

Leaving the blood in - Using autobiography and narrative to tell the story of research into experiences with academic writing: How to get it write/right?

Abstract

Academic writing can be difficult to accomplish and disengaging to read (Monchamp 2007), the result is that often when we carry out research, our final readership can be miniscule. While reading and writing for the purposes of research should be informative, insightful, rigorous and challenging, is it also possible to make these processes entertaining or even pleasurable? Can the researcher give some personal insight into their world view and also from that of their interviewees instead of pretending that they play an entirely passive and objective role in the research process? Many qualitative researchers (Grumet 1981; Cortazzi 1993; Charmaz 1995; Ely, Vinz et al. 1997; Erben 1998; Usher 1998; Denzin and Lincoln 1998, 2003; Ellis and Bochner 1998, 2003; Richardson 1998, 2003; Bruner 2004; Perselli 2004; Antoniou and Moriarty 2006; Short, Grant et al. 2007; Sparkes 2007; Caulley 2008; Trahar 2008) have started to push the academic writing borders and explore new ways to write up research. This assignment seeks to provide a rationale for using narrative as a research method to tell the story of my research and to trial these methods on a small-scale project. A professor with an extensive writing portfolio has been interviewed in order to access some of her experiences with academic writing. The author seeks to use a emotionalist approach to the interview process by obtaining the participant's view on their authentic experiences through open ended and unstructured interviews (Silverman 1993) with the aim of encouraging the interviewee to share their thoughts while discussing the author's own observations and attitudes towards academic writing. This is in order to provide ideas and insight that might help other academics with their own approaches to the writing process.

Introduction

“They (academics) started to question why university life had to be that way, why they had to be removed from their work, why only certain forms of discourse counted as knowledge, why they didn't feel more connected to those they studied, why their mind should be split from their body, why they had to keep their emotions in check, why they could not speak from the heart.” (Pelias 2004, p. 11)

The purpose of this assignment is to carry out and explore two interrelated themes. The first is a personal quest where I am hoping to provide a rationale for making the process of academic writing more creative and challenge the objective stance that academic writers are traditionally expected to take. The second aspect of my work will be to investigate how a successful academic writer engages with the writing process and to bring the two matters of enquiry together by writing up my findings in a creative way.

Writing and publishing are increasingly crucial to the development of a successful academic career. The creation of ‘new’ universities in 1992, together with the expansion of selective funding for UK Higher Education (HE), have taken writing and publishing out of the hands of an academic elite and made them a requirement for almost all HE lecturers. In addition, today’s lecturers have a burgeoning workload that is not restricted to teaching and research. The volume of e-mails and administrative duties coupled with the increase in pastoral work now required to support students mean that contemporary academics rarely experience the luxury of dedicated time and space to write (Lee and Boud 2003).

The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) evaluates, and financially rewards university departments based on the research ‘outputs’ of academic staff. In this context, a lecturer’s scholarly publication record is not only a key indicator of their professional esteem but also of their financial value to their institution. This pressure to write and to write well is

undoubtedly intensified by the widespread assumption that academics are naturally able and willing to write (Moore 2003). Issues with workloads, physical space and personal anxieties mean that privately, many academics struggle with their writing or at least struggle to enjoy and take pleasure in the writing process. “I suppose the greatest obstacle to writing is my own attitude. I have a real problem in convincing myself that the writing is part of what I do. The result is that every activity that is related to teaching students has, in my mind, a higher priority than the writing.” (Murray 2002, p. 41-42)

In March 2007 I co-facilitated a series of writing retreats for academics from the Universities of Brighton and Sussex. A colleague and I had discussed our own problems with academic writing and how confidence and issues of limited time and crowded working spaces often increased the frustration of writer’s block and dwindled levels of motivation (Antoniou and Moriarty 2006). Building on the work of others in the field, (Murray 2001; Moore 2003) we applied for funding from a Creativity Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) and were able to run one residential and one non-residential retreat that used creative writing methods to build confidence and passion with writing and offer participants timeout from the pressures of their day to day lives to discuss and take part in writing exercises and/or carry out their own writing. The retreats were an almost a magical time with overwhelmingly generous input from the participants and excellent feedback at the end of the two days.

I was shocked and comforted to learn that many of the participants, regardless of position or status at the university, (some were professors, others were heads of department and there were a few newcomers like myself), nearly all struggled to write with confidence when it came to academic research. The main bone of contention seemed to be between the academic and the creative/personal voice. One participant compared the two by saying, “it’s (academic writing) a highly controlled fantasy where people have no emotion and where writing is a

highly genred and sort of yeah, academic writing is Halal, the blood is taken out of it whereas (creative) writing, the blood is left in.” (Moriarty 2007, p. 11) It seemed that like me, many academics despite working hard on research projects and on reports, when it came to writing the data up felt as if they were obliged to take on a voice that did not sound like their own, that their academic writing voice was separate to their personal voice and that for many this was problematic.

“the voice that I use in academic mode, is it mine, or is the voice of my profession, my ‘ought to’ voice, the voice that I’ve been taught to use? The voice I use today, it is my own; I recognise in it myself, the person who is really me. To find again that voice restores to me myself, it makes me whole, it wake me up. Oh that I could reconcile those two voices to be me, myself in every situation’. And I suppose that’s how I felt.” Dee, Principle Lecturer (Moriarty 2007, p. 14)

“I suppose this is a development from your retreat which was really good and it was great to be there but there was a thing about for me about being real erm versus being I don’t know being pretend, you have to make so many compromises don’t you?” Miles, Principle Lecturer (Moriarty 2007, p. 14)

Participants were interviewed to discover if the retreats had had an impact on their approach to academic writing as part of my Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD). The irony was that while I enjoyed the reading and then the interviewing for Assignment 2, I felt that in the writing up of my data, I had somehow lost the rich and engaging stories that my interviewees had imparted which was frustrating and demotivating to my own writing development. My rationale for deciding to carry out a piece of Qualitative Research was that it would free me to observe and listen to my interviewees, which it did. As Kathy Charmaz states in the *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data* (Rubin and Rubin 1995), “Qualitative
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Jess Moriarty

interviewing provides an open-ended, in depth exploration about an aspect of life about which the interviewee has substantial experience, often combined with considerable insight....Interviewing is a flexible, emergent technique; ideas and issues emerge during the interview, and the interviewer can then immediately pursue these leads.” (Charmaz 1995, p. 312) The process of communicating what I had discovered however was obstructed by the framing and shaping process that enabled me to view it as ‘academic’. This is not merely a personal problem, as Laurel Richardson highlights, “we have a serious problem: Research topics are riveting and research valuable, but qualitative books are underread....Qualitative research has to be read, not scanned; its meaning is in the reading.” (Richardson 1998, 2003, p. 501)

As a Creative Writing lecturer, I felt dishonest to my practice churning out another dry and passionless essay that had lost all sense of my interviewees and of ‘me’ in it. And I also wanted to have a better understanding of ‘me’, to use my research to find my own voice and style with academic writing and to feel more confident about my identity as an academic, “*Finding a voice* – Among our basic tasks in making a story are cultivating personal style and finding a voice. These are choices that we must make as writers and ideally we do so consciously. When we undertake academic writing, however, we often let that choice be made for us.” (Margaret Anzul, Margot Ely et al. 1991, p. 168) A potential outcome of this assignment then is to empower my writing process with a deeper and better understanding of who I am as an academic and as a writer, after all, “Why should we be ashamed if our work has therapeutic or personal value?” (Ellis and Bochner 1998, 2003, p. 221). By developing my academic writing style, I hope to boost my own levels of motivation and also begin to feel part of the academy without conforming my own sense of what ‘good’ writing is.

'Good' writing, albeit creative, academic or indeed any genre where the author is trying to convey an idea or a viewpoint to their reader should communicate ideas clearly and effectively, it should engage the reader on some level and it should be well structured and technically sound in terms of grammar, spelling and layout. This is something I tell my creative writing students and what I also tell myself when writing academic pieces but in creative writing, the central voice of the narrator or lead character must come through whereas in academic writing this is permissible but not the 'norm'. The writing is traditionally expected to be objective and devoid of emotion and passion, bereft of the personal. By exploring ways to leave the personal in, I hope to put the blood back into my writing.

Background

One freezing cold May morning in 2007 I dragged myself to a symposium on reading and writing research at the University of Sussex. The keynote was the Director of the Qualitative Research Unit at the University of Exeter and seemed to be predominantly interested in sport. Why had I come? As I prepared myself to glaze over and go over my notes for my own presentation later that day, Professor Andrew Sparkes started talking about new ways to write up academic research, as poems, plays, life stories. It was my first eureka moment as a student (EdD course) and new researcher. I was so inspired that I e-mailed him the same day to thank him and explain my own frustration with academic writing; I felt as if I had to conform and adapt my writing style to fit in with the academy in order to be taken seriously. Sparkes kindly sent me a draft of an article he was having published later that year. The article told the story of Jim, a character not unlike Sparkes who struggled with the RAE culture and the pressure it was putting on his staff. The story was engaging, warm, human and as with a good film or novel or poem or play – it moved me, it spoke to me, it made me think ‘yes, that is what academic life can be like’.

Sparkes had asked people to read and give feedback on the piece and included their comments within the article. The feedback was startling as clearly it helped people make sense of their academic and personal worlds.

"The theory is brilliant but divorced from people and society or alternatively the data is good but divorced from theory.....It moved me deeply on a number of levels and in places sent shudders down my spine and tears to my eyes as I connected with the professional and personal passions portrayed in the various moments depicted."
male academic early career (Sparkes 2007, p. 556)

"the essay did for me what I believe an excellent essay of this kind can do: It allowed me to see more fully the complexity, both conceptually and emotionally, of the problem. It reminded me how the literary can have power within the social sciences.....It persuaded me that change is needed." Reviewer 2 (Sparkes 2007, p. 551-552)

As a writer and academic, this is what I want to do - to make my reader realise that change is needed (or at least possible), and to do it using the personal and the researched. My research question has now evolved from Assignment 2 into how to use my personal experience, informal interviews and the story of my research to facilitate a more holistic approach to academic writing and hopefully suggest ways to change or enhance the academy and our approach to communicating ideas and knowledge, not just to our peers but to the world beyond. "You're ready to tell it. Your job here is to create a text in which the person or persons you have learned about come to life. What one writes can make what was studied tangible, compelling, credible or flat, uninteresting, questionable." (Margaret Anzul, Margot Ely et al. 1991, p. 167) Knowledge, language and ideas should be shared in order to inform and enhance the world but in order to do this, we must engage our readership and help the stories of research to come to life. "Indeed, we can do work that can be shared with everyone." (hooks 2003, p. xii), academic writing should be challenging but it need not be impenetrable to those in and outside the academy.

By carrying out an informal interview with a successful academic writer I hope to fulfil two objectives; one is to gain insight into her writing process and the other is to explore means of writing up data in a creative way. By using narrative and autobiography I hope to feel that my academic voice is my voice and not merely me pretending to be something I feel I am expected to be. This means avoiding the traditionally accepted methods of analysis and

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remaining objective in my work but rather allowing the reader to see inside, not only the life of my interviewee, but also into my view of academic writing and how that view has come to be.

Methodology

“‘Boring’ is a word that is often used by lay people to describe academic writing of all kinds....One has to wonder why the colourful and frequently emotionally charged experiences are often edited out of the final accounting.”

(Monchamp 2007, p. 1)

The concept of doing and writing up research in a creative way is not a new one (Grumet 1981; Cortazzi 1993; Charmaz 1995; Ely, Vinz et al. 1997; Erben 1998; Usher 1998; Denzin and Lincoln 1998, 2003; Ellis and Bochner 1998, 2003; Richardson 1998, 2003; Bruner 2004; Perselli 2004; Antoniou and Moriarty 2006; Short, Grant et al. 2007; Sparkes 2007; Caulley 2008; Trahar 2008). Communicating data as poetry, scripts, creative fiction, creative non-fiction, biography and autobiography are just some of the ways that academics have sought to engage their readership in their work (for some of the examples see (Grumet 1981; Ely, Vinz et al. 1997; Ellis and Bochner 1998, 2003; Holloway and Jefferson 2000; Sparkes 2002; Short, Grant et al. 2007; Sparkes 2007) . In ethnography in particular, it is now widely accepted that there is a biographical and autobiographical dimension to the detailing the lives of others and expressing one’s experience of being with and observing those others (Coffey 1999). Because of this, “Rarely are the relations of fieldwork epistemologically and personally insignificant.” (Coffey 1999, p. 159). To deny a personal interest in those who we observe and our experiences of the research is to deny a truth; if we do not care on a personal or professional level, why are we bothering to do it at all? Qualitative research generally encourages this humanising approach; humanising the researcher and the researched, “Qualitative researchers are off the hook, so to speak. They don’t have to try and play God, writing as disembodied omniscient narrators claiming universal, a temporal general knowledge: they can eschew the questionable metanarrative of scientific objectivity and still have plenty to say as situated

speakers, subjectivities engaged in knowing/telling about the world as they perceive it.”

(Richardson 1998, 2003, p. 508).

Reflexivity in practice has been widely accepted as a valuable way of enhancing practice, personal and professional development (Schon 1987), not least in teaching practice where it is understood that, “To improve educational systems, we need to know more about teachers’ perspectives. We need to know how teachers themselves see their situation, what their experience is like, what they believe and how they think. In short, we need to know more about teachers’ culture from the inside.” (Cortazzi 1993). Similarly, researchers can also enhance and provide insight into their practice through their descriptions of what they have experienced and then reflecting on these experiences. In this case, employing narrative and autobiographical techniques to tell the story of our research becomes imperative. “The narrative account must therefore carry the teacher’s voice if researchers and other observers are to know what a teacher knows or feels. Indeed, how can anyone else know what is inside the teacher’s head or heart without the teacher’s commentary?” (Cortazzi 1993)

Considering the background, experience and thoughts/reflections of the writer/researcher is becoming of increasing value in Qualitative Research although it is so far a relatively untapped resource (Agar 1996). A reason for this might be that using autobiography, narrative and reflection on experience is still challenged as being problematic in terms of impact on practice. Even I can accept that enhancing my practice cannot be done merely by imparting my thoughts and ideas in a creative way, it needs the discipline and bolster of academic research. In a journal article motivated by conference sessions on teacher research where teachers 'reported' their classroom experiences, Brooker and Macpherson stated that, "These insider accounts were grounded in practice, were interesting, reflected a deep sense of commitment on the part of the teller and were seemingly appreciated by other conference

participants...This experience raised two questions in our mind: What had been the contribution of these stories to the audiences understanding of the social practice that they had represented? How had they added to the theory about that practice?" (Brooker and Macpherson 1999, p. 208) They went on to challenge such accounts of practitioner research calling them, "little more than picturesque journeys of self indulgent descriptions of 'this is what I did'..." (Brooker and Macpherson 1999, p. 210). There is also the potential for romanticising experience (Silverman 1993) and of being narcissistic when one's life is up for scrutiny, but, "it (autobiography) is an evolving method and this idea needs to be exposed and then corrected." (Grumet 1981). The potential to write about oneself and one's experience and for it to be meaningful and academically rigorous however, need not be mutually exclusive.

My aim is to detail the experience of my interview with the hope that it will motivate some readers to ask themselves, 'what do I think?' and to promote reflection (Schon 1983; Schon 1987). I accept that this naturalistic method of research has been discredited by some as being potentially simplistic (Silverman 1993) but in the discipline of creative writing, showing and not telling is widely accepted as best practice (Goldberg 1986; Bell and Magrs 2001) for drawing the reader into the world of the story by providing depth and making the written seem more real. When reading a work of fiction, I expect the author to build character, setting and plot by providing a vivid three dimensional perspective and as a lecturer, I tell my students to show, not tell, in their own creative pieces. It would therefore be unnatural to myself as a researcher to just tell people what I have discovered and not show them using creative techniques to build a more three dimensional world for my reader. In Qualitative and Narrative Research this idea is more commonly accepted as the role of the researcher is to provide insight into lived experiences and provide emphasis on the meanings that people ascribe to these experiences (Trahar 2008). In doing so, do we run the risk of

producing work that is somehow invalid? “This selection process of framing and bounding the story will affect what is written....It is impossible to tell the truth, the whole, truth and nothing but the truth.” (Caulley 2008, p. 446-447). I would argue that this is not just true in story telling but in any academic writing. It is inevitable in any reader/author relationship that the author must eventually let go and let the reader make their own mind up about what is really going on. To do otherwise is to become passive as a reader and fully omnipotent as a writer and as a creative and academic writer, this is unacceptable to me – I want to engage my reader. If I no longer want my creative and academic selves to be totally separate then it is important that I begin to apply the same standards to both entities.

Understanding more about the world view of the writer then becomes a necessity because, as in all research, it is the author who chooses what is worth noticing, what has the most meaning in their subject’s experience (Mason 2002). Combining my own autobiography with my the life experiences of my interviewees then becomes more possible, “Qualitative writing becomes very much an unfolding story in which the writer gradually makes sense, not only of her data, but of the total experience of which it is an artefact....The voice and person of the researcher as a writer not only becomes a major ingredient of the written study, but has to be evident for meaning to become clear.” (Holliday 2002, p. 131). Usher provides an additional rationale for using autobiography in research in that, “Autobiographies tend to be read through the need for a ‘human’ presence in the writing, a need to locate the person ‘behind’ the text. Once discovered, this presence seems to guarantee both the sincerity and the authenticity of the self of the story.” (Usher 1998, p. 21). This combination of autobiography and narrative enables the researcher to give insight into complex worlds but also to examine their own identity and world view and explore this through their writing which will enable the reader further insight but also help them to consider factors that might influence their perspective and in turn the usefulness of their research (Trahar 2008).

My focus is a combination of Naturalism and Emotionalism (Silverman 1993), observing my subjects in their natural state and not attempting to impose meaning on them. The open-ended is often used in Emotionalist research in order to facilitate intimate contact between the interviewee and interviewer, in an attempt to “understand the impact of the biography of both researchers and subjects.” (Silverman 1993, p. 57) although I accept that the interview can never be a truly natural environment. Emotionalism satisfies my aim to use open ended interviews and adopt an auto/biographical approach, my problem here is with the ‘intimate contact’, rather I intend to elicit “authentic accounts of subjective experience....The key here is to establish rapport with respondents and to avoid manipulating them.” (Silverman 1993, p. 122) . This humanistic approach that can lead to ‘analytical laziness’ (Silverman 1993, p. 127) however, in order to meet the criteria of the EdD, I will have to ensure that this is not the case. Emotionalists also seek to elicit emotions from their readers and my aim is that the work will move the reader in some way and prevent an objective view from being possible. I am ready to say something more about me in order that the reader understands my world view and perspective a little better before I commence the interviewing process:

I was 30 this year. I am a 30 year old, white lecturer who has lived and worked in Brighton for most of my life. At the moment I live on the outskirts of the city with my partner, Paul and every other weekend and in the school holidays his 8 year old son Alfie. I have been lecturing in Creative Writing at the University of Brighton for the past 4 years but I also carry out research and have an involvement in pastoral work within the school. I still pinch myself when I think about what I do for a living; I genuinely do love my job. Politically I am left wing although recently I have found it difficult to ally with a political party, preferring instead to call myself a Humanist. I am a Feminist woman who writes and rather than a Feminist writer – I do not ‘do’ Feminism, I just am one and in that I mean that I do not chose

to carry out Feminist work, it is in everything I am and do - it is an organic part of my being. My mother is a counsellor and my father an actor, both went to university and I am the oldest child of two, my brother, Matthew, is 19 months younger than me and studying to be a Human Rights Barrister. These are almost bullet points of my life to date but they are also influencing factors on who I am and the work I do. At this point, I am a Qualitative Researcher carrying out research that I hope will help me to explore and understand academic's experiences with writing. I intend to merge my creative and academic selves and write up my research using Narrative and Auto/biographical styles in order to tell the story of my interviewees, give the reader insight into their lives and my own life in order to promote a more holistic, personal and emotional approach to academic writing. I hope that in doing this that the reader and I will come to know my subjects, the world and myself a little better and that this in turn will help them to understand themselves, their approach to writing and their own world view more clearly.

Methods

“Open-ended interview Flexibility; rapport with interviewee; active listening.”

(Silverman 1993, p. 110)

In order to develop my own writing by writing as narrative and/or autobiography but also to enhance my practice, I have chosen to interview a university professor with an extensive writing portfolio in order to gain insight into their writing process and to identify any shared barriers and motivators with writing. This is to build on my previous work where I interviewed participants from a writing retreat and found that issues with time and space, voice and/or academic identity and writer's block provided the impetus for applying for the retreat. By interviewing the professor, I hope to find possible solutions for these concerns and hope that their experiences will inspire or at least interest other academic writers.

My sample data was small, only one interviewee but my intention was to carry out an extended informal interview with commentary containing my reflections and analysis that I hoped would make the data more insightful than in the past when in chopping my interviews up, I felt that I had lost the stories of my interviewees. My previous research used semi-structured interviews (Foddy 1993; Charmaz 1995; Rubin and Rubin 1995; Kvale 1996; Denzin and Lincoln 1998, 2003; Gillham 2000; Drever 2003; Holstein and Gubrium 2003) in order to elicit personal reflections. The interviewee's input was warm and generous and there was a real sense that, for many of us, problems with academic writing are shared. It was frustrating that despite the quality and interest of the responses, many of the stories were lost in the shaping and editing. On reading Coffey and Atkinson's work I was struck that my own writing had indeed shattered the narratives, “Our interview informants may tell us long and complicated accounts and reminiscences. When we chop them up into separate coded segments, we are in danger of losing the sense that they are accounts. We lose sight, if we

are not careful, of the fact that they are couched in terms of stories – as narratives...” (Coffey and Atkinson 1996, p. 52)

I was also conscious that when interviewing participants from the retreats, I was amongst friends, people who I had met with and worked before and that they may have been tempted to tell me what I wanted to hear, certainly their feedback was unanimously positive. I expected the professor to be more challenging in her responses and in her expectations of me as a researcher and I did not want her to feel that I was wasting her time. It was important that she felt valued and that I engaged with her responses. I had selected the interviewee because I found her inspiring in terms of the volume, style and quality of their written output – I genuinely wanted to hear about her experiences with academic writing and encourage her to describe and reflect on these insights in some detail. “In open interviews people tell stories, narratives about their lives. In current thought, there is a shift from modern formalized knowledge systems to the narrative knowledge embodied in storytelling.” (Kvale 1996, p. 1) By encouraging my interviewee to tell me her stories I believe I have been able to enhance my rationale for writing up my data as narrative.

I e-mailed a professor who I perceived to be successful in terms of their written output, (successful because of the volume and national and international interest in their work) and asked them if they were prepared to be interviewed as part of my research into academic writing. (Because this was a small scale project, I felt that this small sample was acceptable however in the future I would aim to interview a broader range of people.) She responded positively and I e-mailed again with my reflections on my last piece of research and where I felt I was at going with this project (See Appendix 1). I then asked for dates that were convenient and asked to visit them in their offices. This, I hoped, would make it clear that I was grateful for her time and build some immediate rapport.

I devised 15 open-ended questions (See Appendix 2) that I hoped would ignite some meaningful reflection on academic writing but I was also prepared to go off text and respond to individual comments with follow up questions or my own thoughts and ideas. In doing so, I hoped to draw out details and build a rapport with my subjects. Due to the Emotionalist approach I intended to take in order not just to accept but encourage the personal, it felt natural to attempt a more open interview style that might also help to develop my Qualitative Research skills, “Qualitative interviewing builds on the conversational skills that you already have...The researcher encourages the interviewee to reflect, in detail, on events they have experienced.” (Rubin and Rubin 1995, p. 1-2). My intention was to use the interview to enhance my practice by giving accounts of a senior academic’s approach and experiences with writing, exploring ways of writing up data that would enhance rather than destroy the interviewee’s stories and effectively develop myself as a writer and researcher. This three-pronged approach seemed reasonable as in the telling and hearing of stories we can hope to know ourselves and the world a little better. “The lives of others, in written form as well as the flesh, interact with us, keep us company, and tell us about ourselves.” (Campbell 1997, p. 69)

Ethics

A fundamental problem with my interviews and the writing up of the data will be confidentiality. If I am telling the story of my research and using autobiography and narrative, guaranteeing anonymity will be virtually impossible. In order to combat this, I have changed the names of my interviewee and omitted any details that I feel will expose them directly. Transcripts of the interviews were also sent to the interviewee, asking them if on reflection there were any comments they would prefer to be left out. In order to maintain a rapport with my interviewee, I have accepted that anything they decide to cut will not go in the final report.

Findings

“My intent was to bring their experiences to life for the reader rather than simply try to explain them...” (Dundar Jnr and Rodriguez 2003, p. 146)

What follows is the edited transcript of my interviews with ‘Alice’, interspersed with my own narrative and reflections on what was discussed that are distinguished from our conversation in italics. The writing in italics is my attempt to be personal and creative in the writing up of my data. The indented sections that are in bold provide my analysis of the interview that evolved having considered the interview data and my personal reflections on the Alice’s answers in relation to my own experience with academic writing, thus drawing together my personal quest to be creative and my objective to produce meaningful data on the academic writing process. It should be stated here that the interview focuses on Alice’s experiences with academic writing only. When we discuss ‘the writing’ it means academic rather than personal or creative writing.

Interview 1 – Alice (A) and me (I)

Before I interview Alice, I am invited to watch her give a lecture. Its 9am on a Monday in May so I am genuinely surprised that the lecture hall is full of first year undergraduates. As they troop in, Alice greets them by name and says something positive to them, ‘I love your shoes’, ‘Great hair’, ‘Did you do well on that essay for X?’. They respond enthusiastically, all of them, spurred on by the cakes and crisps coming round the room to celebrate the end of term. This is something I do with my students but not with Alice’s flair; I hand out inexpensive chocolates, she has luxury crisps and a whole birthday cake. The atmosphere is infectious, not least because despite the early start, the students seem almost as charged and engaged as Alice. She spots me and glides over, embracing me and telling me I am beautiful. Try as I might, the blush seeps through my cheeks – she got me but I don’t mind. I can’t deny

that I am excited. I saw Alice give her inaugural lecture earlier in the year to a packed theatre where I had felt sort of euphorically tidal waved by the end, entertained, challenged and provoked but also humbled by a woman who has achieved such a vast amount in a relatively short space of time. I wasn't the only person wondering how she does it then so it is a personal thrill that I am going to get the chance to find out. Her publishing record is not unlike a Yellow Pages in size, along with her accolades and awards for her contribution to teaching, learning and the world in general, her CV makes for impressive and daunting reading. Even before I get the chance to ask her how she has done it, I am pretty sure that there's no magic formula, just hard work, enthusiasm, focus, belief and passion which I have, just not in the unrelenting quantities that Alice seems to possess.

The lecture is a full throttle, multi media event and at the end her students applaud and queue up, (queue up!) to thank her and hug or kiss her. I ask one of the students if it is always like this, "Oh yes!" she smiles. "How did you all react at first?" "We were a bit shocked but now we prefer it." "And what about your other lecturers?" I ask, already dreading the answer, "We wish they were all like this." she says brightly.

On the way to Alice's office she is trailed by myself, a prospective PhD student and some of her undergraduates who want advice on other areas of their work. She listens to all of them and suggests time slots for later that day or week when she can fit them in. No one gets turned away or fobbed off. I feel as if I am part of an entourage but that the diva has time for everyone, we are all made to feel included in her orbit. Eventually, the door to her office is closed and the interview starts, the PhD student is invited to stay which I don't mind and so he does. The audience genuinely doesn't bother me as I am beginning to feel tidal-waved again, having him there enables me to consider an observer and I try to get a grip and

remember I am here to do some research, not just get an autograph and a picture of the two of us together on my phone. I breathe and start.

I So the first question is, Isaiah Berlin talks about hedgehogs and foxes, I am a hedgehog at the moment, hoping to evolve into a fox, but you are a fox, clearly – your outlook is so varied and diverse. Why do you choose to work like this? Even in the lecture, and the articles I have read by you, its bits of everything that you manage to drag in. Why is it like that for you?

A I suppose, um, to understand me you have to understand politics. I am on the left, and I am proudly on the left, and I am a social democrat and I believe that we came into being to create social change. I try and enact those political situations, in the teaching that I do, in the formal academic work that I do, and in the journalism that I do, I see political changes coming to all those different fora, and so therefore I have to do all that different fora.

Having said that, I came from a really pretty rough background, no one in my family went to university, I came from a house without books: so for someone from my sort of background to become a professor is a miracle, but the way I suppose I have had to do it is work incredibly hard. I wish I could lie to you, but just incredibly hard. The only way white middle class Englishmen would even look at somebody like me is if I had three and four and five times the qualifications they had, and three, four and five times the books and the articles that they had. Therefore that is how I got through. That's my commitment; that's my belief; and that's how I got there. But has it been a joy? Absolutely. The teaching is a joy, the teaching is a pleasure, the writing is a pleasure.

Alice launches in with the personal from the word go. She tells her story as it is in the present and as it was in the past. By commenting on her political motivations and her family background, she enforces the idea that her

academic self is the result of her experiences, of who she is. If this is the case, then why are we (academics) traditionally discouraged from including such details in our written research and letting our readers know who we are? This fuels my argument for leaving the personal in and showing the reader who the authorial voice is so that they can get a better understanding of my worldview and where my writing and research is coming from in terms of inspirations and motivations as in many ways this will give them better tools for understanding what it is I have tried to accomplish and why.

I Rage is a powerful motivator in your work, is there a lot to be said for writing with rage in your heart and in your mind?

A Yes, and particularly if you believe in politics and political change, you have got to do it from a position of anger. I mean its Marx 101, you have got to see the consciousness, see the experience, see the inner quality, and then you can do something about it.

I I think that's my big problem with academic writing, that I feel almost that you have to drain the rage, drain the passion, drain the heart out of it. That's kind of how I felt when I started. Now more and more I feel that that's not true. But I was scared to put any emotion in. I had to separate the two people out – have you ever felt like that?

A No. But there are costs if you don't. I mean again we are going to call a spade a bloody shovel, but yes there is and I would probably write a bit strangely because I come from an oral culture, so it is a bit odd. And certainly academics at this University, much to my amusement have said "oh you don't really write in an academic way" so "thanks so much for sharing that with me! I have written 10 books and you've written one – talk to the hand" (laughter) But the consequences of that is that you are treated poorly, like you are not a proper academic – and of course I'm a chick and, ah it's a nightmare. But if you are

prepared to take that. You have got to believe in your work! You've got to! What you've got to do to survive is disconnect from critiques from other people. Never read reviews, never read user generated content bollocks, never engage with it. Believe and then you will be ok. Believe in your path, believe in your journey.

She is so unlike the stereotypical but also prevalent image and persona of your typical professor. There are no elbow pads, slow pauses or meandering passages, it is rapid machine gun fire and dodge or be damned. At times, I am left thinking, 'yes, that is what it is like', to be a woman in academia and also to think that you have to do it the way of the white, male hierarchy in order to feel accepted but she has achieved so much, they have to accept that she is a power in her own right. I don't have this kind of impact factor but nor do 99.99% of my colleagues. Has it always been like this for her? How did she build her 'swell'?

Early on in her academic career, Alice seems to have had a similar experience to my own, (although perhaps for different reasons to my own), of feeling as if she were outside the academy. This is highlighted by the comment, "you are treated poorly, like you are not a proper academic.....it's a nightmare." Alice

This seems to be a shared view by most people who become academics, certainly in my previous research, the interviewees felt as if they had to take on an identity that was not yet their own (Moriarty 2007). The fact that this had also been the experience of a senior colleague was comforting and motivational to me; perhaps I just needed to persevere? Unlike myself however, Alice thought that being left on her own to 'get on with it' had been challenging but enabled her to follow her own path and go on her own journey and that this had been a benefit.

I Early on how did you find the culture, before the rage of education, when you first started?

- Motivational
- Supportive
- Paranoid
- Jealous
- All of the above

Do you think you have been moulded by your experience of academia or you've always dealt with it on your own terms?

A I have always dealt with it on my own terms. Because when I started I was so young. I got my first academic job when I was 22/23, I was a 5'2" blonde, I looked like a post-operative drag queen! No one was going to be remotely frightened or worried, of me at all. I was very, very junior, I was doing all the teaching under God's earth, as all the junior staff have to do, so I was, '*why would they hassle me?*' because I was doing their job for them. I just kept going, "I believe in teaching" and they were "*well let her keep believing in teaching*" so I was ignored, for probably the first 10 years as a junior staff member.

Then as the books started to emerge, book 2, book 3 and I got to 50 or 60 refereed articles, and then it's funny to say that suddenly something like a light was turned on and they were like "*right! she could be a problem*". And so a lot was done to try and keep me in a box, push me down, but me in the teaching bundle, put me in the teaching box, because that's of course how it works too. If you're a woman, you can write, but if you teach as well you're a teacher – and you can't do both!! So that was the oddity of it but I said I will do both and I will find my own way. And I won't have the weird mentors and me going "*darling I will look after you*" (laughter) yukky, yukky, yukky. So there are costs and consequences. But the thing is when you have made it, and I probably have, but when you have made it you

don't owe anybody anything. You have made it on your own terms, and that's what I feel like.

I wouldn't have minded the odd mentor but I don't tell her this. The idea of a senior academic advising me on my writing and research when I joined the university was and still is a bit of a dream of mine but I don't say in case she thinks that makes me weak. I don't mean a lecherous male mentor with designs on something other than my academic growth! Luckily I never received 'that' offer, but I have met many senior colleagues that I have respected and admired and feel I could have learnt a lot from through a shared research and/or writing project. Without a mentor, she is right, I am making it on my own terms but it is slow going sometimes and I still find myself unsure if I am getting it right and desperate to ask someone I look up to, 'what do you think?' but my experience of academia is that we don't do this. In my previous research, the writing retreat participants said that they valued a community of writers, a shared approach and I have heard of it happening elsewhere (Lee and Boud 2003; Moore 2003; Murray and Moore 2006) but Alice seems to enforce the notion that you grit your teeth and you get on with it and you sink or swim. I'm pretty sure I'm not sinking but I'm no Michael Phelps either.

Before I started the interview, I had felt that having a mentor in the academy to advise me on research and inviting me to co-author articles would have been an enormous plus but perhaps in years to come I will value the sense of 'I did it my way!'. For many academics the idea of a community of writers or some form of support network is described as being a real benefit (Moore 2003) and I have felt that sharing my work with others has improved my confidence as when working in solitary confinement I could only hear the voice of my inner critic telling me that I was not good enough to be an

academic and participants on the writing retreat shared this view. Alice's argument is that if you are a professor, who do you get to mentor you? You are the best of the best and should therefore have the belief, the confidence and the skill to get on with the job and trust your own judgement. Part of the process of gaining confidence and belief in my academic work has for me, and others I have spoken to, has been tied up with the feedback process and gaining constructive criticism from my peers. I can envisage that removing this element of my own writing process would increase my productivity but I enjoy and benefit from the sense of community and the support I get from my colleagues. At present and until my writing is more established, the feedback process is a barrier for Alice that provides a motivator for me.

I This is more about the physical. I have heard that you write at 3.00am in the morning. Why is that? Has it always been that way?

A My whole family gets up very early. And I have always, yes I have always get up at 3 and I always will get up at 3, I naturally bounce out of bed at 3. Wide awake. So there's no problem. And I write. I write between 3 and 5.15am then I throw myself in the shower. Then I go in the gym between 6.30 and 7.30-8.00. So I have always. I write best in the morning. Then I do sort of not as intellectually stimulating or difficult work through the day. Sometimes I draft during the day, but the interesting writing, that comes in one piece, I am writing journalism say; the journalism that comes in one piece, when it does, comes in the morning.

I had initially hoped that this was an urban myth but when Alice confirms her daily routine I find it strangely comforting because well, that's it then. I will never naturally bounce out of bed at 3am. I cannot be her. Is this the only way to do it though? Do we all have to be

superhuman if we want to be accepted as academics who want to find alternative paths to the established trench that seems to be our legacy?

I So are there any other physical preferences? Do you write in a certain place? With pen first? Music playing?

A One of those weird pen people! No I write straight onto the keyboard. You do as well? Straight onto the keyboard, tremendous, no problems at all. I have music going the whole time, generally dance music, electronic music. I love that. It helps me a lot. The rhythm helps me a lot. Yeh, I have a big house, thank God, wonderful, husband writes on the second floor and I write on the third floor. We sometimes meet on the bottom floor and watch telly. Yes tremendous – my own space, technology, printers, everything, yes, great. Couldn't hope for better. But I have written anywhere. I have written on the kitchen table, sometimes if I have an idea I write a whole piece out on the train.

Alice has dedicated time and space to write in that she feels enhances her writing process. Certainly for me, writing when I find time here and there is the norm but the ideal is to carve out chunks of dedicated time where I can sit at my desk and just write. This is a luxury however and not just for me. On all of the writing retreats, undergraduate classes and workshops I have facilitated, problems with time and space provide consistent barriers to getting on with the writing. Juggling work and life is hard enough so writing becomes a thing to be done on top of the lesson planning, the marking, the pastoral and academic work with students, the meetings, the gym, the family, the partner, the children, the eating, the breathing. It becomes a chore, another plate to spin. Alice has made time and space at 3am, confirming her status as a formidable professional and superhuman

but for the rest of us, or certainly for me, this will never be our reality.

Finding time and space remains a problem that may only be solved when we accept that as academics, we are also writers and that this aspect of our job is further legitimised in terms of allocated time and space for writing defined in our allocation of hours and even in our job descriptions.

I Do you ever experience writer's block? *Please say yes, please say yes.*

A No. *Blast!*

I Any barriers?

A No. *She's not pretending.*

This is unusual by anyone's standards. Most of us will admit to Hoovering, tidying, tea making and drinking, playing solitaire (my own guilty secret), e-mails or indeed anything to stop us from having to get on with or at least to distract us from the process of writing. I enjoy writing and even then will make reams and reams of notes so that I feel mentally prepared to get going and on occasion the words do not come because I am tired or because I am preoccupied or, and most usually, because I have a million other things to do and while I can do a million other things all at one time, I cannot write and do anything else, I have to be focused on the task. Alice's confidence and professionalism is impressive, startling in fact but it is also, in my experience, not the norm with any writing.

I Any motivators for writing?

A No. it's the job. I see it as a skill. I see it as a craft. This might help you I hope. I see writing as a skill, you do as well. I don't see it as a challenge, I don't see it as creative, I don't see it as – Oh my inner child is speaking – no, it's a craft and it's a skill.

You can switch it on and off. I have never had writer's block and I have never had any problems writing at all. On a good day I can write 12,000 or 13,000 words. On a mediocre day, like today, when I am teaching, I will write 4,000 words. That's every day! Tremendous. Never a problem in the world!

I agree with her, it is a job, a skill, a profession and if we all got up at 3am and wrote before going to the gym then the world would be a better place. 13,000 words a day and I would be on a beach in Greece instead of holed up writing my EdD! I am reminded of the closing scene from Elizabeth (Kapur 1998) when she reveals the change in dress and appearance that created her iconic image. As she enters the room, her subjects bow, humbled by her mere presence, no longer seeing her as a woman but as their Queen. This is what listening to Alice is like. Her stories are human, they are lived, but at the same time I am tempted to lean over and prod her to make sure that she isn't made of metal. I am further convinced that she is indeed a Terminator or Cyborg when she tells me that she never reads fiction.

A No. I don't read any fiction at all!

I Really!!

A No. I don't read any fiction at all. The only fiction I ever read was at school, I never read any fiction. I am only interested in non fiction. People who have lived – things that have happened.

I Do you see creative writing as a kind of luxury?

A No. I am just not interested!

I Do you think you ever will be?

A No. no. I am not remotely interested; I am interested in history; in political tracts; in all sorts of non-fiction; speeches and stuff; have zero interest in fiction. It horrifies people, I am so sorry. I have zero interest in literature. I did it and read it at school; I did incredibly well at it and I haven't read a fiction book since. Haven't read a fiction book at all.

Ok, now she is scaring me. When I go on holiday, which is rare, I always go for two weeks, I always go abroad despite it being morally bereft to fly now, and I take at least 10 novels so that I can lose myself in a different culture, another language and also so that I can be immersed in creative fiction. It is the only thing that can rejuvenate me at the end of an academic year. Where is her 'off' switch? How can she maintain this focus and commitment to work without any outlets for escape?

I One of the people I interviewed last year, who is a professor at Sussex, he said that academic writing is the Halal of writing because its all the blood and guts strained out of it, whereas creative writing the blood and guts are there, they are back in. But your writing has the blood and guts in it. It's not been bled.

A I am interested in war, and militarism, and anger, and violence and debate and struggle so that seems to be really *bloody* and interesting. Sweaty, I like sweaty writing. And of course I take all adjectives out. I like a really, really straight and clear to the point, short sentences straight through. Yep. It's non-fiction. I read umm eighteen books a week, all non-fiction.

I decide at this point that she must have cloned herself and that I don't need to be more like her; I just need more of me.

I The passion is still, it's not dry like academic writing is perceived to be by a lot of people. Your writing is full of passion.

A But also I feel guilty, because I have made my own way and I am prepared to deal with the consequences. But, also, I am a professor, and I feel really guilty about that talking to you, because here I am on a £50G a year, nice house, fantastic job, wonderful students and I don't have to play by the rules. There will be consequences when I don't and I get beaten around the head but I have made it so I can keep going. But I have also got to be careful when I'm helping you move through the stages of your career, bow a little bit more to the master on the way through, so you can find your own pathway.

In essence, many of the barriers and motivators for writing that I have discovered in myself but also by interviewing participants from the writing retreats are not shared by Alice as she has found the time and space to write and become confident in her writing process and because she has made it into the academy and, even more impressive, she has done it on her own terms. But she is the pinnacle, the summit. Realistically I can one day hope to timetable dedicated time and space for writing in my weekly timetable and I can expect that by continued practice, my writing will improve and develop but there are aspects of Alice's process that have to be bowed to or that one has to be terrified by. I believe in working at the university and within the academy with the aim of making the world a better place through the education and personal development of students and of my co-workers and of myself but my terms for making it are that I balance the vocational and the personal by leaving space for something other than academia, space to nurture myself and my own well-being and Alice's timetable leaves, as far as I can tell, little space for that.

I What do you read on holiday? Do you have a holiday?

A No. I haven't had a day off since 1993!

I (laughs) Oh. Nausea keeps coming. (laughter) No holidays! No literature! (laughter)

A Sorry sorry.

If I am to find my own pathway, then it has to be littered with holidays and novels. She has beaten the establishment but she has got there by surpassing their expectations, by going further, higher, being stronger and better than anyone else, male or female, in it. It isn't natural or holistic though, I can't do it like this. She is inspiring but you have to pick and choose the bits you can use as drivers, the whole package is inimitable, totally unique.

I You read a lot, not just for your research, but working with your students, your staff, your colleagues everything. How does that help your own writing process?

A The funny thing I don't think it necessarily does, to be honest with you. That seems like a terrible thing to say.

I Really? It's not terrible, it's surprising I suppose.

A I have to supervise probably 24 or 25 PhD students, with hundreds and thousands of words, every day. No it doesn't. It's at a different level to mine.

I Because your writing is so much yourself, if you like, it just means that - obviously when I read other peoples work it kind of develops my sense of what I think my writing is...

A That's wonderful, that's, wonderful!

I... but, you don't need that? You're sure? Or ..

A I suppose I am. But I also treat it like I am being helpful. And I will say do this, and mark this, like I did with Ray, (the PhD student). Ray's got wonderful ideas. Brilliant; craft it;

shape; and help if I can. But I am not necessarily sure – it doesn't, no it doesn't help me. It's what a professor should do; I will always do it – but I do it for that reason rather than some sort of selfish reason. But also remember, I have done a lot, I have supervised a lot of PhD students so of course that's at a lower level. If it's the worst piece of work they will ever do that's why it's a doctorate, if it was the best piece of work they wouldn't be needing to do a doctorate! So obviously it's at a lower level and my job is to help them lift. If it was at *my* level I wouldn't be supervising them.

When I first started lecturing in creative writing, I had a real panic: why would anyone care what I think about their work? I kept waiting for a student to dismiss my feedback and then for the rest of them to sneer and point at me but it hasn't happened and in the interim, I have read thousands and thousands of creative pieces and now see my ability to give insightful, useful and clear feedback as one of my key strengths. It should be, I have worked hard to hone it and make it that way but I still don't see my word as law. If another student challenges me or comes up with something better then fair enough but most of the time I am confident that what I think is right. That is part of the job right? Maybe I wrote the question expecting the saccharine response; 'yes, reading the work of my colleagues and peers really helps to inform and develop my own work' but Alice cuts to the chase and I can see that she's right. She is the law, she has achieved her status by being the person others turn to for guidance and advice, not the other way round so her response doesn't seem arrogant, it just seems true. I can't imagine that her inner critic gets much of a look in. That while I'm playing Solitaire and telling myself I'm not good enough, she's got another 12,000 words done.

I So it's (your writing) not for an audience? It's just what you think good writing is?

A I will use the example from Bob Dylan. The thing about Bob Dylan is he didn't write for an audience, they always said that Bob Dylan wrote a song and the audience would come to Dylan. And the weird thing is, and of course I heard that years after I had this, the audiences come to me. So I write as think, its interesting, quirky, complicated writing – and then whenever I go and speak there is invariable fifty or sixty people with a back-pack full of books for me to sign. You don't think the audience is there and then out comes the books that they want you to sign. So – 'you've got 8 books?' they are 'oh yes' and I guess I'm like 'wow I didn't know you existed'.

Good to know I'm not her only attendee who was briefly confused, believing that they were a groupie at a concert and not observing an academic lecture.

Alice writes knowing that the audience would come to her. “the audiences come to me.....so actually I don't have a reader.” Alice, and therefore she chooses not to engage in a feedback process. This again is something I do not feel ready for and still rely on the comments of others to enhance my final product. Because I am not at the top of the food chain perhaps, I still need support from colleagues to make me feel as if I am on the right path or to reassure me that I am. I have found the feedback and advice of people I respect and trust to help my writing and my confidence with writing. That it is never helpful to hear, 'that was rubbish.', but that similarly, insightful critique of a piece can ultimately help to hone and lift my work.

I Do you have an emotional link to your writing or is it just the job. Can you separate out the emotion unless you think it is adding to the professional quality of writing?

A No. No its cold text. I control the words the words don't control me. The only joy I get out of writing is when I have written something funny. For me the hardest writing is comedic

writing. When I write funny stuff I do enjoy that. I write one in four or five, pieces that are comedic and I love that. If I make myself laugh I think its funny, I like that.

I A lot of your writing is funny.

A You are saying the same there. I wish it was more that way; but about a quarter of it is. But that's the only emotion that I love.

I But you think about a lot of professors writing, how many professors, when you read their work, are you moved, or do you laugh or do you feel angry, how often does that happen with academic writing? Maybe it's different for you. But it doesn't happen as often as I wish it did.

A I agree. And I think probably it's because I feel free. I really feel free.

(laughter)

I Free because of where you are now? Or have you always felt free. Free because you were ignored?

A I have always felt free. Because I come from a working class environment and a working class family – there is a confidence in that. You know who you are, you know where you have come from, you get on with everybody, you know your path. So if you know who you are and you know where you came from what could anybody else give you? What can they give you that your parents or your environment couldn't? That's how I feel. I have got this fantastic environment and I have got to use it!

Regardless of background, are many academics able to feel free?

Constrained by burgeoning workloads, the RAE and the pressure do achieve

high standards in all aspects of their work – I know where I have come from,

who my family are and where I am now and that brings me comfort and confidence but it is not ultimately freeing me in terms of my academic work. Alice has not felt a pressure to conform, she has resisted it and achieved professional success and international renown as a result but this is one story. I need other stories in order to unearth experiences that will tell me a little more about myself and how to improve my writing process, I can aspire to be like Alice but her pathway and journey are unique to her, by expanding my sample and interviewing a broader range of academics perhaps I can better understand and improve my own writing process and suggest possible pathways and routes for other people on their own unique journeys? Instead of telling people what they should be doing via the outcomes of my research, perhaps my writing could provide recommendations and possible stops on the tour that will enrich these journeys rather than trying to convince my readers that there is only one possible route, I would prefer to celebrate that there are many, some that we will share, some that we will go alone and others that we will invent for ourselves.

I So knowing yourself is really important.

A Yeh. And I fuck up all the time, I say that – and it's about acknowledging 'that went badly' 'that went well' 'how can we make it better'.

I Confidence to fail is the biggest part of confidence.

A Yep. The most courageous thing you can ever do is have the courage to be wrong. I always say that you have to have the courage to be wrong and do it anyway.

I haven't got there yet. I still don't feel free to follow my own path and rules, I still sometimes feel as if I am an academic outsider but rather than valuing this position I find myself working out a way in. why can't I celebrate the potential that wanting to be 'other' than the traditional academic brings and be confident in myself to at least try and achieve my ambitions on my terms? I may not be able to do it the way Alice has done it but that doesn't have to mean giving in and being what I think I am expected to be?

I It is frightening. It's inspiring but it's frightening, as well, to hear this. I was talking to your students. I was thinking about my experience of watching a normal lecture and then I compared your lecture, and this is a bit brown-nosing, I compared it to watching Madonna in concert, because I felt entertained, inspired, but I also felt completely inept and humbled. But also I could never be like that.

A Yes...You can be better. You can be better. I have so many limitations. So many things I can't do. And there are a few things I can do, luckily I am in a job that can do them. But 99% of things I can't do. You are better, because you are more balanced and you are more reflexive: and I am not at all.

I This thing about confidence is really coming through. That knowing yourself, confident about where you are in your life, the impact on your writing, your teaching, your world view, and even the students say that. That is the thing that came through as well.

A But why would I be worried about what other people think? Who are they? Who are they? I feel that I am contributing to the country. Doing good work. If they don't like what I do that's tremendous – off you go and do it yourself.

And the interview ends. Alice thanks me and promises to read my work and give me feedback which is incredible in terms of her generosity but also because I am already

worried what she will think of my urge to mix the creative and the academic. She tells me that she isn't worried about anonymity, I guess because she believes in herself, in what she says and thinks and writes and that therefore hiding her light is insulting and redundant. 'Be proud of who you are and what journey you are on, follow your own path.' – no problem if you're up at 3 every morning and get a standing ovation on Monday 9am! I am inspired though, buzzing and sort of cross with myself for being so seduced and dazzled by my experience. I'm not even at the car before I've rung my partner and given him a blow by blow account of how it went. I monologue at him for twenty minutes before he asks me how I feel, "Tidal-waved." "You need a holiday." he says. How do I tell him that all holidays are off so that I can be professor in the next 5 years?

My analysis and the chopping and coding of data in the past has, in comparison with the narrative of my interview with Alice, seemed dry and lifeless. This could arguably be a comment on my analysis but more I feel it is just how I feel about 'good' writing. Showing and not telling is, for me, the only way to communicate ideas and experiences and using narrative in my research is something I feel I must continue to practice as this assignment has shown me the possibility of writing the emotional, the personal, the lived and that, for me, has brought back the pleasure of writing.

Conclusion

“Qualitative researchers want those who are studied to speak for themselves, to provide their perspectives in words and other actions. Therefore, qualitative research is an interactive process in which the persons studied teach the researcher about their lives.” (Margaret Anzul, Margot Ely et al. 1991, p. 4)

Interviewing Alice was inspiring, motivational and engaging and I believe that in telling her stories instead of chopping and coding and manipulating what they said that I might be able to provide some insight into academic writing practices that will be useful and illuminating to colleagues in the field. By maintaining the ‘I’ voice and writing from the heart as well as the head, I hope to show the reader what writing and working as an academic can really be like and that perhaps that will help them to understand their own writing and their own worlds a little better as a result, even if it is to say, ‘my experience is nothing like that.’

My personal quest to be more creative in my academic writing and maintain a sense of the personal has therefore been fulfilled. I now see a clear path forwards through my thesis and the final stage of my EdD. I also feel confident that I have provided insight into the academic writing process of a professor who has achieved international acclaim for her writing and believe that her answers have confirmed a few of my own issues with academic writing:

- That it is not easy, it is a discipline and a skill.
- That it takes dedicated time and space to write effectively.
- That confidence and self belief are intrinsic to battling writer’s block.
- That we can write from the heart about what moves us.

- That the traditional constraints of academic writing exist but that it is possible to do it on your own terms.

There are aspects of academic writing that I feel need exploring in more depth, including a community of practice, giving and receiving feedback and the allocation of academic workloads and how this impacts on one's ability to write and write well. As part of my thesis, I hope to carry out further informal interviews and collate an academic version of The Paris Review Interviews (Gourevitch 2007) with the aim of providing ideas, inspirations and prompts for discussion on the academic writing process.

When I became a lecturer, I wondered how or when I would become an academic. I felt as if I was attempting to infiltrate a secret gang with a secret language that they used for writing up their research, a language and style that I often found impenetrable, or disengaging or dull. In a time where we/I wonder who has the monopoly on power and democracy I wonder if the academy in its traditional form, white, male, hierarchical, is trying to maintain a grip on types of knowledge by maintaining a writing style that excludes rather than includes readership? Yes, academic work must be rigorous and challenging but it can also be holistic and human. We can tell stories about the people involved in our research and our own human experiences instead of trying to be omnipotent deities in our writing and stop pretending that our work is not personal, emotional and part of who we are.

I have now been a lecturer, researcher and writing practitioner for four years – I am an academic. The Professional Doctorate in Education has helped me to develop, enhance and understand this identity and now, as a result of this project, it has helped me to realise that I

Professional Doctorate in Education
Assignment 3

can be all of these things and be real about who I really am in my writing, that I do not need to pretend to be someone or something that I am not. I just need to tell it how it is, how I see it and hope that by being clear about who I am and what I think will in some way be useful, illuminating or engaging to my reader – whoever they may be.

Word count without Bibliography: 13,028

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