The use of vignettes and aMSN Messenger in researching therapist accounts of practice with children in educational settings

ABSTRACT   This article reviews a research methodology which uses a qualitative, narrative approach to online, in-depth analysis of vignettes. The research sought to investigate the ways in which dramatherapists, based in different countries, understood the nature of therapeutic change in their work with children. The article describes the approach to the generation of data through the internet by a combination of vignettes, aMSN messenger and email. It reports on the approach taken to the analysis of data with samples from the findings. Participants kept a diary of their response to the research and the article draws on this within its analysis of the methodology.

Keywords: children; drama; internet; therapy; vignette

Introduction

This article considers the use of aMSN messenger, narrative vignettes and mutual analysis between participant and researcher in qualitative research into therapist perceptions of efficacy in their work. It draws on recent critical examinations of the use of narrative vignettes and of internet based dialogic communication between researcher and participant to discuss the methodological potential of combining vignettes and 'research conversations' in gaining a rich understanding of perceptions of dramatherapists working within educational contexts.

The research question was: 'How are therapists making use of the concept of 'therapeutic core processes' (Author, 1996, 2005; Karkou & Sanderson, 2005) in analysing their practice?' The purpose was to conduct an international research project to support further insights into the 'core processes' and their use by therapists. The focus of this article concerns an analysis of the methodology as a means of gaining rich insight into therapists' understanding of their work with children. Participating therapists worked in settings such as schools and child mental health services and were geographically dispersed, practicing in countries such as the UK, Canada, Malaysia, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Taiwan and Thailand.

Participant therapists supplied a vignette of their practice. This was followed by an interchange between each participant and the researcher, analysing the vignette. Participants were asked to keep a record of their experience of the methodology. This article focuses, in particular upon this perspective, as a way of gaining insight into the methodology

The professional contexts of the research

Arts therapists are state registered professionals within the Health Professions Council (www.hpc-uk.org/index.asp) in the UK and the field is developing in many countries (Karkou and Sanderson, 2005; Author, 2005). Authors such as Kidger at al. (2010) and Edwards et al. (2010) have analysed issues arising from recent changes in educational provision which position schools as sites for multi-agency work. They argue, for example, that such shifts creates challenges as 'spaces appeared as sites for action outside the well-bounded practices of the schools, with practitioners cutting new pathways across local landscapes (Edwards et al., 2010, p. 29). Kidger et al., in particular, note the 'more explicit recognition of the role of schools in addressing mental and emotional health' (2010, p919). Davis and Florian's (2004) scoping review of strategies for work with children with SEN notes the presence of innovative 'multimodal' ways or working, including the use of the creative arts (2004, 37). However, the review notes the 'limited research on implementation'. In their recommendations for future enquiry they note the need for researchers to reveal the role of research in 'stimulating' insight 'to reflect upon existing practices and to experiment with new approaches' and how models 'might be used in different contexts and for different purposes' (2004, 36). Davis and Florian note a mismatch between theory, models and the lived experience of practitioners. To redress this they note need for research into 'pay attention to contextual factors' and to consider how professionals in schools understand their work 'in real settings in order to take account of the ways …(they)… work in relation to the wide variety of situations they face (2004, 37). Research by Karkou has indicated that schools are the second most frequently reported area of practice for arts therapists (2010, p. 11). However, she notes that though there are a number of *reports* on practice in schools, there is a paucity of *research* in this area and identifies an urgent current need for international enquiry, 'about the therapeutic approaches that are useful for arts therapists working in this environment'(2010, p. 15). The need to research and communicate effective understandings of how therapies such as dramatherapy offer opportunities for children is a clear priority, as a response to issues raised by Kidger et al. (2010) about understanding how methods are effective. In

addition, in response to Edwards et al.'s (2009) issues about multiagency work in schools there is a clear need to be able to articulate across disciplines how therapeutic processes are seen and understood.

There are a variety of frameworks for understanding the nature of change in the arts therapies (Author, 1996, 2005; Jennings, 2009; Karkou & Sanderson, 2005; Landy , 2007; Payne, 1993). The research aimed to examine one such framework, used within the literature to define therapeutic change: that of the 'core processes' (Author, 1996, 2005; Karkou & Sanderson, 2005; Langley 2006) often used in descriptions of work with children (Dooman, 2012; Karkou, 2010; Oon, 2010). The original descriptions of the processes aimed to define how the arts therapies are effective (Author 1996, 2005). These elements, or 'core processes', described the ways in which arts forms and processes can be therapeutic. The processes include play, role, dramatic projection, witnessing and embodiment (Author, 2005; Karkou & Sanderson, 2005).

Methodology and Data Generation

The approach to research sought to combine the capacity of narrative vignettes to generate rich insights into therapeutic practice, with the use of the internet to enable an enquiry with a geographically dispersed population of participants. The following contextualises the innovative approach in relevant debates within the literature, identifying key challenges which the methodology sought to respond to.

Approach to data generation - debates and issues: Vignettes

Vignettes used within research have been defined as written or recorded scenarios which aim to stimulate reflection or discussion about specific situations (Simon and Tierney, 2010). Reviews by Jenkins et al. (2010) and Simon and Tierney (2010) identify that vignettes have traditionally been used in education to assess levels of understanding or to illustrate results, and involved generalised situations created by the researcher.

The research method relates to aspects of these definitions of vignettes as stimulating reflection and analysis. However the method responds to Poulou's challenge to develop their potential in new ways to examine therapeutic practice in education. In contrast to the common approach identified by Jenkins et al and Simon and Tierney, the use of vignettes were innovative in that:

- they were neither hypothetical nor provided by the researcher, and that

- they explored the specific possibilities that internet based communicative analysis linked to vignettes could offer.

The article will examine the potential of vignettes authored by the participants themselves, reporting on their work in schools or similar settings, and on the values of such self-authored vignettes being accompanied by ongoing dialogic analysis enabled by the internet.

Approach to data generation - debates and issues: internet technology and divisions between online and offline domains

The work, in part, responded to debates within the literature relating to the 'challenges' to qualitative researchers concerning the opportunities and 'false promises of internet technology' (Gajjala, Rybas and Altman, 2008; Kien, 2008; Tutt, 2008). **X** Gajjala, Rybas and Altman (2008), for example, express the need for researchers to find innovative ways of enabling greater understanding of meaning making within web based qualitative research interactions. The methodology developed in the following research can be seen as a response to Kien's call for work that progresses researchers' encounter with 'the intersection of online and offline practices' (2008, p. 1106) and Tutt's concern that there is a division between online interaction and offline practices. The methodology discussed in this article proposes a connection between new media and methodology which can be situated within such concerns about 'division' and the need to respond to technological advances as offering new opportunities. The research methodology attempted to bring the specific potentials of narrative based online communication in research into contact with understandings of professional practice of participants' work 'offline' in the field of therapy in educational settings. It responds to Gajjala, Rybas and Altman's (2008) challenge in its attention to the accounts of participants about their experience of communication and meaning making within internet mediated communication within the research.

Benefits and limitations

The generation of data in the study aimed to combine the *benefit* of a narrative vignette written by each therapist with a second element: the mutual analysis of the vignette narrative conducted through aMSN messenger and email between the therapist and myself as researcher. aMSN messenger was used partly to explore the potential benefits of web based ways of working outlined above, and partly as a way

of dealing with the fact that participants were living as far apart as Canada, South Africa and Taiwan (Author, 2008; 2009, Mann & Stewart, 2000)

It has been suggested that there are potential *limits* to the narrative vignette as a vehicle to engage in a meaningful way with the lived complexity of the processes and responses in the participant's experiences (Jenkins, 2006, p. 8). Hookway critiques the use of vignettes, arguing that the participants' responses may be conveyed through a 'normative screen' which 'minimises the potential' for feelings or issues which the participant may not wish to acknowledge to the researcher. He adds that another problem with vignettes is that it is a methodology that relies on memory and is 'therefore susceptible to memory impairment and retrospective reconstruction' (2008, p. 95).

Gajjala, Rybas and Altman (2008) in their research examining the production of cyber identities argue for the need for the field of qualitative enquiry to deepen its understanding of meaning making and interaction in web based relationships. The combination of documented conversation, further reflection on the conversation by email exchange and participant diary was a way the research sought to maximise the participant's opportunities to have their voice and 'vision' of their views and experiences included within the research's meaning making of their work and to meet the 'need' tarticulated by Gajjala, Rybas and Altman. As the following analysis will show, the reflections of the participants on the research process were captured through the diary they kept which provided insights into the meaning of the vignette, the process of the methodology and its perceived value to the researchers. Their inclusion within this paper aims to provide important perspectives and insight on the methodology.

Participants and Procedure

Through an arts therapy professional association (BADth) registered clinicians were offered the opportunity to be involved in the research, and twenty five therapists agreed to participate. Therapists had to be full members of BADth and practising in appropriate setting as outlined above. Each therapist had to submit material from the setting confirming ethical clearance and that they complied with Codes set by the Health Professions Council (HPC) Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics, Duties of Registrant (2003) http://www.hpc-uk.org and by the University's Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

Procedure and data generation: summary

The generation of data involved three elements. The first required the therapists to provide a vignette from their practice: a written description of a piece of clinical practice chosen by them to exemplify the ways they used the 'core processes' (Author, 1996, 2005; Karkou & Sanderson, 2005) in analysing their therapeutic practice. The second was a 'research conversation' using aMSN messenger and email. aMSN messenger was chosen as a mode of communication involving live, typed conversation, enabling immediate communication whilst keeping a record of that conversation for both parties.

Approach to data analysis: summary

The approach to the analysis of data drew on Elliott (2005), Floersch (2004), Riessman and Quinney (2004) and Robson (1993) which situate the process of analysis of narrative, qualitative research within hermeneutic or interpretive traditions. Riessman and Quinney's (2004) review of narrative approaches identifies standards for 'good' narrative research in relation to data collection and analysis. Their analysis focuses upon a 'comparative approach' which involves an examination of transcripts and the identification of similarities and difference amongst participants' narratives (Riessman & Quinney, 2004, pp. 404-5). The analysis drew on Floersch's (2004), Elliott's (2005) and Robson's (1993) summary of approaches to drawing conclusions from qualitative narrative data: patterning though the noting of recurring themes; clustering in the grouping of areas with similar characteristics, identifying variables including the examination of causal networks, along with the development of chains or webs of linkages between variables. The same approach was then taken in relation to the third element of data: the reflections on the research process by participants. Here, also, patterning, clustering, the development of chains of linkages were also used to analyse the transcripts.

Research Methodology: Illustrative Examples

The following sections offer illustrative examples from the research. It does not seek to offer the findings of the research in relation to what was discovered about therapists' uses of the 'core processes' in educational setting in different contexts: this is presented elsewhere (Author 2009). The material is included to illustrate and examine the methodology. The extracts are from therapists working in schools with children who had been referred due to their experiencing social, emotional or behavioural difficulties. The first excerpts from the data illustrate the combination of vignette, initial spontaneous questioning by aMSN messenger and the use of reflections through subsequent email responses.

Vignette excerpt : Participant C

Joe began his therapy sessions by pacing up and down one side of the therapy room, vocalising sounds and repeating patterns of speech from cartoons: 'I don't like the look of that!' 'This is the sentence – death!' 'And then there was an almighty crash!' In order to establish a therapeutic relationship I would attempt to interact with Joe… at the start of the therapy I felt that my playfulness was ignored, blanked, or even unwelcomed by Joe. On one occasion I had joined in with the pitch and volume of his vocalisations. He stopped pacing and placed his hands over his ears. This felt like a clear message to me: too much, too soon. I realised that perhaps I was being too presumptuous by asking Joe to share his world and play with me so early in the therapy….and so I took up a position in a chair on the opposite side of the room, where I could see and hear Joe. This was where I remained for the next few sessions…Joe has defined an area of the room as his 'stage' and I, by default, had defined an area for the audience. It is usually the case that I introduce the clients to the possibilities of a defined 'stage' and 'offstage' area in the room…I noted that Joe had engaged with the creative space before feeling ready to engage with me…partly because he probably found it less threatening than engaging with me in the beginning…Therefore Joe began his therapy by seeking out where he felt most comfortable and secure. At this stage I realised my role was to recognise the value of the space he created; respect his need to create, and moderate, a degree of distance between us; and to be witness to what I saw, heard and felt within that space..'

Vignette Research Conversation excerpt, Participant C

aMSN Researcher: I was interested in the way you talked about yourself as a witness but also you said a 'presence' and that you talked about 'my playfulness'. What did you mean by your presence, 'playfulness' and its relationship to witnessing?

aMSN Participant C: It was important to be a witness. More so in the beginning. My 'presence' was as a witness and also, in this case, in sharing play: and being there: I think a client - not just

Joe - wants to know their therapist can be playful.

Subsequent Email Participant C, 1 day after aMSN conversation: a p.s. to add to my MSN comment about being a 'presence'. I'm also using presence in the sense of feeling I was being accepted by Joe as another person - player, if you like - as opposed to an object, which is how I had felt in the early stages. i.e. like a non-person who's function was to hang up his coat/tie his shoelaces/hand him a prop.

Subsequent Email Researcher 3 days after aMSN conversation: I'm just thinking as well about your comments about playfulness , sharing and connection–play can also be tough, excluding, frustrating and isolating -– perhaps you in your role made good use of your ability to be an active witness first in maintaining a respectful distance and witnessing his play and then tested out possibilities becoming active, a player…?

 Subsequent Email Participant C, 3 days after aMSN conversation: Of course! Somehow I'd

    managed to forget the darker side of 'play' – as is experienced by some. Certainly many of the children I see as clients would be familiar with that. This being the case, it does seem that the positive benefits of play can be introduced and experienced in therapy with the therapist not only as a guide, but as someone who wants to engage with you, the client. 'Yes' to all your points about witnessing, waiting, offering, testing out opportunities to play together – these responses are judged according to how a child might seem at the time.

Vignette Participant reflections on the research process

  Reflection on the process by the participants was an additional element of the research. Participants were asked to note their feelings and thoughts prior, during and following on from, the creation of the vignette, aMSN messenger conversation and email exchange, in order that these could be drawn on in reflecting upon the process of research. This material was analysed thematically and the responses used to reflect on the research method and process. The following presents themes, excerpts from the data and reflections on the research method and process based on the analysis.

The relationships between words, writing, spontaneity, the use of new technology and insight was referred to by twelve of the participants. Many had not used the technology before, and the use of typed, spontaneous communication and reflection to be used as data was much commented on.

> Participant H: I was feeling nervous about setting up and using aMSN as hadn't before and about a real time online conversation. I usually spend ages composing emails and written work so I was worried that instant messaging would be hard.
> This participant later commented on the effect of the process:

> Participant H: 'That was ok.' I felt quite exhilarated that it had gone ok that the researcher had been reassuring and encouraging and that my answers were what he had in mind. I was surprised how easy it became to answer spontaneously and how helpful this could be e.g. in online supervision.

> Comments as reported in the data above such as 'I warmed up into starting to think more – I liked being able to come back, add things/ideas' or 'I knew I could add things, too, after the aMSN messenger conversation, that helped, I think, it didn't feel final,' seem to show the research method encourages openness through combining attention to the vignette by the researcher, the live internet encounter and follow up with email developing a relationship over time and in the attention given by the researcher. As the data showed, a number of participants commented favourably on the cycle of vignette, live aMSN messenger conversation followed by email exchange.

Gestures towards other, untold narratives within the act of research was referred to by a number of respondents:

> Participant A: I am aware of being pulled in several directions writing it and that it could have been focused towards each of the processes so I've tried to balance the theory and practice - I find it hard not to write about both. At the same time I feel attached to saying

something about dialectics but I know this is because of the research project that I would love to be doing - I'll tell you more of this another time if you're interested.

A strand within the commentaries about the particular values of the form of the research concerned the particular reflective qualities of aMSN messenger as a live, typed medium:

Participant R: I think it was an interesting process, putting the words down and taking some time to reflect on them. I tried not to let it inhibit me, fearing words put into writing feel more of a commitment than the spontaneity of verbal interaction.

Participant C: I found that the constraints of the web messenger process (brevity and speed) challenged me to get straight to the point! Reading over the conversation transcript I was surprised and reassured by how your questions assisted me to articulate the essential gist of my ideas about the vignettes…a reflexive skill that combines creating/living and then stepping back to interpret/differentiate.

Four participants commented on the way the research process evoked complex personal connections. Here issues about ethnic identity and loss are given as examples:

Participant R: I thought it very interesting that I think I became a bit defensive (and resistant?) at one point, which you sensitively picked up on, concerned about 'intruding' into the relationship. I reflected on this for some time and I think I have recognised that there is quite a lot of unprocessed material to do with my own feelings about the relationship and about the work. I think Bilal's experience of being a refugee and the persecution he suffered may have triggered my own feelings and identity of being a Jew and the shadows of the holocaust.

Participant K: I have found your reflections and thoughts have brought up many feelings in me. And suddenly I realise that I have not mourned the loss of this group as much as I

felt it was a loss to them. I am surprised at how this process has been a kind of mourning process for me, one which I have not yet been able to do fully.

Discussion

The data indicates that the method of vignette and conversation often functioned *to privilege, or worked to obtain, the participant's meanings* within the narrative (Monrouxe, 2009). The research conversations tended to produce responses from the participant which elicited evolving understanding, of the meaning in the vignette and its narratives. The data's richness is shown to evolve through a combination of spontaneous insight or response during the aMSN live conversation and responses further developed by longer reflection by email – both enabled by the ongoing internet access. The method created a richness of data and meaning making through this combination of spontaneity and the availability of the 'first stage' data of the vignette for immediate reflection, along with the facility for an open period where the participant could note down ideas and reflections and email them for further dialogue with the researcher. This produced a range of kinds of reflection – some made in the moment, those made whilst looking at the text of the vignette and conversation and those made in reverie, or during time away from the data itself.

The reflective time and space created by email exchange following the aMSN messenger is shown to be of value in deepening the analysis, as the participant and researcher could return to the written documented words of the narrative vignette and the conversation, and could add to this create another level of interaction. In the research the transaction and relationship, then, can be seen to offer value in specific ways. It can be seen in comments such as Participant V's, 'The combination of the aMSN conversation followed by email and the kinds of questions you asked made me feel connected, that you understood, you could see what I was trying to do' and in Participant C's 'Reading over the conversation transcript I was surprised and reassured…'. This combination of written live conversation 'brevity and speed' (Participant C), space and time for and adjustment 'taking some time to reflect on them ' (Participant R)was seen to deepen the analysis, to allow space for the value of time and reflection, and for this to be put into the reflective communication resulting in new or deeper insights into the processes at work within the vignettes. Participant P, for example referred to her reverie whilst driving 'I carried on thinking on the drive home, through the dark and windy B-roads. I felt my first response didn't give the full picture, really…..So, here are some of those additional thoughts' whilst Participant R

mentions the importance of being able to see the documented conversation as an enabling facet of reflective analysis. Not only did the online contact enable the research to access the experiences of participants from a geographically wide area, the analysis made by participants of the research process indicated that the online process of vignette combined with ongoing 'conversation' enabled a relationship to be developed which created trust and open-ness in the participant analysis.

.   The inclusion of the researcher as interviewer in the role of conversational participant in exploring the narrative vignette was used in particular ways. The relationship between interviewer and participant within the 'conversation' raises particular issues concerning the nature and value of subjectivity and reflexivity (Ochs and Capps, 2001; Monrouxe, 2009).

        The research approach described here tminimised Jenkins' and Hookway's critiques by providing opportunities to enhance the vignette's capacity to reflect complexity through the further enquiry made possible by the aMSN and email exchange. This exchange could also provide an opportunity to develop trust between researcher and participant, again potentially lessening the screening of material. The approach to recollection taken here reflects Ellis and Bochner's and Murray's perspectives on the distortions of memory in relation to researching individuals' storied experiences. The narrative within the vignette is seen as a story about the past rather than the past itself (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and is not concerned with accurate representation of clinical events. The 'past' becomes 'premised on a construction of meanings and beliefs around certain memories' rather than any 'accurate' recollection (Murray, 2009, p. 484). The use of narrative within the vignettes in the research makes use of distortion and reconstruction: the interest is not upon the precise recollected detail, but on the meanings which the respondent gives to their narration.   Authors such as Frost et al (2010) can be viewed as arguing that a key aspect of subjectivity in qualitative research can be described in terms of a specific sort of transaction and relationship, having particular values in meaning making: 'subjectivity in qualitative research can be taken to mean the living knowledge of an individual, which is drawn into the co-construction of the meaning of an experience by researcher and researched' (2010, p. 454). This was much commented on by participants in their evaluative reflections. Here the process of meaning making in relation to the narrative vignette is not only seen in terms of cognitive awareness of theory, but as evoking emotional responses in the respondents. Participants D and K note the potency of the method in a similar way, it evokes, for them, unfinished feelings, or feelings that reveal further elements of their understanding of the processes at work. Participant K illustrates how the method allows the inclusion of

this back into the analysis of the narrative by allowing reflective space: 'and suddenly I realise that I have not mourned the loss of this group as much as I felt it was a loss to them' and that the analysis was a part of an ongoing re-making of the narrative meaning: 'I am surprised at how this process has been a kind of mourning process for me, one which I have not yet been able to do as fully'.

The above material indicates the method's potential for generating in respondents the desire and impetus for dialogue and mutual meaning making: bringing together the benefits of the initial vignette narrative to communicate their work, with the value of online conversational narratives in deepening and enabling further analysis (Ochs and Capps, 2001; Monrouxe, 2009).

Conclusion

The analysis of the methodology developed within the research has illustrated how it responds to Kien's call for work that progresses researchers' encounter with 'the intersection of online and offline practices' (2008, p. 1106) and Tutt's concern about division between online interaction and offline practices. The combination of participant created vignettes and online mutual analysis has shown the value of bringing web based communication into contact with participants' professional offline practice in deepening an understanding of processes within their work with children in schools and educational settings. The excerpts from the research findings and reflections on the methodology made by the participants have illustrated the ways in which the combination provided opportunities in the following areas. The methods discussed in this article have reflected the way online, synchronous aMSN conversation, combined with email exchange, offer particular opportunities in research.

The article has reviewed the uses of aMSN messenger and ongoing email internet analysis of vignettes as a new development and as a valuable way of generating data. It has shown how such innovative, online methodology is useful for developing effective access and relationships with geographically dispersed participants and is an effective way of investigating therapist practitioners' understanding of their offline practice. In addition, the use of diaries and the reflections enabled through email conversation have responded to Gajjala, Rybas and Altman's (2008) identification of the need for the field of enquiry to deepen its understanding of meaning making and interaction in web based relationships. The excerpts and the analysis of the research provided in this article show how the therapists and myself as researcher took

the narratives within the vignettes in our aMSN messenger contact and worked together with interpretation to establish rich perceptions of the processes contributing to change. In this way the research can be seen as a response to Kien's challenge for 'new methodological frontiers' (2008, p. 115) in the bringing together of vignette, online synchronous conversational analysis and emailed reflection in qualitative research into therapeutic practice.

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