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Arts-Based Education Research in the UK and Ireland: potentialities and challenges

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Background

BERA is inaugurating an Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER) SIG for the first time in 2010. Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are presently in the process of developing an All-Ireland ABER community. Prior to these developments, there have been various attempts to gather a momentum around arts-based research, yet arts-based researcher communities have tended to remain fragmented, pocketed within their own disciplines and with no overarching sense of purpose or community. Elsewhere, especially in North America, there has been a much longer and stronger tradition associated with ABER. Although also riven by differences in forms of knowledge and representation, and fighting for legitimization, the definitional power of the N. American traditions of ABER is pervasive. There are identifiable differences and tensions that are evident between the North American perspectives and traditions of ABER and those which seem to be incipient to the UK and Ireland. These issues and any tensions are worth addressing as the BERA ABER SIG begins to gather various ABER troupes and tribes under its umbrella and open discussions on the nature, purposes, practices and future developments of ABER at this embryonic stage of development.

Research Questions

Arts-based educational research (ABER) could be viewed as being at a pre-paradigmatic cross-roads with all the potentialities and tensions that such positioning brings. Although issues of legitimization still remain in relation to the wider educational research community, there can be no assumptions of homogeneity within the international ABER community itself. Rather, various established and less-established tribes and troupes can be identified giving rise to a variety of identifiers that arts-based researchers use to define and describe their work (eg. arts-informed research; arts-based educational research; artistic research; artful inquiry; arts practice as research; *art/tography*; creative inquiry, etc.). Each tribe or troupe, then, has its own emphasis, each its own territory (more or less clearly mapped), its own identity(ies) and each its own community of researchers. Occasionally we reach out and meet transiently through national and international conferences but internal, underlying tensions are rarely addressed.

This symposium paper will provide an opening gambit through which to begin creative conversations around three potential areas of identity confusion stretching across the ABER community and which may aid the development of a sense of community in the UK and Ireland. These issues are: (i) whether the arts are seen predominantly as means of representing research outcomes rather than as means to 'sources of data'; (ii) whether arts research is viewed as being appropriated to the social sciences; (iii) whether 'arts practice as research must be defended', through which the arts themselves must retain integrity.

The symposium intends to engage participants in opening discussions that will illustrate the importance of developing a critically respectful community of practice that will embrace the myriad ways in which the different artistic genres (fictive, narrative, poetry, drama, dance, music and visual art), separately and together, can methodologically complement and augment educational research.

Frame

I think we are in a position to improve on the description of ABER as (a) legitimate research method(s). ABER is neither a method, nor an anti-method. It does not oppose the use of tried and true procedures for minimizing known forms of error. Nor does it call for research that is careless or haphazard. It is a tradition of inquiry (a relatively new one, though it draws from one of

the oldest domains of human understanding, the arts) and has the potential to further extend the boundaries of more established qualitative research traditions.

Research findings

As we attempt to build a community through the BERA ABER SIG we need to begin by:

- De/re-colonising arts modalities
- Recognising ABER as 'risky business'
- Celebrating interdisciplinarity
- Collaborating across the methodologies
- Shattering artistic snobbery within ABER
- 'Making data' or data representation?
- Centralising the importance of 'disciplined subjectivity'
- Constantly examining criteria for ABER and questions concerning external validity
- Recognise limitations as well as ABER's potential to significantly enhance.... ..ie we don't want ABER easily dismissed at the borderlands, as neither good art nor good research.