Abstract for Research Practice Practice Research Symposium

Title: Visualising the unseen: drawing the hidden aspects of neurological disorders

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'Trying to describe a seizure is like trying to describe the colour blue to a blind person.'

This paper reflects on the first two years of a practice based research PhD that explores how drawing can be used as a tool to bring together the unseen and unseeable elements of neurological disorders. Both epilepsy and Parkinson’s defy easy visualisation. Although epilepsy is often described as an invisible disability, it has also been characterised as a force that enables a new kind of sight, accompanied by feelings of déjà vu, strange auras, smells or tastes that are hard to describe. Parkinson’s, conversely, creates physical challenges in communication, causing problems in forming words, facial expressions and body language.

In order to explore these conditions I have developed practice based research methodology that explores how we can use drawing’s embrace of touch, suggestion, narrative and metaphorical analogy to visualise the personal experience of neurodegenerative disorders with empathy, curiosity and respect for individual experience. Firstly through artist workshops that bring together scientists and epileptics to study how a seizure is made medically visible and how epileptics relate to and rework these images. Secondly through ‘drawing encounters’ with Parkinson’s UK groups in which we explore drawing as a way to understand and come to terms with a new way of moving. The outcomes of these workshops are a series of drawings, animations, installation and patient artwork, which demonstrates why drawing, as a conveyor of tacit knowledge, is the medium most suited to expressing the phenomenological, felt experience explored through these patient collaborations.

In this paper I will discuss the benefits and challenges of a research methodology that relies on collaboration within a specific community, from practical considerations such as forging initial links with charities such as Parkinson’s UK to negotiating individual relationships with patients. I will also discuss how these research methods draw on traditional creative approaches to wellbeing that emphasise drawing as a calming, reflective process, but also demonstrate how drawing research can further these approaches by documenting, challenging, disrupting and uniting multiple perspectives.

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1 Interview with Participant in Epilepsy Workshop Two, Lancaster University, 30th November 2013.
Sand Drawing produced by participant in Parkinson’s Drawing Encounter One 10/02/16

Artwork produced by participants in Epilepsy Workshop Two 30/11/14