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# Where are the five chapters?: Challenges and opportunities in mentoring students with art-based dissertations

## ABSTRACT

*This article explores the author's experiences of serving on dissertation committees in which a primary methodology is art-based. Experiences at two different universities, one a state university in the United States and one an international graduate school in Europe, reveal both challenges and opportunities discovered in working with these new methodologies. The author reflects on her experiences with the student researchers, with faculty colleagues, with the institutional cultures of the universities, and with the author's own struggles to learn new ways of thinking about the world of researchers conducting narrative, ritual, movement, musical, performative, poetic and visual forms of enquiry.*

## KEYWORDS

art/tography  
art as inquiry  
art-based dissertations  
art-based research  
dissertation mentoring  
expressive arts therapy  
research

## INTRODUCTION

To the Gods and Goddesses of Research  
Give us then the courage  
To challenge the privileged paradigm  
To break the illusion of objectivity

To carry lightly the loud weight of words  
For we are longing for poetry  
Woven through with dance  
And drama performed with music  
Let us look with both eyes open  
At our unexamined subjectivities  
Let us crack the categories of our thinking  
And find an epistemology of the senses  
Where wonder and passion interplay with reason.

(Sally Atkins)

Art-based research challenges the comfort zone of many academics. My first encounter with art-based research in academe was a meeting with a new faculty colleague who had done her dissertation work using, among other methods, her own painting as a way of processing, analysing and presenting the stories of her participants. My colleague also had presented her findings in dramatic form as a reader's theatre piece. In addition to the quality of her scholarship, her use of the arts as a mode of enquiry was both impressive and exciting. I was struck with how the artistic forms of enquiry and presentation enhanced the emotional and visceral impact of her work. I wanted to know more, and soon I was excited to find *Art-Based Research* (McNiff 1998), the pioneering book about art-based research in the field of expressive arts therapy in which I teach and practice.

Since that time I have continued to explore the literature emerging in art-based and arts-informed research. My exploration has included the work of Eisner and Barone (2011) at Stanford University, the work of Irwin and de Cosson (2004) at the University of British Columbia, the work of Springgay et al. (2008), the work of Leavy (2009) at Stonehill College, the work of Clark/Keefe (2010) at Appalachian State University, and the comprehensive handbook of Knowles and Cole (2008). These are only a few of the new books quickly emerging around the idea of art as enquiry.

I have discovered art-based research in familiar journals like *The Arts in Psychotherapy*. I have also discovered art-based research in many journals that were new to me, including the *Journal of Applied Arts and Health*, the *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *Qualitative Health Research* and *Qualitative Inquiry*. Not unlike others in my field, I was not exposed to art-based research methodology in my own academic training, so I remain a novice in the field.

## PERSONAL BACKGROUND

Art-making as a method of personal enquiry is basic to my practice of expressive arts therapy and consistent with theories and practice in the therapeutic field (Allen 1995; Knill et al. 2005; McNiff 1998). Currently I teach and practice in graduate programmes in expressive arts therapy at two universities. As a teacher and practitioner of expressive arts therapy and as a poet, I have experienced art-making as a process of asking questions and opening issues, as a way of knowing, as Pat Allen (1995) has put it, in my university classes, in my clinical supervision work and in my personal life.

My background in the behavioural sciences in the early 1970s was heavily influenced by the positivist paradigm of the times. Experimental methodologies were considered the best, if not the only way to conduct research, the only way of seeking answers to important questions in a scholarly manner. Despite

Thomas Kuhn's (1962) admonishment that we were then entering a period of paradigm shift, the dominance of the positivist paradigm was absolute in my academic setting. I felt even then that I was being schooled in what the philosopher, Parker Palmer (1983), calls a one-eyed way of knowing, the western scientific method, a methodology and a worldview which has dominated not only the social sciences, but also much of western thought, culture and civilization for more than 200 years.

At the same time that I was conducting an experimental study for my own dissertation, I was working part time as a research interviewer with a noted sociologist at a nearby medical school. There I was learning the skills of personal interviewing, seeing the limitations of numbers, graphs and check marks in boxes to give voice to the complexity of the human story. Also during this time I was seriously engaged in the practice of writing poetry, which began for me at age 9 and has continued throughout my life. I remember vividly an encounter with my dissertation advisor in which he told me in a very condescending way that I wrote like a poet. Despite his intended meaning, I took his comment as a compliment, though it never occurred to me at the time that one could combine poetry and research.

During my career I frequently have worked in multidisciplinary research teams that included researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds and focused on more qualitative research methods, primarily from anthropological research traditions. I have felt the limitations of different forms of academic research to address adequately the complex questions of human experience. I feel that art-based methodologies offer exciting possibilities for research in the field of expressive arts therapy, and that they have the potential to offer significant contributions to research methodology in many fields. I am inspired to read and study further in this exciting field.

## **DISSERTATION STUDIES**

Currently I am serving on four doctoral dissertation committees related to expressive arts therapy or education in which a form of art-based or arts-informed research is a primary methodology. Two of these dissertations are being conducted within the context of a doctoral programme at a private international graduate school in Europe in which the arts are central to the university mission. The other two studies are being conducted as a part of a doctoral programme within a comprehensive state university. Each institution requires impressive rigour both in the methodology and in the writing of the dissertation. In both academic contexts, the use of art-based research as a formal methodology is relatively new within the institutional culture. Each of the studies involves a different dissertation committee, and each institution employs differing processes for review of the dissertation. All of the studies are at different stages of progress, and none has as yet been completed.

### ***Dissertations at a private graduate school***

The first two dissertations are being conducted within the context of a private university in Europe, which is devoted to graduate studies in interdisciplinary art-based approaches to philosophy, health and communications. I serve as a core faculty member of this university and teach there in the summer sessions. At present none of the faculty serving on these dissertation committees has had specific formal training in art-based research methodologies. Committee faculty members represent different academic disciplines and come from

different countries around the world. At this university, theses and dissertations typically are expected to include an artistic component, although there is no requirement that students use a strictly art-based methodology. Because of the interdisciplinary and international nature of this university, academic writing products include many disciplinary forms and genres. In the tradition of European doctoral work, students receive little coursework in specific research methods. Learning how to conduct research occurs primarily within the context of the mentoring relationship with the dissertation advisor. Of the two dissertations at this university, one dissertation involves a collective case study methodology with an art-based component of the interview process. The other employs the methodology of a/r/tography (Irwin and de Cosson 2004; Springgay et al. 2008).

In the first dissertation, the researcher is exploring intergenerational effects of past trauma. The primary research methodology is that of a collective case study of descendants of trauma victims, which includes in-depth interviews with the participants. Embedded within the primary methodology is the use of a variation of decentering (Knill et al. 2005), a therapeutic method of moving away from the primary focus of the interaction into an art-making experience as enquiry before returning to the issue at hand. Adapting the therapeutic use of art-making as enquiry into a presenting problem, the researcher in this study uses an excursion into visual art-making to explore the possibility that the decentering experience will expand what is shared in the interview process. The researcher facilitates participant reflection on the art-making process and product in order to elicit more elaborated information in the interview. In this collective case study visual art and poetry are also used as methods of data collection, as data sources, and as data analysis and presentation.

In the second dissertation, the researcher uses a/r/tography as the primary methodology. The researcher in this study explores the experiences of women clients participating in ongoing art-making experiences in a private expressive arts studio and examines the impact that these experiences have on their lives. Consistent with the practices of a/r/tography, this dissertation is multi-layered. The researcher in the study uses intermodal expressive arts, including her own and her clients' poetry, visual art, movement, ritual and performance in a variety of ways at every stage of the work to explore the research question and to analyse and share the research findings.

### ***Dissertations at a state university***

The third and fourth dissertations are being conducted within a doctoral programme within the state university in which I teach full time. Faculty involved in the dissertation committees at this university can include qualified faculty from any discipline. In this university the doctoral programme has a broad focus on educational leadership. Students participate in formal coursework in research methodologies, including quantitative, qualitative and art-based methods. The university has one internationally known and respected art-based research methodologist on the faculty, and this faculty member typically serves on dissertation committees in which the researcher uses art-based methodology. This faculty member also serves on the university's Institutional Review Board.

In the third dissertation the researcher is exploring what is actually happening, moment to moment in experiential art-based activities used within the context of graduate classes in expressive arts therapy. The researcher is

using detailed observation and artistic responding as well as in-depth interviews with participants to explore students' experiences of in-class arts-based activities designed to expand learning about the therapeutic potential of art-making.

In the fourth dissertation the research is in the beginning stage. The researcher is also planning to employ the methodology of *artography* and has assembled an interesting dissertation committee including an art-based research methodologist, an educational philosopher, an environmentalist and an expressive arts therapist. This researcher will explore the question of how higher education can better prepare teachers for the complicated times in which we live, facing the global destruction of species and social systems.

## **CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN WORKING WITH ART-BASED DISSERTATIONS**

It is interesting to see that art-based research is being encouraged and supported in both of these two very different academic institutions, and it is also apparent that using art-based research in a dissertation presents some unique challenges as well as some unique opportunities in each institution. In my work on these dissertation committees, challenges encountered have included challenges with the student researchers, challenges in working with faculty colleagues, challenges within the institutional cultures and challenges with me as a novice in the field.

### **Challenges**

Art-based dissertations do not look like traditional dissertations. Faculty members unfamiliar with art-based research sometimes fail to see that they include the standard 'five chapters'. Reviewers still want to see clearly that the dissertation includes at least the following chapters: (1) Introduction, (2) Review of the literature, (3) Methodology, (4) Findings and (5) Discussion. Art-based dissertations typically have included more than the content of the five chapters, though the standard content may not be immediately observable. Often art-based researchers use evocative metaphorical chapter titles, share detailed and elaborated information about methodology and findings and interweave their literature review with their own conceptual framework.

It is interesting, but is it research? Working with a newly emerging field generally requires a more elaborated rationale and explanation for its use. This is especially true in the area of academic research. Even for seasoned academics, using art-based research requires justification, especially to colleagues unfamiliar with these new methodologies. For doctoral students as novice researchers, the importance of clear, careful and systematic work becomes an absolute necessity. As we have learned from experience, we need to explain and justify what art-based research is and why it is appropriate for the particular research question. This need for clear rationale and clear explanation of the methodologies will likely continue in the situations in which I work.

Students still must write in complete sentences (unless it is poetry). In one committee meeting, working with a bright and creative student who describes herself as a visual thinker, surprisingly I found myself becoming the 'grammar grinch' of the committee. Seeing real problems in basic writing skills, I was grateful to be able to refer her to the university's writing centre for support. The brilliantly detailed and beautiful visual maps she had created to convey

her ideas still had to be explained in clear narrative form as well. In another situation, I found myself advisor to a native German speaker who was writing her dissertation in English. As both of us began to realize the vast differences between German and English sentence and paragraph structure and general style of academic writing and organization, it became clear that this student would need extra editing help to convey her ideas in a clear and coherent form. Her paintings and poetic renderings were indeed compelling, and she needed also the narrative form and structure of the dissertation to elaborate her methods and findings. I am reminded that just as each study is unique, each student is unique. There is no standardized guidebook for mentoring creative work. When pushed about deadlines, one student shuts down, while another needs to be held accountable.

Faculty committees can mean possibilities or purgatory. Faculty committees assembled for any purpose in most institutions can be notoriously challenging. Faculty committee members typically are from different academic disciplines in the arts, education, humanities and the social sciences. Their interactions are complicated by differing methodological traditions and different language domains within the academic disciplines. In an international setting, there are the additional barriers of language and culture. In both universities of my experience, some colleagues find the terminology and methods of art-based research confusing and suspicious. It is very helpful to have at least one faculty member familiar with and supportive of these methodologies.

Institutional cultures still favour traditional research. Even for those open to art-based methods, other qualitative methods are often expected. Art-based methods are sometimes seen as adjunctive to surveys or interviews. Postmodern views of the reality of multiple subjectivities are often met with suspicion by those who define research as the scientific method. The role of the personal perspective, a cornerstone of art-based research, is especially subject to questioning, and the researcher must be prepared to defend the choice to include the personal as important data within the research project.

### **Opportunities**

Along with the challenges presented by mentoring art-based research dissertations have come some incredibly valuable opportunities. For me the biggest opportunity has been the requirement to learn about a new way of thinking about and conducting research. As an academic, I have been involved in research and publication throughout my career, and this is for me the most exciting form of research currently being done.

My reading and study, and especially my connections with faculty colleagues, have offered me tremendous opportunities for new learning. As committee members we have come to value our own and each other's differing viewpoints in meeting the challenges presented. We have supported each other in navigating the territories between linear structure and creative spontaneity and in questioning the relevance of the traditional template of the dissertation. I find it especially exciting to be in those places where the students are leading the way, asking us as faculty to keep up with them. These dissertation committees have become enriching and inspiring communities of learning.

I have discovered that as a methodology for research in the field of expressive arts therapy, art-based research is entirely consistent with emerging theory and practice. Using art-based research as a methodology also stands firmly and appropriately in contrast with long-standing practices

in therapy of making art adjunctive and subservient to theories of the social sciences. Realizing the power of the arts to offer multiple perspectives on any given issue recognizes and honours the complexity inherent in studying human phenomena. Thus this marriage of art-based research methodology with theory and practice in the field of expressive arts therapy is an important contribution towards the growth of both fields.

## SUMMARY

My experience of mentoring doctoral students with art-based dissertations is both challenging and exciting. Like most faculty members, I take the role of a mentor very seriously and invest considerable time and energy in it. Inspired by Celeste Snowber's (2005) encouragement, I see the mentor role as that of an artist, offering deep listening to the creative process as it unfolds in each student's work. One of the biggest challenges for me in working with these dissertations has been my own feelings of inadequacy. When this feeling wants to overwhelm me, I go back to McNiff's (2009) dictum of trusting the process, and I go to my own art-based way of exploring an experience deeply, which is poetry. This is the practice that brought the poem with which I began this article.

For my field of expressive arts therapy, art-based research has a resonance with the basic ways of working with the arts in a therapeutic setting. For some practitioners, the emphasis on the use of the arts remains on their expressive qualities. For many others, myself included, there is a growing emphasis on artmaking as a method of enquiry for bringing to light personal and societal issues, for discovering insights and awareness and for marshalling internal and external resources to meet life's challenges. For me art-based research in all of its many forms is one aspect of recognizing and reclaiming the power of the arts in the service of life.

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