

*Conducting and Reporting Research: Original Papers*

## **Writing Research: Narrative, Bricolage and Everyday Spirituality**

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### **Abstract**

*Privileging writing provides an opportunity to explore different approaches to (re)presenting research. Writing research always involves decision making about what can be told, when, how and to whom. This account suggests that writing research as narrative may also involve reconceptualising oneself in new ways; it describes the process of becoming researcher, writer and bricoleur. These multiple 'becomings' present new and different possibilities. In this case they changed the story that would eventually be told and the way it was told. A personal experience of researching, writing, and forming bricolage is shared and deconstructed within the context of a specific research project about spirituality in different early childhood settings. Research about spirituality meant that at some point this elusive concept had to be (re)presented as the written word through the creation of fresh, and, in this case, 'messy' or layered text. In the research, writing was itself a means of discovery; a research method and means of analysis. Part of this process involved engaging with the poetic aspect of revealing lived experience. Qualitative case study research involved children, teachers and parents. In this account the voices of participants, researcher reflexivity and narrative approaches to writing research are celebrated.*

### **Introduction**

An ongoing focus on narrative in educational settings, particularly early childhood educational settings (Meier, 2008), means that it is important to write, to know how to write and to enjoy writing. Writing is the glue that binds the teacher/researcher role; it is a primary means of expression. Luce-Kapler (2004, p.xi) acknowledges that "understanding the potential of writing to orient us in the world, to help us think and understand, even perhaps to heal us has been the impetus behind my work as a teacher, writer and researcher". Her statement affirms the position of teacher as researcher and it also speaks to me as someone who lives and works in an educational environment. This paper has deconstructed some of the processes that enabled me to become researcher, writer and eventually *bricoleur*, that is, someone who rearranges and reshapes material as an expressive act. This process expanded my idea of myself as someone in an educational context who is able to move beyond recording and stating facts to a place of interpretation and creativity.

The research that supported this process was an exploration of how spiritual experiences are supported in early childhood educational settings (Bone, 2007). This inquiry involved a Montessori *casa*, a Rudolf Steiner kindergarten and a private preschool. Children aged from two and a half to seven years old participated in qualitative case studies along with their parents and teachers. In this research a working definition proposed that spirituality:

connects people to each other, to all living things, to nature and the universe. Spirituality is a way of appreciating the wonder and mystery of everyday life. It alerts me to the possibility for love, happiness, goodness, peace and compassion in the world. (Bone, 2007, p.8)

Spirituality is proposed to be an inclusive concept and spiritual experiences are often described in the stories people tell (Coles, 1990). This research privileged narrative as a means of understanding spiritual experience. Stories were shared, became part of a new text and the writing of this text had to (re)present the lived experience of participants and myself as researcher in these early childhood settings.

In this research, writing became a method of discovery (Richardson, 2000a). Writing was what I did from first contemplating this research as I noted ideas, constructed mind maps and an annotated bibliography, put my thoughts into journals and expanded my understanding about the spiritual. At the same time I wrote autobiographical stories about the past, recorded personal experiences of the present and saved questions for the future, kept a diary of events and made notes to myself; this became material for the preliminary papers I was writing for supervisors and presentations. Writing became what I was doing most of the time that was allotted to my research. Often this writing is discounted: it is too fragmentary, just preliminary thoughts, evidence of work in progress. When writing is recognised as a means of making new discoveries this is not the case (Richardson, 2000a). The writing is itself a method and a means of ongoing interpretation and analysis.

Writing is central to the process of carrying out qualitative research, and through writing the “impossible possibility” (Derrida, 2001, p.10) of the research enterprise can be glimpsed. In terms of research about spirituality it soon became obvious that there would be no definitive revelation, no absolute truth and no end to the exploration. Instead, I realised that as Deleuze and Parnet (2002, p.52) point out “the author creates a world, but there is no world which awaits us to be created”. Writing is the creative act and the world it creates is of the moment, a work of the imagination with links to changing and often fragile realities. Writing about spirituality presented specific challenges. It is a concept that has been described as beyond words (Bone, 2008a) because it is elusive and hard to pin down.

The problem with the written word is that it makes a permanent mark and words may be attributed, referred to, contested or ignored. Words stick. Writing involves decision making and at the beginning of the project I wondered when and where I should start and what and how I should write. Writing research means also to be judged, critiqued and to prepare for what is often a solitary pursuit to become public. This is part of what Derrida (2001, p.9) calls the “anguish” of writing and to write research is ultimately to confront the self.

Writing is more risky when seen as a product; it can also be exploratory, messy and experimental. As I used writing in this way it became obvious that I was taking on the role of *bricoleur*. This role involves what de Certeau (1988, p. xviii) calls “artisan-like inventiveness”. It requires the researcher to be systematic, workmanlike and creative. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) describe the *bricoleur* as like a craftsperson, a quilt maker or constructor of collage. To become a *bricoleur* reflects a way of thinking about the world that is unfixated and changeable. It is not about a search for certainty, constructing boundaries or

drawing new lines. On the contrary, it shows a desire to shift and change. To become *bricoleur* in this particular research project mirrored the mutability of the spiritual dimension.

Narratives from the research were written with the intention that they would ‘fall out’ of the main narrative, as if shaken out, what Richardson (2000b, p.153) calls constructing a “pleated text”. A creased and convoluted text always has other stories hidden in the folds. A text can be closed or opened like a fan to reveal new stories. I always envisaged certain narratives revealing themselves in order to become available to be looked at with fresh eyes (Bone, 2007). The stories from the research that follow are in italic font to distinguish them from the writing that surrounds them. These narratives present possibilities for reinterpretation and are a series of ‘becomings’ that describe my personal experiences of becoming researcher, becoming writer and becoming *bricoleur*. The use of italic font also indicates that it is possible to read this account by taking short cuts, to focus on the narratives and not necessarily to engage with this piece of writing in a linear way.

### **Becoming ... researcher**

One of my experiences of becoming researcher is presented in the narrative ‘Winding Wool’, as follows. It describes the day I entered the Steiner kindergarten as ‘the researcher’ for the first time. It is an account of what it felt like and reveals my thoughts about what happened. At that stage I was still feeling that researching spirituality might be a near impossible task and something that would need supernatural help or some kind of special magic in order to be successful. Sylvia is the teacher who was supporting this research in the kindergarten:

#### **Winding wool**

*My way of being a researcher was challenged in the Steiner kindergarten setting. I was told that it was very important that the children hardly notice me and if they did then I needed to be busy doing something that was useful and in this way I would become part of the kindergarten in a seamless and subtle way. The teacher described this as a process of making me ‘invisible’. The first morning I was put on a stool near the entrance and next to the basket where children find their slippers and say goodbye to their parents. I had a basket of wool, tangled and messy, and my job was to wind the wool into neat balls. In my research journal I note that ‘Sylvia is busy, she settles me by the slippers and gives me a basket of wool to work with. She tells me to turn each ball into a smaller size ball. I begin to do this and am amazed at how the speed of my movements mirrors my feeling of being wound up – I relax and consciously begin to move slowly’.*

*Eventually I found this rather a soothing occupation. However, on that first morning I was sitting there and a parent said hello and asked what I was doing and instead of telling him that I was the researcher they had heard about I said ‘oh, I’m just winding wool’. He gave me an odd look and said something polite and left me reflecting that I had not sounded very confidence inspiring and had not even answered the question. Perhaps this was because my occupation did not fit with my notion of doing research.*

*Because I was not taking notes but had to remember everything to write up after the session. I felt tired after these sessions and to begin with would sleep afterwards for hours. Perhaps I felt enchanted, under a spell. Many fairy tales mention winding wool or spinning threads as a means of dealing with magic and danger from the world. Sometimes the threads are spun into gold which is exactly what I wished from my activity as I hoped that the tightly wound balls of wool would turn into detailed and accurate field notes. Engaging in this kind of activity was unusual for me and highlighted the strangeness of working in a different way in a context that was challenging my preconceptions. (Bone, 2007, p.101)*

In telling this tale I notice how the separation of writing from being researcher disrupted my notion of what doing research meant. The written observation has become so much a part of 'finding out' in early childhood contexts that not being able to write notes was quite a challenge. I have critiqued my position since writing this narrative. Did I imply that what went on here would only become 'gold' if transformed by my "gaze" (Foucault, 1991, p.174)? I do not think so. Far from feeling any sense of superiority my position was ambiguous and uncomfortable. The idea that the researcher changes the context they enter was confirmed (Goldstein, 2000) and the decision about how this would be managed was taken by others. There was a subtle shift in perception about whose process it was.

The idea that winding wool might be a way of becoming researcher had not entered my head prior to having this experience. The teacher I was liaising with said that I would have to be unobtrusive but we did not discuss this in depth. The whole idea of being invisible collided with the concept of transparency. They are similar words but not the same. In the other settings my presence was 'transparent' in that I was introduced to the children, they had their own consent forms and were part of the negotiations that preceded my time there (Bone, 2005). In the Steiner context these processes did not include the children in the same way. Once I put preconceptions to one side and entered wholeheartedly but invisibly into the world of the kindergarten the children made all the connections that I could have wished for. I also discovered that the magic I was after was already there.

### **Transformative Writing**

Writing allegorically and comparing this research method with spinning straw into gold, enabled the fusion of ideas that was necessary in order to construct a major theme of the research: *everyday spirituality*. By using writing as a means of discovery I realised that spirituality had the power to transform everyday life. Through writing about this process I was encouraged to think about an aspect of the research that was explored further, as 'The Alchemy of Everyday Life'. Alchemy is the process of turning base metal into gold, a project pursued through the ages. The reference to the alchemy of everyday life suggests that spirituality, like alchemy, is a transformative process, it can make the ordinary extraordinary (Bone, Cullen & Loveridge, 2007) and this could be likened to the esoteric processes needed to transform metal into gold. I began to link everyday spirituality to the pedagogical practices happening in front of me. It seemed that I had made a jump or a leap of faith. Spirituality is not completely secret and 'inner' but as everyday spirituality is a visible dimension of lived experience and an integral part of early childhood pedagogical practice. At the same time I realised that writing about the process of research was not an add on or something that happened afterwards, it was not just about writing up, it actually is a research method, a means of discovery. As Derrida (2001, p.11) points out, to write is "to be incapable of making meaning absolutely precede writing" (Derrida, 2001, p.11). To write is to engage the unexpected and transform for oneself what may be unknown up to that point.

### **Becoming...writer**

Each fresh piece of writing sent out connections to something else, in that sense it was rhizomic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) and unpredictable. Writing mapped new territory and paradoxically did not have to be original although it was always expressing something in a new way. The rhizome “can be connected to anything other, and must be” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.7). These connections include “lived events, historical determinations, concepts, individuals, groups, social formations” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.9) and anything may lead to anything else. Writing involves exploring words, meeting new words, wondering how they fit with familiar words and their usage. It may mean addressing the intricacies of academic conventions, finding a new voice or communicating in another language. In my case, I became interested in different kinds of writing and was willing to follow leads even if they went to unexpected places.

Becoming a writer involves crossing borders. When studying it is easy to get lost in academic texts forgetting that other genres of writing can illuminate life in a different way. While examining a central concept from the research, the concept of everyday spirituality (Bone, 2007), I searched for evidence from other sources and read fiction, biography and autobiography as well as academic texts and explored different ways of writing in order to inform my personal narrative style (Pillay, 2005). Writing narrative is a way of making discoveries about the self and it became obvious that echoes from the past reach into the present.

In this exploration of the spiritual in everyday life I was also exploring my own memories and experimenting with means of (re)presentation. I was discovering that writing creates its own geography. In becoming researcher and becoming writer I was wandering in new places, crossing borders and exploring new horizons: being nomadic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

### ***Being Nomadic***

St. Pierre (2000, p.258) acknowledges that being nomadic means to “travel in the thinking that writing produces in search of the field”. There is an understanding that the destination may be unknown. Like a nomad I also came to the realisation that everything I needed was already with me. To become a researcher often feels like such a new journey that it is easy to return to the pervasive image of the empty vessel, waiting to be filled with information from previous studies, using reliable methods and relying on the perceptions of others. Chatwin (1996) suggests that nomads are disruptive, curious, restless, they challenge the established order of things. In the previous narrative, ‘Winding Wool’, I am perceived as someone who has the potential for disturbance. As researcher I began to realise the debt I owed the participants and the owners, managers, or gatekeepers who allowed me wander over their territory. This was what kept me grounded. It was in the writing that I could be nomadic in a different way and in writing I entered upon a “line of flight” (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002, p.10) that took me in new directions.

To engage a line of flight is to be transient and mobile; to take chances on a trajectory of discovery. An instance of this is described in the following narrative:

#### **Flying...**

*It is raining outside, a winter night. There are seven parents in the room at the kindergarten. They often all talk at once. There are other things going on, heads nodding, eyes meeting, and faces and hands move faster as the*

*conversation takes hold. I am writing while listening and trying to concentrate on everything that is happening but it all seems to be escaping somehow.*

*Later I look at the words I am transcribing onto the computer. I can remember the voices and the tone in which things were said but somehow the words seem fragmented. It is like I can hear the tune but am having trouble with individual notes. I begin to play with the spaces between the words. I really want to retain the feeling of what was said and the spirit of what happened in the room. At this point it takes off and I become aware that what might be a mechanical task is becoming creative. In terms of spirituality it occurs to me that connections are forged in that moment when I no longer know where someone's words end and mine begin.*

*Before this happened I had always taken for granted one of the tools that supports these possibilities. The computer is involved; does the computer take over? Sometimes it's a struggle but sometimes the words just glide into place. Sometimes I am not conscious of the movements of my fingers and I marvel as my thoughts become visible. The print appears on the screen in front of me ready to be shifted around, deleted, saved, cut, pasted, and transformed, in the endless rearrangement that is writing.*

In this narrative my process connects to three themes identified in the research (Bone, 2007): spiritual witness, spiritual in-betweenness and the spiritual elsewhere. Through the writing I was trying to stay spiritually *with* the participants. Later I accessed the space of being *spiritually in-between* as I worked in the space between the words. My interaction with the computer was sometimes out in the *spiritual elsewhere*, the world of dreams and imagination. These are aspects of my particular line of flight where the process melded with the field of investigation through the activity of writing. Deleuze and Parnet (2002) propose that writing is itself a line of flight, it is always becoming. In this process of discovery I was learning to fly and, more specifically, as researcher/writer I was becoming *bricoleur*.

### **Becoming ... *bricoleur***

In Denzin and Lincoln's (2000) terms the task of *bricoleur* in the research context involves putting together disparate elements in new ways, making a puzzle, being a quiltmaker, creating a montage. Data are taken apart, deconstructed, reformed and ultimately demand an "active audience" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.5). They suggest that the resulting montage, the *bricolage*, may be "a crystalline form", or "quiltlike", a "reflexive collage" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.6). My analysis of data has involved *bricolage*; a process that is made easier by technology. Information is moved from handwritten fieldnotes to notes with comments and connections to the literature. It is possible to use different fonts and to move between documents in order to construct a *bricolage* that is always shifting. New text is constructed that remains open to fresh interpretations. The data are transformed in the analysis and this creative process retains a sense of mystery (Wolcott, 1994) and has the potential to surprise.

As *bricoleur* I wished to (re)present the spiritual in a way that would involve the reader. This meant changing text from a straightforward reproduction of participants' voices to a piece of writing in a different form, a poetic form, designed to engage at an emotional level. Joelle was one of the teachers and after an in-depth interview my shifting and playing with words went through several incarnations. I began to discover the potential of empty space.

Examples of this work, reproduced below, begin with Joelle's words at the start of the interview. She repeated my question about what she thought spirituality meant in the context of the early childhood setting where she was a teacher. Then she continued to share what spirituality meant to her. Later I reworked her words into poetic form and through this medium began to "re-see" (Meier, 2008, p.59) the experiences she shared with me. The following sequence illustrates the process:

**First:**

What it means in the early childhood setting?

The word spirituality for me I think it's the essence of life for me. The before, the during and after life- the spark of life. It's actually emotional for me to talk about. I think we've all got it.

**Changes to:**

What it means in the early childhood setting?

The word spirituality for me I think it's the essence of life for me.

The before, the during and after life – the spark of life. It's actually emotional for me to talk about. I think we've all got it.

We're all one and we share the same spirit.

**Finally becomes:**

Spirituality...

What it means in the early childhood setting?

For me I think it's the essence of life.

The before, during, and after life

- the spark of life.

It's actually emotional for me to talk about.

I think we've all got it.

We're all one and we share the same spirit.

The most important thing for me is love –

Love is it for me.

Joelle's words were moved, spaces were added, repetition was used and phrases from elsewhere in the transcript brought forward and added on to give emphasis to each stanza (Bone, 2007; 2008b). When we presented this poem for the first time at a conference Joelle acknowledged that it affected her emotionally and "in a beautiful way" (personal communication). We felt very connected. This accords with what Deleuze and Parnet (2002, p.52) stress is essential "one must...speak with, write with". Working in this way is not the same as reproducing speech and of course sometimes it is important that the words of participants must stand alone. In this case the interweaving of words and the work of the *bricoleur* can be interpreted as a spiritual action. The process of writing with Joelle constructed a sense of what I call "spiritual witness" (Bone, 2008b). The act of being in the poem with Joelle affirmed that this spiritual aspect of intersubjectivity can be achieved through writing and by creative approaches to presenting research findings.

### *Validity of Writing as Method*

As Richardson (2000b) pointed out, original methods are open to critique. She experienced problems when she wrote a poem called “Louisa May”, a work that represented an interview as a poem. Such methods raise questions about validity. Richardson (1997, p. 92) discusses validity as a “crystallisation”, a notion that:

deconstructs the traditional idea of ‘validity’ (we feel how there is no single truth, we see how texts validate themselves); and crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know.

When exploring the notion of crystallisation I am reminded that people often tap crystal. They want to hear whether it is genuine and if it has a ring that echoes and resonates or if it is dull, a fake, imitative, lacking sparkle. The phrase ‘does it ring true’ comes from this action. An account must ‘resonate’ in order for meaning to be shared. Perhaps a way of achieving some kind of resonance can be achieved through evocative writing.

### *Evocative Writing*

To evoke is to call up; this may refer to calling up spirits from the dead or to a means of inspiring certain responses, feelings, memories and energies. When used in the context of writing, to evoke – *evocare*, implies that whatever is being described is being brought to life. This is something that writers search for, the evocative phrase that will speak to the reader or listener. There is a sense that when this happens there is a possibility for sharing experiences or memories and as Derrida (2001, p.13) suggests, what is written must be “infinitely transmissible”. In order to evoke the spiritual it was necessary to think spiritually, to think through the word *spirare* – to breathe, and to imagine life being breathed into the words on the page. It was necessary to be inspired, a word connected to the spiritual. Inspiration came from being in the early childhood settings, spending time with children, becoming aware of the spiritual in each context and making connections through writing with participants and with the readers who, at that time, only existed in my imagination.

### *Writing as a Dream space*

During the research process, when trying to express through writing what happened in the spiritual moments that occurred everyday, there were countless times when phrases or paragraphs had to be rewritten, altered or deleted. How hard it was to let certain passages go and how necessary it was to listen to supervisors, participants, and critical friends. In this sense writing is far from a solitary pursuit although it often requires silence and certain rituals. It requires, as Van Manen (2002) suggests, entering a different space. He describes an inner space, the “somewhere else” that writers often inhabit. “the space that the words open up” (Van Manen, 2002, p.2). This space, for me, is the spiritual elsewhere, where dreams and reality mingle and thoughts and ideas collide, take flight and reappear as the written word.

### **Conclusion**

Writing is often seen as a marginal activity or merely the end point of a research project. This account challenges the notion of end points and outlines the process of becoming researcher, becoming writer and becoming *bricoleur*. The notion of becoming supports a reconceptualisation of endings whereby an ending is simply opening up another possibility and supporting new directions. This particular piece of writing is a continuation of



something that as yet does not seem to be at an end, it is still happening and always becoming (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002).

In telling these stories I have described a particular interpretation of research and focused on writing as a method and means of analysis. Reference has been made to concepts from Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Deleuze and Parnet (2002). These concepts help me to explain the unexplainable; the risks and ambiguities of writing that involve “assembling, being in the middle, on the line of encounter between an internal world and an external world. Being in the middle” (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002, p.52). The researcher sometimes takes the role of negotiator, the one in the space between participants and text. This article looked at the notion of ‘being with’ in that space, an aspect of “spiritual witness” (Bone, 2008b), of creating and connecting. As *bricoleur* my shifting and shaping often constructed narratives that remain undecided. Writing narrative presents its own challenges and writing in this way supported my search for deeper meanings, the wish to remain curious and an invitation to share and rework experience. Finally, this is a personal acknowledgement that my experience of connecting with other voices, the use of writing as a means of discovery and analysis, and the work of reshaping and creating poetic text, was also always about the unfinished enterprise of becoming spiritual.

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