# *Artistic Approaches to Research*[1]

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Ted Chamberlin, a professor of English and comparative literature at the University of Toronto, once said that universities are about the telling of stories. The old stories, he says, we call *teaching*, and we call the new stories *research*. The focus of this address is on the new stories—our research.

I will talk about general issues that arise when I think about research as story—about the kinds of audiences that might be attracted to our research stories, and about ways that our stories might be made more compelling to the audiences that we seek to reach. In doing so, I discuss the view of others who are grappling with different forms of research presentation, and I will punctuate my remarks with some challenges for you, as the audience, to take up as we make our way through the session. As musicians and artists and researchers, we will weave our way in and out of issues related to form and audience—issues we constantly deal with in our artistic work—and hence, the title of this address.

## Why Tell Stories? And to Whom?

When I think about research as story, a number of questions immediately arise. What kinds of stories are best to tell? Who tells the stories? How are the stories told? Who listens to the stories? Which stories are told, and re-told, and which stories are forgotten? Which stories do not get told? Just as there are both good and bad examples of academic research and academic writing, there are also both good and bad examples of stories. Not all stories are compelling ones, nor are all stories worth telling. Nevertheless, I am convinced that thinking of research as story can lead us to create text that has more value than many traditional forms of academic writing, in both quantitative and qualitative paradigms. I am also convinced that we should be telling our stories to more people, sharing our work with audiences far beyond those who live and work in the academy. For if our work is important—and I believe that it is—then it ought to be accessible not only to colleagues, but also to teachers, parents, policy makers, taxi drivers, grocery clerks, and perhaps even the children that many of us make the subjects of our research. Of course, making our research stories accessible to audiences as diverse as these means that our stories might have to take several forms, a point that I will return to later.

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For now, let me turn to comments that others have made about academic writing. I was brought up short when I first read a statement made by John Kenneth Galbraith who claimed that 'There are a significant number of learned men and women who hold that any successful effort to make ideas lively, intelligible, and interesting is a manifestation of deficient scholarship. This is the fortress behind which the minimally coherent regularly find refuge'. Indeed, many of you know that it can be much more difficult to explain our research in a lively and interesting fashion, than to hide behind a jargon-laden discourse so dense that only those who understand the jargon can have access to the ideas thus described. When I think, for example, about the kind of writing that I did for my doctoral dissertation some 15 years ago, I wonder who it was that I was trying to convince about the value of the work. Or perhaps more to the point, who I was trying to convince that I was worthy of the title 'researcher'? One thing is certain: the writing of my dissertation—the stories I told—were not written for the teachers of music, the very people who should have been most interested in the results that I had found. Indeed, it was nearly a decade later before I finally wrote up my dissertation research in a way that appealed to teachers, in a way that made a difference in the world. And the writing up of this research—which, incidentally, made some of the faculty members on my tenure review committee frown and speak of my work as 'lacking scholarship'—is a story: with anecdotes, samples of children's work, photographs. Stories of living and learning. I daresay, in fact, that it is an artistic work (Upitis, 1990, 1992).

Of course, I am not the only one who has come to write in ways that are more compelling than the traditional paradigms. I offer a quote from Laurel Richardson, a qualitative researcher in the United States who has been reading and conducting research for over three decades. She writes:

> I have a confession to make. For 30 years, I have yawned my way through numerous supposedly exemplary qualitative studies. Countless numbers of texts have I abandoned half read, half scanned. I'll order a new book with great anticipation—the topic is one I'm interested in, the author is someone I want to read—only to find the text boring. Recently I have been 'coming out' to colleagues and students about my secret displeasure with much of qualitative writing, only to find a community of like-minded discontents … our empire is (partially) unclothed. (Richardson, 1997, p. 87)

Richardson further claims that one of the gifts of poststructuralism is that it 'directs us to understand ourselves … as persons writing from particular perspectives at specific times; and … it frees us from trying to write a single text in which everything is said to everyone' (p. 89).[2] One of the issues we will explore is not only multiple texts, but multiple representational forms—aural (and oral), visual, written, acted, and so on.

Let's start with text for taxi drivers. Taxi drivers—like bartenders—are an interesting lot. Many are keen observers and critics of human behaviour. Some have graduate degrees. Some have never completed public schooling. Many have children. And in my experience, many have firm ideas about how society should change. Taxi drivers and bartenders pay taxes. They have something to say about education, and about educational research.

I'm going to present you with a claim, and a challenge. After you've had a few minutes to work out some answers to the challenge, and to talk them over with a neighbour, we'll hear a sample of your ideas. And maybe you can try them out on the taxi drivers that drive you back to the station at the end of this conference.

*A claim ...*

> If you can't tell a taxi driver or a check-out clerk at the grocery store about your research, then you haven't developed a way to tell your story so that your work will make a difference.

*... and a challenge:*

> Can you describe your research in one or two sentences? What you do and why it matters?

Earlier I quoted a statement by Laurel Richardson. I turn now to her description of what she terms 'experimental representations' (1997, p. 91), that is, 'genres that deploy literary devices to re-create lived experience and evoke emotional responses' (1994, p. 521). She describes several such experimental representations, including (a) narrative of the self, (b) poetic representations, and (c) ethnographic drama. By 'narrative of the self' she refers to

> highly personalized, revealing text in which an author tells stories about his or her own lived experience. Using dramatic recall, strong metaphors, images, characters, unusual phrasings, puns, subtexts, and allusions, the writer constructs a sequence of events, a 'plot', holding back on interpretation asking the reader to 'relive' the events emotionally with the writer ... Accuracy is not the issue; rather, narratives of the self seek to meet literary criteria of coherence, verisimilitude, and interest. (1994, p. 521)

This is not unlike the form that I chose to report my dissertation nearly a decade after carrying out the work.

I turn now to poetic representation, a form used by Richardson herself. Poetic representations can be used to write up interviews, honouring the 'speaker's pauses, repetitions, alliterations, narrative strategies, rhythms, and so on. Poetry may actually better represent the speaker than the practice of quoting snippets in prose' (Richardson, 1994, p. 222). And finally, constructing ethnographic drama blends realist, fictional, and poetic techniques, combining written and oral texts. There are other forms described by Richardson (1994) and other researchers like Thomas Barone—a colleague of Maxine Greene and Elliott Eisner—but you probably get the picture.

Before we all dash off to write stories, poems, and dramatic representations of research data, I should hasten to add that Richardson cautions that 'the freedom to experiment with textual form ... does not guarantee a better product ... the work is harder ... the guarantees are fewer. There's a lot more to think about' (1997, p. 93). I agree with Richardson's claims. But I think that experimenting not only with text, but with forms—including poetry, dance, drama, visually compelling representations, and sound—is going to be of vital importance as the calls for accountability for educational research grow louder with each passing day. And we, as musicians and artists and researchers, are well-suited to take up the call. In fact, for a recent call for accountability that comes from the Office of Standards in Education in this country, I would direct you to view the work of Tooley and Darby (1998), who claim that the 'question of what we as educational researchers ... get up to is important ... [the public] pays for educational research, through taxation' (p. 7), followed by a scathing examination of the value and impact of educational research in England.[3] Incidentally, the opening paragraph of their report reads

> At the University's Christmas party, a porter told one of the researchers about his unsatisfactory schooling experiences in Manchester. 'But', he said, 'that's what you educational researchers get up to, isn't it, trying to make schools better places for people like me?' Some pleasantries were muttered, and the subject changed to more festive things. This report is an attempt to give a more honest answer. (p. 7)

So what do we conclude at this point? Simply, I think, that we can—and should—tell our stories in a number of ways—through lively and coherent language that avoids the kind of jargon that distances the reader from the writer (sometimes on purpose), through narrative, through poetry, through dramatic presentations, through a combination of words and sounds and images. Indeed, as web-based publishing grows, artists and musicians will be further able to report their research in ways that capture and engage the imagination through the sights and sounds delivered on the computer screen.

Let me give you an example of this, a book by Ricki Goldman-Segall that is linked to an interactive web site. The book is called *Points of View: Children's Thinking*, and was published in 1998 by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. The web site can be found at *http://www.pointsofviewing.com*. There are three pages that I have chosen to share. The first is of a young student, called Josh, who, for me, epitomises how lively a tiny video clip can be—how a moving picture is worth at least a thousand words, a thousand-fold (p. 165). The second is a sample of correspondence that has been posted to another page. And the third shows how a child's poem about lost rain forests makes its way into the research—an artistic rendering of her views (p. 217), not unlike the rather more sophisticated work of Laurel Richardson.

## Who Should Hear Our Stories?

The discussion thus far has concentrated primarily on experimenting with forms of story-telling that push the boundaries of traditional research reporting. I would now like to push the boundaries of audience. It is not only our colleagues and taxi drivers who need to hear about our work, but policy makers, government officials, journalists, parents, and the widely varied compendium of people that we call 'the general public'. Again, I'll issue a claim and a challenge.

> *A claim ...*
>
> In order to receive sustained funding for research, the need to convince governments, policy makers, and the public of the value of our work will only grow.
>
> *... and a challenge:*
>
> Can you think of new audiences to reach? And how to reach them?

A national meeting was held in November of 1998 involving 65 researchers and numerous elected government officials, along with staff from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), one of several federal granting agencies in Canada that funds the kind of research that is reported at conferences like these. At the meeting, the message was clear: researchers in the social sciences and humanities need to disseminate their research to the public. In his address, SSHRC President Marc Renaud coined the phrase 'get public or perish', and in so doing, urged

researchers to report their work in jargon-free ways to the general public in order to gain public awareness and support for the important research that we undertake.

What are some strategies that will bring research into the public domain? Strategies that involve sharing research results enthusiastically, convincingly, and with integrity? I will use my own current research project as an example of how research stories might be told.

The *Teachers as Artists* research project is about finding sustainable and effective ways bringing the arts to schools. The entire teaching and administrative staff in a small urban school take part in arts workshops, interact with artists-in-residence, and pursue individual projects in the arts. Every year, a number of workshops are offered by local artists, primarily in music (e.g. guitar, piano) and the visual arts (e.g. print-making, photography, carving). The programme is designed to take advantage of community strengths in the arts, bringing together teachers and local artists with the aim of increasing artistic sensibilities of teachers, ultimately strengthening arts education in elementary classrooms. Results attest to the personal and professional transformation of individual teachers. There is also evidence of the emergence of arts advocacy within the community.

Over the past two years, this research has been reported at six national and international academic conferences: the National Arts Education Symposium, Sydney, Nova Scotia, in July 1997; the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, in April 1998; the Canadian Society for Studies in Education, Ottawa, in May 1998; the International Society for Music Education, Pretoria, South Africa, in July 1998; the National Arts Symposium, Victoria, in July 1998; and the Research in Music Education Conference in Exeter, UK, in April, 1999 (that would be this conference!). Papers for peer-reviewed journals and conference proceedings have been prepared in the 'usual' ways—it is vitally important to understand that 'getting public' does not mean that more traditional forms of research dissemination are displaced—nor that all forms of traditional reporting are displaced by the experimental representations that Richardson (1994, 1997) so aptly describes.

But beyond all of this, one of our commitments in this research was to seek a broad audience for dissemination of findings. We have been able to accomplish this. Thus far, our research results have been reported to the general public in local newspapers, on the local (Ontario Morning) and national (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) public radio stations, and are featured in the promotional material for the Queen's University Capital Campaign. An exhibition of children's art from the research school was mounted in a major local shopping mall. Parents of children in the school learn about the research through the school newsletter, through special arts opportunities for their children, and through the display of students' work. As a result of the visibility of the project, we were invited to submit text for an entire issue of a research newsletter designed for teachers and distributed to all of our associate schools. Also, a short video presentation designed for workshop, conference and other presentations was created—a video that our local Member of Parliament has arranged to have broadcast on several television documentaries. And, our local MP has also arranged for a 'householder'—a regular mailing that goes to 40,000 households in our area—to feature our research. The latter two examples are a direct result of the SSHRC meeting held in Ottawa in November 1998.

Following the meetings with the MPs in November of 1998, the SSHRC President also implored researchers to write letters in praise of a recent and much welcomed increase in SSHRC funding announced by the federal Minister of Finance, Paul Martin. I did so—in fact, I wrote a half dozen such letters, with copies to the SSHRC president.

Upon receiving the copies of those letters, I received a warm note of thanks from the SSHRC Government Relations Officer, stating that I was one of few that had followed through with letters, ending his communication with this rather telling note of caution: 'We are wondering if we haven't seriously underestimated the time and resources that the group has to devote to this kind of promotion activity' (9 April 1999, J. Charron, Government Relations Officer, SSHRC). Doing this kind of story-telling and advocacy for research is—like any other enterprise— time consuming, and it requires resources. One of the things that our research team is now doing is examining strategies for 'getting public' that are easily within our grasp as researchers in the academy, with limited funds and limited time. Some of these strategies have included using the University Communications Department as leverage for gaining television and radio interviews, writing newspaper articles and features, hosting public events, creating web pages (<http://educ.queensu.ca/~arts/>) and contributing to in-house research forums and publications. In the process of doing this work, we have asked ourselves what have sometimes been difficult and uncomfortable questions, namely:

> What captures the imagination of the public? How can quantitative and qualitative research results be reported so that they are not misinterpreted by the public? How can this kind of non-traditional work be honoured in the academic system of tenure and promotion? How can public relations be a form of education? And—coming back full circle to where we began—how can we communicate results with integrity without relying on academic jargon?

I would like to give you what I feel is a partial answer to the first question in our present context, namely, what captures the imagination of the public in relation to research in music education. There are, I believe, two areas that capture public interest in music education. The first is research on brain development; the second is the relationship between music and academic achievement in other subjects. These types of research are a far cry from studies that focus on 'music for music's sake' or 'art for art's sake'. But I am beginning to understand that unless I can report my research stories in ways that capture the public's imagination—tie my stories to issues of academic achievement, for example—then I will never get the chance to talk about 'art for art's sake.

In my experience, these are the kinds of statements that make people's ears perk up:[4]

> A project in the state of Georgia, U.S.A., involving 841 elementary and secondary schools with over 600,000 students, found that 'the arts are an important factor in achieving academic excellence'. Students in school districts where staffing and funding of their arts programs was a priority had higher SAT scores, were more likely to graduate with college diplomas, and had lower drop-out rates. While these findings do not establish a cause and effect relationship, they indicate that strong arts programs do *not* come at the expense of academic achievement. (Music in World Cultures, 1996)

> A longitudinal study of 25,000 middle school students showed robust associations between involvement in the visual and performing arts during middle and high school and subsequent achievement, after controlling for student family income and education levels. (Catterall, 1998)

> Learning and performing music strengthens the synapses between neurons from different parts of the brain. Moreover, the synapses formed in early childhood endure. (Begley, 1996)

> There is a limited 'window' of opportunity to develop the complex circuitry of neurons that makes up the brain—visual circuits are largely completed by the time a child is two years of age, math and logic circuits are formed between birth and four years, music circuits are set between three and ten years, and language by ten. (Begley, 1996)

Let's now take a little time to look at some of the other questions posed, with the following task—what can you do tomorrow to begin to address at least one of these questions:

> How can quantitative and qualitative research results be reported so that they are not misinterpreted by the public? How can this kind of non-traditional work be honoured in the academic system of tenure and promotion? How can public relations be a form of education? And—coming back full circle to where we began—how can we communicate results with integrity without relying on academic jargon?

In closing, I would like to draw your attention to a statement made by Philip Jackson, in a recent book titled *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art*. Jackson (1998) wrote that arts have the power 'to be genuinely transformative, to modify irrevocably our habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and perceiving. Changes of that magnitude may occur infrequently, true enough, but when they do, they leave no doubt in the mind of the experiencer that something significant, perhaps even spiritual, has taken place' (p. xiv). We would do well to aim for this kind of significant, even spiritual experience in the sharing of our research—the sharing of our stories.

## NOTES

[1] The preparation of this keynote was supported in part by SSHRC grant no. 410–97–0805, Teacher Development and Elementary Arts Education (R. Upitis, Principal Investigator).

[2] Not everything from poststructuralism, in my view, is a gift. Before arriving here in Exeter, I spent the weekend in London, and saw a play called 'Art'. In it, one of the characters defined 'deconstruction' as a term out of *Builders Weekly* that people use when they don't know what they're talking about!

[3] While I might question the research results in Tooley and Darby's (1998) work, both in terms of their own research methodology and in terms of the political agenda, it would nevertheless be folly to thereby dismiss it. Reports like these are found in many jurisdictions, and are, I believe, a sign of what is yet to come.

[4] A discussion about the ways in which research results like these can be, and have been, distorted is beyond the scope of the present address, but an issue that bears close scrutiny.

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