Glow up: the power of fiction in higher education research

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ABSTRACT

Increasing numbers of researchers in the field of higher education research are searching for meaning rather than metrics: something in their data that call to them and that make their hearts soar. This paper leans into post-qualitative approaches and attempts to resist methodological arrest, drawing on the disciplinary language of literary fiction to explore how we can make meaning through creative acts of reading. We trace our literary roots across readings from a diverse range of texts and approaches to show how this method could help us reshape and reframe pedagogic challenges within higher education.

Introduction

In this article, we propose a methodological approach that takes fiction as data and foregrounds the creative act of reading as a form of enquiry. We argue that by reading and imaginatively mapping fictional texts that are either campus-based or feature academic and/or student characters, we find ways to rethink and reshape our work as practitioners, researchers, and teachers. We see teaching as a social, situated, and relational practice, and so believe that pedagogic understanding/s is informed by our reading, not only of research data and educational literature, but also of people, contexts, and the wider world, which can both mask and confront the challenges of teaching and learning within contemporary higher education. Fiction can enable us to surface and leverage the processes of sense-making which reside within these everyday readings to augment our understanding of how our identities and interactions create teaching and create the capacity to effect real-world pedagogic change. Within the tradition of arts-based methodologies, and specifically the emergent methodology of fiction-based research (FBR), we propose a shift from writing fiction to reading fiction as a form of enquiry. Meaning is emergent through the encounter between fictional texts and the reader/s. The interpretative work of reading becomes a story of that encounter – with all its hesitancies, reversals, and speculations, the emotions it carries, the remembrances that it stirs. Any interpretation of fiction tells a story of reading and reader, with all their

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experiences, expectations, assumptions, and understanding (Culler 1997, 63), or what Snaza (2019) would call the 'literacy situation'. In this way, reading fiction offers a magical emergence of meaning, a critical and a creative act which creates space for unlooked-for outcomes. To embody our approach, we read *On Beauty* by Smith (2005), a novel which figures the University. Fragments of raw analysis are woven throughout our article to preserve something of the messiness in our emergent sense-making and to demonstrate the 'patience and watchful attention' in our collaborative readings (MacLure 2023, 217). Through this, we aim to offer a sort of protocol for 'bringing forth the unpredictable', a 'bespoke' 'ambulant' method that follows the contours of what we are examining, and which we were able to 'fashion for ourselves in the middle of things' (MacLure 2023, 217) (Table 1).

Homing in on Snaza's (2019) notion of 'boundary crossing' where disciplinary boundaries are permeable membranes and in response to the call of post-qualitative research to embrace unknowing and resist methodological obduracy we carry our becomings through encounters with the text into this exposition. MacLure (2023) has suggested that although speculative ontologies require researchers to abandon the 'God trick' which positions research and methods outside the thing examined, 'some sense of method, even if it unfolds from – *must* unfold from – ongoing and immanent immersion in the field' (217) is necessary. We therefore propose a protocol, a sense of method, which seeks to trace the contours of our enquiry by following 'the glow' of data (MacLure 2010, 282; MacLure 2013, 661). The glow is something within the data that has the power to call and make itself known to us within emergent assemblages of our enquiry or in response to a set of problems (MacLure 2023, 218). Following these glowing moments of heightened intensity, wonder and affective resonance, attunes us to the materiality, sensations, and ephemeral qualities of teaching and learning. In this article then, we present our noticing, significances, and uncertainties through literary interpretation and conversation – the stories of our readings. We slip through and between theory, texts, and narratives – reminding ourselves and making strange at every turn of the constructed nature of methods, treating our trainings as literary scholars, teachers, and educational researchers not as something normal but as something 'forced and under constraint' (Deleuze 1994, quoted in St. Pierre 2021a, 6).

We adopt a diffractive reader-based approach which reads texts through one another (Murris and Bozalek 2019) – rather than taking a critical external standpoint on what came before, either in our experience (mirroring/reflection), in our thinking (difference/criticality), or in our research practices (methodology). Diffractive thinking, developed by Barad (2007), rejects the subject-object divide and instead views reality as a dynamic, relational process where agencies of observation and observed are mutually constituted. This onto-epistemological framework focuses on how different material-discursive practices produce unique patterns of difference, rather than seeking to mirror or represent an independent reality. Working diffractively enables us to pay attention to the inter-relationships and entanglements across concepts, disciplines, 'data', and ourselves as researchers. Following Murris and Bozalek (2019) we also engage diffractively with Haraway (2016) and Barad (2007), reading theory with practice guided by key questions to move us forward, rather than creating an overview, seeking themes, similarities, and differences between texts (1505-6). In this way, we are emboldened to challenge the binary which splits the real from the imagined. We do not seek to 'fix' or supplant

existing ways of using fiction, to create a new 'normal' through critique, but rather to explore what might be possible if plunge into 'unknowing' (Taylor and Bozalek 2022) – 'letting go, diving, freefall, surfing, swimming, waving *and* drowning . . . to see the world in a grain of sand' (Taylor 2016, 20). We are not rejecting or resisting methodology *per se* but are instead exploring what e/merges from these 'literary encounters' (Snaza 2019, 124). We offer examples of individual and collective textual analysis, and trace how analysis evolved, weaving in our 'polyvocal, conspiratorial' (Barone 2001, 178) conversations to embody our approach.

Finding meanings in methods

> In a way, it's fictionalised. It's not someone real. We're not asking anyone to share their pain.
> Yeah, true. But it's still a story that's been told, and it's a story that resonates.
> Transcript text, our analysis

Increasing numbers of researchers in the field of higher education are searching for meaning rather than metrics: something in their data that calls to them that may even make their hearts soar. Yet what often starts as a genuine desire to make human connections with and through 'data', such as relational pedagogies (Gravett 2023), risks becoming obfuscated in dense language and theoretical discourses that re-incarcerate ways of knowing rather than liberating them. The epistemological instability generated by critical and postmodernist theory has confounded positivist paradigms that an objective, universal, and authoritative truth is out there waiting to be discovered through systematic application of neutral research instruments and processes (St. Pierre 2016, 226). Instead, knowledge production has come to be viewed as 'situated, embodied, and contextually relative', shifting the focus from 'knowledge to knowers' (Harrison and Luckett 2019, 262). This transfer of authority and the destabilisation of certainties reconfigures knowledge froma fixed something 'out there' to a mutable something 'in here' (St. Pierre 2013). It is this transformation that we wish to explore teaching to 're-orient thought to experiment and create new forms of thought' and teaching (St. Pierre 2021b, 163).

The power of story in research

Against this epistemological backdrop, arts-based research is on the ascendency and has made serious inroads into educational research. Stories are the key whereby the secrets of lived experience, identity, and emotion can be unlocked. We believe that stories are at the heart of all arts-based research and although the dominance of the written word has been challenged (MacLure 2013; Thurlow 2016), with arts-based research embracing collage (Burge et al. 2016), multi-modal assemblages (Porto 2023), fine art (Rousell 2019), drawing (Huang 2022), poetry (Cousins 2017; Pithouse-Morgan et al. 2014; Müller and Kruger 2022), and dance (Blumenfeld-Jones 2016) – the power of storying and storytelling is undisputed. Stories motivate and are made manifest through methods borrowed from all the creative arts. Eisner's (1991) *educational criticism* and Barone's (2001) *narrative storytelling* laid the groundwork for arts-based educational research (ABER), and distinct methodological traditions have emerged which coalesce around narrative. Narrative enquiry and autoethnography are well-established and well-respected within the repertoire of Social Science researchers. Speculative fiction and science fiction

have projected researchers into an array of possible futures (Conrad and Wiebe 2022; Macgilchrist, Allert, and Bruch 2020) showing particular synergy with the field of educational technology (Selwyn et al. 2020; Suoranta et al. 2022; Hrastinski 2023) and more recently exploring the implications of AI on higher education (Bozkurt et al. 2023). The ability of fiction to enable us to facilitate 'collaborative future making' (Bayne and Gallagher 2021) unlocks fiction as a design tool (Bell et al. 2013; Cox 2021; Costello and Girme 2023) which can 'prototype the world' by seeding imaginative conversations about possible futures (Bleecker 2022). These methods are active story-makers working with and within lived experiences. Our experience of the text, the experiences represented through the text hold no special authority – our voices raised in interpretation do not convey truth – merely a re-fictioning, interpretation piled on interpretation: 'turtles all the way down' (Geertz 1973, quoted in St. Pierre 2008, 325). Our approach, like FBR, recasts the researcher as storyteller and/or 'main character' (Clough 2002; Leavy 2013, 2018), it is important, we think, to start by articulating our own 'main character' backstories.

FBR – as springboard for our technique

C: This is a good quote . . . from On Beauty . . . the world not giving meaning to you and that you have to find or make it yourself'

J: Yeah. So that's interesting. The distinction between an identity.

C: Yeah.

J: And a sense of self.
   Transcript text, our analysis

Both of us are trained literary scholars, products of a 1990s UK higher education approach to literature that focused on applying robust critical theories to texts as a way of making meaning. The curriculum was canonical with occasional forays into post-colonial or feminist literatures. To succeed we had to learn to play with theories, distance ourselves from our affective responses to fiction and see the text as an object to be deconstructed and dismantled into symbols and signifiers through which the critical theories could be understood and strengthened. Moving from our original fields into education has disrupted continuity of thought – we are already distanced, somewhere on the continuum of knowing and forgetting our training. We carry residual traces of who we once were as 'literature people'.

Catriona

I felt the loss of something, intangible at the time but which I later realised through my ongoing love of reading fiction, that what I had lost was in fact my ability to respond intuitively (emotionally?) to the language and characters within the text and make meaning of the world. It was only by studying French and Francophone literature where I could engage deeply with language, a language that was not mine and which I have never truly possessed, that I fell in love with fiction again.

Jennie

Books became puzzles to be solved – assembling clues from criticism, theory, history, and sociology. Any personal engagement mediated by cumbersome academic apparatus, until the apparatus itself displaced the pleasure of the text. Fiction has a bit part. My reading is

wildly inconsistent – I notice unevenly – missing characters, names, scenes, dialogue – what was displaced to make way for the Academy is now just a silence.

Our approach

FBR sidesteps the tensions of subject/objectivity within research and invites the reader in to a deep and affective response to the data (Leavy 2018; Nayebzadah 2016). It can be deeply engaging, creating an immediacy in the readers encounter with the contexts, subjects, objects, and meaning of research through language, tone, and characterisation, compelling understanding and creating deep learning experiences. Importantly, fiction does not pretend to answer all the questions it raises but contains ambiguities and silences to feed the reader's imagination. These 'interpretative gaps' make space for the reader to enter the text (Leavy 2015, 56). This mediated and uneasy relationship with the real makes FBR a useful approach to inquiry. It is often asserted that fact and fiction do not inhabit entirely distinct realms – epistemologically, ontologically, or in creative and academic practice (Leavy 2015, 57; Bridges 2020, 1401). This leads Luna (2015) to pose a question which is vital to our own project: 'Besides the appeal of fiction as an engaging format for students, and the appeal of the format to researchers aiming to engage students and multiple audiences, what does FBR provide over fiction for the reader?' (269) We suggest that for the reader there is no difference. We shift the locus of enquiry from the data/writer to the data/reader. This shifts sense-making from the interpretative act of writing to the interpretative act of reading. We do not seek to supersede FBR or follow through the usual either/or approach of methodological innovation. Rather we embrace a 'yes/and' plurality. We seek to exploit the capacity of fiction to blur the boundaries between reality and imagination, between reader and author, between 'real life' and 'lifelike'. In short, we use fiction to open our understanding of the 'as is', engaging cognitive, affective, and ethical ways of knowing.

What constitutes 'data' in this context?

And actually to get back to methodology, that's what I have always struggled with with a lot of Social Science type education articles when it is surveys and it is focus groups and a lot of the quotes that you see they don't they don't make you feel like they're there in the same way. So there's both a distancing and a kind of invitation in, but maybe on your own terms. Which maybe takes us back to teaching.

  Transcript text, our analysis

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories. (Haraway 2016, 12)

Novelists, authors of non-fiction and academics alike engage in research before communicating their 'findings' – whether the output is a biography, a novel, or a journal article. In FBR data is typically collected via traditional qualitative research processes – interviews, surveys, field research, and/or through the accumulation of authorial experience. The process of writing is either interpretative – constituting analysis of the data, so the artistic work is itself a form or research, or is a representation of findings in the form of art. For example, creating poetry from interview transcripts and focus groups

(Glesne 1997; Richardson 2003), fictionalising interviews and focus groups into a narrative that tells a story but in a way that protects the anonymity of the speaker and that enables the researcher to become a subject in the story too (Clough 2002). Bridges (2020) posits a third category 'artistic work as research data' (1405). A variety of approaches fall within this broad area including analysis of 'passive iconography' artistic expressions and outlets found in everyday educational life; art as stimulus to which research participants respond to generate data; participant generated art as data (Bridges 2020, 1406).

Diffractive reader-based research: what does data look like in this context?

All these methods conceive data as a thing born of interaction – between researcher and research subjects, between researcher and research question, between collaborators, participant-researchers. That interaction presupposes a relationship with the 'real' that data can capture and mediate *en route* to meaning. Following Barad (2007), we want to open space to consider what happens when data are conceived as *intra-action*:

> That is, in contrast to the usual 'interaction', which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. (Barad 2007, 33)

Therefore, rather than focusing on what data is (fact or fiction/true or imagined) and what data does (truth-telling, storytelling, bearing witness), we hone in on this relational aspect of data, how it 'glows' (MacLure 2013) to us in different ways depending on our own experiences and positionalities, and how the intra-action between reader and text is at once measure and manifestation.[1]

MacLure's description of finding data that 'glows' fired our interest as it resonated with our experiences – professional, personal, and borrowed. Her understanding that the cognitive and emotional responses brought to 'data' are pre-loaded from films, books, art, conversations – sometimes sharply focussed, sometimes half-remembered connected with us. She argues that the involuntary response to data is instinctive, embodied, and relational, formed by the whims of 'chance alignments and divergences' and generating 'fissions of excitement, energy, laughter, silliness' (MacLure 2010, 282). As such it is a 'sense-event', and the glow 'a kind of 'surface effect', to use one of Deleuze's terms, of something that is befalling us' (MacLure 2013, 662). Experiencing data in this way catches-up researchers 'in the forward momentum of becoming' which sits uneasily with conventional Social Science methods of sense-making, MacLure (2013) argues instead that we need to remain open to becoming – to make sense – which brings the potential to 'trigger action in face of the unknown' (662). Our readings of her text connected with our experiences and academic explorations of reading fiction and triggered us to methodological action.

An example – diffractive reader-based research in practice

On Beauty by Smith (2005), is set in a North American campus in Boston and traces the lives of two families, interwoven in myriad ways but in particular by the mutual professional hatred between the two fathers, both academic professors in the Humanities and their student daughters, Victoria and Zora.

We have argued that the cognitive-emotional experience of reading fiction mirrors this process of *becoming* and sense-making. If the 'truth' of the data is found in the body, mind, and memories of the researcher – the intersection of the interior with the exterior – the making of connections can bring us to a place of understanding, which does not close possibility but opens them. Indeed, the value of these fictional worlds is that they not only busy our imaginations with descriptions, speech, and ideas, they represent physical and emotional landscapes that we can inhabit. They recall places we have seen or been to, we have the flash of recognition, like when we glimpse ourselves in a photograph or a crowd – sometimes comforting – sometimes uncanny. Characters interact with each other, with their bodies as well as with their words. Unlike research methods, the job of fiction is to evoke and make real 'bodily entanglements' – convincing the reader that these are 'life and blood' characters with lives, wills, bodies, hearts, and souls. And in the way readers 'visit' fictional places readers also have 'life and blood' entanglements with fictional characters. Fictional characters (bad writing aside) are not 'angels'– they are not cerebral creatures designed only to emit signals or carry linguistic universals – we are supposed to have relationships with them (MacLure 2013, 664–665).

The academic tomato

'It's a Wellington thing – it's a student thing', said Victoria rapidly, coming up on her elbows. 'It's our shorthand for when we say, like, Professor Simeon's class is "The tomato's nature versus the tomato's nurture", and Jane Colman's class is "To properly understand the tomato you must first uncover the tomato's suppressed Herstory." – she's *such* a silly bitch that woman – Professor Gilman's class is "The tomato is structured like an aubergine", and Professor Kellas's class is basically "There is no way of proving the existence of the tomato without making reference to the tomato itself", and Erskine Jegede's class is "The post-colonial tomato as eaten by Naipaul". And so on. So you say, "What class have you got coming up?" and the person says "Tomatoes 1670-1900." Or whatever.'

Howard sighed. He licked one side of his Rizla.

'Hilarious.'

(Smith 2005, 312)

The tomato scene surfaces a range of pedagogic problems: how does the curriculum create meaning, who owns that meaning, and how is it shaped, how do students' encounter learning, academia, and teachers. We share some of our analysis to surface how using our diffractive reader-based research method/approach has made us think differently about learning and teaching within higher education. Set against the specifically non-university space of the bedroom in an intimate scene between Howard and Victoria, Victoria reduces curricula to the commonplace: 'the tomato'. Work is the interchangeable component differentiated only by the theoretical lens through which it is seen. This 'shorthand' shared by the 'nerdy' Wellington student community suggests belonging – an 'us' against the 'them' of academics. Boundaries divide across lines of belief – the seriousness brought to academic endeavour. This can be read in two ways. One is that students understand the conceptual architecture of these courses, that 'tomato'/'subject' is not the point, rather 'meaning' is created with and through theory. The tomato is only the conduit for ontological and epistemological exploration – in the way that canape spoons carry tuna salad and quails' eggs. The other is that the Academy has failed – education reduced to 'takeaways' which rehearse the tired tropes, personal predilections, and

one-note worldviews of myopic academics. Students reject the immanence of Art and theory – and see only interchangeable units of 'tomato' – to be consumed or discarded. Victoria locates the value of Howard's teaching in its rejection of the possibility of Art as a path to universal human truth, beauty, or liberation, in its intellectual rigour:

> 'But *your* class – your class is a cult classic. I *love* your class. Your class is about never *ever* saying *I like the tomato*. That's why so few people take it – I mean, no offence, it's a compliment.' (Smith 2005, 312)

Bodily entanglements: we can't put an erection in our article

The explication precedes an excruciating sex scene – uncomfortable physically for the characters and emotionally for the reader – that we were definitely not going to talk about. Narrated from Howards' perspective, Victoria rehearses a, to him, bewilderingly enthusiastic seduction – the bastard offspring of literature, film, and pornography:

> His erection was blatant, but first she coolly drank the rest of his wine, pressing down on him as Lolita did on Humbert, as if he were just a chair she happened to sit on. No doubt she had read *Lolita*. (Smith 2005, 315)

Howard narrates the text, but Victoria seizes control of the plot. The reader's emotional tangle stems from the uncomfortable feeling that this is a narrative neither of them really owns – it is borrowed from a remembered repertoire of fictional sexual performances:

> Now she began to unbutton his shirt slowly, as if accompanying music were playing, and seemed disappointed not to find a pornographic rug of hair there. She rubbed it conceptually, as if the hair were indeed there, tugging at what little Howard possessed while – could it be? – purring. (315).

Howard's narration creates distance – between the production and consumption of 'the sex scene' – between the characters in the scene and the characters that inspired it 'she moaned and took his fingers in her mouth, as if they were somebody else's cock' (Smith 2005, 317).

So, what does the juxtaposition of the 'tomato' speech – in-jokes, community, knowingness, and belonging and this 'seduction', which connects the reader with disconnected characters through a visceral feeling of second-hand embarrassment do?

> C: But why does he continue. You know that every, every line. I'm just thinking. Please just stop. Like he must, he must know it's wrong.
>
> J: Yeah, I don't know and that's not explained, is it? But we get a sense of his deep discomfort. But it's almost like his inadequacy in face of the performance, like he doesn't know how to deal with the, doesn't know how to interrogate the performance, or he's not able to interrogate the performance because he's in it. And is there something about not being able to, for want of a better phase, be sucked into a way of being, that you're unable to stand back. I don't know. Is that something to do with the tomatoes as well?
>
> C: I'm just going back to the tomatoes and wondering.
>
> C: Is it? Is it the whole idea of something being worth something? So, everything's commodified
>
> J: maybe
>
> C: Whether it's tomatoes, whether it's sex, whether it's
>
> J: yeah

C: art.
C: I don't know

The 'bodily entanglements' feel explicit here in the page – our discomfort and unease voiced in our discussion. We are reading the scene through the eyes of Howard, the senior established male academic and it somehow makes Victoria's knowing and mocking of academia and academics more powerful and also more poignant. This analysis highlights the power of the teaching relationship that we rarely acknowledge explicitly. Our unease and discomfort as readers becoming subsumed into our unease and discomfort in teaching, and in academia more generally?

Beyond this general analysis, however, how does this this fictional representation help us to understand about a challenge or issue within higher education? Our conversation below outlines how our interpretation of the text opened up an exploration into our own practices:

What is my tomato?

J: But what am I saying?
C: What would your tomato be? Now, that's the key question. That is the key question. Your teaching, what would the tomato be?
J: I I can't tell you what the tomato should look like because the tomato will be different depending on your garden. That's basically reflective practice isn't it? [laughter]
J: We need to reflect upon the truth. We need to contemplate your tomato and think how you could make that a better tomato. But you're on your own because I can't help you. [laughter]

Contemplating our own tomatoes alone might be a handy metaphor for reading diffractively, using fiction as data. How we take that into praxis – the ways that we have of knowing and living, teaching, and researching whilst reflecting upon the 'truth' and/or it's im/possibility cannot be 'helped' and can be actively hindered by Methodology 101.

A diffractive reader-based approach

Our encounter with reading as an ongoing process of glow whereby each reader re/creates the text by noticing different things, creating different connections and significances, is itself a produce of 'chance alignment' and divergence. It traced our previous academic lives, re-calling encounters with literary theory – sense-making grew within a 'flat topology' becoming and growing like crystals flat edge to flat edge (MacLure 2013, 665). Sense-making through 'glow' surfaced previous readings of Barthes, so the reading becomes an echo (a mapping) of previous academic experience for the reader:

> [A] text is made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focussed and that place is the reader . . . . The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. (Barthes 1977, 148)

Texts can no longer to be *deciphered* – are not 'secrets' to be unlocked, no ultimate meanings to be found, no explanations, no critical victors – but rather must be *disentangled* (Barthes 1977, 147) foreshadowed new theoretical lines of flight. This process of noticing and

remembering enacts diffractive ways of reading, where reader-text resonance is created only through twinned experience of the familiar – which chimes with one's own concerns and the unfamiliar – a captivating otherness which captures one's attention. De Freitas argues the interpretative act – the embodiment of imagination – as readers move 'to-and-fro between self and other' is 'at once necessary and extremely dangerous'. 'Fiction is never innocent' and brings potential for agency, transformation, and a proliferation of meaning (2003).

The inherent ambiguity of these resonant readings is co-extensive with the goals of post-qualitative research – experimentation and creation of the new. Reading is immanence – and like post-qualitative research: 'It never exists, it never is. It must be invented, created differently every time' (St. Pierre 2021a, 6). Each reading will be quite unlike another, the intra-action between reader and text resonates, creating a fleeting moment of sense-making. A concrete encounter with a text becomes our starting point for inquiry, the act of reading is 'a concrete encounter with the real' with which we begin (St. Pierre 2019, 12) – we don't know what we are going to do before we start and do not pre-empt where our enquiry will take us. Our aim is not to re/present 'reality' or move from fiction to fact but to reorient thought – making space and case for action. We actively challenge the easy certainty of evidence-informed practice – application of methodology to data culled from the world to create knowledge which in turn can be applied to enhance the operation of the world. Following Haraway (2016), we see our methodological approach as a way to 'make trouble' – 'to stir up', 'to make cloudy', 'to disturb', and to 'stay with the trouble': learning to be present with the text, collaborating and combining our experiences and expertise in relational semiotics that is 'always situated, someplace and not noplace, entangled and worldly' (4).

Following the approach of our poetic-enquiry methodology – whereby sense-making comes from inhabiting and thinking through the aesthetic and poetic imaginations of others (Cunningham and Mills 2020), we turn to fictional texts – conceived and created not as research but as fiction. We offer 'readings' of the university, its people, its classrooms, and its pedagogic practices through literary fiction. Our explorations pursue an alternative approach to FBR, one which foregrounds the readerly process of creation and interpretation by using academic fiction as a source material for understanding teaching and learning within higher education. We do not aim to analyse fiction to find hidden secrets, nor reflectively analysing ourselves to uncover our hidden worlds – there is no 'truth' lurking within the presence of an 'I'. Instead, we want the reader to engage with the text as a way of making sense of their own academic identities and pedagogies.

Reading as enquiry

And I wonder if there's, you know, if there's anything more to say than, you know, the university is having an existential crisis. Yeah.
But maybe we knew that anyway.
So I suppose what is seeing the university through the different perspectives of these characters and their interactions, painful or otherwise, and their views of the university and its function.
  Transcript text, our analysis

Chick (2013) writing about the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) suggests that 'close reading', of classrooms, student-work, practice, is the strongest methodology

for discipline-based educational enquiry undertaken by literary academics into their own practice. 'Close reading' is translated for non-literary scholars, to emphasise alignment with fact-orientated paradigms 'What does it say?' equates to 'What are the facts?', 'What does it mean?' becomes 'What inferences can be drawn from the facts?' (23). Chick suggests that 'close' reading is also 'distant' reading – an appropriately critical, objective, and rigorous process of meaning making, which is inductive, iterative, systematic, and exhaustive.

Katan and Baarts (2020) argue that reading is a form of enquiry, developing a concept of academic reading, 'Inquiry-Based Reading (IBR)'. This is distinct from 'close reading' insofar as researchers focus not on the object of the text but rather on the objectives of their own enquiry, looking through the text: 'when she learns from reading the text in-depth, she may be learning about something that is not even in the text itself but potentially entirely external to it' (69). In this way, reading is not knowledge acquisition but knowledge creation. Knowledge is created through the transformational impact on the researcher, the encounter through the text alters thinking, conceptualisation, perspective: 'It's something the text does to me, but, you know, it's not something the text does to me without me having invited it to do so.' (70). Maxwell (2018) figures reading as a 'calling to thinking' rather than a communication of thinking, and a 'means through, by, and in which, understandings are enabled' (65). Reading is understood as *technē* in the Heideggerian sense 'as an aided bringing forth of Being', and as a collaborative practice. Each reader sets out from a present state of mind, cognition, habits, and practices and engages in a shared struggle to create shared thinking.

The 'methodology'

Our e/merging technique for thinking within and outwith methodology is simple and flexible – another contribution to 'a thousand tiny methodologies' that tries to elude the codes and criteria of traditional qualitative methodology (Lather 2013, 635). Its three principles are:

- fiction as data;
- reading as sense-making (individual or collaborative);
- relationality – intertextuality – positionality and attention from the nature of the reading self.

Reading is noticing, a process through which readers think *through* the text – reading for noticing, resonance, significance, and for thinking. The 'reader' can be differently configured – guided by the nature of enquiry and could be:

- the research subject – readers read and the researcher harvests the 'meaning' – this is closest to conventional arts-based methodologies and for us would be the least authentic use of the method;
- the research participant – participant-enquirer, citizen research, collaborative enquiry;
- the researcher – autoethnography/collective autoethnography.

We hold all of these in play and invite you to explore how and why in the remainder of this article.

Playing with methodological veracity

In the preceding sections, we have mapped our technique – we use the word 'mapping' deliberately, and have in mind Deleuze's distinction between tracing and mapping. Tracing copies – and replicability assumes stability and universality of the represented phenomenon. The *status quo* and existing *modus operandi* are upheld. In contrast, mapping respects the frightening complexity of the territory and opens-up possible escape routes – 'lines of flight', transformative forces which are able to reconfigure alternative realities. It can chart systems that are 'contingent, unpredictable, and productive' (Martin and Kamberelis 2013, 670). Maps can create new possible realities by bringing together disparate phenomena and connecting them to whatever forces or directions seem potentially related to them. A map is also able to reveal forces which have been elided, marginalised, or ignored altogether.

> The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted, to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation … A map has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back to the same. The map has to do with performance, whereas the tracing always involves an alleged 'competence.' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, quoted in Martin and Kamberelis 2013, 670–671)

We felt it would be useful to summarise the ways in which this approach plays with the concept of credibility and 'valid' by signposting explicitly where and how our approach (cor)responds to an established framework of research criteria accepted within the Social Sciences (Tracey 2010). Leavy (2018) adapted this same framework to evidence the credibility of FBR and so we in turn adapt Leavy's FBR framework to show how our approach, despite its exploratory and playful nature, can make sense of learning and teaching. We also hope to communicate something of the nature and threshold standard for reading as enquiry to foster its potential for knowledge creation. By superimposing the tracing of the familiar symbols and markers of research 'validity' onto the map we see the dominant discourses differently, but more importantly, we seek to activate a 'line of flight' (Martin and Kamberelis 2013, 671).

Table 1. Quality criteria for diffractive reader-based research.

Quality criteria for research	Quality criteria for fiction-based research	Quality criteria for diffractive reader-based research
Validity	It could have happened; resonance	Intertextuality; resonance between text and reader as self.
Rigour	Aesthetics; literary tools	Affective and intellectual response to literary devices and to the interplay of form and narrative.
Congruence	Architectural design; structure	Belief/faith in value of approach.
Transferability/ Generalisability	Empathetic engagement; resonant; universal themes/ motifs	Noticing – ability to articulate empathetic engagement.
Thoroughness	Ambiguity	Identified and exhausted every possibility of interpretation; depth of interplay between reader (as self) and text.
Authenticity	Verisimilitude; creation of virtual reality	Prolonged engagement with text; triangulation between text-reader-self response; 'staying in the trouble' (Haraway 2016).
Reflexivity	Writer's personal signature	Relationality. Being attentive to positionality of self as reader; acknowledging conditions of text; reading as transformation.

Validity < > Resonance

The reader can recognise something in the text that spoke to them and their teaching context. This is a key aspect in the validity of this approach, and one that is bound up in the way in which the reader relates to the text.

Rigour < > Sensation

The reader's willingness to be open to the text and to make connections through affective engagement with – that is alert to the sensation of, a set of problems or particular challenge within teaching and learning.

Congruence < > Authenticity

The authenticity of the readers' response and belief in that response leads to belief in their relationship with the text/s.

Transferability/generalisability < > Empathy

This is linked to the reader's affective response as it is how they are able empathise with the characters, both academics and students, and how they can then – through their lives and actions – notice and articulate their own academic identities and practices within their teaching context.

Thoroughness < > Assiduity

The depth, breadth, and height of the readers' interpretations and analysis matter here; readers don't explore only one idea to locate truth, authenticity, or finite meaning/s, nor do they skim along the surface, reduce variation, complexity, or seek thematic unity. Rather– as you will see below – readers discuss, share, argue, and challenge their interpretations until they know they can go no further.

Authenticity < > Verisimilitude

Readers need to 'stay with the trouble' to borrow Haraway's (2016) term, to delve deeper into their textual response. The verisimilitude that is so effective for FBR, is also important here, as it transfigures reading into new speculative narratives able to represent the reader's encounter with the text, re-making reality.

Reflexivity < > Reflexivity

We cannot stress enough how important it is within our approach for the reader to acknowledge their positionality; to demonstrate an awareness of how their experiences of higher education, of their own challenges within the university context and – importantly – how their own academic identities, experiences, and practices affect their reading.

Guidance for diffractive reader-based research

As our approach is methodologically fluid/boundary crossing, we offer the following guidance as a point of departure. This is designed to facilitate methodological experimentation rather than conceived as a limiting framework. Key elements of the approach are:

- Fiction-based: fiction situated, populated, or positioned within the context of higher education.
- Positionality of the reader: acknowledges where you are coming from as a reader (identity) and where you are setting out from (cognition, experience, intertextuality).
- Question-led not question answering: asks open questions that enable the reader to rethink/reframe a challenge within higher education and locate emergent questions relative to their own enquiry/becoming.
- Literary interest/expertise/experience: a form of enquiry that can be scaffolded by the questions (Table 2) and the model so does not require advanced literary skills.
- Analysis of key literary devices: the following table scaffolds the use of the method but will be more effective if you can identify one or two key moments in the fictional text which feature the university context in some capacity to explore.

Table 2. Guidance for undertaking diffractive reader-based research.

Characterisation	• Who are the characters and how are they constructed within the Academy?
	• Do you respond to/empathise with the academic characters (lecturers/professors)? If so, why?
	• How are students represented here? What is the effect?
	• As a reader, what characters resonate with you, and why?
	• What characters feel unrecognisable to you in your context, and why?
	• Do the characters change?
	• Does your understanding of and response to the characters change?
	• Which characters talk to each other and how do they talk to each other? How does the dialogue between characters impact upon your feelings towards then and towards what is happening?
Narrative	• What happens? Why?
	• Is there a specific issue in higher education, teaching, and/or university life that is explored through the plot? If so, what is the effect?
	• Is there a key theme or themes that emerge(s) through the plot and how does it make you feel as a reader?
Space	• How is the university campus depicted (if at all) in the text? Does it resonate with your own experience? Explain how and the effect on you as a reader? How is the classroom represented in the text?
	• As a space, how does the university contain the dynamics between staff and students, staff and staff, and students and students?
Language	• What languages/registers/modes are used in the text, and to what effect? How does the language create mood and tone?
	• Is the grammar and/or punctuation unusual?
Narrator	• Through whose eyes do we see the characters, places in the book?
	• Whose language and perspective describe the scenes and events to us?
	• Do you trust them?
	• What is the effect?
	• What does the narrator not know, understand, or notice? (How do we know? Why might this be?)
	• Whose perspectives are missing?
Figures and tropes	• What metaphors, imagery, and themes can you identify?
	• How do they create meaning?
Pleasure	• What did you enjoy?
Desire	• What do the characters want?
	• What do you want of this text?

Conclusion

In this article, we have outlined a conceptual and somewhat playful exploration of how following the glow in diffractive reader-based research can enable academic colleagues and educational researchers to make sense of higher education pedagogies and practices critically and creatively. Our reading and writing embody an encounter with fiction and

we invite educators and colleagues to explore their teaching experiences and contexts, individually or collectively, through a process of diffractive reading. This approach eludes a fixed methodology, and does not aim to uncover hidden truths or represent objective reality. It instead embraces ambiguity, partiality, mutability and multiplicity, imagining research which is fluid, speculative, and which creates space for ongoing becoming. We have outlined the potential of diffractive reader-based research to expand the repertoire of arts-based and post-qualitative approaches in educational research. Privileging the reader's creative and embodied entanglement with fiction sustains a relational, situated, and performative process of sense-making. Through this process, we propose that fiction becomes a powerful medium for rethinking teaching and learning within higher education, reframing pedagogic challenges, and sparking new directions for inquiry, action, and change.

Note

1. In this context, we differ from the research that reads fiction to examine cultural representations of academics, e.g. Emily Henderson and Pauline Rafferty's work on conferences (2023), as well as Zoe Bulaitis who uses fiction to explore academic representation (2020). We focus here instead on the active engagement of the reader - rather than trying to decode the message of the text.

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