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In contemporary parlance about what counts as educational research and what are its purposes, the injunction of ‘knowledge mobilization’ is becoming more prevalent. Granting agencies such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) request knowledge mobilization plans and indeed make available specific funds for its purposes. SSHRC’s newsletter (2008a) explicitly encourages researchers and universities to emphasize knowledge mobilization in research planning and accountability, defining it as “moving knowledge into active service for the broadest possible common good” (SSHRC 2008b).

Precisely what activities constitute effective knowledge mobilization remains unclear, although suggestions include workshops, public events, and representation of research findings in alternative media such as fine art forms.

photo by Martin Elliott
alternative media such as fine art forms. Generally, knowledge mobilization seems to be about active engagement of diverse public users of research results—engagement that extends beyond ‘traditional’ forms and forums of academic dissemination that presumably are non-mobile, e.g. articles in refereed journals directed towards academic readers. Outcomes of this engagement presumably should mobilize the public to become research users, and mobilize ‘impact’ or visible change among these research users.

All of this sounds well, and good. Until, that is, one considers the complex processes of social scientists dabbling in new forms of communication and representation for purposes of social interventions, purposes that are shot through with ethical questions, and questions that ultimately double back to challenge central assumptions about what counts as educational research. My reflections on these issues were occasioned by a recent experience of community-oriented research where colleagues and I presented our research as a drama as part of our ‘knowledge mobilization.’

In our case, then, we drew upon an art form for the purpose of engaging the public and perhaps better “moving the research results into the hands of research users” (SSHRC 2008a, 6). The results were sometimes puzzling, sometimes painful, but always provocative. The specific problems of working with art help to highlight important questions at stake in all activities purposed as knowledge mobilization and all representations of knowledge, questions which have for many years now been central in debates about the politics of representation in qualitative research. This brief commentary tells a bit of our story, then explores certain troubling remembrances it invokes, in questions that continue to haunt me.

Our study – women’s learning in garment work

The research project focused on work and learning experiences of immigrant women garment workers at a large jeans-making factory, both on the job and in English language training programs offered at the plant. The plant was the GWG (Great Western Garment) company, which opened in 1911 in Edmonton, Alberta. Acquired by Levi-Strauss in 1961, the plant was closed permanently and operations moved to Haiti in December 2004. Our team not only interviewed workers, managers, union stewards and plant-based educators, but also videotaped garment production operations at the plant, and studied historic archives including hundreds of photographs depicting the factory’s activities throughout the 20th century, old advertisements, union records, and different garments produced over the years.

Interviews with the workers—mostly seamstresses—explored their worklife at GWG/Levi’s, their relationships, the nature of the work community, and their responses to the many plant changes over time including learning opportunities. Many had been employed by GWG/Levi’s for two or three decades, sometimes performing the same task for years at a time (one woman introduced herself to us as “I’m buttonhole”).

By way of brief context, studies of the Canadian garment industry have shown it to be a job ghetto of low wages and status for women (Steedman, 1997). In Canada, about 50% of garment workers traditionally have been new immigrants, and this category of “immigrant women” has served to commodify them to employers, reinforcing their class position in providing cheap, docile labour in exploitive conditions often permeated with racism and sexism (Ng, 1999).

While many Canadian garment factories became unionised by the mid-twentieth century to offer stable employment, decent wages, and working conditions, globalization brought a widespread closure of these plants in the 1990s, with a loss of 33,000 jobs in Canada between 1989–1993. Garment workers after years of employment in garment piecework lacked training to do little else, and thus often were forced into precarious employment as home-based sewers dependent upon an unregulated network of “jobbers” that supplied large clothing distributors.

As we spoke with the workers, many of whom had immigrated directly from China, Vietnam, India, eastern Europe, and parts of Africa, we were moved by their strong identifications with the
GWG/Levi’s plant. Many spoke in highly personal terms about their sense of self in this work and the strong bonds they had formed with other women working at the plant. They learned instrumental skills of managing the big industrial machines and the labour structure of piecework of course, but more important to them was learning to survive and support one another at the plant. We tried to capture this learning in different parts of our script. They shared vivid stories about strategies they had learned to outwit supervisors and piecework structures, but also to adapt to the grinding conditions by turning their bodies into machines.

They also learned English in plant-based classes, in which they talked most about learning confidence, and a sense of personal worth and identity. They experienced what some might call political or ‘critical’ learning about their rights and the power of solidarity, while simultaneously learning to be compliant with the company’s hierarchies—even bearing allegiance to the firm and its managers. From this study I have published articles in ‘traditional’ academic disseminatory fashion about the difficult conditions and exploitative potential of garment piecework, the solidarity and sociality among these women, the balancing act of plant educators, and the contradictory learning threads woven through the women’s tales of survival (Fenwick 2006, 2007a, 2007b).

**Our play—experimenting with ‘art’**

However, our research group wanted to go further to invite our academic audiences as well as the public into the close personal power of these workers’ stories. We obtained a bit of funding to create a large free-standing display of the historic photos overlaid with participant quotes, which was developed by a professional media company. This exhibit was mounted at May Week events (celebrating labour history), the University foyer and City Hall. While the display looked impressive, it could not convey more than a gloss of the study’s context and the workers’ tales. We were unsure of its impact or relevance to casual passerby, or the sense they made of it.

So we also decided to create a play to present to the Congress of Learned Societies in Canada. This ‘play’ was a very modest reader’s theatre script, which I thought would be an easier and more straightforward art form for non-dramatists like ourselves. That is, we read the script aloud while seated, in the voices of the workers. The reading was supplemented by a bit of action that we invented, sound effects from the plant, and historic plant photos projected onto a screen behind us. The script was entirely constructed from the actual words of the workers in the interview transcripts, and grounded in the themes of learning, struggle, solidarity, contradiction and the role of plant educators that we identified through our academic analysis of the interviews.

We first showed the play to the people we had interviewed, mainly for their approval and corrections. This event turned into perhaps the most unexpected and powerful reward of our study. The workers and educators seemed delighted: laughing, pointing out themselves and their friends in the portrayals, elaborating on the stories, sharing different meanings and emotional responses to the portrayals. Then, following our next showing to education scholars at the Congress conference, we were invited to present the play to various community educators and immigrant service agencies. The community responses were also compelling and immediate: audience members appeared to identify closely with the portrayals and the issues, and the drama launched discussions around workers’ learning, educators’ roles and agency supports. Finally we recorded the presentation on DVD to make it more easily available to such audiences. In other words, I believe we were engaging the spirit of ‘knowledge mobilization,’ or thought we were: attempting to communicate research findings in creative ways that truly engage public hearts and minds, and possibly inspire action around important social issues.

However, several messy issues lurked in this mobilizing process. A fuller explanation was published in *Labour/Le Travail* (Fenwick 2006), but a few are useful to highlight here. First are the difficulties encountered by non-artists borrowing forms from art to represent research findings. Art does not exist as a neutral form into which substance can be poured, and art forms such as theatre have deep integrities that texture the conception of the content. In our case, the dramatic
script was developed after the formal research analyses were complete. The script was assembled by one person, myself, and I am at best a naive amateur in the field of drama and scriptwriting. I had studied readers’ theatre and its process of development. But what I did not fully appreciate were the challenges involved in constructing coherent story lines and engaging, consistent characters—issues that performing artists have since pointed out to me comprise important weaknesses in the present script. I created five character voices to present composites of the GWG/Levi workers and educators; that is, excerpts from various transcripts were collapsed into each one of the five voices. I also juxtaposed incidents from different time periods in order to focus on the workers’ personal experiences of these events, rather than on chronological plant developments. However, as was pointed out by arts-based educational researchers to whom we presented, the jumping timeline was confusing and the characters appeared contrived: structural faults that tended to obscure the power of the original experiences. Further, the action we had inserted violated the form of readers’ theatre in ways that ultimately were incoherent. Indeed, a dramatist at this gathering suggested that our presentation was “only about 10% art.”

This comment, while well-intended, invites a host of considerations. The judgment of good or bad art must be located against criteria of technique, aesthetics and theme appropriate to the form and purposes of art. Are these criteria equally appropriate when judging knowledge mobilization that begins from research findings and draws from art forms? And to what extent ought we to apply such criteria, presumably alongside criteria of rigour, validity, significance, and so on that, for many, characterize ‘good’ research?

The application of percentage—an interesting turn to quantitative measures when discussing art which inevitably escapes quantification—invites the troubling notion that art-mediated research representation may be part art and part research, leaving us determining which percentage of the product is to be adjudicated accordingly in either field. And such judgments still do not broach what is supposedly the over-riding concern of ‘moving knowledge into active service.’ How can such impact be understood and measured in knowledge mobilization processes such as this little drama that sparked so much dialogue and reflection, whether or not it was bad art?

Second are the practical difficulties in adopting unfamiliar formats to communicate research findings. The original performers were not trained actors but myself and volunteer education graduate students at the University of Alberta. I believe we were all surprised by the amount of rehearsal required to attain even a modest level of performance quality. The successful coordination of music, sound effects, and power point photos with our script-reading was also far more difficult to achieve than we had realized.

Third, we made the mistake of producing the DVD by simply hiring a video production company to film our live readers’ theatre. This was expensive by our grant standards, but we discovered later that we needed much larger funds to have completed a proper production. We did not understand the different nuanced distinctions and demands of theatre and film, and we had borrowed some of the more banal tropes of docu-drama in assembling the final product. Naturally the result was static and, without the intimate power of live performance, amplified our rather naïve readings.

Most of these lessons point clearly to one realization: we neglected to collaborate closely with performance artists. This seems now rather obvious oversight. At the time I had thought: we are simply reading aloud some excerpts of transcripts, so how hard can it be? In fact we didn’t know how much we didn’t know—about art and art forms, about the tremendous labour required to develop such representations, about audience and the mirrors of interplay set into motion through art presentations, and about the multiple effects of representation when woven with research. And I would submit, much of the labour and specialized knowledge required for effective ‘knowledge mobilization,’ as well as its issues, similarly may be unrecognized in our current conceptions of it.

**Considering ethical questions**
But there are further messy issues, ethical ones, haunting these processes of working through art to present research. The first has to do with what happens to collective and individual histories and their tensions when they become structured according to the genre demands of theatre. The women workers made it clear that they wanted the play presented as widely as possible, to show their stories to others. Yet whose collective story were we showing, and for what ends? For me a troubling part of the script assembling process was finding myself choosing those pieces of transcript that seemed to ‘play’ best dramatically.

An example is one ‘scene’ where the women shut down all the sewing machines in protest over equipment that would not handle the new thin fabric, forcing endless seam rippings that slowed down their piece production and cost them wages. While this was actually a small story in terms of the women’s own remembrances of factory life, it was short and easy to invoke with a few quotes—much easier to script (for me) than the more significant long-term and subtle resistances that they began to incorporate into their daily routines as they learned English.

Furthermore, I sometimes chose a broader sweep of vocal juxtapositions rather than a deeper focus on one nuanced aspect. For example, the play’s opening is a series of decontextualized voices, layer upon layer, uttering different women’s descriptions of the factory. These descriptions struck me for the most part as particularly moving in their emotionless, matter-of-fact acceptance of the inevitable. I felt that simple presentation of these invoked the profoundly numbing conditions better than would have a close exploration of one woman’s journey into that life serving a sewing machine.

I also found myself selecting clear ‘stories’ over those transcript excerpts that hinted at contradictory issues that were more complex and difficult to portray, at least for me in a half-hour script. One such issue was (most) women’s enthusiasm for the factory and its managers, about which they would cite the annual picnics and the general sense of ‘family’ that they associated with their work. This is a multifaceted phenomenon that I have been well-trained to represent through expository critical discourse, but felt quite inadequate to broach effectively through a drama like this.

I also found that the script began to take a shape of its own. This narrative arc was driven by the more dramatic conflicts involved in the women’s work lives. This arc also arguably distorted the research results. Overall, much was left behind that would have warranted close analysis in a research report. Yet even in scholarly articles about this case, I subjugated the women’s stories to a process of data reduction and selection according to my interpretive emphases—as one does in conducting data analysis and representation. Indeed my articles focused upon very small bits of story to amplify as an argument.

Of course, this process—including the problematic practice of representing participant ‘voices’ through snippets of quotations—has been widely debated among qualitative researchers, and most of us work hard to find representational approaches that honour participants’ shared tales without becoming captured inside them. The activities of compression and re-construction became particularly visible and more uncomfortable when the women’s voices become embodied in a literary recreation.

Yet there is also a new space that opens as transcript excerpts and ghostly traces of research analysis/theorizing processes begin to mingle, to collaborate with possibilities opened when researchers begin to engage their data afresh through an art form. The data becomes re-enfleshed, after being stripped from the workers’ bodies and enactments and frozen in digital moments in transcripts hoarded in our hard drives.

The re-encounter of researcher and researched enables multiple recognitions, such as our first discomfort at hearing the interview participants’ words come out of our own mouths—and releases, from notions of validity and rigorous analysis into creative emergence with the data. Not only did we as researchers re-learn the (re)search, we re-searched what truths were at play, what truths held sway, to whom, and for what purposes. Obviously in terms of knowledge mobilization, then, the questions of which/whose truth and what truth of mobility (in what direction) is judged
in representation are rather more complex than existing definitions may allow.

The second has to do with the obligations of the researcher/artists to participants when constructing a representation of research results. For example, while our academic audience at Canadian Social Sciences and Education (CSSE) Conference appeared appreciative, some felt that the play needed to present a more robust critique of the labour process, the garment company, and educators’ complicity in the exploitation of garment work. Very little of this critique was extant in the interview transcripts. We had already inserted text into the final slides of the presentation that told about the plant shut down in 2004, throwing 450 garment workers out of work including all of the interviewees, and moving operations to Haiti (where a subsequent workers’ strike was violently quelled by hired militants). Thus our final scene of the play, where the women workers claimed that working for this company was like being part of a family where they were wonderfully treated, was juxtaposed against slide text telling the larger story.

But the women interviewees asked for all of this text to be taken out. They wanted the play to end nostalgically, showing how much they loved their jobs and the plant. The interpretive tension here between participant and researcher perspectives on the stories is a familiar one in many empirical studies employing critical social theory. It is exacerbated by problematic power relations embedded not only in the researcher’s control of representation but also in the ‘enlightened’ emancipatory stance of the researcher speaking the truth of oppression to the oppressed in what ultimately constitutes an act of oppression.

In our case, we retained the critical text in our live performances, and included in the follow-up discussion with audiences the women’s unhappiness with this text, the problematics of critical analysis, and our own conflicted allegiance to both their personal tales as well as the wider collective tale invoked through their location in the political economy. In the DVD representation of our performance, we finally eliminated the text. We felt that without the possibility of engaging viewers in dialogue about these tensions, we could not simply refuse the women’s insistence to own at least part of the truths at play. This struggle illuminates the complex considerations in choosing a vehicle for knowledge mobilization: different modes invite different forms of engagement, with different ethical obligations—obligations to audience and researchers as well as to the research participants.

In considering our next steps, we found ourselves acknowledging the capacity of a play, even a problematic and modest venture like ours, to exhort strong audience identification and response. The ethical question of whose authority should be allowed most influence on the stor(ies) circulating amidst such heightened response becomes critical, but it will be answered differently according to the governing epistemology—whether of art and aesthetics, critical social science, narrative, ethnomethodology, reflective dialogue, and many others that have been invoked throughout this discussion.

Moving past issues of epistemic authority and assessment, a question more to the point in the very activity of knowledge mobilization ought to focus more upon what new spaces for connecting people to learn from each other, and what new forms of human engagement in knowledge are enabled through the entanglements of ‘art’ and ‘research.’ In exploring this question, we found that the boundary separating these domains folds in upon itself—but not to the point of dissolving distinct realms of thought and expression. Amidst the folds, hybrid forms of inquiry and knowledge engagement may be possible that cross realms of imagination, aesthetics, and social science without distorting or reducing them.

**Considering knowledge mobilization**

As one reviewer of an earlier draft of this article helpfully pointed out, the term ‘knowledge mobilization’ suggests that knowledge is not an act of meaning-making between text and reader/viewer but of transmission—a model that unfortunately can be valorized through the use of art forms to share/shape research findings. Yet knowledge mobilization in action surely must be
understood to be a circulation of multiple meanings and responsibilities, in multiple directions—not just for diverse users, but also for the knowledge producers. For us the whole experience of constructing the drama provided a unique interpretive pathway into the data, yielding fresh insights about the workers’ learning.

We learned that a drama can engage viewers with an emotional power and immediacy that moves quickly into dialogue of key issues. Vastly different audience responses can be provoked, and these oppositions opened new questions and perspectives for us. Indeed, our experience of performing these workers’ voices, reading their words aloud again and again, brings a new appreciation for the subjective worlds within these words. In this way, researchers, research participants, and audience members participated at various times as both users and producers of knowledge.

However, we also learned through these experiences of knowledge mobilization that aesthetic creation is a field of its own. Our presentation to the arts-based researchers was somewhat of an exercise in humility. Yet they were kind in helping us to realize that we had—perhaps rather arrogantly—focused all of our efforts on the social science of our research, and had turned to art forms only in the most superficial ways to provide a vehicle of communication. For some of them, at least, we had produced ‘bad art’, but still our play had managed to rouse intense and emotional responses to the garment workers’ experiences—and not only among academic audiences desperate for respite from talking-head presentations.

One lesson that may be derived from artists justifiably defending their expertise is that researchers who aspire to incorporate arts media into their dissemination of findings while avoiding bad art need to develop knowledge of fine arts. Or better yet, we need to collaborate directly with artists in the conception and conduct as well as the representation of research—not just artists, but others working in diverse realms of public engagement (social activists, journalists, graphic designers, chefs, therapists, gardeners) with whom we might explore new hybrids of both knowledge development processes and representational forms.

These issues ultimately foreground important questions about all activities of knowledge mobilization and its injunctions, which tend to encourage alternative modes and media of communication that can reach out to diverse public audiences in ways that academic publications may not. Such communication practices, whether arts-based, technology-enhanced, or workshop-oriented, require highly specialized expertise in various domains—copy-writing, graphics design, marketing, various fine arts, digital media production, etc.—that social science researchers cannot be expected to have themselves, or even to understand sufficiently to recruit and manage effectively in the research process.

Further, even simple uses of these alternate forms are expensive in time, equipment, and funding, particularly when we figure in the lengthy collaborative time required. Finally, the effective representation, communication, even ‘mobilization’ of research through alternative forms is not a novelty to be tacked onto the end of a research process, but must be woven throughout the conception and conduct of research. In other words, if taken seriously, knowledge mobilization will require dedicated time in design, development and collaboration, by networks of individuals bringing various specialized expertise. One can even imagine the influx of new ‘knowledge mobilization consultants’ who are skilled at pulling together teams of communication/graphics specialists and liaising with researchers to weave processes of research and its mobilization.

The prospect of this weaving inevitably should make us pause: what then is educational research, and how does the knowledge mobilization process affect systematic inquiry? Who decides which representation is the most truthful? Even more daunting are familiar ethical questions in research that acquire new significance when we understand how activities of knowledge mobilization and the inevitable interdisciplinarity they entail erase old distinctions between knowledge ‘producers’ and ‘users’: What knowledge is ultimately mobilized? Whose knowledge? For whose purposes? And what of knowledge unknown to the researchers that becomes mobilized, among themselves as well as other participants and audiences? This is not to refuse a serious consideration of
knowledge mobilization working with art and other media, just to acknowledge the new worlds we are entering when we do, and their exciting complexities. And, in the words of the Educational Insights editors, ideally a research journey opens us to new beginnings, at every turning of the page.

Acknowledgements

Partners in the original study included Edmonton Community Foundation, Catherine Cole Associates, Ground Zero Productions, Edmonton: A City Called Home, Provincial Archives of Alberta, and the University of Alberta. Important contributions to this research from the following individuals are gratefully acknowledged: Joan Schiebelbein, Catherine Cole, Lan Chan Marples, Don Bouzek, and Melanie Wong. Grateful thanks are also extended to the women who helped to present the drama to various audiences and venues: Xin Fu, Ev Hamdon, Joanne Janzen, Joan Schiebelbein, Judy Sillito, and Sarah Hoffman.

References


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