

LYNN FELS

55. A DEAD MAN'S SWEATER

Performative Inquiry Embodied and Recognized

Keywords: performative inquiry, research, learning, role drama, complexity

... one of these days, I'll be out fishing and I'll see my grandfather's boat returning to harbour. And he'll be bringing the fish back with him, millions of them jumping in the bow waves. And he'll yell, "Boy, hand over that there sweater of mine that you've been wearing. It's darn cold out here!"

I am in the heat of a performative moment, literally, sweating under the fisherman's white wool sweater, rain coveralls, life jacket, and sea cap, imagining the return of my dead grandfather and his crew all lost at sea years ago, off the coast of Newfoundland. We are in the opening moments of our role drama on the Newfoundland cod fishery, the local processing plant has been shut down, the cod stock dissipated. In role as an aging fisherman, I regale my grandson about the days when "you could run across the backs of the cod to shore to fetch a forgotten lunch, the fish were so plentiful in those years."

I came to my doctoral studies with a desire to understand the learning that occurs during drama activities such as role drama (introduced to me by my thesis supervisor, Patrick Verriour), playbuilding, and other modes of improvisational creation. I was in search of a learning theory, a research methodology, and a way to share my learning through the arts with others. I was hopeful that I might through my work encourage teachers to engage in drama in education across the curriculum (Fels & Belliveau, 2008). What I did not anticipate was that I would conceptualize and articulate performative inquiry.

Initially I planned to explore how elementary science education might be impacted through drama and storytelling, and embarked upon a three-year research project with Dr. Karen Meyer in her science education course for pre-service teachers (Fels & Meyer, 1997). However, an over the fence conversation with my neighbour, Lee Stothers who was then embarking on her doctoral research in Asian theatre, turned my curiosity towards theorizing performance as an action-site of learning and inquiry (Fels & Stothers, 1996; Fels, 1998, 1999). "We know drama is learning," we agreed, "but how do we theorize it?" Lee sent me off to the library to research the term "performance" in an etymological dictionary (Barnhart, [Ed.], 1988).

Perusing the onion-thin pages, I learned that form refers to *form* or structure, and that *ance* means action (as in d/ance). The prefix, *per*, meaning "utterly, throughout and through," informs the adjacent word, in this case, *form*. If we draw upon Heidegger's understanding of knowledge as an active engagement simultaneously

embodying knowing, doing, being, and, as an earlier article I wrote proposes, “creating,” we can then say that *per/form/ance* may be understood as “through form we come to action,” recognizing that *action* means “knowing doing being creating” (Fels, 1995). Thus, through engaging with form we come to learning.

However, the prefix *per* is slippery, meaning also:

“to do away, away entirely or to [the] destruction” of form.

Thus, to my surprise, *per/form/ance* may be read as “*simultaneously* through form *and* through the destruction of form, we come to action, ie. knowing doing being creating. If we further understand that form embodies action, as art educator and theorist Elliot Eisner suggests, and that the shape and construction of a form, whether an object or structure or procedure as situated within an environment or given context reflects the actions, desires and prejudices of those who constructed either the form and/or the environment within which it exists (Christofferson, 2009), then our etymological reading of performance calls us to attention. Knowing that form is embodied action, simultaneously suspect, and accountable, and that we may through its interruption, reshaping and/or destruction come to new understanding, invites us to identify performance as a generative action-space of inquiry and learning.

While an etymological search may be dismissed as a playful jigsaw of meaning-making, what brought me to a standing ovation, much to the librarian’s distress, was the complicity of the prefix *per*. With its doubled meaning, “through form and through the destruction of form,” we suddenly find ourselves located in a space complexity theorists call “the edge of chaos,” between structure and chaos where patterns of interrelations are continually created and recreated through an “endless dance of co-emergence” (Waldrop, 1992, p. 12). In new biology, the edge of chaos is recognized as a generative space of interaction which gives rise to emergent new life; within educational research, we might consider the edge of chaos as a fertile performative engagement of inquiry and reflection bringing forth new possible learning.

Complexity theory and enactivism which both inform performative inquiry draw our attention to what matters: to be mindfully aware of, or as Maxine Greene (1978) reminds us, in “wide-awakeness” to, the interplay of relationships, structures, practices, implications and complicities within embodied forms of action and interactions that in turn shape who we are and how we engage in our shared environments. “What we do,” Varela says, “is what we know, and ours is but one of many possible worlds. It is not a mirroring of the world, but the laying down of a world...” (Varela, 1987, p. 62). As researchers, it is our task to be aware of how we are engaged and our own complicity and responsibilities as we seek meaning-making in relationship with others and our environment.

Far from merely existing relatively autonomously in the same location, individual and environment continually specify one another. Just as I am shaped by my location, so is my location shaped by my presence. (Davis, Kieran, & Sumara, 1996, p. 157)

Such a location calls to mind our Newfoundland role drama, where we are struggling as community members to come to terms with the processing plant's closure.

A business tycoon comes to town with the promise of new prosperity, a new hotel on the plant's current location, employment for all. The student in role as the business tycoon is complicit in his promotion of his hotel as the community debates the benefits of tourism; he knows that the employment he offers are minimum wage jobs, that the bulk of the profits will end up in his back pocket and those of his investors. As one promise after another rolls off his tongue, I in role as the old fisherman become suspicious.

Engaging in performative inquiry through improvisational performances such as role drama invites participants and researcher to explore environments, issues, concerns, actions, in role through embodied play and reflection. On occasion (impossible to plan, always hoped for), participants may experience what Appelbaum (1995) calls a stop, a *moment of risk, a moment of opportunity*. Appelbaum's stop moments are those moments that interrupt, that evoke new questioning, that make visible our habits of engagement, our biases, issues we have overlooked or have never considered. It is through our questioning and reflection of these stop moments that new learning becomes possible. Such moments of recognition are those moments when we see a situation or issue from a new perspective, and while we may or may not embody this new learning within the role drama, it may influence us in future interactions. A stop is a moment that calls us to attention; a moment of recognition when we realize that there are other possible choices of action, other ways of being in engagement. And along with choices of action come ethical implications as participants listen for the absences of what has not yet been imagined.

Tugging his drowned grandfather's sweater over his head, the fisherman thrusts it into the startled hands of the business tycoon. "We had dreams to save our community and you plan to steal it from us. Here. Take it! It's yours! I don't believe that my grandfather will sail home, the cod leaping in his bow waves, not anymore - take his dreams and mine with you back to the city." Nobody speaks. Nobody moves. The silence is deafening. And then the moment erupts into action.

A participant in role as a fisherman comes to my aid, throwing a comforting arm over my shoulder. As he writes later in his journal, my action of handing over my grandfather's sweater to the business tycoon nearly brought him to tears. In that moment, he reports, he realized that he had to respond, that it was his responsibility to come to my assistance. The handing of the sweater to the tycoon, was simultaneously a call to responsibility, a relinquishing of dreams. Recognition that our fishing community was in the process of being betrayed by the business tycoon became a pivotal moment in the role drama and in our inquiry into what may happen when a community loses its main source of economy and turns to others for assistance. This moment of recognition evoked questions as to our own responsibilities and complicity. *How could we give away responsibility for our community's survival to*

outsiders? What had we risked in disempowering ourselves? How might we now proceed?

During our debriefing circle and subsequent journal writing - key components of performative inquiry - participants reflected on what had happened during the role play and the moments that had stopped us. While the angst of a dying outport in Newfoundland may be distant from our own experience, we can, if only for a moment of recognition, come to an embodied understanding of what matters and relate it to our own experience: the value of trust, responsibility and care for others and ourselves in relationship to our actions and our relationships within our own community. What matters in our performative engagement together becomes an embodied, symbolic, metaphorical, and ethical stopping point in our shared and individual journeys of inquiry.

What we experience and learn through performative inquiry may be considered within our own lives in relationship with others. Thus performative inquiry becomes a vehicle of investigation, learning, and reconsidering what is possible. Performative inquiry embraces performance - in creative action and interaction, critical thought and reflection - as an action-space of learning and exploration. Its tools of inquiry are our bodies, our minds, our imaginations, our experiences, our feelings, our memories, our stories, our biases, our judgments and prejudgments, our hopes and our desires, our curiosities and our questions - simply, our very *being, becoming*. The catalyst for inquiry may be a question, an event, a theme, an issue, a feeling, a line of poetry, a fragment of lived experience, a narrative quest, a human condition: any phenomenon which we wish to explore through performative engagement.

The performative researcher in concert with his or her participants is guided by questions embodied throughout the inquiry and upon reflection: *What if? What happens? What matters? So what? Who cares?* What is exciting about performative inquiry is that we enter a performative space of what is not yet known, and are challenged to experience our interplay together in ways that call what is absent or not yet recognized into presence. Cognition or learning is seen not as a mental operation separate from the body in action and interaction with others but as "...*an ongoing bringing forth of a world through the process of living itself*" (Maturana & Varela, 1992, p. 11, my italics).

*it is in the meeting places between we become
Here and Now, something happens. (Fels, 1999, p. 43)*

It is within these meeting places realized through performative inquiry that something happens - a moment of hesitation, a stop, a moment of recognition, that is our learning, our knowing, our being becoming. Writer Jana Milloy notes that a moment is "a child of duration" (2007, p. 157). Such moments may last a lifetime as we reimagine, reconsider, remember what matters, and explore how we may engage anew with each other in our shared environments of inquiry and learning. Through the lens and interplay of performative inquiry, unexpected moments of encounter call us to attention. And it is these communal and individual space-moments of recognition that performative inquiry seeks and maps, charting turbulent waters with navigational skills honed by the risk and possibility that is performance.

PERFORMATIVE INQUIRY EMBODIED AND RECOGNIZED

REFERENCES

- Applebaum, D. (1995). *The stop*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Barnhart, R. D. (Ed.). (1988). *The Barnhart dictionary of etymology*. New York: H.W. Wilson.
- Christofferson, R. (2009). *Dancing in the Belly: Performative inquiry in pregnancy*. Unpublished Master's thesis. Burnaby, BC: Simon Fraser University.
- Davis, B., Kieren, T., & Sumara, D. (1996). Cognition, co-emergence, curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 28(2), 151–169.
- Fels, L. (1995). Cross-country with Grumet: Erasing the line. *Educational Insights*. Retrieved from <http://www.lane.educ.ubc.ca/insights/home.htm>
- Fels, L. (1998). In the wind clothes dance on a line. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 14(1), 27–36.
- Fels, L. (1999). *In the wind clothes dance on a line: Performative inquiry - A (Re)Search methodology*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia.
- Fels, L., & Belliveau, G. (2008). *Exploring curriculum: Performative inquiry, role drama, and learning*. Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press.
- Fels, L., & Meyer, K. (1997). On the edge of chaos: Co-evolving world(s) of drama and science. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 9(1), 75–81.
- Fels, L., & Stothers, L. (1996). Academic performance: Between theory and praxis. In J. O'Toole & K. Donelan (Eds.), *Drama, culture, and education* (pp. 255–261). Australia: IDEAS.
- Greene, M. (1978). *Landscapes of learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Maturana, H., & Varela, F. (1992). *Tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding* (Rev. ed.). Boston: Shambhala.
- Milloy, J. (2007). *Persuasions of the wild: Writing the moment, a phenomenology*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Burnaby, BC: Simon Fraser University.
- Varela, F. (1987). Laying down a path in walking. In W. I. Thompson (Ed.), *GAI: A way of knowing - Political implications of the new biology* (pp. 48–64). Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne.
- Waldrop, M. M. (1992). *Complexity: The emerging science at the edge of order and chaos*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Lynn Fels is Assistant Professor at Simon Fraser University, Canada. She co-authored *Exploring Curriculum: Performative Inquiry, Role Drama and Learning with George Belliveau*.