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# Shared-story approaches in outdoor studies: the HEAR (Hermeneutics, Auto/Ethnography and Action Research) ‘listening’ methodological model

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## **Abstract**

Capturing the voices of practitioners and participants in outdoor experiences as data in qualitative research, demands imaginative, creative and practical methodologies, embedded within sound ethical frameworks. In this chapter, we explore shared-story approaches as ways in which experiences can be considered, analysed critically and conceptualised to give ‘testimony’ - a recognisable way of constructing meaning and disseminating research findings. We illustrate HEAR (Hermeneutics, (Auto)Ethnographic Action Research) as a methodological ‘listening’ model and a form of praxiography, rooted in the use of fables and stories to convey findings. This transdisciplinary method has meaning and application within and out with outdoor contexts.

## **Introduction**

Ethical, responsible research demands careful expression: we are in a position of power, our words can influence others and be inadvertently harmful. We explore shared-story approaches as ways in which experiences can be considered, analysed critically and conceptualised to give ‘testimony’, construct meaning and disseminate research findings. We illustrate the HEAR methodological model with reference to research exploring young people’s relationship with nature (Hayes, 2017). A ‘listening’ model, this conceptual

approach is a form of praxiography (a method focused on production of knowledge in practice), rooted in the use of fables and stories to convey findings. Using the example of a story with layered meanings, we demonstrate its effectiveness for engaging attention and introducing alternative ways of thinking about research findings.

The use of shared-story reflects perspectives and experiences through narrative and is a powerful tool for illuminating and problematizing practices. We critique its position as a transdisciplinary method within creative qualitative methodologies to optimise and enable inclusivity for participants, practitioners and researchers. We provide guidance on ways of using this approach, whilst exploring the reasons underpinning this method, aiming to encourage further practice.

## **Exploring shared-story approaches**

Our use of the term ‘shared-storied’ emphasises that the story is shared for a reason, we found meaning and felt the need to *share*, to communicate it to others in a way that encourages them to respond and perhaps provide a reciprocal story. The terms story, fable and anecdote are often used interchangeably, so we will pause to provide working definitions so that if you want to adopt this method you will be able to identify the most effective form to use. A story can be fictional, nonfictional or a blend; can be unimaginatively told (for example: an account or report) or imaginatively told, using creative writing techniques (for example: a tale or amusing anecdote). Frank (2012, p. 2) highlights that as well as a means of providing information, stories “...give form – temporal and spatial orientation, coherence, meaning intention, and especially boundaries – to lives that inherently lack form”. A tale is a form of story or narrative, particularly one imaginatively told. Like Van Maanen (2011, p. 8) we use the term in deference to the “inherent story-like character of fieldwork accounts”. An

anecdote is a concise entertaining story about real events or people. A fable is a short story, typically with animal characters, designed to convey a moral. This can be useful within pedagogical situations as exemplified by Carson's seminal text 'Silent Spring' (1962). A *Magic Moment Fable*, as defined by Hayes (2017) is a short story, imaginatively told, that interprets a moment subjectively perceived as significant. It conveys a lesson, a moment from which we can learn. Figure 3.2.1 shows the different forms of stories and relationships between them. Myths, Legends and Fairy-tales are included; however, they are not discussed in detail as they represent *extraordinary* stories (our emphasis), viewed as the realm of fantasy and imagination. Whilst we may draw from some of the techniques used to create these fantastical stories, we feel this is a less appropriate method for making sense of carefully elicited research data.

<Figure 3.2.1 HERE>

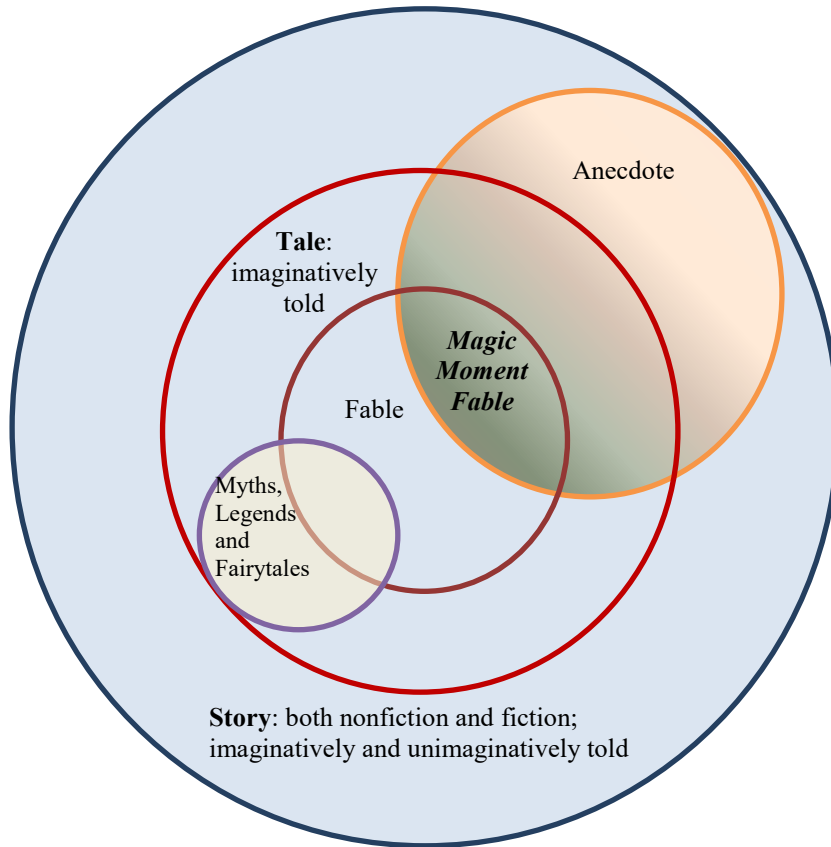
### **Sharing stories**

Stories can engage, captivate, encourage participation and can be used to foster comfort, familiarity, make connections and as a hook to gain attention. Frank (2012, p. 3) highlights, "Stories may not actually breathe, but they can animate...Stories work with people, for people, and always stories work *on* people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided". Sharing a story enables others to begin to understand us, to give *testimony* to what we have experienced (Etherington, 2004).

### **Writing stories**

Some researchers use creative/artistic forms to create evocative narrative pieces, others use creative non-fiction often for ethical reasons (see Chapter 3.1), Stories can be written as a

Figure 3.2.1 Diagrammatic illustration of the relationship between the different forms of story (Hayes, 2017)



way of illustrating key points and exploring issues in more detail. Here, initially, author, Tracy utilised fables written by other people (for example, the traditional Aesop's Fables) subsequently, she developed a collection of her own fables. These highlighted initial key findings from the research and sharing them evoked a response from the reader/listener encouraging them to explore their own experiences and values regarding outdoor learning, resulting in mutual response between respondents and researcher. The questions and comments heard, the stories people shared, inveigled their way into her thinking. Thus, her stories came to be included within the body of the dataset; writing and sharing them became part of the elicitation process, as a creative approach to engaging with the topic. As you read the next section, we respectfully ask you to consider how could you make use of this approach? What stories do you have to share?

### **Illustrating shared-story approaches**

This next section includes a *Magic Moment Fable* as a way of demonstrating how to utilise a shared-story within research. It is based on research into young people's relationship with nature; however, this approach is applicable elsewhere, for topics that warrant qualitative attention and an exploratory, questioning approach. What is presented here is a joining of voices in a multi-layered textual form (Ellis, 2004) whereby we first invite you to imagine yourself in another's place, embodied within the story, the retelling (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012) of a specific moment, and then provoke you to join in a reflective contemplation of what this may mean in practice.

#### **Exploring a shared space as a different place**

*"She loves going outside, and the fresh air is so good for her..."*

I listen to the words of the carer whilst focusing my eyes on the young woman in the wheelchair in front of me. The young woman's eyes are firmly fixed on the top of the head of the older woman who is leaning over her. She is unable to speak, at least in

audible words. No-one is sure how much she can hear, or understand of the world around her...

I observe her hands, which the carer is attempting to cover with woolly gloves. Her fingers stiffen, resolutely unbending. An unspoken, unacknowledged battle commences. I remember similar battles with my own (non-disabled) children when they were young, and think that mittens would have been so much easier...

A brief concession on the part of the carer who switches to pulling a warm, woolly hat over the young woman's head, cheerfully pronouncing: "*There, that will keep your ears warm.*" Then the finger battle resumes ...

They are interrupted by the arrival of what I take to be a school nurse, who quietly interjects that the young woman has missed her lunch. A syringe of liquid nourishment appears, to be injected through a tube into the young woman's stomach. The carer explains they will have to stay behind while we take the rest of the class to the park. She promises they will join us as soon as they can ...

Two hours later, we return to the classroom. The young woman is sat at the front of the class, accompanied by the carer, who cheerfully announces, "*Look, she's having her own nature experience...*"

She is positioned in front of a whiteboard connected to a computer, which is showing whirling, swirling, multi-coloured pictures, accompanied by 'sounds of nature'. My first reaction is frustrated anger. This is not a nature experience. This is someone else's interpretation, an unnatural, synthesised, clinical version in an indoor space. The young woman has been deprived of something vital...

I place myself next to them as the other students go to the cloakroom to remove their outdoor clothing. I rest my hand next to hers, our fingers gently touching. Then I look down. Her fingers are relaxed. Her eyes are focussed on the patterns in front of her. I follow her gaze to the screen and find its effects hypnotic...

On waking from my trance, I reflexively question 'How can I include this experience in a research project that purposefully focuses on young people's voices?'

The ellipses at the end of eight sentences within this story suggest points at which to pause and focus the conversation. We offer our perspectives within an interpretation that takes account of both "context and circumstance" (Mazzei and Jackson, 2012, p. 745) and encourage you to consider your own interpretation.

***She loves going outside, and the fresh air is so good for her...***

Simple words, casually spoken, however they reveal so much about the carer's approach to caring for her charge. There is an air of assumed positivity, an easy assertion of authority that perhaps aims to convey a commitment to inclusive practice: a belief that we should have equality of opportunity to participate in the activities on offer. Yet there is the first niggles of discomfort that we are forcing this young woman to experience the world on our terms, not hers. This normalising language is from the perspective of the provider; the shared space cannot be contested but ownership of the decision to be there can, through giving more status to knowledge constructed in everyday life (Fenwick, 2003). The dominant discourses regarding learning outdoors argue that children and young people are disconnected from nature, they are experiencing nature-deficit disorder (Louv, 2005) and arguably more importantly, that we need to reconnect them. There is further admonishment that activities should be accessible for all, with specific adaptations where required. Has this negative discourse become too dominant (domineering)? How can we know what is important to her?

*No-one is sure how much she can hear, or understand of the world around her...*

Many questions arise from this simple statement, including how does she make meaning of her world? How do we then make meaning of this? How do we capture 'silent/silenced' voices? What do we mean by 'voice'? Is this different from speech? Can you have a voice without speech? Yes, according to Jackson and Mazzei (2012), if we see it as noiseless rather than silent. There is not sufficient room to address all the questions here, especially those with a biological/neurological aetiology. We focus on meaning-making and voice, and on how we, as researchers bearing witness to the encounter, avoid treating her 'voice' in a simplistic and mechanistic manner (Jackson and Mazzei, *Ibid.*; Koro-Ljungberg and Mazzei, 2012). We must develop a relationship that is a relational exchange (Gilligan, 1993) which forms part of the process whereby we make sense of our world, and our experiences within it.



Cope and Kalantzis (2000) identify six elements of the process of meaning making, only one of which is linguistic; the other five are textual, visual, audio, gestural and spatial modes of meaning. In their later work Cope and Kalantzis (2009) propose the use of open-ended questions about meaning, enabling us to interpret situations and transfer multi-literal meaning to different and possibly unfamiliar settings. There are multiple ways to ‘read’ the encounter described in the story (Kuntz and Presnall, 2012); the focus on capturing and presenting the ‘finger battle’ within a story avoids “...reification of the transcript as the primary artifact (sic) of the interview” (p. 733), highlighting the embodied and emplaced nature of the interaction. If this was recorded as an interview/focus group, without an oral-voice she would be absent, although perhaps there may be some displaced noises that may be attributed to her. Through shifting perspective, moving from the invisible/inaudible to the visible/audible, embodying the central role in the story, she becomes visible, her presence is heard and felt.

We identify purposeful behaviour on the part of the carer, who demonstrates concern and care, suggesting a shared belief that it is good for her to go outside, a sign of common purpose with us/the project. By interpreting the resultant tensing of the fingers as a deliberate action, rather than an uncontrollable muscle spasm, we are also attributing purpose to this act - a political statement through body language rather than words: a silent rebellion.

***Mittens would have been so much easier...***

If mittens rather than gloves had been used, this moment would have been masked, it would have gone unnoticed. How much else are we missing through adherence to more traditional methods? Is there time and space for non-verbal communication and do we have the necessary skills and awareness to adopt this approach with young people, particularly those who have some form of disability? Childhood and adolescence are not phases to be

outgrown, young people's experiences in social, cultural and political contexts (Valentine, 2003) are part of a lifelong process that shapes and defines a person. Whilst mittens may be appropriate for a young child young people of a similar age to this young woman are more likely to opt for gloves. Gloves allow for more individual movement of fingers, more freedom for expression.

***Then the finger battle resumes ...***

There are no answers, merely more questions, particularly with regards to what, if anything, the young woman was trying to convey. Was she hungry? Cold? Unhappy at the thought of going outside? The limitations of being a participant-observer in this space are all too clear. The researcher does not have a well-established relationship with either the young woman or her carer; she is there as an accompaniment to the project worker who is facilitating the outdoor experience. She recalls an earlier session when the young woman in the story had joined in, in her own way. She had been wheeled outside by her carer and placed near the centre of the playground. Tracy recalls observing her turn her face towards the sun, like a flower, absorbing the warm rays through her skin. She had appeared calm and relaxed: so very different from today.

***She promises they will join us as soon as they can ...***

They do not join us in the neighbouring park. If they had, would it have been accessible? Or relevant? We have become adept at considering those who have become excluded, and, in the name of inclusion, developing methods of reaching them, to include them in what we offer. However, we also need to listen in a multi-modal manner. It is not enough to simply provide resources and materials to enable others to participate in what we offer, what we like doing; we need to explore other ways of providing relevant experiences.

***Look, she's having her own nature experience...***

Kellert (2012) categorises experience of nature as taking several forms including direct experience (unstructured play and contact with wild places, self-sustaining nature), which is seen as integral to healthy growth and development, referred to as the 'naturalistic necessity' (Kellert, 2012) and 'Vitamin N' (Louv, 2013). Other forms include indirect experiences (structured/facilitated contact with 'managed' nature, for example, a garden or a pet), and representational experiences of nature, for example through stories, toys, computer or images (Kellert, 2012). In the story shared here we see an example of a representational experience of nature; is this a lesser experience for this young woman? It is certainly a safer one.

***The young woman has been deprived of something vital...***

Vital to whom? Her or us? Left to the unmitigated vagaries of nature, this young woman would not be alive, in many ways she lives in an artificially constructed world. Yet even the action of typing these words, attempting to describe her life feels unkind, as if we are denying the value of her existence in the world; we feel we are falling into the 'slippery stuff' of conflicting values and controversy (Milligan and Wood, 2009); the things that are "... hard to quantify, measure, produce outcomes for and ultimately rely more on beliefs and opinions than facts" (Wood, 2007, pp. 44-5). The questions continue: what are the benefits to her of spending time outside? How does it impact on her well-being? Who is defining the 'criteria'? Placing ourselves next to her, we attempt to enter her space, as defined on the young woman's terms. Within this shared space we consider is it important for her to spend actual (not just virtual) time in nature?

***I follow her gaze to the screen and find its effects hypnotic...***

The impact of technology, media, mediated experiences is a highly contested, emergent area of research. However, there appears to be a paucity of relevant literature, with more being published about children and technology, including play (Skår and Krogh, 2009), education/pedagogy (Palmárová and Lovászová, 2012; Heinonen, 2015) and the use of mobile devices. Within a wider discussion on how an over-reliance on virtual, electronic connections may be eroding our connection to actual physical places, Kupfer (2007, p. 39) claims that “the more electronically mediated activity replaces place, the more we become dis-placed”. We find no answers from looking at the screen, merely more questions, particularly as to what this troubling encounter may mean in terms of this research project.

***How can this experience be included in a research project that purposefully focuses on young people’s voices?***

The challenge is to find a place for this story within the more mainstream/dominant narratives on (dis)connection to nature. The direct, formalised relationship is with the project, not with the school, staff, young people or their parents. There is a need to stay aware, sensitive to needs and situation, yet also realistic and pragmatic as the research study was not about SEN/D (special education needs and/or disabilities), this was just one facet; although a very interesting one, it should not dominate the bigger picture.

**Critiquing shared-story approaches as a transdisciplinary method**

Like other researchers exploring the social world (for example, Macartney, 2007; Mazzei and Jackson, 2012) in this study we felt constrained by traditional forms of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies and were determined to find a way of working in a transdisciplinary manner to explore the research question. We agreed the most effective way to do this was to combine three methodologies: **hermeneutics** (questioning);

auto/ethnography and action research, and the acronym HEAR implies listening. Taking each methodology in turn, firstly what we mean by applying the term hermeneutics is best elucidated by Fairfield (2011, p. 3): “The logic of hermeneutics is non-linear, non-formal and non-foundational; it is relational, contextual and dialogical. Interpretation does not begin at the beginning and it is without end...”. Through the creation of stories, we pass forward this questioning approach, encapsulated in textual-form to provoke and stimulate further questioning. The second methodology, and arguably the strongest within the blend, is auto/ethnography, a concept that has been in use for several decades yet still has multiple meanings and interpretations, it involves “a rewriting of the self and the social” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 4; see chapter 2.6). Events are remembered and analysed; the moments chosen as a focus tend to be perceived as epiphanies, a turning-point (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Those defining moments that make us stop and wonder, to question in an attempt to extract meaning (Denzin, 2014). The experience must be critically analysed, otherwise it becomes merely ‘a nice story’. This means recognising that our interpretation and presentation have been filtered through our own experiences. We agree with Macartney (2007, p. 29) that re/presenting “...perspectives and experiences through narrative is a powerful tool for illuminating and problematising practices and approaches based on deficit discourses ...” such as those applied to young people with disabilities, and/or nature deficit disorder.

The third methodology is action research: the impetus for innovation is a typical feature of action research (McNiff and Whitehead, 2011) and is central to the research. Another distinctive characteristic is that the researcher is typically a practitioner within a workplace setting: “...it is research from inside that setting” (Somekh and Lewin, 2011, p. 94). This contrasts with other research strategies, which insist on the researcher being objective and

external to the practice/setting. It is unashamedly subjective and situated. This story demanded attention due to the jarring of researcher values, the questioning and challenging of beliefs, which proved to be a transformational (Custer, 2014) moment. For many young people their attendance at a non-mainstream school already places them in the socially constructed position of being ‘ontologically other’ (Farrugia, 2009, p. 1013), inhabiting a space that is defined by processes that may serve to stigmatize the young people, and their families; their voices are mediated and interpreted by the teaching staff. How do we know it is their ‘voice’, how can we even begin to gain an understanding of their perspective, is it possible for us to view the world through their lenses? This questioning highlights the importance of working in a moral and ethical manner that goes beyond ethics panels, and necessitates highly developed self-awareness, empathic skills and a creative imagination (see chapter 1.2).

This is not unemotional research, it embraces a view of research as being emotional (of the heart), as well as cognitive (the head) and practical (hand). There is no attempt to hide behind a curtain of academic objectivity. The researcher is included, not as a form of narcissism or self-therapy but “... on behalf of others, a body that invites identification and empathic connection, a body that takes as its charge to be fully human” (Pelias, 2004, p. 1). We agree with his methodological approach of research with people beyond assumed authority, critical argument and establishing the correct criteria. We want to capture the silent, minority voices, to be compassionate, passionate and emotional. However, we also want our research to be credible, to be recognised as contributing to knowledge, to do justice to the people who volunteer to participate and to respect those read our work.

Tracy became increasingly aware that she was the only one to witness the finger battle, the only one able to bear testimony, the privileged position that we are in as interpreters of social interactions. As identified by Landsman (2003) and discussed by Farrugia (2009, p. 1013), parents of children with disabilities “come to locate, interpret, and often to advocate for the personhood of one they would previously have known only as ‘the other’.” The same may be said of researchers, who also have to find an appropriate methodology that will withstand the demands (vagaries?) of academia. The finger battle becomes a “...methodologically, embodied metaphor [that] works against the logic of abstraction, the oversimplification of processes of human meaning-making [...] a means of presenting a depth to human experience” (Kuntz and Presnall, 2012, p.738).

### **Bringing this to a close**

This experience, her story, impacts on us in that it makes us question the different ways that we access the natural world; there is no universal ‘best way’, only temporally, spatially and socially constructed ways. Ultimately it is a matter of subjective differences (Ellis, 2004) based on personal values and morals. Understanding may be gained by participation in social situations, through dialogue between researcher and researched; however, there are ethical and moral questions/dilemmas raised through entering the lives of others, participating alongside them, sharing stories and thoughts.

Transdisciplinary approaches need to cross disciplinary divides, reflect a wide range of interests and resist being categorised within one discipline. This necessitates developing methodologies that are imaginative, creative and practical, and most importantly, they need to be ethical. In developing HEAR, we found a way to critically reflect on experiences in a way

that made *understanding* the focus of the reflections and then to put this learning into practice – so that it was of practical, as well as methodological, use.

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