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Lynn Fels

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Collecting Data Through Performative Inquiry: A Tug on the Sleeve

LYNN FELS

Arts Education, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada

Performative inquiry offers practitioners and researchers a way of engaging in research that attends to critical moments that emerge through creative action. A tug on the sleeve introduces the reader to how we might engage in performative inquiry and how individual moments may be understood as embodied data that through reflection inform our practices and learning in the arts and education.

We are trying to find an ending to our play, Jack and Jill and the Beanstalk.

“I have it!” I tell the kids excitedly. “You can all hold hands and skip in a circle around the giant’s body singing, ‘Hurray, hurray the giant’s dead. Now we can all go home to bed!’” I demonstrate, singing loudly.

“What do you think?”

They are politely silent, but I can read the thought bubbles over their heads. *Are you kidding us? What a stupid idea!* Eight-year-olds are a tough group to impress. I sigh. Creating a play from scratch with Grade 2s is no easy gig.

And then that kid—you know, the kid the teacher always warns you about and says to *just send him to the principal if he gives you any hassle*—that kid tugs my sleeve. He’d already refused to participate in our playbuilding, so I had appointed him assistant director and invited him to sit beside me, *because proximity is the first rule of classroom management*. He tugs my sleeve again.

“What?”

“I know how to end the play,” he says. “I’ll be a police officer, and I’ll arrest Jack and Jill and their mother for killing the giant!”

Imagine! Justice for the hapless giant of Jack and the Beanstalk! The students vote unanimously for his idea. I am outnumbered—and humbled. It is at this moment that I consider the possibility that these pint-sized playwrights I’m

I would like to heartfully thank Clark and Logan, the two boys who “stopped” me for the gift of learning they offered me, and Dr. Patrick Verriour whose work in role drama (Tarlinton and Verriour 1991) introduced me to a way of being present and deeply engaged in inquiry and play that is research.

Address correspondence to Lynn Fels, Arts Education, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6, Canada. E-mail: lynn_fels@sfu.ca

working with just might have better ideas than my own. Perhaps, I tell myself, I should create more opportunities for them to contribute. Maybe I need to listen a little more attentively.

This moment is, as philosopher David Appelbaum calls it, *a stop*.

This was not the first time that a child has offered me creative resolution to a playbuilding activity; however, it is the interruption, the tug on the sleeve, that stops me. This stop invites me to open a space for listening to the ideas of children in a new way, *with respect, with curiosity, with openness, a willingness to wonder, and welcome, what children might offer*. That kid stepped out of a familiar script, and in doing so, he encouraged me to reimagine what I thought I already knew.

As an educator and researcher, this pedagogical moment, or stop, became a pivotal illustration of my understanding of what it means, as philosopher Hannah Arendt (1961, 196) proposes, *to love children enough so as to invite them to participate in the world's renewal not as we image it, but as they will come to create it*. It was also a moment that called me to an understanding of the arts as an action site of inquiry.

What questions catch us unaware, like a tug on the sleeve, when we are looking in another direction? How do we truly attend to the possible worlds unfolding within those performative moments that interrupt, disrupt, and if we are attentive, encourage us to reimagine our engagement as educators, as researchers, as learners in the presence of our students? In this article, I would like to explore how a child's tug on my sleeve has become a metaphor and practice of performative inquiry. I would like to share how one might engage in research through performative inquiry,¹ while speaking to the importance of Appelbaum's (1995) concept of the stop, and how attending to those moments that tug on our sleeve as embodied data for pedagogical exploration can enlarge the space of the possible (Sumara and Davis 1997).

Imagining Performative Inquiry

Performative inquiry calls our attention to those moments that invite us to pause and reflect on the pedagogical significance of such moments for our work, for our relationships with others, for who we are in the world. Performative inquiry does not provide a method nor steps to follow, but rather offers researchers and educators a way of inquiring into what matters as we engage in drama or theatre activities, or indeed in any creative process or activity that is an action site of inquiry.² Performative inquiry embodies mindful attention, creative and improvisational interactions, and reflection as a way of being in inquiry.

¹At the time I conceptualized and articulated performative inquiry (Fels 1998, 1999), I was unaware of the use of the term by anyone else. Initially, I sought to theorize drama as research, and I chose the term performative inquiry for specific reasons based on the etymological meaning of performance and its relationship to complexity theory. Recently, the term performative inquiry has been used by others as an umbrella term embracing other forms of theatre-based research, such as ethnodrama, ethnotheatre, research-based theatre, or performance ethnography (see Butler-Kisber 2010); it has also been referred to as a generic term when discussing performance, embodiment, and inquiry (see Pelias 2008).

²Performative inquiry need not be restricted only to research through drama and theatre. Performative inquiry may be engaged in any of the arts—dance, music, multimedia, visual and performing arts—and indeed, as a way to consider the stops in our everyday lives, in terms of how we perform and are performed by our environment, our roles, our contexts, our relationships with others and the “scripts” that we create, and what is revealed in those stop moments, the embodied data, that call us to attention.

Performative inquiry evolved through my practice of engaging in drama activities such as playbuilding and role drama with my students. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, I worked as a performing arts educator, integrating the arts across the curriculum. Through the years, I undertook a variety of arts education projects: For example, in a school in London, Ontario, Canada, fifth-grade students created and performed original group medieval stories through reader's theatre; the fourth graders created a play that incorporated scenes involving the times tables on Planet X; and in a local high school theatre class, the twelfth graders coauthored and produced a collaborative play inside the Story Dragon for hundreds of participating elementary children for the London Children's Festival.

As my work evolved, I moved away from predetermined scripts and began creating plays through improvisation to scene. This creative process released the children and me from the tyranny of scripts; on performance night, I no longer stood behind the curtains wincing every time a child forgot a line. Our plays were original and co-created, with the students creating their lines and improvising their scenes. And the children kept surprising me—offering metaphorical tugs on my sleeve that called me to attention, tugs that inspired me to conceptualize and articulate performative inquiry.

During my doctoral studies in the 1990s, I searched for a research methodology that resonated with my own practice and understanding of the arts as an action site of inquiry and learning (Fels and Stothers 1996). How, I asked, do we bring to the field of educational research the spirit, integrity, compassion, curiosity, imagination, reflection, and sensitivity required by and practiced within our work in the arts? In my thesis, I wrote,

which research methodology will voice sound illuminate move within through my work as researcher and educator towards moments of interstanding that are my hope and ambition?

and so I realize performative inquiry

and in that moment,

I recognize a landscape of possibility.

(Fels 1999, 28)

At the time, my dissertation was in playful response to conversations among educational researchers seeking recognition of the arts as legitimate sites and practices of research (Barone and Eisner 1997). Arts educator Elliott Eisner, a key advocate in the field, called for the incorporation of arts-based processes in educational research. He wrote about “the potential of different forms of representation to uniquely influence our experience and, thus . . . alter the ways in which we come to understand our world” (1995, 1). I was further inspired in my desire to theorize drama as a way of being in research by a corridor conversation with Rita Irwin, an artist scholar whose own work with her graduate students led to the conceptualization and articulation of a/r/tography. *How could it be, she wondered, that her scholarly writing about art was recognized in the academy, but her juried art exhibits were not? Was not an artist also a researcher?*

During the early 1990s and into the new millennium, a number of arts-based education researchers have come to articulate theoretical and methodological approaches to drama and theatre processes—research-based theatre, performance ethnography, playbuilding as inquiry, ethnodrama, ethnotheatre—that give insight into their work and its implications as legitimate ways of doing arts-based research (see Belliveau and Lea 2011; Gallagher

2001; Norris 2010; Saldaña 2004, among others). The field of theatre and drama education research was and continues to be a fertile space of reimagining research through the arts. What is unique to performative inquiry is its focus on the emergent moment as a pedagogical action site of inquiry and learning.

Performative inquiry invites us to turn the lens of inquiry onto the work that we do as individuals, educators, performers, artists, teachers, participants, and researchers; to make visible the scripts, activities, relationships, language, and structures that perform us; and to illuminate, interrupt, and interrogate the environment, contexts (social, cultural, political, economical, geographical), and habits of engagement that shape our performance in relationship with others on the stage, in rehearsal, during creative play, and in our lives. Performative inquiry pays attention to those moments of recognition—stops—which through reflection, may inform our understanding of how we encounter and engage relationally with others. Performative inquiry requires of its practitioners four key things: to listen deeply, to be present in the moment, to identify stops that interrupt or illuminate our practice or understanding, and to reflect on those stops, in terms of their significance, implications, and why they matter.

The Stop as Embodied Data

A curious word, *data*, as in our work as theatre practitioners, educators, and researchers, our collective exploration is a creative endeavor; our data are embodied, our data breathe, dance with presence and possibilities for new learning.³ Might we come to a new understanding of what it means to collect data, analyze, interpret, and present our findings? How might a philosopher's concept of *the stop* inform us?

A stop, according to Appelbaum (1995), is a *moment of risk, a moment of opportunity*. A stop arises when we are surprised or awakened to the moment; we become alert to the suspicion that something else, some other way of being in a relationship or in action, is possible.

We stop and question: *Wait a minute, this moment matters!* A stop tugs on our sleeve, and says, *listen, there is another way to engage, to respond, to interact*. A stop occurs when we come to see or experience things, events, or relationships from a different perspective or understanding. Stops may occur in our everyday living and in our work in any field of endeavor in which we engage; they emerge through creative play, through encounters with others, in which we recognize absence, a gap, a dissonance, a possibility newly perceived.

A stop illuminates what has not yet been seen.

A stop is temporal, elusive, and may be missed or ignored.

A stop cannot be manufactured, planned, or orchestrated.

A stop requires that we be present and wide awake.

Appelbaum's stops (1995) are moments that call our attention to gaps, absences, dissonance, the unexpected; stops are moments that interrupt, provoke new questioning, call

³Among the pioneers in arts-based research were those in dance who recognized movement as a form of inquiry (see Bagley and Cancienne 2001). As dancer and arts education researcher Celeste Snowber writes, "The body knows" (2001, 26).

forth reflection, and inspire through reflection, new interstanding.⁴ A stop may arrest us as we engage in performative investigations, offering a pedagogical arrest that embodies new possible ways of understanding who we are and how we engage in relationship to the context of our environments and in our relationships with others.

Through my work with students and in my research, I have come to understand that these stops matter, that they are action sites of inquiry, and that these moments, if reflected upon through a lens of inquiry, hold within them possibility for new understanding of what we thought we knew. *A stop is embodied data.*

As a researcher, I must first be aware of the stops that arrest me and then reflect upon the value of each stop in terms of its pedagogical, curricular, personal, and communal significance. A stop matters because it requires choice of action; we cannot remain suspended in paralysis but must decide upon a response, a stepping into the as-yet unknown. And such choices of action may make us uncomfortable, throw us off balance in an unfamiliar (or feared) landscape, and yet, we must choose to engage. As theatre director Barba advises his actors, “The aim is permanently unstable balance” if “life action” is to be realized (1995, 19). To be unsettled, then, is the hope of a performative inquirer.

What and how we chose to engage in our research, our theatre, our lives speaks to the risk, the opportunity offered by each stop we encounter in our performative explorations with others. We must *tread lightly, oh so lightly*, as Madeleine Grumet (1988)⁵ advises, into new possible worlds that we *lay down in walking* (Varela 1987). Each action has a consequence. As educators and researchers, as learners, we are called to listen, to be compassionately and ethically wide awake (Greene 1978), to mindfully attend to the present moment and all its possibilities.

Performative Inquiry in Action

So how does one engage in performative inquiry? As researchers in educational research, we are called upon to ask a research question, collect data, and through analysis or interpretation, speak to the significance of our findings and their implications. As a researcher in performative inquiry, one begins with an open-ended question, a curiosity, a quote, an issue, an idea, an event that is explored through a creative process, such as role drama or play creation, and in turn, inevitably, new questions or curiosities emerge. Our research is guided by a series of questions, *What if? What happens? What matters? So what? Who cares?*⁶ What if preservice teachers create and lead a role drama about residential schools? What matters? What might we learn (Fels and McGivern 2002b)? What happens when a drama educator and a science educator co-teach science education through drama and storytelling (Meyer and Fels 1998)? What if individuals diagnosed with mental illness were invited to create a play about the issues they faced (Noble 2006)? What issues would be identified? Would we encounter any stop moments? What learning might emerge?

⁴The term interstanding was coined by philosophers Taylor and Saarinen. They write, “Understanding has become impossible because nothing stands under. Interstanding has become unavoidable because everything stands between” (1994, Interstanding 2). The term proposes that meaning making is created through interaction between individuals.

⁵Madeline Grumet, in a talk at University of British Columbia, cautioned her audience to “tread lightly, oh so lightly.” Attendance by author. Date unknown.

⁶I am thankful to Dr. Karen Meyer for these questions and my son, Marshall Fels Elliott, who as a fifth-grade student shouted out from the back of the class, “Who cares?” when Karen was asking students for questions that a scientist might ask. We have not yet determined if his intonation included a question mark or an exclamation mark when he offered “Who cares” as a possibility.

Performative inquiry requires the researcher to actively engage with participants through arts-based processes, and in the process of inquiry, critical and creative exploration, reflection, and replaying, we collectively create a *journey landscape*, an *action site for mapping in reflection* the learning that emerges through embodied moments of Appelbaum's stop (1995). Whether we are creating a play for an audience, investigating issues through a role drama, or are engaged in exploring our own creative process through our arts practices, performative inquiry invites researcher and participants to be active in the inquiry, alert to those moments that call us to attention—moments that surprise us, moments that illuminate habits of engagement or relationships or values that in turn need to be interrogated.

Performative inquiry does not offer a method but rather a way of being in embodied inquiry with others through the arts. We are invited to listen for and attend to stops, and if there is a tug on the sleeve, we respond, through dialogue, reflection, new choice of action, further inquiry, and creative expression such as performative writing, poetry, storytelling, performing anew what we have come to learn, and in doing so, reporting our experience and learning in ways that invite others into sharing the experience.

Documenting Embodied Data

How do we document the learning that arises through performative inquiry? Researchers may choose to write about their own individual experiences and emergent learning arising from an embodied stop. Or they may incorporate stops that have been experienced and identified by the participants with whom they are working, who have shared their stop moments in writing, or during group debriefing or individual interviews. For example, I write about two student teachers who came to me to share their experience of leading a role drama and how they had to let go of their plans as the role drama unfolded. They also spoke to their concern in terms of choice of action and what stops us from taking action, elicited by their own failure to step forward in role when the king sought to punish the perpetrators of the fledgling democratic movement (Fels, 2002, 2009). In my current research on leadership development through the arts, students are asked to identify and reflect in writing any stop moments that they experience during each class, thus creating documentation of embodied data that offer insight into their experience, meaning making, and learning.

Performative inquiry recognizes that exploration through the arts offers participants opportunities for learning and calls on us as researchers and educators to respect and acknowledge the presence of those who contribute to our understanding. Performative inquiry also offers a language that speaks to our way of being in inquiry: *possibility, absence, gaps, stop, journey, landscape, mapping in reflection, resonance, realization, moments of recognition*—terms very different from those of *data collection, analysis, reliability, validity, generalizability*. Furthermore, performative inquiry invites performative representations of the learning that has emerged so that the reader may also experience the stop. This writing may incorporate poetry, stories, personal anecdotes, reconstructed narratives and may include inventive playing with language, time sequencing, layout of text, use of metaphors, images, and/or other media, so as to evoke feelings, memories, recognitions, and new interstanding. The reader or viewer enters into the telling as it unfolds as a co-performer, recalling his or her own experiences, coming to his or her own questions and insights, and through engaging, recognizing the learning offered.

“How will I know that this writing works?” I once asked Elizabeth Sparks, a special needs educator then teaching at my university.⁷

“It works if it resonates with the reader,” she replied.

As researchers, to report on our work, we perform through the telling of stories those moments of recognition that stop us; we engage the reader through performative writing, writing that hopefully resonates with the reader, invites him or her to pause and perhaps recognize themselves in the telling.

The Cow That Plays Goalie for the NHL

Let us return to our performing arts education consultant, struggling with the play she is creating with second-grade students from the fairytale “Jack and the Beanstalk.”⁸ A critical stop occurred on the first day of our meeting together. This stop is embodied data—data that I, in this moment, now document and perform through this writing.

“First, we’ll have five Jacks and five Jills. One pair per scene,” I explain to the second-grade teacher. “And I’ll rehearse one group of students at a time, so I can work with them on creating their individual scenes. There’s no script. We’ll create it together.”

The teacher nods her head.

“Great,” she says. “You take the first group, and I’ll assign silent reading for the rest of the class.”

Five students—Jack, Jill (Jack’s sister), their mother, the cow, the elf with the magic beans—and I find ourselves in an empty classroom. It is our first rehearsal.

“OK!” I jump into action. “You all know the story.⁹ Now let’s create some dialogue. Mom discovers the cupboard is bare, and she says—”

“Oh no! The cupboard is empty! How will I feed my children?” the child playing the role of Jack and Jill’s mother proposes dramatically.

⁷University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, where I undertook my doctoral studies.

⁸In this article, I refer to stops that arose during drama activities that explored fairytales. “Jack and Jill and the Beanstalk” was part of a fairytale unit that was being taught by the teacher who requested that I work with her. However, I have experienced stops when engaging in role dramas exploring issues in a variety of topics, ranging from codfishing in Newfoundland, air pressure, and small-town land development, among others. And of course, others who use performative inquiry as their research methodology speak to stops that occur in a variety of areas from those that occur when working with individuals diagnosed with mental illness to those experienced in one’s own creative process as an artist.

⁹Interestingly, when I share this story with my undergraduates, many of my students are unfamiliar with this fairytale. The increased diversity of today’s classroom means that students are exposed to a variety of literature, stories, and media that are not necessarily shared in common. The challenge we have as educators teaching curriculum through the arts is to attend to what is relevant, resonant, and valuable to a child’s learning and life experience. (See Fels and Belliveau 2009).

“Good job! Now Jack, what will you say?” The children begin to improvise their scene. I spot the cow moping in the field. I stroll over. *Great, just what I need, an eight-year-old actor with artistic temperament.*

“Hey, what gives?”

“I don’t want to be a cow. It’s boring!”

“But,” I protest, “you can be any type of cow you want to be.”

“Any type of cow?”

“Any type of cow you want.”

“OK, I’ll be a cow that plays goalie in the NHL, and I’ll bring my hockey net and my goalie stick and my helmet, and I’ll be practicing stopping pucks in the field when Jack and Jill come to—”

A cow that plays goalie in the NHL? Is he kidding me? That certainly is not in the story I just read aloud to them. Whoever heard of a cow that plays goalie in the NHL in a fairytale?

This moment is a stop. I teeter on the edge of indecision. *How do I now respond?* For a horrible instant, I almost say no. It’s my first thought. I want to say no. I’m the director here! *But in that stop is also a go.*

I recognize the politics of the moment, an emergent curriculum co-created by student and teacher, the imagining of something new that a child offers to awaken me from my slumber of habitual engagement. Hannah Arendt tugs on my sleeve: *To love children enough so as to invite them into the world’s renewal, not as I imagine it, but as it will be created by the children—*

He waits. I picture him playing hockey with his friends after school. Hockey is something that he is good at. He cares about hockey. A gift is being offered. And I accept.

What curricular and pedagogical implications are embodied within this stop? Why does this stop matter? Why did this “tug on my sleeve”—an encounter between a child and adult—touch my heart as an educator? What have I learned from this encounter that I may now share with others?

This stop—a child proposes to be a cow that plays goalie for the NHL, and an educator accepts his offer—this moment speaks to what happens and the possibilities that may then emerge when educators invite into the curriculum children’s passions: their interests, ambitions, curiosities, questions, fears, and dreams. This stop is data embodied in an encounter between teacher and student, director and actor, adult and child. In reflecting upon this one singular event, which becomes my action site of inquiry, the following learning emerges:

This stop speaks to the importance of co-creating curriculum through dialogue and action between teacher and students.

This stop speaks to the value of welcoming children's voice and agency into our understanding of curriculum.

This stop challenges preset lesson plans and underlines the importance of incorporating a child's presence within an emergent co-evolving curriculum.

This stop speaks to authoritarian challenges, perceptions of expertise, and power differentials faced by a child who offers an alternative in counterpoint to the instructor.

This stop speaks to authorship and reminds us to ask whose voice is present, whose voice is absent, and why?

This stop invites the educator to engage in ways that require a new writing of the educational script, as playwright, as educator, as researcher, as an adult in a relationship with a child.

This stop speaks to the value of listening and being present to the presence of a child.

This stop speaks of recognizing our own expected or anticipated scripts in our interactions with others and those scripts that perform us because of the roles we play, and speaks of letting go to invite new possibilities;

This stop invites us, as researchers and educators and practitioners, to embody the invitation of Arendt's natality, to welcome the offerings of children, to be humble in their presence, to enlarge the space of the possibility by saying yes.

This stop matters.

Embodied within this stop moment is all the data

I require to come to new learning.

By first recognizing the stop (remember my first impulse was to say no) and then, through my choice of action, saying yes, I co-created with the students an unexpected telling of "Jack and Jill and the Beanstalk." Pedagogically, this stop called me to attention and encouraged me to reconsider how I teach and work creatively and critically with students. What matters is whether or not I am now able to share my learning with others, and to incorporate my learning into future choice of action. This stop—a fleeting moment of dialogue with a child, remembered long after the experience—has impacted who I am today as an arts educator and my practice of research.

A Moment, a Child of Duration

Performative inquiry, then, is a way of being in inquiry and sharing what we learn in a language that speaks with the integrity and spirit and ambitions and hopes of our quest in the arts. It is a language of the body, heart, mind, spirit embodied in flight, in exploration, in moments of yearning, curiosity, surprise, delight.

Each moment a child of duration, as writer Jana Milloy (2007, 129) writes, is a moment that shapes our passions, our understanding, reminds us of what is possible and what has yet to be imagined. A moment may haunt us, calling us back to reflect, to remind us of something missed, something not yet learned. A stop may be recognized in the moment of its unfolding, as my stop moment did, when I looked into the excited eyes of the boy who wanted to be a cow that was a goalie in the NHL. Or we may fail to recognize the stop that tugs at our sleeve and the learning embodied within it, only to recognize its importance years later, as I experienced in my participation in a role drama of Cinderella led by drama educator Galvin Bolton during my first doctoral course at university (Fels 2004).

Milloy (2007) proposes that each moment unfolds one into the other, a temporal unfolding that holds and beholds simultaneously past, present, future (Arendt, 1961). The challenge is to recognize the possibilities that we behold within each present fleeting moment and that we must attend with care, to tread lightly, oh so lightly. Each stop is an invitation to imagine a new possible world, an opportunity to engage anew. As researchers, then, we understand that the tug on our sleeve is a moment not to be ignored, but one to be cherished, reflected upon, and shared. Each stop is an action site of inquiry, embodied data that dances on the edge of learning in the midst of our creative endeavors.

He tugs again.

“What?” I ask.

“I know how to end the play,” he says. “I’ll be a police officer and I’ll come to arrest Jack and Jill and their mother for killing the giant!”

The children cheer, and surprised, I embrace this child’s offering. I am, as they say, outnumbered. The arrest of Jack and Jill and their mother creates an exciting final scene, the students eagerly offering suggestions. This play is truly their play!

Two weeks later, the children step forward into applause for their curtain call. The police officer and the cow that played goalie for the NHL receive a standing ovation. And I, standing backstage, hidden behind the curtains, come to the recognition that engaging children in the curriculum through the arts matters, and in that moment, I decide to return to university to find out why.

The moment is, as philosopher David Appelbaum calls it, *a stop*.

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