

Conference report: carnival of invention

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Conference Report:

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Katherine Wimpenny, Kerensa Bushell & Polly Blake*

Carnival of Invention. Brighton University, Falmer Campus, June 15, 2018.
Organized by the Collaborative Poetics Network

Key words:
collaborative
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change

Abstract: In this report we present a reflection on the Collaborative Poetics Network's first "Carnival of Invention" which was held on 15th June 2018 at the University of Brighton, England. Collaborative poetics is an arts-based research method that brings together expertise from artists, academics, and community participants, to share knowledge and promote social change through engaging and accessible ways. On the day of the Carnival over 40 contributors from around the world came to participate in a series of workshops, presentations, installations and displays. In this article we outline the themes addressed on the day and the media utilized in these interactive and experiential sessions. We argue that this event supported the benefits of arts-based research in developing, analyzing, and communicating rich data sets. Finally, we provide evaluation and reflections from the event (including in *haiku*, a traditional Japanese form of poetry), in an attempt to creatively capture the events of the day.

Table of Contents

- [1. Introduction to the "Carnival of Invention" and Collaborative Poetics](#)
- [2. Methodology](#)
- [3. The Opening Welcome and Beyond](#)
- [4. Data Collection](#)
- [5. Closing and Feedback](#)
- [6. The Evening Performances](#)
- [7. Conclusions](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[References](#)

[Authors](#)

[Citation](#)

1. Introduction to the "Carnival of Invention" and Collaborative Poetics

The "Carnival of Invention" took place on June 15, 2018, hosted by the [Collaborative Poetics Network](#). The event was comprised of two distinct parts: The first part was hosted at the University of Brighton and the second, evening, session in Brighton's city center. This second component consisted of a networking meal and spoken word/music performance. Almost 100 academics, artists, and practitioners attended the event. Through the Carnival we sought to demonstrate the benefits of participatory and arts-based research, to promote collaboration across wide-ranging disciplines, fields and sectors, and to present a new methodology in social research: collaborative poetics. [1]

Collaborative poetics is a transformative arts-based research method, which has generated widespread interest. Arts-based research recognizes the importance of bringing together different methods and approaches from the arts and social sciences. There are many forms that can be used; for example, performance inquiry, poetic inquiry, collage inquiry, narrative inquiry, phenomenological inquiry, and photographic inquiry (BUTLER-KISBER, 2010; GREGORY, 2014). [2]

Collaborative poetics represents a participatory, social-justice based approach to such research, bringing together artists, academic researchers and community participants as a collaborative "research collective" to produce innovative and engaging ways of understanding social issues to promote social justice (JOHNSON et al., 2018). [3]

The method was developed in a pilot study in 2016 funded by the National Centre for Research Methods at McGill University's Participatory Cultures Lab. This pilot involved Helen JOHNSON and a group of young spoken word artists combining their efforts to explore the possibility of poetry being used as a research tool to investigate and communicate individuals' lived experiences of discrimination (JOHNSON, CARSON-APSTEIN, BANDEROB & MACUALAY-RETTINO, 2017). JOHNSON subsequently established the Collaborative Poetics Network to further the development and application of this method. The "Carnival of Invention" was the inaugural conference for the Network and an opportunity for us to bring others into the conversation. [4]

The "Carnival of Invention" was framed as an accessible event that was distinctly different from more conventional conferences in terms of atmosphere and approach to presenting theory/research practice. The Carnival involved over 40 contributors, including early career and established academics, community groups, and artists, engaged in projects around the world that advocate the use of arts for research and social justice. [5]

Throughout the day, attendees were immersed in creative pursuits and provided with new opportunities to learn and understand. The day unfolded in a manner similar to storytelling. MOON (2010) describes storytelling as engaging us, taking us from the current reality into story reality, and returning us to our current reality

with fresh perspectives, in order to promote change. Each session engaged attendees on a physical, psychological, social, and emotional level. Session facilitators highlighted issues of discrimination, persecution and exploitation, but also told uplifting stories and messages of hope. [6]

The day included 13 hours of scheduled programming, during which participants used a variety of methodologies to create a shared experience and a fertile environment for knowledge and skill exchange. Methods of delivery included poetry, dance, video, craft, song, and visual arts, as well as lectures in accordance with a more traditional conference feel. This offered an experiential introduction to the many dimensions of arts-based research, which challenged participants to reflect on their current approach to research and collaborative work. [7]

The event provided time to meet during the day and evening, network with others, and form connections for future engagement and joint working. It generated ideas and resources to use in teaching and research and provided alternative approaches for reflective practice. For example, the interactive workshop entitled "Considered Action: The Role of Reflection and Global Citizenship" (given by Dinos ARISTIDOU) incorporated a performance piece around a series of reflections and provocations that engaged the audience with questions regarding activism and considered action. [8]

2. Methodology

The conference was an opportunity for academics and practitioners to explore the creative side of qualitative research methods. Qualitative research is used in the social sciences for its ability to provide in depth understanding of the emotional and contextual realities of individuals' lived experiences. Traditional qualitative methods include in-depth interviews or ethnographic observations. However, these particular methods can be impersonal and not so easily consumed, and can result in the readers being overwhelmed or unmoved (JOHNSON et al., 2018). This seems to suggest that methodologies are needed that can better communicate the lived experiences of participants in a way that maintain richness and yet is sufficiently condensed to be easily consumed by practitioners and community-based organizations (FURMAN, LIETZ & LANGER, 2006). [9]

As noted at the beginning of this article, creative and arts-based research can provide precisely this, making evidence-based research more accessible to community groups and practitioners (see also GREGORY, 2014). This makes the dissemination of research findings to stakeholders more tangible. Where researchers strive to highlight areas of social justice this means more people can interact with the message, creating a bigger impact (BARONE & EISNE, 2012). [10]

3. The Opening Welcome and Beyond

Helen JOHNSON opened the event by performing an original piece of spoken word. This acted as the first demonstration of the day of how a social issue can be taken and integrated into an artistic piece while still holding true to the lived experiences of the participants. It emphasized how a powerful message can be communicated in an accessible and emotive way. Following the spoken word and welcome notes, [a short video](#) introducing collaborative poetics was shown to further engage the audience and open them up to the idea of using this method in their own work. [11]

Following the video there was a panel discussion with some members of the Collaborative Poetics Network. This panel was interactive, as members answered questions directly from the audience. The audience questions reflected their earlier experience of the opening spoken word performance and the collaborative poetics video, as well as expectations that they had for the day and their reasons for attending. This provided a rich opening discussion that would continue throughout the day's sessions. [12]

The remainder of the first part of the day was filled with diverse parallel sessions which conference participants self-selected to attend. The common threads weaving through these sessions are displayed in table one (below) and represent: areas of social justice; capturing of individuals' lived experiences; the richness of content that can be evoked from the use of creative methods; and participation in practice. [13]

4. Data Collection

Participants at the conference were involved in participatory workshops, which enabled them to understand how arts-based methods can be used to develop, analyze, and disseminate a rich data set. To use the example of poetic inquiry and what it offers, poems are the experiences, thoughts, ideas, and observations of a "target" population and the poems can be analyzed in a similar way to interviews or focus groups, for example by using thematic analysis (BRAUN & CLARKE, 2013) or interpretive phenomenological analysis (SMITH, FLOWERS & LARKIN, 2009). [14]

One such approach was taken by what POINDEXTER (2002) called the research poem. POINDEXTER outlines that the researcher should take the completed work, in this case the "poem," and draw out phrases, sentences or paragraphs that appear significant or highlight the unique personality or perspective of the "participant." They should then arrange the "chopped pieces" into stanzas that represent the narrative flow and meaning. In doing so, it is important that the researcher does not change what is actually said by the participant.

| Examples of Themes | Mediums |
|--|--------------------------|
| Women and domesticity | Dance |
| Universal suffrage | Music |
| Plight of aging women | Spoken word |
| Theoretical links between art and social science | Poetry |
| Anger and emotional wellbeing | Visual presentation |
| Addiction recovery | Performance presentation |
| Mental health and wellbeing | Interactive workshop |
| Substance misuse | Workshop |
| Diabetes/health promotion | Film making |
| Global citizenship | |
| Feminism | |
| Gender | |

Table 1: Example themes addressed via panel sessions and the mediums used to facilitate these topics [15]

5. Closing and Feedback

The closing remarks, hosted by Carol RIVAS, allowed for a reflection on the day, and captured critical moments of creative and collaborative potential. Many delegates remarked on how they saw greater future research possibilities, and how they could combine their own research with the methods used in sessions presented earlier in the day. Following this was a networking meal (discussed further below), which offered a further opportunity to meet and discuss ideas and share thoughts in an informal setting. This led into a selection of performances from artists who seek to facilitate social change through their work. [16]

The Carnival used the metaphor of a mosaic to represent the bringing together of expertise from artists, academics and community participants, sharing knowledge in engaging and accessible ways, and promoting social change. The following poem, composed by one of the Carnival organizers, Sandie WOODS, captures how this approach has enabled practitioners to create new perspectives, new insights and new ways of working. These ways of working are no longer separate parts but have become something new, dynamic and unique.

*Lying on the ground
pieces that have been broken
become something new
A mosaic is formed
new connections have been made
a thing of beauty*



Figure 1: The collaborative poetics mosaic [17]

In keeping with the ethos of the conference, participants on the day had the opportunity to leave creative feedback on a mosaic similar to the one which features in the [collaborative poetics video](#) and was also displayed on the day (see figure one). Feedback was also gathered in the form of traditional feedback forms and from e-mails received after the event. Feedback was constructive and will be used to inform the planning of successive events. On the whole, it was also very positive. Participants stated that their expectations were well met or "exceeded." Many attendees requested that future similar events be programmed over two days. Others suggested that they would welcome more opportunity to attend more sessions and also to have more time for debriefing and discussion at the end of sessions, so as to integrate understanding of these new methods with existing research methods/questions. [18]

The following, written after the event, is a reflection on the importance of voice, hearing stories that represent disadvantage in society, raising awareness, and promoting action and social justice. For example, during the day we heard from Alinka GEARON about research into child trafficking, and how creative methods assisted with accessing and listening to young people's voices about being trafficked. It was an emotional and sensitive subject area but also provided hope that by raising awareness we could influence change.

*Hearing you
Whispered in the wind
the words of pain and sorrow
are carried to you
Waking you from sleep
in the silence of the night
her words can be heard
No longer silenced
joining together with you
new stories are told* (Sandie WOODS, reflective thoughts written after the conference) [19]

In conclusion, the Carnival was very well received, as this comment from one of the delegates indicates: "A brilliant day!! Hoping that you have enough energy and support to make this happen again—the sheer number of panels proves there's a need for this space." [20]

This quotation is representative of the general feedback received both on the day and in the evaluation forms. What seemed to resonate with participants was how many different types of panel sessions were offered. In the overall feedback enthusiasm was expressed for such creative and collaborative spaces. Many reflected that they left with a sense of inspiration, insight into new and creative practices, and a motivation to collaborate with others. It certainly seems that this event will be a catalyst for future arts-based research and the inclusion of this type of approach in a broader range of disciplines, fields and contexts. [21]

6. The Evening Performances

LEGGO (2008, p.165) explores knowing in poetry and how it is a medium that "invites us to experiment with language, to create, to know, to engage creatively and imaginatively with experience." The final part of the "Carnival of Invention" saw a change of both venue and pace. The Latest Music Bar was the setting for the evening session where four professional performers demonstrated how spoken word and music can capture the everyday lived experiences of individuals in society, and connect the audience the heart of the story. These artists provided very compelling, authentic pieces of work that captured both common and extraordinary lived experiences and made them widely accessible to the audience. [22]

Quiet Loner (the pen name of singer-songwriter Matt HILL) brought a contemporary element to the evening session, with a creative integration of lyrical wordplay inspired by storytelling and folk music. His performance was a display of how emotional and political thinking can be performed to capture an audience and deliver a message. [23]

Kate FOX, a stand-up poet known for her comedy series on Radio 4, and former poet in residence for the Great North Run and Glastonbury Festival, performed a selection of work that was entrancing, and provocative in challenging the audience. She delivered an innovative mix of humor and poetic storytelling. FOX recently completed her PhD on class, gender and northern English regional identity in stand-up performance, which she presented on earlier in the day. [24]

Jacob SAM-LA ROSE is a poet, educator, and supporter of young and emerging poets. His work has been featured in many prominent publications and translated into several languages. His performance on the night was expressive in capturing his thoughts on contemporary culture. [25]

Finally, Joelle TAYLOR is an award-winning poet, playwright, essayist and author and founder of the Poetry Society's National Youth Slam Championships. TAYLOR has worked with women from marginalized communities, prisons, and conflict zones, empowering these individuals to share their stories. Through her performance she addressed deep social issues in a compassionate manner providing a strong voice for the oppressed in each piece performed. [26]

7. Conclusions

The "Carnival of Invention" was an experiential and participatory event that demonstrated the power of collaboration between academics, artists and practitioners. It prompted discussion about how these innovative methods can enhance social research and create a bigger impact through dissemination of results that are accessible to a wide-ranging audience. The feedback highlighted that many attendees are looking forward a follow-up event, and we very much hope to be able to deliver this! [27]

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