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Layering, unknowing, and unlocking: Thinking beyond structure through arts-based research

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ABSTRACT

While it is still disputed in some academic traditions, the potentials of artistic practice as research and arts-based research have demonstrated that creative engagement with materials, processes and ideas lead to holistic insights that move well beyond the goals of objective research and its quest for solid answers. The article retraces our experience as Art Education instructors guiding graduate students through an online capstone arts-based research course, as we endeavored to bring our students' artists', researchers' and in-service K-12 art teachers' identities into a productive place of "knowing-in-being," an embodied and relational model of inquiry. Emphasizing students' voices and their thinking throughout their a/r/tographic and phenomenological projects, we reexamine their artistic experiences and scholarly reflections as the course unfolded, arguing that our students' identity as teaching artists transformed in the process of making and thinking in, with, and through arts-based inquiry. The discussion of the paper is a narrative about pedagogical strategies and curricular decisions that were adopted as we designed, taught, and reflected upon the outcomes of the course. The article emphasizes how the processes of layering, unknowing and unlocking constituted experiential thresholds through which students discovered new creative capacities as artists, scholars and art teachers.

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Introduction

In a 2018 article published by *FIELD*, a journal of socially engaged-art criticism, anthropologist Tim Ingold observes that "research has become the measure of our world" (para 1), and that its explorative models would benefit from setting aside the illusions of the scientific objective model to embrace research as an act of curiosity, driven by the desire of "knowing-in-being" (IV, para 4), which Ingold contends, is the essence of research. It is an act of correspondence, a form of experience and of relationship (Ingold, 2018).

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While it is still disputed in some academic traditions, the potentials of artistic practice as research and arts-based research have been well-established in academies across Europe, Canada, and Australia since the 1990s, and have taken root to some degree in the United States. Rikou (2018) suggested that “when a research process can be considered as “art” is related to how art institutions think (and act)” (para 15). This observation emerges from a view that the freedom of artistic practice can benefit social science research, establishing bridges between disciplines. All the while, other voices coming from the domain of artistic practice remain skeptical about the reorganization of artistic research into an academic discipline, fearing “the institutionalization of artistic research as commodified education, creative and affective industries, administrative esthetics, and so on” (Steyerl, 2010, p. 55). As faculty members steeped in interdisciplinary (and existential) shifts between scholarly, educational, and artistic practices, we understand arts-based research and artistic practices as grounded in experience that supports “a dynamic, creative, and constructive process that enables the emergence of the new and the unforeseen, always mediated by techniques and materials” (Borgdorff, 2013, p. 116).

In borrowing from Borgdorff (2010), we also clarify the differences between artistic practice and artistic research. In our educational work with students, we uphold that in research, “artistic practice is not only the result of the research but also its methodological vehicle when the research unfolds *in and through* the acts of creating and performing” (p. 46).

Guided by the questions, “in what ways have our students succeeded in exploring, embedding, and integrating the arts in their educational research?,” and “how did their identity as teaching artists and ours as mentoring faculty transform in the process?,” this paper presents how a team of instructors guided graduate Art Education students through the process of an online arts-based research capstone course experience where their artists’, researchers’ and in-service K-12 art teachers’ identities could be brought into that productive place of “knowing-in-being” (Ingold, 2018, IV, para 4). The graduate students in our online Art Education program are in-service art teachers that come to us with diverse experience as practicing artists. They may have been practicing artists for years before turning to education, or have jumped in a teaching career despite limited artistic skills of their own, having acquired an introductory knowledge through a few art courses, in an undergraduate program that favored a social sciences approach to education. For most, experience with research will have been initially formed by values of empiricism and scientific objectivity. While they are intrigued by artistic practice as research, the traditions of academic research still appear to them a more legitimate approach to inquiry than insights formed through material explorations. As K-12 art teachers seeking

a graduate degree in Art Education, their years of teaching experience also vary. While most of our students are still in their formative early years as teachers, some are veteran art educators seeking professional rejuvenation through new intellectual and artistic challenges. The program prides itself as offering a well-rounded advanced education for artist-teachers.

In introducing students' research projects, we reflect upon and reexamine the artistic and scholarly challenges and successes that they encountered as the course unfolded, and highlight the pedagogical presence that was required to meet students' idiosyncratic journeys. We elaborate on the artistic and epistemological challenges that students encountered in contextualizing their practice within a broader research sphere, as they worked to maintain "the internal consistency and coherence that represented a strong and seamless relationship between purpose and method" (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 67).

We argue that the benefit of art-based research is often in its complex unearthing and examination of issues and assumptions more than it is in providing permanent answers (Eisner, 2004), and that the process invites "unfinished thinking" (Borgdorff, 2010, p. 44). Our students engaged in an exploration that expanded the boundaries of the art education discipline and affirmed the legitimacy of the artistic experience as a way of knowing (McNiff, 2008).

As well, and in contrast to Steyerl's (2010) argument, we realized that many of our students needed to step outside their discipline-bound pedagogies of art education and engage in a creative research process that would lead them beyond the course map and structures, bring them to question their established assumptions about research and knowledge, impelling them to find their own way. We intended to open and expand possibilities for our in-service students who are teaching, living and operating within systems and structures of education defined by policies, rules, and expectations. This is why we chose to make reference to arts-based research (ABR) rather than arts-based education research (ABER). We intentionally focused the goals of the course toward artistic inquiry as its own legitimate endeavor, all the while trusting that further along, the experiences of sustained and focused artistic engagement would inevitably infuse our students' philosophies and teaching practices. As we will elaborate further in the text, our students have often grown to identify strongly with their teaching selves whose main duties are to be organized adults, shouldering responsibilities, and staying in control of their curriculum and classrooms. Many have long relinquished the time and space for their own creative practice and have distanced themselves from the inner knowing that artistic inquiry requires, a process that differs greatly from their daily teaching realities.

After clarifying the pedagogical structure of the course, we narrate individual students projects in the section *Students Experiences*. We then regather in a common voice to reveal that for many of our students, artistic exploration in uncharted territory proved frightening. Some expressed the desire for the safety of the normalizing and regulating mode of productions. We conclude that the arts-based research forced students to trust in the creative capabilities of their discipline to reveal deep and important understandings. Enriched by their explorations in arts-based research, our in-service teacher's pedagogical strategies will demonstrate the transferable nature of learning that is embedded in artistic experiences as these support the development of skills, attitudes, and values of holistic relevance, beyond the project at hand.

Instruction and pedagogy

The course, in its first iteration in 2019, was designed to lead students through the conceptualization, process and completion of a visual (studio arts) and reflective written research project over a 14-week semester. It culminated with the presentation of an online art exhibition in an individually designed e-portfolio space that was accompanied by a support paper. Following a typical graduate research model, a synchronous class time included the entire cohort early on in the course, then made space for individual thesis-advisement meetings in later weeks. During these 14 weeks, students met weekly using Zoom[®], an application added to our learning system. Outside that class meeting, the course was asynchronous, pre-designed, written and organized per modules for self-directed online learning using Blackboard[®]. The weekly modules offer narratives, videos, websites and photographs, in an attempt to satisfy different learning styles and to establish a clearer connection between artistic visual research and relevant literature.

As we advanced in the course, students delineated a research territory, began to define their own strategies as these related to their areas of focus, and were supported in their effort to balance contextual inquiry and analytical reflections with time for visual and fully embodied practices. An embodied practice reveals an affinity for phenomenological inquiry that allows a spatial, temporal, emotional, and corporal engagement with the reflective process (Van Manen, 2014). It is motivated by the realization that material explorations and sensory awareness involve the body, with its own intelligence and presence, which is also what Ingold (2013) proposes when he asserts that knowing belongs at the heart of being.

Alternating reading, reflection, writing and studio-based work allowed the complementarity of these modalities to enrich their arts-based inquiries. Contrary to an art education curriculum where these strands are defined and

often differentiated as pedagogy, theory, teaching and studio practice, arts-based research uses artmaking as a primary mode of inquiry. Its practitioners make use of methodologies and approaches that are most natural and authentic to their goals. Their philosophical and artistic dispositions assist in folding in a theoretical orientation and keep their research process focused.

As researchers, faculty members, designers and artists, we each came into the experience from different academic paths and brought to the course our various strengths and expertise as researchers—especially our individual backgrounds in arts-based research. We practiced patience and flexibility in embracing the unknown, guiding students, but holding the guidance loosely, wrestling with ambiguity and letting go of control and our expectations (MacLeod & Holdridge, 2013).

As a team of instructors, developing trust in our work together and in the capacity of our students was a big part of our initial mentoring tasks. Through our conversations, our questions, those of our students, keen listening and reading between the lines, we guided students into making work focused on what they cared about deeply.

As instructors with online teaching experience we acknowledged that the pursuit of social presence and connection with students demands open, attentive and sustained communication. To that effect, students were asked to keep a research journal that provided a private exchange with their facilitator/mentor. Uploaded weekly to the online learning course site, and embedding various media, these journal entries allowed an ongoing and reflective exchange that gave instructors deeper insights into the students' thought processes, allowing them to provide personalized assistance in navigating their research. Another application offered a class-wide discussion forum inviting students to post comments and share ideas with peers. Using the journal entries, as well as frequent individual online meetings allowed trust to develop and students research processes to develop both as deeply personal and collaborative endeavors.

In their choices of materials and artistic processes, students elected to work with sculpture, embroidery, painting, “live” painting, performance, photography, installation, ceramics, and virtual reality, to name a few. In some instances, students' research topics overlapped, but were approached and developed in different ways.

In presenting a selection of their research projects, we include excerpts from students' support papers, artist statements, along with samples of artwork, privileging the spontaneity and timeliness that came through in their research journals. We opted to introduce students with whom three of us worked individually, emphasizing their voices while narrating our interpretation of their processes and evolving relationships, as the semester unfolded.



Figure 1. Kulis, E. (2019e). Research journal [mixed media].



Figure 2. Kulis, E. (2019a). Dorothy's house from *Relics of Home* [mixed media]. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

Students' experiences

Erin's memory Anchors (in the voice of instructor CR)

Erin knew from Week 1 of the course that she would explore "the phenomenon of feeling at home through the use of objects, created, kept, or remembered as instruments or vessels of memory" (E. Kulis, research journal, January 28, 2019f). In the beginning, as her instructor, I insisted that her idea was too broad. I urged her to narrow down and concretize her topic, but she gently pushed back by submitting thoughtfully articulated

journal entries coupled with visual sketchbook pages depicting her developing ideas around home, memories, and objects. I noticed that the way Erin almost innately dug into her research interest resonated with how Sullivan (1996) describes the artist's inquiry process as being inherently non-linear, open-ended, interactive, and reflexive. Her creative process throughout the course can also be described as idiosyncratic (Boomgaard, 2011) as she pored over academic journals, historical nonfiction, videos, contemporary artists' works, as well as pushed herself to retrieve personal memories, dreams, and objects from the past.



Figure 3. Kulis, E. (2019b). Luke's room from Relics of Home [mixed media].

The title of Erin's supporting paper, "Objects as Memory Anchors" is based on Arianna Huhn's description of a personal object that anchors or "bears witness to one's life, regardless of its physical properties" (Huhn, 2018, p. 412). Her interest in understanding the relationship between certain objects and personal memories is explained in a journal entry that recalls the time she spent in college as a live-in caretaker for an elderly woman, Dorothy, who suffered from advancing Alzheimer's disease.

The home had been the house that [Dorothy] had raised her children in and had lived in for over fifty years. She often pointed to objects and personal items around the house and told stories to help illustrate the memories of her life. Although she remembered what each item was and what its significance was to her personally, as her state began to unravel, and the disease took hold—she no longer realized that she was still "at home" and she would ask to be driven home to alleviate her feelings of unfamiliarity. In these moments I would attempt to anchor her to the present by pointing out familiar objects in her house so she could remember that these were her items and she was in the place she belonged. I began to wonder which items I could use to hold her in the present, by connecting with familiar parts of her past. (Kulis, 2019c, p. 4)

In Week 5, Erin decided that her final art project would be a dollhouse with five separate rooms—each room accompanied by a story about a home she lived in with objects that are anchored to her memories (Figure 2). She drew inspiration from artists such as Lori Nix, a photographer known for creating elaborately made dioramas, and Charles Matton, a sculptor who made intricate miniature enclosures. Erin was also "intrigued by Joseph Cornell's arrangements inside boxes and anything that was like looking into a small separate world" (E. Kulis, research journal, February 25, 2019f).

In Week 7 Erin shared a photo of two smiling children with a caption, "My childhood friend Luke and I, making popcorn."

My best friend growing up had a big brown bunk bed in a room with a sliding glass door to outside and octagonal windows... We created maps of far away lands and pretended we were pirates on a raft floating out into the pond behind their house. We covered his ceiling with glow in the dark stars and dreamed we were in space.

Luke passed away at age 19, when I was 20 in a biking accident. Soon after his death I remember lying on his bed staring at the ceiling for twenty minutes, wanting to sink into the blanket to become part of the furniture and simultaneously never go into his room again. (E. Kulis, research journal, March 11, 2019f)

After Week 7, Erin's journal entries became shorter, more efficient, and they hardly included images.

Erin titled her dollhouse sculpture, *Relics of Home*. Her artist statement captured not only her work, but also how I would describe Erin's entire project and process—ephemeral and grounded.

An embroidered napkin, a sewing thimble, an old guitar pick; these things could be hurriedly shoved into a junk drawer or displayed proudly behind a frame. One item may bring a person to tears only to be thrown away by someone else. Why do we keep? ... Do things have a spirit that is evoked through physical engagement and are our minds wired to store our memories within things like buried time capsules for safekeeping?

Through this piece I seek to discover the importance of object memory by confronting my own past, the homes I've lived in and the objects within them that have illustrated the memories of my life. Through this work I have remembered, I have grieved, and I have found closure to feelings of homesickness and displacement for the lost homes of my past. (E. Kulis, artist statement, May 8, 2019c)

Tim's live paintings (in the voice of instructor DIV)

Tim's initial research questions focused on pedagogy, social justice themes, and how making art about issues in society might motivate his students. As his instructor, I saw his heart for social justice and his initial desire for giving personal 'voice' to his own students through his research. However, in this arts-based research course I hoped for Tim to give himself the freedom to do the same. At week three Tim wrote in his journal entry, " I have been thinking a lot about the comments I received on my last journal entry. What do I want from myself as an artist and researcher and how can I use it to strengthen myself as a teacher? (T. Chaves, research journal, February, 11, 2019c).



Figure 4. Chaves (2019b). Live painting [mixed media].

This is where the unlocking of Tim's own artwork began. Sameshima and Knowles (2008) talk about the student-mentor role in arts-based research and finding the balance between guidance and support—how to “guide something for which there is no path to follow” (p. 111). It was in a synergistic process of back and forth dialogue—through his reflective journal and my responses, his writing for assignments and my feedback, course readings, and talking in our live Zoom[©] classrooms, that Tim began to situate himself in both his story and the artistic path he wanted to follow, as reflected in his journal:

After my trip to Italy I created abstract paintings inspired by photographs I had taken of the walls of aged architecture. I was inspired by the layers of time from the rotting of material to new and old paint, to graffiti covering those layers as a symbol of contemporary day. (T. Chaves, research worksheet, February 20, 2019c)

When I read Tim's reflection, my intuitive response to his memories was to nudge him to focus on his own artwork through the lens of his lived experience, while also fostering his desire to activate students' inquiries into social justice issues in his classroom. Writing back to Tim, I mirrored his expressed interest in exploring social justice issues and the layering of the age-old wounds of segregation, colonialism, and the effects of other power structures on educational systems in this country—and ultimately students' personal lives. I supported his intent to consider creating work together with his middle school students that dealt with issues of social justice, but I also nudged him to embrace his own art as a form of knowing.

While wrestling with his exact theoretical framework and methodology, a week later Tim was giving himself the freedom to pursue this arts-based research and had situated himself within the work. His artistic inquiry focused on what it was like to be a member in the LGBTQIA community in Boston and explored what adversities and social issues affect people in this population from the 1980s to today. He wrote in his journal about his plan:

I think I want to interpret this through layered mixed media paintings just [as] you suggested how layers of time can be seen in the walls of architecture. I want to represent the many layers of discrimination, segregation, and prejudice throughout the years and symbolize the contemporary mark of hope and equality. (T. Chaves, research journal, February 25, 2019c)

Like doors unlocked, Tim's own artwork as inspired by layering and unlocking, did indeed open up. Referring to his new research as *live paintings*, he would work continuously over several days and add new narratives and layers each day, inspired “by both experience and experiment,” as he put it (T. Chaves, support paper, May 8, 2019c). Tim's reflections on his literal interest in layering led him to linking critical reflection with critical action (Sullivan, 2006).



Figure 5. Chaves (2019a). Accept yourself [mixed media].

Tim's artwork, also influenced by social interviews he conducted, explored themes of self-acceptance, identity, conformity, and how external pressures and social acceptance of the LGBTQIA group in community have changed and evolved over time. Further into this article, we address this idea of unlocking and layering in students' arts-based research.

Whitney's voices (in the voice of instructor DIV)

In a word, Whitney's arts-based research project was all about empathy. She developed what she called, "an empathetic approach to inquiry," as she desired to "evoke empathy and understanding of students' personal worlds," with the goal of capturing her students' lived experiences in her

artwork in order to “establish a presence for them ...” (W. Bates, support paper, May 8, 2019). In her words:

I am interested in the different experiences of people from diverse backgrounds, locations, and races ... Portraying these ideas is sometimes challenging because I do not want to appropriate or misrepresent an experience that I do not fully understand because I have not experienced it. (W. Bates, research worksheet, February 17, 2019a)

Like many graduate students who are already teachers, Whitney’s first research ideas leaned toward arts-based education research (ABER) rather than arts-based research (ABR). After reading about practice-based inquiry such as a/r/tography (Irwin, 2013), she became increasingly interested in how her personal art practice might be more integrated with her teaching and research inquiries into students’ many ways of knowing (McNiff, 2008). A/r/tography is a type of practice-based, phenomenological inquiry that recognizes the overlapping roles of one’s art practice, teaching, and research (Irwin, 2013; Irwin & Springgay, 2008).



Figure 6. Bates (2019c). Unicorn fairyland [mixed media].

Inspired also by the work of artists such as Käthe Kollwitz who painted the adverse experiences of others and international street artists she had observed who work alongside local child artists to tell their stories (Artolution, 2020), Whitney began to combine her interest in a/r/tography

(Sameshima & Knowles, 2008) and arts-informed inquiry (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2014); she wanted to visually narrate the human experiences and memories of her students, commenting:

It seems very fitting to use a/r/tography and art-informed inquiry practices in this study... However, I am sort of stuck with *how* I will use arts-based approaches to study this idea, because... I have never attempted to present a larger phenomenon, or research, though art... (W. Bates, research journal, February 4, 2019a)

As her instructor, I suggested that Whitney's inquiries could follow more of her *own* personal ideas and interests in visually narrating human experience, identity, and memory. Her stuck-ness wouldn't last long, and her 'ah-ha' moment came in week five while reading Savin and Wimpenny's (2014) holistic perspectives on a/r/tography. In her journal she wrote,

I thought: what if I reverse this idea and try to find the interdisciplinary connections my students make organically? And what if I expand the idea of interdisciplinarity to outside of school, to students' life experiences? This is where I began to feel like I engaged my artist self in the mix. (W. Bates, research journal, February 16, 2019a)



Figure 7. Bates, 2019d. Work in progress [inspired by a kindergarten artist, with reference photo].

Whitney's ideas about artistic practice *as research* took form. She was "becoming a/r/tography" (Irwin, 2013) and mentioned how both her art and teaching would "show up in [her] thoughts and personal life" (W. Bates, progress report, March 4, 2019a). Driven by her research question, "How can art be used as a catalyst for understanding diverse

perspectives?” Whitney began to incorporate the tools, processes, and materials of her students to create her own body of work, while listening to recordings she made of students explaining their ideas. Her hope was to “elevate the status of children’s artwork as authentic portrayals of human experience and thought” (W. Bates, progress report, March 4, 2019a). Whitney saw it as an empathic way to more deeply “understand [students’] unique perspectives of the world” (W. Bates, support paper, May 8, 2019a, p. 4). While interpreting *their* voices through her own work, she was finding her own.

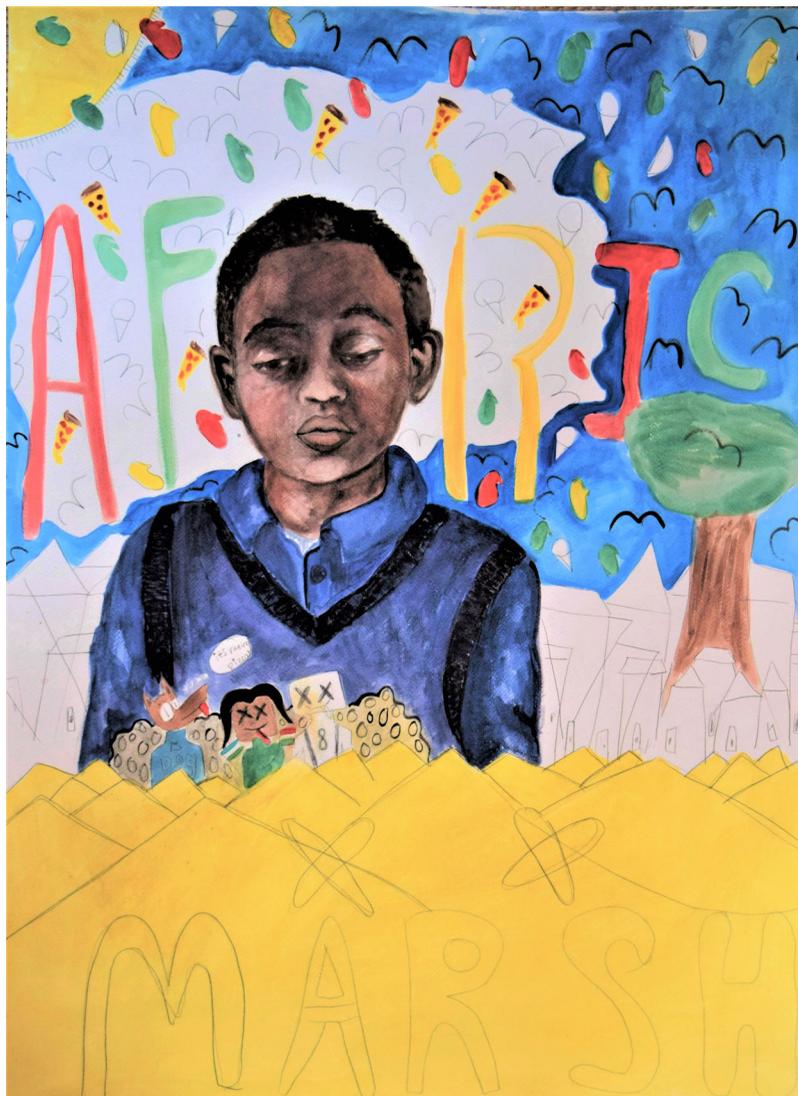


Figure 8. Bates (2019b). This is important to me [mixed media].

In her piece entitled, “This is Important to Me” (see [Figure 8](#)), Whitney illustrated a student’s artistic inquiry in which he combined and juxtaposed drawings of the African continent with yellow, green, and red ‘raining’ from the sky, book characters, and modern celebrities. In his work, the student included the flags of Sierra Leone and Guinea and a brown version of DJ Marshmello. In her interpretation of his thinking and compositions, Whitney marveled at the child’s “seemingly unrelated objects that made perfect sense to him.” In [Figure 8](#), notice the way that she drew the student as a DJ—the one “composing this magical scene” (W. Bates, support paper, May 8, 2019a, p. 21).

Cynthia’s inhabited recollections (In the voice of instructor RB)

In her early attempts at articulating her research focus, Cynthia who had recently moved to a new city and found herself emotionally unsettled, wondered what the concept of home meant to her and how a sense of home could be conveyed through art making. With a touch of melancholy, she added the question, “does the impermanence of life alter the perception of home?” (C. Rosenbluh, Support Paper, May 8, 2019b, p. 4). Throughout the semester, her process was imbued with a range of emotions that made her work deeply personal, but its shared human significance enabled her to discuss and examine the topic with a maturity that reached beyond self-



Figure 9. Rosenbluh (2019a). Beyond brick and mortar: Can the sense of home be conveyed through artmaking? [installation, mixed media].



Figure 10. Rosenbluh (2019a). Beyond brick and mortar: Can the sense of home be conveyed through artmaking? [installation detail, mixed media].

referentiality. She was teaching high school photography at the time, and discovered that the topic of home was a subject her students enjoyed exploring, as it was rife with the possibilities of metaphorical and symbolic imagery. Compelled by her immediate reality and the surge of memories it activated, her arts-based research process brought her back to her childhood. This return journey to her roots echoes Erin's narrative, but the interpretations and work that would emerge from the research differed greatly. In her artist statement, presented at the entrance of her exhibition, Cynthia explained,

As a child, I enjoyed making shoebox houses, I would design rooms with furniture, windows with curtains and matching rugs. I would sit for hours constructing, evaluating and rearranging items used in a home. It seemed appropriate to begin my journey by creating a box house. I expanded my thoughts about home by drawing the floor plans of places where I had once lived. I found the process of making the floor plans to be helpful in analyzing my memories and experiences. Each floor plan is placed on the wall in a linear timeline, beginning with my grandmother's home, childhood home, first apartment, family home, and current home. The floor plans overlap with the next plan creating a modular web connecting the memories. The personal artifacts and photos displayed reflect my memories of a person or experience. (C. Rosenbluh, artist statement, April 25, 2019b)

In working with students like Cynthia, I endeavored to have them explore beyond their own experience, to contextualize their work, and expand their awareness of other artists' interpretation of a similar topic,

perhaps as an equivalent of what a literature review would represent in an academic research. Cynthia had been focused on exploring a private inner font of inspiration to represent her ideas. At times, her research efforts into existing sources appeared reluctant. Eventually, her query led her to the videos of Art21, where the work and words of artists Do Ho Suh and Pepón Osorio resonated with her sentiments. Cynthia also found resources that explained memory and longing from a scientific and empirical perspective. In her support paper she bridged concepts from psychology and memory with commentaries about artist Do Ho Suh's work:

His memories brought him back to his childhood home in Seoul, Korea. Suh describes his need to physically make art to understand what he refers to as his "issues of longing" (Art21, 2003). Marcus (1995) states that, "we hold on to childhood memories of certain places as a kind of psychic anchor, reminding us of where we came from, of what we once were, or how the physical environment nurtured us..." (p. 20). By exploring the meaning of home through art making, a door is opened for psychological self-analysis that leads to new discoveries and richer understandings of ourselves and others. (C. Rosenbluh, support paper, May 8, 2019b, pp. 6-7).

For her interpretation section of the support paper, Cynthia used an epistolary strategy. Phenomenologically, to preserve the sensibilities of the experience, the undertone of reminiscence and longing, her choice of letter writing to her former homes allowed her "to evoke rather than theorize" (Wright, 2019, p. 290). Instead of communicating her interpretation through analytical distance, she intuited that "subjective experiences are much more central to our thoughts, feelings, and understandings of the world" (p. 290). The letters were intended for her former houses, as if these were persons she cherished. In these letters, she reminded the houses of how she felt within their enclosures and of what happened there. To one home that had been demolished, she wrote the letter as an obituary. In *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard (1958) lends to objects a phenomenological reverie that animates them. "A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. We are constantly re-imagining its reality; to distinguish all these images would be to describe the soul of the house" (p. 17). In these letters, and through every house that she mentally revisited, Cynthia reorganized the significant events of her life. In her work, houses were family.

While avoiding a critical analysis of one's artwork may be withholding from the viewer/reader a full appreciation of one's research reflective pursuits, as it demands an immersion in the creative process, a "being-with" that is beyond language, followed by an ability to step outside with an eye to clearly examine and assess, in retrospect, the unfolding and outcomes of one's journey, for some students, the analytical performance could not arise immediately on the heels of the immersion into the studio work. As in the

case of Cynthia's research, when writing the interpretation, she was still engrossed in the subjective soul world of her creative process. The epistolary form became another voice for the same quality of flow and engagement.

Outcomes and discussion

Challenges and wanderings

Alongside the energizing artistic discoveries our students made through their research efforts, every week brought challenges. All students at some point or another found themselves lost and frightened. Ingold's (2018) proposition that one would never really know ahead of time the destination of their research, that much of the process cannot be imposed upon, and "that it never reaches any conclusion" (para 2) became an unsettling truth for most. Beside perhaps the obvious lack of experience and self-confidence with arts-based research, it bears repeating that most of our students were in-service teachers who spent their working days being organized, in charge of children, shouldering responsibilities and rewarded for being in control. As a result, our students pushed back, at times unwilling to see their insecurities, and resisting the process of opening. They also resisted the need to let go of their teachers' identity or to integrate it to that of the artist and the scholar.

As graduate students, letting go of controlling all aspects of their research was a difficult skill to develop. Some had decided the outcome before they began. We reminded them often that the "risk-taking" they ask of their students who engage in school art projects was now becoming real for them too. Suddenly, these values that are promoted to bolster the importance of art in schools became values that they had to integrate and make real. Irwin and O'Donoghue (2012) have noted the same. They write:

While many artists working in our time are committed to finding or creating openings to that which exists beyond the present, we found that for the most part our art teachers [candidates] showed signs of resistance to thinking without structures, to thinking beyond structures, and to imagining a different idea for the structures they perceived ... of their experience in school classrooms. (p. 233)

The systems of schooling our students were used to and the demands that are made on these art teachers "placed them at odds with the unpredictable nature of art and its experience did not move our [candidates] students to change" (Irwin & O'Donoghue, 2012, p. 233), but to resist the expansion into living curiously, to imagine new contexts for the relationship between artistic research and pedagogy.

Another challenge came in helping students navigate the ambiguity associated with understanding their artmaking *as* research. They were challenged to *seeing* their own artwork as data; then trusting themselves to

further create *as* a method of analysis. Our students consistently needed to develop an understanding of how to situate and contextualize their work in culture, time and place. Shortcomings inherent to their previous knowledge preparation became apparent as some students were, at times, unwilling to realize that their interests were not ahistorical and universal and that their work was rooted in specific situational references, alongside the thought and processes of other artists and scholars. Asking questions and holding a mirror to their personal philosophical positions was a first step in having them become attentive to the theories underlying a text or an artwork by another. We spent much time helping them situate their work.

Recurring themes

Layering

The concept of *Layering* was a recurring theme for us, instructors, as we assisted students in addressing their layered identities as artists, teachers, and researchers and their coming into, becoming, and finding their own way as arts-based researchers. One of the first challenges was to help students think about their own practice as research and encourage them to prioritize their own artistic practice—to let go of their focus on research as being connected solely to their educational practice as teachers. Helping them find or re-find their artistic identity meant helping them peel back the layers of identity, as they sometimes struggled to leave their teaching selves as the immediate focus of the research.

Secondly, each of the student examples we have shared represents layers and complexities in these graduate students' inner lives, experiences, and dreams. Actualized through arts-based research, their ideas grew into layers of possibilities. We witnessed how important it is as facilitators to help novice arts-based researchers listen to their own heart in this process.

At the same time, a level of un-layering was needed to help students understand that arts-based research is by nature, a generative, layered process—especially when it comes to data analysis—one that some students found difficult to embrace (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008, p. 99-100). In arts-based research, we know that creating art can become the data, which in turn “may also be a method of data analysis as well as a means of data representation.” Sameshima et al. (2019) talk about peeling back the layers of meaning of collected data by “materializing and representing” the learning (p. 5).

However, we found it difficult to coax several students out of their pre-conceived ideas about research to accept that in arts-based research analyzing or interpreting the data could “result in the creation of new artifacts based on the original data,” as Sameshima et al. reminds us (2019, p. 7).

Those students who did embrace this layered process, kept making in order to understand, and kept pushing to ask the questions that seemed to generate work that became richer with each layer of meaning they unearthed.

Tim's research is a good example of the benefit of embracing the concept of layering—both literally and metaphorically. Initially inspired by ancient walls in architecture that were painted with current day graffiti, he engaged in art-based inquiries that led to the creation of collages exploring issues of social justice, layered with realities unearthed in interviews he conducted in the LGBTQIA community, and his personal experiences as a gay man. His students would then benefit from his deep inner work and experimentation, as he led them to critical action in original works related to identity, social norms, prejudice, and discrimination.

Unknowing

The wise cliché goes that in order to find one's own way, it is important to get lost. The image it calls forth is often that of a forest or mountains shrouded in clouds, probably a gift from studies on mythology by Joseph Campbell (1949). To show our students that their quest for something beyond what they already knew was the labor of any hero's journey, may have made them roll their eyes in youthful disbelief. The truth however, is that for research to reveal new understandings, one has to let go, to start with unknowing. We saw how reluctant our students were in letting themselves be taken by a research of which they knew not the outcome nor controlled the process. Loss of control, loss of solid ground under their feet was a difficult yet necessary threshold to cross. As in the a/r/tographical process, the researcher is vulnerable, and the "living inquiry ... breathes and moves through difficult spaces of un/knowing" (Springgay et al., 2008, p. 336). These spaces of unknowing are uncomfortable for teachers who are used to structure and work hard to stay in control of their class to avoid chaos. For one student teaching elementary and middle school art at an international school in Asia, being structured in all aspects of being a teacher was the norm. She also noted that she was not making any art due to her work commitment. This student was clear from the beginning of the course that she was interested in research that would involve her international students and her (British system) curriculum. She resisted picking up materials and tools to create art when she was urged to do so during the first few weeks of the course, which is when we tell students to begin exploring their artmaking without any expected outcomes. Instead, the student stuck to writing texts on photographed images on her iPad[®].

Through her journal entries and assignments, it became evident that she was assuming that the experiences of her international students and teaching

echoed her own childhood peripatetic experience which had spanned four continents. Eventually, the artworks and biographies of contemporary artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija revealed to her the practice of artists who knew similar experiences. The discovery forced the deepening of reflections on her own 'international' experiences of uprootedness. She was inspired by the artists' stories, their art practices, and their use of different materials to evoke meaning, which became catalysts for her to get back to making art.

It was through the process of creating a triptych collage that incorporated found materials from personal objects such as old passport pages, letters, and photos that gave this student a deeper insight into her own unique experience as an international student in the 90's. This process resonates with Ingold's (2018) description of how one encounters research, "to be attentive to that which always escapes, always overflows our most determined attempts to pin things down" (III, para 3). The "essence of research" he contends is "being-inside it" (IV, para 4). And to be inside sometimes takes the step to unlearn, or what we call the process of Unknowing.

In a similar line of thought, Irwin and O'Donoghue (2012) write about the important position of "being with" for teacher candidates who might have attachments to certain ideas that they have learned over time. They expound the importance for teachers to constantly challenge their long-held beliefs through the "...processes of undoing, making uncertain or extending knowledge, [for] there is always the potential for other ways of knowing to emerge. (p. 226).

For this student who came into the course with a preconceived idea for her research, a new direction opened up only when she stepped back to examine the nuanced and unique experiences of contemporary artists who were similarly 'international' in their upbringing. Through her arts-based research, this student challenged her long-held certainties and assumptions about international students. By allowing herself to be vulnerable and open through the artmaking process, she also realized how her strict adherence to curricular structures and teaching had cornered her into a certain way of doing and knowing.

Unlocking

Mika Hannula (2009) suggests that in artistic research, there is a "democracy of experiences" (p. 4), which means that there is no *a priori* hierarchy of experience (Hannula, 2009). While the three salient themes that we metaphorically call, Layering, Unknowing, and Unlocking are not linear or hierarchical, the *Unlocking* cannot happen without the prior two themes that have been described.

In order to unlock, or arrive at the “aha” moments, which happened at different phases for each student, they had to democratically gather their lived experiences as artists, teachers, and other roles with which they identified as individuals. Not all of the experiences were relevant to the research, but in order to unlock a felt correspondence with a methodological approach, answer or break through research questions, or even, to arrive at their research questions, they had to be “willin[g] to put [their] views and works out there, [and] transparently... articulate and communicate...” (Hannula, 2009, p. 4) what they were doing with us. Hannula (2009) also stresses the importance of playfulness, of “shift[ing] the focus away from putting things into a box and then using all our energy to keep the box locked, solid, and stable (p. 6).

Students were encouraged to explore in multiple directions and foster plurality in their doing and thinking while they created their work and informed themselves through reading and discovering other artists’ works. Since many of them were artists in their own right, this almost cyclical process of making and reflecting in a self-critical way was not a real stretch when they returned to the groove of artmaking. However, since they were almost all novice art-based researchers, as facilitators, we had to eventually guide them to specificity while they were simultaneously still *Layering* and *Unknowing*.

Thus, the *Unlocking* moments happened when students were able to democratize their artistic experiences *and* contextualize their inquiry within existing research frameworks. One such case occurred with a student who pursued a deeply personal research embodied in textile materials which she had selected for their expressive conduits. The materials offered a multi-sensorial and metaphorical experience. She chose them for her familiarity with the skills they required, but also because she hoped to find in their manipulation the key to express ideas subtly, in an alternative language, as she always had struggled with words, with self confidence in speaking her thoughts, and in making art that would “expose” her reality. She had also chosen the materiality of textiles because they connected her with the family matriarchs who had taught her weaving and embroidery. From the onset, threads and weaving were metaphors for connections and for a necessary disentanglement, a search for voice and affirmation. The colors and motifs were carefully selected for their meaningful contribution to the ideas she wanted to communicate, as if color was a first step toward an external representation of deeply buried utterances.

Throughout the project, she busily embroidered obscure messages and icons on fabric pages. She was making a book, where she was somehow mastering a way to inscribe something of importance without saying it. As she worked, she attempted to be present with and analyze her state of

mind, using "an ongoing, recursive process" (Butler-Kisber, 2018, p. 63). Her initial choice of methodology was phenomenological inquiry because it allowed her to engage spatially, temporally, emotionally, and corporally with the reflective process (Van Manen, 2014).

As the student worked to unlock doors to her expressive aspirations, she dreaded writing a support paper where results and analysis, referred to in our course as *interpretation*, would have to be presented in writing to "intellectualize [her] awareness" (Van Manen, 2014, p. 242). The passage from embroidery to words on a page represented for her an impassable threshold.

While one envisions unlocking as an epiphanic aha moment, in some cases, it is a long arduous process, a letting-go of fears and barriers. In finding ways through the final threshold of writing, of having to communicate, our embroiderer of secrets spoke in poetry. Van Manen (2014) has suggested that in phenomenology, one could not divorce the spirit of the research from its results. "To summarize a poem in order to present the result would destroy the result because the poem itself is the result. The poem is the thing... phenomenology, not unlike poetry is a vocative project; it tries an incantative, evocative speaking, a primal telling" (p. 241).

Unfinished reflections

In this article, we revisited and reflected upon our students' efforts at exploring, embedding, and integrating the arts in their educational research. We have sought to demonstrate and bear witness to their identity as teaching artists which transformed in the process of making and thinking in, with, and through arts-based inquiry. Our story provides an example of how students may benefit from instructors establishing a flexible pedagogy within an organized and dynamic framework that allows students' creativity to flourish.

In our conversations with students and between ourselves, we acknowledged that the productive moments of "knowing-in-being" (Ingold, 2018, IV, para 4) convinced us that for art teachers, this approach to investigation did more than initiate them to art education research and expand the boundaries of the discipline. Their questions and art processes, articulated and produced through such methodologies as a/r/tography and phenomenology broadened their self-perception as artists and teachers, and deepened their appreciation of the potentiality of artistic investigations, and its pedagogies. We argued that arts-based research revealed to students that art as a vibrant way of knowing often takes roots outside control and apparent logic, resonating through multiple planes that necessitate steps into the layering, unknowing and unlocking of lived experiences. If artistic

exploration in uncharted territory proved frightening, our students learned to trust their capabilities, and can now bring their own students through. Their arts-based research experience will have made them better artists. As a consequence, their future curriculum design and pedagogy will demonstrate their ability to be increasingly learner-centered, and to teach inquiry-based methods that are process-oriented, emergent, and attuned to their environment. Teachers' main responsibilities to develop minds, and to form attentive, aware, and critical thinkers are always important, and even more so now in this time of uncertainty and unknowing.

Again, and again, as guiding faculty, we came back to our love of questions and the infinite ways they can be investigated.

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves... And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. (Rilke, 1993, p. 35)

We asked our students to stay willing to live in the questions, and find their voice; to trust that their inquiries can make a difference in their own and the lives of their students. As a pedagogical strategy and curricular choice, transformative research raises more questions than it answers. For this reason, it is unfinished and forever open. In its determination to keep moving forward, its process is organic, complex, and immersive. It embraces unexpected outcomes and inevitably leads to new explorations.

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