,' Ruby wrote the script for the soundtrack and provided photographs and footage of home movies from her childhood for inclusion in the track. When she saw the finished product, she was very moved.

Working in this kind of collaborative way to generate creative forms in the research, is predicated on a relationship of trust and care. Leon and Ruby's engagement with the research and their active participation in the development of different creative forms, have been enormously enriching to me personally and to the research as well. Their feedback to me is that their level of engagement has also been of great value to them, giving them an opportunity to explore their own issues of transition in more depth.

Conclusion

Creative representation of research data seeks to explore a deeper understanding of the complexity of human experience through the use of a new vocabulary. There is no one way of undertaking this process of representation and analysis, no single creative form that can reflect the whole experience, as felt by the managers participating in the research.

My exploration has been driven by my desire to accomplish something which honoured the managers' experiences and transcended Lather's 'univocal authority' (Lather 1991). The intention in my research has been to explore ways to present the managers' experiences in ways which might be useful for others, that defied closure and opened out the invitation to engage.

To engage with research represented in creative form is a political, humanising and creative act in itself.

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