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Cut It Up and Put It Back Together: Cut-up and Collage as Tools to Overcome Academic Deadlock

Anna Bager-Elsborg, Aarhus University, Denmark

Daphne Loads, University of Edinburgh, UK

ABSTRACT

This 'On the Horizon' paper concerns creativity in the research process as a way to overcome unhelpful pre-understandings and 'false clarity'. This paper gives an idea of how we can allow research to be as complex and messy as reality. Cut-up and collage are introduced and suggested as a way of letting go of rational analysis and allowing subconscious observations to come forward. The research example is from a project examining the disciplinary characteristics of academic law in a research intensive university.

Keywords: messiness; teaching; collage; creative research methods

Introduction

The process of research is messy. It is no secret that arriving at interesting, relevant or even ground-breaking conclusions is rarely a product of a linear process. "[R]esearch is frequently not carefully planned in advance and conducted according to set procedures, but often centres on compromises, short-cuts, hunches and serendipitous occurrences." (Walford, 2001, p. 1-2). Hence, the messiness is a well-known condition in research. However, the ambiguity and the messiness are not easy to work with or to present to others. In the trying to organise and understand the social world we are in danger of creating, what McArthur calls, 'a false clarity'. That is, we get stuck with too simple ideas, "applying tame descriptions to wicked concepts and adopting tame methods to explore wicked things" (McArthur, 2012, p. 421). This was the case for the first author of this paper. After conducting interviews with a number of academic lawyers, she experienced how difficult it was to allow new questions to come forward than the ones she first identified when she did the interviews. Hence, her thinking became rigid in the way that she, from an early point, had created the narrative of her analysis. Emerging ideas were fitted in to the story she had already observed. However, without a thorough analysis to substantiate the case it just hindered the project in moving forward. Therefore, a creative research approach was introduced as a way out of this deadlock position. The aim of this change of approach was to take up Eisner's (1997) challenge to acknowledge and explore "the variety of ways through which our experience is coded.... the ways in which the transformation of experience from the personal to the public can occur...(and) what we can learn from each of these transformations (and) exploring the edges and reexamining the meaning of research" (p. 7).

The question of this paper is *how can non-traditional and creative research methods help a researcher overcome deadlock situations?*

This question is answered by a description of how cut-up and collage as a research method helped one of the authors to gain access to ideas and to move her research process forward. As the paper is written mainly as a process description with a theoretical starting point most of the paper is written in the first person (referring to the first author). First, cut-up and collage are introduced and explained. Secondly, the paper addresses the challenges faced in the pre-analysis phase of a PhD project. Thirdly, examples from work with collage are given.

Cut-up and collage as a method

Cut-up is the technique of taking a page of text, cutting it into pieces and rearranging the words and phrases to make meaningful new combinations. Collage creates artefacts by sticking together heterogeneous images, words, objects and materials that have been removed from their original context. Cut-up and collage are familiar practices within the tradition of arts-based research, which takes the beliefs, sensibilities, materials and processes usually associated with the creative and expressive arts and puts them to work in research projects (Leavy, 2009). Both have been used in all aspects of research, in data collection or creation, in analysis and interpretation and in the representation of findings. (See, for example, Chilton & Scotti, 2014; Kay, 2013; Loads, 2010).

So why use cut-up and collage in research? First of all, they are technically undemanding activities, allowing research informants and researchers to produce sophisticated and striking artefacts without the requirement for any specialised artistic skills. Importantly, cutting and sticking are embodied activities. So much of the work we do as academics is disembodied: we try to 'cut through'

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confusion, 'grasp' ideas and create 'cohesion.' It can be a relief physically to cut paper, grasp fragments and glue things together. Cut-up and collage produces unexpected juxtapositions that can lead to insight, and that allow for subconscious thoughts to come through. They help the researcher to reflect on connections and questions in ways that draw on intuition and metaphor, unsettling the linearity of written records (Vaughan, 2005). Collages can increase methodological transparency as they "reflect, reveal and document the process of their own creation" (Vaughan, 2005, p. 42). Most excitingly, they open up possibilities for challenging hegemony: the meanings they represent are provisional, multiple and situated, offering the possibility of an epistemology that "values multiple distinctive understandings generated by different cultures and that deliberately incorporates non-dominant modes of knowing and knowledge systems" (Vaughan, 2005).

Cut-up and collage owe some of their power to associations with the work they do in the world beyond research. They bring to mind the way Picasso's collages woke us up to the strangeness of the world and challenged artistic conventions or how Burrough's (1961; 1962; 1964) cut-up novels introduced an element of chance into creative writing, raising questions about the roles of both writer and reader.

It is important to remember that these creative, lively methods also bring with them uncomfortable associations that can actually get in the way of research work. Just as some found Burrough's methods too shocking, leaving them "drenched in puzzled silence" (Walters, 1962 cited in Cran, 2013), so academic colleagues tutored in academic disciplines with firm precepts for data handling may find it difficult to take seriously a research method that celebrates ambiguity, tolerates uncertainty and avoids propositional language. Others may believe that cutting and sticking belong in the kindergarten or the therapy room and have no place in academic research. It is important to explain the rationale for these methods, especially to "those who sail by other stars" (Eisner, 1997). The following paragraph will show how a researcher with no former experience of the method found her way through cut-up and collage.

Process and insights

This early-stage research project was a case study of a department of law in a research intensive university. The data for the research project consisted of in-depth interviews with nine academic lawyers. The purpose of the project was to understand why academic lawyers teach how they teach based on their disciplinary affiliation and the social and cultural conventions of their department¹.

After conducting and reading through interviews the same stories kept coming back and new questions became difficult to ask. Every time I read through my interviews I read the same story and I had the feeling that I had fallen in love with this story already when I conducted the interviews. The story was about a dedicated teacher who structured her material and presented it clearly in her teaching. I felt stuck in the process because I could neither create the relevant distance to my interviews to compare them across nor go deep enough to understand the dilemmas the teachers told me about. I kept referring their stories without being able to analyse their meaning.

In this stage I sought advice from a senior colleague (second author of this paper) who suggested the use of drawings to focus my thinking. Thus, I started to draw elements from my interviews – metaphors and pictures used by interview persons, pictures of students and other elements that came to my mind as I was drawing. I made one drawing of the content of my interviews and one drawing about my PhD process. I have never worked with drawings or visual presentations before so the drawings were very simple and consisted mostly of matchstick people. However, the final result underlined the fact that my head was full of stories and that I had trouble choosing which were the most relevant or interesting.

As a part of every analysis is to discard some information and scrutinise other, my lack of ability to focus became a problem for choosing a way to approach my analysis. Hence, my colleague's advice was to free myself from the need to tell one coherent story and try to cut things up. After being introduced to cut-up and collage both drawings were cut into pieces so each bit only had one story to tell. My drawings kept me close to my data but I could also have chosen policy documents (e.g. study board regulations from law), single quotes or statements or even tables of statistical results.

I filled the desk with little tubes of glitter, colours, a free M&S Home section Magazine and allowed myself to let go of structure and expectations and have fun for half an hour. A really important thing was not to think too much about where and why I placed things as I did but just to have confidence that something would come out of it. I picked out the things I liked from the stack and glued them on to the piece of paper. It was not systematic in any ways. I flicked through the pages of the magazines and stopped if anything reminded me of something I was told or gave me the feeling of law as discipline. Figure 1 shows the final result.

¹ The project is not yet published. Questions regarding the project can be addressed to first author.



Figure 1. A picture of the collage

There was no strategy of analysis other than to have a look at my creation and to see which ideas and associations that brought to mind. As the picture shows a lot is going on in the collage. It is not possible to go into every part but the following paragraph will outline a couple of insights.

- The apparent contradiction between the representation of Law as something clean, simple and beautiful (right hand upper corner) and the messiness of the teaching (middle). I created the right hand upper corner as a representation of the discipline as it has been described to me: Law as a well-ordered system with internal logic and a simple mathematical beauty. In contrast the teacher is teaching in the middle of a wilderness. The teacher is carrying a heavy load and his feet are planted in a chaos of different patterns, growth and messiness. This contradiction I had not noticed before but it is a consistent element in the data.
- The students were portrayed (in the upper left hand corner) in the lecture hall with their Mac computers. Teachers told me how students were well-dressed and all had their computers in front of them. There is also a chair as teachers told me that learning law depends on your ability to sit on a chair for a very long time. Above the students is an unsolved Sudoku. The Sudoku is also represented in the discipline corner as a picture of the system logic of the discipline. As students they are still trying to learn how to solve the Sudoku.
- If you take a close look you will find the word 'HOME' in the collage. The four letters are scattered around the page. It is a coincidence that I had the word HOME – it came from the front page of the free magazine I picked up in M&S but it now tells a story about academics being 'at home' in their discipline. There was a feeling of safety and comfort when the academic lawyers told me about their discipline. It was very clear to them what it consisted of. Even their offices had a strong home-like feeling.

In summary, the insights were not completely new. They lingered in the back of my mind but became clearer and more nuanced throughout the selection process. In the end I had only chosen five out of over 20 pieces of my drawing. The cut-up and especially the collage had drawn my attention to contradictions and areas of doubt and uncertainty in the data and in that way helped me make the familiar strange. As one of my problems was that I had difficulties looking across interviews and to choose where to focus the collage gave me some hints on where to focus my attention.

Reflections and next step

It was the first time I had worked with creative research processes and at first I was sceptical as I am used to being very structured in the ways I approach my analyses. However, I came to a point in my PhD project where I felt I did not do my interviews justice as I kept seeing the same story without acknowledging the diversity and nuances across persons and within stories. In the end, the half hour of creativity gave me some ideas and also sparked some energy into a deadlock situation.

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The next step was to examine these new insights and consider how they could help to move the research process forward. As a consequence I started to look for discrepancies in the interview persons' description of their practices. I found that it was possible to identify the incongruence between the 'wilderness' and the simplicity of the discipline in the interview transcripts and these text parts were coded. Furthermore, my attention was drawn to how teachers perceive of their students as persons who have not yet discovered the disciplinary clarity and how it affects the way they talk about teaching. This made me develop several codes to capture the movement from novice to expert and the description of students. The final analysis of the data is on-going.

Conclusion

The research process is rarely as straightforward as presented in journal articles. It is messy and full of preconceptions and sticky ideas and sometimes the researcher needs help to move beyond the obvious. Cutting to pieces and putting back together is one way of helping the researcher to let subconscious observations come forward as it did in this case.

This paper has illustrated how creative research methods can help ideas to flow by allowing research to be out of control. In common with other arts-based methods, cut-up and collage are particularly valuable in those research projects that call for emotional as well as cognitive engagement, attention to process and openness to multiple meanings (Leavy, 2009). None of the things in this process are creatively demanding and the methods are widely applicable. However, it takes a little bit of courage to sit down with a tube of glitter and call it research.

Biography

Anna Bager-Elsborg (M.Sc. Political Science) is a PhD student at Centre for Teaching and Learning, School of Business and Social Sciences, Aarhus University. Anna's PhD project is about lectures' attitudes towards teaching in academic law and business management. During spring 2015 she was visiting fellow at the Institute for Academic Development, University of Edinburgh. abager@au.dk

Dr. Daphne Loads is a member of the Learning and Teaching team at the Institute for Academic Development at the University of Edinburgh, where her responsibilities include support and development for academic staff who teach. Daphne is currently researching arts-enriched professional development. daphne.loads@ed.ac.uk

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