Approaches to Action Research: Maintaining Integrity in Innovative Methodological Design

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Abstract

This paper discusses the ways in which Action Research and Reflection can be developed in new and innovative ways that utilise the fields of the creative arts, critical creativity, and arts-based educational research. The author considers that drawing on such theories can enhance understanding of experiences and provide new ways of doing if they are applied rigorously. The approach discussed is partly developed in response to an increasingly technical rationalist approach to teaching and learning, and the research used for development of teaching practice, and partly as an approach to methodological design for research and teaching. Finally, it examines the genre of Impressionist painting to explore concepts of reading images and the construction of reflective approaches from this.

Keywords: Impressionism; Reflection; Methodology; Rigour

Introduction

What I wish to discuss in this paper is experimental. I have long been interested in the way in which concepts borrowed from the arts, literature, and other humanities subjects can be relocated as approaches to Action Research. The discussion below is essentially split into two parts: 1) Where my work has come to so far in this; and 2) The ways in which these ideas can be extended. For the second part I have taken a number of academic risks in pushing boundaries to see what might be possible when synergising Action Research, Critical Creativity, and art (in particular Impressionism). I hope, as is my rather tentative intention, to open up a new space for dialogue in this field.

Some Background

In 2010 I was fortunate enough to be in Rouen, France when an exposition of Impressionist painting was taking place. The gallery was full of original paintings by Monet, Pissarro, Turner, and many others and it was a privilege to see these at first hand. Whilst staying in Northern

France I also took the opportunity to visit Monet's house and gardens at Giverny where he painted his famous 'Lily Pond' series. The garden remains evocative of those paintings and has been well preserved. As a previous student of fine art I have long held an interest in the history of art, and in particular Impressionism, and having used the arts for the development of educational Action Research methodology in the past I was stirred by the way that Impressionism could be constructed in such a way that supported further developments in the use of the arts for this. What I wish to do is to return to this idea in the second half of this paper as an illustration of how we can maintain the integrity of the methodology itself while still pushing its boundaries. However, in this first part I would like to contextualise these ideas and my work (in progress) so far.

The current state of play

I believe we are fortunate to work in a discipline that, despite attempts to reduce it to crude outcomes and evidence, offers opportunity to be creative and innovative. Teaching requires the ability to be flexible, not only in its planning to ensure needs are met, but in its actual delivery by reading situations and adapting to need 'in action'. Aside from the technical skills and knowledge needed to deliver effective teaching, the process of reflecting both in and on practice is a further attribute required that is complimentary to the teaching itself. Richard Winter (1989) as I have noted previously (McIntosh, 2010) discussed the notion of confidence that an engineer might have in designing a bridge based on the various theories and knowledge he would use (architectural, metallurgical, etc) to ensure that it would stand and take the weight of whatever would pass over it. Though there are many theories of teaching and learning that we can use, in practice we still cannot be sure that they will be effective because the dynamic of individuals in any group may alter the outcome of such use. What might work very successfully with one group does not guarantee success with another, even at the same stage of their learning. The questions arising immediately from this are of the 'what made that teaching and its outcomes different' type; and these can only be answered through careful reflection on what changed that experience, for ourselves and for the learners.

The kinds of uncertainties that arise from these experiences are then multiplied by a hardening culture of the 'what works' agenda (Fish, 1998). This technical rationalist approach suggests an evidence based approach to teaching, learning and outcome. Based on short-term measurement and a limited span of what constitutes evidence, teaching is reduced to an activity consumed by its recipients for immediate purposes rather than any long-term benefits they may have. While there are questions as to its efficacy, it is still heralded as the way forward. Conversely, where Action Research has been proved to work it continues to be pushed to the margins. There has

also been question as to the value of other qualitative research methods and their contribution to teaching as a practice. For instance, Bogdan and Biklen (2009), as myself and Paula Sobiechowska (2009) have noted, discuss the perception of methodologies such as phenomenology or ethnography used in educational settings is that they do not necessarily add to the disciplinary practice of teaching, though may uncover other factors (such as cultural or organisational) that occur within educational environments. These other factors may be dependent on what view is taken about what helps or hinders a good educational experience. However, it is hard to imagine good teaching occurring if there are organisational and cultural deficits which impact upon the process.

Returning back to the title of this paper, this is where the majority of my thinking has been, focusing on how innovative use of the creative arts and humanities can contribute to research and learning which is collaborative, participatory, exploratory, and meaningful regardless of the topic being studied. This does not mean that we are examining the aesthetic qualities of the works being used or produced, but in how they can be utilised to develop or further knowledge as teaching approaches or as research methodology (Eisner, 2008). In a world where increasingly higher education appears to be moving towards a model which is less about critical thinking and more about delivering content which can be measured as learning through assessment, this approach appears radical and almost rebellious, and institutionally can be regarded with suspicion or as unnecessary frivolity. However, this work has a long history which has not necessarily been situated in the radical domain. John Dewey as long ago as 1932 was advocating these ideas as forms of pragmatism (Dewey, 2009).

Action Research is generally characterised through cycles of action and reflection which at times in practice can be used almost prescriptively. From my perspective this can place a superficial frame onto the process, reducing its ability to change and adapt as necessary. I see action research – and in particular *educational* action research and the way I have developed my own approach to it - differently to this. For me it is less about a cycle and more about periods of sustained transformation through engagement in focused reflection which is embodied through creative forms of action. Within this is the opportunity for two perspectives: 1) viewing it less as a research process and more about practitioner development; or more properly a form of practitioner research which is located firmly within the individual themselves and how they respond to their own insights and behaviours; and 2) a mechanism for collaborative learning in the classroom. What I believe can characterise this approach to Action Research and creative teaching are the ways that theories are drawn upon to construct methods and methodologies. This in itself is an inductive process, opening up the possibilities for wider perspectives, understandings and dialogues. Possibly the best way to describe how my work is moving forward is to describe it as *Past, Present,* and *Future* and to present it in this way as a work in progress.

Past

For the last ten years I have been developing teaching, learning, and research methodologies that utilise the creative arts and humanities to support how learners can explore specific subjects, practices, and their own feelings about their experiences of practice. When I first began this work I was concerned with learning and reflection, particularly with regard to practitioners studying to become practice educators in the nursing and health professions. My concern was with how they enable reflection in their own students when they did not necessarily have any advanced skills of reflection themselves or understood it in any deeper way than the experience of using reflective tools such as Kolb (1984) or Gibbs (1988). This progressed from a session as part of a wider module to a module in its own right where I was able to move from concepts of how the arts can support reflection and learning to involvement of artists, poets, and others in leading sessions. I have written about this previously (McIntosh 2008a, 2008b), but it is worth repeating: At this point I had no idea that the work that I was engaged in could be used in any other way than as a form of teaching. Transforming what I was doing as a methodology for research or personal professional development was not on my agenda. At the same time as I was beginning this work I embarked on a doctorate. Without spending too much time discussing this, I realised that there were aspects of this process that were worth exploring at a much deeper level. Initially I was concerned with the process itself and what it meant with regard to the learners, but over time it began to change course and became much more about the process as action research methodology within which the experiences and insights of learners were explored and tested out to inform its future direction. What I eventually finished up with was a doctorate that explored the development of Action Research methodology as much as the outcome to research itself. Though I explored this in my doctoral discussions, what I feel is important to say is that the term 'methodology' is a loose one, because effectively what I constructed was derived from a number of concepts ranging from psychoanalysis, metaphor, Bakhtinian dialogics, and critical creativity that can be adapted and applied in differing ways to differing situations or research problems. However there is a caveat to this; and this is that there must be rigour in how this is done as we are seeking more than methodologies that are aesthetically superficial or pleasing. As Eisner (2008) writes, there must be utility, otherwise such methodologies are mere novelty whilst not necessarily novel or innovative. The past then, for me has been characterised by how methods for teaching and learning practice, methods for reflecting as a tool for the practitioner researcher, continuing professional development and methods for qualitative/social research can be developed through the use of the arts and humanities; both conceptually and practically.

Present

I currently find myself employed at the Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Queen Mary University London as a research fellow in medical education where the emphasis on research is mainly in mixed methodologies focusing on patient safety and professional development. The opportunities for Action Research through the arts and creativity in this post are limited: medicine and health service research more generally is governed by a 'what works' agenda that relies on more traditional forms of evidence and the amount of involvement needed for Action Research for busy clinicians is mostly unsustainable. However, there are some exceptions to this, for instance myself and colleagues Della Freeth and Emma-Jane Berridge have a paper accepted in the EARJ which used an appreciative inquiry approach to explore simulated learning and debriefing in medical education (McIntosh et al, forthcoming). Secondly I am currently working on a paper for a bio-medical project concerned with how scientists collecting bio-medical data for a low emissions zone project from children aged 8-9 years of age can influence their understanding of pollution through a teaching component to the project. This work involves an analysis of the drawings and paintings children have produced as part of the teaching.

A diversion from this work as a result of winning a small learning and teaching award has been the development of a student selected component within the MBBS curriculum which used the arts and humanities to support the learning of 1st year undergraduate medical students. The use of what are termed the 'medical humanities' for learning is relatively new to medical education, and usually focuses on how works of art, philosophy, literature, and history can provide insights to medical practice. This particular course, developed with Dr Louise Younie, a GP and clinical lecturer who has developed her own interest in this field (Younie, 2009), was created to engage learners in differing forms of creative practices, such as painting, creative writing, photography, and working with clay in order to support thinking reflectively and being patient-centred. This is very different to the science-based learning that permeates most of medical education and the way in which traditional use of the medical humanities for learning in the UK has been delivered. Though similar to my previous work, the focus is different in that it is more about using the creative arts and humanities for action learning rather than Action Research; though both are connected by the relationship that all this work has to both reflection and reflexivity.

What I have also been doing, with Digby Warren of London Metropolitan University, is to collect examples of the use of the creative arts across a range of disciplines (including economics, business studies, fashion marketing, medicine, and nursing for instance) in Higher Education to form a textbook on the uses of creativity in the classroom (McIntosh and Warren, 2013). Reading the breadth of uses described by the contributors has been a great learning experience and extended my own appreciation of this approach to learning substantially.

Ultimately, the challenge in all of this work has been in how integrity can be maintained; how rigour ensures that when methods used that are novel, innovative, or seemingly radical they can be constructed in such a way that it is theoretically driven: The testing out of ideas is at the heart of this approach. My view is that if we are able to construct new ways of doing through existing forms of knowledge, then we are able to open up new dialogues in the process. We can then extend existing theories in ways which have surprising results.

Future

What I would like to do now is to flesh out some early thoughts on how we can reconstruct ways of knowing, thinking, and exploring so that concepts of reflection, learning and practitioner research can become meaningful through the conduit of other sources of knowledge or practice. In order to do this, as alluded to in my introduction I would like to examine the ways in which concepts associated with Impressionism can aid in the process.

Thinking on Impressionism for Action Research and Reflection

> *"It's on the strength of observation and reflection that one finds a way. So we must dig and delve unceasingly."*

> *"I know that to paint the sea really well, you need to look at it every hour of every day in the same place so that you can understand its way in that particular spot; and that is why I am working on the same motifs over and over again, four or six times even."*

Claude Monet (painting.about.com, 2012)

I would like to do to begin this discussion by supplying a series of images that perhaps begin to explore some of the key themes that I wish to build on over the next few pages. These are a few of a large number of paintings undertaken by Claude Monet of Rouen Cathedral.
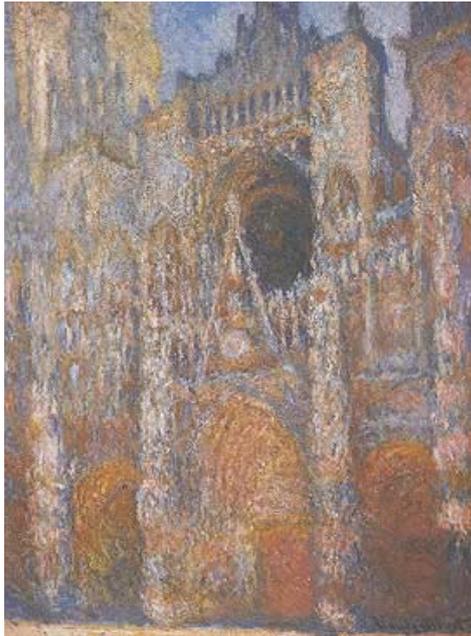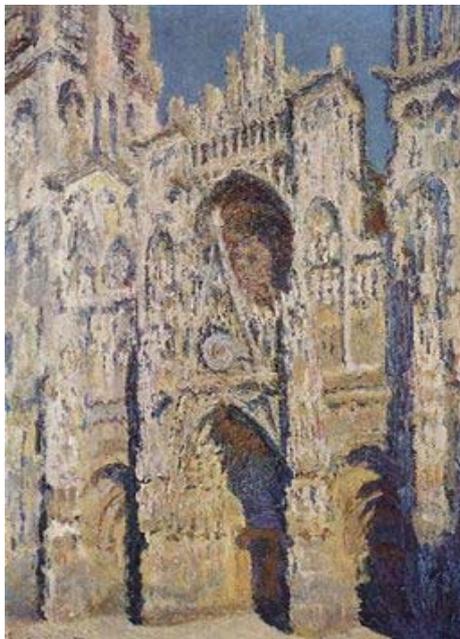
Fig 1.

Fig 2.

Fig 1. Cathédrale de Rouen, portail plein midi
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Fig 2. *Cathédrale de Rouen. Le Portail et
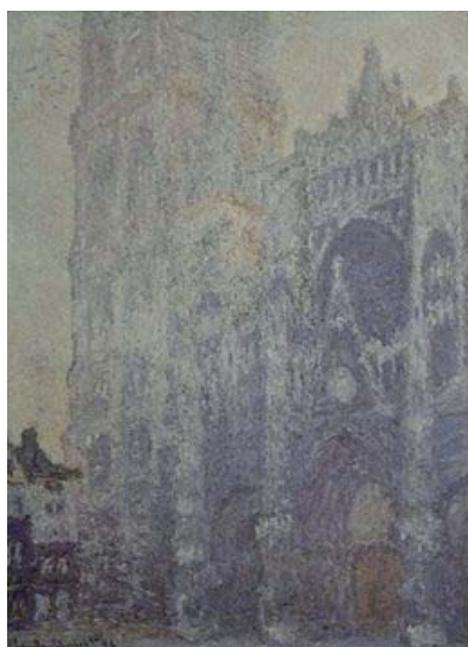la tour Saint-Romain, plein soleil*

Fig3

Fig4

Fig 3. *Rouen Cathedral. Facade (Morning effect)*

Fig 4. *La Cathédrale de Rouen. Le portail et la tour Saint - Romain, effet du matin ; harmonie blanche*

(Claude Monet; Reproduced under Creative Commons Licence (PD-US)**.** Acknowledgements: Wikimedia Commons).

Obviously, to see these paintings in real life is quite different than as digital images or as prints. The size and scale is part of this, as is the texture and use of brush strokes which cannot be seen in these small images. I will return to these factors later, but for now I want to think about more

visible elements: specifically tone and composition. Monet painted around thirty pictures of Rouen Cathedral; mostly from the same position at the front of the building from the small square that it faced onto. Monet was fascinated by the quality of the light in Normandy and how to represent this in his paintings. What I am fascinated about is in how he can take one central theme – such as the Cathedral – and use it to explore the change of light upon it, for what it does is to change our experience of viewing and perceiving it. The use of colour takes us beyond our understanding of the building as an edifice made of stone; it enhances the effects of sunlight through the red ochre and is bleak and cold in its muted greys. In figure 3 he even manages to capture the sunlight as it appears through a thick morning haze. The point that I feel is important in this series of paintings is in exactly how when the light and weather moves over the cathedral it changes how we view and perceive it – and yet in itself it is the same thing. Monet uses colours, textures, and technique to change what we see. I feel this provides us with a lovely visual metaphor for the nature of both Action Research and reflective practice: The edifice is constantly re-shaped and coloured by its environment and context, yet it is essentially the same thing seen through new eyes. This lays down the foundation stone for the rest of the discussion.

Impressionism; some background

Impressionism as a genre of painting can be seen as the transitional point between traditional and modern art. But it did not occur overnight. At its birth, Impressionism was seen as outrageously radical, and yet now it seems traditional in comparison with current art. Though presented very differently by various Impressionist artists, central to the genre was the notion of 'realism'. This is not so much about creating images which are as real a representation of the subject as possible; more a way of the artist being more 'real' in their interaction with the subject and how it is represented. In a sense we could call this authenticity – a term in Action Research we are more familiar with. This construct of 'realism' is central to the discussion which follows below.

The term 'subject' is also interesting, for in many ways Impressionism moved away from the representation of a 'thing' or a 'scene' to a representation of the *experience* of engaging with it, such as how the natural light is seen or felt, or how the water reflects what is above it. This does not exclude scenes such as landscape (Monet's poppy fields as an example, or Pissarro's urban/industrial scenes), but it is not necessarily the scene which is important, it is the representation of how it is affected by the natural environment. Turner's glorious seascapes are perhaps the most extreme examples of this.
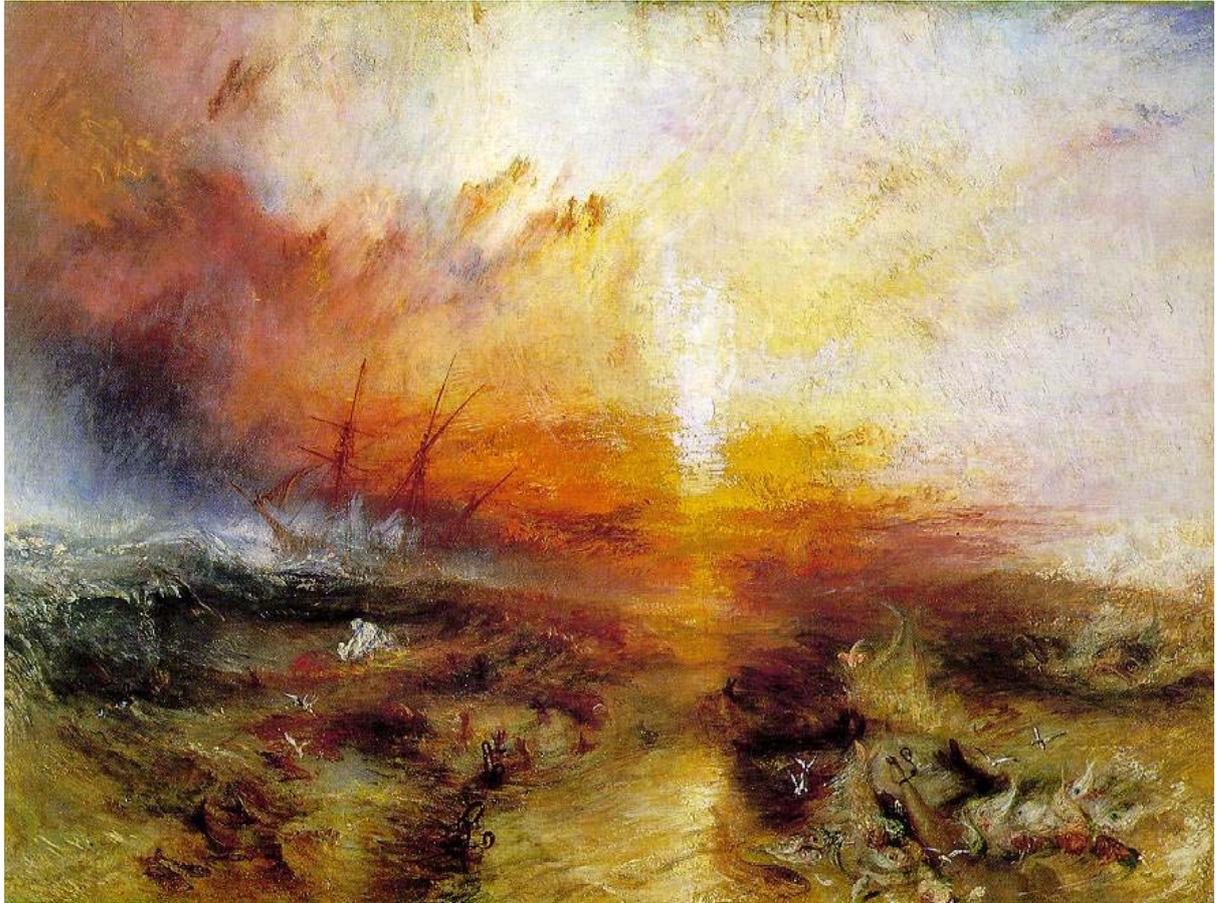
Fig 5. JMW Turner: The Slave Ship. Attributions; Reproduced under Creative Commons Licence. John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. (PD-US)

Where I think this begins to link to reflection and Action Research is in the seeing beyond that which is directly in front of us. Artists often describe a process of what it is they are trying to represent. For instance (though not an Impressionist) Edvard Munch talked about 'painting what he had seen, not what he sees' (Bischoff, 2000, in McIntosh, 2008b), while Manet, felt by most to be the founder of Impressionism, stated 'I paint what I see, not what others like to see' (Impressioniste, 2012). In other words they are seeking to represent something that is beyond what is obviously there, or something which is there but because it is so ordinary it is overlooked; a nuance, an emotion, a quality. Accuracy is not the aim; how it is felt or experienced is. This subjective approach leads us into a dialogue of possibilities as to how these things can be understood – a process fundamental to action research. What I feel this creates is space to think about how the principles, values and practices of Action Research can be framed alongside some of the key factors of painting itself – or more specifically how a painting can be constructed and read; such as composition, form, space, tone, and subject matter, and how these can then be synergised in such ways that they become useful concepts for research and reflective methodologies. More specifically, there are some specifics of Impressionist techniques (brush

strokes or how depth of field is created for example) that might contribute to appreciation of practices as illuminative concepts.

Developing some relationships between these fields

In thinking around the notion of interdisciplinary practices combining to create a new and different 'other', I have been struck by the way in which an Impressionist view of the world – such as how to capture something as a fleeting glimpse in an ever-changing environment – can add to the concept of the 'researcher practitioner' (Fish, 1998). One way of developing this methodologically may be to look at the established field of Action Research, and the less established but growing field of critical creativity for ways in which these three discreet disciplines can work together. This in a sense deepens the work I have been developing over the last few years (McIntosh, 2010) where I have sought to create linkages between some of the principles of Action Research to develop approaches which are both rigorous and transformative, and which borrow from the work of Joy Higgs, Angie Titchen and others (2007; 2011) as emancipatory practice through engagement in the creative and performative arts. Thinking about critical creativity and its uses for research and professional development within Action Research is rather like placing the developments I have made so far under a microscope to examine what is working together and in what way the various components work against or resist one another: And of course I need to think about this with a focus on *educational* Action Research as opposed to wider issues of social justice or organisational change (though this is not to say that this approach could not be used in these areas). There is another fourth dimension I would like to add into this mix, and this is concerned with arts-based inquiry into education. This is because the work of Elliot Eisner (2008) and others adds a further philosophical and practical dimension to an ongoing process. As Eisner has said; 'there are multiple roads to multiple Romes' (2008). This helps to remind us that there is no definitive way to do something, just many ways that will all uncover something new and different.

Let us look more closely at the ways in which the theories above are presented and how Impressionism can act as an adjunct to them. This is of course an oversimplification, but is important in reaching a more discreet point.

Action Research

My departure point for this is the seminal Handbook of Action Research (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). In particular I would like to focus on Gustavsen's chapter on mediating discourse (ch.1). This chapter creates an interesting discussion on mediation of theory and practice using a critique

of Habermas' (1973; 1984) work on critical theory and communicative action. Whereas Habermas saw theory and practice as entirely separate, Gustavsen (2008: 19) explores the idea of 'democratic dialogue' where there is exploration of 'the ground between'. What he refers to in this is the point at which these two perspectives meet. Habermas was not alone in his thinking: Though not as eloquently described, his ideas have long been echoed by practitioners resistant to the use of theory, and the theory-practice gap has long challenged academics and practitioners as to how it can be closed. What Gustavsen develops is an illustration of the application of a theory to practice which is then explored from the perspective of the *experience* of how that theory is implemented and its consequences. This experimental process then becomes, as Shotter (1993, in Gustavsen, 2008) suggests, the way in which we should use theory. The theory is not therefore definitive; applying it to action tests it, both in terms of new ideas and associations that emerge through the experience. It does not take a huge leap of imagination to see how an Action Research cycle can emerge from this (though as noted earlier in this paper I think the concept of an action research cycle as 'true action research' is somewhat prescriptive and limiting in how the discipline can develop).

Examining this more specifically from an educational Action Research perspective, John Elliott (1987) discusses the differing perspectives of Habermas and Gadamer. Though this paper is now nearly 25 years old, the kinds of issues discussed are arguably still the same today. Elliott suggests that for Gadamer, the issue is one of theoretical understanding which is constituted of a practice-centred discourse, while for Habermas the way that norms in practical discourse are established is through theoretical critique. While Elliott (as he himself notes) seems to lean towards the Gadamer view, this does not preclude the testing of practitioners theories, citing the Ford Teaching Project as an example of illuminating the practical and theoretical discourse. What this essentially means for me is in how we develop approaches to inquiry which enables practice to uncover ways of thinking and knowing which are engaging and innovative, but which are rigorous and which have, as Eisner (2008) notes as vital, utility. This then takes me into the areas of arts-based educational research and critical creativity as a way of exploring this from constructs which are methodologically and philosophically rigorous, but which are also novel (and I hesitate to add here, that this excludes 'novelty value' which has no purpose other than as an unwelcome distraction).

Eisner (1985, in Eisner, 2006) explores the notion of aesthetic modes of knowing. In this he considers the ways in which form is modulated so that it can then modulate our experience. This is obviously not confined to visual arts, for it is applicable to poetry, music, sculpture etc, and it is likely that as individuals we may find some forms of aesthetic experienced differently to others. Ultimately, he suggests that *'In sum the form of the work informs us. Our internal life is shaped by the forms we are able to experience'.* (2006: 97). What he then focuses on is the phrase *'we are able to experience'.*

This is of particular importance, for the issue is one of what is inferred or read within an aesthetic form as opposed to a clear statement, such as might be found in an executive summary. As Eisner notes, if these forms spoke for themselves, we would not need to spend any time on learning how to read them. It is therefore important that we are able to cultivate our perceptions and competence in how we appreciate what is being represented. Interestingly, what Eisner further discusses is that this construct of understanding form is not limited to the arts, it is as applicable to science – theories, conceptual systems, and taxonomies, for the content of our imagination requires transforming into some type of form to become accessible, public, and shared. In order to become acceptable the coherence of this form, whether an image, a theory, or a piece of literature is vital. The way in which we are attracted to theory, Eisner (1985) suggests, influences the way we then judge it. This is in turn affected by personal previous experiences and the way we are formed as people and professionals. What we infer or read, regardless of scientific or artistic form requires reflexivity, as it is being interpreted through a particular lens, and this asks questions of what we are consciously aware of and what emerges out of our unconscious (McIntosh, 2010).

In relating this discussion to critical creativity, McCormack and Titchen (2007) situate their ideas within a critical paradigm, informed by perspectives such as practice, research, education, and importantly, skills and sensitivities to engage in practical activity. As McCormack and Titchen (2007) suggest, practical activity is *'a form of praxis in which practitioners learn how to pick out the salient features of their environment, develop perspicuous responses to those features, and adjust and adapt themselves* (p. 43). In relation to Impressionism we can begin to consider what is salient around us and inside of us, consider how we respond to these, how we adapt as a result in relation to their composition, how these are affected by change and circumstance, and how they become to be seen as a result; and this returns us to the construct of 'realism' in our actions. Sartre (1996) talked about human being's ability to act as bystanders to their behaviour and thinking, almost viewing themselves from a secondary position. We can therefore in fact act as artists studying phenomena – that of ourselves. The outcome of this process is of course to arrive at some form of transformative action.

However, this is only a very scant overview, and requires some deepening and contextualising within the practice of Impressionist painting which build upon these concepts.

Using approaches to reading images for specific dialogue or explication.

Though not specifically related to Impressionism, principles for the reading of images generally fall into the following approaches: Composition; Tone; Perspective; Content, and subject matter (Acton, 1997). More specifically, a painting or other visual image is given its character through

what is in it, where items are positioned, and the tones which give it its sensibility. One further way of representing significance or importance is through the concept of depth of field; i.e. what is at the front of, or in the background of the image which warrants most attention. In the discussion below I use Impressionist art to illustrate these approaches.

Fig 6. Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1883) By the Seashore. Acknowledgement: August Renoir Gallery; http://www.renoirgallery.com/gallery.asp?id=23. Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York USA Reproduced under Creative Commons Licence (PD-US)

The Impressionist painter Renoir painted many portraits of people in natural surroundings, often with plain backgrounds. This painting however offers some of what I am talking about. Renoir has chosen to foreground the portrait in its detail, while the background is blurred in contrast. The foreground is further detailed – the face and eyes are more detailed than the hands for instance. This may in part be due to the fact that the model is Aline Charigot, whom he later married, so was attracted to this part of her, but may also reflect what he sees as most interesting. Let us now look at a different use of depth of field:

Fig 7. Pierre –August Renoir; (1880-1881) Dejeuner-Canotiers (Luncheon at the Boating Party).Acknowledgement:http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/renoir/land/dejeuner-canotiers/renoir.dejeuner-canotiers.jpg The Phillips Collection, Washington DC. Reproduced under Creative Commons Licence (PD-US)

In this painting, Renoir does not focus on foreground: Instead he represents the conversations happening in their groups equally. The detail of those behind the group at the table is clearly as important to Renoir as those at the front, so gloved hands on cheeks, leaning in and listening attentively, and a cocked head are all interesting parts of the background. It is those movements and facial expressions that Renoir is attracted to and represents.

Finally, below is the painting 'Station at Sevres' by Albert Sisley (1879). In this painting Sisley sets the station in the background. Though the detail is unclear, he has made the structure of the station clearer through his use of bright blue sky. This then brings it forward even though it is at the rear of the painting. He also centres this in the picture, making it the focus of what we see. The workers in the foreground are less visible, almost part of the environment.
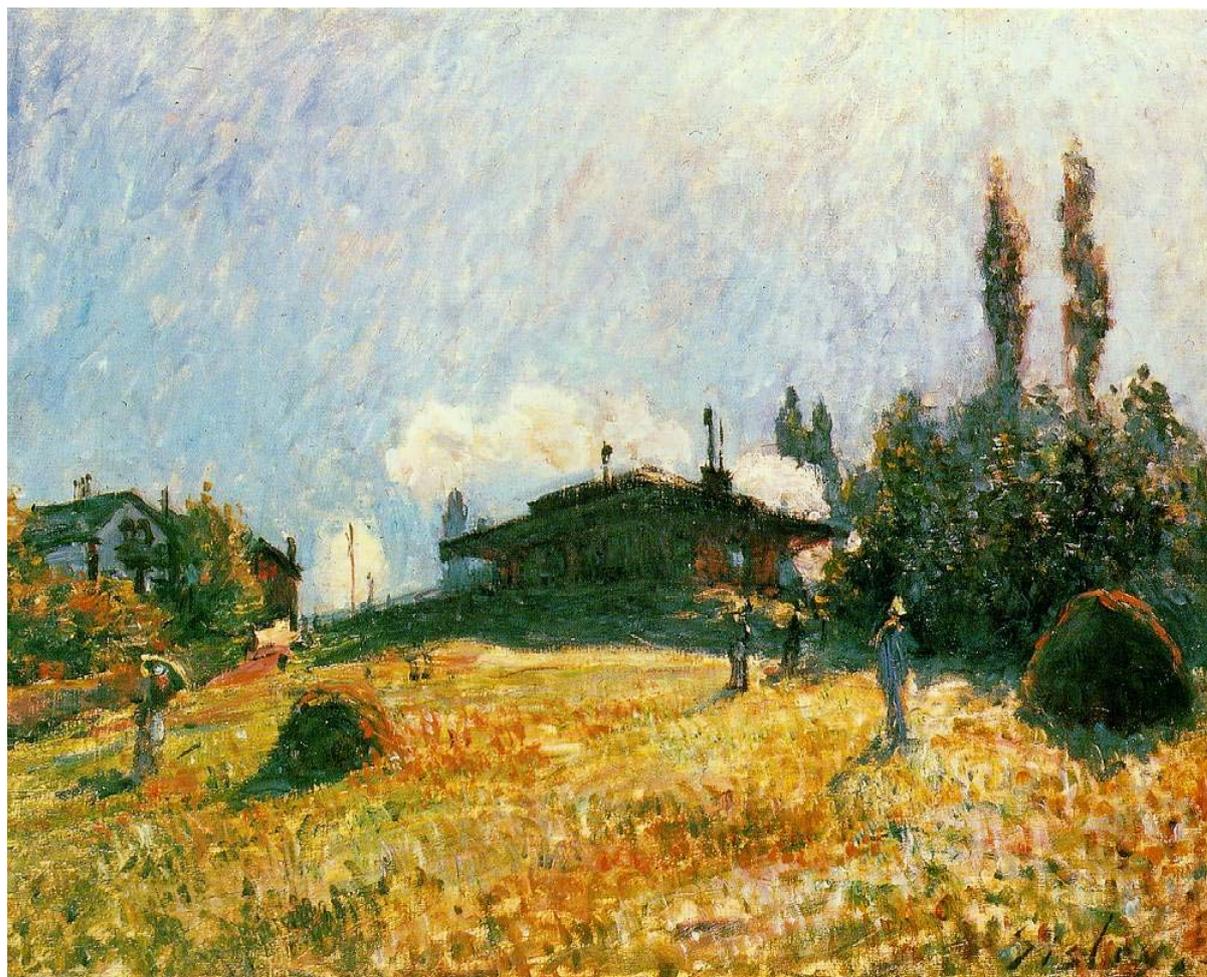
Fig 7 Albert Sisley (1879) Station at Sevres. Acknowledgement:
http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/sisley/sevres.jpg Private Collection Reproduced under
Creative Commons Licence (PD-US)

In all of the images above, our attention is drawn to the central feature of the painting through
the way in which both the foreground and background are composed to bring out that which the
artist wants us to focus on – what they are representing as 'real'.

Broken colour:

A technique developed by the Impressionists was that of broken colour. In this technique, the
artists attempted to use colour in its rawest forms rather than mixing them to find the exact
colour or tone of the subject. By applying colours directly alongside one another on the canvas,
the artists were able to create an illusion that they had mixed, though when close up the variation
in application can be seen. The most extreme genre within this is probably Pointillism, where
dots of paint are placed specifically on the canvas to create a particular colour or shade – for
instance tiny dots of yellow and red create the colour orange to the viewer. In relation to
reflection and forms of Action Research this use of broken colour means that separately applied

or understood elements can be set aside one another to create particular types of 'harmony', changing colours, tones and experiences.

Brush strokes themselves were also important. Before Impressionism the world was one of flat colour, where to see brushstrokes in the paintings was to be avoided. As impressionists wanted to capture light, shade, and fleeting moments, speed was vital. The brush strokes were used to accentuate a movement or object through the use of colour. What the brush strokes also do is to create a texture to the paintings – close up Monet's Rouen Cathedral paintings are heavy with paint and come right off the canvas. The purposeful use of the 'brush' (the brush being the conceptual tool we use to develop our reflections) helps create the textures which form part of our representation of the experience

Where does this relate to educational action research?

The issue at this point is in how such ideas can be translated into concepts that inform educational action research. Perhaps the way we can do this is by thinking about the ways we may reflect on events or action through ways that we can read and construct a painting. Firstly then, if we imagine a classroom setting in which we have taught, we can consider this in ways such as:

Composition

Who is in the classroom? What is its gender, age, or cultural makeup?

What kind of environment does the teaching take place in? Lecture theatre, classroom, outside space? Is it conducive to the mode of teaching/subject?

Tone

How is the tone set? What or who changes it? What does the tone feel like (light, cold, dark, bright, grey?) Is the tone felt as a colour or a feeling or both?

Form

The differing perspectives available in that setting: learner, teacher, culture. How is the learning *experienced* by learners and teachers? How is this understood in some kind of multi-dimensional way?

Space

Systems of perspective and volume that add detail to some components and blur the detail of others. Secondly, techniques which create a sense of 3-dimensionality.

Subject Matter

Where the topic fits with regard to the wider arrangements for learning: Modular, Curricular, and professional requirements and the function of this learning and its meaning.

Key points can be identified, generated and represented through the application of the constructs of Composition, Tone, Form, Space and Subject Matter as described above, and further embellished by exploring what has become significant by identifying a depth of field – why do some factors appear clear and prominent and others less so? What is it around those factors which makes them more prominent, or which parts of the field in total are interacting with other parts or are isolated from them? Finally we can use the concepts of 'brush strokes' and broken colours to create a sense of texture and urgency to the process. This is essentially about how differing elements of the 'data' - in whatever form – come together as a new form. The way in which the colours and tones of the reflection or dialogue act alongside one another creates something new and unexpected. The reflective question then remains: 'What is it that makes it authentic, representative of a moment, or how what is observed is changed by its immediate environment?' This then takes us back to Monet's overarching concern of how the light captures and changes the subject it comes to rest upon.

We now come to the question of taxonomy of the use of the arts for the Action or Practitioner Researcher. At a crude level, we have reached a point where the various approaches above can collide and synergise: We can frame this taxonomy within Eisner's (2006) aesthetic modes of knowing, where form is modulated to modulate our experience of engaging with it, and with McCormack and Titchen's (2007) suggestion that as noted above, practical activity is *'a form of praxis in which practitioners learn how to pick out the salient features of their environment, develop perspicuous responses to those features, and adjust and adapt themselves* (p.43). From these approaches, we can begin to see how these concepts can begin to unravel our experiences of how we engage in an activity and how we identify key points for further inquiry and development. At the end of this process, we are seeking a practice-orientated discourse, where the results of such engagement become dialogic and opened up to theoretical possibilities and which have, as Eisner has stated, utility. How that critique is represented becomes an interesting point in itself, and this is an area I would like to turn to now.

Representing and analysing what is collected.

One of the areas I have written about previously has been the way in which complex models of reflection have been reduced down to headings and sub-headings that ultimately lead to a lack of reflection and a frustrating overuse of description. We then berate learners for their lack of

analytical qualities, but in actuality the fault falls more fully with the educators for not providing the skills or imagination to develop these abilities more deeply. The various work that I have been involved in, whether developing Action Research methodology or teaching that incorporates the arts and humanities, suggests that there is critical thinking and dialogue that can occur through their use that does not occur through other more theoretical or academic textual traditions. Furthermore, these practices lend themselves well to what John Elliott discusses – that there is theoretical possibility that can emerge from them, but which can accommodate multiple positions of knowing. The utility is in the way that the 'data', whether for reflection or research, is self generated and self collected, but is presented in such ways that it becomes dialogic: What perhaps starts out life as a personal metaphor becomes opened up to others and is then shared, where it then becomes extended and can be tested. The discussion is grounded in the metaphor but is collectively understood as an abstract concept of reality. It is out of this that theoretical constructs emerge.

The kinds of data generated can be of any type – let us not forget that this process is not about what is aesthetically pleasing, it is about symbolism and meaning communicated and the ways in which these are then interpreted. Drawings, paintings, photographs, poems or narratives and stories are all examples of this, as creative journals or music may also be. In a recent teaching exercise with medical students we asked them to represent their experience of medical education though the lens of a camera. The results were fascinating, and as they shared their photographs amongst each other, feelings of perceived inadequacy, exhaustion, frustration at modes of learning, changes in social relationships and ways of coping emerged. It seemed that, for the first time, they had been given space to reflect and realise that others were experiencing similar emotions to their own. For students planning to enter a high stress profession to begin to identify and consider self-care as important in their training and future practice is, to paraphrase Carl Jung, 'unpleasant, but of the greatest gain' (in Hannah, 2001: 7).

There are of course ways in which this data could be analysed more rigorously by developing frameworks, for instance in my case which draw upon theoretical approaches to literary metaphor (Gibbs, 2008), visual metaphor (Forceville,1996) archetypal psychology (Hillman,1992), and Bakhtinian Dialogics (Bakhtin,1981) The choices if one decides to do this is concerned with what the strategy and analysis is for: Is it to develop a process for reflection that enables personal and professional development as a practitioner researcher, or is it to facilitate organisational change and development through the symbols that emerge out of the creative research process? Once this is decided, the way the methodology can be refined becomes clearer as teaching technology or for research purposes.

Conclusion

This is a very early discussion on how we can push the boundaries of Action Research in the development of methodologies for educational research and teaching and learning. In effect they offer a form of arts-based research in education, but which are grounded specifically in the values associated with Action Research. A further stage is to refine a taxonomy that could be applied to whatever form of practice is targeted – Continuing Professional Development through reflection, research into a particular aspect of teaching and learning, or organisational change (a visioning process) as examples. Of course Impressionism as a genre was not located solely in the visual arts, as there is also the field of Impressionist literature. However, the use of some of its concepts and practices to refine skills of reflection and interpretation of what we see through close observation of practice leaves us with the potential for:

- 'Painting a picture' of events in practice
- Opening up these pictures for sharing and interpretation in how they can be 'read'
- Enabling theoretical critique on what is shared and found as a result.

Returning to the title of this paper; maintaining theoretical integrity is key in developing innovative Action Research methodology and teaching. I hope that in this discussion I have begun to open a debate as to how things might be done that are not limited by academic research conventions that stifle rather than create potential for learning in all its guises but still maintain rigour in its development. If anyone has interest in developing these ideas or applying the concepts to practice from which we can generate practice-orientated discourse I would be happy to collaborate in taking it further.

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