

Trusting the Mapmaker validity and presentational knowing, part two

[Validity criteria are] enabling conditions that not only allow the development of guiding ideals that can be used to facilitate the adjudication of research but also actively engages researchers in a process of deliberation.

Sparkes, 2001

We need to construct our criteria for judging various forms of inquiry as we go along.

Smith, 1993

Trusting the Mapmaker, part one specifically engaged with issues of validity for presentational knowing, drawing on ideas and experience from qualitative research, arts-informed research and art therapy. Reviewing literature in those fields showed three areas of overlapping concern:

1. **Reflexivity, researcher presence and being connected to experience;**
2. **Aesthetic form, aesthetic merit and aesthetic significance;**
3. **Impact, offering the chance of being emotionally moved, communicability.**

These validity criteria are especially pertinent to the issues of presentational knowing explored in the chapters preceding *Trusting the Mapmaker, part one*. These early chapters of this thesis are concerned with a kind of a dream of or aspiration for how a more fully fledged presentational knowing might emerge in action inquiry.

Now, *Trusting the Mapmaker, part two* comes after two hefty chapters on experiences of work and the slow, gradual move to incorporate the possibilities of those earlier chapters into the unfolding realities of my practice. If I were only to use the validity criteria identified above to assess the fullness of this thesis, much of the writing would fall woefully short – they are, as Sparkes indicates – “guiding ideals” (Sparkes, 2001). As such I wish to nest these validity criteria for presentational knowing within an enlarged view of what makes my research processes and this thesis²⁰¹ valid.

I will start with a critical inner reflection, rather than any of the many ready-made lists of quality criteria for action research and qualitative research (Kvale 1995, Lather 1993, Lincoln 1995, Reason and Bradbury 2001, Reason 2003). This is not to say that my inner reflection is not already informed by those (and other) lists, discussions and criteria. Along with my experience of assessing participant work on the MSc at Bath, they are part of the intellectual constructs I bring to my reflective spaces. My aim is to

²⁰¹ Equally, I see the thesis as a subset nested within the overall research process.

acknowledge the field without following it slavishly²⁰². What are meaningful indicators of quality for me in my research?

- The research represents an effort or attempt to improve, develop and enlarge my professional practice;
- This inquiring research effort is extended over time, becoming part of the way I work and live life, rather than an optional, detachable extra;
- This experience of living an inquiring life is evoked in the ways the thesis has been created and written;
- This inquiring research effort has both the internal effect of developing my humanity and my practice (as indicated above), and an external effect and influence;
- The influence from my inquiring, researching and working practices is somehow aligned with my own sense of what is important, needed and valuable in the contexts where I work;
- Through the lived experience of this inquiring research, I come to discern more finely what I believe is important, needed and valuable in the contexts where I work;
- The inquiring research and this thesis itself embodies and mirrors that which I espouse, such as:
 - *the qualities of many ways of knowing at the same time;*
 - *a particular emphasis on presentational knowing to counter the cultural (and my internal) domination of knowing through the intellect;*
 - *a sense of invitation to, and active involvement from others in the research (in the case of this thesis, the reader and in the case of my work, the participants and colleagues with whom I work);*
- There is an explicit enough connection between the inquiry, my practice and the wider, ever-emerging purposes of my work (which might be summarised as “*becoming more fully human in the face of ecological and social destruction*”);

How, then, do I stack up against my own criteria? Well, I think I have done well on the inquiry being extended and a part of my life. Perhaps, if anything, it has taken over my life (as I hinted in the preface to this thesis). The work does have the quality of my practice enlarging and improving over time (in the sense of fulfilling more of its purposes in more easeful ways). That should be clear from the text, and convincing in that I am not claiming any glory so much as a very human *two-steps-forward-one-*

²⁰² What, then, would be the validity of my validity, if I merely piggy-backed on others’ ideas and constructs?

step-back story of gradual progress and confusion and forgetting and succeeding and mucking up.

I am more concerned about the ways in which I have found myself able to gain feedback on, understand and represent the long term influence of my presence and my work. I don't think this is an easy task for anyone. Much "spiritual" guidance suggests that we need to learn to live with not knowing the consequences of our work, of concentrating on the processes of our practices and "letting go" of attachment to the outcomes.

In addition, people like Anusha in India have said to me that the qualities of my presence are influence enough as they are. This rings true at one level and yet feels insubstantial in the context of quality, validity and PhD theses. I have slipped around between these thoughts, feeling urges to gather feedback specifically "for my PhD" (which can sometimes feel instrumental or obvious) whilst also valuing unsolicited, surprise feedback when it comes (which can feel haphazard and insufficiently rigorous) and designing feedback processes directly into my projects – *to the extent that I judge I can in the context*. I am also aware that my work is often transient, with short term projects and short term working relationships – and that this affects the nature of my long term understanding of the meaning and influence of my work in the world.

Could this thesis have included more "voices from experience"? Yes.

Maybe.

Maybe I have not been bold enough in seeking more feedback on the outcomes of projects I have worked on. Maybe I have been too keen to move on to the next project. Maybe, when the funding runs out and ILO projects "go on hold" for unknown months and even years, it's just too hard to keep track when I am no longer under contract. Things move on. Maybe I've been unconscientious in this. Maybe I've been realistic. Maybe I have pluralised my own perspectives, and worked with others to pluralise theirs... enough. I know that I value the specific inputs from Yao, Robert and Samuel in Ghana, and wished for more conversations like those. I also know that more "forced" attempts to deepen conversation, such as with Ravith in Sri Lanka, can yield disappointing results.

Returning to those criteria of reflexivity, aesthetic form and impact from *Trusting the Mapmaker, part one*, I have a number of self-critiquing comments to make.

First, the issue of *reflexivity, researcher presence and being connected to experience*. Here, my self-assessment is that my research and this thesis are strong in this area. I have questioned my own intentions and actions sometimes to the point of paralysis

(particularly when it comes to the issue of enacting power in my ILO work). I have sought to offer illustrations and examples from my experience throughout, and, whilst accounts of individual experience might be criticised within conventional research paradigms as “not being generalisable,” I believe that my experience has formed the bedrock of my knowing and learning in ways which offer solid, embodied, pluralised insight and understanding, both for myself and potentially for others. In addition, I find that I have particularly prized texts which have been produced by fellow researcher-practitioners (such as Allan Kaplan, Diana Francis and dian marino) above those of “in-the-head-academics” (who also have their place).

Second, the issue of *aesthetic form, aesthetic merit and aesthetic significance*, which has prompted much reflection for me. I think it is clear that I have made every attempt to use visual and poetic material in my thesis to an extent which seeks to readdress the imbalances between propositional, written forms and presentational visual and evocative forms in academic work. Throughout my research, I have been surprised and disappointed at the extent to which academic papers *about* issues relating to presentational knowing appear with not so much of a whiff of visual imagery to embody the claims they are making. How barren this feels in comparison with the richer world of art, typography and graphic design publications. And yet, from my typography viewpoint, I look at my thesis and it does not particularly excite me. So much more could be done, if it weren't for the fluxing arrangements of drafts, alterations and submissions. It never seems to be set solid enough to allow a few weeks of working graphically (which would also seem like setting the thesis in concrete) – especially at a time when the writing and producing of the content understandably takes precedence²⁰³.

Third, the issue of *impact, offering the chance of being emotionally moved, communicability*. Here, I think first of my freefall writing accounts, particularly those set in Moradabad. I found it emotional and sometimes upsetting both to experience and write out these stories. Now, that's so long ago the experience and related emotions are “well composted” and I do not feel as moved as I did in the past. Many readers of this thesis will be new to these stories though, and as this writing goes out into the world, I am anticipating that I may receive some feedback on its impact (particularly from the students I work with, some of whom might be interested in reading the thesis).

Now, in the light of my own self-assessment and at least some critique of the qualities of its presentational form, I will turn to others' ideas on the nature of validity in this kind of inquiring research by drawing on Reason and Bradbury's ideas about quality and validity in action research. How could I not look here, when I have been working in the environs of the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice for six

²⁰³ A question for the future: *what aesthetic qualities does an ever provisional, fluxing, contingent and reflexive research and knowing call for?*

years? Reason and Bradbury suggest five quality and validity criteria for action research practice (Reason and Bradbury, 2001: 450-454):

1. **Quality as relational praxis** – “the need to expand the bounds of who we invite to participate and when.” My ILO work has always been relatively strong on spending time with the local people who the work is designed to serve. My sense is that there is far more that could be done to “devolve” decision making for such projects – and that this is a weakness and lack of trust which permeates the “development profession”. For example, in Moradabad, many local people said that the consistency of the electricity supply posed a bigger issue for them than health and safety, which was my mandate;
2. **Quality as reflexive-practical outcome** – “people should be able to say ‘that was useful – I am using what I learned!’” I have experienced this most strongly through my ongoing second person inquiry groups, exemplified in this thesis by the UK Cabinet Office’s public service leaders’ project;
3. **Quality as plurality of knowing** – through “conceptual-theoretical integrity,” “extending our ways of knowing” and “methodological appropriateness.” Much of my work, learning and inquiring research clearly calls for a greater attention to be paid to different ways of knowing in practice, and seeks congruity through explicitly including a plurality of knowing in representations such as this;
4. **Quality as engaging in significant work** – “[bringing] ongoing consciousness to the fundamental question of whether or not we ought to be doing what we are doing at all.” Most clearly exemplified in this thesis by my reflections on and experiments regarding power and my ILO work. This is of increasing relevance as the pressures of CO₂ pollution bear down on air travel;
5. **Emergent inquiry towards enduring consequence** – “new patterns of behaviour are created and can begin to alter institutional patterns of behaviour, albeit slowly. One may start off with, and build upon, small wins.” I can see this quality criterion being played out most strongly in my own evolving behaviours. But, there are some instances where glimmers of influence have appeared on an institutional basis, for example, ILO staff unknown to me having read my “mission reports” and wanting to meet with me while I have been in Geneva.

Very simply, Reason and Bradbury say they seek to address the questions “am *I* doing good work?” and “are *we* doing good work?” (Reason and Bradbury, 2001: 447).

Equally simply, I’d respond to the question “**am I doing good work?**” with: “it’s not bad. Like a school report, you could do better – perhaps by trying less. You might be

limited by “being your own boss” and perhaps a greater commitment to structural, organisational change would challenge you to flourish more.”

I’d respond to the question “**are we, the MSc at Bath, doing good work?**” with: “yes, this seems like good work that we are doing here. But we need to watch out for becoming complacent or merely working as privileged uppers to justify our life choices.”

I’d respond to the question “**are we, the ILO, doing good work?**” with: “the ILO stands up for issues that are important, without a doubt. But sometimes our work together is prescriptive rather than responsive to what local people might say that they want themselves. We need to work to get local people involved in our decision making and planning processes earlier, even before funds are allocated. And we need to learn to become more relaxed around working with processes where we can’t quite predict what the outcomes will be.”

Finally, I’d respond to the question “**are we, the field of action research, doing good work?**” with: “our intentions are good and frustratingly impossible. In the face of issues like climate change, we need to continue learning more about the nature of large scale, systemic change. We need to stop feeling the need to defend ourselves and get on with things as if these ways of working were ordinary and normal. We need to do more to practice what we are preaching about many ways of knowing, and make sure that we don’t get too precious about ourselves and our practices.”