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Abstract

Joe Norris's book on playbuilding can cause readers to think quite differently about qualitative research and plays. His evocative text encourages researchers to engage their inner playwrights and to consider how we perform knowledge and how we mediate data in order to engender novel reactions from our research participants, readers, and ourselves.

Keywords

Playbuilding, Qualitative Research, Arts-based Research

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Playbuilding as Qualitative Research: The Play

Ronald J. Chenail

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Joe Norris's book on playbuilding can cause readers to think quite differently about qualitative research and plays. His evocative text encourages researchers to engage their inner playwrights and to consider how we perform knowledge and how we mediate data in order to engender novel reactions from our research participants, readers, and ourselves.
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Cast

Ron: A book reviewer

Joe: A book author

Ron: (*standing in the center of the stage, holding a book in one hand, and holding his head with his other hand*) Joe, you really need to stop messing with my head.

Joe: (*entering from stage left*) Whatever do you mean?

Ron: It's your new book, *Playbuilding as Qualitative Research* (Norris, 2010); it's got me thinking too much.

Joe: Thinking about what?

Ron: About what I think research is, about what I think research does.

Joe: That's great to hear, Ron, because that's one of the reasons I wrote the book.

Ron: To make me suffer?

Joe: No, to get folks like you to think about how they think about research. And for that matter, I want to get folks thinking about art too. And maybe, just maybe, that research and art can be the same thing. How's your head feeling now?

Ron: It's still spinning, but I think the direction changed.

Joe: You're strange, Ron.

Ron: I've heard that before!

Joe: Well, Ron, since you're such a nice guy to review my new book, I think I should help you with your head-spinning condition and share a little about *Playbuilding* and how I think it can be used to understand qualitative research and to open up readers' eyes to see how a collaborative arts-based research approach can be evocative and healing.

Ron: Wow, all of that is in this one book?

Joe: Yes, and more!

Ron: Okay, let me hear your best pitch!

(Ron sits down on a bench and Joe moves to center stage)

Joe: Well, I was first introduced to playbuilding or, as it is more commonly known, "Collective Creation" back in the 1970s, and I fell in love with the approach because it helped me to find a way to create a different relationship between my students and me and between us and our audiences. It also helped me to see that we could blur the distinctions between who was the author and who was the actor, and in some cases who was the audience. It liberated us from our hardened categories of who's who and most interesting of all it was a very creative way of being creative!

Ron: Yes, I liked that part of the book especially how it seemed everywhere you went after grad school someone wanted you to put on a play in some form or another. You seemed to be in one of those Judy Garland-Mickey Rooney movies!

Joe: Well, Busby Berkeley I ain't *(Joe feigns some dance steps)*, but the feel's the same. It's exciting to work creatively, especially when that collaboration can help people find a voice and that performance can help to bring focus to personally and socially critical issues such as prejudice and oppression.

Ron: Okay, that's when collective creation became "Mirror Theatre" –sort of like the same turn qualitative researchers take when they see who and what they study can bring attention to marginalized groups or to folks who have been silenced in some manner.

Joe: So, you did read the book!

Ron: Yeah, sometimes I do read the books I review! *(spoken with sarcasm)*

Joe: Well, then you already know that the series of projects I did as a part of the "Safe and Caring Schools" initiative in Canada helped me to see the power in playbuilding and performance. This process also led me to see how much stronger presenting the results of our work in the form of a play seemed when compared to disseminating the results of research as a paper or chapter. The form in which the information is presented can amplify the material, engage the audience, and in some instances, can say as much as the content being presented!

Ron: Sort of like presenting the review of a book about plays in the form of a play! (*Ron and Joe look out to the audience with strange smiles on their faces*)

Joe: Yeah, who would do something as obvious as that!

Ron: Not me (*He says with an innocent look*)

Joe: Well, where were we?

Ron: I think, if my memory serves me, you were about to tell me how your work with the Mirror Theatre productions got you to think more about the connections between art and research. I was going to say it was your *reflections* on Mirror Theatre that led to this insight, but I don't like relying on such cheap puns to get a laugh or two.

Joe: Yes, I, too, take great *panes* (*with emphasis*) to avoid using puns about mirrors.

Ron: And that's what I like about you!

Joe: Okay, okay, I'll stop *mirroring* you and get on with the tale.

Ron: Yes, it *reflects* badly on you when you do so.

Joe: Stop, you're *cracking* me up!

Ron: Yes, but when you peered through the crack in the mirror you saw what drama could bring to research and what research could bring to drama.

Joe: Exactly—that was it—when all of the pieces began to fit together. I realized I could enhance the collective creation process in Mirror Theatre by using all sorts of techniques from qualitative research like interviewing, participant observation, and thematic analysis; and my experiences in Mirror Theatre also helped me to see better how I could bring greater production values to the way I presented my research findings and how I could creatively involve my co-researchers throughout the research process.

Ron: One big happy family!

Joe: Well, yes, it was delightful to conceive, create, and conduct these plays, but it was also emotionally challenging to deal with the topics we were taking on. Kids talking about being bullied, about being discriminated against, about being made to feel not important and then them hearing and seeing their real-life episodes being performed on stage could be emotionally draining for all of us.

Ron: Yes, so much for the emotionally-detached researcher!

Joe: That's right, but we can end up seeing that this emotional investment can bring wonderful feeling in return as we give voice to the silenced, put into the spotlight that

which has been left in the dark too long, and bring audiences into a space where they can never quite see their world in the same way again.

Ron: See that's what got my head spinning in the first place!

Joe: What do you mean? (*Joe sits down next to Ron who pops up from the bench*)

Ron: Well, just when I was all comfortable thinking I knew just what qualitative research is, how to conduct it, how to present the results, and especially how to judge the quality of it all, here comes your book with all of its genre-bending, category-blurring, deconstructing, reconstructing, unconstructing rhetoric. I read the plays, go back to the sections on how to create these productions, then back to plays again, and I can see how the productions can be seen as renderings of the data produced by the collective process. I can even see how you have a discussion section after your plays when you can discuss the implications and limitations of the work. It's just that I really hadn't thought about how similar research and art can be and what can happen when we push past the metaphor and take seriously what research can be when we embrace its artistry. It's just taken me some time to figure this metaphor out!

Joe: Yes, life becomes very interesting when our figures become literal! That's what the book is all about. Research like art and art like research have evocative qualities, but we sometimes get so overly concerned with addressing the gaps in the literature and contributing knowledge and information that we miss the emotional, the ethical, the moral, and the performative provocation that sharing narratives can be, even when they come from humble beginnings such as data.

Ron: Data as star—I think I wrote that phrase one time (*Ron's shameless attempt to get readers to check out his 1995 paper on presenting qualitative research*), but now it means something very different to me. Data carefully collected, and analyzed, and represented on stage as lines spoken in a play can have a tremendous effect on the actors, the researchers, the teachers, and the readers, er, I mean audiences as they are all drawn into the production. So the play really is the thing!

Joe: Yes, sweet prince I think you got it!

Ron: Ay, there's the rub!

Joe: What rub?

Ron: Well, you see I edit this journal and I write all these papers, but now I have this desire to write plays and perform my research. How can I go back to writing reviews in my old, comfortable narrative fashion?

Joe: Oh, I think you'll come up with something creative!

Ron: Let's hope so!

(Ron and Joe shake each other's hands and exit stage right)

Reference

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Author Note

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