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Beyond Methods: Lessons From the Arts to Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Beyond Methods concerns the world of qualitative research and the power of the arts to influence it. The book comprises an opening essay by Liora Bresler, followed by ten chapters each by different authors who represent dance, music, poetry, storytelling and the visual arts. The chapters are grouped into three sections: The Diverse Kinds of Lessons from the Arts; the Quest of Understanding an 'Other' situated in a different culture; Intersections between Research and the Arts to include Educational Practice. The review focuses particularly on the hindrances fieldworkers might encounter, as outlined by Bresler: the 'automatic pilot' habit of recognition; subjectivity, and attachment to knowing.

Beyond Methods: Lessons From the Arts to Qualitative Research

Liora Bresler is a passionate advocate for qualitative research in relationship with the arts. A tireless traveller and evangelist for the cause, she is celebrated internationally for her inspirational addresses to conferences. I vividly remember meeting her for the first time. We were both new to the Research Commission of the International Society for Music Education in Miami in 1994. Her seminar paper was entitled “Curricular Orientations in Elementary School Music” (Bresler, 1995/6). It was based on a three-year ethnographic study, and its data sources were drawn from multiple perspectives (see also, Stake, Bresler, & Mabry, 1991). The paper caused consternation amongst some of our seminar colleagues, possibly because it was so different in style and content from the more usual presentations, which tended to adhere to mainly quantitative models. Others of us welcomed it for its freshness and originality.

In the intervening years Bresler has continued to champion her cause, and her jointly written chapter with Robert Stake, on ‘Qualitative research methodology in music education’ is required reading for researchers new to the field (Bresler & Stake, 2006). At the same time she is committed to crossing boundaries and borders, particularly in relation to the arts. This is most evident in her editorship of the highly ambitious two-volume *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education* (2007).

As for my own background as a reviewer of *Beyond Methods*, I am not a card-carrying qualitative researcher. My academic focus has rather been on historical research relating to music education, principally, but not exclusively, in schools. I have also carried out ethnographic fieldwork in Newfoundland, researched the life histories of a group of music teachers and student teachers, and have published a biographical study of a Salvationist musician. So in that sense I have some connection with the roots of qualitative research, specifically ethnography and biography as outlined by Bresler and Stake (2006, pp. 274-276).

Beyond Methods is the result of collaborations instigated by Bresler, who, in 2010, had been invited to become the first recipient of the Hedda Andersson Chair at Lund University in Malmö, Sweden. It represents the fruit of her work there between 2011-2015. The book commences with an overture by Bresler followed by ten chapters, each by different authors who cover the full range of stages in an academic career, from advanced doctoral students and new PhD’s, to veteran researchers. The ten chapters are grouped into three sections: 1) “The Diverse Kinds of Lessons from the Arts”; 2) “The Quest of Understanding an ‘Other’ situated in a different culture”; 3) “Intersections between Research and the Arts to include Educational Practice”. As Bresler explains, each chapter “illuminates a fundamental aspect of researched lived experience through an aesthetic lens” (p. 8.)

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Bresler's Overture sets the scene. It is an authoritative essay, sub-titled "The Polyphonic Texture of a Collaborative Book: Personal and Collaborative Intersections". The venture, Bresler explains, is a methodological quest based on a belief that the arts can provide inspiration and support for the mission of qualitative research. Such a quest she admits is fraught with difficulty: "Qualitative research is inherently an impossible venture... Trying to stabilize experience through writing is not unlike pinning a butterfly." Undaunted, she concludes nevertheless that "the endeavour is a worthy one" (p. 1).

As is common practice in this research tradition, Bresler shares her personal journey in which a key moment of illumination was that the familiar lenses of music analysis that structure the fluidity of sound can be used to analyse the fluidity of classroom life. It was an insight that was corroborated by her influential mentor and a pioneer of qualitative educational research, Elliott Eisner. Subsequently, she has striven to make explicit the relationships between artistic engagement and qualitative research, for example the resemblance between intent listening during interviews and musical listening.

Bresler notes three hindrances that fieldworkers might encounter in developing fresh perception and meaning making in familiar settings: the *automatic pilot* habit of recognition; subjectivity; and, attachment to knowing. She makes the following suggestions. First, because the *ordinary* is extraordinary in its ability to go unremarked, researchers should juxtapose distances. To do this involves the creation of a polyphonic texture, including points of dissonance. In employing such multiple and sometimes contradictory perspectives researchers can develop a greater trustworthiness in their investigations. Second, as far as subjectivity is concerned, the only way to release its control is to bring it to our own awareness. Consequently the situatedness of the researcher has to be of central concern. Third, an attachment to knowing also involves a re-appraisal of *not knowing*. The commonly held notion that the beginner's mind is a hindrance, is rejected in favour of a view that it is a means of fresh seeing.

The four pieces in Section 1 address the diverse kinds of lessons that may be learnt from the arts, and stem from the authors' doctoral dissertations completed in the last four years. Lia Lonnert first of all probes the need for caring, in the sense of cultivating concern and empathy. A crucial lesson in her experience came from watching a performance of Christopher Marlowe's play, *The Jew of Malta*, in which the leading part was both danced and acted. Through the dance, she found that the complexity of the character was deepened: it was an emotional understanding beyond intellectual understanding. Consequently Lonnert began to understand that through art we could understand another human being, and maybe ourselves. She then makes a link to qualitative research in which an empathic understanding is key to the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Indeed, both researchers

and artists can touch the soul. Her essential point is that the communication of qualitative research is not only through results, but through reaching the reader's emotional understanding through empathy. Underlying Lonnert's analysis is the notion of the "unlived life" or "the life we could have lived" (p. 17), which not only involves understanding ourselves, but also understanding others.

For Tyler Denmead, an artist and art educator, much of his stimulating chapter relates to Bresler's preoccupation with *not knowing*. He argues that not knowing is an intentional pursuit for artists which can also be used as a strategy in ethnography. His open-ended, exploratory and arts-based workshops with young people are underpinned by this notion. He talks from his own experience of the importance of decluttering spaces, allowing teachers and students to "take off the baggage of coming into the same place every day" (p. 31). In the process, settled routines are disrupted. Denmead argues that educational ethnographers might attempt to similarly peel back suppositions and patterns to create bare spaces where unexpected analytical findings might emerge. Researchers might, he suggests, "consider doing less, and perhaps *being less* in the field" (p. 33). The chapter includes a welcome description of the context in which the fieldwork was being carried out.

Sven Bjerstedt, a jazz pianist, talks in a similar way to Bresler of the reciprocity between his research and his musical life: "My PhD studies helped me to play the piano better... While the artist shapes a dissertation, it in turn shapes the artist" (p. 37). The focus of his rather dense chapter, "It is all Process", is on what jazz improvisation might bring to qualitative research. He presents four characteristics of jazz improvisation: Collective Tradition versus Individual Voice; External Impulses versus Internal gestures; Change of Self through Narrative; Process versus Product. He then applies these characteristics to qualitative research, and poses the question: "Could qualitative research partake more of improvisation, less of composition?" (p. 46).

Finally, in this first section, Bruno Faria explores "points of (im)balance through artistic research trans-actions". His personal story is that he noticed as a classically trained performer that the prevalence of standard score-based repertoire in his training and career meant that there was an (im)balance that kept in the margins other opportunities such as improvising. To rectify this (im)balance he took up as a challenge, sound-painting, a process originally devised by Walter Thompson, in which artists improvise on parameters that are conventionally attributed to specific musical signs and gestures. Meeting this challenge steered his own composing into new directions. He points to a similar (im)balance in interviewing between sound and silence. Fieldworkers would do well to consider what remains unsaid. Faria concludes that researchers and artists should embrace the value of what appears to be the

unexpected, both in performance and research. In exploring different perspectives, one's understanding of the world is enriched.

The group of three essays in “The Quest of Understanding an ‘Other’ situated in a different culture” are framed by Bruno Nettl's chapter (a slightly revised version of the intriguingly titled “The Meat-and-Potatoes Book: Musical Ethnography”, published in his classic *The Study of Ethnomusicology* (2005, pp. 232-243). It contains an invaluable survey of the literature. Five approaches from the classic works are identified: an inventory of musical culture; comprehensive collections of songs and musical analyses; dealing with the musical and cultural values in a non-western society; historical accounts from Austria and Germany; an anthropology of music perspectives. Fundamentally Nettl argues that ethnography needs to be comprehensive, that all domains of a culture are inter-related, and that we need to work within this broad perspective in the context of a critical framework.

As a native Japanese, Koji Matsunobu reflects with insight upon “time, silence and listening in Qualitative Research”. He points out that Time is a crucial component of field research, and that for him the Japanese concept of *jo-ha-kyū* is central to his experience. It derives from the structure of Japanese performing arts, in particular from the Noh Play tradition: a slow beginning breaking into a faster pace, proceeding to a rapid conclusion. Matsunobu's original understanding was “a text-book sort of knowledge” (p. 67), but it came alive when he became a student of noh singing. A critical moment was when he realised that there was a similarity to his fieldwork experience: it often starts slowly, as the researcher settles into the site, it builds up through the process of data collection, whilst the realisation of the *kyū* stage is heightened towards the end of the process, often in reflection.

As far as silence is concerned, Matsunobu argues that our western cultural orientation encourages us to focus more on substance in the foreground than space in the background. But in Japanese arts, our eyes and ears are sensitized to the value of blank space and silence. The compositions of Takemitsu underscore the significance of meaningful silence. Likewise in interviews we tend to listen to what is said rather than to what we do not hear. Approaching silence is an important consideration for researchers, because it enables them to delve into the depth of human experience. Matsunobu concludes that in the training of qualitative interviewers too much emphasis is placed on asking questions, when the real skill is listening.

We move from Japan to the Gambia in Eva Sæther's fascinating chapter exploring musical research sensibilities. She is a musician whose driving force lay in her work with fiddle tunes from Norway and Sweden. To facilitate her fieldwork in the Gambia she made use of research methods that gave space for what music offers: communication, closeness, improvisation, intensity and surprises. Her translator and ‘door-opener’ was himself a key informant. He

came to believe after some time, that Sæther's verbal interview method was not suited to provide the 'thick description' the project required. He asked her to sit down and keep quiet while he played the questions on his instrument, the kora. He started with an ostinato to a narrative that talks about how Allah rules our destiny, and later inserted a disturbing improvisation. There followed a fruitful discussion with the interviewees about the tradition, and about the value of breaking rules and taboos, and finding new ways of kora teaching to include all children. Without this musical intervention Sæther admits that she would never have found the answers to her questions about attitudes to musical learning in Gambia. Sæther also deals briefly with multi culturalism in Malmö, the challenge for music teachers to work in some classes containing 99% of immigrants, and her present work in establishing the Venezuelan *El Sistema* movement in the city. She wonders intriguingly whether we can become border educators and researchers, with the researcher representing the world of the other.

The third section of the book focuses upon Intersections between research and the arts, including educational practice. Four of the five chapters emphasise the importance of autobiographical writing within qualitative research.

A surprising but entirely welcome poem by Robert Stake, one of Bresler's chief influences, is given its own brief chapter. It concerns "Freedom from Rubrics", which he places side by side with freedom of worship, freedom from want, freedom from fear. It is a poem about the power of the arts to inspire education, and will resonate with the experience of arts educators. In some ways the poem could act as a prologue to the whole book. I quote the last verse:

In some places, the rubric has attained a dictatorial power.
It sometimes usurps the law of reason.
This may be time to battle
For freedom from rubrics. (p. 123)

Focusing upon children of school age Göran Folkestad explores "Living the Dichotomies of Music and Music Education: Lessons from the Arts for Research". More specifically his recurring themes and dichotomies include: popular music vs. classical music; informal learning outside school vs. formal teaching/learning inside school; self-directed learning vs. teacher-structured sequenced teaching; performance vs. education; and, teacher identity vs. artistic identity. What is of particular interest is the way Folkestad structures the chapter. He describes it as "a methodological experiment in what might be called 'reversed auto-ethnography'" (p. 105). First, he summarises scholarly discussions relating to his dichotomies, but then after each of these, he relates his own memories as a child and young person. Folkestad thus explores personal experience and connects this to autobiography whilst relating

to wider cultural, political and social discourses: his personal memoirs provide a mirror through his own layers of experience. The chapter is an engaging exemplar of the bringing together of scholarly overviews and autobiographical reflections.

Moving from school-age children to teachers in training, Anna Houmann describes her impressive work with intending teachers of music in her chapter “The Key to the Life-World: Unlocking Research Questions Through Expressive Objects”. Initially she requested her students to each write an autobiography and to compose a piece using the sound-track of their lives. They were then asked to create a three-dimensional object designed to express their understanding and experience of the term *music teacher*. They painted, sewed, baked, wove, welded, clipped, glued, plastered etc. These expressive objects were regarded as a key to the life-world of the student teacher (i.e. an intentional, lived and social world). Houmann argues that the collection of data through such expressive objects unlocks the door to the life world, drawing heavily on stories and the use of metaphors. A more direct explanation of the examples of the three-dimensional objects would have been beneficial. There is some confusion in the numbering of the three figures in the chapter.

The final chapters are by two veteran educators, who approach issues of transition in their lives prompted by retirement. In “Dance/Teaching/Research: The Practice of Living”, Susan Stinson eloquently describes how being an artist/educator/researcher has given her a way of being in the world. She focuses upon the challenge of regarding teaching as moral praxis: “I often wondered to what degree I was avoiding dealing with larger issues of social justice, hiding out in my own safe world of dance education” (p. 146). It followed that the selection of a research topic was not just about satisfying her own curiosity, she also had to remain conscious of the moral implications of her work. She concludes that research involves the practice of persistence and courage. Ultimately, as an act of faith, research “is not just something we do, but who we are” (p.151).

Betsy Hearne contributes a highly personal and poignant chapter to conclude the volume. Her background is in storytelling, children’s literature, and folklore. She believes that when research is viewed as a story it becomes inseparable from our own life story. I found a resonance here with the neurologist, Oliver Sacks (2015), who tells us, “I am a storyteller, for better and for worse. I suspect that a feeling for stories is a universal human disposition” (p. 384). In Hearne’s professional life she was drawn in particular to stories of strong women overcoming adversity. Her research on folk tales reflected Joseph Campbell’s circular model of the mythic journey: at first one is outward bound, intent on learning, and passing tests of courage and endurance; the second half becomes increasingly inward bound returning home with a handful of wisdom. In 2007 Hearne retired, and at the same time she was diagnosed with cancer. Not surprisingly stories of brave women all took on new meaning. She concludes

by saying that “Aging brings tough choices, but wisdom can make up for it” (p. 161), and asks challengingly “what happens to a self that is built of work when work falls away?” (p. 160).

Beyond Methods opens up the world of qualitative research and the power of the arts to influence it. Its scope is wide, embracing dance, music, poetry, storytelling and the visual arts. What arises from reading the book is the striking reciprocity between researchers and their involvement with the arts as artists, performers, and teachers. Frequently they deliberately challenged themselves by exploring artistic worlds, which were foreign to them. The chapters taken together have a collective energy which stems from the authors’ and editor’s conviction that the arts can truly provide a stimulus for qualitative research.

More critically, the over-riding emphasis is upon the subjective responses of the researchers to the task in hand, which I understand is a part and parcel of qualitative research. Reading the book from start to finish however, I felt at times the overall tendency towards the self-referential beginning to pall. I would have welcomed more self-criticism and more questioning regarding the claims of qualitative research. I would also have appreciated more discussion of the social contexts in which the investigators were situated, in order to provide greater variety and balance for the reader. The inclusion of an index would have been helpful in identifying common themes and influences.

To conclude, *Beyond Methods* is an excellent starting point for anyone who wishes to explore the possibilities inherent in the symbiotic relationship between qualitative research and the arts. It stands as a tribute to the pioneering work and influence of Liora Bresler who has by example demonstrated how ‘art, research and life’ converge.

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Gordon Cox was until his retirement, senior lecturer in Music Education at the University of Reading. He writes extensively on the history of music education and is a past co-editor of the *British Journal of Music Education*. His most recent books are *The Musical Salvationist: The World of Richard Slater (1854-1939) Father of Salvation Army Music* (Boydell Press, 2011), and *The Origins and Foundations of Music Education: International Perspectives* (Bloomsbury Press, 2017, co-edited with Robin Stevens).

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