Challenges of multi-professional working within one English Higher Education Institution: 'We hit a giant': is this a shared experience?

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Abstract

This paper discusses the process and outcome of an innovative qualitative research approach evidencing the lived experiences of a group of academics who were confronting what they felt at the time to be the indisputable extinction of their network. In an effort to provide a constructive response to the academics' despondency and lack of agency, one colleague, Tom, suggested using a creative approach to enable individual voices to be heard, acknowledged and appropriately shared. Utilising this consideration, the findings from a collection of personal narrative reflections were thematically analysed, snipped and re-situated in order to create a poem telling and highlighting the elements academics considered were the key drivers for their frustrations and disillusionment.

Introduction

This paper presents an innovative research approach reporting findings using a creative format. The research was carried out in an attempt to evidence the lived experiences of academics who, driven by professional and theoretical knowledge, tried to redesign curricula to provide more consistent and regular opportunities and experiences for students to work and learn together across professional and faculty boundaries. Confronting what felt to be the indisputable extinction of their network and the resulting despondency of members one colleague, Tom (one of the authors), suggested using a creative approach to enable individual voices to be heard and acknowledged.

Context

The research participants (including the authors of this paper) were all members of a university-based multidisciplinary network group in southern England. The group was created in 2014 as a result of findings from a former research study (Soan, 2013) in order to provide increased opportunities for pre-service public service practitioners, to experience and gain knowledge and skills in working with others from different professions. Through the implementation of online joint teaching resources and events, by 2018 this network obtained a base in a university centre with support from a Professor. However, just as this was beginning to be established significant personnel left the university and a restructure commenced. It is at this point that the members questioned whether the group's role and the continuation of its work was possible. The process and product of the research study, which enabled a collaborative response to the situation, is reported in this paper.

The lead facilitator wrote in a blog:

> *It was towards the end of the academic year, 2018 that a group of academics from various disciplines and professions met to discuss whether it was worth continuing with our joint-working project……… Many of us had been working and meeting together since 2014 and we were passionate about providing our*

students with opportunities to learn and study together across professions and disciplines. We were, and still are convinced, that it is only through these opportunities, pre- and post-qualification, that professionals working in different professions and disciplines across public services can improve outcomes for all the people they work with. However, due to many issues, we were feeling despondent and discouraged, but we didn't know how to share our thoughts in a way that would enable us to 'keep-going' and recognise the importance of what we were aiming to achieve.

Tom suggested that we should independently write a short piece stating why we were members of the network and why it should continue. Some of the group decided to follow Tom's idea. Once these pieces were gathered and anonymised three colleagues from the group met together and sentence by sentence thematically analysed the accounts. The results identified [four] main themes: potential for change, institutional barriers, innovation, desire to make a difference………. Together we were able to place our comments under these four headings and from this, led by Tom, we created the poem 'We hit a giant.'

Somehow, reading and sharing our frustrations and disappointments, and indeed hopes - in this poetic manner, gave us the determination to keep taking one step forward even though we knew we might have to keep experiencing the two steps backwards! Thank-you Tom, for giving us the tool to express ourselves and for creating the culmination of our thoughts in such a creative way.

Methodology

All members of the network group were offered the opportunity to participate in this small-scale collaborative writing research (Richardson, 2005) to help the group decide whether to continue the network or not. They were told that if they wanted to participate then they could by submitting, via email, a narrative describing why they were a member of the multidisciplinary network and what they felt its value was for students preparing to work within public service professions. The narratives were written in private at a convenient time for the participants within a four-week period and emailed to the group's lead facilitator. It was agreed that all narratives would be anonymised to protect the individual academic's professional positions. The lead facilitator fulfilled this task. Original sources were kept securely by this facilitator to ensure compliance with agreed ethical steps (BERA, 2018). Once anonymised the narratives were shared with the other two researchers for analysis.

The researchers read all of the narratives individually initially, identifying key themes. When this stage was considered complete the themes were shared. In this instance there was no discrepancy regarding the identified themes, and these are described in the following discussion section. It was then possible to agree a colour-coding scheme. Following this decision each researcher returned separately to the narratives and carried out two further stages of the research process. Words and phrases which clearly represented a key theme were coloured in the appropriate colour (including white) and then when this coding was complete, they were cut out of the original piece of narrative and put onto a table within thematic groups. Although quite a slow process the act of cutting and snipping was important as it gave significance to the words given to the researchers by their peers. This visual and physical process enabled the identification of words and phrases which were the same or similar in meaning and these were grouped together. Through discussion one or two snippings from each group were then selected and placed onto a second table. This process was repeated until the key snippings from the thematic groups had been moved to the other table. The researcher, who is also a poet, then took the snippings one by one and began structuring them into a poem. Figure 1 illustrates this process. The other researchers watched and after organising a stanza the poet read the section out loud and sought comment from the other researchers. In this way the researchers, through discussion, positioned and repositioned the snippings together, until all were satisfied. This final stage of the process took about an hour, but it did enable the collaborative creation of the poem entitled "We hit a giant."

< Insert Figure 1 here>

Findings

The Poem:

<u>We hit a giant</u>

How wrong was I

I no longer believe

Time

Dovetail

I remain in their world of systems

Whole system results

I feel I can walk away

Work organically and any boundaries disappear

Progressive innovative ways

Two key aspects

An ecosystem approach

Because it wasn't ever life and death

Potential for change

A bottom up initiative

A hands-on approach to learning

Cannot ignore the barriers

Institutional and structural glass ceilings

Interpreting the impact of how

Hearing about the coming together

Demoralised

Energised

No option

Brick walls in the faculty structure

Profit

Funding and time

Professional territory I suppose

Maintain the power and the status

And we fall back down the hill yet again

Uphill struggle

Shared goals

Supporting the best possible outcomes for children

Vulnerable

A holistic understanding

Speck of hope

Model of multi-agency working

Key to breaking down institutional barriers

Powers that be

Are wrong to ignore us

Inflexible

Self-serving business procedures

Ridiculous barriers and hurdles

Continued disservice

I wasn't seen to be as important

WORK IN SILOS!

Brick walls in the faculty structure

Innovation being extinguished

Opportunity

Develop

Collaborative

Educators and medical practitioners working together

Is innovation through shared experience?

Holistic understanding

Shared goals

Catharsis

Make the difference needed

Some refuse to engage

Difficult

Impossible to navigate

Silo working in training and programmes

I tried to stand up

Be counted

Resources

Time has been obstructed

Family at the centre

Joint shared knowledge

Working together

It was apparent that aspirations will not be followed

Vulnerable members of society

Words are positive

Actions limited

The system maybe broken

But the people should not be as a result

Discussion

The Themes

On careful reading and re-reading four main themes that interact with one another throughout the poem were identified. The first theme clearly focuses on the participants views of the professional and personal benefits gained from being a member of the multidisciplinary network group. As Figure 2 illustrates these words and phrases all recognise the power of being involved in potential change and innovation, of breaking down silo working and professional barriers, and the strength of holistic understanding for making "the difference needed".

< Insert Figure 2 here>

Intermingled with these positive and hopeful words and phrases is the second theme generated by the participants' feelings regarding the perceived, or real, lack of support for the network and its work at the 'institutional' level. These show a high level of discrepancy between the positives of being a member of the network and its potential loss. The language used in Figure 3 reveals the emotional thinking of the participants when faced with considering whether the group should continue to exist or not. These responses show how members want to stand by what they believe to be of value for their students, but acknowledge the constant negative battles required to be fought in order to keep focused on what they consider important.

<Insert Figure 3 here>

The institutional barriers that were felt to hinder the successful implementation of multi-profession working is the third subject of significance and is illustrated throughout the poem. The institutional barriers were felt to be connected to:

- lack of funding and resourcing

- the focus on markets as dictated by external factors

- the business and accounting systems perpetuating a 'silo' culture between faculties and professions

- separate faculty / professional targets (i.e. influencing curriculum content) and budgets determined by nationally (and business) decided figures.

The final subject matter weaving throughout the poem is one which is unquestionably more prominent for the caring public service professionals than for many other university-based programmes. It can be argued that the students wishing to achieve a university level qualification for entry into an education, health or social and justice welfare career are focused on not only gaining positive outcomes for themselves, but also for their clients, patients, students, pupils and service users. As many of the academics and lecturers in the network group were also former practitioners, the importance of the outcomes for the 'end-user' is of great importance and key to their professional and perhaps also their personal identity and beliefs / value systems. This may indicate why there was the need to provide an opportunity for group members to express their emotional response to the situation, as well as a pragmatic, academic one. By recognising and valuing members' emotional response the group was then very quickly able to deal with the practical issues impacting on the continuation of the network in a pragmatic and constructive manner.

Creative Methodologies

When shared with members of the network "We hit a giant" received a positive, cathartic response. The research participants stated that it was a process that enabled them to express their feelings about a specific professional situation in a creative and therapeutic manner. Significantly, they felt that the process was restorative, as well as enabling them to be both reflective and reflexive. Such findings echo the work of Richardson (2001: 33) when she says that creative writing gave her "a feeling of control over time and space, and a faith that I would recover."

It was also felt essential to explore whether it could be argued there are positive gains for other practitioners and researchers in using this approach in research which fails in many ways to fall within the objectivity of many traditional qualitative research methods. Work by Cahnmann (2003) and particularly Richardson (2001) give a clear understanding of its value as a qualitative research approach. Richardson (ibid: 34) writes:

> *No writing is untainted by human hands, pure, objective, ''innocent.'' The old*
>
> *idea of a strict bifurcation between ''objective'' and ''subjective'' – between the*
>
> *''head'' and the ''heart'' – does not map onto the actual practices through*
>
> *production of knowledge, or knowledge about how knowledge is produced.*

Thus, the researchers felt it was valuable to reflect on the context in which the research took place. From this process several factors were considered significant for the success and impact of the findings from the research study.

Data collection – the participants

It is suggested that a key factor in gathering authentic voices within the narratives (the data) from participants who could have felt quite vulnerable due to their professional positions

(Richardson, 2001) was 'safety.' Indeed, ethical guidelines (e.g. BERA, 2018) generally emphasise the importance of anonymity because of such reasons. However, the depth of emotion sharing, as well as professional opinion, indicated that additional factors such as participants trust, and respect, as well as safety found within the network group (including the researchers) could be influential. The network group started in 2014 and many original members are still engaged. Members are clear that two reasons for this continued engagement is that they know that the group is a safe space in which to share their true feelings and also an organic space which encourages new ideas in a field of study they are passionate about. This it is suggested facilitated a level of trust in the researchers to maintain confidence and to treat their feelings, their 'heart songs' with care and respect.

Analysis – the researchers

As described earlier in this piece the research process ran smoothly with few difficulties raised by researcher discussion or differences of opinion. The network consistently presents papers at conferences, as a multi professional duo or team, write abstracts and articles together and carry out research across professional boundaries. Reflecting on this the researchers considered it was this collaborative nature of the research and writing experiences gained within the network across the years that had given them the skills to work in such a trusting, productive and effective manner. The researchers stated that they trusted each other and had learnt to actively listen to each other and were open in acknowledging professional practice and policy differences. Thus, the researchers felt it was firstly a privilege to be trusted by their peers to analyse their narratives, but also felt able to explore difficult and what might be thought of as uncomfortable topics resulting in findings which, it is suggested could be a close view of the participants views and experiences.

Limitations

This research was small-scale with data collected from only nine participants, three of which also undertook the creation of the poem. Whilst the thematic analysis approach was adopted, it could be argued by some that this was achieved in a predominantly subjective manner.

Originality

It is contested that this research demonstrates how an expressive art form, such as poetry, can provide a supportive space for professionals to express their practice reflections, highlighting strengths, whilst also allowing the constraints involved to be safely voiced. It is also suggested that such an approach is helpful for supporting the mental and stress wellbeing of academics during times of great change and difficulty. Finally, the authors would argue that using this approach not only captured in this specific instance, the true expressions of the participants at a given moment in time about a work-based project, but also illustrates a wider understanding of a working environment as experienced by these individuals.

Conclusion

It is thus believed that this expressive and creative research poetic approach can as Brady (2005: 1004) suggests, be complementary to our more traditional qualitative and quantitative study :

> Unlike the prerequisites for scientific discovery and representation,
>
> phenomenology, poetics, and an anthropology of experience put the
>
> observer upfront in the interpretive equation as an active participant.
>
> But the composite attention paid to them in accounts of being-in-place
>
> and to culture as something constructed out of the interplay of the
>
> senses,…………can give the overall effort an authenticity complementary

to, but otherwise unavailable through, more conventional thinking……

The end result has important applications in active research, formal

education, and concerns for the quality of life on the planet.

This research found three specific strengths for using poetry in research which echo several of the findings of Brady (2005) and Richardson (2001; 2005). First, it enables the participants to share their individual feelings and views on a subject of value to them in a safe, non-judgemental environment. Second, a poem is a concrete representation which facilitates a collective professional and emotional response to be collated for a specific situation and in so doing enables the emergence of a shared understanding of the value placed on, in this instance, the network group, whether positive or negative. Finally, it perhaps unwittingly, lays bare broader subjects of value and significance for the creators and their professional values. As Cahnmann (2003:35) states in relation to a slightly different environment "In educational research and practice we are working with human beings in all their ever-changing complexity. Incorporating the craft, practice, and possibility of poetry in our research enhances our ability to understand classroom life and support students' potential to add their voices to a more socially just and democratic society." In this study the importance of the 'outcomes' for those who 'receive' the service from the professional is explicit and appears to dominate the participants' thinking and thus, it could be considered a crucial facet of a pre-service public service programme of study.

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[**PLEASE TAKE THE OPPORTUNITY TO THE POEM:** *"We hit a giant"*

  AND *Please tell us how you felt when you read and heard this poem. Could this artistic methodology be a new useful way for you to collect data?]*

We hit a giant ..
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