

## RESEARCH REPORT

# Social Fiction as a close-to-practice research approach

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### Abstract

**Context:** Close-to-practice research in educational settings has evolved through various approaches, such as practice-led research, practice-based enquiry, and close-to-practice research. These methodologies emphasize the active involvement of researchers within their own practices, blending research, teaching, and activism. The trend towards using creative and arts-based methods in social sciences and education has led to new forms of inquiry and dissemination. This research situates itself within these developments by exploring Social Fiction as a unique form of close-to-practice research that integrates these roles.

**Aims:** The study aims to explore Social Fiction as a method for integrating and reflecting on the varied roles of academic life, such as teaching, research, and creative expression. The objective is to provide a platform for academic dialogue that addresses the complexities and challenges researchers face when using Social Fiction. The initiative seeks to understand how Social Fiction can challenge existing academic and methodological norms, encourage deeper engagement with societal issues, and foster a more inclusive and reflexive research community.

**Methods:** The research involved a writing group where participants, including the authors, engaged in creating and sharing Social Fiction pieces. These narratives were used as a method to reflect critically on their professional roles and the issues encountered in educational and research settings. The process of writing, sharing, and revising fiction pieces was central to the methodology, merging data generation with analysis. This approach was coupled with regular group meetings to discuss and refine the narratives.

**Findings:** Participants reported that creating and sharing Social Fiction pieces allowed them to grapple with issues of voice, truth, and representation in a way that traditional research methods do not always permit. The exercise revealed common struggles with these issues and highlighted the potential of Social Fiction to provide new ways of expressing and understanding complex social realities. It was noted that while fictionalizing could risk distorting participants' experiences, it also offered a means to protect vulnerable subjects and engage more deeply with the unspeakable aspects of human experience.

**Implications:** The study suggests that Social Fiction offers a valuable addition to close-to-practice research by enabling a more nuanced and creative engagement with social issues. It challenges traditional boundaries between research and creative practice, proposing a more integrated and holistic approach. The findings also suggest that Social Fiction can empower researchers and participants by providing alternative avenues for expressing marginalized voices and experiences, thereby contributing to a more dynamic and inclusive research community.

**Keywords:** Social Fiction; close-to-practice research; practice-based research

## Context

In educational settings, research that is effectively close-to-practice research has been defined in a variety of ways: practice-led research (Smith and Dean, 2009), practice-based enquiry (Whiteford, 2020), or close-to-practice research (Wyse et al., 2018). Although there are differences in philosophical and theoretical outlooks across these conceptualisations, there is a common thread of researchers being insiders in and involved with their research. In addition, there is trend within the social sciences, humanities and education towards heavier reliance on creative and arts-based approaches for data collection, analysis, and dissemination. At the heart of these developments lies the focus on "doing and making" as part of the research process. Again, the researcher is not removed from but actively engaged with research. As a result of this deep engagement and active involvement in research, we find that research, teaching, and other aspects of our roles, such as activism or creative practices, get blurred. However, instead of attempting to disentangle the research-teaching-practice triad, we explore how we can actively embrace working in the centre of our research-teaching-practice Venn diagram. Within the scope of the Practice As Research network led by Nicole, we have therefore set up a writing group that focuses specifically on the identification and development of Social Fiction as an innovative way of conceptualising close-to-practice research.

## Motivation, focus and questions

The heart of the Social Fiction genre lies at the intersection of research-teaching-practice, emphasizing critical and creative ways of social inquiry, knowledge generation and dissemination. We aim to reflect on and bring together our varied roles and performances (e.g. teacher, researcher, performer, author, learner) within academia. Through interpretive, and artistic forms of expression we focus on commonalities between our many roles rather than their distinctions to understand and explore societal problems we deal with in our research.

Our endeavour aligns with the radical transformations that qualitative research has undergone (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), when novel forms of interpretive expression, such as flash/social fiction (Leavy, 2022), poetry, and games, are increasingly used to explore social issues deeply and rigorously from participants' perspectives.

In this research, we focus on researcher-writers' critical reflections on social issues through Social Fiction. The Social Fiction community rejects any professional or disciplinary hierarchies among participants and/or their productions and encourages participation of researchers from all levels of

academic career, fields and institutions. The goal of Social Fiction writing community is to provide a platform for a dialog, aiming to understand the enablers, challenges, and barriers for staff using Social Fiction as a form of social inquiry in their field. The rationale for using fiction as a vehicle in that process can be traced back to:

1. the fundamental appeal of stories;
2. fiction's potential in relation to the politics of representation; and
3. fiction as a way to go beyond research data through speculating or imagining. (Tipper and Gilman, 2024, p. 23)

This specific project we report on here examines the Social Fictions generated by researcher-writers who are active participants in the Social Fiction community. We also consider the potential challenges and hesitations the participants may experience regarding the complex, disarming, and awkward dimensions and challenges of generating Social Fiction as a new field of inquiry in the making.

We expect this practice to make modest but meaningful interventions, aiming challenge existing hierarchies of knowledge and methodological orthodoxies. The aim is to foster ongoing dialogue about the anthropological nature of education and research (Ergül 2017), with more emphasis on listening and learning over mere knowledge transfer. We also hope this initiative will be beneficial for the members of this writing group in terms of their own engagement with academia. In fact, our regular meetings, sharing the flash fictions, articulating, and collectively thinking about our writing experiences, and turning this knowledge into critical questions to be shared in different academic platforms like this one are modest yet meaningful indicators of such everyday transformations.

## Inquiry plan and activities

Close-to-practice research approaches have long been critiqued and criticised. Critiques include that this form of research is merely an attempt to translate research to make findings more accessible and to bridge the gulf between scholarly theory and practical application (Chi, 2021; Hall et al., 2017).

Also, there is a philosophical debate of whether it is the practice or the theory that needs to take centre-stage in these forms of enquiries, as indeed, the term close-to-practice research suggests theory and practice sit alongside each other rather than within one another (Parsons, 2021). In this respect, the creation of Social Fiction occurs in a third space (Parsons, 2021; Wyse et al., 2021; Hordern, 2021) that practitioner-researchers inhabit.

Our approach to our inquiry is therefore not categorizable in the typical phases of a research that moves from literature review to data collection/generation, from analysis to dissemination. Instead, Social Fiction writing connects data generation with analytical discussions. In subsequent iterations of sharing and revising fiction the writer engages not only with the scholarly task of theorising personal and collective experiences in view of published research and the raw data, but also focuses on improving their craft through implementing literary devices.

Social Fiction writing addresses long-known challenges faced in conventional ethnographic writing, including that many cultural experiences cannot be verbalised (Fabian 1990). By providing creative and aesthetic tools, Social Fiction explores new possibilities for articulating the 'unspeakable', making the political stance, criticality, and positionality of the author integral part of the process of data collection and interpretation.

With this inquiry, we therefore aimed at exploring the opportunities and challenges of Social Fiction writing and at developing deeper understanding of the role and function of Social Fiction in educational and social research. To this end, we formulated the following research questions:

- What are the Social Fiction writers' concerns in educational and research settings?
- Does Social Fiction function as a close-to-practice approach in educational research?

To answer question 1, we set the task to create a short Social Fiction piece about Social Fiction writing. This task required each writer exploring their own concerns and views relating to the benefits, opportunities, drawbacks and challenges of Social Fiction through the active engagement in writing.

This process was akin thinking with stories (Frank, 2013) and using writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000, 2003).

In the subsequent meeting of the Social Fiction writing group, we shared these pieces of creative writing and offered feedback to each other to improve the written pieces, as is commonly practiced in creative writing groups. We then reflected critically on commonalities and differences across the pieces, thereby engaging in an analytical process not too distinct from reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Clarke and Braun, 2021). It was in this meeting along with further discussions between the report authors that question 2 was answered.

## Ethical considerations and relationships

The ethical considerations in Social Fiction writing, in the main, are not far from those of other qualitative methods of inquiry focusing on individual's experiences and sense making processes, such as performative inquiries, auto-ethnography, or practice-as-research.

Reflecting on researcher's positionality: In Social Fiction writing, it is essential for researcher-writers to consider their own positionality and its potential influence on the ways in which the stories told (Leavy 2023, p. 22). As researcher-writers of this group, we maintain a critical awareness of the intersectional (Collins and Sirma, 2020) nature of our own identity and those of the individuals we focus on in our stories, constantly reflecting upon the privileges and limitations this entails. We also remember that positionality is a dynamic and constantly evolving process.

Ensuring data privacy and confidentiality: Even though Social Fiction may not necessarily focus on researcher-writers' private experiences, the nature of this genre is more centred on the 'personal'; hence, the author's voice, identity, and subjectivity manifest more clearly in comparison to a conventional reporting. This may sometimes blur the lines between what is narrated and the author's personal experiences. Essentially, every story is 'the writer's story,' but with the author not often being the subject of the experience narrated. This aspect of potential risk of 'exposure' can lead to the researcher-writers being categorized, judged or associated with certain values, norms and issues presented in the fiction. However, as discussed below, the reverse is also true.

Ensuring a beneficial research environment: Social Fiction group provides excellent opportunity for researchers from all levels to focus on and share their experiences and observations through a fictional narrative. For instance, most members of the IOE's Social Fiction community collaborate with individuals identified as 'vulnerable' (e.g. children, refugees, marginalised communities, people with health concerns, traumatic experiences and/or with disabilities) within complex research contexts. Some of these experiences may involve traumatic elements, often silenced or lacking appropriate channels for expression. Social Fiction addresses this and provides a means for group members to disclose these disarming and distressing experiences in a safe and supportive environment. As such, Social Fiction shifts the focus and transforms the narrative from 'the author's story' to a broader

mediated 'experience,' filtered and redefined within the genre's realm and ultimately elevated to a fictional and aesthetic level (Váňa, 2020, p. 182).

Social Fiction serves as a creative mode of expression for the marginalised communities and individuals, conveying and amplifying the voices to the readers.

Tackling potential power imbalance: It may be unrealistic to conceive of a community devoid of power relations, even within horizontally organized communities such as the IOE's Social Fiction group. While the regular meetings and moderation are administered by the group lead (Nicole Brown, co-author of this report), the flow of the meetings, the content of discussions, the Social Fictions shared by participants and the overall ethos of the group are collectively discussed and by its members.

Diversity: Currently, the members of the Social Fiction community are researcher-writers from diverse higher education institutions. As mentioned earlier, the community operates as a collective that does not consider the institutional and/or disciplinary hierarchies.

Dissemination within and outside the community: Regular meetings open with informal chats and updates (e.g. relevant publication opportunities or conferences). The platform then opens with an invitation for members to share their short fictions, followed by constructive discussion and feedback. The goal is to create a productive, inclusive and supportive environment for everyone. Joining the meetings is optional and no one is obligated to share their fiction. All participants are academics with backgrounds in social sciences and arts and humanities, with extensive experience collaborating with vulnerable populations. This shared background ensures a common understanding of basic ethical precautions and principles. All Social Fictions shared on academic or non-academic platforms are published with the consent of the authors who participated in the production process.

## Findings

The sharing of the Social Fiction pieces was a fascinating experience for all involved. Every member of the group felt apprehensive about the vulnerability shared. Any creative will highlight issues of vulnerability when sharing their creations. Yet, in this case, where the authorial voice and narrative voice were so closely interlinked with one another there was an additional worry that any fictionalised statement may be interpreted as the author's "issues". Indeed, Nicole offered an exploration of truth and voice that had been the topic of a number of discussions in previous group meetings. The leap

from Nicole's personal concern with doing justice to the participants and how participants' voices should be communicated and addressed in/with the fictionalised characters is not far-fetched or difficult to make.

Another interesting observation was the many commonalities across the fiction pieces shared. Pretty much all Social Fiction writers had been grappling with voice and truth. Social Fiction writers explored how in writing fictionalised accounts they are potentially distorting their research participants' truths, thereby marginalising or even silencing them rather than offering empowerment (Gibson, 2021).

Simultaneously, writers highlighted the benefits of fictionalising accounts, especially where vulnerable participants and sensitive topics were concerned, a main reason for researchers to engage with fictionalising in the first place (Tipper and Gilman, 2024; Leavy, 2023)

An example of this came from the Social Fiction piece Hakan shared, where he focused on the interplay of three distinct gazes and voices: the narrator's, the fictional character's, and the researcher-writer's. By highlighting the tensions among these gazes, Hakan delved into the challenges inherent in narrating the often-unspeakable experiences of the vulnerable and asked: Whose voice is represented in this text? And, how can Social Fiction serve as a tool of expression for the oppressed? The title of his short fiction, "The Invite," offers insights into both inquiries. In fact, his fiction ended by invitation to the character in the story to step out from behind the text and move in front of it, to co-author the experience. This proposal has a potential to challenge traditional narrative boundaries, suggesting a more inclusive and dynamic interplay where researcher-writer and the character transcend their fictional confines to actively shape the experience narrated.

But the commonalities were not limited to the contents of the Social Fiction pieces. There were overlaps in how these contents were expressed, thus the aesthetics and artfulness of the fictionalised accounts. A few pieces, like Nicole's, played with the idea that fictionalised characters are "real people" who exercise agency, which is in stark contrast to the critique that fictionalisations disempower participants (see Gibson, 2021; Parr, 2021).

This small-scale inquiry highlighted that the practice and process of Social Fiction allows researchers – the Social Fiction writers – engage transparently and explicitly with research practices that would otherwise remain hidden. The empowerment/disempowerment conundrum should be discussed within the context of any qualitative research where participants' quotes are used in anonymised form, for example. Yet, it is not. Instead, it is simply assumed that researchers empower their

participants by using direct quotes or "original" words and voices. The fact that pertinent publications (e.g. Gibson, 2021; Parr, 2021; Tipper and Gilman, 2024; Leavy, 2023) and Social Fiction writers explore agency demonstrates a powerful aspect of the practice. In that respect, Social Fiction writing does function as a close-to-practice approach.

## Reflective evaluation on the process

A close-to-practice research approach that connects practice and research so closely as the process of Social Fiction writing does, comes with difficulties. One of the most prominent issues is that the research and the practice cannot be separated into neat categories. Instead, Social Fiction writing remains somewhat nebulous and vague, and it may not be entirely clear where research and practice end or begin. This means that critics will not recognise the approach as either research or practice.

Similarly, writing fiction does not mean that we are writing fiction well. The craft of fictionalisation needs to be trained and exercised like any other creative or physical practice. Sharing the fiction pieces within the Social Fiction group is therefore not the same as sharing the pieces in creative writing groups, where the expectations differ. Creative writing groups will not pay attention to truth and voice as much, and instead focus on whether the writer has successfully used the literary devices and creative tools available to them. And the danger is that creative writing groups will not recognise Social Fiction as literary works.

However, those involved in the Social Fiction group continually express how their engagement with Social Fiction supports their own professional learning and development and positively impacts research practices and the generation of knowledge. As far as we are concerned, this is the very definition of a good close-to-practice research.

## Next steps

Having seen the power of stories and the benefits of Social Fiction, we are keen on further exploring Social Fiction as a close-to-practice research approach. To this end, we have already gained institutional ethics approval for our next inquiry. We will study the experiences of staff and students in higher education contexts in relation to the discourses of academic dishonesty, plagiarism, safety, and academic performance especially regarding uses of artificial intelligence. The aim is to understand - through Social Fiction - what the enablers, challenges and barriers are for researchers, staff and students in exploring the personal experiences and reflections in everyday academia.



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