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Arts-based Educational Research in Action in Vocational Education

1 Art as Experience.

This paper presents findings from a qualitative, empirical study which explores teachers' experiences of professional learning and collaborative and cooperative pedagogic practices, guided by key ideas and concepts in the theoretical framework underpinning arts-based educational research (ABER). Barone and Eisner 2012 draw attention to how ABER is essentially evocative. They argue that utilising the evocative expressive properties of an artistic, aesthetic medium is one of the primary ways in which arts based research contributes to human understanding. Through the presentation of extracts from a series of 10 case studies accompanied by evaluative commentaries and critical discussion, this paper presents accounts of the experiences of teachers attempting to improve literacy, language development and educational practice in Further Adult Vocational and Technical Education (FAVTE) contexts through their direct engagement ABER.

A total of 10 Case Study extracts provide practical examples of the power of social, collaborative, cooperative and aesthetic experience in igniting imagination, enhancing and increasing human learning, heightening human vitality in ways (Dewey, 1934, 2005) which evoke and deepen understanding of complex and enduring concepts, theories, issues in educational research in FAVTE contexts. For example, in ABER research, the author (in the context of this research study, the teacher-educator) creates and calls upon experiences that would otherwise not be available to practitioner-researchers working in the sector. In ABER various perspectives on the meaning of activities are not merely stated and explained but, as is the case of good art, expressed, lived, experienced, and enhanced. Within the literal and visual arts physical realities are recast into a “composed apparition”(Langer, 1957), a virtual whole ... moving away from an everyday world and temporarily entering a new and less familiar one. The apparition of the storied world itself. Engagement in a world beyond the range of our everyday experience becomes a heuristic device (a mental/affective shortcut) that speaks directly to familiar nearby concerns even as it raises questions about them. ABER employs vivid images, stories and descriptions of other perspectives of the real world to encourage and support the development of teachers' capacities and confidence in engaging in educational research and their development of scholarship. Barone and Eisner (2012) argue that ABER has the capacity to trigger empathy and bring us closer together in ways which, in the context of this research, enable practitioner-researchers in vocational education to rethink entrenched pedagogic practice, educational research and educational policy by challenging taken-for-granted assumptions (their own and those of others) in the light of experience.

ABER plays by rules that differ from those applied to more conventional educational research but it may be judged, firstly by its illuminating effects including its ability to reveal what had not been noticed previously. Secondly ABER has the ability to make vivid subtle but significant aspects of the educational world that the research addresses enabling the reader/viewer/listener to notice or become more aware of – to look where the researcher looked and to see what they saw through a constellation of factors expressed and represented in an artistic image. Thirdly, ABER has the capacity to generate questions which have not yet been asked. Next, ABER has the ability to focus incisively upon educationally salient issues and enduring questions where the material helps us to get to the heart of the matter, persuading readers of the educational importance of events portrayed. Finally, ABER's has the ability to make reference to phenomena outside of the research text which enables the reader/viewer/listener to make connections that had not been made before. ABER puts literary language to work by employing language designed to stimulate imaginative faculties which bring the reader into presence, invite them into the direct experience of another person/world of ideas. ABER does not tend to use direct and denotative language. Instead it employs the language of the:

- Evocative
- Expressive
- Contextual

- Connotative
- Vernacular

The methodology employed in this research is inductive beginning with individual cases in order to tentatively and incrementally move toward what may be more general. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring themes in data from 10 case studies and narrative accounts of practitioners engaged in the national Practitioner Research Programme (PRP) - a national programme of intensive research training for teachers of vocational education has been funded by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) in England for over 7 years. The PRP employs ABER in bringing complex ideas and concepts in education and educational research to life. The lived experiences of teachers conducting research in the PRP are used to illustrate the impact of ABER upon education practice. The research problem which provides the impetus for this study aims to address a number of research questions including, how best to support teachers in helping them to research and improve their practice through systematic, supported practitioner-research? How aesthetic experience and the arts can contribute to making complex ideas and concepts in educational research accessible and useful to teachers and education leaders working in FAVTE contexts? It also attempts to address the research question of, how intensive HE-supported intensive research training can contribute to increasing the FAVTE sector's capacity for self-improvement through systematic practitioner-research in ways which also meet the standards necessary to rise to the requirements of successful peer-review and publication? Finally, The question of, if/how the use of visual and other forms of art, can mediate the acquisition and development of teachers' understanding of ideas, theories, concepts in research and practice in vocational education is also explored.

Rethinking the relationship between teachers, researchers, students, education leaders and others and building their capacities to conduct research together for mutual benefit in the interests of the common good will be pivotal in the development of new pedagogical principles and practices and the opening up of places and spaces in which we can imagine new and inclusive educational futures for all learners. Our purpose in calling for a shift in existing educational research practices and horizons which frame the present differently enables teachers to help their learners to encounter existing social, intellectual and economic boundaries and obstacles to engagement in educational research not as shackles to past exclusion and inequities but as tension points condensing the past in order to see and open up new possibilities and relationships in educational research together.

This brings us to the question of what educational futures are desirable and for whom and sets us on a quest not so much for "what works" as to the question of "education for what?". In systems of education preoccupied with quick-fix responses to hyperactive policy processes conducted at social media speed, measures of educational quality based upon performance outputs have become conflated with educational standards. Questions of educational values and purpose are now displaced and reduced to blunt and crude measures of outputs which then masquerade as what counts as quality in education. In this context, it is wise to remember that a public that is inured to these fixed ways of seeing and thinking about what we mean by good education, may find it difficult to imagine how educational research and the improvement of educational practice might be done differently. If we accept that education should be respected and concerned with the protection and pursuit of the common good and that the right to quality education which fosters the intellectual, moral and social capacities of all learners including their abilities to work together and transform the world with empathy, compassion and care, then we need to create conditions in which their teachers can do the same. This will involve building the capacities of teachers to lay the foundations for flourishing, divergent futures of education as well as finding new approaches to teachers' professional learning and the improvement of research and practice informed by ABER. and aesthetic experience

A goal of this research is to illuminate the processes through which educational research, academic writing and scholarship develop and the contribution that practitioner-research informed by engagement in aesthetic experience and the arts can make to the improvement of educational research and educational practice. Set within the context of the PRP in England, this research draws upon

accounts of experience, 10 case studies, individual and focus group interviews, and evaluation data provided by teachers and education leaders participating in the PRP regarding how engagement with aesthetic experience and the arts can contribute to making complex ideas and concepts in educational research accessible and useful in the improvement of educational practice. Following Eisner (1993), the central argument here is that human experience and educational research can and should be represented through the wide variety of media at our disposal on the grounds that different forms of representation are both constrained and made possible by the form or medium we choose to use. Dewey (1934, 2005) points out that all human ‘experience is art in germ’, immediate before it is mediated, presentational before it is representational, sensuous before it is symbolic. Eisner (1993) foregrounds how experience is the bedrock upon which meaning is constructed therefore the meanings we construct to a large extent depend upon our ability to get in touch with the qualitative world we inhabit.

Barone and Eisner (2012) draw attention to how all forms of representation, the means through which the contents of our mind are shared with others, are both constrained and made possible by the forms of representation we choose to use. According to Eisner, the arts contribute to the growth of mind in a mind-making process and this involves connecting with the qualitative world of human experience. To create a form of experience that can be regarded as aesthetic, he argues, requires a mind that animates our imaginative capacities and evokes our ability, ‘to undergo emotionally pervaded experience ... forms of experience that are at once moving and touching, experiences of a consummatory nature, experiences that are treasured for their intrinsic value’ (Eisner 2002, p. xii). He notes how these are experiences which we can access when we attend to the world with an aesthetic frame of reference that interacts with forms of art that make such experience possible. He invites us to consider how the arts can serve as models of what educational aspiration and practice might be at their very best. When we are able to think about teaching as an artful undertaking and to conceive of learning as having aesthetic features, he contends, we can envision the design of an educational environment and the educational experiences which are encountered within that environment, as an artistic task. Works of art call attention to ontological aspects of human experience that we sometimes cannot or would prefer not to see or are too great to bear, or too extreme or too complex to be put easily into words. Different forms of understanding are promoted by different forms of representation which may or may not be related to reason and argument rather than intuition and experience. Beliefs about what constitutes legitimate research in education therefore, have enormous ramifications for the understanding, or misunderstanding, of human behaviour, social interaction and educational practice. When the tools we use to represent educational phenomena limit what is expressible or representational, a certain price is paid for the neglect of what has been omitted. This is one of the reasons why the tools we use to represent the world and the human condition within it need to be capable of making lived experience palpable. “We need to touch the souls of students as well as to be able to measure their sleeve length or hat size” (Barone and Eisner, 2012, p.4).

The research reported here takes the above works as starting points. It draws attention to how until relatively recently, the initial and continuing professional development of teachers of vocational education has rarely involved purposive engagement with the arts and humanities. Within the past few decades however, growing numbers of educational scholars and researchers involved in the initial and continuing professional development of teachers of vocational education have begun to explore the possibilities of artistic forms of understanding in the development of the professional learning of teachers of vocational education. A central aim of ABER is to enhance perspectives related to human activities which are educational in character. ABER involves the presence of certain aesthetic qualities or design elements of education which infuse both the process of educational inquiry and the research “text”. Most existing ABER has employed forms of art that are primarily of a literary nature rather than fine art, music, visual, or performing arts. ABER frames a research field that exists across and beyond disciplines and can also take the form of non-linguistic arts including visual and performing arts. The legitimacy of ABER has been questioned by those who have misunderstood this unique approach to educational enquiry. Much research in vocational education therefore has tended to be framed by an epistemology that seeks certainty and aims to produce findings that are meant to predict and control educational outcomes in ways which enable consumers of educational research to

formulate, prescribe, predict, inspect and control educational practice. Research in vocational education to date has also tended to pursue knowledge that is considered to be objective, valid and reliable by following the conventions and protocols of the natural sciences rather than research grounded in social phenomena and human experience.

Emerging Evidence

While it is too early to draw conclusions from this research, as it is still work-in-progress, emerging evidence from a preliminary thematic analysis of the narrative accounts of the experiences of 10 teachers of vocational education as they learn how to be (*savoir être*) teachers and practitioners researchers through the PRP, suggest that, using the expressive properties of an artistic medium is one of the primary ways in which ABER can contribute to the teaching and conduct of research and practice in vocational education by making theories, concepts, ideas and arguments surrounding methodology, methods, academic writing and scholarship in educational research more accessible to sector practitioners. This study is purposefully putting ABER to work through a spectrum of factors expressed and represented in artistic artefacts and aesthetic phenomena to explore if/how the use of visual and other forms of art, can mediate the acquisition and development of teachers' understanding of ideas, theories, concepts in educational research in order to improve educational practice across a range of FAVTE contexts.

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