

# Image theatre and digital story-telling: Towards a research method called ‘Collaborative Embodied Participant Analysis’ (CEPA)

Michael Carlin<sup>1</sup>

This paper reports on research that I have been undertaking investigating the use of image theatre and digital storytelling with groups of university staff to gauge their thoughts, perceptions and experiences of the creative industries in higher education. In piloting these approaches as research methods specifically, I have been interested in comparing the responses that emerge from such active, participatory activities, which have ideas of embodied cognition at their centre, with the kind of material that emerges from focus groups and one-to-one interviews.

As an academic and manager within a faculty of creative industries, the overarching focus of my research has been on critically exploring aspects of the rise of this multidisciplinary field within higher education. In our current HE context, much credence is given to student voice; my concern with staff voice being marginalised or lost within institutional decision-making has led me to search for research approaches which might help to articulate the multiplicity of thoughts and views of staff. At the same time, such approaches help to address three key challenges: a) carrying out insider research in a faculty in which I also hold a management position; b) subverting the dominant language of the meeting room which is often filled with jargon and cliché; and c) contributing to encouraging dialogue and interaction amongst staff across disciplines within the faculty.

I have called the method that I am piloting ‘Collaborative Embodied Participant Analysis’ (CEPA), which has involved critically re-investigating each of these constituent terms. Practically, the method is initially rooted in an active,

participatory drama-based approach known as image theatre, seeking to investigate how applying processes of embodied meaning-making and interpretation, linked to a heightened need for reflexivity by the participants, might lead to insights and perspectives that would differentiate this approach from other, more dominant research methods. At its core is the notion of collaboration in meaning-making, but also in interpretation and re-interpretation. Participants collaborate with other participants, but are also collaborative research partners to some degree. And fundamentally, this collaboration is carried out through a physical, embodied, drama-based process.

An extension of this work has involved digital storytelling in which, following a recorded interview in a meeting room, individual academic staff are recorded talking about their approaches to teaching and learning within the actual spaces that they normally teach in. This is useful in extending notions of embodiment through the linking of experience to place and space; investigating the impact of being physically present in a space on the ways those participants might think about and articulate their experiences.

In both cases – the image theatre and the digital storytelling – we are concerned with performance which demands a physical engagement and interaction. Whilst participants are not actors per se, there are levels of enaction and physical expression demanded which open up further possibilities for considering relationships between embodiment, experience and understanding. This paper highlights the ways in which the various facets of these activities might be qualitatively analysed and understood.

---

<sup>1</sup> School of Drama and Music, Univ. of South Wales, CF24 2FN, UK.  
E-mail: michael.carlin@southwales.ac.uk