



## Creative research methods in education: principles and practice

by Helen Kara, Narelle Lemon, Dawn Mannay, and Megan McPherson,  
Bristol, Policy Press, 2021, 208 pp., £27.99 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-4473-5707-0

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Creative research methods in education: principles and practice**, by Helen Kara, Narelle Lemon, Dawn Mannay, and Megan McPherson, Bristol, Policy Press, 2021, 208 pp., £27.99 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-4473-5707-0

I am not artistic, I can not draw or dance, but this book has made me realize how creative I am. I have used some of the methods described, when I have wanted to challenge my own thinking or enhance the engagement of participants. Those that were unfamiliar, made me reflect on how I may do things differently in future. The wide range of real-life case studies, which can challenge thinking and provoke useful reflections, is a major strength of this book. It illustrates the breadth of creative approaches that are available to educational researchers. The examples range from poetry, drawing and dance, to using technology for blogging. Some approaches are complex, but others are as simple as carrying out interviews when walking, which is something I have done in the past when interviewing teachers about classroom practice, as it allows the interviewee to show and demonstrate, not just describe.

Each case study is presented alongside ‘tips’ for carrying out the method but also ‘traps’: the challenges a researcher may encounter if they do something similar. It is impossible for all conceivable challenges to be addressed and it is left to the reader to consider their own research; to decide which approaches they could use and consider why they might select one approach rather than another. This is a useful exercise for any researcher and especially the target audience of undergraduates, postgraduates and practitioners. The value of the book is wider than this though; as a more experienced researcher, it helped me to reflect deeply on my own practice.

Creative research methods are often associated with data collection or presenting findings. But, just as Kara (2018) did for ethics in her book *Research Ethics in the Real World*, the authors show that creative methods are relevant to all areas of research. After a brief introduction (chapter 1) all stages of the research process are covered: research design (chapter 2), context setting (chapter 3), data gathering with children and young people (chapter 4) and with adults (chapter 5), data analysis (chapter 6), research reporting (chapter 7), presentation (chapter 8) and dissemination (chapter 9). The final chapter (chapter 10) provides an overview of what the reader can do next.

Information about what creative methods are, and why they can be valuable, is spread throughout the book. This can make it difficult for a novice to get a comprehensive overview of the topic. The authors seem to be avoiding repeating key messages, tips and traps even when they could fit into more than one chapter. So, while it is a great book to dip in to, some of the key information might be missed if it is not read in its entirety. It would have been useful to have a summary of these key messages, possibly in the final chapter. The book requires an active approach to reading, each chapter includes questions to consider and, for those who find a method particularly interesting, suggestions of where to find more information, including videos and animations. This is useful, as there are only a limited number of images to bring the case studies to life.

The book highlights some criticisms of the methods it presents. One example is the subjective nature of creative approaches. We are perhaps used to the idea of the subjectivity that researchers might bring to research. With creative methods subjectivity is also an issue when looking at the results of the research. The book refers to a quote from Cole and McIntyre (2004) ‘there is no such thing as a one to one correspondence between message intended and message received’. Cole and McIntyre (2004) examined the role of the audience in interpreting research. They describe an exhibition of artefacts, texts and photographs they held relating to an Alzheimer project; the

audience were asked to record their responses. They found many different interpretations of the same items.

Another potential criticism is the danger of shifting the focus from the research questions to the method or product, especially when using something artistic like poetry. The focus can be on the poem created by the researcher rather than the participants' voices. The authors stress that the focus should always be on the needs of the research, rather than aesthetic and entertainment values. The outputs of creative methods can become resources to support further analysis, resulting in a better understanding of the participants' experiences, strengthening rather than weakening their voices. Creative methods are open to other criticisms too, but this does not differentiate them from other, more traditional methods. There is a useful comparison of how issues of reliability, replicability and validity can be addressed when using the different approaches.

Overall this is a well written, accessible and thought-provoking book that promotes the use of creative methods in educational research in a balanced way. It is clear that creative methods are valuable not as a replacement, but as a complement to more traditional methods. It is easy for researchers to get stuck in a rut and reuse familiar research methods. It is even easier for new researchers to be attracted to more common, traditional approaches. I now have a book that I can recommend as a way of encouraging students to evaluate, and hopefully try, some of the other options. I am very glad to have this book on my shelf and would definitely recommend it to students, but also to researchers wanting to reflect on their practice.

## References

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