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The First Time: Performing beginning teachers’ ‘firsts’ exploring a theatre-based research method

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Theatre-based research methods have been employed in a variety of ways to transcend more traditional research methods, and bring research findings to a broader and relevant audience. Performing research to an ‘expert’ audience is transformative in nature. The audience share a collective understanding of the material presented, where their understandings can be challenged or confirmed. The ethical responsibilities of the theatre-based researcher are therefore paramount in presenting the research in a manner that respects the research participants, and allows the audience to make informed judgements.

This paper outlines my experience in devising and performing 'The First Time' - a performance about twelve beginning teachers' firsts. The performance was constructed from their interview data and performed by teachers - most of who are drama teachers – in order to sensitively represent the real stories of the research participants. The research was framed within a practice theory approach (Schatzki, 2001) with a focus on the transformation of practices situated within a particular time and place. The method of performing the research to an ‘expert’ audience of performing arts practitioners, teachers, and teacher educators created an opportunity for both the transformation of teaching practice and the transformation of theatre.

The research findings focus on the importance of creativity and flexibility in an approach to both research and teaching. The outcomes of my research have implications for theatre-based researchers, as well as teacher educators, in-service teachers, and beginning teachers. All these practitioners are continually negotiating the waters of their ever-changing professions.
Keywords: identity; first-year teachers; theatre-based research; methodology

Introduction

In the exploration of first-year (1yr) teachers’ experiences of identity transformation, I employed a theatre-based research approach in order to analyse and explore such notions of identity. Such notions can be seen in some of the scenes from the theatre-based research performance ‘The First Time’ where the processes of scripting, rehearsal and performance processes assisted to analyse the experiences of 1yr teacher participants. We begin with the prologue, introducing the theatre-based research method employed, then interweave the theatre-based research processes with the analysis of first year (1yr) teachers’ identity transformation.

Prologue: looking back

![Image](image171x254to431x411)

Illustration 1. The chorus of Interviewees or narrators

INTERVIEWEE 1
I wish I could go back in time, like six or eight months, with the knowledge and experience I have now. I would do things so differently. I just didn’t even think about it at the time.

1The full performance of The First Time can be viewed at:

http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLB1ED0FDEF2AA8836
INTERVIEWEE 2
It could have gone either way, but I think it would have been positive regardless. When I think about it now, looking back, I’m like wow, I was in a completely different head space to what I am now. It’s probably funny looking back on it.

INTERVIEWEE 3
I think now, looking back at it, now I’m so happy. I’ve done everything I could.

The idea of desiring to go back in time and assist our past selves is supported by Mead’s (1913, 1934) work of the self as ‘I’ and ‘me’ – the nature of the self as revealed by introspection. This notion provides a foundation for exploring the power of teachers’ first experiences as a lens to understand identity transformation, as the telling of a first introduces an ‘I’ (past) by a ‘me’ (present). The self – appearing as ‘I’ – is the memory image of the self, the ‘old me’, allowing the ‘new me’ to understand the transformations that have taken place since the event described. The concepts of the ‘old me’ and ‘new me’ can be viewed not only as key to understanding identity in general, but also as key to understanding the 1yr teachers in this study, in regards to the descriptions of the firsts they used to represent themselves. The prologue to ‘The First Time’ is an amalgamation of twelve 1yr teachers’ interview data using the device of polyphonic voices through a chorus of narrators (as the ‘old me’) representing each participant, in order to capture how these teachers looked back on their firsts – revelatory or epiphanic moments and experiences. ‘The First Time’ is the result of a theatre-based research process aimed to capture the experiences of 1yr teachers’ identity transformation within a phenomenographic paradigm – one that seeks to describe, analyse, and understand (Marton, 1981) the qualitatively different experiences 1yr teachers undergo in their identity formation and transformation. The employment of theatre-based research processes assisted to capture, analyse and represent the 1yr teachers’ experiences of identity transformation through their firsts.
Employing theatre-based research

Theatre-based research is the careful investigation into dimensions of the social world by the researcher through a reconfiguration and representation of selected facets of what the research uncovers, with those facets now transformed into aesthetic substance upon their embodiment within an aesthetic form; and the production of disequilibrium within the audience of the work as they vicariously re-experience what has been designed (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 20). The process is the primary focus of theatre-based research, which is different to research-based theatre, which is research guided by aesthetic features. Theatre-based research approaches include performance ethnography, ethnodrama, Forum Theatre, and verbatim theatre.

I employed a theatre-based method to conducting the research because I believe the connections between what phenomena are being investigated and how they are investigated needed to be harmonious. My employment of a theatre-based method of inquiry aimed to draw attention to the appropriateness of the method towards the phenomena being investigated, namely the lived experiences of the participants’ identity transformation. I held two thoughts in mind when considering the use of theatre-based research processes to investigate the experiences of the participants. Namely, that the study of lived experiences (van Manen, 1990) examines how we come to construct and organise what has already been experienced; and that lived experience hints at a process whereby we attribute meaning to what has happened to us (Britzman, 1991, p. 9). Theatre-based research approaches generate knowledge that enable researchers and audience to notice what had not been seen before, to understand what had not been understood, to gain a deeper appreciation of complex situations that contribute to the end to which educational research is committed (Barone & Eisner, 1997, p. 85).
The purpose of the theatre-based research play script and performance ‘The First Time’ was essentially as an analytic process. I began by employing scripting as a process designed to allow myself (and other readers) to view the data from a critical distance. The process of inquiry through a theatre-based method in this instance occurred within the process of composition and vice versa. Its purpose was more than the creation of an aesthetic object. It was employed as a method of inquiry in itself; involving experimenting with ways of analysing and presenting, or representing, the interview texts (for example Ackroyd & O’Toole, 2010; Barone & Eisner, 2012; Denzin, 2003).

Analysis through scripting, rehearsal, and performance

It was my initial intention to employ scripting as the primary tool to understand the data. Like Mienczakowski (2001) and Saldana (2003) my background and identity as a performing arts practitioner played a large role in the selection of the theatre-based method. Theatre has formed part of my core identity, and as such I ‘read’ the world through it, I ‘see’ aspects of theatre in everyday occurrences and objects where others might see an algorithm, or a business model. This is my way of understanding things that are often hard to grasp, and is one reason why I felt compelled to explore a theatre-based research approach to the phenomena of identity transformation. In the early stage I saw the performance as a tidy conclusion to the process of scripting as analysis. However, the rehearsals, and particularly the performance, became more significant tools for analysis than I had anticipated. The power of the performance was revealed through my understanding that the process of description occurs on both the page and the stage, using language as written and spoken to represent the participants’ experiences. The process of analysis in theatre-based research occurs in relation to both the written and performed work, where each scene in ‘The First Time’ signifies a
category of identity transformation, through which the differences between and within each individual’s situation is considered. One such example was analysing Lara’s first — her epiphany about lunchboxes.

Lara: situational identity

Illustration 2. Lara feeling left out

TEACHER 1
OK, so that’s the first 2 weeks planned. Any other questions? OK.

LARA
Leaves, while the TEACHERS stay gossiping

TEACHERS 1, 2 & 3
Are you all right down there Lara?

LARA
I don’t feel part of the team.

INTERVIEWEE 3
I’m super uncomfortable because all they do it bitch about people at the school and I don’t join in, and sit there not talking to anyone feeling uncomfortable, because I don’t know these people!

INTERVIEWEE 1
They haven’t done anything wrong to me, and I don’t want to join in with gossiping about things that happened in the past because they didn’t affect me.

INTERVIEWEE 2
And all the people they’re talking about have seemed really nice, so that’s one of the hardest things – I’m actually on the outer because I don’t join in. The other prep teachers are very anal, very OCD and I didn’t want to be like that.

TEACHERS, miming teaching their classes, dialogue is spoken simultaneously in a calm yet mechanical tone

TEACHERS 1, 2 & 3
Get your lunchbox out of your bag and have some brain food.

LARA
_to her students_
OK, get your lunchbox out of your bag and have some brain food
...and then come back…

TEACHERS 1, 2 & 3
Put your lunchbox in your bag.

LARA
put your lunchbox in your bag...

TEACHERS 1, 2 & 3
Put your bag away and sit at the table quietly.

LARA
and, quick, put your bag away and come and sit quietly.

TEACHERS 1, 2 & 3
Get your lunchbox out of your bag and have a snack.

LARA
OK, go get your lunchbox out of your bag and have a snack...

TEACHERS 1, 2 & 3
Put your lunchbox in your bag.

LARA
put your lunchbox in your bag.

TEACHERS 1, 2 & 3
Get your lunchbox out of your bag and have some lunch.

LARA
OK, lunch time. Go get your lunchbox...

TEACHERS 1, 2 & 3
Put your lunchbox in your bag.

LARA
put your lunchbox in your bag...STOP! Just leave your lunch box on your desk
[...,]

INTERVIEWEE 1
Because it’s open plan I’m always looking into the other room and going

INTERVIEWEE 1, 2 & 3
‘Oh her kids are more organised and know what they’re doing’

INTERVIEWEE 2
and when she lets them in after recess her kids are in two perfect rows,

INTERVIEWEE 3
and we’ve got a tub that they put their drink bottles in so at lunchtime they go
up to their tub and get their drink,

**INTERVIEWEE 1**
so her kids are in 2 perfect lines and they’ve already taken their drink bottle out of the tub, and I’m like

**INTERVIEWEE 1, 2 & 3**
‘these kids just know what to do!’

**INTERVIEWEE 2**
And I thought my kids are so bad they’re not doing that. I’m not doing things right.

**INTERVIEWEE 3**
And I think it’s starting to get better just naturally. It’s not me nagging them all the time, and I’m like

**INTERVIEWEE 1, 2 & 3**
‘Oh, maybe I didn’t need to worry so much?’

**INTERVIEWEE 1**
And that’s like the littlest thing — it doesn’t have anything to do with teaching, it’s like a daily thing that happens. But it’s something that’s actually made me realise something — I’ve had an epiphany about lunch boxes!

Lara’s scene is crafted to highlight how differently she perceived herself from her more experienced colleagues. The monotone delivery of the Teachers’ dialogue accompanied with synchronised and stylised movement contrast with Lara’s more naturalistic portrayal.

Illustration 3. Synchronised movement

This scene is also designed to encourage the audience to empathise with Lara; to put themselves in her situation, and recall their own similar experiences of the frustrations of feeling as though having to be like other teachers. We feel for Lara as she leaves the meeting, while the characters remain to gossip. She is excluded by their conversation,
and also excludes herself saying she doesn’t want to be “like that”. Yet Lara still tries to emulate their actions, without really considering why. Initially she believes she is “not doing things right”, because her students are not responding to her the way the other prep students respond to their teachers. When Lara states “it’s starting to get better naturally…” she comes to the realisation that she needs to be herself in order to develop an effective learning environment through a natural rapport with her students. Through Lara’s experience we see how important it is for her to understand ways of being a teacher, particularly through her interactions and affiliations with colleagues.

**Scripting and rehearsals as analysis**

The play script served as an effective tool for data analysis, particularly when developing an understanding of the process of data reduction. Initially I was dissatisfied with the term ‘data reduction’, believing it to be counter-intuitive to ‘reduce’ the participants’ descriptions of their experiences, while also understanding the importance of honing in on their meaning. The process of scripting allowed me to reconcile these thoughts by creating a snapshot of each participant’s *first* as representative of their experiences. Later, the performance revealed more nuanced understandings of the participants’ experiences as viewed through the eyes of the teacher-actors and audiences.

Because of its ability to communicate research findings in an emotive and embodied manner, theatre holds particular potential for research, which often engages complex questions of the human condition (Rossiter et al., 2008). In analysing 1yr teachers’ stories it was important to provide detail about how the stories were expressed. In committing words to the page the writer leaves it up to the reader to interpret the words via cues from the author and in light of the reader’s own experiences. Through my own process of writing it became evident that addressing the
embodied aspects of these teachers’ practices in an appropriate format would add to
existing forms of knowledge about beginning teachers’ practice. In addition to
analysing the impact of the time and location in which the stories were told, who they
were told to (including myself), and the language used, the theatre-based research
processes also acknowledge the embodiment of the lyr teachers’ practice – the
emotions and meaning conveyed through their gestures, inflection, tone and emphasis.
There are two interrelated notions of embodiment being considered in this research –
the embodiment of lyr teachers’ practice, and the embodiment of the performers
representing the participants’ experiences. Both serve to highlight the body as the place
of knowing. Performing this research draws on the embodied practices of the
participants as described in the interviews – what they do as an indication of what they
think – and is represented in performance through the embodied practices of the actors
who are themselves teachers.

In the past I have worked on Forum Theatre projects combining the performance
skills of drama undergraduates with the ideas of pre-service teachers. These experiences
gave me cause to reflect on the way teachers are represented by actors. I made the
decision to work with teachers who I knew had the skills to perform with the intention
of encouraging them to bring their own personal histories to the performance and offer
suggestions as to the interpretation of their characters. I wanted the experience for the
audience to be as authentic as possible, to move their experience beyond enjoyment to
something that would speak to teachers from teachers, and to counter the pitfalls
experienced when employing actors who know little about those they are representing
(for example Ackroyd & O’Toole, 2010, p. 14-15). I therefore approached teachers I
had worked with in the past on a variety of performance-related projects, inviting them
to participate in the representation of the participants’ experiences.
I cast the teacher-actors in roles that I believed would be similar to their own experiences. Here, the term role is employed in a similar manner to the social roles teachers undertake. The actors as teachers extended their understanding of their own roles as both teachers and actors through taking on the role or character of another teacher, and utilised this understanding to represent the experiences of the participants. The Interviewee characters represent each participant as they described their first – as a ‘me’ of the present – in the interviews. The teacher-actors portraying the trio of Interviewee characters were cast not only on their availability and agreement to take on a large role, but also because they had more recent performance experience than the other teacher-actors. The Teacher characters represent each participant’s first as the ‘I’ of the past. The Teacher roles were cast as follows:

- Lara was played by a young primary teacher with experience teaching preps;
- Sari was played by a teacher with experience working at a year 9 campus of a boys’ school. This teacher-actor also portrayed Sandra, as both are secondary English teachers;
- Beth was played by a drama teacher, who also portrayed Janet;
- Cassidy was played by a secondary teacher who I knew had experienced anxiety in her own 1yr practice;
- Maggie and Amelia were played by a 1yr teacher;
- Tash was played by a primary physical education (PE) teacher; and
- the male roles were given to the male teacher-actor who was at the time in his 1yr of teaching.

Each teacher-actor could relate strongly to their character/s and the situation/s, and offered some insightful interpretations. One notable aspect of the embodiment of