The limits of Language: A Case Study of an Arts-Based Research Exploration

JANINKA GREENWOOD - UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY, CHRISTCHURCH

Abstract

This paper has a twofold focus. It explores some of the possibilities of arts-based research, in particular how drama processes might be used to variously research social issues, to research art-making, and to research teaching through drama. It also reports a drama encounter between Bangladeshi and Czech teachers. The encounter took place through a three day workshop exploring uses of art-based research in Prague. The need to work across languages and cultures prompted us to begin the workshop by working without language. This developed into a focus for an hoc methodological study that considered how such a cultural encounter might be considered in terms of the three research focuses identified above. This paper both reports the cross-cultural encounter and maps some of the different ways the small body of data generated by the encounter might be used to address a range of research questions. As such its approach is conceptual rather than the report of empirical evidence.

Biography

JANINKA GREENWOOD is Professor of Education at the University of Canterbury, and Director of the Research Lab for Creativity and Change. Her current research focuses on teacher education and the development of criticality and the processes of change. She has a long-standing engagement with the uses for arts for learning and with arts-based research, and strong interests in learning communities, cultural difference, post-colonialisms and practice-based research methodologies. She is a Co-Convener of the Emergent Researchers Network in EERA (European Educational Research Association). She has various projects with colleagues in Norway, Canada, Czech Republic, Germany, Thailand, Malaysia and Bangladesh as well as in New Zealand, and works with local and international students. Her publications can be found on http://www.canterbury.ac.nz/spark/Researcher.aspx?researcherid=2020212
Introduction: Purpose and focus

We live in a world filled with texts and images. Sometimes they so saturate our senses that we are unaware of them. Sometimes we actively engage with them to create dialogues of various kinds. We each also create our own texts and images, in speech, writing and bodily presence, sometimes overtly and intentionally explicit in their communication, sometimes weaving complex webs of sub-text, sometimes latently provocative as silence.

It is in this arena of complexity that arts-based research plays an important role. Many researchers have found that the more traditional tools of qualitative research are insufficient to explore the complexity of meanings, relations, attitudes and understandings. We may look at the long-established palette of interviews, observations, document analysis and see them like the old train in the image below: well-built but a little rusty and parked beside railways lines that are too definitively linear for the research journeys we want to take.

Arts-based research grows out of the search to find ways to sidestep the constraints of predominantly intellectual and verbal ways of exploring 'big questions', and to find new richer ways of situating and understanding knowledge. Art products and art processes allow us ways to explore and play with form and meaning in ways that can be more visceral and more interactive.

This paper explores one learning encounter and examines a range of ways arts-based tools might be used to research aspects of the encounter. In the process it maps some of the different ways the data might be analysed to address different kinds of focus. It also reports some of what might be called findings and indicates areas that might provoke further inquiry.

The encounter took place through a three day workshop exploring uses of art-based research in Prague. Although the majority of the participants were Czech and either teachers of drama or doctoral students, three Bangladeshi teachers joined the group. The Bangladeshi teachers spoke English and no Czech; few of the Czechs spoke much English, and I, the facilitator, spoke Czech and English. The need to work across languages and cultures prompted us to begin the workshop with a session where we worked without language, developing physical imagery and finding ways to negotiate and refine work without words. This developed into a focus for our methodological discussion and we looked at ways the study of such a cultural encounter might serve each of three primary research proposes that could be meaningful and useful to our group: using art to research social issues, to research art-making, to research teaching.
through drama. We developed a small body of data based on the first wordless session and a further body of work exploring the theme of “ma vlast” (my heritage/identity).

![Diagram showing three circles with the text: using art to research social issues, researching our work with drama, researching art and art-making.]

Figure 1. Three different purposes for using arts-based research.

**A brief meander through Europe before coming to the encounter**

The seminar took place at the end of a short trip to Europe by me and the Bangladeshi teachers. We had been to a conference in Portugal together, briefly visited Paris, with its cathedrals, Eiffel Tower and Louvre, and came to Prague, the city of my birth, for the workshop which I would lead. Like all tourists we succumbed, to varying degrees, to the addiction of taking photographs. My companions photographed everything: scenery, buildings, food, people and themselves in relation to everything they experienced. We returned with thousands of photographic images. Of particular interest to me were the interrelationships between us, the experiences we had (individually and together), the camera, and the layers of imagery that emerged. The images that follow are made from photographs taken by from our collective archive. With the permission of my colleagues, I created the collated images.

The composite image (Image 2) below illustrates a simple case of the shifting focus of perception. In the first photo the camera is outside, held by one of our group while the rest of us (in red café blankets) are seen enjoying our food. In the second photo, again captured by the one outside the frame, we see the process of capturing an image of the food. In the third photo the image of the food is being looked at in the camera and the outside photographer captures the act of looking. Our immediate experience included all these dimensions: being, deliberately looking, and being deliberately looked at. Our later reflections were mediated not only by our own experiential memories (visceral, emotional and mental) but also by the way the act of photographing had crystallised specific aspects of experiences and by way the collected images recalled the experience to us. All this then might be called data. As I will discuss later, such a composite and complex approach to data has important implications for arts-based research.

![Image 2. At a Czech café, 2014 (Personal Source).]

1 The individual photos were taken by Alam, Salahuddin, Rasheed and Author. After a time it is difficult to remember who took each photo and so we have all agreed to assign collective attribution.
Sometimes the act of looking is more important than what is being looked at. Sometimes we cannot see because of pressure associated with looking. I first remember looking at a print of the Mona Lisa when I was in my early teens and wondering, like others, why a woman who was supposed to be mysteriously beautiful had no eyebrows. Over the next five decades I have often looked at images of the painting, sometimes with careful attention. One time when I did not really look at the Mona Lisa was when I was in the Louvre during this journey. I think I did intend to. I saw the wall the painting was hung on. I saw the frame and an image of some kind inside it. Above all I saw the crowds of people and their cameras between me and the target I had come to view. In truth the crowds did not really block my view; they pushed and moved and everyone got a chance to spend time at the front barrier. Rather it was that my focus seemed to be on going to the Louvre, finding the hall with the Mona Lisa and shuffling through the mass of moving people to secure my own vantage post. The arrival point was neither a disappointment nor an enchantment. The painted image simply dissolved into the dense montage of other experiences. The recollection reminds me of the intense subjectivity and situatedness of attention and understanding.

It seems the others in our party might have had similar experiences. Image 3 below captures some of this fractured experience of encountering the Mona Lisa. One of our group did actually photograph the painting, at an angle that did it less justice than images that could be gleaned from the internet, but as a kind of evidence of personal presence. The second photo in the image captures the omnipresence of other people’s cameras and infers the presence of our own party’s camera as one of us turns spontaneously from looking at the painting to face the camera that will record his presence. In the third photo there is a deliberate pose that signals the satisfactory completion of an experience of discovery and witness.

Image 3. By the Mona Lisa, 2014 (Personal Source)

Not only is looking a complex matter; so is being seen. Image 4 hints at the complex ways viewpoints interplay to determine relationship and positionality. In the first photo in the collage my colleague is seen presenting an image of the school he has been researching. He is well outside the image. He is alive in the room; the image is frozen on a screen behind him. He can be seen clearly; the image is bleeding out. He has control; he points to the image signaling the significance of its aspects. In the second photo I point the camera at ceramics in the museum, but it is me who has become the subject. Moreover, my reflection is caught in the glass casing and I surround and even become part of what I am looking at. Yet this is the first time I have seen these objects and they are several thousand years older than me. On the other hand, my colleague has been an active participant in the research that is flattened on the wall behind him: he shares language, culture, history and religious belief with the research participants; he has walked with them, talked with them and shares love with them. Separately each of the photos reflect an aspect of how we might be seen and see ourselves as insiders or outsiders in a research project. As a composite image, with accompanying narratives, they suggest more complex and sliding positions. They hint that what is seen is not always the truth (although it may well be a truth). As I discuss later, this is important when we use arts-based processes to record and interpret experiences and outcomes.
Pausing to reflect and collect

One of the values of arts-based research is that it challenges us to acknowledge and sift through the complexity of experience. It prompts us to think again and perhaps differently about the nature of evidence, about the layers of forms and perceptions that we might consider as data. It prompts us to ask if objectivity is possible, and if it not, what might we consider in its place as a means of validating our exploration. It subverts facile positionality of ‘insider versus outsider’. Because it involves processes of making and remaking it allows us to play the hyphen (borrowing Fine’s metaphor, 1994, for re-conceptualising self and other).

Another value for those of us who are artists is that this is a form of research that uses our kinds of performative and written languages. It carries capacity to be aligned with our sense of artistic agency and with the questions we want to explore through our art. It also allows us to explore art itself.

Of course, the tools and strategies that distinguish art-based research from other forms of research have congruencies with other methodological approaches. Action research, and particularly in its participatory forms, acknowledges the blurred distinction between processes and products and is concerned with shifts in awareness. Reflective practice involves a constant re-positioning of gaze and an active deconstruction of the practitioner’s role. Photo voice asks participants to capture their ideas in images as well as in words. And, inevitably, art-based researchers can also impose their own methodological limitations on their work, sometimes developing new constricting orthodoxies.

So, in the end, perhaps it is simply the artist in us that draws us to arts-based research and that asserts the claim that our media are legitimate ways of exploring the world and creating knowledge.

And arriving finally at the workshop encounter

As explained above, the workshop was initiated as a teaching seminar. However, serendipitous presence of participants from two cultures who did not share the same language allowed us to work together in ways that developed a body of data that we could use to illustrate aspects of our conceptual exploration of methodology. The image below captures some of the moments of the shared work.

As a facilitator I was faced with the challenge of bringing the two cultural groups together actively and quickly, and without the need for turgidly polite translation. In research terms this intercultural composition of the group could be seen as giving rise to two interrelated questions: How is it possible for a teacher to operate within significant language differences? How is it possible for students to collaborate within language differences? And then as I began to shape a strategy, a third question emerged. How can the use of art(s) help?

After a brief physical encounter exercise using mirroring, I fell back on a wordless (for the participants) devising process I have used before. It begins with each individual working in their own space and devising short movement sequences in response to the prompts of home, leaving, memory, offered successively. After each separate movement
piece was explored, refined and remembered in the body, each individual was asked to create a physical narrative that integrated the three separate elements in some ways that was personally meaningful. Then I asked the participants to find a partner who they had not known before the workshop and, without speaking, to share their pieces, and from them to create a new joint performance narrative. After time given to explore and consolidate the new pieces of work, pairs were asked to find another pair and in a foursome to repeat the same wordless process. These works were then presented to the wider group (and inevitably captured in the ever-lurking mobile phone cameras).

We then talked about the experience, now using words and translating them. Participants variously commented on initial awkwardness of collaborating without language, points where a sense of flow began to develop, reluctance to surrender their own sequences, processes that emerged for contesting or yielding leadership, tendency to turn to clichés, bodily shifts from self-consciousness to relaxation, and desire to hear the verbal narrative behind one another’s stories.

We were approaching lunchtime so I then asked the participants to work over the lunch break in groups of their own choice and develop a short physical or photographic devised piece that, avoiding clichés, could exemplify the concept “ma vlast”. Ma Vlast is the title of a Smetana’s music that exalts in Czech heritage. We briefly explored what these words might mean in a contemporary context to the Czech participants in the room, and what Bangladeshi parallels might be. By now three further possible research questions were emerging in my mind. What can we learn about the cross-cultural interactions through art processes? How can we use arts to collect data? How can we interpret the data we have gathered?

The devised work was shared after lunch. And so were the images participants had taken of the morning’s work. We then talked about the work for some time, deconstructing images from viewers’ and makers’ perspectives and brainstorming themes that were emerging. This discussion, the images, and our memories of the work created a body of data that we used to inform our subsequent exploration of arts-based methodology.

The discussion that follows draws on that material and develops it to explore three
different purposes for arts-based methodology might be used with the case of this intercultural encounter. For the most part this discussion is conceptual and speculative, building on possibilities that arose out of the workshop rather than reporting explicit inquiries or findings.

**Using art to research social issues**

The first purpose is one that is frequently addressed (for example, Finley, 2005; Prosser, 2011; Donelan & O’Brien, 2008) in art-based approaches to the social sciences. In such cases researcher and participants use various art processes to investigate questions that address any of a broad spectrum of social issues. The intention is to open up different, and hopefully more empowering, options for exploring such issues and expressing perspectives.

In the case of this particular intercultural encounter, there might be questions that address the processes of communication, concepts of identity, or power relationships. Each focus would direct a slightly different field of inquiry. In terms of the questions I posed to myself and discussed earlier, about finding ways to overcome language barriers, the following sub-questions might direct the investigation. How can we talk to each other? How can we negotiate meaning and refine collective understandings? What assumptions do we make in negotiating meaning? What kind of power dynamics are operating in this negotiation? How can we facilitate better communication and better understandings?

In processing the data that arose it might also be useful to pose some further questions that could also be illuminated by the data. What concepts of identity do each of us bring? As individuals? And as groups? How do we perceive the Other? And whose needs should be/are being met?

Our data gathering tools for such a study could begin with those that have been described above: wordless improvisations, devised work, photos of the processes, and reflections about processes and products. It is worth noting perhaps that while the basic process for generating work was arts-based, the data is not limited to art forms. Reflective discussion prompted by work in the arts is also an important part of the investigative process.

Analysis might take a number of directions. In the workshop we began by identifying the themes that participants saw arising out of the work, and by seeking out and developing individual narratives. We also began to note differences in interpretation and what these might suggest about the degree to which communication was perceived as effective (noting that different interpretations did not necessarily preclude effective collaboration or reflective dialogue), where the locus of power lay and how it shifted, and what cultural understandings might be latent in the work and in the dialogues. On the last day of the workshop we brainstormed but did not fully explore other ways we might analyse our data within this same broad intention. We noted we could look at the silences that occurred, and at fractures that appeared in discourses. We might focus our analysis on identifying moment of change in content focus, in energy or in group dynamics. We might overlay our analysis with a theoretical framework such as *third space* (Greenwood, 2005), *other-ing* (Said, 1978), or *globalisation* (Albow & King, 1990). We might even decide to take the baseline work a little further by applying some of the analytic theatre strategies of Boal (1979) to explore and debate understandings of the problems that inhibited full and free participation, of what we might see as ideal solutions, and how we might initiate first steps.

The brainstorm is summarised in Figure 2 below.
Within the explicitly limited scope of our workshop, we did acquire some data that we could interpret and critically analyse. In terms of exploring interaction between the two cultural groups, it was evident that they did work together. Part of this may have come from innate courtesy, but it was also clear that both groups invested energy into the collaboration, were willing, in various ways, to explore the workshop’s concepts curiously and critically, and found some enjoyment in the process. Image 6 captures moments of the interactions. It shows active engagement and laughter, both during the work and while socialising in the evening.
It seemed that working physically facilitated interaction where language was an initial barrier and that working wordlessly reduced shyness and feelings of formality and awkwardness. Once both groups of participants had developed physical interaction and collaborated in physical meaning-making, they showed confidence in talking verbally, even arguing, and in informal as well as formal discussions would often call on the help of a translator to allow them to communicate at a level where they could more fully explore each other’s ideas.

**Researching art and art making**

Because all the Czech participants in the workshop were involved in some way in making theatre, be it on the stage or in the classroom, we also examined how art-making could itself be investigated by arts-based processes. It was an initial surprise to me that almost all the art workers came with the assumption that while art had the power to fire motivation and generate useful learning, artefacts themselves and the resultant learning should be investigated by more traditional research methods. Therefore, we brainstormed the methodological approaches we might take to researching the art-making itself. The resulting brainstorm is summarised in Figure 3.

![Figure 3. Brainstorm of using art to research art and art-making](image)

Here our questions centered around semiotics, the aesthetic and the realisation of makers’ intentions. Whereas in the last section the emphasis was on processes and effectiveness of communication, here the emphasis is on the work itself. How are we reading it? How do we react spontaneously? And after hearing the makers’ intentions? How do we navigate between makers’ intentions and our own reactions in interpreting the work? What traditions of performance and emotional resonances were evidenced in the work developed by the Bangladeshis? In the Czechs’ work? What kind of semiotics were evident when members of the two cultural groups worked together? We might also consider the work as in progress. How then might it be further developed? What latent texts could be teased out and explored? What attitudes or ideas might be stronger if they were expressed as sub-text rather than through overt words or actions?

The data we could use was initially the same as in the previous section, with similar tools for gathering it. However, it could also be useful to play further with the improvisations, particularly by inviting makers’ to refine their work as reaction to viewers’ readings. Art-
making is a cyclical layered process, and so in researching it, the enactive analysis of data can become data itself prompting further analysis and further data.

Analysis might again begin with participants’ reflections on the work, but now the lenses would reflect the questions about form and meaning suggested above. As we examine semiotics we might consider specific elements of drama such as language, movement, manipulation of time and space, narrative style, emergence of symbols. We might consider performative traditions and ways in which makers manoeuvre within them. We might examine emotional impact. In all these cases we step into the ambit of the aesthetic, a domain that is multi-faceted and overtly subjective (see Greenwood, 2011) and thus evasive of precise description. As researchers we might either seek to map some the complexity, as this paper is doing, or we might select a particular focus to track whilst still acknowledging it as a track within a highly complex conceptual framework.

For example, one track our data might invite us to explore is the different semiotics the two groups brought to art-making. While there was active collaboration from both sides there were also hints of difference. One of these was in the alignment of the performative body. Both the Czechs and the Bangladeshis had experience in performing on stage. Image 7 captures some of the ways their bodies expressed tension in motion, particularly in terms of spinal alignment. Perhaps this is the result of the countries’ different performative traditions as well as of different cultural concepts of personal space. If the work of devising was to progress further it might be interesting to develop exploration of this semiotic.

![Image 7. Holding the body (Personal Source)](image7)

There were also slight differences in choice of performative style. As is seen in Image 8, the Bangladeshi trio chose a naturalistic style to perform their concept of ‘ma vlast’: they sat and talked, in Bangla, about the affairs of the day as they took tea, just as they might in their respective home villages. Most of the Czechs tended towards abstraction, building symbolic image clusters that reflected their fragmented attitudes towards national pride, europeanisation, history and contemporary challenges. No doubt this difference in chosen style arose partly from the fact that the Bangladeshis were aware of themselves as visitors to the space, but might also have grown out of previous drama-making experiences. Whether or not to encourage further border crossing would be an issue to be considered, not only in terms of its aesthetic potential, but also terms of pedagogical goals.

![Image 8. Abstraction and naturalism (Personal Source)](image8)
Researching our work in drama pedagogy

Teaching with or through drama was the primary professional focus of most of the Czech participants in the workshop. It was therefore the third research purpose that we examined. To an extent this research space overlaps with the two examined previously: it is concerned with social behavior and learning, and also with examination of art and art-making processes. However, it brings a further specific focus: it looks at how teaching through strategies that involve one or more of the arts may lead to specific learning outcomes. Such outcomes might involve content knowledge in some field, art-making skills, or shifts in attitude or group dynamics. It might be useful sometimes to also investigate teachers’ learning as well as that of students. My own focus of inquiry, both during and since the workshop, was on how well the drama-based strategies I used were facilitating understanding of the concepts that were the subject matter work of the workshop, and how I might need to adjust what I was doing (and also how I might change it for future work). Figure 4 sums up the brainstorm. We recognized, however, that not only are learning and teaching closely interrelated but also that their power develops over time and so our exploration on the third day of the workshop was aspirational rather than fully grounded on work we had produced.

For the purposes of the workshop, as for this discussion, we retained the data base we had already developed but suggested it might be useful to add reflective journals (to record shifts over the passage of time) and to use further drama strategies, such as hot seating or Boal’s deconstructive use of physical imagery (Boal, 1979).

Accordingly, analysis could be in terms of specific content goals (knowledge and/or skills), increases in active engagement and/or self-concept, or in terms of particular theories of learning, such those of Zygotsky, Brunner, Freire, or Heathcote.

My own evaluation of our work together, brief though it was, is impressionistic rather than analytical. I found that I could indeed engage two groups who were significantly divided by language and also by cultural experience by working from a physical and creative basis rather than from a discursive one.

I also found, perhaps not for the first time, that content and method were unescapably linked. Each of us drew something different from the learning encounter. We performed some collective understandings of that individual learning by developing and sharing physical improvisations and playing with the resulting dialogues. Thus each of our

Figure 4. Brainstorm of using art to research drama pedagogy
learning experiences was woven with both personal and collective threads. Like our experiences as academic tourists in Europe, what we learned by working together over the three days was multi-layered, both subjective and objective, and resistant to exact identification.

Because of this complexity, I could not with any claim to certainty identify how each of the two cultural groups (who unsurprisingly reviewed the evolving process among themselves as well as openly sharing reflections within the workshop) interpreted the intercultural engagement. The work that was presented and our recordings of it captured only fragments of the total experience. In addition it perhaps further fractured the experience. The work done by makers and viewers (and in arts-based investigation both viewers and makers are called on to work) was inescapably situated not only in expectations created by past experiences and in received semiotic codes, but also in the consensual decisions of each group. Although the choices made in such work are not random, there is an element of seizing fortuitous opportunities, and so of capturing fluid emotions or conceptualisations ‘on the hoof’, and of working with the edges of understanding rather than with considered conclusions. Just as the image At a Czech café captured a montage of being, deliberately looking and being deliberately looked at, so too the participants in the workshop operated on similar interwoven planes. Makers worked to recognise their feelings and thoughts, focus their awareness and select ways to represent them knowing that their viewers would be interpreting what they saw. Viewers tried to simultaneously enjoy the work they viewed and critically reflect on and interpret what they saw, knowing that the feedback they gave would create a further layer of marks and associated meanings over the work.

Learning through drama, therefore, while it may lead to specific planned and even measurably learning outcomes, may also lead to more complex and less definable learning. Along with other practitioners (for example Gallagher, 2010; Heathcote &Bolton, 1995; O’Neill, 1995; Schonmann, 2016) I might argue that it is these fluid visceral chameleonic elements of learning that make teaching through drama so interesting and valuable.

So what? Beyond the limits of language

As I write this paper I find that the title assumes a growing number of dimensions. Initially it was prompted by the fact that the people I worked with in the three day seminar were divided by language, and that I sought a way to break through that limitation. Secondly it became a description of the way we began our work: finding a physically creative base that could both integrate the group as whole and provide a common experiential base for the theoretical concepts we were to explore.

As I explored the photographs that had been taken I began to appreciate how much they captured of the various flows of energy and the moments of hesitation, of the shifts in mood and emotion, and of the fluid dynamics of leadership. I also began to appreciate the complexity of the aesthetic and cognitive meanings embedded in the practical work. I found myself straining to reflect that complexity in the words and images I have used in writing. Some of that complexity, I hope, is expressed in this paper. Some, however, is beyond language and the ways discursive language mediates our experience. Playing with what lies beyond is the role of art.

So return to my beginning. We live in a word filled with texts and images. We live also with visceral, kinesthetic and emotional experience. Somehow we navigate our ways through this multiplicity of input and make shifting, perhaps growing, sense of it. To research that complexity – if we want - we need a methodological approach that engages with the complexity. As artists and as teachers through art, we can turn to the tools we already use for making our art and use them to explicitly research our experience.
References


