Advocating for the Use of Poetry and Mixed Media Work in Analytic Processes

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Abstract

As part of my analytical process of looking at data collected from a pilot study on the use of film in the classroom, I discovered that I had the space to engage in a creative analysis process. In this article, I propose that creative methods be employed when analyzing data. An arts-based approach to research (Barone & Eisner, 1997) led to two creative products for my research: Poetry, which has been used with research in the past (Cahnmann, 2003; McCullis, 2013) and mixed media. This article explores relevant literature about integrating poetry and other arts into analysis and serves to advocate for an arts-based process when trying to understand and represent study data.

Keywords

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Many research exercises begin with a problem statement; given the nature of this article, I will begin with a process statement. Researchers have suggested that qualitative analysis can be done in a variety of creative ways (Bogumil, Capous Desyllas, Lara, & Reshetnikov, 2015; Cahnmann, 2003; Lahman et al., 2010; Stenhouse, 2014). Those working in qualitative paradigms have employed a multiplicity of methods, as I will illustrate throughout the description of my own processes. The processes, for this work, included both poetry and a mixed media representation of my findings.

My aim is to describe a series of creative analytic processes and advocate for their use in the research work of other scholars. Carroggio De Molina (2014) wrote, "Scientists and artists, as spectators of a phenomenon—any phenomenon—achieve, ultimately, the same product. After all, their ways to understand their environment must converge because its mental mechanisms are the same" (p. 4). Collins (1992), writing from the perspective of a researcher and musician, noted that qualitative research in itself might be considered an art form. What I took away from considering these creative processes is the notion that analysis and qualitative research in general need not be boxed in to a closed set of academic expectations. I will now trace first poetry then other creative processes in a brief look at what has been written in professional literature.

Poet, Artist, and Researcher Roles in the Literature

From a perspective developed in the literature, the very subject of this inquiry lent itself to concepts of authorship, in general, and poetic exercise more specifically. This beginning with poetry spoke to my own experience as a creative writer years before I knew that I would turn my attention to writing research. Botzakis (2011) drew parallels between the role of an author in traditional print literature and film. Wexman (2003) drew similar parallels between the authorship experience of written text and the function of a director in the realm of film.

For Wexman (2003), little if any distinction was made in this consideration of authorship and, by consequence, the role of text can be extended from written symbols to visual products and process. Wexman (2003) wrote, "Like lyric poems or abstract expressionist paintings, most such productions announce themselves as personal expressions of the filmmaker's innermost feelings" (p. 11). For me, research work about film in literacy led

naturally into a creative, analytic process as I considered my role as the researcher/author, and my participants' roles as speakers/authors.

Researcher as Poet

First, in order to reach out from my positivist training and begin exploring creative avenues of analysis, I look for permission in the works of other qualitative scholars. Given the question of whether or not to use poetry as a means of analysis, Cahnmann (2013) responded, "why not?" (p. 35) and suggested that analysis is not a closed concept. In order to bridge the world of poetry and research, I turned to another source. McCullis (2013) suggested that the nature of poetry aligns well with qualitative research, either as products created by participants or as beginning points to spark responses to elicit and gather data. Researchers are active in this constructive process. McCullis (2013) wrote that the difference between literary poetry and research poetry is "the position of the author to the data" (p. 89). These roles, it seems, are not completely separated. Cahnmann (2003) suggested that researchers can gain a "heightened form of language" from poetic analysis, including use of metaphor and rhythm (p. 31). Poetry, in this view, can lead to play with language, and can help researchers learn to listen carefully. Indeed, analytic processes hold the possibility for a variety of creative explorations. Researchers have permission to engage in a playful (and revelatory) experience with the data that they collect in the field.

I learned that there is not just one way of going about analysis through poetry; in fact, the possibilities for using poetry in research are wide and varied. I mention a few of these methods here with the hopes that work can be inspired beyond the approach I took in my own work – and I include this section as a reminder of the next steps in my own arts-based thinking. Lahman et al. (2010) considered multiple techniques for poetry as an analytic technique (change) in qualitative research. The use of participant words to form poetry was included in this approach to poetry, and this use of words inspired some of my own creative, analytic choices. Additionally, this consideration of poetry focused on researchers constructing their own poems; participants in the study included three professors and three doctoral students. The participants began a process of circulating emails among themselves to create a collaborative poetic document, detailing their experiences as researchers and as readers. This choice to have poetry constructed by the participant is a kind of "next step" challenge for me, as I was the one composing poems in the example I am working from. Hopper and Sanford (2008) showed that poetry can be used in the process of reflection as educators prepare to enter the field. Hopper and Sanford (2008) noted that the poem produced from their three-year project captured the complexities of the experience and suggested that poetry can accomplish this representation uniquely. In addition to the already-mentioned poetic methods, Xerri (2015) has used poetry as a stimulus during qualitative interviews. Clearly, poetry offers much ground to cover in research work.

Striving to be a strong writer tied in strongly to being a good researcher as I moved through creative, analytic processes. To this end, Cahnmann (2003) spoke to the vital role of writing in the research process, suggesting that the kinds of creative processes that are involved when constructing poetry can have positive results for researchers. So then, poetry has been employed as a product created by researchers, a product created by participants, and as a stimulus during the interviewing process itself. In terms of practical suggestions about the poetic process, Cahnmann (2003) advocated for researchers keeping journals of poetry and for avid and wide reading. But as the next section will explore, poetry is not the only creative means of analytic process.

Researcher as a Mixed Media Artist

Broadening research into creative projects, researchers have explored analysis beyond poetry, utilizing other artforms to represent and explore their findings; I elaborate on examples of these creative researchers in this section for permission in the next phase of my own creative processes, as well as to advocate for building layers of arts-based processes into the work of others. Arts-based research, according to Barone and Eisner (1997) should be "engaged in for a purpose often associated with artistic activity: arts-based research is meant to enhance perspectives pertaining to certain human activities" and should be "defined by the presence of certain aesthetic qualities or design elements that infuse the inquiry project" (p. 95). It was my hope in undertaking an arts-based approach to adhere to this latter criterion of aesthetic quality and design, and it was a fortunate result of this project that my perspectives changed during the analysis process. What this means for creative analytic work is that the product must also reflect a certain level of quality, resulting from thoughtful consideration and time spent.

This thoughtful consideration means that researchers are able to justify their creative choices and make these choices in view of the purpose of their study, and in response to other creative work. In my own creative analytic process, this justification extended even to use of color choices. Carroggio De Molina (2014) discussed the way stains and colors can form a representation of what the artist wishes to convey. In literacy studies, Machin and van Leeuwen (2016) have offered a similar discussion of the communicative power of color. Gunaratnam (2007) compared the actions of a creative researcher to movement on a tightrope. The process is one of perceptiveness, care, and vulnerability—the criteria I worked to follow and advocate for when working in creative, arts-based analytics.

Completing arts-based research is about more than just looking good and making quality choices. The purpose of the analytic process is to advance our own thinking as researchers. Bogumil et al. (2015) wrote, "Incorporating the arts in social science research transforms the research process in profound ways that have the potential for challenging dominant forms of representing knowledge, increased self-awareness and gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study" (p. 2). Indeed, in my work, moving themes into physical space helped me address potential overlaps and even helped me develop an additional thematic direction.

So what are the possibilities for representing data? When it comes to arts-based representation and analysis, there are many product types. Rydzik, Pritchard, Morgan, and Sedgley (2012) wrote of the use of photographs in tourism research. Other creative responses can include music or other literary genres outside of poetry (Gunaratnam, 2007). Barone and Eisner (1997) included films, as well as charts and diagrams, suggesting that the purpose of such representations is to show the findings rather than obscure them (p. 8). Prosser (2013) advocated for the use of visuals to represent findings, including LEGO blocks and illustrations. Clearly, the possibilities are wide and can even stem from the topic or function of the research as well as the creative inclinations and habits of the researcher themselves.

In addition to those forms already mentioned, comic strips, documentary films, and blogs were a few of the projects that Bogumil et al. (2015) included in their discussion of arts-based research methods. Contributing yet another example of arts-based representation, Lapum, Ruttonsha, Church, Yau, and David (2011) constructed an installation that was over 9 feet in height, composed of poetry and photography from participants who had undergone open-heart surgery. The nature of this study was narrative, and viewers could walk through the installation, viewing the poetic and photographic artifacts on their way through. This product included two artistic approaches and symbolically represented the journey of these patients.

Including the arts as a part of the research process means that experience can be represented in a variety of ways, and this process can increase researcher reflexivity. This sense

of reflexivity was defined by Bogumil et al. (2015) as "the awareness of the researcher's own presence and contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process" (p. 3). As I constructed my own responses to research in new forms, I attempted to maintain an awareness of my creative choices and my understanding of the data. The process of writing memos as I worked was helpful. I will now share a brief example of my own creative work with the hope that it will inspire others and serve as another entry in this litany of artistic examples.

An Example of Poetic Process

Employing poetry as a means of understanding my data became a process of returning to the words of participants in my study and considering the way I also used words. The poems represented my own on-going interpretations of my participants' responses. Given the dyadic nature of both my interpretations and my participants' expressed reality, the poems used participant words, prioritizing their voices in bold print, and included some of my own words, which are represented in non-bolded format, to weave together responses. This use of poetry as a research method corresponds somewhat with Lahman et al.'s (2010) description of constructing verses based on a research experience but goes on to blend in words gathered from transcription data, mingling with another method Lahman et al. (2010) described. As mentioned earlier, Lahman et al. (2010) engaged in a process of creating poems but reflected briefly on asking participants to create poems as a source of research data. I hoped, in my poetic analysis work, to merge these methods so that I, as researcher, created poems but these poems stemmed from the words of my participants—almost acting in a role of absent co-creator of the verses. What I have gained from my use of the literature is that there is yet more ground to cover and a multiplicity of other approaches to explore.

In order to construct poems in my beginning creative work, I looked for words and phrases that were sometimes recurring but always directly related to the themes I was exploring in the final stages of my analytic process. For example, in the first representation, words that indicated seeing and/or vision to me were "three-year vision," "dreams," as well as the focal point of the vision for the teacher's class, which included "finding that voice," "elements of story," and an anxiety about the danger that students might "miss the message." In describing concerns about his work, this participant sighed and expressed a desire to help students "know" they "are not alone." These phrases stood out as unique representations from this participation, regardless of how often they occurred.

I wove these words together and entitled the poem with an action-oriented pseudonym, again tying back to language that came through in my transcript:

The Seer Poetic Representation

A **three-year vision**,
swirling with **dreams**,
now compounded in a
sigh,
building **rapport**,
finding that voice
through **elements of story**,
being careful not to
miss the message,
I know I'm not alone.

This poem acts as just one example of the kind of work that can be completed in research. Along with this approach, I have also maintained my own poetic work in reflective form in research journals during more recent interpretive work. My choice to begin poetically ties back to my own experience as a creative writer, exploring poetry publications electronically and in print. Indeed, this creative work has been part of my life for over twenty years now, even predating my interest in research writing.

Mixed Media Process

As stated in the previous section, researchers can combine poetry with other artistic expressions to represent their findings (Lapum et al., 2011). After constructing the 10-line poetic representations of my participants, I included these as part of a larger canvas image, making use of acrylic paints and copies of my data set to explore my data in an alternative, creative manner (Ellingson, 2013). Ellingson (2013) suggested that "multiple methods of analysis and representation" can "span artistic and scientific epistemologies" (p. 414). It was this expansion of analysis that I sought, and so I chose to work in players, moving from one step to the next to continue exploring the data.

The process of creating a mixed media art piece helped me to concretely move around bits of my data. Rather than copying and pasting in a word processing program, this active creativity helped me explore my codes for potential themes. I returned to my original In Vivo and Process codes (Saldaña, 2016) to think through the contents of the study in a more specific manner, with a new sense of inquiry.

In the process of making decisions about what appears on the canvas, I attempted to make choices which, at a symbolic level, I felt represented aspects of the themes I was uncovering. Using color as symbolism on an open canvas space aligns with Lapum et al.'s (2011) discussion of symbolically representing the experience of participants, previously noted in the literature review. I should note here that this creative process, elicited by the work I was involved in and based on my data and tentative findings, still involved my perspective. Carroggio De Molina (2014) wrote that, "With colour, over different fields, the same stimulus generates different responses" (p. 3). Another researcher may have chosen to weave in a different arrangement of colors. This use of colors lines up with the impressions and interpretation of the researcher although there is room to include participant choice in the artistic color scheme.
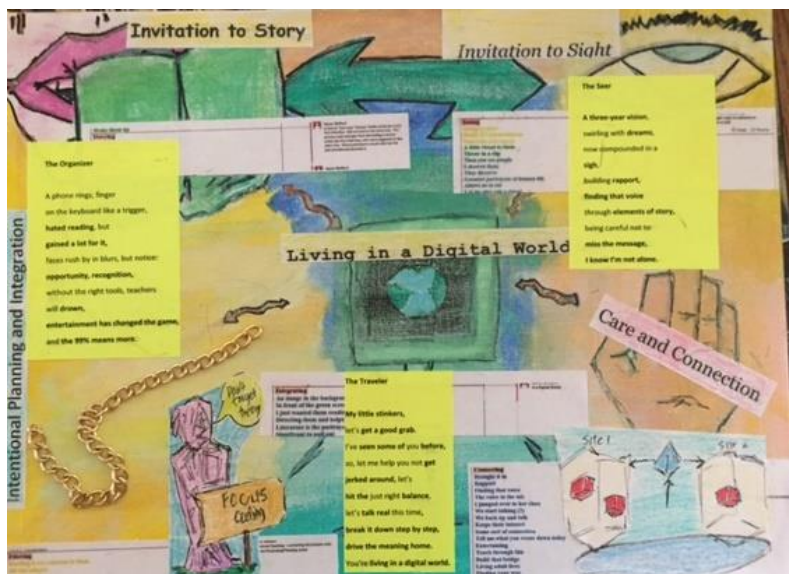

Figure 2. Mixed-media representation

Carroggio De Molina (2014) wrote that a variety of elements, including light and perception, can shade our response to colors. I actively chose colors and symbols to present the five themes in my study, recognizing that, given a different set of conditions, these colors might be viewed differently. Machin and van Leeuwen (2016) commented on this meaning-making nature of color—citing red as a color that can convey positive messages, like passion, or negative messages, like danger. The "payoff" of what these voices from literature offered was that my choices were based in my understanding of the data, and I advocate for this kind of working by process and justification. What red means might change, but my explanation as the first reader of the data and as the person assembling its representation is key in sharing the meaning behind the process.

Along with colors, I included images which I felt might convey the substance of each theme. I included an open hand offering a gift or invitation for themes of connection, an open eye related to themes of seeing in the classroom, an open mouth with a book representing codes dealing with story, a computer screen featuring an image of the globe to represent the idea of being alive in a digital world, and a physical object— gold chain—to represent intentional planning and seeing/integration of concepts. These choices reflected my own emerging understanding of the data as I continued in the analysis process for a period of about three months.

I chose a warm pink to represent the connection theme, a golden range of colors to represent illumination for integration and sight (seeing/integration of concepts), and colors of blues and greens to reflect the digital world motif. Carroggio De Molina (2014) wrote that, "We must conclude that reality, in any of its aspects, depends on the mental mechanisms by which [it] is created, and its characteristics are determined by the categories of these mechanisms" (p. 3). Given this changing view of reality in terms of color and creative decisions, these choices for the canvas were the result of the "mental mechanisms" I used to create them and depended on responses from participants. This depends on the "state of mind" of the artist/researcher (Carroggio De Molina, 2014, p. 3). Given another set of circumstances, another group of participants, or another audience or method, this work could have turned out much differently.

The poems were affixed to the mixed media visual I created for my alternative representation of the data. Including the poems helped demonstrate a verse-based caricature of each of my three participants. This project turned into a process and product that I was first able to use to gain understanding in a study; I have since had the opportunity to now share in a variety of settings, including a professional conference. Bogumil et al. (2015) commented on the importance of sharing arts-based research projects as a means of maintaining quality in the research and particularly suggested that this sharing process could take place effectively in classrooms.

Perhaps most significantly, designing a mixed media project allowed me to see that two themes generated from my data; *Invitation to Sight* and *Invitation to Story* were two unique thematic categories. Originally, I had arranged all of these codes under one heading, *Invitation to Sight*. By putting these codes into a physical space, not unlike a card dealer or street magician putting objects under cups for delightful discovery, I found that there were distinct words and phrases connecting students with the stories contained within films. In the context of this study, that teacher-student interaction with film went beyond a simple desire for students to see the implications of a curricular concept; *Invitation to Story* reached into the lives of the students themselves.

Implications for the Analytic Processes

While it has been my hope to represent the context from the original study, my intent has been to showcase two aspects of the analyses I used. This process was part of an advanced qualitative research class at the university level—an ideal place for creative analytics and sharing to occur (Bogumil et al., 2015). I have discovered so far in this inquiry is that the worlds of creativity and research are not binaries but can be quite osmotic in their relationship with one another.

These two roles are not mutually exclusive; that is, poetry and artistic technique can act as an alternative means of analysis. This finding aligns with Collins' (1992) comments regarding the nature of qualitative research. It was not my intention to use these methods in isolation. Creative analyses were implemented in tandem with coding processes and memoing.

Given the voices from the literature that speak to creative analytics (Bogumil et al., 2015; Cahnmann, 2003; Lahman et al., 2010), it seems reasonable to suggest that authors of research projects might have the liberty, and in some cases perhaps even the responsibility, to be authors of poetry and other art-based projects. As Ellingson (2013) noted, qualitative research approaches give scholars the opportunity to "consider jumping and straddling multiple points across the field of qualitative methods—consciously, actively, and creatively" (p. 413). This analytic play is aimed at expanding "ways of knowing" (Ellingson, 2013, p. 414) when it comes to data. While this inquiry is focused from a qualitative approach, future literature in this arena should consider the role of poetry and art in both quantitative and mixed methods approaches, and there is even space for a more comprehensive review of what researchers are still creating to represent their findings. Creative approaches to understanding all forms of data might move beyond chart and graph-based representations of research findings to consider multiple ways of understanding data, even when data are quantified.

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