



# Creating deeper attachments: Reflections on developing arts-based pedagogy and practice within psychology

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Democratic pedagogy  
Arts-based methods  
Psychology pedagogy and practice  
Student engagement

## ABSTRACT

In this article we explore the potential of arts-based methodologies to contribute to pedagogy and practice in psychology. Drawing on insights developed by Elliot Eisner (2008) related to what education can learn from the arts, we first explore how Eisner's ideas, along with our experiences, might infuse research supervision. Through 'applied practice' we then identify some of the potential benefits and challenges of including arts-based methods during supervision. Reflections show how important it is to create a safe space, deconstruct hierarchies, and provide examples of arts-based research, along with an opportunity to experiment and share. Together, these seem to support the development of trusting mature relationships that can lead to personal growth and transformation. While we have become advocates for the potential of arts-based research in psychology our reflections also identify a number of challenges and conditions to realising such benefits.

## 1. Introduction

If young people are to develop a deep respect for others, a keen sense of social responsibility, as well as an informed notion of civic engagement, pedagogy must be viewed as the cultural, political, and moral force that provides the knowledge, values, and social relations to make such democratic practices possible (Giroux, 2001, p.5)

In his address to the National Art Education Association National Convention in 2008 Elliot Eisner, educator and visionary of arts education, suggested eight ways education might learn from the Arts. Given our interest is in exploring the role of arts-based methodologies in psychology, rehearsing these here provides an education focussed backdrop to provoke our thinking about how we introduce arts-based methodologies during supervision. Additionally, if, like Henry Giroux quoted above, we aspire as a discipline to contribute through our pedagogy to wider democratic practices, civic engagement and social responsibility, might arts-based pedagogy have something particular to contribute?

Eisner (2008) began his address by suggesting that the scientific paradigm was eclipsing the value of arts through its focus on measurement. In response, his agenda was to show how education could capture the imagination of students while also being a source of insight that went beyond pre-identified learning outcomes, policy requirements or technical advancement, through engagement with the Arts. While Eisner's

interest was school improvement, the issues appear to us to be relevant to education more widely, and in terms of this essay, one educational context often overlooked in much research; supervision.

Currently, supervision remains a developing field shrouded in mystery where supervisors have traditionally received little or no formal education about supervision (Halse, 2011). As such, Weimer (2008) makes a case for supervisors to reflect on their applied practices and publish these in order to invite conversation and raise awareness about different approaches and challenges. It is against this backdrop that our reflective practice is aimed here, making more visible how arts-based methods are introduced in a group supervision context along with documenting some the benefits and challenges of doing so.

We begin with a brief overview of the ideas advanced by Eisner. Having laid the foundation for these we briefly describe the philosophy underpinning our supervision, followed by two illustrations of how Eisner's ideas unfold in practice.

## 2. What education in psychology might learn from the arts

### 2.1. Form and content coexist

Eisner made the case that the methods used to create or express something inevitably shape what can be known from it. While this

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included curricula, and how subjects are organised and delivered, it also encompassed recognition that by communicating in different ways there is potential to learn different things about one's subject. In Eisner's words,

content and form coexist and must, of necessity, define each other. To change the form of a form is to change the quality of experience that it makes possible. The quality of experience that a form makes possible is what the content of the form is. (2008, p. 2)

While we were initially schooled to think of writing as the end product of a linear research endeavour, Eisner's philosophy aligned with what we began reading as doctoral students. In particular, that writing can be a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000a) and discovery (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2009). Initially, neither of us understood how, by writing one way as opposed to another, this would happen. As we began to experiment with form, in David's case writing and performing a story and later songs, and in Kitrina's case though writing poems and then songs, we learned how different insights can arise (see Carless and Douglas, 2011; Douglas and Carless, 2009a,b, 2015). More recently, as supervisors contributing to the research journeys of students, our concerns have become, if we limit students to writing monological, neutral, detached types of communication, will their insights and development be foreshortened?

Eisner also recognised that form and content are two sides of the same coin and one cannot be changed without having an effect on the other. Likewise in supervision, the *character of the interaction* contributes to how students will experience the subject matter (Matusov, 2009). If we are able to provide a rich multisensorial experience that provokes an emotional response, conversation and interest, students are likely to be changed in different ways compared with when they are presented with pedagogy that provides only a singular view (Denzin and Salvo, 2000) or positions the student as a vessel to be filled (Freire, 1968). Added to this, presenting all research from a detached position, as a consequence, is more likely to detach students from their findings, and their findings from their everyday experience of life (Matusov, 2009). If, returning to Giroux's point above, we believe education can contribute to developing empathy and social responsibility it seems that supervising students in ways that draw out these qualities becomes a must, even if this requires a radical rethink of how supervision is practiced.

## 2.2. Nuance and surprise matter

Eisner believed that through an aesthetic encounter one can learn to notice what might otherwise be missed. Within supervision these concepts impact how a supervisor will relate to research students, what type of room and settings meeting occur in, how power is diffused, as well as how each one listens or responds during conversation.

Nuance also influences how we create the type of environment that might "release [students'] imagination" (Mulvihill and Swaminathan, 2019, p.13) and encourage students to openly challenge traditional ways of carrying out research, using their own experiences.

Related to this, Eisner asked: how can we create the conditions that lead to surprise? Such ideology appears the antithesis of knowing beforehand what students should learn and teaching for this. Creating conditions for surprise goes against pedagogy that only measures student success by what students can bring to mind from what has been taught. While undoubtedly there are some aspects of psychological theory that may suit pre-formulated delivery and assessment but, might our practice be expanded? Can we include creating an opportunity and possibility that through engaging the sedimentary layers of students' experience and imagination that they might see and learn something that they didn't know they knew?

## 2.3. Seeing and knowing beyond what is

For Eisner, the most promising way to 'see what is there', a skill vital

for a researcher as well as for a young person navigating the world, is to slow things down. For example, what may have been missed with a cursory glance comes into view more clearly when the action slows. Through storytelling and film making, examples of arts-based methods, the way they are written or produced can slow or freeze-frame events. This deceleration allows us to recapture what Merleau-Ponty (1948, p.58) suggests is 'the fine grain of real life whose aesthetic value may have been lost from sight', or as Eisner put it, to smell the flowers, not just recognise one is looking at a plant.

Building on Michael Polanyi's (1958) work, Eisner (2008) reminds us that what can be communicated through the spoken word does not represent the limits of an individual's knowledge and understanding. For example 'felt sense' and 'spiritual knowing' lie at boundary of what is difficult or impossible to communicate in words (see Butler, 1997; Dewey, 1934) yet are nonetheless fecund with meaning. It should be a cause for concern that the form of our interactions with participants limits what they can share. Likewise, teaching in ways which exclusively privilege the written text omits certain knowledge. For Eisner this means we need to expand our conception of what knowing entails and teach in ways that cultivate what is known in multiple forms. Each form of knowing is a form of literacy and provides additional ways to understand and express meaning.

## 2.4. Access and rightness of fit

The final two pieces in Eisner's puzzle relates to how we might access somatic, spiritual, felt-sense types of knowledge and, if we are to use art-based methods to communicate experience, how do we judge such creations?

Accessing embodied knowledge has been one factor in our use of song-writing, performance ethnography, storytelling, film making and poetic representations. We knew, both from our own autoethnographies as well as from being in an ontic<sup>1</sup> space with participants, that there was much missing from our early research, and we wanted to find ways to include what was absent. Right from our first experimenting with songs (for example) we witnessed and experienced multiple surprises from the way audiences (both academic and non-academic) responded (Carless and Douglas, 2010)

But how do we know a particular song or story provides the insight or knowledge that was missing? For Eisner, a starting point is through a "sense of rightness of fit" which is, "an ability to discriminate without being able to articulate the conditions that made it possible" (Eisner, 2008).

When we first began using arts-based methodologies in our research we were unsure whether a story or performance had adequately represented a participant's life, or conveyed important insights. It was having an opportunity to perform for or share the work with participants and then gain their feedback which persuaded us of its worth. Likewise, it has been the comments from students following a performance or story that has persuaded us of the pedagogical impact and value of these outputs (see for example Carless and Douglas, 2010; Douglas and Carless, 2020a; 2020b, 2018; Douglas, 2009).

But might we also share with students how we learn from others responding to and experiencing our work, and show how, through conversation and feedback, we also gain new insights? Such processes have been at the heart of linking our research with real world issues, be it mental health among injured soldiers (Douglas and Carless, 2015), or ageing among women in Cornwall (Carless and Douglas, 2010). For Dewey (1934), maintaining such links are vital because, "When the linkage of the self with its world is broken, then also the various ways in which the self interacts with the world cease to have a unitary connection with one another" (p. 247).

<sup>1</sup> Frank, citing Bakhtin (Frank, 2004, p. 104).

### 3. Border crossing

As doctoral students within the department for exercise, nutrition and health sciences we were being inculcated into a positivistic paradigm. What made it possible for us each to challenge and resist this monological pedagogy had different starting points. For David, becoming a singer-songwriter before becoming a research student seeded a 'way of knowing' through the body and through the process of song writing. Later, these insights challenged and sensitised him to what was being 'left out' of his research using more traditional methodologies (Douglas and Carless, 2020a,b).

In Kitrina's case, entering academia as a mature undergraduate student she found her personal embodied experience of *being* a professional athlete (see Douglas, 2009), was at odds with scientific research presented in the psychology literature and lectures. At the time, she experienced the dominant monological performance narrative as silencing.

Embarking on doctoral studies in contrast, provided time and an opportunity for us to engage in extended dialogue with each other, as well as wider literature, which made it possible to challenge monologues. In Kitrina's case, narrow portrayals of women's experiences in high performance sport, and in David's case, the deficit model of mental health, through arts-based methodologies. Our 'border crossing', from positivism to social constructionism, from monologue to dialogue, from writing being an end product to arts-based performative methodologies infusing all aspects of the research process aligns with the accounts of others who were unable to address anomalies in their research through the ontologies and epistemologies of the empirical paradigm (Falhberg and Falhberg, 1994). Over the years our understanding has been broadened through the contribution of feminist, performative, queer and indigenous scholars whose insights have added to and extended our understanding about knowing being a multiple state of affairs rather than singular one, that dialogical and polyvocal positions exist, and that we can know *through the body* via somatic understanding. Like Rosiek (2018) we see different arts practices provide 'a means by which we sensitize ourselves to new possibilities of experience. In other words, art seeks to generate new modes of being in the world; it is simultaneously epistemological and ontological in its ambition' (p.32).

### 4. Developing our supervision practice

Bills (2004), Halse (2011) and Qureshi and Vazir (2016) note that underlying research supervision is a belief that if a researcher can 'do' research, that they have the required knowledge and skills to also supervise student research projects. For Qureshi and Vazir (2016) and Agricola et al. (2021) such a belief obscures too much about the pedagogical 'encounter'. Halse (2011) suggests one way to move these issues out of the shadows is for supervisors to reflect on and share their applied practice. While providing supervisor reflections is useful, it is only one side of the coin. Importantly therefore, might we also invite students to reflect on their learning, and consider these insights together?

For us, our formal education did not include learning to supervise (Qureshi and Vazir, 2016) or learning to use arts-based methodologies. Our learning has been through previous experiences, observation, through available literature and to some extent trial and error. Because of this, as suggested above, feedback from students has become essential to our gaining confidence that what we are doing is achieving what we set out to do. Recently, through our ongoing conversations, we have begun to introduce into supervision what we have noticed is often omitted during research methods modules. For example, although some research methods modules touch on the terms 'building trust and rapport' these terms are not well understood. For Flax (2023), teaching should provide *an experience* of what gaining trust is like. Currently there are few examples of supervision practice to show how this is achieved and few reflections from students about the process.

We have also felt it important to try to encourage students to develop

and explore different ways of communicating research so that it might maintain the dignity of their participants, and be understandable to participants and the wider community. Again, in psychology there are few examples of this practice during supervision and few reflections from students about what they value through supervision in order to achieve these aims.

Another dimension of research often missing from both research modules and one-to-one supervision is how to collaborate. For example, during commissioned research a researcher is commonly part of a research team. Being part of an interdependent research collaboration means there are regular meetings and often a good deal of knowledge exchange or/and mentoring between colleagues (Douglas et al., 2019). These activities provide another opportunity develop trust and rapport. However, these types of collaborations are rarely included in dissertation supervision. In contrast, it seems students are more likely to be dislocated from their peers. It also seems dissertation supervision provides few opportunities for students to scaffold and support the learning of both their peers and advisors or to learn dialogically, hallmarks of the philosophies of Freire (2008) and Vygotsky (1978). Lastly, one-on-one supervision can be isolating and/or intimidated for some students (Dautel, 2020; McClure, 2005; Qureshi and Vazir, 2016).

Like others (Chatfield et al., 2014; Drisko, 2016; Moreno et al., 2023) we have been proactively trying different approaches to introduce and balance these complex challenges during supervision (Weimer, 2008). While we have invited students to provide feedback after engaging with findings of arts-based research during lectures, we had not invited students to reflect and evaluate their learning about arts-based research during supervision.

### 5. Learning through reflective practice and evaluation

Whereas the primary aim of research is to gain generalizable new knowledge, the aim of an evaluation is to improve standards and assess if and how what we are doing is working. This being the case the purpose of this evaluation is to make judgments about its effectiveness, and/or to inform future delivery.

To this end Niemi, Heikkinen and Kannas make the case that involving students in the process by 'listening seriously to their stories of experiences as learner...[are] essential first steps in developing education' (Niemi et al., 2010:139). While it is common practice at UK universities to invite student feedback, supervision is one area where there has been little 'serious' feedback from students published.

As autoethnographers, we recognise that supervision provides not only an opportunity to learn and develop our teaching practice, but also, a lens to understand the political, cultural and narrative backdrop that shapes supervision. Traditionally, this has followed an expert-disciple model whereas, more recently, as noted by Hemer (2012) and Palmer et al. (2023) 'there has been a shift from the 'grey-beard expert' model to more collaborative supervisory styles in which the students are viewed as learning partners' (p.1479). Responding to students as 'learning partners' extends to our consideration of ethics and these are perhaps more complex and nuanced in models where relationships are not static but dynamically develop over time and change in response to different challenges that arise during supervision (Corrigan and Nascimento, 2022). With regard to the ethics of inviting students to share their stories of experiences as learner as a way of evaluating supervision and provision, and sharing these publicly, Hawkins (1997) draws attention to the way ethical decisions are likely to be influenced by the traditional "principlist" model, where there is a tendency to "overemphasize moral principles and rules" as opposed to decision being negotiated and developing withing a learning partner context. For Hawkins (1997) and Kuczewski (1997) ethical decisions (for example regarding power imbalance, informed consent, student agency, anonymity, risk of harm) need to reflect different starting principle each time and the different types of relationship. This mean at times an ethical review board should be consulted about the appropriateness of student collaboration or

feedback while at other times, in different circumstances, ethical decisions about how to invite, communicate and publish feedback may be a negotiated process with learning partners in response to particular questions at specific moments in time. This doesn't reduce the responsibility of a supervisor to understand and be aware of ethical responsibilities and inevitable power imbalance between the supervisor and the students, yet different cultures, experiences and possibilities evoke new possibilities for sharing learning. Our approach has been to be open and transparent, aware of and uphold ethical guidelines while also consulting and working with students.

The tools we draw on here to help guide our assessment of these issues are reflexivity, storytelling and inviting and listening to student reflections.

## 6. Brief background

During 2021/22 academic year, in the wake of the COVID19 pandemic, students were allocated supervisors for their final year project. Initial introductions were via email exchanges, and following these students were invited to an in-person group meeting on campus in one of the cafés. Meeting in a social space familiar to students (as opposed to an office) and as a group, as opposed to one-to-one, was intended to be less intimidating. However, it also provided an opportunity to begin to foster collaboration and awareness between students which was seen as particularly important following the pandemic. The meeting potentially would provide students whose research plans were less advanced to learn how others were approaching their research projects. Through both email exchanges and initial face-to-face meeting students were offered the opportunity to attend weekly group supervision with focussed conversation about 'doing research' to explore issues and questions that might arise during the course of their final year projects as a group, or continue one-to-one supervision.

Three students declined the invitation for group supervision and continued solely with individual supervision. For these students, supervision followed a similar pattern to their year group. Five students accepted the invitation to participate in group supervision. In addition, two students who had read some of Kitrina's published autoethnographies wrote asking for advice. After consulting their supervisor, the students were invited to join a 'research group'. Both attended regularly while also receiving supervision from their allotted supervisor. All students participating in weekly research group meetings self-selected to attend. Given that students were able to opt into or out of the sessions, along with three students declining the opportunity, it suggests there was little pressure or coercion underpinning student's attendance.

In the first two sessions students were introduced to narrative theory and provided examples from our research that showed different ways narrative could be used. After this, there was little pre-planning. Rather, during different phases of each student's research the challenges they faced became the topic of discussion for that particular week. For example, prior to conducting interviews, a 'Forum theatre' (Boal, 1992) style interview game was introduced where students could volunteer to play the role of 'researcher' or 'interviewee' while other members of the group could stop the 'action' (interview) at any point and ask questions, or take over a role. The opportunity provoked dialogue about issues that arise during interviews while providing students with an experience of *what it is like* to either be a participant or an interviewer. The simulation used life history interview approach which gave agency to the person being interviewed regarding what they decided to discuss or disclose. The opportunity, to share events in their life with peers, seemed to provide an additional means of building trust and friendship between group members.

In terms of group supervision, some activities were inappropriate to carry out in a group. One example was the debriefing session which, like all field interviews, took place following data collection. These meetings provided an opportunity to identify any welfare issues that arose during interviewing and provided an opportunity for the supervisor to

demonstrate interest, care and support or to potentially provide signposting should a more serious issue arise. Another example of activities that took place individually were feedback on particular draft chapters prior to submission and when a student wanted to discuss a personal issue.

During one of the in-person meetings midway through the year, two students commented that their house-mates and peers were somewhat envious of their 'research group' saying "I wish my supervisor did that" or "I wish we did that." At the time, Kitrina made the point that, like other student feedback she had published, their stories about learning and group supervision, arts-based research and autoethnography, would be important to document, share with colleagues and to publish, if that would be something they valued. That said, she also made the point that the first job was to complete their dissertations and degrees. Therefore, as a group, it was decided to reflect on their experiences as learners and teachers, at a later date. Following completion of their degrees, as students were proactively exploring their 'next steps' (both writing, presenting at conferences and publishing) Kitrina returned to ask students to reflect on their experience of creating and sharing arts-based methodologies, and about any learning that may be useful beyond their dissertations.

All those attending provided feedback with the expectation that it would be submitted for publication. Five had been studying for a MSc and two a BSc in sport science, sport psychology or psychology. All gave their written permission for their comments to be published alongside the story that Kitrina wrote about her experiences of teaching. All members of the group have read and provided feedback both on the story 'research group' as well as the full submitted draft of this article, prior to it being submitted for publication believing it to be a faithful representation of the learning and relationships that developed.

In what follows we present two illustrations of this reflective practice specific to arts-based research and group supervision. The first illustration is through a storytelling methodology and a story—titled 'Research Group'—which provides insights into the weekly group supervision meetings. Storytelling, as suggested above, has become a familiar way we have interrogated our own experiences (Carless and Douglas, 2010; Douglas, 2009). It enables us, as supervisors, to slow down 'the action' and through this to potentially notice more. Additionally, storytelling provides an *experience* of, for example, how rapport, trust and relationships were established and how some challenges were negotiated, from the viewpoint of the supervisor. Prompts for writing the story came from brief notes taken by Kitrina during weekly meetings to remind her what the students wanted to research, (see for example appendix 1), as well as her ongoing reflexive practice. Etherington (2004) describes reflexivity as an activity which brings awareness of day-to-day life and the positionality of the individual irrespective of whether this is for political, scholarly or research purposes. The second illustration presents reflections from students about their experience of arts-based research and group supervision.

## 7. Illustration one; 'research group'

Characters in the story: Jessie – A dissertation supervisor; Nathan and Alice – Undergraduate dissertation students; Luke, Seb and Amy – MSc. students

It was now three weeks since her "Introduction to narrative" session, where Jessie talked about narrative theory, and read "Going home" an autoethnography exploring a time when she was playing professional sport and experienced 'burn-out'. She hoped the story would help them understand how an individual can be silenced by the dominant cultural script. In week three they had taken it in turns to be the interviewer conducting a life history interview or be a participant, talking about their experiences. She'd been very moved at how candid students were describing their childhood experiences and the move to university life.

"That was fun" Nathan said.

“Yeah, I really like changing roles and talking about my childhood,” another agreed nodding, “Can we do it again?”

In between the weekly session they’d also looked at some of her research-based films and seemed genuinely curious and engaged by the different approaches. This week, ahead of research group, she’d invited them to write a story, but she had no idea if anyone would actually do it.

As one by one faces appeared on the Zoom screen, she thought back to her original question to each of them when they first met.

“Why are you interested in researching *that*?” she’d asked, curious as to whether there was a personal connection to what each hoped to study.

Alice had been first to contact her. “I’m interested in researching body image and the influence of the media,” later explaining, “well, I’ve had issues with body image”. Then there was Amy who was curious as to why there were so few female triathletes. “I was just so angry” she recounted after attending a triathlon coaching course “it was just so patronising to women!” One by one, each student revealed a personal experience which had prompted a desire to do research in that area, and to make a difference.

So here they all gathered on Friday afternoons, studying such different issues ranging from international students at a British university, the transition into pro sport, and the journey to becoming an ironman. There was a happy informal air each week, and good conversation without her having to initiate it. In fact, she had to interrupt the conversation to get the show on the road.

“OK! can I butt in?” she asked as the noise abated. “Last week I asked if you would each write a story about an experience doing research or about the topic you’re researching, or related to it. To remind you, this is one way of being reflexive about your position as a researcher, but it can also be an ethical move to be on the page *with* your participants as opposed to being a neutral, distanced outsider. It’s also a way to be transparent about your history and biography and how that relates to or might influence your research. As you learned when we did the forum theatre interviewing, writing yourself into your research might also help you understand what it’s like for a participant. So, I just wondered, have any of you been able to do that, write a story, and if you did, does anyone fancy sharing?”

“I will,” Alice offered without missing a beat.

“Great! Before you do, I just want to remind everyone that what gets shared here stays here, we need to respect what each other brings, and agree to not discuss these issues outside of this meeting without getting agreement from the others”. They all agreed, and then Alice began. “My story is called ‘Through the eyes of bulimia.’” Alice took a breath and then started reading...

Jessie found Alice’s story provoked her to remember what it was like to vomit, but unlike Alice, never on purpose. Alice, used the term ‘purging’ in her story and Jessie noticed she was being eased into seeing the world from how Alice experienced it, counting calories in *every* restaurant, *every* time, always unhappy with the way she looked. Later in the story Jessie noticed how Alice had used a story she’d shared a few weeks earlier as a sort of template to have two internal voices in dialogue. In Jessie’s story one voice was telling her to go home as it would be good for her mental health, while the other voice was saying she must play on. Here, Alice had done something similar as a way to communicate in one voice the dominant cultural narrative where her eating was seen as a “dis-order” and another voice, trying to counter this damage. But more surprising was how Alice finished her story; refusing to become a “labelled condition” and deciding that now was her time to speak out. Amazing, Jessie thought. It’s like she had suddenly been empowered to talk about this.

After Alice finished there was a pause. Jessie was surprised by her own emotional response and hadn’t expected such evocative imagery. She didn’t want to jump in and take over but was also feeling Alice might need to hear something supportive, so allowing the images to continue to infuse her thoughts she began.

“That was a powerful story Alice” then pausing before, “such visceral imagery, I can really feel it in my body, your choice of words, the unwanted vomit, yes, that reminded me of horrid feelings I’ve had if I’ve ever been unwell and been sick, the internal dialogue and how one voice was always putting you down, the other trying to pick you up. Great writing”. She paused again, then asked, “would anyone else like to respond?”

Seb stepped in.

“My flatmate said his girlfriend did that, they would go out to eat and she’d be looking at the calories in every dish on the menu, he helped her through it though, to get a better image of her body and she came out the other end, she not like that anymore.”

Luke took up the baton.

“Alice, that was very brave, wow, really powerful story.”

Without direction, everyone in the group added to the conversation. Sometimes citing their own experiences, at other times reflecting on what the story revealed to them about what they didn’t know. What impressed Jessie was everyone seemed sensitive to what it may have taken to share something so raw, but that was also hopeful. *That* story seemed to set the stage for others to talk or write about issues that can often be taboo, or silenced. Several talked about their anxiety, others about complex relationships, father-son, or brother-to-brother.

Next up was Seb who shared a story about a dilemma he faced wanting to go training, but that conflicted with a desire to also be with his friends who wanted him to stay and do things with them. He worried if he went training they may think he didn’t value their friendship. These were all issues that Jessie was familiar with having played professional sport.

Then Nathan asked to share a story. This was longer, rambling, and covering continents and different chapters of his life but it all began when he and his friends were at home, running to the playground and smoking, and then, years later, at Uni, desperately seeking a way to relieve his anxiety, loneliness and fear. Jessie had no idea of what it was like being a foreign student at a British university, or that it could be so lonely and distressing. At the end Luke piped up immediately,

“You know the other week when I read a story about drinking, well, it wasn’t beer. I substituted beer for what I was actually doing, because I was worried, I thought I shouldn’t say I’d been smoking dope, but I thought drinking beer would be similar. I told myself it didn’t matter, that I could substitute one thing for another. But now ...”

While the students laughed, Jessie was suddenly worried about her obligations as a member of staff to report illegal behaviour. *Is it legal to smoke weed?* she wondered. She had no idea. It wasn’t that she had a moral stance, she thought alcohol was similar, but there was this nagging feeling about having to report something and maybe there were limits to what should be discussed. As she tuned-back-in some of the group were now discussing anxiety management, medication and ADHD.

“I sometimes get a panic attack before I even go into the lecture theatre,” Alice was saying. “And if there is a chance I’m going to be asked something, I won’t go to the lecture at all!”

Jessie was shocked. Did she hear right? “You mean you won’t go to a lecture, because your worried about being asked a question?”

“Yes.” Alice confirmed.

Jessie had so many questions about why these students didn’t want to approach student mental health services and how they were managing anxiety, depression and poor mental health. But then Luke began to try to respond in a practical way.

“It’s been so good meeting you Alice and Luke, and hearing about your lives. I’m really sad you feel so alone Nathan. I’d like to help. I’d like to see more of you. One of the reasons I’m doing an ironman is to inspire others, to show you can do things you didn’t think you could do.”

Jessie was now aware of the passing of time and the need to finish, but also had a slight uneasiness with what Luke was saying. But how to

approach it sensitively she wondered.

“Well, might you think about why you feel you want to help others?” she began, while trying to find the right words. “It’s great you want to do an ironman, but have you considered it might not inspire everyone? There’s some research that shows your achievement might have the opposite effect. What if some people feel inadequate ‘cause they can’t do something like that? Or what if someone feels they don’t need or want to be helped? I’m not saying you completing an ironman can’t inspire someone, I’m just asking you to consider the alternative possibilities and where is this desire coming from?”

After another slight pause, she changed the subject. “Anyway, next week we are meeting on campus.”

“Shall we bring nibbles?” Seb asked.

“Research group with nibbles,” Luke laughed, “great idea!”

“I’ll make a lemon drizzle cake,” Jessie offered.

“I’ll bring fruit,” Luke added.

“And can someone book a room?” Jessie asked.

“Yep I’ll do that and let you all know.”

“Until next week then”.

[...]

In the story above we have tried to provide a feel for what arts-based pedagogy might look like during group supervision, along with making more transparent some of the challenges that it might bring. As Eisner suggested, the story form brings into view the types of relationships that were established and the ways students supported each other’s learning. In what follows, we explore these issues from the perspective of students through their reflections.

## 8. Illustration two: student reflections

There were broadly five issues identified by students and each is discussed in some depth below.

### 8.1. First exposure: “Get away! What is she on about?”

Elsewhere (Carless and Douglas, 2010) when we have asked students to provide feedback after live performances of our arts-based research in lectures their feedback revealed sport science and physiotherapy students often feel shock and surprise. Along with these initial feelings, their feedback also revealed most experienced an ‘ah-ha’ turning point moment leading to a deeper level of emotional engagement and understanding. In a similar way, after Kitrina shared some of our arts-based research in research group there was an initial sense of surprise that research findings could include stories and poems. For example:

You shared your stories, we read your things, you sent us links which explored why you did your research, and then you got us to explore our own stories and I think that broke down barriers. Obviously, our perspective of your research was a new thing, at least for me, and at the beginning I was like, *get away, what is she on about?* Just because that wasn’t a world I knew. I didn’t know that one could even do that type of research. I think what it was, you were honest and open. In the beginning we didn’t share much. But we deconstructed the power dynamic.

Without ‘being affected’ it is unlikely that change will occur. Central therefore, to deconstructing power and democratising education, is allowing the power of stories, poems, films, songs, etc., to do their work. Even while initially the student above asks “*what is she on about?*” their preconceptions about the role of the supervisor are challenged by stories that “broke down barriers”. This process, described by Arthur Frank as *thinking with a story*, provokes an individual to question what they

previously believed to be true. “To think with a story ... is to experience it affecting one’s own life and to find in that effect a certain truth of one’s life” (Frank, 1995, p.23). Such an experience, then, “destabilizes our old ways of seeing and thus allows new images into our awareness” (Frank, 2000, 149). A new image of what a supervisor is, as a consequence, “deconstructs the power dynamic” leading to the first shoots of trust emerging within a creative group environment.

Two other students describe a similar democratisation as both learn there is a way of doing research that fosters authenticity and humility:

I got art-based methodologies very quickly as it made so much sense to me. Actually, I couldn’t wait to be creative! Your work inspired me to try new techniques I had not tried before and to use a creative outlet .... I also watched YouTube videos where you were mentioned as a pioneer in that you argued that you don’t have to be a poet to write a poem ....and it is that democratisation of expressions and freedom that really appealed to me.

Before starting out on my research project, I had little idea of the options available to me. As soon as Kitrina shared the different methodologies ... my eyes were opened to the world of arts-based psychology ... I had never seen findings presented in such creative and informative ways ... I distinctly remember her saying she carried out some research on the back of a moped in Barcelona and I immediately found this fascinating. *Why can’t research take place here? If this is where someone feels comfortable sharing their story then this is the best place for this research to take place.* The real thing that stood out to me from Kitrina sharing how she conducted and presented her research was its authenticity and how it got to the crux of a topic through vulnerability and being human. I have certainly taken part in this research before where I have felt like a number on a list and pretty disposable. I feel like arts-based methods have the opportunity to prevent future participants from feeling like this.

Before students were exposed to arts-based research during research group they had no knowledge that it existed, it wasn’t something they had been introduced to in any lectures, yet, it left a powerful mark on their understanding, and brought into view something that had been missing from their pedagogy.

### 8.2. Invitation to experiment: “It created a deeper attachment to my work”

As mentioned earlier, we have for some time felt that before researchers carry out research on others, they should understand a little of what the process is like when it is your life that is the focus of inquiry. With this in mind, after introducing students to narrative theory and storytelling, they were invited to write a short story about an experience connected to their research. If, as Eisner suggested, form and content are inseparable, using a story form, we hoped, may provoke students to write in ways that would lead to surprise and deeper insights. For two students this process was profound and allowed each to learn something that may have been missed using traditional methods:

I could always write a in a journal, but never an in-depth story about how I felt. Obviously, you taught us to do that with autoethnography, how to talk about a specific story, having conversations with yourself. That’s where I got the structure from, your writing ... I think I went back to my rawest emotions, when I was feeling the worst about my body image. And because it’s something I’ve experienced for quite a while it was quite easy for me to go back and reminisce on the feelings that I had when it was bad, and then just writing down the story because it was just a conversation in my head. But also, in a lot of ways, it helped me move on from my disordered feelings with body image. I think just talking about it, getting it out on paper, and properly expressing how I felt, made me reflect on it, and it made me

feel like, what I was going through I could overcome it, if that makes sense?

Being able to adopt poetry for my research enabled me to explore and present profoundly mine and others' emotions. It created a deeper attachment to my work, creating something that I didn't think a Bachelor of Science allowed you to. Poetry, as a form of art and communication, created a visceral and intense response for me. It perpetually caused a response to my senses.

In the first extract, one student found writing a *story* as opposed to making a journal entry, seemed to open a way of expressing things in a more empowering way. For the second student, writing in poetic form provided a new lens that created a deeper attachment their work. In the example below, experimenting with different art forms again, provided different types of insight.

Filming and doing the animation helped me structure my thoughts and the overall message! Painting helped me release my emotions and find common threads between the participants stories and mine. Writing the poems helped me look at aspects I had parked in my head and not explored. It also allowed me to share disturbing aspects with my partner. Though this was disturbing as it is not easy to see the reactions (distress) to your reading on loved ones.

While the above illustrates some of benefits of poems and stories as research they also identify some ethical challenges. For example, for one student seeing her partner become distressed as he read about her grief and sadness was upsetting. However, she is not saying that because the poem brought distress it should *not* be shared. On the contrary, she went on to make the point that "arts-bases methods gave me the tools I needed to communicate with my partner" that is, writing poems made it possible to share something she had not been able to communicate. Thus, learning this skill was not only important for her research but also to dealing with an issue that had been problematic in her personal life. Also important was that through experimenting with different art forms each form brought a different yet complementary view about the topic she was exploring compared with using only one form of artistic expression.

### 8.3. Building trust and confidence: "I owed it to myself and the group to be honest"

Trust is linked with feeling safe and being confident that 'the other' will not cause harm. In research contexts it is through building trust and rapport that meaningful insights are gleaned (Ellis, 2021; Etherington, 2009). When beginning their studies the common perception among students was that the supervisor's role was to judge them. This created a feeling of insecurity and a need to maintain walls. By gaining first-hand experience of what 'building trust' entails – that is through the process of Kitrina becoming vulnerable through sharing stories about her life and experiences - so do students begin to develop a sensitivity and awareness about the artistry involved in story construction as well as an awareness about the consequences of concealment or transparency.

I think we have a fear of supervisors, maybe its insecurity of the students, from a young age we learn that from the teachers. Teachers are the ones who think they know everything, that must play a massive role? A feeling like they are judging all of my moves. Have I done the work I was supposed to do? Did I hit that deadline?

I remember writing the story and I put in marijuana first, and then I had a conversation with my housemate and said "I'm going to have a meeting with a lecturer, do you think this is a good idea?" Because a lot of what we are told, or I was told, was to protect yourself. So I didn't think there's much harm changing it to another drug [alcohol], but obviously, it's against autoethnography because you have to be

transparent. It was another student mentioning that he smokes and then because of the nature of the talks, you know, how honest the others were being, I knew that I should be *being* transparent and honest, so I sort of owed it to myself and the group to be honest and transparent.

In the first part of the extract the student feels a need to protect himself, and this is affirmed by a peer. However, over time, the honesty of others in the group provokes him to consider that his concealment is *perhaps* ethically *wrong*. The trust *others* put in *him* leads him to feel an obligation to also be transparent. Narratively speaking, even though hidden from the rest of the group, in order for this student to claim to be the person he believes he is (honest, caring and transparent) he needs to open up about his concealment. Sharing his predicament with the group, why (at first) he hid something eradicates the concealment, restores his identity and at the same time provided insights into how dominant narratives, at times, silence us all.

Likewise, the extract below shows how students begin to notice that trust was built over time and in the nuances between what might be 'allowed' to write about in the context of a dissertation:

I think by story two or three, people had come to be a bit more honest. Because I wasn't sure what I could actually say, whether I had to be sensitive with language ... With body image, especially when you are talking about purging and calories, I don't think that is necessarily something you can share. It might be triggering. Then with other people talking about drugs or swearing, because it's a University dissertation, it's hard to know what you are allowed to say ... It was more interesting because everyone was sharing personal stories, rather than just reading other people's work. It was coming from people *that you actually kind of knew* (our italics)

Given that students had been largely inculcated to hold a narrow view of what research is, in order to begin to experiment with an art form it required them to trust the creative process. That is, to resist the urge (at least initially) to be critical of what they produced. In this regard we feel we are no more resilient than students in that when we share something new it is vital for it to land on a pillow as opposed to a rock. It may be that what is created doesn't make it beyond the first step, but a gradual discernment about a poem's worth or use, its rightness of fit, needs to evolve and that is impossible alone. However, when sharing, an overly critical response can have catastrophic consequences to an individual's confidence. By sharing with a group who were in a process of *becoming* sensitised to aspects of each other's lives that may have, through necessity, been hidden, their peers provided both the necessary 'cushion' as well as to use a Vygotsky (1978) term, a scaffold, to validate findings and support development. Both processes contributing to building confidence.

'You can't improve if you don't get feedback,' one student suggested, adding that it was 'feedback, not only on the content and what emotions it would bring up, but also getting examples of writing technique and storytelling technique' that were essential to improving his skills, to know 'we were on the right track'

Again, these are examples of proximal development where the evocative storytelling of one slightly more skilled student helped move forward the writing of a less skilled student (Vygotsky, 1978).

Lastly, sharing in the group also provided a step to sharing findings publicly:

Sharing stories with other students made it easier for me to share it then with the public and the participants. I don't have much self-confidence and even though sharing with participants and the public was very scary and anxiety provoking, sharing became a positive meaningful experience as the feedback was demonstrating its effectiveness. It showed me that I could have an impact. Thank you for pushing me gently out of my comfort zone!

#### 8.4. Emotional responses and surprise: "My participants were flabbergasted"

Related to trust being put in the hands of the group, the depth of emotional response to each other's work often came as a surprise.

He shared the poems he wrote as part of his dissertation and reading them made me emotional. They took me into the lives of the participants and the few words of his poems showed me more about the participant and their lived experience than any 'typical' lengthy results section could begin to show. The poems were emotive and offered a powerful yet succinct snapshot into the research.

My participants were initially flabbergasted by my decision to re-represent our conversations through poetry. However, after I read it to them, or they read them, they were struck. Many of them felt the emotions they had been through. They responded by feeling a real sense of understanding. This 'unorthodox' way of presenting research was cherished and still is, when I meet my participants or show my poems to others.

Reverberations of this type can last beyond a dissertation, especially with poems as they are somewhat easier to perform (and remember). For one student, in his new job/role, there have been additional opportunities to share his poems, and through doing so he has gained equally powerful responses and validation for his work. That is, the poems are *continuing* their work.

Arts-based research, which opens possibilities for evocative writing, makes it possible for an audience to locate themselves within the social environment or context being explored. This is in contrast to traditional social science research which provides understandings of others in ways that often emphasise difference: healthy/sick, black/white, etc., and as such can preserve divisions between 'us' (e.g., researchers or audience members) and 'them' (e.g., participants), or between student/supervisor. [Diversi and Moreira \(2009: 220\)](#) observe, 'humans seem to focus on communality with the Other only after personal emotional connections have been made.' The above comments suggest that the poems and stories created by students were offering this type of emotional connection.

#### 8.5. Fostering mature relationships: "Discussions that peels back layers"

What seemed to be happening between us was more than directing a student to complete their research project, in that over time, we were all entering into mature relationships, where one can be emotionally 'present' for the other. Such relationships can lead to more meaningful conversations and deeper understandings ([Ellis, 2021](#)). Sharing stories about everyday life opens possibilities for collective meanings to emerge. We see these processes as being manifest through what arts-based inquiry made possible, which included the nuanced interactions within the group, and being given a way to see beyond what is obvious in everyday life. Reflecting on his experience one student wrote:

It has been a really cool experience engaging in your research group and being exposed to an environment which encourages discussions that peels back layers. The best thing I have taken from the environment, which you created, is to encourage conversations which go past the surface and into deeper territory. Typical interactions in our society are on the surface but when you peel back the layers, conversations get much more interesting. I think I have learnt to have these conversations with people that are willing to, and I will continue to encourage it.

## 9. Challenges and ethical considerations

The first challenge we considered here was the question of whether to share these reflections publicly or not. Influencing this decision were the responses of students. Inviting reflections seems to be a positive step towards 'listening seriously to their stories of experiences as learners' ([Niemi et al., 2010](#))<sup>1</sup> and 'engaging students in meaningful dialogue about pedagogy' ([Gogoi et al., 2022](#)). To this end every member of the group was consulted, and every member of the group believed the story and feedback provided recognition of important learning that might impact teaching and supervision more widely. Perhaps more importantly, students also believed other students would value learning about and engaging in this type of pedagogy within sport psychology and sport science.

An opposing view, which we have also considered regarding publishing, is that student feedback should not be published. For example, because the comments are much deeper than would be expected in standard module feedback, and may be too revealing. Responding to this point [Sellman \(2009\)](#) suggest that, given the opportunity, students often surprise us with their feedback. That is, if we provide opportunities for students to develop embodied understandings, and they learn creative ways to communicate these insights and if their learning helps them to articulate their experiences with depth, then it should come as no surprise that they communicate with clarity, sensitivity and with self-awareness when asked to reflect on any issue ([Sellman, 2009](#)). As noted by one student, the weekly meetings provided a space and opportunity to learn to communicate at a deeper level, one that, 'peeled back the layers' and having learned these skills it would be more surprising if the feedback was less astute, articulate and transparent.

A second ethical concern where there may be less consensus concerns students writing or reading something that they or their peers may find triggering or upsetting. This is of course an important issue to raise and one reason for writing about these types of issue is to provoke conversation about best how to manage them. It is perhaps important to be mindful that in field research (especially when interviewing) a researcher will never know beforehand what a participant may talk about. In some instances, researchers have written about their experience of vicarious traumatisation ([Etherington, 2009](#)). For this reason, all students are given a debriefing session following field research as this is an essential way we can identify, mitigate and managing any distress. One potential way we might manage potential harm when students share evocative stories (for example) is to discuss 'trigger warnings' before students share their research.

Connected to emotional triggers, we are aware that while writing about life experiences isn't therapy, two students said they found the process therapeutic, therefore it may be useful to touch on and discuss these distinctions during the early sessions. Given students found the learning we describe above to be empowering, it is important not to overly fearful of emotional responses and issues that may initially be uncomfortable, or at times distressing. It is not uncommon during an interview for a participant to experience distress yet, when asked, they often want to have their experiences witnessed and their voice heard and represented.

Likewise, it seems important to be aware of how often students are silenced. Perhaps a guiding principle is to give students (like we do participants) a choice in what they decide they would like explore creatively, as well as giving their peers a choice in what topics or issues they are likely to be exposed to ([Matusov and Sullivan, 2020](#)).

Another ethical concern relates to fracturing what a student may believe to be true about life or research. At one point during research group one student stated, "*Its like everything we were taught was wrong!*" While we do not believe *everything* students were taught was wrong, it seems that the way psychology is often taught makes it appear *as if* there is only one way to carry out research, and report it. Maybe, part of the role of arts-based methodologies is to gently persuade students that there are alternatives? Yet, if "pedagogical violence" ([Matusov and](#)



Sullivan, 2020) is to be avoided, we need to approach this sensitively.

One of the main challenges of introducing arts-based research is it is unlikely students will embrace its potential if there is a threat of them having their first attempts judged to harshly - as may occur in a large lecture scenario. When we write a song or poem, other academics are not our first port of call for feedback. Asking students to reveal vulnerabilities to large groups of peers (some of whom may be unwilling to do the same) risks too much. Playful experimentation requires nurturance in a context and environment where trust has been established and where others understand something about the risk, and what is involved in the artistic process. We are also aware that group learning is not for everyone or not for everyone all the time. There were three students allocated for supervision who chose not to attend research group. Given the primary aim of supervision is completion of the dissertation, not mastering an art form, differing aims have to be borne in mind. The choices we have as supervisors remind of us of 'production' choices we have when recording and producing a song. At such times decisions about instrumentation are made *in the service of the song* – not because the lead guitarist has found a catchy riff, or the pianist would like to showcase their skills.

Related to this, if the teacher/lecturer has limited experience in using arts-based methods, or no skills, interest or expertise, or if they are unwilling to be 'exposed', to be vulnerable before their students, then we feel the necessary conditions for deconstructing hierarchies and democratising pedagogies that lead to building trusting relationships and embarking on a playful journey out of one's 'comfort zone', are unlikely to be attained.

## 10. Reverberations

Our aims with this article were to shed light on some of the benefits of teaching arts-based methodologies to students studying psychology and sport science, and to document our reflections about doing so in a group supervision context.

Gergen and Gergen (2011) suggest that by expanding the range of tools we use so do we expand the potential for social action. While we may at first think of social action being at a global level, it can be equally important for social action to relate to local, everyday issues students face, such as, amplifying difficulties faced by international students who come to study in the UK, the needs of people who have lost a loved one or to better support for female athletes. In each of these cases documented here the student was an insider with personal experience of the issues they were studying and as such had a personal interest in social change.

As educators, we might be able to say these things are possible, but we can't *know* what each student will bring or take from the class, nor can we know how they would like to use the process. Several of the students commented that they gained self-understanding, empowerment and have experienced therapeutic benefits, but we can't possibly vouch others will experience a similar outcome. We have (somewhat) to trust that arts-based methods can support students, and not be lured into making claims beforehand as to what exactly a student might learn, or what they might do with their knowing. By allowing the creative process to be shaped by the world of the creator we have supported learning that has had personal meaning, value as well as social impact.

In studying what makes a good university lecture, Su and Wood (2012) suggest subject knowledge, a willingness to help, inspirational teaching methods, timely feedback and using humour are all important. Yet, the authors conclude by saying we need to build deeper understandings through "engaging students in meaningful dialogue about pedagogy." We feel the comments above provide evidence of meaningful dialogue about arts-based pedagogy in psychology. Returning to Henry Giroux's points about how we might develop young people's respect for the 'other', a sense of social responsibility, and democratic practices, the work we have presented here suggests that arts-based methodologies have a lot to offer.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Kitrina Douglas:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Supervision, Methodology. **David Carless:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank James Brading, Katie Bramley, Joshua Eibenschutz, Chloe Lamb, Henry Dobson, Angel Lopez Mato and Pascale Wasching, for giving permission to share their reflections here. We would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their generous reflections on an earlier draft of this manuscript, and Sharon Vince and Viktoria Magne, University of West London, for their reflections about teaching and supervision.

## Appendix 1. Name of student

Came to uni 2019, grew up overseas, 'thought I was interested in sport'

Change idea about what I want to do.

Million ideas changing, physiology/politics.

Very interested in nature stuff, but social side more interesting

Doubtful stuff I can do ...

Mental well being.

Recession and cost of living, got carried away, now theory, cost of living and impact on literature, looked in may but nothing new.

Sedentary behaviour.

## Name of student

For dissertation just wanted to do moral injury for vets.

Its not clinical rehab.

Maybe do questionnaires.

## Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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