

BEYOND TEXT. EMBODIED READING OF DATA

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we will describe two examples of ABR workshops which we named the Beyond Text –method and where researchers and artists working together read and interpreted research data in embodied way. This means paying attention to the way the reading process affects one’s body as sensations, feelings and emotions. We learnt in our study, that the critical reflection of emotions and embodied feelings involved in the research process may offer a path to understand the underlying discriminatory power relations and structures by making the researcher’s own prejudice or preconditions visible.

INTRODUCTION

In feminist organization studies it has been shown that innovative/innovation processes also “produce” inequality (Andersson et al 2012). Discrimination is embedded in organizational structures and cultures, or “inequality regimes” as Joan Acker calls them, which are difficult to become aware of (Acker 2006). Studying discrimination requires a consideration that organizational structures and cultures (the way we do

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things around here) are not only organizational values and procedures but embodied (power) practices (Kerfoot 2000).

In this paper, we seek to demonstrate how the subtle workings of power and even discrimination in organizations can be made visible in participatory action research (PAR) by the critical and reflective use of arts-based research (ABR) methods. In participatory action research (PAR) a researcher aims to co-operate with the organization members and facilitate the problem identification (Brydon-Miller et al. 2011).

We will describe two examples of ABR workshops which we named the Beyond Text –method and where researchers and artists working together read and interpreted research data in embodied way. This means paying attention to the way the reading process affects one’s body as sensations, feelings and emotions (Adams and Owens 2016).

The context of our pilot test- activity is ongoing artistic-pedagogical investigation into the development of research methods of Beyond Text. In this paper we will discuss two cases or events of Beyond text Erasmus Plus project which aims at finding ways to support practitioners and researchers, within universities and those professions and organization beyond, to use arts to conduct high quality research assessment and evaluation through practice.

The first exploration (Driftwood Cottage) took place in Driftwood Cottage in Chester, UK in 2016. The second (Vic) was organized at the University of Vic, Spain in May 2017. In Driftwood, the exercises conducted took the form of physical theatre responses to the reading of

written data documented from an ongoing project being undertaken by Dr. Anne Pässilä in Finland. In Vic, Spain, the data explored through drama exercises were citations from published Swedish discrimination notifications brought to the session by Arja Lehto, who works as a research officer in Equality Ombudsman, Sweden.

The difficulty of recognizing inequality also lies in the traditional methods of inquiry which view organizations as stable, knowable and predictable (Weick, 2007). In participatory innovation process in particular, the researcher should be a critical “co-producer” and interpreter of the data (Fook, 2010) which can be intriguing at the same time as it is disturbing for the researcher. Through creativity, play and imagination ABR methods can open way to illustrate dimensions of lived experience of discriminatory processes or situations. This may increase the researchers’ and participants’ capacity to hear and register the range of emotional responses towards equality issues among organizational members.

The researcher needs to work consciously and self-reflexively in order to contribute to an equal and non-discriminatory organization (Andersson 2017 unpublished). This reflexivity must be applied to the researchers’ own privileges, such as gender, age, skin colour, class or sexuality.

This paper provides an insight to a process where data from a research project is read and interpreted in an embodied way. The interpretation can be described as happening in three stages:

1. textual research data describing lived discriminatory situations or power issues is interpreted and embodied through drama exercises (performances in Driftwood and Vic)
2. the feelings and thoughts arising from the exercises or performance are further analyzed and reflected collectively (verbal and visual reflection in Driftwood and Vic)
3. these two previous stages and the material available from them (notes, photos) are interpreted again from distance and written in a style of academic paper (collective work on-line).

LITERATURE AND THEORY

We build our analysis on the literature of methodological uses and politics of affect as well as arts-based research methodology. Theorization on affects helps us to understand how the experience of discrimination, witnessing or embodying and performing discrimination in drama exercise has embodied, even visceral dimensions which cannot be separated from their cultural, historical, social and political dimensions.

As feminist media scholar Katariina Kyrölä has suggested, the way “we see ourselves (and others) as

ethical subjects relates intimately to not only how we feel about things, but to how we feel we should feel about things, and to how we express, articulate and intellectually process those feelings” (Kyrölä 2017). In her recent article, she analyses 24 essays where university students in Sweden reflect on their affective reactions to the American film *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire* (2009) and asks how ‘feeling bad’ can mobilize ethical subjectivities in encounters with racialized suffering and injustices.

In this paper we examine what kind of affective encounters take place in the process drama convention of physical theatre. Physical theatre is a recognised genre of performance in which there is a reliance on physical motion which is used with gesture to communicate emotion (Artaud 1948). As a convention within process drama (Adams and Owens 2016) it can be used as a deceptively simple but sophisticated form through which written text can be interpreted.

We investigate how researchers and participants own (contextual) position as embodied, feeling subject can be constructively examined as an essential feature of any (research) encounter. Here, we could think according feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed (2003) affects and emotions as embodied, cultural feelings that simultaneously bring some bodies closer to each other and create distance between some other bodies. What can the feelings and emotions expressed and experienced in the process drama convention of physical theatre and research tell about discriminatory power?

The Driftwood Cottage event was organized in such ways as to allow the conditions for creative practices in education and in this case in particular –research- to flourish. We see as being determined by the extent to which democratic principles are established. In this sense the event was strongly informed by Rancièrian principles of learning together without pre-determined outcomes (1991; 2004; 2009; 2010).

Participation was a fundamental component at Driftwood Cottage. For Rancière the means of achieving equality runs contrary to many accepted notions of what education might mean; the ‘ignorant schoolmaster’ polemic being a case in point (1991). In our narrative ignorance is cast as a virtue on the part of the researcher, as a prerequisite for analysis of data and learning through it to occur. This is because equality disrupts traditional power relations in any education setting in Rancière’s thesis; the expert in gender or in theatre or in education is equal to all others in ignorance, all both refer – and defer – to the object of study as the source of knowledge. The expert is not the explicator, or the arbiter of understanding on the part of others, which Rancière argues is a disabling process, an additional layering of meaning to the original object of study, over which the expert has absolute control and thereby institutes an unequal and permanent power relations.

DATA AND METHODS

1. CASE DRIFTWOOD COTTAGE

The first exploration took place in a small house, Driftwood Cottage in Chester, UK in 2016. The second was organized at the University of Vic, Spain in May 2017. Driftwood Cottage is a small house on the banks of the River Dee, UK, just across from the water from the University of Chester. One of the team members, Dr Anne Pässilä was staying in this rented accommodation as a visiting research fellow. Sensing the potential of this inspiring setting, close to, but separated from the official university buildings the idea was hatched by Pässilä and her colleague Prof. Allan Owens to use it as a centre for two days workshops in a kitchen table fashion (Pässilä, Owens, Holtham 2016) where investigative action could be undertaken and conversation could flow in a relaxed way with no chance of interruption by daily professional requests. They invited a deliberately small group of experts who had interests in the field of drama education: a senior researcher, two professors, two PhD students, one expert from gender studies, one equality expert-practitioner from innovation studies and one artist-expert from physical theatre. The group changed composition slightly from day one to two to bring in experts in gender on line from Sweden and Finland.

The purpose of this two day workshop was to draw on the tradition of theatre ensemble creation as a way to read and interpret data, done in two sessions (each 6 h) March 2016 in UK. The group who assembled physically in Driftwood Cottage had each come to the University of Chester with separate agendas but had time in their schedules to come and spend time in experimental work.

The exercises conducted took the form of physical theatre responses to the reading of written data documented from an ongoing project being undertaken by Anne Pässilä in Finland.

The data read in Driftwood consisted of statements from managers in a particular region of Finland who were in the middle of a change process whereby they were being required to work transprofessionally rather than the usual silos in which they operated. An extract would be read out by one of the group and then another three or four would physically start to create an image or begin a movement that embodied their interpretation of the data. Sometime this would take less than a minute, sometimes 4 or 5 minutes. There would then be a collective interpretation by those/the person who had been watching or documenting including the experts watching on skype. Questions would be asked, reflections on what had been done intuitively undertaken and a collective set of interpretation shared about the data. The aim was to play with the data in this way and so helping it speak.

Power was often made visible in ways that were not immediately open to interpretation, but the feeling that

much was in the data that resisted easy articulation was strong at times. When a particular image or movement attracted attention we stuck with it and repeated or elaborated in the attempt to interpret further. What was particularly interesting was one of the participants', Yosuke Osahi's physical interpretation which was often distinctive powerful and provoking. As his area of expertise is a particular form of physical theater (Owens 2011) he had the range of skills that allowed him to express and explore very deeply. He gave confidence for the group to proceed in this way, in an activity of reading data that was as 'normal' as being sat round a table interpreting data in the conventional way by rational analysis, discussion, still bodies and nodding or shaking heads.

Towards the close the awful paradox of creativity of solitude and the collective surfaced. The understanding that problems of inequality are created in organisations because there is no time to reflect or think; that this kind of system keeps authorities and hierarchies in place and so reproduces the problems rather than addressing them or asking questions about why there is no change. To start to talk about them, to go to work and start to talk to them as if they could really go away takes such courage and effort. A sense that bodied reading could give others a chance to see what we do through embodied could be a different case and way of working for change.

The feeling of togetherness at Driftwood is perhaps best framed in through the concept of ensemble (Brecht, 1969,) where by a group of people, or those will to perform with and to each other come together to engage and experience drama rather than realise predetermined outcomes through it. In Ensemble theatre a group of individuals commit to working together develop a distinctive body of work and practices- often over a long period (Owens, 2011)- in which the success of the whole validates the process rather than the triumph of the individual. An attempt is made to seek and value the contribution of each individual to enrich the whole.

In the case of Driftwood Cottage we connected strongly with Rancièrian (1991; 2009; 2010) idea of learning together without pre-determined outcomes. We were interested in creating a democratic ensemble bodied reading of data as well as question our own taken-for-granted assumptions. A key feature being that we were undertaking together an academic task of data analysis that traditionally would be a solitary or cognitive sit-down few colleagues form of practice and working it collectively with bodied movement.

2. CASE VIC

A multilingual and international group of artists, researchers, teachers, and people from working life were brought together under the umbrella of the Beyond Text Erasmus Plus project in May 2017. One of the Beyond Text sessions was hosted by Anne Pässilä, Arja Lehto, Suvi-Jonna Martikainen and Raquel Benmergui in cooperation with Professor Allan Owens.

The intention of the session was to experiment with beyond text ways of analysing, interpreting and understanding data. The data in this context were citations from Swedish discrimination notifications. As Professor Harmaakorpi from the School of Innovation Lappeenranta Technological University commented in the session, “it is the job of the researcher to make the data speak.” Therefore, in order to facilitate meaning-making, i.e. the polyphonic voicing and understanding of the data, the participants were told where the data came from and they were asked to engage in a framed beyond text activities. They worked in groups with specific emergent roles: *the reader* read a citation aloud, *the impulse-giver* physically moved the reader or gave them physical impulses while they were reading and *the seer/listener*: watched and listened as the reader & the impulse-giver engaged with the data.

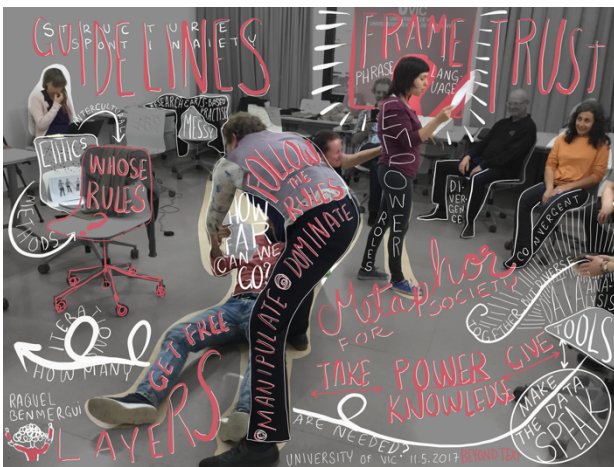


Photo 1 Embodied reading of data. Photo and illustration by Raquel Benmergui

What emerged?

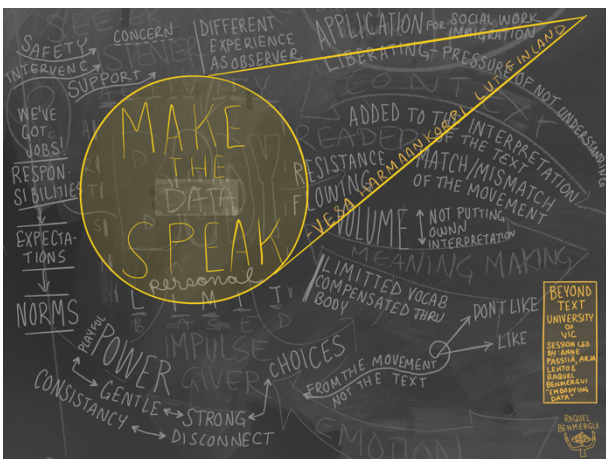


Photo 2 Collective reflection after embodied reading of data illustrated by Raquel Benmergui

The participants felt liberated from the stress which may ensue when first working with data. The activity and the roles released the participants from the pressure of the text and its interpretation. It acknowledged emotions as part of the research process, allowing them to enter and

surface. The participants reflected that the meaning-making emerged through the connect and disconnect of the movement and the words being read; the volume, emphasis and speed of the reading; and the strength, gravitas, playfulness of the impulses. The experience also embodied the research process, its messiness, balancing structure, spontaneity and ethics.

One of the key elements that surfaced was power relations. Here, we present the preliminary analysis of the material which is handwritten memos and short excerpts by Arja in a form of dialogue between Arja and Anu. Anu did not participate in VIC workshop.

EMBODIED POWER RELATIONS

ARJA: At first hand, the power issue was made visible from the performances. This was particularly expressed like “power of moving or the feelings attached to be moved by someone”. Who has the power of “moving” somebody else? The power relation was displayed in polyphonic ways but also the most explicitly described as a “moving force”. Some participants were analyzing their own strong feelings connected to the imagined situations that they felt in the moment of the exercise. These were described as an important point was to realize that some people (imagined employers) have the power to make the movements.

Embodiment seemed to be an important part for the researchers own understanding and showing up own feelings in the research process.

ANU: Do these movements have a direction, focus or qualities (slow/fast, shrinking/expanding)? For example, fear makes us to go away, or to shrink, get stiff. Interest and curiosity makes us move towards that what we feel interesting. Seldom we feel emotions as separate, clear-cut feelings that can be labeled as fear and sorrow, but usually emotions are mixed and blurred, which makes them difficult to even verbalize. We might feel at the same time pulled towards and pushed away → ambivalence of feelings.

OUT OF CONTROL

ARJA: A researcher’s own feelings of flow or resistance (in discrimination situation) seemed to provide a sensitized awareness to the phenomena of discrimination when you experience it yourself.

ANU: Here you can find the quality of the movement: flowing or resisting.

ARJA: An example was when a citation caused so strong negative feelings of being moved, beyond the words, that it was difficult to keep control. Another example was that the situation was causing too overwhelming emotional reactions, such as laughing.

ANU: What kind of negative feelings? How do you know they were negative? From their faces, gestures? Whose interpretation is this, who felt or said that reactions were “too overwhelming”? Do we talk about appropriate/inappropriate emotions here? That is what

Kyrölä talks about also – inappropriate reactions to fatness, for example – for example – what to do with them as a researcher? Or what do they tell us about emotions and discrimination and power?

ARJA: An observation given to the discriminatory power situation was explained as something that happened to one's researcher role. Traditionally, the researcher is expected to be untouched (subjectively) by the research data. To become aware of (during the physical theatre play) how the power to be moved (or manipulated as the person expressed it) was causing strong negative feelings, almost difficult to control the situation as one participant explained.

"Researcher's feeling of powerlessness."

"The movement took the focus, it was difficult to understand the intentions behind."

Another example describes the physical theatre acting process as moving from acting to own feelings. In the same manner as the discrimination is described in the citations as a subtle process or situations, in the exercise a participant expressed herself as taken over by her own feelings. This could be interpreted that the participant might have experienced similar situations herself, the imagined situation reminded something from her own past. Similarly, it was explained that it was difficult to describe one's own feelings, to pinpoint what was there exactly.

☛ "The content of words disappear!"

COMPLEXITY OF THE SITUATION

The exercises also made visible the complex dynamics of discrimination. Since the citations mainly described one situation such as the persons in citations had experienced it, it was not possible to make sense of the processes behind. Also the citations were describing only the feelings of the discriminated part. As such the discriminatory practices and the employer's picture was not there. The employer and everyday organizational practices themselves would need to be described as well.

Some commented that lack as difficulties to understand the intentionality of the discriminatory practice, although the intentionality might not to be easy to discern, since there is very seldom a clear case of intentional discrimination. This is why we need other ways of exploring and tackling discrimination in organizations, because it works not only through conscious and rational minds, but through deeply cultural, learned and embodied ways of feeling towards gendered differences and racialized people, for example.

ARJA: The citations seemed to touch the participants and make them to "move" and the body movements pointed directly to the feelings of injustice.

"Words made me move and understand more!"

ANU: This citation tells how our bodies, minds, language and feelings cannot be separated from each other. Critical reflection of our experiences is needed, because experiences are always already cultural.

WHAT WAS LEARNT

We learnt in our study, that the critical reflection of emotions and embodied feelings involved in the research process may offer a path to understand the underlying discriminatory power relations and structures by making the researcher's own prejudice or preconditions visible. Beyond text as a research method would be an innovative way of collectively analyzing discriminatory practices that we as researchers and practitioners might be a part of. A collective analysing would make visible the ways in which sense is being made out of discriminatory processes and practices.

DISCUSSION

In this paper we were to find out how embodied and culturally rooted feelings can be interpreted in a three-stage research process including drama exercises, reflection of the exercises and performances and analysis of the previous stages.

The physical theatre activity began in both cases simply but rapidly developed towards more complex problems. Instead of talking about a given dilemma chosen as an entry point in the consideration of a given subject or phenomena, researchers and artists stepped in and out of it, not to lose themselves in an illusion, but in order to see familiar things in a different way; for example 'doing gender'. This type of approach was 'enactive' from a social-constructivist point of view. In assuming that gaining understanding related to 'doing gender' is relational and begins with an action, which in drama often involves bodies as well as mouths moving as an important part of thinking, coming to know, make sense of things, and understand. As the action can be stopped, replayed live in different ways it is particularly ripe for use as a means of data analysis, allowing for a playing with data in the here and now. Therefore we came up to a definition that in the field of ABR methods new emerging understanding takes place through direct collective imagined experience, observing others and reflecting on the implications and consequences of this through the connections made with our own lives and those of others.

Individuals grow into, arise, shape and are shaped by their relational role with the world and process of ABR methods we aimed to create opportunities for interaction and reflection on this. In the second sense enactive refers to the ability to take on a role and let go of it, to continually step in and out of the carefully observed reality of a collectively imagined world in order to make connections with the largely unobserved realities of our own everyday lives.

Next we discuss more the potential of the ABR/Beyond Text method to be used in a wider organizational

context (to address discriminatory practices) that aim to facilitate the real equality work by first showing the problems and then how to make use of the methods of visioning and dreaming of change, by creating alternative “spaces” (Page et al, 2013). Then it might be possible to analyze further the different emergent emotions/feelings as meaning something.

Embodied reading of data is useful for practice because it brings another level of interpretation and an analysis of data concerned with emotions related not only to power and structure in the studied organizations but also in research process. It also provides meaningful knowledge for practice-based researchers and stakeholders in participatory innovation processes.

Similarly this question has been discussed by Page et al. (2013) in the context of participatory research study investigating lived experience of doing gender equality work in organization. Page et al show that the use of ABR can make visible the transformative potential in equality and diversity practice and how to re-engage in it (Page et al, 2013 p 581). For example the feelings of ambivalence and power were raised up in research process.

When it comes to innovative capacity in organizations there might be a reason to ask why some organizations seem to be capable to transform new ideas or manage challenges and transform them in to changing and innovative practices? According to Andersson et al. (2012) innovation in organizations is part of the organizational everyday practices and thus gendered, classed and ethnified or aged. To understand the nature of the ongoing simultaneous processes of both innovation and discrimination is challenging and complex. Innovations need also to be contextualized and the taken for granted assumptions have to be questioned. The critical gender perspective challenges the traditional concept of innovation as well as organization. (Andersson et al, 2012).

To become innovative, organizations need to build a capacity for that. Only by critically reflecting the organizational power relations, innovations and organizations get more sustainable and ethical.

Here we end up to Rancière problematization of several key terms that are normally associated with learning, most notably ‘understanding’. Through the maintenance of inequality, understanding becomes constantly subject to validation by assessment, and this is under the absolute control of the explicator. The determination of understanding is wholly based on the mediation and packaging of knowledge that is presented to others, and ignores any new, original, idiosyncratic, personal or in our case collective interpretation that other participants might bring to the analysis, since this may deviate from the ‘correct expert’ understanding provided, and potentially render it invalid. As he explains: ‘Scholarly progression is the art of limiting the transmission of knowledge, of organising delay, of deferring equality’ (2011, p.8).

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