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Evidencing atmospheres and narratives: Measuring the immeasurable?

Heather Prince²⁶ and Tracy Hayes

Most academic researchers conscious of metrics for the assessment of quality of research such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK, will be seeking impact for their work. The evaluation of academic research now extends to relevance and impact beyond the academy (Gunn and Mintrom, 2017). Some may consider evidencing the impact of research into atmospheres and narratives somewhat challenging, particularly for those who adopt a creative, interpretive approach. Thus, if we are to evidence this in our practice and to a wider audience, we should consider whether or not it is measurable, how we would want it to be used and who may read or act upon it.

The political systems in the UK, as in many other European countries, are situated in a positivist theoretical framework and capitalist paradigm built on accountability, performativity and measurability, and where scale is objectified. Policy and decision making for funding throughout Europe usually is based on evaluative evidence (E) that places the apparent fluidity and openness of research into atmospheres and narratives at an epistemological margin. Emphasis is placed on an outcome driven educational system (Prince and Exeter, 2016).

The challenges of evidencing our research are many: Atmospheres and narratives may encapsulate the sensing or feelings of a presence that is not physically present, or the interpretation of which draws on hauntings and/or aesthetics, often metaphorically (Goleman, 2008); for example, as represented by the photo of cobwebs metaphorically linking us through time and space (Figure 1, below). We are challenged in measuring the 'interpersonal dynamic' (W). There are difficulties for young people in articulating learning, which tends to be through recall of information in an exposition; they often do not have the words to express the value and meaning of an experience (FP), particularly personal and social development and growth.

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Figure 4: Cobwebs linking us through time and space, taken at the ‘Shot at Dawn’ memorial, National Memorial Arboretum, UK. June 10 2017.

It could be that research on atmospheres and narratives closely linked to practice would *influence* practitioners rather than impact them, where the term ‘influence’ provides a wider scope of selectivity and a less direct cause and effect relationship. Participants in outdoor experiences are often able to recognise intra-personal values and meanings retrospectively (H; W) through meta-analysis and reflection (Gray, 2017; Prince, 2005). For example, students on an extended solo experience (Williams, 2012) experienced dissonance or ‘stasis’ at the time but were able to analyse the effect of that intervention on their personal development and maturation much later and the analysis of developmental outcomes was the focus of the research rather than immediate outcomes.

Einstein’s epigram ‘Many of the things you can count, don’t count. Many of the things you can’t count, really count’ (O) resonates with the European Institute of Outdoor Adventure Education and Experiential Learning (EOE) research community striving to evidence the value of experiences that support the development of, for example, emotional connections, resilience and motivation. These outcomes might require a qualitative research approach and sometimes the development of new methods and methodological frameworks (Hayes,

2017; Pringle and Falcous, 2016) or the recognition of the need to involve a breadth of methodologies and data elicitation/collection tools in the process of 'bricolage' to build the evidence base (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Tracy, 2013). Quay and Seaman (2013) caution against innovative practices at the fringe of curricula that become centralised. In doing so they become outcomes rather than process and are thus lacking in sustainability.

One way forward of valuing the process could be to ensure that voices, particularly of young people, are listened to, captured and heard (O). Voices provide a depth of articulation to demonstrate and show the meaning of experiences, bring them to life and focus on the 'showing' rather than the 'telling' (Ingold, 2000). Tansley and Maftei (2015) support this alternative (alterative) approach in their critique of more traditional forms of reporting, as being more open to interpretation, non-directive and arguably, more respectful. 'Voices' are defined in a broad sense and may not involve speech. They can be through narrative, including stories, tales and poems, or visual and aural media, for example. These more sensory modes of expression can be used to capture and share experiences in a way that focuses on the processes involved, rather than the end-product or outcome; it also helps to make visible the meaning found by participants. We may not be able to measure influence, but we can capture its essence and make it explicit (FP; Hayes, *ibid*). Words help to make intangible issues more tangible; narrative methods enable us to describe it, make it visible, to show the influence and importance of our work.

Czarniawska (2004) explains that narrative involves two perspectives: seeing *narrative* as a mode of knowing, and seeing *narration* as a mode of communication. Hayes (2017, *ibid*) argues that there is a third perspective, seeing the *narrator* as the link between the two, following van Maanen (2011) who recognises representational styles selected to connect the observer to the observed. This developmental thinking moves towards 'showing' and sharing, reflecting the interpretation of storytelling as open and creative, through which participants can bring their own experiences and modes of understanding to the reflective process (Gray and Stuart, 2012). This should not be viewed as a nebulous process, as environmental storytelling, for example, '...is the act of using live narrative performance to teach an audience about the natural world, how it works, and how to care for it' (Strauss,

2006). Furthermore, a storied approach embracing socio-narratology (Frank, 2012) is acknowledged as a valid form of data.

The challenge for researchers is in collating and making sense of those voices in the written form:

A writer's voice is often composed of many voices, which the writer brings together in a conversation. The writer's voice emerges in the way she calls on all the voices and combines them in making an overall statement. To identify the dominant voice of any text, as readers we need to hear distinctly all the voices that the writer calls on (Bazerman, 1995, p.89).

We need to make a judgement within this multi-layered textual form (Ellis, 2004) as to how much of this type of data is needed to demonstrate evidence and authenticity, and the translation of this evidence/data to the language of funders (P). Perhaps we should leave non-textual forms of data in their original mode in order to communicate those voices whom they represent. However, these approaches to the interpretation of voices do have advantages over objective evaluations where there are questions of reliability through 'evaluation fatigue' (R) and the smoothing of large data sets to produce headline figures.

Quality research needs to be achieve representation of the voices of the participants, often young people for whom it needs to be right and truthful, and which may not be generalizable (N; A). Tracy (2013) identifies eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research as: worthy topic; rich rigour; sincerity; credibility; resonance; significant contribution; ethical; meaningful coherence. To this we would add that, in action research, it needs to be robust in theoretical and methodological terms, have value-for-use and build capacity (Elliott, 2007), and that these are benchmarks that we can examine against the evidence from interpretative practices such as narratives and stories.

The provision of evidence to substantiate our research on atmospheres and narratives in the field of Outdoor Adventure Education and Experiential Learning should draw on transdisciplinarity that views knowledge-building and dissemination as a holistic process and requires innovation and flexibility (Leavy, 2016). It draws on knowledge from disciplines relevant to specific research issues or problems, while ultimately transcending disciplinary borders and building a synergistic conceptual and methodological framework which is irreducible to the sum of its constituent parts. We should acknowledge that utilising more

creative, aesthetic and interpretive practices, may result in more questions than answers, as outcomes of an enquiry (Nixon, 2014). For example, ‘what is impact?’ and ‘how is it measure’ and more to the point ‘who is impacted by it?’ We need to celebrate the process and ‘measure what you value, not value what you can measure’ (FP) to respond robustly to, and counter-balance, calls for metrics and numerical data. By doing this we will be able to find the influence of what we do as outdoor practitioners, whilst being able to respond robustly to the challenge, “You told us a great story, but...”

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