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Book Review

Being, Seeking and Telling

Peter Willis, Robert Smith and Emily Collins (Eds.). *Being, Seeking and Telling: Expressive Approaches to Qualitative Adult Education Research*. Flaxton, Queensland: Post Pressed. ISBN 1 876682 07 8

by **Sally Borbasi**

The book has been produced by academics from the University of South Australia with support from the University's Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work. Both Peter Willis and Robert Smith are Senior Lecturers in Education while Emily Collins is a Research Assistant/Editor whose background is medical and science and communication but who has an interest in education. This book is the third in a series of texts edited by Peter Willis that explore the use of qualitative research in adult education. This book expands on some of the ideas and concepts presented in his previous books and yet at the same time leads to new ways of thinking about qualitative research. Not surprisingly, the book is dedicated to the memory of Michael Crotty, a scholar who worked closely with Peter Willis and whose interpretation of and musing about phenomenology inspired many of the contributors to the series.

This book is said to have been generated out of a need to explore more comprehensive and vivid accounts of ways to represent human learning and education. In the words of Peter Willis and Robert Smith the book "aims to explore ways to generate research texts that represent as vividly as possible the world of learning and education practice, so that its life and texture can be revealed and its experiences and meanings brought to life." The book explores the notion of research approaches that Willis and Roberts call expressive or 'works of art'. Expressive research aims to portray what a social phenomenon is like for those experiencing it rather than those who analyze or

categorize it. It is the view of the editors that past approaches to qualitative work have tended to categorize, conceptualize and theorize experience rather than portray it so that its lived character is preserved. The project of the book was to look at different ways to portray or present lived experience. This has led, according to the editors, to two readings of the project. Some papers explore different ways to present research findings while others explore what the nature of lived experience might be. Some contributors refer to their work directly as arts-based expressive research also called arts-based educational research (ABER) while others might call it heuristic, autobiographical, experiential, reflexive, storytelling and so on, but all explore different ways to express human social phenomena.

Arts-based expressive research is described by Willis as a complementary alternative to the more common explanatory forms of research. Essentially this research genre is about representation of professional practice through artistic rather than scientific approaches and seeks to generate emotions, feelings and conceptions in a similar way to that experienced by many people when engaging with a work of art. The researcher is referred to as an artist who creates a virtual reality, sketches imagery, produces poetry and presents an aesthetic form that has a mark of individuality. The chapters do indeed represent work with these characteristics. The book comprises a rich array of texts that reflect artful imagery and creativity that push the boundaries of qualitative work and

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inspire one to consider new ways of being, seeking and telling in interpretive work. And yet, while the reader could easily be seduced by the aesthetic power of the work s/he is constantly reminded that expressive work needs ways of creating, critiquing and validating it so that it makes a worthy and useful contribution to human knowledge. There are therefore some substantive chapters devoted to this issue.

More specifically, the book is divided into three sections. The first explores the interpretation and construction of knowledge or the *seeking* element in expressive or arts based research. ABER is explained and the reader is provided with exemplars drawn from expressive work by a number of educationalists most of whom are completing or have just completed PhDs. The second section examines the *being* in imagistic, subjectivised inquiry and raises issues about the stance or position taken by the researcher. The third section deals with the *telling* or illustrative component of expressive or arts based work; how to report the findings of research and give accounts that include heart and imagination. Elements of all three however are common across chapters.

Contributions to this book represent a rich mixture of approaches and styles to writing. What is obvious, is that what is written about is deeply meaningful to the writers. Indeed, much of what they write about is their own experience. While some chapters are more substantive in content than others, each contributes in some way to the reader's understanding of the ideas underpinning the collection as a whole. Intended readers for the book include undergraduate and postgraduate students and researchers working in education and adult education. In my view the work will be useful to a range of academics and students looking for new ways to think about and express qualitative data.

Expressive research offers ways to rethink the nature of the research product. It is an emergent paradigm that takes lived experience into the post modern. In my opinion, the material/art collated in this book represents a breath of fresh air in current discourse/s surrounding work that draws on phenomenology and it has the potential to reinvigorate debate amongst researchers working in this area.

About the Author



Sally Borbasi is an Associate Professor in the School of Nursing and Midwifery, Flinders University of Adelaide. She has a strong interest in phenomenology and its application in nursing research. She is a registered nurse with a BEd (Nursing), an MA (Education) and PhD. Her research interests include exploring the lived experience of phenomena related to (ill) health and the body. She has recently completed a study exploring the experience of mucositis for bone marrow transplant patients. One of her current studies involves the examination of nurses' perceptions of caring for end-stage heart failure patients.