ABSTRACT
            This paper discusses one author's decision to write a
fictive story about her experiences as a beginning professor. It highlights
her obligations to: a poster presentation on an arts-based approach to
research; the audience who would attend the poster presentation and read the
text; others who might appear in the text; and herself. Overall, her
obligations shaped her decision. Obligations to the conference influenced her
to write about something out of her own experience, using an arts-based
approach. Her obligation to show, rather than tell, the audience what
education was to her encouraged her to try fictionalizing her experiences.
Obligations to others in the story caused her to seek the guidance of others,
with people from outside and within the university reading and commenting on
the manuscript. Obligations to herself drove her to forge ahead in this
endeavor. She believes that sorting out these obligations helped her grow as
a researcher. Fiction allowed her to write about heroes and villains, evoking
rather than describing her experiences. It allowed her to write a story that
would affect readers at an immediate, emotional level while she made meaning
out of her relationship to the culture of higher education. (Contains 36
references.) (SM)

The Story Behind the Story

By

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Abstract

Under what circumstances might it be appropriate to fictionalize data? What obligations do we have to ourselves, the audience for our text(s), and the others who become part of our texts? What are the issues related to using this alternative format? In this writing story, I explore the questions and issues I faced as I made the decision to write a fictive story based on my experiences as a first year professor. I explain why I chose to fictionalize my experience, the issues I wrestled with, and what I learned from experimenting with this genre of arts-based research.

Obligations. Obligations to the Arts-Based Approaches to Research SIG poster presentation scheduled for AERA. Obligations to an audience: those who would attend the poster presentation and those who might read the text I created for the presentation. Obligations to the "others" who may appear in my text. Obligations to myself: to grow and learn as a qualitative, experimenting researcher. Obligations.

Just what were these obligations to these various entities? How might I use the sorting through of these obligations to solve my dilemma? You see, I had chosen to use my first year as a professor as the basis of the story I would present at the poster session. It had hit me in the shower: "I know, I'll fictionalize it!" By fictionalizing events, people, and places, I could write about sensitive, sometimes nasty, occasions, right? I would not have to be politically (or literally) correct, right? I could create characters who were heroes or villains and not everyone would have to live happily ever after, right? It was an opportunity to test my "artistic nerve" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 105) and "exploit the capacities of the mind to process information in a variety of ways" (Barone & Eisner, 1997, p. 91). (Right?)

This writing fable chronicles my wrestling with these questions, and more.

Obligations to the SIG

I had an obligation to the Arts-Based Approaches to Research SIG: I promised to make a contribution to the Poster session when I volunteered to be a participant. We had agreed to a common topic: What is "education"? We settled on a common research strategy: to use ourselves as the subject of research. We also had agreed to re-present our findings in an arts-based approach to research. When the proposal was accepted for AERA, I was committed to come up with my contribution to the poster session. By being a member of

the SIG and participating in the poster session, I also was committing to promote an awareness of arts-based approaches to research. Part of the purpose of the poster session was to educate others about the possibilities of alternative approaches to research.

So when it hit me in the shower that I could fictionalize my experiences as a first-year professor, one dilemma was solved: what would be my contribution to this poster session? By fictionalizing my experiences, I could write about "What is Education?," using my self as the subject of research. By fictionalizing it, I also was experimenting with an arts-based approach to research and what would be a new genre for me. This new genre offered the opportunity to experiment with a mode of storytelling that attempts to

> bridge the gaps between author and reader, between facts and truth, between cool reason and hot passion, between the personal and the collective, and between the drama of social life and the legitimized modes for representing it (Bochner & Ellis, 1998, p. 7).

It also would allow me the freedom to write about my experience (Frank, 2000) without holding me accountable for facts, but instead, holding me accountable for "communication of my interpretations and vision, my experiences, my emotions and values" (Banks, 200, p. 404).

I could fulfill my obligations to the SIG. Now, what about my obligations to the audience?

Obligations to the Audience

The first question I had to sort out here was which audience? My "choice of an audience, the conscious imagining of those who might read [or take in my] work" (Lincoln, 1997, p. 41) had an influence on the story I would tell. I had an obligation to the audience who would attend the poster session. But I also had an obligation to those who may read

the text I created. And what if, in that audience, were those who found "themselves in [a text] not of their own making" (Neumann, 1996, p. 191)?

My obligation to those who would attend the poster session was relatively simple to identify. They were the primary intended audience for this piece. Who would attend this session? Probably a lot of people like me: those who were interested in alternative forms of research and pushing the envelope with experimental forms. I knew there would be visual, dramatic, and poetic re-presentations of "What is education?" and that I may or may not be the only one using fictive techniques. I supposed that people who were just plain curious and wanted to see what this poster presentation was about would also attend. One of our goals as a SIG was to educate people as to what arts-based approaches to research were. So, in considering my audience, the purpose of the presentation, and my own desire to experiment with fictional techniques, it made sense to fictionalize my own experiences. The essence of my personal first year experience had a connection to a public purpose (Goodson & Walker, 1995).

My obligations to those who might read the text were less clear and far more complex. Again, part of the purpose of the piece was to educate people as to what arts-based approaches to research were. From preliminary feedback I had received, I also believed the piece may prove cathartic for those who lived the culture of institutions of higher education: "the charm of the single case that evokes the universal" (Banks, 200, p. 404). In that respect, a universal experience was conveyed in this particular story. I was not concerned so much about those who had no personal knowledge of my university. They would not be able to identify or speculate as to who the characters were based upon or which events were the basis for some of the dialogue. No, my concern lay with those who

WERE at my university and might see themselves in a text not of their own making (and not be pleased with how they were portrayed).

<u>Obligations to the "Others"</u>

How would I respond if someone from my School found themselves in this story and protested? I could point out that it was written as fiction and this is clearly stated in the beginning. Although I used my experiences and people I knew as a basis, the characters were not literal re-creations of these people. I could offer to rewrite the story, creating composite characters, disguising events even more than I did. I could use the "greater good" argument: it was a story about the nature of (higher) education, not specific events at the university. I could also use the "it's-not-so-unique" argument, citing that others from other universities confessed they had been in similar meetings, similar conversations, similar situations. I could point out that by writing from the third-person subjective point-of-view (Zeller, 1995) I had made myself into a character as well. I was an "other" in my own text (Richardson, 1998a). Finally, they were free to write their own version of the story if they did not care for mine.

As I considered the array of possible responses before me, I realized my problem was that I did not see this as an epistemological issue. Rather, it was an ethical issue (Norum, 1998b). I was writing a fictionalized version of MY story, based on MY experiences, and MY impressions (Norum, 1999). It was an autoethnographical piece: clearly about my experience, yet still an exploration of the relationship of (my)self to others and (my)self to the culture of higher education (Ellis, 1997, 1999). It was also a heretical piece of research, bringing a controversial voice to the forefront (Norum, 1998a). Yet, could

I portray other people in MY story, perhaps in unflattering ways, without their permission? But if I sought their permission, my creative endeavor would be put to a sudden death.

Was it bravery or foolishness to write about dysfunctional politics and stale, tenured professors? Even if the tale could have taken place at Y.O.U.R. University, what about those from M.Y. University who may not appreciate my experiment with fictive techniques?

These were questions that infiltrated my mind, even as I put the finishing touches on my story. Had I been fictionalizing "good" events and everyone was portrayed as a hero or heroine, these questions may not have surfaced. Who would protest if everyone was portrayed in a flattering light (whether it was the "truth" or not)? Who would complain if each incident had a happy ending ("realistic" or not)? Is it OK to write about "others" without their permission if you will be making them look good?

In the story, there were good guys (heroes) and bad guys (witches). They did not all live happily ever after. Was I opening a Pandora's box by using MY experiences as a first-year professor? Even though I stated up front that the story was not about literal events or people, but rather, was meant to convey the essence of that first year, was that enough to create characters that interested me based on real interactions and experiences (Banks, 2000)? When it came to the writing of fact and the writing of fiction, how would I make sense of that puzzling interrelationship (Richardson, 1998b)?

Hoping to resolve my dilemma, I sought guidance from my department chair (and gifted mentor). As I had suspected, he found the story wonderfully cathartic, told with candor and humor. He suggested that the story was true, though not in a literal sense, and that things like this happen in Higher Ed. Therefore, he supported me in presenting the story at AERA but advised it may not be a piece that went into my "tenure and promotion" file.

I decided to move forward with my plan to write a fictive story based on my experiences as a first-year professor, not because I had a definitive answer to my dilemma, but because I made a writerly judgment call: I wanted to portray the complexity of the experience without getting bogged down in literal facts (Frank, 2000). I could not do that without portraying "others" in the story.

Obligations to Myself

The story was not hard to write. As I wrote for the first time from the third-person subjective point-of-view (Zeller, 1995), it was freeing to not have to worry about factual accuracy. I enjoyed making up names, characters, and events. I did not have to be literally accurate in what I chose to write about. I was in total control of how I created the different characters (including the one that spoke for me), the events I chose to dramatize, how they were dramatized, the dialogue that came out of the mouths and minds of the various characters (Wolf, 1992). I was free to create the world I wanted my audience to take in. And because it was a world based on MY experiences, I was also presenting a world no other author could create (Denzin, 1998).

At the same time, I worried that perhaps I was not fictionalizing enough. Anyone in my School of Education would know who the "characters" were and would recognize if they themselves were in the story. The politics of portraying others and making public sensitive incidents were becoming issues. Although highly unlikely, what if someone from my university came to my poster presentation at AERA? What if word got back that I was airing "our" dirty laundry? Would there be political ramifications for me if I pursued this idea?

These nagging concerns were balanced with how much fun I was having! I was experimenting with a new genre. I was crafting what might be called an "impressionist" tale: a story based on dramatic recall; meant to show rather than tell the reader what "education" is; full of characters who had things to do and words to speak (Van Maanen, 1988). I was pushing my own envelope, coming to understand under what circumstances fictionalizing data may be appropriate. I was also learning for myself the advantages of fictionalizing data.

Heroes and Villains: Why fictionalize?

When I decided to write about "what is education?" by using my experiences as a first year professor, factual accuracy was not my aim. By using events that might have or could have occurred (Denzin, 1998), at my university or another, the events I portrayed were based in fact but were not fact (Denzin, 1997). It was not a literal account of what transpired. Rather, it was a tale full of true lies (Knowles, 1999), mythical facts. These mythical facts served to evoke the essence of my experience without vigilantly recording (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) the veracity of the events.

Stephen Banks suggests, "Whenever the aim of the research is to evoke in audiences a feel for the subjective experience of others, fiction can be the mode of presentation" (1998, p. 18). I wanted to use a form of presentation that would allow me to "make a point without tedious documentation, relive [experiences], and say what might be unsayable in other circumstances" (Richardson, 1998a, p. 356). I also sought to use a form that could "evoke a setting, a social context, an involvement of all the senses in ways that enhance understanding" (Wolf, 1992, p. 59). I wanted to paint a picture of the culture of higher education as seen through the eyes of different characters and at the same time, have the piece be understood as a fictive work (Richardson, 1998a). The facts were not the point of

the story, rather, I found myself wanting to articulate the significance and the meaning I had made of my experiences (Ellis, 1997). I also hoped to write a story that would speak to other readers about their experience and invite them into my drama (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995; Carse, 1986; Eisner, 1991; Ellis, 1997; Kiesinger, 1998), perhaps enabling them to "gaze in fresh astonishment upon a part of their world they thought they had already seen" (Barone, 1992, p. 20).

The story was not meant to be a repository of truth. It was meant to engender conversation about an important educational question (Barone, 1997; Kiesinger, 1998): What is "education"?

Moral of the Story

If as Richardson (1998a) suggests, "I write in order to learn something that I didn't know before I wrote it" (p. 347), what do I know now that I didn't know when I made the decision to fictionalize my first year experiences as a professor? I came to realize I made decisions about what to tell and how to tell it, influenced by whom I planned to tell it to (Van Maanen, 1988). My obligations served to shape my decisions. My obligations to the SIG influenced me to write about something out of my own experience, using an arts-based approach. My obligation to show, rather than tell, the audience what "education" was to me gave me the artistic nerve (Van Maanen, 1988) to try fictionalizing my experiences. My obligations to the "others" in the story caused me to seek the guidance of others. People from outside my university as well as inside my School read and commented on the manuscript. My obligations to myself drove me to forge ahead in this endeavor. Sorting out these obligations has helped me grow as a researcher.

How I chose to write about my first year experiences as a professor dictated what I could write about (Richardson, 1995). By choosing a fictive mode of presentation, I could write about heroes and villains, evoking rather than describing my experience (Gottschalk, 1998). I could write a story that would affect readers at an immediate and emotional level (Frank, 2000) while at the same time, I could explore and make meaning of my relationship to the culture of higher education. I could write a story that would give me practice in the intertwining of reality and fiction as I explored how to make academic writing more readable and the articles more enjoyable (Duke & Beck, 1999; Eisner, 1997; Frank, 2000; Goodman, 1998; Krizek, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1997). But perhaps mostly, I could write a story that might further the conversation about the culture of higher ed and the methodological implications inherent in arts-based modes of research.

May this writing story about that story further the conversation(s)!

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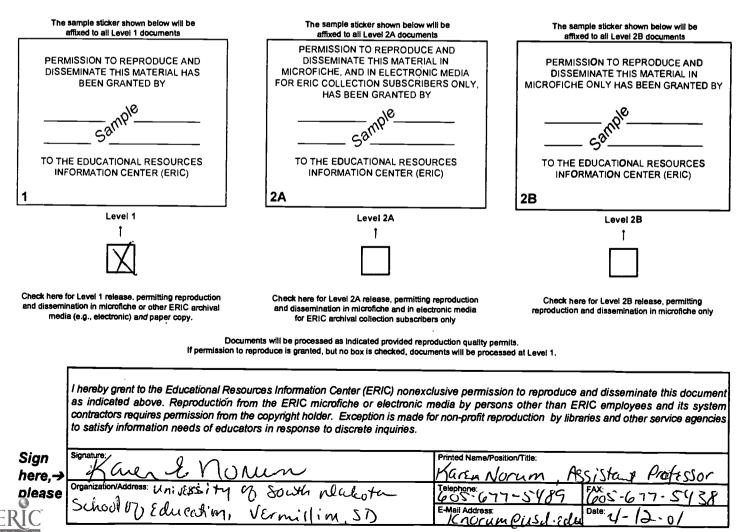
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