

Glasgow Refugee Asylum and Migration Network (GRAMNet)

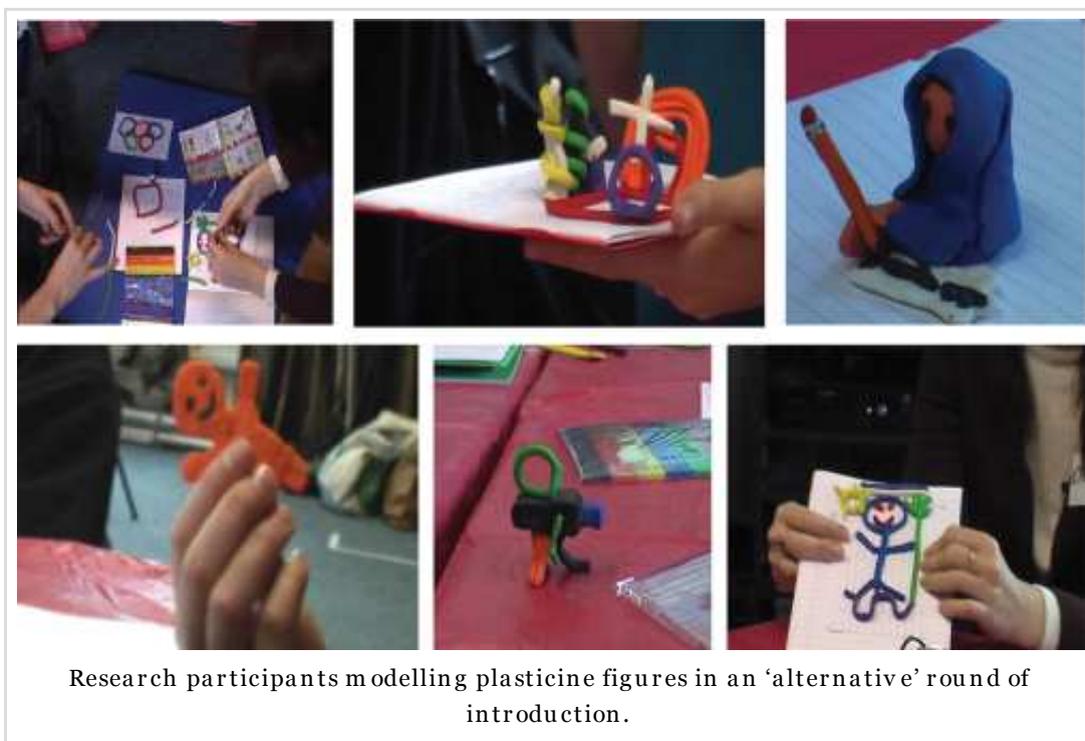
JULY 24, 2013 · 3:42 PM

‘Playful’ research: Exploring intercultural experience through arts-based methods

Katja Frimberger just submitted her PhD at the School of Education and is now waiting for her viva. She explored international students’ intercultural experiences through a series of drama workshops which took ‘precarity’ and ‘estrangement’ as methodological guiding principles. In this blog post she describes why a methodology that works from ‘precarity’ might be more ‘immanently ethical’ when it comes to researching intercultural experiences.

My doctoral research, located in the area of intercultural education and performance, explored international students’ intercultural experiences. I used a ‘playful’ research methodology. On four consecutive Saturdays, my research participants and I met in the School of Education’s drama lab to mould plasticine figures, engage in improvisational drama exercises and share creative writing pieces. Most of these activities were filmed by the group, with cheap camcorders that I borrowed from the university’s AV department. A script, which I devised out of people’s writings and verbatim accounts, never made it on to a ‘real’ stage. It was never performed for an audience other than ourselves. We giggled a lot, shared potluck lunches and had lively exchanges over multiple cups of coffee. Play and food were all essential part of the research.

My methodology sounds ‘messy’ and ‘eclectic’ and that is exactly what it was: a purposeful, ethically and pedagogically relevant mess. Exploring something so immensely complex, personal and embodied as people’s intercultural experiences required in turn methods that were equally ‘embodied’. This meant that our (research participants and my) acts of research were acts of production rather than acts of ‘collecting data’ or ‘capturing reality’. I’d like to say we produced ‘research art’ together: fictional writing for example and rehearsed a script which referenced a ‘real event’ one of the participants recounted, but which at the same time functioned as a fictional text. Such playful methodology didn’t work from the premise that there was knowledge about intercultural experiences ‘out there in the world’ in a straightforward, collectable format in the first place. It acknowledged instead that such knowledge was of a more complex and ‘poetic’ form – deeply interwoven with people’s personal narratives, memories, ‘written into their bodies’ and acting between reality and fiction.



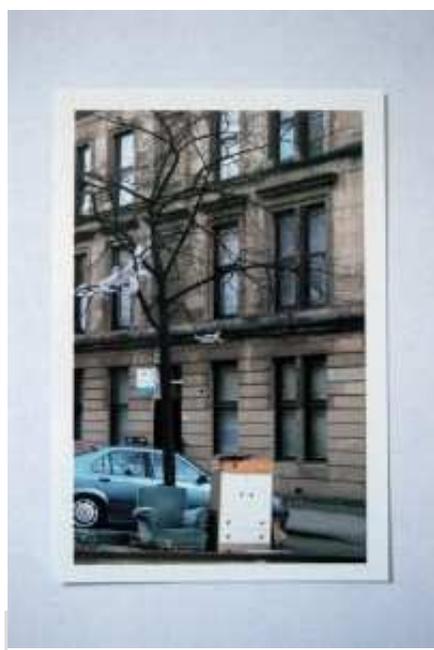
This position of research as an act of creative production rather than an act of collecting or extracting a 'slice of reality' (where 'truth' can be named by the researcher) evolves from a view on culture and intercultural learning that is rooted in relationships and thus difficult to categorise into an abstract and fixed academic 'stranger' or 'strangeness' knowledge (see for example Ahmed, 2000). Culture, instead of being a fixed and reliable entity, one that adheres to borders, books and predictable ways of doing things, is seen as a highly performative construct (see Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004). It is also considered as being in constant evolutionary flux – negotiated, made and remade by 'you and me' – concrete, material bodies that meet, greet, eat, drink, laugh, cry together and make culture thereby, to ever evolving effect. Culture – and with that intercultural experiences – are then located in our bodies (Bourdieu, 1992 calls this 'habitus'), and not simply present as abstract, retrievable schemata in our minds (see Ingold, 2000).

One could say that a 'playful' research methodology exploits this 'precarity' (Butler, 2005) of intercultural spaces – the non-verbal, fictional and unpredictable elements – for creative, collective 'acts of making'. Such methodology moves into these unpredictable spaces and doesn't consider intercultural precarity as a 'lack' or 'problem' that needs fixing, so that we can continue a more sober, academic discourse about intercultural experience. It regards precarity as 'potentiality' – an opportunity for collective creation, exploration, personal and collective learning. And that is where research meets pedagogy. Writing creatively or positioning your body into the visual structures of an improvisational theatre exercise doesn't require you to necessarily supply me with an 'accurate', 'coherent' or even 'realistic' account of yourself, so that I – the intercultural education researcher – may later sit down and analyse your given account in equally, academically accurate ways.

The shift from a methodology of collection and analysis to one of production and pedagogy also describes an 'ethical shift'. Rather than considering 'research ethics' as something external to the research method, ethics is seen as integral to it. Such an 'immanent ethics' (see MacDonald & O'Regan, 2012) emphasises the need for ongoing ethical reflection within the particularities of the respective research context. An immanent ethics, and the methods that come with it, grow and shape within and against the precarity of intercultural spaces. The 'nature' of such ethics can't be fully preconceived before the research or easily channelled into buzzword-objectives that can satisfy tick-the-box managerial needs. An immanent ethics stubbornly insist on process; it seeks to integrate pedagogy – learning as sociality, relationship-building and the protection of people's vulnerability – as immanent to its work method.

Following from this ethical shift, more process-oriented questions – about the kind of educational, ethical and ultimately political spaces the research aims to facilitate – become more important than the search for ‘watertight’ methods that can easily align to an external, institutional and acontextual ethical code. Taking the precarity of intercultural spaces as the starting point for the formulation of methods and ethics that ‘become’ within lived-in intercultural relationships, instead asserts critical embodied reflection as a valid objective within intercultural education research.

In my particular research context this meant using a range of arts-based methods, such as improvisational drama and creative writing, that fostered what Lockford and Pelias call “bodily poeticizing” and “specified the performers’ [research participants] body as a site of knowing” (2004: 431). The kind of knowledge and discourse stimulated by such ‘embodied methods’ might be best illustrated by one of my participants’ (Sonja’s) creative writing pieces. Sonja used as stimuli for her piece a picture she took in Glasgow, which represented a moment of ‘strangeness’ to her. Written as a stream of consciousness, her piece dips in and out of the realm of fiction and reflects the very complexity – ambiguity, artifice and depth – of ‘intercultural experiences’. As embodied experiences, they stimulated comments and questions ranging from the mundane to the critical and deeply philosophical and act somewhere between reality in fiction.



Sonja’s picture.

I find it strange that there was a pigeon who went shopping for a hat.

It was a rainy day so I understand there was the need to stay dry but I still found it to be unusual.

I find it strange that an uncomfortable silence filled the room considering there was an openness to love and a disregard for all things which were awkward.

I find it strange that a different person would act in a different way in similar circumstances. I found it difficult to understand which was the right way.

I found it strange that the furniture sat on the street but I found it also to be beautiful and resembling art.

Even the toilet paper in the trees blowing in the wind seemed to create a sense of flow and aesthetic to the tableau. In some ways it can represent the beauty of a strange space which, looked at from another perspective, one of environmental concern, can be considered as ugly and wasteful.

I find it strange that we spend time commenting on the quality and differences between sandwiches sometimes.

Instead of looking for good things about this new place, we often seek to point out and highlight what is worse in comparison from home.

I often wonder why we do this and what's the 'best' way to appreciate and love both places and cultures. - Sonja

Sonja shared her piece in a small group with other participants. Her reading stimulated more concrete conversations about 'fly-tipping' and waste on the streets of Glasgow – a 'strangeness experience' which turned out many participants shared in real life. Sonja's creative piece, as well as the more sober, 'real-life' conversations stimulated by her reading afterwards, reflect the manifold ways intercultural experiences might be shared within a research encounter. Researching from an immanent ethics through a diversity of methods that take into account individual embodiment and foster learning and researching as sociality, will result in a range of reflective research modes and conversations; ones that produce embodied, 'three-dimensional data' and resonate precarity, vibrancy and with that the critical and creative potentialities of intercultural spaces.

Themes and scholars that were central to my research included:

Immanent intercultural ethics

- *MacDonald, M.N. / O'Regan, J.P. (2012). The Ethics of Intercultural Communication. In: Education Philosophy and Theory, doi: 10.1111/j.1469-5812.2011.00833.x.*
- *Phipps, A. (2013) Intercultural ethics: questions of methods in language and intercultural communication. In: Language and Intercultural Communication, Volume 13, Issue 1, 2013, Special Issue: THE DISCOURSE OF ETHICS AND EQUITY.*

The precarity & potentiality of intercultural spaces

- *Ahmed, S. (2000). Strange Encounters – embodied others in post-coloniality. London: Routledge.*
- *Butler, J. (2011) Precarious Life and the Obligation of Co-habitation. Talk at the Nobel Museum Stockholm, May 2011. You find Butler's speech as a youtube video [here](#), or as a PDF document [here](#).*
- *Butler (2005). Giving an Account of Oneself. New York: Fordham University Press.*

Methods that work from precarity and pedagogy

- *Boal, A. (2000). Theatre of the Oppressed. London: Pluto Press.*
- *Brecht, B. (1964). Brecht on Theatre – the Development of an Aesthetic. London: Methuen.*
- *Fels, L. (1998). In the wind clothes dance on a line: Performative enquiry – a (re)search methodology. In: An interdisciplinary journal of curriculum studies. New York: Rochester, Band 14(1), pp. 27-36.*
- *hooks, b. (1994). Teaching to Transgress – Education as the Practice of Freedom. New York, London: Routledge.*
- *Lockford, L./Pelias, R.J. (2004). Bodily Poeticizing in Theatrical Improvisation: A Typology of Performative Knowledge. In: Theatre Topics – Volume 14, Number 2, September 2004, pp. 431-443.*
- *Pink, S. (2009). Doing Sensory Ethnography. London, New Delhi: Sage Publications.*

Culture in flux/Embodied culture/Habitus

- Bhaba, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Ingold, T. (2000). *The Perception of the Environment – Essays in livelihood, dwelling and skill*. Oxon, New York: Routledge.
- Phipps, A. & Gonzalez, M. (2004). London: Sage Publications.
- Shaules, J. (2007). *Deep Culture – The Hidden Challenges of Global Living*. Clevedon, Buffalo, Toronto: Multilingual Matters.

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Jenny Ebermann (bxljenny)

July 26, 2013 at 11:03 am



Reblogged this on [Mindful Leadership & Intercultural Communication](#) and commented:
Very interesting research!

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August 7, 2013 at 8:20 am



Thanks for reading!

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