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Serving two masters: A reflective narrative of reconciling the tensions faced in designing doctoral research

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents a reflective narrative of the process of designing a PhD project. Using the analogy of the play One Man, Two Guvnors*, this paper discusses the tensions a beginning researcher faces in reconciling her own vision for a project with the academic demands of doctoral-level study. Focusing on an ethnographic study of a reading group for visually impaired people, the paper explores how the researcher's developing understanding of the considerations necessary when working with disabled people impacted on the research design. In particular, it focuses on the conflict faced by doctoral students when working in a paradigm that requires actively involving research participants, thereby relinquishing some control over the project. The aim of the paper is to provide an honest narrative that will resonate with other beginning researchers.*

KEYWORDS: Disability, emancipatory research, ethnography, participatory research, reading groups, visual impairment.

I recently had the pleasure of going to the theatre to see *One Man, Two Guvnors* (Bean, 2011). In this play the main character, Francis Henshall, finds himself working for two different masters, resulting in scenes of pure slapstick as Francis tries to please both masters while preventing each from learning about the other. While this may seem an odd place to start an article about designing a PhD study, my experience often felt like this: trying to serve two masters but questioning whether or not I was actually pleasing either.

The project was a longitudinal study of a library-based reading group for visually impaired people (VIPs). As an English teacher, I wanted my doctoral research to explore an aspect of reading but stumbled across the idea for this project when a colleague invited me to accompany her and a group of children to a local library to read to a VIP reading group. While the topic was not embedded in the classroom, I believed that it would have relevance for me and other English teachers in exploring both reader identity and the value of a group reading experience. However, while I was working in an area related to my classroom interests, it was in many respects outside of my day-to-day expertise. Given the wide range of research carried out by classroom practitioners, I was probably not alone in working outside of my comfort zone.

However, this was not the only challenge I faced. The strong relationships which formed from working closely with this group for an extended period of time, my developing understanding of approaches to research involving disabled participants, and the theoretical framework I adopted, all led me to develop a certain vision for the project. However, I soon sensed tension between this vision, based on an epistemological position, and my understanding of the expectations of PhD study. It seemed that I, like Francis, had two "masters". These masters made constant and often conflicting demands on my time and energy but, while Francis is mostly successful in keeping his masters ignorant of each other, it was impossible for me to separate the two. Was there a way to please both or was it inevitable that one would dominate over the other?

This question is highly relevant to this special edition of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique,* given that the rationale includes exploring how choice of research method may reflect a researcher's epistemological standpoint on what counts as research. However, I would suggest that a crucial word is missing from this statement. It is not simply a question of what counts as research but what counts as "real research". The methodological choices I made led surprisingly often to questions about whether my work represented "real research" and provoked in me reactions veering from severe crises of confidence to almost uncontrolled anger. The analogy of the two masters, therefore, represents the tensions I faced as a result of choosing to use a particular approach as part of doctoral research. In exploring these tensions, this article includes a discussion of the process of designing the project, a reflection on overcoming a particular difficulty in the research design as well as some consideration of the relationship between methodology and the writing up of the project.

Given that my only real experience of PhDs is my own, I cannot attempt to present generalisations; I can only share my own narrative of the process. The assumption is that other English teachers might, like me, find themselves working in areas related to teaching, but not directly embedded within classroom practice. However, the challenges discussed in this paper are of relevance to anyone involved in doctoral level research. The aim of the article, therefore, is to provide an honest account of my journey in the hope that other beginning researchers might find parallels with their own experiences.

STARTING OUT

As with many PhDs, the beginning of the journey included a taught research methods programme, leading to an assignment outlining the research design, theoretical perspective and methodology. While the final project is almost unrecognisable compared to that first attempt, what never changed was the proposed methodology as ethnography always seemed most appropriate for this longitudinal study. However, ethnography was a much broader field than I at first realised, dividing, at a most basic level, into two approaches – traditional and new. Traditional ethnography, with its focus on group identity and shared systems of cultural meanings (Spradley, 1979), is characterised by the use of certain conventions, such as the absence of the author from the text. Reflecting positivist assumptions such as objectivity, reason, truth, coherence and validity (Van Maanen, 1995), and casting research subjects as "mere components of social worlds" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995, p. 46), traditional ethnography seeks to create "a museum-like picture of the culture being studied" (Rosaldo quoted in Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, p. 2). However, from attending the reading group and hearing both the discussions about the books and the stories which the members shared, I knew this was not what I was not seeking to create.

New ethnography, which reflects postmodernism's preference for seeking out multiple voices and its disbelief in grand narratives (Punch, 2005), casts doubt on the idea of an objective researcher seeking to uncover absolute truths. As such, it presents the opportunity to capture the diverse experiences and voices of the group members. Aiming through the use of collaborative and dialogic research methods to be "truer to the lived worlds of others" (Sauuko, 2003, p. 14), new ethnography is concerned with giving voice to people historically positioned on the margins of society (Angrosino, 2007). Another feature of new ethnography is reflexivity. This includes making researchers accountable for their work both in terms of their positions of authority and their moral responsibility in terms of representation and interpretation (Madison, 2012), as well as challenging the supposed neutral and value-free stance of traditional ethnography (Callaway, 1992). Acknowledging that the "personal and cultural components of one's being [cannot] be shed like luggage left in a locker" (Callaway, 1992, p. 30), I knew that my upbringing and long career as a teacher were at the root of my discomfort in referring to myself in the third person as "the researcher". New ethnography allowed me to write myself into the research.

Furthermore, new ethnography could be presented through a range of writing styles, including poetry, drama, polyvocal texts (Richardson, 2000) and autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), all of which sounded interesting to an English teacher used to encouraging creativity in writing. However, my attraction to this way of writing was not simply for the sake of it. As Richardson (2000) states: "How we are expected to write affects what we can write about" (p. 927). I wanted to produce an evocative text that would capture the diverse experiences of the participants as part of my attempt to avoid presenting the group members simplistically as "the visually impaired" as though they were a homogenous group.

However, while I felt drawn to this way of working, a part of my mind worried that I had not actually seen any of these alternative ways of presenting research. While they might exist out there somewhere, was there really a place for them in a thesis? In common with many PhD students, I imagine, my uncertainty about expectations fed my insecurities. Given the potential to both under- and overestimate the nature of a PhD (Phillips & Pugh, 2010) and the lack of consensus about what a PhD actually is (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004), it can be difficult for beginning researchers to fully understand what is required. In trying to negotiate the messages I was encountering in the early part of the research journey, I sensed that some ways of working were considered more rigorous than others. These related to whether the knowledge created was local or generalisable, whose voice was dominant in the text, how data was analysed, and the kind of product that was generated, Given the perceived need to conform to certain expectations, it is perhaps unsurprising that I lacked confidence about the potential for using what appeared to be some non-traditional forms of working. The issue, therefore, became a tension between the use of a particular approach to research and my understanding of the requirements of doctoral research, a dilemma which, at heart, focused on issues of voice, power and narrative.

However, at the same time as I was wrestling with this question, other challenges began to emerge. My growing understanding of ways of conducting research involving disabled people was also inclining me to work in particular ways. However, once again there seemed to be tension between how I felt I should work and what I felt would be deemed appropriate in terms of academic requirements.

LOCATING DISABILITY IN THE STUDY

As a study of a VIP reading group, locating disability within the study was fundamental to the research design. However, perhaps unbelievably, I naively failed to recognise this initially. What drew me to the project was an interest in reading and reading groups. For someone with a great love of books, reading had always been a solitary activity (Bell, 2001; Hoggart, 1998; Long, 2003). What could be the appeal and value of a reading group? Furthermore, my own experiences of reading had mostly been via a visual medium. VIP reading groups presented an opportunity to explore reading through different formats, particularly audio. This was again influenced by my background as an English teacher. Parents of children I taught never asked if their child should read a book but they did ask if they should listen to story tapes. I had always been curious about this and felt that it must reflect some cultural attitudes about the value of print versus other text forms. At this stage, the project seemed to me to be about reading and reading groups – not disability. However, the more I read about disability, the more I came to be both interested in and challenged by this aspect of the research.

The first challenge was ethical and led me to ask serious questions about whether I should continue with the project at all. While some argue that non-disabled people can play a role in disability research (Barnes, 2001; Drake, 1997; Price & Shildrick, 2002), others have argued against this, maintaining that the traditional model represents a "rape model" (Reinharz, 1992, quoted in Oliver, 1992, p. 109), alienating, disempowering and disenfranchising disabled research participants. The possibility of such accusations was worrying, both because of being a non-disabled researcher and because the methodology was underpinned by a commitment to considering issues of power and voice regardless of who the participants were.

Another challenge was more practical, linking to how the research should be conducted. The shift from an individual to a social model of disability was accompanied by a shift in approaches to disability research (Barnes & Sheldon, 2007). As French and Swain write:

> Research is not justifiable simply on the traditional grounds of furthering knowledge with the presumption that knowledge is intrinsically good. All research is political, and research production and processes can further the oppression of those who are the subjects of research. (French & Swain, 2000, p. 36)

Emancipatory and participatory approaches represented a new direction for disability research with the hope that, by empowering disabled people, rather than academics and researchers, to take control of the research process (Barnes & Sheldon, 2007), research could be part of the solution, rather than part of the problem, for disabled people (Oliver, 1992). For a non-disabled researcher working within a particular theoretical framework and wrestling with the question of whether I should continue this work, it seemed vital to send the clearest message that this project represented research *with* rather than research *on* people (Reason & Heron, 1986, cited in French & Swain, 2000). Emancipatory research, therefore, seemed the right choice. However, I was aware of debates about the difficulties of actually doing emancipatory research (Thomas, 1999) and discussion of whether such an approach is a "realistic goal" or an "impossible dream" (Oliver, 1997). Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly for the purpose of this article, Katsui and Koistinin (2008) had outlined the difficulties of sharing ownership and control within the demands of a PhD study.

Once again I faced the same dilemma. As a non-disabled researcher, using emancipatory approaches seemed most consistent with the theoretical perspective; however, it would mean handing over control to my participants. If part of the requirements of a PhD was showing the ability to design a research project, could I really use such an approach? While I never doubted the importance of the work, I did doubt whether I could reconcile these tensions and began to consider pursuing the project for its own sake, rather than framing it as a PhD study. Tangled up in questions of whether and how I should proceed, I was very close to giving up.

However, I gradually came to believe that one of my masters was playing tricks with me and toying with my insecurities. One master – the underpinning epistemology – was taunting me with the fact that I professed commitment to collaborative research and empowering participants. As such, I should surely adopt an emancipatory approach if at all possible. However, this approach assumes that participants themselves have the desire to control the project. While the group members fully supported the project and were enthusiastic about participating, they had not expressed any such desire. In fact, imposing a research agenda on the group had the potential to impact negatively on what they wanted to do, come together for one hour each month to discuss a book they had read.

Reassessing the situation at this stage, I had to accept that, perhaps paradoxically, my determination to use emancipatory approaches was actually questionable ethically. This was because my real motive for leaning towards this way of working was linked more to allaying the fears I felt as a non-disabled researcher, rather than a commitment to a particular research paradigm. I knew without any doubt that my commitment to empowering the participants, telling their story, drawing out their experiences and highlighting the issues they faced as visually impaired readers was genuine. However, I also knew that, while I in no way wanted to exploit the participants, I did want to keep working towards this qualification for myself. The challenge, therefore, became to design a project that would be collaborative and prioritise the participants' ways of knowing, but which would not intrude on the group's activity, and yet be considered rigorous enough academically.

At this point I looked again at participatory research. Given that participatory research also has the potential to empower participants, reflect the views of service-users and influence policy and practice (French & Swain, 2000), this seemed a way to fulfil my commitment to my participants in a way which would be less intrusive on their activities but allow me to maintain more control over the design of the project. However, while I firmly believed that this was true, I still worried about whether my view, as a non-disabled researcher, even counted. Would this argument for a participatory approach be convincing or viewed as a convenient way of giving myself permission to continue?

Finding a way forward

The first indication that this approach could work came through getting to know Susan Dale. Her narrative text *Knitting in the Dark* (Dale, 2008) invites the reader to step into the world of sight loss. Using different fonts and presenting the words of her participants in stanza format as a way of translating spoken language into text, Dale's poetic representations looked striking on the page and allowed me to hear the voices of the participants, to feel their emotions and to enter their worlds in a way that no other text about visual impairment had done. I was immensely struck by the power of this work.

I made contact with Dale who was working on her EdD project, which used a collaborative, narrative methodology to explore both her own experiences of living with visual impairment and the experiences of her four research participants (Dale, 2009). I was struck again by her innovative way of working. This project was constructed almost as a collage, weaving together edited excerpts from conversations with participants, excerpts from her journal, emails and a commentary which formed an academic reflection on attitudes and assumptions about blindness and research practices. More radically, the primary format was audio, both to make the study accessible to blind and partially sighted people and to enable the sighted reader to gain insight into reading in this way. For the text version she was again using a stanza format and different fonts for each participant. Seeing Dale work in this way within an EdD project gave me the confidence to believe that I could also take some risks with my own work. Furthermore, this work was participatory, rather than emancipatory, but the collaborative nature of the project meant there was no sense of exploiting participants. The enormous power of this work, therefore, confirmed my belief in the value of this way of working.

The next pivotal moment came in reading an article *Disability in the news: A reconsideration of reading* (Titchkosky, 2005), where the author describes the experience of reading a newspaper report about the recommendation to let a disabled girl, Courtney Popken, die as her condition had no cure. Titchkosky describes being initially swept along, before realising suddenly that she was no longer at one with the text. Her initial acceptance of the article lay in the fact that the report depended on everyday assumptions to make it make sense – assumptions which she at first failed to recognise, such as that bodily impairment is a fate worse than death. Titchkosky argues that texts can capture readers if they contain common-sense ideas that seem to belong reasonably together. Her book *Reading and writing disability differently: The textured life of embodiment* (2007) expands on this and investigates how attitudes towards disability are embedded in bureaucratic, journalistic and medical texts.

As I read Titchkosky's work, I began to find more answers to the problems I faced. In struggling to identify how disability should be located within the study, I had failed to see something very obvious – in writing up the project, I would be constructing disability. I could not know who would read my project, but it was more than likely that it would be read by people interested in reading and reading groups – people who, therefore, might have little understanding of approaches to disability. The danger was that they would simply accept ideas in my work that seemed to belong reasonably together as common-sense assumptions about disability/visual impairment. After much confusion and concern, a way forward was emerging. What I now saw was that at every stage of writing about this reading group, I needed to step back and evaluate how the text might be constructing disability. Rather than leaving the reader to respond intuitively, I had a responsibility to reflexively question the text to identify and challenge common-sense assumptions about disability. The significance of disability within the project was actually in the text itself.

> Critical attention to how disability is and is not read and written today is one way to participate in the disability studies project of destabilisation. Such attention can lead us toward reading and writing disability differently, and provide for the possibility of developing new relations to the cultural values that ground the various appearances and disappearances of disability in everyday life. (Titchkosky, 2007, p. 5)

Another breakthrough came through reading the work of Rod Michalko. His work reflects on how society privileges the sighted view of the world. Because sightedness is considered natural and normal, its truth is accepted as "the" truth. Differences in biology, such as blindness, are considered abnormal and distorted and mean that the view from blindness is rejected.

> ...we are looking at the same thing and the difference is that we are "seeing it" differently. But, this difference is more radical; while we see things differently, I am wrong and "they" are right. (Michalko, 2002a, p. 93)

According to Michalko, therefore, "The difference of blindness is located in the understanding that blindness resides in the genre of difference that does not make a difference. It is not the insertion of a new (different) point of view, belief, or opinion into the world" (Michalko, 2002a, p. 93), meaning that the view from inside blindness becomes "useless-difference" (Michalko, 2002a, p. 94). This notion of "useless-difference" struck me powerfully and I was shocked to be made to confront society's privileging of the sighted view of the world. Surely I had been drawn to work with this group precisely because I had instinctively believed that working with visually impaired readers might provide valuable insights. Rather than assuming that the ideas of sighted readers represent truths about reading, I believed that people who read using different formats and who belonged to a reading group specifically for visually impaired readers might cast light on some taken-for-granted assumptions. Reading Michalko helped me to clarify this. The ideas of these readers could and should insert a new point of view into the world. Within my project, therefore, the ideas of these readers would not be dismissed as local, irrelevant or defective, but valued instead as "useful difference".

The various strands, therefore, began to come together, with the principles of new ethnography underpinning the research design, particularly the idea of the multi-layered, polyvocal text. At the most basic level, the project was split into two layers: the participants' experiences as individual readers and the collective experience of belonging to the group. This decision was not taken lightly as there is some debate about including individual experience in research involving disability. However, I believe that to have removed this layer would have run the danger of presenting the participants simplistically as "other". As Kleege writes: "If I were to list adjectives to describe myself, blind would be only one of many" (Kleege, 1999, p. 4). The same holds true for these readers and, within the project, it was a conscious decision not to identify the participants solely by their impairment. The individual layer was, therefore, important and was reinforced by using different fonts for each participant, as Dale had done, to symbolise that the group was not a homogeneous whole but made up of individuals with their own unique experiences.

Another key decision was that each chapter would end with a section entitled *Reading and writing disability differently.* Stepping outside of the text, I could reflect critically on what messages about visual impairment or disability were embedded within each chapter. Finally, I felt that I had an appropriate way of locating disability within the project, one which was consistent with the vision for the project in giving voice to the participants in a way that did not exploit them or impinge negatively on their activity but, at the same time, allowed me to manage the project in a way that would show I could design and carry out a robust piece of research.

Now that the way forward was clear, the next stage was to translate these intentions into reality. The following sections outline the process of achieving this through the construction of a multi-layered text.

INDIVIDUAL LAYER

The reading group, which was the focus of this study, was established in September 2007. Eventually five of the seven regular members volunteered to be interviewed for the project. These comprised: three participants who had been blind since childhood, Jane (50), John (53) and Pete (59); Pia (aged 60+), whose visual impairment was diagnosed in her mid-twenties as part of a medical condition; and Anne (aged 80+), with an age-related visual impairment.

Although I was clear for a long time that the write-up should include both the individual and the collective experiences of the readers, the final format of these chapters proved to be very different from what I at first envisaged and again reflects the twists and turns of the design process. Within this, narrative was an important strand. An inherently interdisciplinary field (Riessman, 1993), narrative has been well documented within social science research and includes a range of approaches, including biographical work, life writing, narrative analysis (in which the analysis of storied episodes of conversation or text can be an end in itself) and narrative inquiry (which uses narrative as a means to an end or, in other words, as a method) (Georgakopoulou, 2007). Narrative was key to this project as a way of understanding how we construct and give meaning to our lives (Bruner, 1986) by providing "a deeper view of life in familiar contexts: it can make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar" (Clough, 2002, p. 8).

Originally the participants were to be presented through individual co-constructed reading histories. These personal narratives were to focus on reading throughout the course of each participant's life and their importance was in presenting the different backgrounds the participants brought with them to the group experience. Not only would these be different in terms of home background or experiences at school, but visual impairment intersected with their reading histories at different times and in different ways. For example, some were fluent Braille readers; others were recently visually impaired, meaning that the majority of their reading experiences related to print. It seemed important to acknowledge these individual stories to provide the context for later chapters exploring the group experience.

The first stage in developing these reading histories was to carry out in-depth interviews. In order to deal with the asymmetric relationship in interview situations

(Kvale, 2006), the participants were made aware of the purpose of the interview in advance, enabling them to prepare for the discussion. At the beginning of each interview, the participant was reminded of the purpose and, following an open question to relate as many memories of reading as possible, the participant was allowed to speak uninterrupted until he/she came to the end of the narrative. The subsequent discussion was semi-structured, allowing me to explore aspects of the narrative in more depth.

Once transcripts of these interviews were completed, I read them and listened to each recording many times so as to feel close to the data in order to be able to write the reading histories. The aim was to produce a flowing, first-person narrative completely in the words of the participants, allowing individual voices to emerge and providing the context for each reader (Atkinson, 1998). These reading histories were shared with the participants, who, in this way, were empowered to corroborate the analysis. Given that the participants were visually impaired, it was important to share information in the format of choice. Three participants received their reading histories electronically and gave feedback in the same way. I visited two members to read their history to them and we worked on the final version together. Given my worry about my role as a non-disabled researcher, the feedback from participants was very empowering for me.

> I have at last got around to reading my Reading Autobiography...I think you have managed to capture not just the outline but the essence of what I said...I have thought about making one or two minor changes but in the end I decided that they would probably destroy the flow of the piece and as they would not have added anything of significance or interest I decided not to try to make any changes. Thank you for getting it so right. (Pete)

In one way, such feedback convinced me that the reading histories, in themselves, were meaningful. As in Dale’s text, the voices of the participants emerged powerfully. However, despite believing this, I once again had a crisis of confidence. While a rejection of abstract, analytic theorising was consistent with the approach, I worried that allowing the stories to speak for themselves without further analysis would not be considered rigorous enough for a PhD study.

Backing down from this approach, I decided to apply the notion of the *bricoleur*, a maker of quilts who produces a *bricolage* – “a pieced-together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 5). Rather than including the reading histories, I decided instead to “piece together” a multi-layered chapter to present the participants as individuals. The first layer would be a profile of each reader, followed by another layer, a commentary, in which I could reflect on any distinctive aspects of the profile. After the five profiles, a discussion section would allow me to draw together and reflect on common themes across the profiles. The final layer of this chapter (as with each chapter of the writing-up) would be entitled *Reading and writing disability differently.*

Developing the profiles involved several stages, beginning with the construction of pen portraits, a technique used by Reeve in her thesis *Negotiating disability in everyday life* (Reeve, 2008*)*. Using the reading histories and data from over two years of observation, I developed a first draft of the pen portraits. These were again shared with the participants in the format of their choice and followed up with a second interview. This began with a discussion of these pen portraits, allowing the participants to express their opinion on my interpretation and to add/change points they felt needed clarifying.

The pen portraits were then developed into individual profiles organised around different stages in the participants' reading history and followed by a commentary. These were again offered to the participants, meaning that they were fully involved in the process. Waiting for verification that the participants approved of the final drafts of the reader profiles was, perhaps, the most nerve-wracking part of the project; allowing them to read what I had written made me feel exposed and vulnerable. However, despite the anxiety this caused, it was essential to my vision for the project and I never doubted that it was the right thing to do. I believe that keeping the participants informed and involving them in the project helped trust and respect to grow and, ultimately, led to the success of the project.

THE SETTING

Having presented the individuals who make up the group, the focus of the thesis moved to the group experience, beginning with a chapter describing the setting in which the group meets.

As at every stage of the project, decisions about how this section should be constructed were considered carefully. The data for this section came from my own observation of the group and from interview data. Being aware that my own perception of the setting could potentially be influenced by the participants' perceptions of the space, I wrote my own description before the interviews. However, the intention was never to use my words only but to compose a "tapestry of voices" (Dale, 2009) weaving together my words and the participants' so that no one description would dominate. Given the variation in type and extent of visual impairment among the participants, it was important to reflect all perceptions of the meeting spaces. However, the full importance of this approach only struck me during the interview process. As I listened to the participants and then transcribed the interviews, I realised how heavily my own description relied on visual experience. If my voice dominated, there was a danger that it would reflect an ocularcentric view. This would clearly go against the project's commitment to using methods which demand that researchers (especially non-disabled researchers) empower disabled people, rather than privileging their own perspective.

Although I, at first, considered removing my description of the setting from the main write-up and including it instead as an appendix, I ultimately decided that there was value in including my perspective. For a project underpinned by Michalko's idea of "estranged-familiarity" (Michalko, 2002b) and Titchkosky's idea of Reading and Writing Disability Differently, it seemed important to disrupt expectations and privilege the participants' views. Including my description based on the "familiarity of sightedness" (Michalko, 2002b, p. 181) to sit alongside five descriptions from inside the estrangement of visual-impairment constructed my perceptions as the minority view and, therefore, challenged common-sense assumptions.

The decision to approach the write-up in this way prompted other decisions. Firstly, my words were written in the second person, so that sighted readers might be drawn to identify with my way of perceiving the space and find themselves positioned with me on the margin. Secondly, the words of the participants began at the left-hand margin while my words were indented; this technique was used to visually represent the fact that the sighted view was the minority view within this project. Once again, each participant was represented by a different font to allow them to emerge as individuals. To allow the text to flow, the description was constructed as a dialogue. In order to show that all the comments were taken from individual interview transcripts, ellipses were used at the beginning and end of each comment to represent the fact that the comment represents a fragment from the interview. The following extract illustrates this chapter:

> ...You walk through the main door and pass through the security devices...
>
> ...to be honest, I get lost virtually each time, because I go in, I walk down to the library, go in and I wait near the lift 'cos usually somebody's there...
>
> ...they're very good about that, about meeting people, taking the ones with the dogs up...they're very good about that...
>
> ...but, whenever I go to the library on my own, I seem to walk into the window, I've mentioned it two or three times to people in the library...the number of times people have had to say to me, you're walking in the wrong direction...
>
> ...slightly to the right you see the Issues Desk. A line of people wait to be served and the librarians bustle busily about. Behind them are shelves of books, presumably reservations waiting to be collected...
>
> ...not only do I have trouble getting into the library, I have trouble finding the desks...
>
> ...the first thing you learn as a blind person when you go to a new building is the route you have to follow to get to where you're supposed to be...then you discover where the loos are...
>
> ...if I wanted to go to the loo in that building though, I wouldn't have a clue where it was and I think that's something that new members should be alerted to rather than having to ask 'cos you can't look where the WC is...I suddenly sometimes think, well if there's a fire where would we go...because nobody's told me that...

The five-page tapestry of voices was, for me, the most powerful and successful section of the PhD and most strongly reflected the theoretical perspective on which the project was based. This will be discussed in more detail later in the article. As with other chapters, this tapestry of voices was followed by two more sections or layers: a discussion of the main issues raised by the participants' comments and, once again, a section entitled *Reading and writing disability differently.* The following section moves on to reflect on the use of this layer.

READING AND WRITING DISABILITY DIFFERENTLY

One advantage of constructing a multi-layered text was being able to include sections based on Titchkosky's idea of Reading and Writing Disability Differently (Titchkosky, 2007). Ending each chapter of the write-up with these sections gave the opportunity for both myself and the reader to look back and ask ourselves whether, like Titchkosky reading about Courtney Popken, we had accepted any aspects of the chapter unquestioningly as seeming to belong reasonably together. This was to address the danger that the reader might accept some ideas as common sense, resulting in assumptions about visual impairment and disability being reinforced.
An example from John's profile illustrates the importance of this approach:

> ...my wife obviously was the...reader for [our children] and was more concerned with that side of things than I was because, you know, I was...just unable to do it and I think now this is why I've got quite interested in perhaps being able to read with my grandkids...because there's more opportunity to sit down and enjoy a book now than there was when my kids were little...

My concern in including such quotes was the question of whether the reader would give equal weight to all parts of this comment or focus on only one part. Would the reader question John's first statement or simply assume his words expressed a self-evident idea – as the word "obviously" suggests? If so, what self-evident idea was being expressed? That the link between being visually impaired and not being able to read belonged reasonably together? That, if someone cannot see, they cannot access print and, therefore, cannot read – obviously? Interpreted this way, John's inability to read with his children would become an impairment effect (Thomas, 2007) – an inevitable result of a physical limitation – and reflect the individual model of disability.

Left unaddressed, this comment (and others) had the potential to reinforce stereotypes which would have run against my commitment to challenging assumptions about visual impairment. One purpose of the *Reading and writing disability differently* sections was, therefore, to directly address comments from the profiles in order to challenge whether the issues mentioned were linked to impairment or other factors. Without this section, I would have felt concerned about including John's comment, not knowing how the reader would receive it. They might have been angered; they might have been surprised; perhaps more worrying, they might not have registered it at all. However, being able to put this comment under the spotlight in the final section of the chapter revealed that John was not linking his inability to read with his children to impairment; otherwise, he would equally be unable to read with his grandchildren now. Instead his comment related to practical issues such as availability of accessible material. What had changed since his children were small was that more books were now available in a format that he could share with others: audio. Addressing this comment explicitly meant that the non-reflective reader was not left with the impression that John's issues with reading were due to his impairment. Instead attention could be drawn to the barriers faced by these readers by the shortage of material in accessible format or the cost of such material.

Similarly, a comment from Jane's profile was also challenged in the *Reading and writing disability differently* section:

> ...[my friend] goes to a book club and when I got the chance to come to a book club, I was so thrilled to have the opportunity to do a normal thing like other mums do, you know, to go to a book club and to be allowed to read things you wouldn't otherwise read.

It was equally important to interrogate this statement to challenge the words "normal" and "allowed". The final section of the chapter allowed me to confront the reader with why Jane felt unable to do this "normal" thing, that is, join a reading group. Why did she feel excluded from this social phenomenon before she heard of the VIP group? Other comments by Jane also implied feelings of exclusion. At one of the early reading group meetings she suggested titles she would like to read, because all her friends had read them and she felt excluded. While "reading is (or ought to be) the most universal and easily accessible of pleasures" (Hattersley, 1998, p. 50), Jane's comments showed this is not the case for VI readers. It was, therefore, necessary to ask whether her feeling of exclusion was an impairment effect – an inevitable consequence of being visually impaired – or caused by other factors, such as her access to reading groups and issues with accessing the texts read by these groups.

The *Reading and writing disability differently* sections, therefore, were vital in showing that the issues faced by these readers were not the result of their impairment but of barriers in society, which disable them as readers.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article has been to present an honest narrative of my PhD journey so that other doctoral students, whether they are working within or beyond the classroom context, may identify something of their own story in this. No one told me that one aspect of the design could take over a year to fall into place; struggling for so long with one facet of the research was difficult and affected my confidence. Surely there was something wrong with me that I could not find a way forward. Perhaps I wasn't suited to PhD study after all? What is ironic is that the very thing that almost led me to abandon the project – locating disability within the project – actually became the driving force, leading me to work in ways I had not foreseen and bringing much personal satisfaction.

Because the project was underpinned by a theoretical framework which included empowering and giving voice to these VIPs, un-privileging the sighted view, presenting the perceptions of the participants as useful difference and confronting the idea of reading and writing disability differently, I was ultimately satisfied with the decision to use participatory approaches. The members were able to be involved in many aspects of the project without disrupting the activity of the reading group. Co-constructing the reading histories, and reading and commenting on the finished reader profiles allowed the participants to be actively involved in creating knowledge about themselves. Moreover, the participants gave permission for every quote to be included. Ascribing a font to each participant meant that quotes were attributable. Where this was problematic, a separate font was used which enabled the participants to have their views included in a way that was acceptable to them. Furthermore, at one meeting of the reading group, the librarian mentioned that only 5% of published material was available in alternative format (Lockyer, Creaser & Davis, 2005). Interviewing one of the participants shortly afterwards, she asked me to include this fact in any work based on the project. She clearly saw the project positively as an opportunity for informing others of the barriers faced by visually impaired readers. Using a participatory approach, therefore, helped me to reconcile some of the tensions I faced, enabling me to work in ways which reflected the aims of the project, as well as addressing some of the issues I faced as a non-disabled researcher. Furthermore, the final design seemed reasonably compatible with my perceived understanding of the requirements of PhD study.

However, while I did not see the use of participatory, rather than emancipatory, approaches as a compromise, I did make other concessions. Reading about new ethnography in the early stages inspired me to create something innovative, dynamic and evocative; for example, as an English teacher, I felt drawn to using poetic representations. While the project was innovative to some extent, I compromised on this ideal and consequently do not feel that my project has the power of Dale's work. By including excerpts from her journal, she adds a deeply personal layer which resonates with the reader. Extended quotes from participants allow their personalities to emerge strongly. While the use of quotes was a significant part of my write-up, I did not feel able to include pages of the participants' words in the way that Dale does, nor did I feel able to let the reading histories speak for themselves. My own feeling is that this dilutes the impact. The tapestry of voices which evokes the setting in which the group meets comes closest to this but, ultimately, my concern for meeting the demands of a PhD overran other considerations. However, even so, it was made clear to me that my approach involved an element of risk. The external examiner for the project was chosen as someone who would be sympathetic to the methodology, suggesting that not everybody would have been. How much more problematic might the choice of examiner have been if I had persisted in wanting to write poetry or if I had insisted that the reading histories were the analysis and needed no additional commentary from me?

Approaching the end of this article, it is interesting to note that writing it has been a struggle, forcing me to relive some of the dilemmas faced in designing the PhD project. For example, I have struggled with the question of whether my vision for this article – to be an honest representation of the journey I faced – will be considered appropriate for an academic journal. Equally, the chances are that this article will find a wider readership than the thesis. Outlining the issues I faced, particularly those of being a non-disabled researcher, makes me feel vulnerable. I have never hesitated so long before submitting an article. This, in itself, reflects how difficult it can be to share something deeply personal with the academic community.

This article began by likening the PhD journey to the play *One Man, Two Guvnors*. Both are filled with complications, misunderstandings and improvisation. In the play this leads to fun and laughter, with the complexities of the plot resolving into a happy ending. In the PhD journey this can lead to confusion and tears with the ending more bitter-sweet than happy, as the need to please one master (the academic requirements) may lead to the neglect of the other (through compromising on how rigidly to adhere to a theoretical perspective). It is this debate which is particularly relevant to this special issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, with its focus on whether different methodological approaches constrain or liberate research and whether these methodological approaches contribute to our understanding.

As a beginning researcher bringing to the project my own beliefs about ontology and epistemology, I was committed to certain ways of working. However, this led to real concerns about whether these ways of working would be respected by others as "real research" and whether the knowledge produced would be valued. One idea underpinning my project was that research is about contributing to conversations rather than having the "last word" (Gergen, 1999). While I did have to make difficult decisions and the final design did contain compromises on my part, I was ultimately more satisfied than frustrated, and I felt confident that it did contribute usefully to the conversation about reading, reading groups and visual impairment. Equally, the sharing of honest, personal narratives contributes to conversations of what the PhD journey is really like, something that may be useful to other beginning researchers trying to reconcile the problem of being one man with two guvnors.

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