writing as method

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Writing as a method of inquiry refers to a research practice of foregrounding and investigating how researchers construct knowledge about people, themselves, and the world by writing. This concept, introduced by Laurel Richardson (2000 [1994]) and developed by Elizabeth St. Pierre (Richardson & St. Pierre 2005) and others, brings the idea that writing is thinking from the humanities to the social sciences.

Writers have always used writing to help them think about their lives and their work, but that function of writing has seldom been taken advantage of in that area of social science research that mimics research in the natural sciences by assuming that language can describe reality. However, after the linguistic turn, the crisis of legitimation, and the crisis of representation, many social science researchers no longer assume that language is transparent and can simply mirror or represent reality; rather, they understand that language helps to create reality. Writing is therefore not an objectifying practice or a mopping up activity at the end of a research project but a creative practice used throughout to make sense of lives and culture, to theorize, and to produce knowledge.

Since the Enlightenment, writing has been divided into two kinds: literary and scientific. Literature has traditionally been associated with personal expression, rhetoric, physicality, emotions, and subjectivity. Science writing is associated with facts, the truth, reality, rationality, and objectivity. Literature is soft and suspect; science writing is hard and true. Enlightenment thinkers such as René Descartes and Francis Bacon set up binary oppositions – mind/body, objective/subjective, fact/fiction – in which the first term is privileged and scientific. The scientific method assumes that the rational mind can divorce itself from its irrational body and produce true knowledge employing criteria of exactitude, rigor, and systematicity. In this scenario, mathematics is the perfect language, supposedly pure and uncontaminated by the inexactitude, imprecision, and precariousness of everyday life. Science is thus above life, and science writing should reflect the same detachment, rationality, and control.

Of course, such a neat division of writing, and the world (scientific and non scientific), was never entirely successful, and events of the twentieth century, in particular, brought into question the idea that the knowledge produced by science could cure the problems of human kind. Indeed, the sometimes disastrous effects of an objective, rational science brought the entire enterprise into question after the atrocities of World Wars I and II, Algeria, and Vietnam. The social movements of the 1960s and 1970s demanded that science – both social and natural science – be taken to task for its complicity in perpetuating poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, and so forth. Texts encouraging a mind–body connection resisted Descartes's 300 year old theory and doubted that the mind and body had ever been separate. Scholars began to move out of their own fields, blurring disciplinary boundaries, as they sought different methods to use to produce different knowledge that might allow different possibilities for living. The "soft" social sciences began to claim the status of the natural sciences, no longer content to be called underdeveloped natural sciences or pre scientific. Physicists began writing for popular audiences, and social science writers began using the genres of the humanities.

Social scientists have always represented their work in words and written texts; however, after the blurring of the genres, forms of representation such as drama and film were increasingly used to report scientific knowledge. Form constrains content, and different genres of writing encourage different thinking and produce different knowledge. No particular genre of writing is superior to another; each has possibilities and limits. Though a conventional scientific research report modeled after that of the natural sciences has been privileged for some time in the social sciences, science does not require a particular genre. A poem can convey as much meaning (and a different meaning) as an academic essay. In fact, to learn as much as they can about their topic, researchers might write up data from a single project using a variety of forms – personal narrative, expository essay, autobiography, fiction, and poetry – in order to engage those data in more and more complex ways, thereby complicating the making of

meaning and illustrating the very partial and fragile nature of the work we call science.

Researchers who have special talents have indeed experimented with alternative forms of representation, including poetry, drama, auto ethnography, fiction, performance texts, poly vocal texts, hypertext, readers' theater, comedy and satire, visual presentations, mixed genres, and even painting and dance. Social scientists concerned with disseminating their work widely often write very different texts about the same project for different audiences.

The tenuous relation between language and meaning that emerges from postmodern the ories of the last half of the twentieth century is central to the idea that writing is a method of inquiry. In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Jacques Derrida explained that language cannot contain and fix meaning. He theorized the concepts *différence* and *writing under erasure* to explain that meaning escapes language and so is always deferred. "Word and thing or thought never in fact become one" (Spivak 1974: lvii). When we write under erasure, we let go of meaning at the moment we introduce it. As a result, meaning cannot be a portable property that words can carry from one person to another, and language cannot "represent" the world.

Postmodern discourses differ from the inter pretive discourses used in conventional social science inquiry that assume there is a deep, hidden, prelinguistic meaning that can be found and brought to discourse. If there is no mimetic link between a deep (or transcendental) Truth and a particular instantiation, then the copy theory of truth upon which some theories of representation are structured cannot hold. Post modernism, after the linguistic turn, suggests that interpretation is not the discovery of mean ing but the introduction of meaning. Because of this, writers can never control readers' inter pretations since there is always an excess of meaning as people bring their own lived experi ences to the texts they read. Writing, then, is not a neutral activity of expression that simply matches word to world. It becomes a task of responsibility as researchers create people, prac tices, and cultures in the texts they write.

Researchers also collect data in the texts they write, so writing can be a *method of data collec tion*. Researchers write throughout the research process as they document their day to day activities, their impressions of events, their for mal interviews and informal conversations with participants, and their formal and informal observations. Some of these data are conven tional – data from formal interviews and obser vations, for example, that are textualized in interview transcripts and fieldnotes. These are official data that are described in social science textbooks.

Other data are transgressive (St.Pierre 1997) and may include memories of the past and the future, dreams, sensualities, emotions, the words of other scholars, the novel just read, a neighbor's comment. These data are found in every study, though their presence and impor tance are seldom acknowledged. Writers can not simply erase these transgressive data from their minds and bodies as they think and write about the more conventional data in their inter view transcripts and fieldnotes. They bring the richness of their lives to their research. Thus, different researchers studying the same topic think with different conventional and trans gressive data and necessarily produce different knowledge. There is no separation between the knower and the known in the work, and the unique positioning of the researcher is valued. *Bias* is not thinkable in this structure, but that does not mean that one does not discriminate among representations, that "anything goes." It means that readers develop more complex ideas of what good research is. Validity is not dis missed but constantly reworked as appropriate.

Since writing is thinking it can also be a *method of data analysis*. Writing allows us to think things we might not have thought by thinking alone. Writing takes us places we might not have gone if we had not written. We must think in order to write the next word, the next sentence, the next theory. An idea simply thought may seem brilliant until it is written. A brilliant unthought idea may appear as we write. Writing forces us to textualize the rigor ous confusion of our thinking, and that work is analysis. This analysis is much more compli cated than what is usually called data analysis – positivist practices of coding data, sorting it into categories that are grouped into themes that become section headings in an outline that orga nizes writing in advance of writing. Those practices ignore the work of writing as think ing, as analysis. They assume that writing only

documents what is already known. Using writ ing as a method of inquiry, however – as a method of data collection and data analysis – acknowledges and builds into the research pro cess the generative work of writing.

The linguistic turn that recognized that meaning (the Truth) about people and culture could not be captured and closed off in language led to the crises of representation and legitima tion that recognized that meaning (truth) is always partial, situated, contingent, inaccurate, and, thus, dangerous to some extent. The result ing burden of authorship led to the ethical turn that recognized that researchers' texts do not capture truth but produce it. Leery of writing texts that might misrepresent or even harm par ticipants, social science researchers began to ask different questions about their work. Instead of asking "What does [marriage, race, subjectivity] mean?" they posed questions such as those Paul Bové (1990: 54) asked about discourse: "How does discourse function? Where is it to be found? How does it get produced and regulated? What are its social effects? How does it exist?"

From these questions comes a different ques tion about writing: "What else might writing do except mean?" Some researchers, particularly postmodern researchers, have begun to ques tion whether the goal of social science research should even be representation (the goal of inter pretivism), and they are increasingly hesitant to get to the bottom of meaning, to gratify the interpretive entitlement of readers to *know* their participants. They are no longer willing to write comfort texts with rich, thick descriptions that provide easy access to and lay bare people's lives, whether exotic or ordinary. Their writing does not encourage an uncomplicated and senti mental identification that erases the difference of the Other. Rather, they shift the focus from their participants to the topic of their research – marriage, race, subjectivity – using conventional and transgressive data to theorize without deli vering anyone or any place in authentic, more adequate, persuasive representations. People and lives are no longer the epistemological end of

the study – objects that can be known – but provocateurs – lines of flight that lead else where. This elsewhere is the promise of writing as a method of inquiry, of discovery, of coming and going, of movement past what is known.

This kind of post representational work can be accomplished in any genre, but it requires that we understand writing differently. Writing becomes a field of play in which we are always unprepared to make meaning, and whatever meaning we make will always come too late to rescue us. Nevertheless, we write because we know that, in writing, anything can happen – and will. Like other writers, we may produce knowledge that will change the world.

SEE ALSO: Author/Auteur; Deconstruction; Discourse; Methods; Methods, Mixed; Post structuralism; Representation

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