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The Question of Quality and Qualifications: Writing Inferior Poems as Qualitative Research

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Alternative forms of data representation have been widely recommended, including the writing of poems as educational research. The arts have their own ways. What qualifications do arts-based researchers need to have? How does one judge the quality of the product? Using part of a novel and three of her own poems as illustrations, the author, a qualitative researcher and literary writer, conjectures about the notion of quality and qualification in the use of art forms as qualitative research.

Introduction

I have been writing poems and stories for a long time, longer than I have been a qualitative researcher, and that began with my dissertation in the mid-1970s, when I did a historical study for my degree in educational administration. This long-dead dissertation was called The Female Teacher: The Beginnings of Teaching as a "Women's Profession" and it was a study of female seminaries in Ohio in the 19th century, utilizing girls' diaries and other archival material. I used my background in literary research as a foundation for my study.

My first poems and stories go back a long way beyond that, to my adolescence. My first published poem was in my college literary journal, in the early 1960s, and it was about spying on our neighbors, who were on welfare, and my outsider bemusement at how they chipped up a piano for firewood and how the kids played in the sandbox with the free flour they got. I still remember my elation when I got the contributor's copy of the journal while I was studying for my Master's degree in English literature.

I have watched with interest the debate about writing a novel for one's dissertation. I listened to the tape of the debate between Elliot Eisner and Howard Gardner and others at the 1996 AERA conference in New York City, as I was driving back to Georgia (Donmoyer et al., 1996). I became emotional. Angry. The holy art of fiction was being dismissed as mere narrative. In the recording, Eisner made a statement that made the blood of many artists boil; that is, that those who use an art as their means of representing data could write an explanatory essay about it, explaining the work of art in social science terms. "My art stands on its own," one dancer said. "I don't need to write an essay to explain it." That an artist should have to explain the work of art is anathema to many who work seriously and with intention and background in one art or another. To explain my literary novel is impossible, for only now, 15 years after I wrote it, am I seeing it. I had recently been divorced. My children were going to spend a month with their father. I was going to be alone in my own house. I had just received career validation by virtue of winning $6,000 as an Individual Artist Fellow in Fiction in Ohio. I began a story of two women, Marvella and Letitia:
Marrella was as alabaster as Letitia was swarthy. These two women had been friends for a long time, even though they were as different as jogging shoes and high heeled spikes. Letitia was the kind of woman whose bedroom was strewn with discarded outfits tried on in a hurry and thrown on the bed; with crumpled-up panty hose; with talcum powder dusting the bureau tops; with lost earrings beneath the corners of the bedspread; and over all a faint perfumey odor mixed with the odor of makeup, female skin, and Ivory soap.

Marrella’s bedroom had all its surfaces clean and polished with lemony scented furniture oil. The nap on the carpet was vacuumed so it all lay in one direction; there were many little boxes in the drawers, and a magnetic hony pin holder sat neatly on the mirrored tray with the perfume atomizers. Her scarves and underpants were neatly rolled or folded and she made her bed as soon as she arose by pulling the covers up to her chin and then sliding smoothly out.

Where from within me were these two women coming? Who were they? I didn’t intentionally or consciously create them or make an outline to explicate them before I wrote. The two women’s personalities developed and just flowed out of me. After the work was all done and the novel, The Three-Week Trance Diet, was published (Piirto, 1985) and I reread it years later, I knew who they were. They were my two selves at the time – my tame daytime self, a responsible, organized single mother, a coordinator of programs at a regional education office – and my wild poetic self. At the time I wrote it, I didn’t even know I was in a state of great mourning for a long marriage. (Actually, the novel is quite funny, and I would often laugh aloud while writing.) But when I wrote it I felt at peace and relieved. Now I call it my novel about the divorce, but no one would know that to read it. This example illustrates the use of coded metaphor in creation. A metaphor stands for something else. It is symbolic. An image is a visual or aurial representation that is metaphorical. A code is a language that transmits a secret message. To write an essay about my novel as research would be impossible, for the novel means itself and cannot be explained. It stands as itself.

Many practitioners of education have a firm and solid background in one or another of the arts. Some are professional artists as well as educators. Many have studied both pedagogy and arts. How can the artistic way of knowing be honored in education, a field of the social studies? How much should a person have studied or practiced an art before utilizing it in educational discourse, especially high-stakes discourse such as dissertations, products in peer-reviewed scholarly venues, or theses? What is the difference between accomplished art and art used for social purposes and personal expression in the field of social studies? In an era that cries out for interdisciplinarity, is it necessary to have studied or performed the art in order to attempt to do it, display or perform it, use it?

Individual, domain, and field

The idea of individual, domain, and field is pertinent here (Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, & Gardner, 1994). A domain is “a formally organized body of knowledge that is associated with a given field” (p. 20). Mathematics is a field, but algebra, geometry, number theory are domains. Literature is a field, but poetry is a domain. Education is a field, but educational research is a domain. “Domains have representational techniques that uniquely capture the knowledge that is in the domain” (p. 22). This is done through symbol systems unique to the domain, a special vocabulary, and special technologies used only within that domain. Social science
symbol systems have dominated the field of education and the domain of educational research.

A field is transformed through individual creators pushing the boundaries of their domains. People working within the domain decide that change is called for. This is what the arts-based researchers are doing currently, in the domain of educational research. They are saying that in certain ways the social studies way of knowing is inadequate, wanting. In order to transform a field, the researcher, the creator, must have mastery of the theory, the rules, the ways of knowing of that field, and also of the domain that is being used to transform it.

The tension

At one arts-based research session, the speakers braided strings of thread and ribbon on chairs about the room illustrating a point about collaboration (Morgan, Finley, & Konzal, 2000). They used the metaphor of weaving to explain their collaboration, but they had no academic background in fabric art or weaving, though one was an amateur sewer and another a collage artist. An audience member spoke, saying that his heart was thumping (perhaps as much as mine was when I heard the Eisner–Gardner tape). He said he had a Master of Fine Arts degree in weaving and was quite disturbed at the panel’s inaccurate metaphors. Their presentation was peer reviewed but no one asked the question of whether they were qualified as artist-researchers in weaving. The reader may think that there should be a place for non-experts to present their research and to use artistic metaphors at educational research conferences, but the fabric artist’s question illustrates a tension within the area of arts-based research and the use of alternative forms of representation.

Maxine Greene said that a professor who advocated arts-based research and who once had the temerity to read a story on a panel with her “is no Tolstoy” (Greene, 1996). I asked her whether she would include contemporary serious literary and other artists in her canon, or whether her definition of art meant that the artist had to be dead. I asked, “Do you mean that only geniuses can be artists?” She said yes – and that some people call her elitist for that statement (personal communication, January 4, 1996). She thought that time was a great winnower for inferior art and that dead or old was perhaps best. The audience exploded with comments about the voicelessness of the old and the dead, who, in the canon, are mostly male. But Greene’s point was also a point about quality and qualification. She said that such works are “art-like” but not art.

I attended an arts-based session where a person had written a PhD dissertation of poems in English, though her mother tongue was another language (Xin-Li, 2000). She had studied a little poetry in her mother tongue, but not in English. She had set to poetic lines the interviews of her case studies. No poetic artist or professor of poetry was on her dissertation committee. As she spoke, the question of quality and respect for the domain of poetry arose as she apologized and admitted she did not know the poetry canon in English. The professors on her committee told her to be clearer; that was their only comment about her poetic attempts. While her poems demonstrated raw talent, the talent was not refined by immersion in the domain of English-language poetry, and may by some be viewed as mocking the domain of English language poetry. The artist may ask, why even study an art, why put in the years in the visual arts or dance studio, why put in the hours of struggle trying to get the character down
right in the theatrical work? Why write a thousand poems and publish five? The study or practice of the domain seems not to be necessary in schools of education which permit poetic dissertations by people who have not studied poetry.

The confusion between personal creativity enhancement and arts

In many of the “arts-based” discussions at qualitative research conferences, the focus is on personal creativity enhancement. Utilizing the arts as personal expression, as autotherapy, is the goal. Helping teachers to utilize the arts, to embed the arts in their practice, to encourage the students to try the arts, is the goal. Creativity can indeed be enhanced through creativity training. As a researcher and writer about creativity, I have even developed a series of creativity training exercises that focus on core attitudes and dispositions common to creative producers, and I give many workshops in creativity enhancement and creative writing (Piirto, 1998, 1999a).

All students would benefit from writing a poem, a song, from making a work of visual art, from exploring their emotions and feelings in a sculpture. I ask my doctoral students in qualitative research in educational leadership to silently fingerpaint their studies while soft music plays in the background, and they receive such insights about their studies that several of them have framed their paintings and hung them in their offices. This is good. There is no issue of quality or qualification in the exercise, or in its execution. It is simply a means of alternative expression and alternative seeing.

Inferior poetry as qualitative research

With this as an introduction, let us consider the use and abuse of poetry in qualitative research. Poetry is the ancient verbal art. Each national and ethnic group has its own esteemed and distinct poetic heritage. Poetry came earlier than writing. It is a natural form of expression, for who has not written a poem in the throes of love, desire, anger, or grief? Yet the domain of poetry within the field of literature is being constantly transformed by individual writers, who push the boundaries of poetry. Poetry then absorbs these transformations and becomes dynamic, new. The domain of educational research with its subdomain of qualitative research is being challenged also, by the arts-based researchers, who ask that they be permitted to use their domains to transform the educational research domain's – and ultimately the education field's – way of knowing.

Traditionally, qualitative research was based in social and cultural anthropology; sociology; history; clinical, developmental, and cognitive psychology; case traditions from political science, economics, law, business; journalism, especially investigative reporting; fieldwork in the natural sciences, especially biology, geology, astronomy; literary traditions such as narrative; and, recently, the arts. Research designs are ethnographic field studies, community studies, case studies, life histories and biographical studies, document analyses and historical studies, survey studies, observational studies, and various combinations of these with quantitative designs. The data are analyzed through analytic deduction, constant comparison, typological analysis, role analysis, network analysis, event analysis, critical incident analysis, natural history, enumerative analysis, and standardized observational protocols, among other
methods. Data are collected by carefully watching and listening through participant observation; nonparticipant observation; stream-of-behavior chronicles; proxemtics and kinesics; interaction analysis protocols; group, key informant, and carcer and life-history interviews; projective tests; the collection of artifacts, documents, and demographics; and other similar social science methodologies (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Merriam, 1998). Where do the methodologies used in the arts fit in?

To Aristotle poetry was more authentic than history because the poet could concoct truth from the elements of history rather than exhaustively write facts. The poet is able to tell the truth on a penetrating level. Aristotle said that the difference between the historian and the poet is “that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars” (Poetics).

Though Aristotle spoke of drama and the epic poem, subsequent critics and thinkers have credited Aristotle with denoting the true nature of the arts. The arts can capture the inner essence of a matter whereas history cannot. “Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars” (Poetics) (see Piirto, 1999c).

Today, in the discussion of the use of poetry (and by “poetry” I mean the Aristotelian sense that poetry is all arts) in qualitative research, it seems the philosopher’s assertion that poetry is more true than truth is at play. The qualitative researcher may use poetry to depict the data imagistically, metaphorically, symbolically. The literary poetic form is chosen, ostensibly, to serve as more than words in short lines on a page; this depiction of what the researcher has found or thinks may be more heartfelt, more concentrated, more distilled, if it is rendered in poetic form. Yet for some thinkers in the field of qualitative research, the person using poetry in the depiction of qualitative findings need have no background in poetry, no record of having written poetry, no formal study of poetry. To write poetry one need not have studied it, seems to be the thought.

This is contrary to the practice of poetry in the literary world today. In a study of 160 contemporary male and female creative writers from the U.S., I found 16 themes in their lives, including the fact that most of them had advanced degrees in English literature (Piirto, 2002a). One criterion for including them in the study was that writers qualified for listing in the Directory of Poets and Writers. In order to qualify, a writer must have 12 points of accumulated credit: one published poem counts as one point; a novel counts as 12 points, a book of published poetry counts as 12 points, and an established literary award counts as four points. I wrote from the participant observer viewpoint, as I am listed as both a poet and a fiction writer (Piirto, 1985, 1995, 1996, 1999c). Those who write and publish public poetry today in the U.S. have studied poetry. Why is it not necessary for those who write poetry in qualitative research to have a familiarity with poetry, to have studied poetry?

Let me use three examples from my own practice. I use my own work here in order not to judge the quality of the poems published as qualitative research in contemporary journals or in dissertations. One might say that the three poems fit together as examples of working on the borderland, the researcher as outsider, the researcher as other, othering the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).
Crazy is good

As a writer, I have kept travel journals and personal journals, which could, in the lingo of qualitative research, be construed as field notes. In late 1998 and early 1999, three colleagues and I were granted travel funds to conduct research projects in India. My project was to visit schools that had as their mission to educate bright youngsters. During the month that we visited, I observed at several academic high schools based on the Anglican and Catholic models; I visited an international high school, the United World College; I also visited two indigenous schools, one based on the Krishnamurti philosophy (Piirto, 2000) and one based on the philosophy of Swami Vivekananda (Piirto, 2002b).

The influence of the British Raj in India is still evident, even though India has been a democracy for over 50 years and is the largest democracy in the world. This influence is seen in the existence of Christian high schools, with headmasters, students in uniforms, and curricula based on English literature and Western thought. Many of these schools are viewed as elite, and are often the preferred schools for students who will go to college and pursue civil, or government work.

We visited the state of Kerala, where my colleagues interviewed businessmen. In the city of Trivandrum, I visited two schools, the Anglican St. Thomas School and the Roman Catholic Loyola School. My field notes are scrawled lists from interviews with the principals, about Christian values, vocational bias, school history, the Indian School Certificate, the three major syllabi, the languages taught, the levels and standards, the numbers of students, the standards for admission, and such. My memories of these interviews are as dim as the rooms in which they were conducted. However, the poems I scrawled in this same notebook speak of black tennis shoes, blue socks, the hot pavement under my sandals, the sound of ever-present crows, the sunny flowered pathways, the definition of a prefect from a young man, and a provocative quote: “O Tiger, come and rest under my shade. Be my protection.” My personal journal, typed on my laptop in my room each morning, also evokes sensory memories:

_Thursday, 4 January 1999_

Woke up at 3:30 a.m., with bad dreams as I just finished _Blasphemy_, a novel by Tehmina Durrani, a shocking account of life in purdah told in 1st person by the wife of a _pir_ fundamentalist Moslem [when I travel, I try to read contemporary novelists and poets from the region where I travel]. Wrote a poem called “Kovalum Dawn.”

Today I visit schools here in Trivandrum. More later.

_Tuesday, 5 January 1999_ 

Yesterday was divine. My speech to the grades 11 and 12 boys went superbly, and I was so excited to see them so excited, enthusiastic, mobile, having fun, and receptive. One of my most exciting speeches, I think. The thank you speech of the boy after my speech was so cute, with him standing at attention, facing front to the class, and saying “We will never forget this afternoon when we learned that crazy is ‘good’.” Dr. P. and his family came to the hotel later that evening to present me with a sandalwood box. His boys are delightful, his wife, a doctor, seems shy, and nice.

A year later, I wrote the following poem for a session at the Albuquerque Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER) Special Interest Group Conference of AERA, where I
read from a chapbook called *Writing India Schools: Creative Nonfiction and Poetry*. I include it here.

**CRAZY IS GOOD**

At the Jesuit-Indian school
boys in white shirts sit
faced front two to a desk
in a cavernous dark room
a prestigious school
that trains future government officials
the priest headmaster says
"Rise to greet the good Doctor.
She is going to talk to you
about her research on creativity."

I talk for awhile on my books
none of them is going into the arts
all into engineering or science
I am bored with this
I put them into groups
they brainstorm birds
"Crazy is good in creativity," I say
"Silly is fine."

the boys have never worked in groups
skeptical, they turn to face friends
who have only seen the backs of their heads
assumptions of alphabetical lives
they soon begin to giggle, then roar
their brains sparkle and spill
the divergent production exercises
I routinely use with my students
so mundane I am slightly ashamed

but the photographs show boy glee
by the time it is time to leave
the class prefect comes to the front
nearly kicks his heels and says all in a rush
a breathless "We will always remember
when the good doctor came and told us
crazy is good, even when we go to university"

that evening the head of
Trivandrum's development corporation
his wife, a physician, and their two boys
one who was in the creativity class
come to my hotel to talk
they bring me a sandalwood jewelry box
thank me for showing their boys
how to be creative
(I nod)
“the parents' phones were ringing
as soon as you left
‘crazy is good,’ ‘crazy is good’
the boys had so much fun
they want you to come back
we need some creative teaching in Kerala”

Kerala has the highest literacy rate in India
result of the Marxist vote in the 1950s
universal education a goal achieved
the absence of beggars
the high price of labor
works against foreign investment
a play, “You Made Me Communist”
*Ningal Enne Communist Akki* in Malayam
influential in turning the common people
against the oligarchic rule of the rich
the influence of poetry in social change
later I read in the paper
that one of the boys placed tops in maths
in the whole state of Kerala last week

deep up, I think.
I do not know what to say.

I commented to the group that the poem “Crazy is Good” is an inferior poem, as it is
too expository, and that the “real” poems I wrote during the journey were ones which
I hoped were more evocative and denser. They told me that such a poem as “Crazy is
Good” has merit too, for qualitative research purposes.

Let me attempt to evaluate my own poem as a researcher/teacher/artist. On the
plus side, the poem shows, in 396 words, the schoolroom. Its title is provocative
because it goes against common wisdom. The poem as research gives direct quotations
from the participants. The poem as research conveys descriptive detail about the site.
It tells the parents' reactions to the lesson. The poem sets the school climate and the
type of education these bright students are receiving into context, as most high school
students in the United States, at least, do almost all their work in groups. Thus the
poem describes an interchange that exposes the interface between two cultures. It has
a couple of interesting phrases: “boy glee” and “assumptions of alphabetical lives.”

But is it a good poem? Are these pluses enough to say that the poem has quality?

On the minus side, the use of “to be” words in phrases says that it is not tight
enough. The lack of resonant images troubles. The clicking of the heels, the turning
around in desks, the sandalwood jewelry box, the mention of a theater work that
changed the country, are the only images, and the latter is suspect. While I, the
writer, picture a traveling troupe going about the countryside putting on the play,
“Ningal Enne Communist Akki,” that picture is because of another image that is not
in the poem; that is the image of arriving a few nights before, on New Year’s night,
bouncing into a darkened town from the countryside on a trip to the southern tip of
India and seeing the splendor of a string of lights, a crowd, and a loud microphone
with a chanting speaker. Our guide told me this is a political poet who goes about the
countryside telling his poems. I don’t have this image in “Crazy is Good,” but it is in the back of my mind as I tell about the play. The expository information in the poem is also problematic. “Kerala has the highest literacy rate in India” is not a poetic line. “A prestigious school/that trains government officials” is not a poetic line. “The high price of labor/works against foreign investment” is not a poetic line. Telling that the head of development’s wife is “a physician” is also problematic. The use of the adjective “skeptical” in apposition is also troubling. I could go on, but I have already written 10 more words explaining the poem than I wrote in the poem.

She walks through guns

Here is another example. In the 1980s, I was principal of a school for high-IQ students in New York City, a laboratory school in Manhattan. Again, my journals and notes fed my creative work, but I never thought to use the creative work as qualitative research. This idea only occurred when I began to teach the qualitative research course in my university’s newly formulated doctoral program in educational leadership. When I taught as a visiting professor for a semester in the department of educational psychology and creativity studies at the University of Georgia in 1996, I recalled my old notes and journals as I pulled out a poem I had begun in 1986. I revised it after antique shopping in a town near Athens, Georgia, where I found a yearbook from the year that the University of Georgia had been integrated and found no mention of Charlayne Hunter, who had been one of those to integrate the university. This revision of a poem first written in 1986 and called “Black and White,” resulted.

SHE WALKS THROUGH GUNS

Charlayne Hunter Gault gives
the Black History talk
in her son’s school
I am the principal of the school
I am the same age as she

there she is, 19,
in the film walking through the guns
at the University of Georgia
in black and white
she’d not talk for days
she’d say “hello” to her mirror
on her own private floor
the first floor of the dorm
her professors would not ask her questions
they would not call on her

when she raised her hand
when she walked through the guns
I had only met five blacks
two boys goosed me and my cousin
at the playground in Ypsi
one man wanted me to play tennis
when I worked for the Army
I stood him up
then sang to myself
"you've got to be taught to hate and fear"
in shame I ignored him
at our offices
the rest of the summer
when he asked me why
I made up an excuse about forgetting
today she speaks
shows the film of her walk
through the gauntlet
her son watches
intent on her
intent on his friends'
acceptance of him
as the son of a famous pioneer
it is that black and white
in this school
he's in 6th grade
those rushing hormones
his friends are black, white, rainbow
his merit in his quality
peer fear runs rampant
she knows cabs pass her by
outside PBS studios
because she is black
even if she is famous
they think she wants to go to Harlem
in between fame and race
she's clear
she stands in front of us in color
next to her image in black and white
her courage to our shame
ten years later in 1996
I bought the University of Georgia 1960 yearbook
at an antique store
Fran Tarkenton was all over it
she wasn't anywhere
nowadays they bring her back to campus
for festivals and reunions
she's their most famous graduate
but in the black and white film
she walks through guns
Charlayne Hunter Gault, when I gave her the first version of the poem in 1986, was a reporter for the MacNeil-Lehrer Report and other Public Broadcasting System shows. She told me that she carried the poem with her on various trips and that she pulled it out to read it when she felt depressed. I didn’t consider the poem worthy even of submitting to a literary journal, but was glad she found it meaningful. Over the years, the poem has been in various states of revision, and the one above is the 2000 version.

In qualitative research terms, the poem may convey a sense of empathy for the lives of the people being spoken about; it also humanizes both the subject of the poem and the speaker of the poem by showing the rural naiveté of the speaker. The research is treated as a work of art. This has to do with how the material is crafted. As Eisner (1996) said, “The thinking is within the material.” The poem provides a sense of particularity, a sense that what is being represented is real. The poem, perhaps, has “productive ambiguity,” and may be more evocative than denotative forms, as there is more of a chance for multiple perspectives. Perhaps the poem provides the reader with new ways of seeing. For the artist/researcher, perhaps using poetry as a means of data representation allows the writer to exploit her individual aptitudes: many artists are not adept in mathematical representations of truth, which are still the preferred means of representation of data in the field of educational research. This does not mean that the researcher cannot represent data. The poem represents a ritual in a school, and provides insight into the workings of sixth-grade behavior as well as insight into the way Black History assemblies are conducted in schools. As such, it becomes more than the observation, more than the insight, if it is a poem that works.

In poetic quality terms, perhaps the repetition of the black and white theme makes it more than just a school-based poem, a poem about a parent giving a speech for Black History Week. The image of the gauntlet of guns, in this latest version, is repeated at the end of the poem and also in the title. It is a better poem now than when I wrote its first version. It is better because of the added experience, the yearbook in the antique store, and better than “Crazy is Good,” but it is still not quite good enough for my personal standards. I must tweak it a little more.

Fraternity bar in Athens, Georgia

Let us take a third poem, one that is also about race and class in Georgia. This was selected for an anthology about the 20th century (Piirto, 1996, 1999d) and I am not working on it anymore. For my purposes, it is “done.”

FRATERNITY BAR IN ATHENS, GEORGIA

they were shoulder to shoulder
drinking beer and playing pool
the room stunk of smoke from hell
the light under the bar shone orange

I sat at the end
talked to who came by
of race in Georgia

inexhaustibly they spewed
headless of Mark Fuhrman’s ignominy
that word
northerners don’t dare to use
and many other words prefaced
by “they” and “them”
shaved almost bald
in fashion in front-faced
corduroy baseball caps
(“I’d never wear my hat backwards like them”)
beside their long-haired white-toothed beauties
they assumed a tribal camaraderie
from the color of my skin
told me their scarred inner hearts
while I smoked their cigarettes
in words I didn’t want to hear
in words I wish I hadn’t asked
at 2 a.m. they bid me bye
“y’all come back again, Professor
when you move to town”
in a conspiracy of skin and tribe
I kept my shame.

This poem was written late one night in a motel room when I came into town to try to find an apartment. Sitting at the motel bar, I received many helpful hints from my neighbors. Then an African-American graduate student came in and talked to the lady sitting next to me, a woman he knew. He, too, was seeking an apartment and asked her if she knew of one. She told him that there were no apartments in the city limits; that he would have to go outside of town to find a suitable apartment. After he left, she turned to me and gave me a list of nearby apartment complexes I might try. I was shocked, ashamed, and silent. Then I got into a conversation with the fraternity members who frequented the bar, and their girlfriends, who were sitting next to me as the young men played pool, that, given the time of night and the degree of sobriety, also gave me pause. The use of the forbidden “n” word was rife. I couldn’t sleep. This poem resulted.

In terms of qualitative research, perhaps the poem reveals the cowardly heart of the author, again dealing with outsider issues of researcher bias and of researcher fear. It is a poem not only about the participants as the researcher observed and interacted with them, but also about the researcher as participant. Put into poetic form, it can, within the limits of that form, chastise the researcher for her own racism and classism. The speaker of the poem was entering a new town, a new situation, a new milieu, and was being initiated to its rules in a very short but powerful lesson. During the semester I, the author-outsider, learned from my southern students about the “War of Northern aggression,” was told to watch from the airplane for the swath of destruction that Sherman had made, and learned to keep my mouth shut and my heart open when confronted with my own northern, Yankee, hubris. “You Yankees are more prejudiced than we are,” is how one of my graduate students put it. In its widest sense, the poem speaks of researcher complicity in the status quo.

You are re-reading the poems above. Are they research? They are based on school experience, one on a visit to a field site, one in the author’s workplace, the other while entering a new school site. They come from field notes – drafts of poems in notebooks –
taken at the time. The researcher has mindfulness that she is a researcher as well as a poet/artist. Are they poems of quality or, to paraphrase Maxine Greene, are they merely “poem-like”? They seek to be, as Aristotle said, “more philosophic and of graver import than history,” with an attempt to be universal, but whether they are of quality is the question. I, the artist, judge their quality as being mixed; you, the reader, have your opinion; what would the editor of a journal say? What would the head of a committee say? Do they have to have any background in the art of poetry in order to say?

At an Arts-Based Educational Research conference, the question of quality was asked over and over again in conversations over the lunch table as participants attended sessions where novice researchers showed diagrams of quilting squares, where professors afloat with social outrage showed their students’ artistic installations about such topics as high-stakes testing, and where highly trained artists – visual, literary, performing – demonstrated both artistic knowledge in the artistic domains and sophisticated theoretical knowledge of educational theory (deCosson, 2000; Rapp, 2000; Reynolds, 2000; Snowber, 2000; Sullivan, 2000; Wilson, deCosson, & Irwin, 2000). To observe heartfelt efforts by researchers with little or no background in the art being demonstrated was sometimes painful, especially to those who worked in, were trained in, knew, and loved the art being demonstrated. Is not the concept of quality and qualification to be taken seriously in arts-based research? Some suggested that a notion of “levels” be attached to the abstracts and proposals.

The question of the quality of the arts-based research is perhaps one for the critics and connoisseurs (Eisner, 1998) to answer – the artists themselves, the peer reviewers of the art world, those who have the power to move the domain. In the poetry world, many would be poets, but it is the domain itself and its tacit yet established rules of quality that move a person into being considered a poet by others (Piirto, 1998).

Often, people have been asked to make works of art in arts-based workshops. Participants have been asked to do sociodrama in drama workshops (Norris, 1997). Participants have been asked to cut out paper words from headlines and make poems in poetry workshops (Sullivan & Comnneiras, 2000). These have been examples of constructionist pedagogy and they have been fun – as personal creativity enhancement. The participants gained self-knowledge. They may have experienced a certain self-therapy. They may talk about and use examples from these experiential workshops long after they have attended them. To have everyone, especially fearful novices, be able to experience, through the body, the dance, the drama, the visual art, the poetry, is valuable. The difference between workshop and performance/display is vital here.

Respect for the domain is necessary for higher-level requirements. In defense of quality and qualifications of the artists and their arts, I have developed two thumbnail criteria for permitting students to do arts-based research for high-stakes projects. First, only those students who have at least an undergraduate minor (and preferably a major) in the domain in which they want to work are permitted to make art for qualitative research high-stakes products such as dissertations and master’s theses. But, in order to recognize persistence and quality, if a student has peer-reviewed exhibits, shows, and products, even if he or she hasn't formally studied the domain, I permit the project. This has happened in the case of a self-trained singer-songwriter who has produced many albums and CDs and who plays on the folk music circuit.

For example, in an inquiry seminar that requires a capstone master’s degree project, my students have produced an autobiographical reader’s theater piece
(written by all, edited by high school English teachers, and directed by a theater minor); a play (written and directed by a person with an undergraduate theater major); an étude for flute (written by a flute major music teacher). They used the domains in which they spent so much time, so many courses, as a medium of research and as an alternative means of demonstrating knowledge. As for the others who want to do so, I recommend that they first take at least 20 semester hours in the discipline in which they want to do the arts-based work, or demonstrate peer-review and a record of exhibits of their art. Then it is truly arts-based. Then the art itself and its ways of knowing are respected. That is my current answer to the issue of quality and qualification.

The arts have their own ways. The poet Jane Hirshfield said: "We seek in art the elusive intensity by which it knows" (Hirshfield, 1997, p. 5). In this quandary, the real epistemological questions must be dealt with. What does the very nature of poetry have to contribute to educational research? What do the very nature of visual art, dance, theater, film, music, have to contribute to educational research? Artist/teacher/researchers have immersed themselves both in their arts and in the study of pedagogy. This is a mammoth task and accomplishment. The result is automaticity within the artistic domain (Bloom, 1985; Ghiselin, 1952) and understanding within the education domain.

Hirshfield said: "Violinists practicing scales and dancers repeating the same movements over decades are not simply warming up or mechanically training their muscles. They are learning how to attend unswervingly, moment by moment, to themselves and their art" (1997, p. 5.) They are learning the way of knowing of the domain. They enter the field of education for their own reasons, but they bring with them the years of practice, the embodiment of the arts domain. They seek to utilize these ways of knowing and must learn the ways of expression in the field of education, while the field of education does not respect their domain by respecting its ways of knowing and of representation if the domain is not in the social studies.

To learn the essence of the domain's educational implications at the feet of artist/teachers who are seeking to synthesize the expression of their work in both domains – the domain of the art and the domain of education – is an exciting possibility. They will create new forms, new expressions, new ways of thinking that bridge domains. Let us welcome our artist-educators, as well as our self-exploring novices. But let us not confuse the quality of and their qualification for rendering, making marks, embodying, and distilled. Let us not confuse the seekers for the masters. Let us not confuse the poets for the poets.

References


QUALITY AND QUALIFICATIONS


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