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Blogging towards understanding: rethinking the notion of data

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Blogging towards understanding: rethinking the notion of data and its analysis

ABSTRACT

From the standpoint of a novice researcher, I have examined how blogging as a literacy practice enables one to explore and understand self in relation to analysing data and making meaning. This paper discusses how blogging can be used as a reflective and critical tool and explores the notion of blogging as transgressive, or stumble data. The theoretical underpinnings of blogging as a literate critical practice is congruent with the work of Freire. Thinking about research through this paradigm thus becomes transformative because it enables one to do data differently. This paper also considers and interrogates different approaches to the analysis of data, and frames blogging as a way to inquire more subjectively. In this paper, blogging is represented as uncoded data; a concurrent and seemingly unstructured method of analysis. To this end, the definition of data is questioned in terms of what is legitimate, and what counts. Subjectivity puts blogging into a relevant context, as one's positioning and experiences become a layered foundation upon which to understand one's research more closely and meaningfully. Self-representation is deeply entwined with self-documentation, which can enable the identity of the writer/researcher to attain greater definition. Flirting with data in unconventional ways and inhabiting a space of unknowing enabled original thinking and creative processes to enter the research space. Reading and writing are framed as methods of inquiry and analysis that are separate, or an alternative, to coding data.

BACKGROUND

In recent decades, the humble diary has had a rather radical transformation. Online diaries, weblogs, or more commonly, blogs, have revolutionised how we reflect on our lives, and share what can be our lives' most intimate details (Wolfe, 2014a, 2014b). Serfaty (2004) ponders this apparent contradiction: the private diary as opposed to the public self-disclosure of online blogs. In prefacing a genealogy of diarising, she states that 'for all their apparent and sometimes actual novelty, online diaries and weblogs are but the latest avatars in the long history of self-representational writing' (p.1). Trottier (2013) has written that the Internet provides a multitude of opportunities to present oneself in alternative ways. Blogs are one platform where monologues and interactions can be enacted online.

Blogs are narrative-based; they tell a story (Walker Rettberg, 2014a, p. 115). The best blogs reveal much about their author, laying a trail of clues that when collected and pieced together is sometimes more satisfying than a crime novel. Some blogs are more along the lines of first person journalism (Hoechsmann, 2012, p. 171). There appears to be a blending of the personal with current events or social phenomena. The focus is on the creative element of writing, on producing a piece that recreates the author's point of view and experiences in a way that is powerful and evocative.

Lankshear and Knobel (2011, p. 143) have documented how changes in online technology has led to an evolution in blogging practices.

From the outset, blogging has been a dynamic phenomenon. The kinds of things bloggers want to do have stimulated and in turn been stimulated by developments in blogging tools. In addition, the kinds of things bloggers want to do, and how they want to do them, have been influenced by everyday events and changes in social practices in their wider lives – which they ‘blog out of’ – as well as by technological developments in bandwidth, mobile devices, networking applications, and the like.

This would suggest that a paper journal is no longer congruent with online platforms such as blogging. Online practices are becoming increasingly integrated and seamless. Blogging still carries a greater share of content than social media, even as mobile blogging has taken hold (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). In schools, students are engaging in 21st century writing practices. In this context, blogs form part of a new critical literacy pedagogy that emphasises ‘difference, discontinuity and irreversible cultural and linguistic fragmentation’ (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 155).

PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Upon beginning a creative PhD (novel and exegesis), I started a blog in an effort to ease myself into a writing mindset. Apart from enabling me to reframe and approach my writing more professionally, I hoped blogging would help me to generate, categorise and refine my ideas. At the very least, I hoped it would assist me to awaken my dormant creativity in order to generate insights for the exegesis.

In one post, **HOW BLOGGING FITS IN** (September 30th, 2015), I outlined ten reasons for blogging. The following excerpts, taken from that post, indicate an emerging sense of how data can be analysed differently:

Categories and tags helps me to group different blog posts so that a topic becomes more three dimensional – there are various elements being explored and analysed, which create a richer picture for me (when I write posts and add tags and categories, it allows me to enter into a type of filing system that links ideas and connects my thinking)

Blogging is like a journey. When I look back on my posts, I can track my thinking, and even signal milestones in understanding. My blog is part reflection, part roadmap. It is a narrative in what can sometimes appear to be disjointed episodes.

The blog itself is a place for generating ideas...The blog is one of several places where I store information, important ‘bits’ that I don’t want to lose. It is a place of gathering and of sorting.

Perhaps not that surprisingly, I soon found that *easing* myself into writing a blog was far from easy. When an ex-student shared her thoughts on blogging with me, I realised I was not alone in this struggle. I had encouraged this ex-student, a budding and talented writer, to begin blogging, which she had. Over months, I noticed she was producing fewer and fewer posts. Eventually, she emailed an explanation:

I'm still not comfortable with the blogging process. For years I used to write and post my words out to friends, fellow writers, teachers.

Blogging is so different. It's like you're having conversations with yourself. I don't feel connected to anyone at all. It's all still very weird! Maybe I was born in the wrong time?

My ex-student's thoughts encapsulated so well my feelings of unease regarding blogging. And yet there were moments of discovery that align with St Pierre's (1997) notion of transgressive data: that which comes to a researcher through the senses, emotions, or even in dreams. I blogged about this almost unconscious sense of the study beginning to make sense and coming together in the following post:

September 30th, 2015

WHAT YOU DISCOVER THROUGH WRITING

As I write, I am discovering elements of the narrative that I didn't know existed. What is even stranger is that sometimes, a previous fabrication – something I have inserted into the narrative for a bit of added interest – will make more sense once I keep going with the story. Later developments, inexplicably, and almost magically align themselves with my previous plot or character creations. Often, I find myself putting stuff in that I don't yet understand. I move forward with faith that if I follow the story, it will somehow take me there. The story, a fluid and separate entity within my mind, is happening on both the conscious and unconscious levels. Often, plausible and exciting developments in the narrative have come to me while I am sleeping.

Though my relationship with blogging remained an uncomfortable one, I continued to engage in it. The possibilities for internal dialogue were fruitful, and as the excerpt below demonstrates, blogging was indeed helping me to deconstruct and demystify the process of analysing my research data.

April 30th, 2015

MY ROUTINE

I blog to isolate particular ideas, and to formalise them in some way, so that when I return to the project, I am more aware of my purpose, or my understanding of my purpose... the more I try to make sense of the process using as many tools as I can that work for me, the more the landscape looks familiar, less alien. ...The points of interest are often in the creases and the folds, in the shadows, not in the smooth, open road.

The blog was also a place where I could work through my ideas on writing, leading me to better practices and greater understanding. There were many entries on this topic. Below is one example:

January 9th, 2015

IDENTITY

Writing real and believable characters involves injecting this essence of identity in the narrative. But how do you do that effectively? Description can often come across as 'telling', and so actions are needed, scenarios. ... What thought processes, what knowledge, what experience, might have prompted something that is clearly hard to capture when one thinks too much. With over-thinking, the risk is that writing can become clunky and self-conscious.

Much later in the study, I identified writing as a method of reflection and inquiry (Richardson, 2000):

December 8th 2016:

LONG TIME NO WRITE

Either way, I need to devote time to thinking and reflection, and the best way to do that is to write myself out of the hole.

Rosenthal Tolisano (2014) has blogged, 'Writing a professional blog should foremost be about *yourself as a learner* and about *your own journey*'. At the outset, in keeping with this notion, I trusted blogging would help me to document and make sense of my journey. Without a strong sense that I was heading in the right direction, I steadfastly blogged my way through the research project. What follows is an account of what happened along the way.

COMMENTARY ON PERSONAL NARRATIVE

As my study progressed, the blog became the space where it was legitimate for me to feel unsure, ambiguous, undecided and uncomfortable. I did not feel it was appropriate to dedicate legitimate space in my research (nor in my professional realm) for this uncertainty. But I was grateful the blog provided an alternative, subversive space that allowed this kind of freedom and possibility.

Was my discomfort about blogging to do with an initial reluctance to air my personal opinions in a public space, or actually to do with the dawning realisation that there was something to extract from the blogging experience that I did not yet understand? On one hand, I understood that strong creative outputs demand giving something – perhaps a lot – of oneself, and that this *giving*, or opening up, might involve revealing personal information. On the other, I was reluctant to step out from the relative protection of anonymity. Concealing one's identity online, what Serfaty (2004) calls the *veil*, extends beyond writing under a pseudonym. Was blogging in fact drawing me into a situation where I had to acknowledge the relinquishing of control? Much as I was attracted to blogging, there was part of me that felt decidedly uneasy about writing online. At the time, in a way that was reminiscent of what my ex-student had expressed, I blamed my discomfort on dislike of exposing myself in a public forum. At the completion of my study, I was able to see there may have been other factors contributing to how I was feeling. The blog was difficult to define in a research data sense, and so I avoided that element of its purpose – a purpose whose meaning and implications eluded me for most of my study. It is now more apparent to me that what I classified as discomfort with the process of blogging may in fact have been unease about the discoveries I was making about my research.

What I recall most keenly about the time I was keeping the blog, was the deep feeling of doubt I experienced every time I approached writing a new post. I felt much less conflicted in my approach to reviewing, coding and analysing data. I now wonder if the reason for that was that I had set myself the task of dealing somewhat mechanically with my participants' accounts. The guidelines for how to conduct research were in one sense very defined, and there was safety in that. The blog, on the other hand, had no prescribed rules, which heightened the sense of loss of control. As time went on, however, blogging about my research enabled broader understandings to develop and questions to be posed. The quotation below (Holbrook & Pourchier, 2014, p. 754) illustrates the sense of skepticism

that takes hold once one begins to think differently about defining data and the process of analysis.

We have grown skeptical of research that asked us to create partial constructs of participants and call them findings, to elevate notes and transcribed recordings as data while overlooking the bits that nudged and pinched us from the shadows, to craft reports with prescribed outlines that erased or reconceptualised what we sensed we might have thought if we only could have written/asked/pursued/done differently.

In thinking along these lines, is *coding* the kind of analysis we do because to try to wrap our heads around thinking-with-theory about research is too complicated? Do we in fact code because we are trying to find definite answers in areas that are intrinsically grey, or that throw up multiple possibilities? We interview, try to extrapolate meanings and definitives, but is the effort to come up with something finite an achievable and realistic endeavour?

I can say the blog was definitely a place where I considered my data. What I had not considered was that what I actually wrote *in it* could itself be seen as data. Is coding nothing but an easy procedure that can be applied to how we *handle* data? Does coding data work to conveniently package research into something that is easily done and easily understood but that glosses over, and possibly trivialises its more complex nuances? St Pierre and Jackson (2014, p. 716) have queried the value of concentrating on coding if it comes at the expense of theorising:

Having opted out of a theoretical analysis, these researchers have nothing much to say and, often, they are too exhausted from months of coding to theorise at all. In fact, we have learned in our own teaching that coding data can be an excuse not to read theory.

As I progressed in my project, I followed procedures that had been legitimised as belonging to the research process; transcribing interviews, coding data, analysing, all felt like a legitimate use of my time. There were enough rules and boundaries within these activities to help me feel secure as I travelled down a path I did not yet wholly understand. In contrast, encounters with my blog made me feel as though I was in freefall. There were few rules about anything, except that I was to produce words that might or might not help me to get a firmer intellectual on how my project was progressing. The primary purpose for gravitating to the blog seemed to be to keep up my writing stamina; a task that sometimes felt more like a necessity and a chore rather than something joyful.

Looking back, I ask myself: If my thinking about the blog was more conflicted than my thinking about data analysis, what does that suggest? Was I perhaps only going through the motions of analysis within the legitimate bounds of research work, thus leaving the conflicting angst of confronting the big questions in my research to my blog writing? St Pierre (2016) has noted that we tend to stick to what we know, or what we have been taught, and that it is difficult to deviate from those research, and thinking habits. Reflecting upon her own habits, she has written that, 'making the ontological turn would mean abandoning the conventional humanist qualitative methodology in which (she) had been so well trained' (p.28). Holbrook and Pourchier (2014) have described a crisis of doubt when it comes to analysing data. 'So we are eager to tell what we think we do when we think, when we do analysis. The short answer is we doubt' (p.754). Their description of how we deal with

the confusion of doing research echoed my sentiments about blogging about my project: ‘...despite the cacophony of ideas that muster our thinking, we find we are nonetheless expected to ask defined questions, to seek out answers to those questions, and to disseminate the knowledge we construct, swallowing our doubt in the process’ (p.754).

St Pierre (2016) has questioned why inquiring differently can be so difficult. In hindsight, I might reflect that my formal data coding and analysis process was on an empirical and epistemological level, while the blogging I was doing in tandem was attending to my ontology, my sense of *being*. How the two sides were connected is still not clear to me.

This is an exciting time as some of us try to make the ‘ontological turn’ and to think differently about the nature of being and so to live differently...What I have learned in the last few years, however, is that making the ontological and empirical turns required to be/live/do something different is not easy. Our ambitions seem to exceed our capacities. Why are these turns so hard? Why is it so difficult to think of ourselves differently – as posthuman, as assemblage? And, given that I am an educational researcher, I wonder why it is so difficult to inquire differently? (p.26).

The passage above goes some way to explaining why I found the blog such a challenging negotiation. My use of the blog as a research tool was so new that I found myself literally stumbling in the dark until such a time as I could look back with the benefit of hindsight. I would be hopeful that in future research projects I would trust the process, understanding that relinquishing control would eventually deliver greater understandings and insights into knowledge. ‘Given the pervasiveness of Descartes’ *cogito* in western thought and science for over 300 years, we should not be surprised that issues of knowledge overtake issues of being in our work’ (St Pierre, 2013, p. 648). Blogging my questions and trying to find answers allowed me to be *in my work* more than I would have imagined possible. The blog was the place where I was allowed to stop and wonder. My research writing needed to sound definitive and direct – free from doubt, and the blog provided a space where I gave air time to discomfort, tension, doubt and loss of confidence. It was where I dealt with the elements of my research that were ‘strange, confusing and maybe even worrying’ (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 723). At the beginning, this occurred pretty much most of the time. What I mulled around in my head, and then onto blog posts was not so much data as *situations*. Brinkman uses the term, *stumble data*. ‘There is a breakdown, a situation, people interacting, discourses mobilised, material structures, and so on, but it seems somewhat artificial to refer to these as “data”. A better word might be “instances”’ (p.723). Stumble data is what we find, rather than what is ‘given’ to us (as the meaning of the term, *data* is *given*). ‘If something is ever “given” in a human life, it is when something presses itself on us in a way that makes us stumble. This is what objectivity might signify in qualitative inquiry: Stumbling upon objects. This means that the most objective forms of qualitative research are often the ones with the loosest designs’ (Brinkman 2014, p.724).

The immeasurable benefit of blogging my way into research was that the blog enabled me to *be*. When I viewed blogging in terms of its value to knowledge-making, I felt decidedly under threat, or insecure. I feared how little knowledge I had. In hindsight, if the blog is viewed purely as a gauge of how I am, of ‘being’, in my work, then I would view that as a resounding success. Part of the success of the blog was also that I did not pressure myself to

be in an immediate sense. I wrote the posts over many months – not all of them made a contribution to being or to knowledge. But some did. Blogging remained in one sense separate from my research, and yet it was completely entangled within it. As St Pierre (St Pierre, 2013, p. 653) has expressed, ‘We are not separate from the world. Being in every sense is entangled, connected, indefinite, impersonal, shifting into different multiplicities and assemblages’.

It is at this point that Freire’s (1992) ideas on writing the word and writing the world can be applied to my experience of finding meaning through writing. In exploring my research through blogging, I was in effect applying criticality to rethinking what data could be. Blogging about my ideas and uncertainties enabled me to start the process of thinking through a process of questioning and reflecting on what I was doing when I did analysis. An intrinsic method of analysis is present as soon as a researcher enters the field. Writing is making material from which the researcher can work through making meaning. Blogging, with the associated technological features that enable filtering and categorising, makes material the analysis. As part of an emergent process of making sense and making meaning, writing facilitates coming to understandings. Writing a blog was my way of making sense of my data and of the research process. It allowed me to work out of my particular space and sets of understandings in a more tangible way than just thinking about them. If we regard writing as a tangible communicative practice, we acknowledge that a text has authority! It is easier when you see your thoughts in writing to give them legitimacy

The knowledge and understandings generated through blogging are fleeting truths – they are subjective – and depend heavily on interpretation in order to gain meaning. Posthumanist critiques, such as deconstructive analyses, insist that we stand at the edge of the abyss – that fearful and terrible chaos created by the loss of transcendent meaning – and struggle with our loss’ (St. Pierre 1997, p. 176). Despite an awareness that some subjectivity was permitted in my analysis of data, I nonetheless tried to maintain a level of objectivity. It was in my blogging that I allowed my mind to roam, and where I allowed any emotions or feelings to bubble to the surface. Blogging thus became my subjective angle, a place where I could express anything I wanted to, where I could, in a way, experiment with notions I did not yet know would hold up to scrutiny. This is a place where I was trying the untested, trying things on for size. Some things floated. Others sank. It was a safe place for this, away from the more informed viewpoints of those who might read my research and might criticise my wilder assertions. And so the blog allowed me to be more flexible with my thinking about my data than I would otherwise have had an opportunity to. It allowed me to play, and to flirt with my data, and in the process, opened up discoveries I otherwise would not have made. Lather (2013) has described this kind of process in this way:

Data get lived in new ways. And so we move into pleasure and surprise in engaging with theory to displace the fear-terror that too often characterises women’s experiences with theory-enriched data analysis. Companionship becomes the dominant state as one opens up to being used by thought. “Making love to” one’s data becomes thinkable as a kind of ethics, something quite different from “better or smarter,” something more akin to the in-between places of pleasure and pain. Struggling with and against, becoming more and other, “in a field of production of desire,” analysis moves way beyond interpretation (p.639).

Subjectivity is about accepting the self. Being able to admit one likes to write and to figure things out alone – for oneself – is something that requires courage. St Pierre (2014) has criticised the idea of forced consensus, which can take place when individuals are coerced to write in groups. Rather than fostering democratic outcomes, with writing being representational of a group, an enforced homogenisation of ideas might work in exactly the opposite way: ‘One might argue, instead, that conflict and antagonism are the permanent enabling conditions of democracy and should not be swept under the rug’ (p.375). It was enormously important for me as I reached for understandings about my work, that I was able to do that in a place where my voice was enabled rather than coerced into conforming with a dominant consensus. It is therefore reasonable to accept that at times, writing is more solitary pursuit than collaboration.

It is only since completing my PhD, and reflecting on how I synthesised my data that I have come to realise the role that blogging played in the process. In hindsight, recognising I looked upon the blog as a writing tool, I realise I completely underestimated the power and role of writing as an analytical tool (Augustine 2014) within the blog. The blog was in fact part of my research process in absence of coding, something I did not fully understand at the time. Inadvertently, the blog came to embody the notion of post-coding data (Augustine 2014) in my research. As she has written, ‘Believing that reading and writing were methods of both inquiry and analysis, I needed to describe *how* and *why* reading and writing counted as data analysis in my study if I did not code data’ (Augustine 2014, p.748). I eventually came to understand the role of blogging as *uncoded data* in my study. Of course, writing the blog was not something that happened in isolation. All the while, I was reading theory. Making sense within the still-evolving parts of the project was my intention. In the end, making sense, or arriving at understandings, became a byproduct of all the combined activities of the project as they happened individually and/or concurrently. The discomfort and bewilderment of blogging had in the end created something tangible. It was abductive reasoning as understood by Brinkman (2014):

Unlike induction and deduction – both of which address the relationship between data and theory – abduction is a form of reasoning that is concerned with the relationship between a *situation* and *inquiry*. It is neither data-driven nor theory-driven, but *breakdown-driven* (Alvesson & Karreman, 2011). It occurs in situations of breakdown, surprise, bewilderment, or wonder (p.722).

The previous passage describes what I experienced while blogging alongside my other deductive framing strategies. Was I in fact working as an inadvertent bricoleur, or craftsperson? Was my innocuous dabbling on the side actually producing insights that would wheedle themselves into my understandings? If I examine how I felt as I wrote my blog, I recognise all the elements listed above: breakdown, surprise, bewilderment and wonder, and with a dose of mystery (Alvesson & Karreman 2011) thrown in. ‘Abduction is not driven by data or theory, but by astonishment, mystery, and breakdowns in one’s understandings’ (Brinkman, 2014, p.722). Brinkman’s description of the abduction process of inquiry as an ongoing and never-ending process is remarkably similar to my experience of blogging my thoughts about the research I was doing. ‘There is, according to this model, no hard and fast line between life, research, theory, and methods’ (p.722).

WHAT CONSTITUTES DATA?

Did the content of my blogs count as data? At the time of writing, I did not consider it to be that important. This brings St Pierre and Jackson's (2014) reasoning into focus: '...we are left with this problem of why some words count as data and others don't in a particular kind of empirical research' (p.716). It was only after the conclusion of my project that I wondered why I did not think my blog counted as data and could thus be included in the project as something more than just a vague notion of identifying and clarifying some of the key elements. If the blog had indeed been counted as data, how would I have gone about defining which words were most cogent? After all, I did write some fifty thousand words, and some of those were not directly related to the project. In the initial and middle stages of my project, blogging became inseparable from other ways of analysing data. As Augustine (2014) has written, I was all at once reading theory, transcribing interviews, coding the field texts. But through it all, I was blogging. And it was the blogging that provided the threads between concepts ideas, theory and concrete understandings. In many ways, blogging was the glue that kept much of my research project from falling apart. It was how I synthesised what I was doing and made sense of it.

St Pierre (1997) has written about the use of transgressive data; that which is seen as being *out of category*, and as such does not fit within conventional understandings of how information is collected during research. In hindsight, I now see that when I was writing my blog, I viewed it very much as something that was out of category, something that did not legitimately fit within my study. Or, more to the point, as something that could not easily be quantified, and so was best left aside. When I wrote up my study, I only mentioned blogging in passing, and labelled it a writing tool. Yet blogging contributed to my knowledge in a way that could not have been otherwise achieved. St Pierre (1997) calls for a rethinking of 'our understanding of both knowledge and its production in order to envision revitalised academic and public discourses to guide our teaching and learning' (p.175). What is knowledge, after all? It cannot always be planned for at the outset of a project. Most knowledge discoveries come as a surprise, not at all as expected consequences.

Do researchers have expectations that their data will behave a particular way? Brinkmann (2014) contends that they do, and questions the purpose of using data. 'After all, Plato did not have data (at least in our sense of the term), but dialogues and conversations, and Kant did not administer data-gathering questionnaires to unearth the logic of morality, but used his philosophical thinking-tools' (p.720). When I reflect on how the blog worked alongside my use, coding and analysis of data, I wonder if it did not actually serve that very purpose. Was it not my dialogue and conversation (albeit with my own self), that I cast out into the ether? As Brinkman (2014) describes, a researcher working beyond data and beyond coding might actually find themselves, instead of working as an 'inductive "collector" and the deductive "framer"' (p.722), to be using the techniques of the 'abductive tool-user, the bricoleur, the craftsperson, as the ideal qualitative researcher' (p.722).

Geertz (1973, p.314) has defined the many and varied facets of ethnography as being thick description:

What the ethnographer is in fact faced with – except when (as, of course, he must do) he is pursuing the more automatized routines of data collection – is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them

superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render.

This representation of thick description is in line with my own efforts with grasping and then rendering the meanings within my study. Blogging was in that sense a tool I used to grapple with meanings that were forming, and which I had not yet come to fully understand or sort through in terms of the myriad possible interpretations. Writing about the hermeneutic aesthetic experience, Freeman (2014) cites Creswell (2012) and Merriam (2009) in referring to thick description as 'the ability to create a rich, contextualised description of an event to increase verisimilitude and transferability of the findings' (p.827). Denzin (2001) defined thick description as having to do with 'capturing and representing the meanings a particular action or sequence of actions has for the individuals in question' (p.116). Despite using blogging as way to better understand and more creatively inhabit the research space, I had not realised at the time I was writing my blog that it was indeed a tool towards interpretive thick description. The blog certainly enabled me to explore interpretive complexities of doing my research as a novel and exegesis. It helped me to step into the writing space while analysing themes and making decisions about how they would be represented in a novel. However, I did not have any of these realisations at the time of writing the novel and the blog, which happened concurrently. At that time, I felt as though I was merely stumbling along. Without a clear sense of how the project would take shape or make sense, I used blogging to anchor myself in the process and learn as I went.

Because the project was represented through a piece of fiction writing, blogging as a parallel activity provided a complementary methodology. Freeman (2014) refers to understanding as something that is gleaned from ongoing participation with the world. 'Because we already understand the world in certain prejudiced ways (i.e., in tradition), understanding is not a state that we arrive at after accruing the right amount of knowledge; it is an event we are already, always participating in' (p.829). I did not consider blogging a legitimate methodology in the study, and yet the understandings that I gained from the practice were what enabled me to reach deeper understandings about the topic and the creative methodology that I had chosen.

Clark/Keefe (2014) has explored the nuances of somatographic analysis, which focuses on the *sensorium*, a way of registering data through sensory means. Taken from the work of St Pierre (1997) making use of a *sensorium* approach involves relying on analytical practices positioned within a somatographic perspective. This allows researchers to 'follow, trace, ride, or otherwise come into deep relation with the palpating forces of the data themselves' (Clark/Keefe, 2014, p. 791). When writing the blog, I was not consciously aware that the practice was in fact enabling me to filter and better understand the research data. I did not attach a great deal of relevance or importance to my blogging practice; just allowing it to *be*. As a concurrent practice to my more deliberate research methodologies, blogging was the silent partner, seamlessly coexisting and complementing the research work in a way that was not overtly obvious in those early stages. There was an awareness, however, that as I wrote my blog posts I was steadily gaining ground on conceptualising the study and ordering my thoughts on how the various components would eventually coalesce into a meaningful whole. In hindsight, it was an inadvertent move towards realising what was observable,

grappling with understandings that were ‘between what is known and what is becoming known, where things aren’t so clear’ (Clark/Keefe, 2014, p. 791).

I did not realise at the time of blogging that I was in a state of ‘*attuning* to the material-discursive dimensions of subjectivity’ (Clark/Keefe, 2014, p. 791). Clark/Keefe’s (2014) description of *attunement* is in relation to being in the world in a way that enables affiliation, a deep engagement and interaction with what is material-discursive. For me, blogging served as a production of meaning in relation to the novel I was writing. Almost without noticing, the blogging experience enabled me to develop a keener awareness of self. Where directly trying to come up with answers about my study and myself within that work would have proved problematic, the practice of blogging allowed ideas to surface in a way that was not laboured or overly self-conscious. Blogging hence allowed me to have a discursive relationship to the project and the novel, allowing me to extrapolate meaning intrinsically in a way that only became apparent in hindsight. Upon reflection, this distance from meaning-making allowed me to more fully grasp the context and meaning of the work. Clearly, my study could have existed in the absence of blogging. However, the insights I gained as a result of blogging ended up being more serendipitous discovery than planned strategy.

CONCLUSION

Did I blog in order to think differently? It was certainly not a conscious intention at the outset. And yet that was in fact what blogging yielded, giving me an insight into ideas I would not otherwise have tapped into or become aware of. My interacting with data in this way was a kind of flirting; a way to open up discoveries unself-consciously. It also allowed me to inhabit the state of *unknowing* (Vasudevan, 2011) that comes with thinking differently about data and analysis.

Blogging was a way for me to think about an issue through many lenses, in a freeform way, without considering rigour and structure, but in a way that was open to creative inspiration and processes. Because I was not adhering to any one framework meant I could consider anything that crossed my mind – anything I was reading became the lens through which I considered the research. ‘a diffractive reading of data through multiple theoretical insights moves qualitative analysis away from habitual normative readings (e.g., coding) toward a diffractive reading that spreads thought and meaning in unpredictable and productive emergences’ (Mazzei, 2014, p. 742).

Was blogging for me a diffractive type of analysis? If it was, I stumbled upon it, and only recognised it once the project was nearing its end while in the process of writing up the exegesis. It was at this time of finalising the study that I returned to many of the ideas that had earlier burgeoned during the blogging process. While following the conventional processes of ‘attending’ to data, coding and analysing, there had been all along an element of my thinking that was working independently; concurrent and connected, yet separate. Mazzei (2014) describes a similar process in this way: ‘It is not a matter of coding or thematising according to a theorist or concept. It is instead a moment of plugging in, of reading-the-data-while-thinking-the-theory, of entering the assemblage, of making new connectives’ (p.743). In many ways, blogging was my thinking-out-loud as I tried to make sense of this large project that seemed at the start to be so daunting and unwieldy.

In closing, I can say with confidence that my own blogging experience, though challenging, did help me to inquire into, discover and define the ideas and themes generated by the research data on a deeper level than if I had not blogged. Writing about myself enabled me to establish an autoethnographic role as I constructed the novel. Through the method of creating a sequence of posts, categorising the topics and through the writing itself, I was able to clear away the debris of minor and inconsequential themes, thereby applying an effective filter to the project. In the end, blogging became a sharp, reflective tool with which to articulate key themes in my life and my work. The outcome was that I now know myself better than I did before.

Upon reflection, I would have to say that writing online provide a better platform for a kind of epiphanic self-discovery than I might I have learned from writing in a paper journal. This knowledge has positive consequences for both my personal and professional life. Blogging continues to be problematic on so many levels, including the difficulties experienced by many writers, which are clearly articulated in the following passage.

Loss, mourning, the longing for memory, the desire to enter into the world around you and having no idea how to do it, the fear of observing too coldly or too distractedly or too raggedly, the rage of cowardice, the insight that is always arriving late, as defiant hindsight, a sense of the utter uselessness of writing anything and yet the burning desire to write something, are the stopping places along the way. At the end of the voyage, if you are lucky, you catch a glimpse of a lighthouse, and you are grateful. Life, after all, is bountiful (Behar, 1997, p. 3).

The desire to represent oneself and others is steeped in the DNA of our human existence. Blogging as a written self-representation becomes self-documentation (Walker Rettberg, 2014b), which lends itself to retrospection and epiphany. Negotiating the complexity, self-doubt and discomfort of writing across genres, space and identity was a journey that was not smooth and effortless. The uncertain moments that accompanied both the creative process and product reflected the emergence into a method of analysis that transcended data, coding and conventional productions of knowledge. In the end, blogging within the research process enabled the identity of the writer/researcher to be affirmed with greater definition.

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