

Becoming an arts-based educational researcher (unfinished)

*Heather McLeod
Memorial University of Newfoundland*

Abstract

I explore becoming an arts-based educational researcher through a short biography of my schooling and three pieces of creative writing. Such an approach to inquiry is capable of persuading us to see educational phenomena in novel ways, and thus to entertain queries that might otherwise remain unasked. The first story is about research in a broad sense in my earliest years, while the second is about searching through art making. The third involves focusing on what it means to become a researcher as an adult and to work collaboratively within a twenty-first century academic setting. Working with notions of bearing witness to myself as researcher and that the personal, the academy, ways of knowing and pedagogy are conjoined I link my research to my teaching.

Introduction

As an art educator I identify with many of Buttignol's (1996, p. 138) descriptors for creative people, "Scattered, reclusive, can be anti-social, mad, exciting, colorful, can be anguished if blocked creatively, driven if in a creative 'flare', misunderstood at times, hard to understand, fun but sometimes scary to be around, people who require freedom and time", however a significant part of my position as an assistant professor involves research and some might say there is a poor fit between Buttignol's descriptors and traditional notions of scientific investigation.

Nevertheless, I prefer to think of research as a notion that is still under development; like me it is involved in a process of becoming. Reflecting on my experiences, here I explore becoming a researcher in relation to a relatively new form of inquiry, arts-based educational research (Barone & Eisner, 2006; 2011; Desai, 2009; Eisner, 1997; Huss and Cwikel, 2005; Knowles & Cole, 2008; Leavy, 2009; McDermott, 2010; Siegesmund & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008).

First I outline my biography in relation to schooling and my developing interests in visual art, history and social justice. Next I briefly summarize arts-based educational research to indicate how this approach allows me to integrate my three interests. Finally, as an example of such research I explore the notions of research and searching through short pieces of creative writing.

Growing up: Art, history and social justice

I grew up in a working class family in British Columbia and we sometimes moved to new communities because of my father's job. In the various schools I attended I was significantly younger than the other children in my class because I'd started school early and was then "skipped" from one grade to the next in the middle of a year. Being new and younger meant that at school I was mostly concerned about making friends. Producing what adults wanted in the classroom was easy therefore I wasn't a particularly hard working student. It was life as reflected in good books and beautiful objects as well as the wonder of the outdoors that fascinated me. Indeed, I very much identified with the words of a poem by Richard Le Gallienne (2008, p.67), which my elocution instructor had me memorize for a competitive performance when I was five:

I Meant to Do My Work Today

I meant to do my work today,
But a brown bird sang in the apple tree,
And a butterfly flitted across the field,
And all the leaves were calling me.

And the wind went sighing over the land,
Tossing the grasses to and fro,
And a rainbow held out its shining hand--
So what could I do but laugh and go?

The prize I won that day quickly vanished but both the words and the poet's implication stuck with me; to focus on 'work' might mean you would miss out on the important and beautiful things which were available on any particular day if only one took the time to notice. Nevertheless, by my teens I realized that teachers and schools could sometimes facilitate exciting adventures. One such opportunity was to become a Rotary exchange scholar in New Zealand, and I managed to convince my parents of the wisdom of letting me go for a year when I was 15. At Wellington East Girls' School my teachers of Art and History were passionate about their subject matter and I glimpsed connections between the daily routine of school, my 'ideal' world of art and literature, and history and social justice issues. The fire with which Miss Campbell, my history teacher, described and analyzed Russia's revolutions convinced me that if I'd been a girl from the poorer classes in that time and place I might well have found myself in the midst of the fray. In the art room Mrs. M. seemed very vulnerable yet most days she found the strength to teach - we students knew that she had been imprisoned as a youth in a concentration camp in Europe and although she never did more than indicate in a general manner her experience of suffering, somehow, and in every way, her intense, dry and somewhat severe presentation of material was suffused with issues of social justice.

My developing interests in visual art, history and social justice influenced the choices I made when I got to university and later in the world of employment, and on reflection I see that over the years I've attempted to knit these strands together. Both my bachelors degree from the University of British Columbia (UBC) and my masters degree from Simon Fraser University were in history where my focus was on issues of social justice. In my late 20s, after having worked my way through numerous interesting but poorly paid arts, social justice and research jobs, going back to university to achieve a professional certificate in education from UBC seemed like a wise move. Next came school teaching positions, where I taught all grade levels from kindergarten to grade 12 including Art, involvement in the British Columbia Teachers' Federation where I served as an assistant director of communications and training for four years, and later work with the provincial government. Meanwhile I maintained my interest in art, picking up courses here and there and always visiting museums and galleries. However, within the various academies I attended art and education felt like separate silos and one did not inform the other. For example, when I took art history and art studio courses in the fine arts I was appalled by certain teaching methods. It seemed that some specialists in the arts had little regard for how they might better facilitate their students' learning. No doubt there were many reasons

for why this was so, nevertheless, I reasoned that we as adult students were not being taught according to the best educational practices.

When in mid career I reflected on the past so as to best plan for the future I could see that I'd spread a wide net in both my education and my professional life choices. I considered pursuing another degree within a fine arts faculty but concluded that education as a field, by virtue of being very broad, was a more workable space for me. Therefore in 2005 I enrolled in a doctoral program in art education at the University of Victoria, where I felt well supported to integrate my interests in a project involving history and art making.

My doctoral research explored the interaction between six families and a particular house, now mine in the city of Victoria, over the course of the last century. Social justice issues emerged which related to the social exclusion experienced by the two families of Chinese heritage within a racist mid-twentieth century Canada. After I completed my dissertation I created "House Very Strong" A Historical Case Study Through Six Visual Text Narratives (Unfinished)(see Figure 1), (McLeod, 2009, a, b, c, d), an arts-based research project from some of the materials I'd gathered. It can be characterized as arts-based research (Barone and Eisner, 2011) in that I seek to persuade the viewer to see the house and people who acted there in a new way, and to ask questions that might otherwise be left unasked.



Figure 1. "House Very Strong" A Historical Case Study Through Six Visual Text Narratives

(Unfinished)

Research Participants: Margaret Leonard, Lena Chow, King Lee, Mrs. Guo, Bjorn and Kirsten Freeman- Benson, Linda Matte, Ian Lawrence, Dale Vanelli.

A series of fridge displays? Social studies bulletin boards? In “House Very Strong” I have explored the experiences and strategies used by six families to claim and personalize space in relation to a particular house. This piece, based on my doctoral dissertation research can be characterized as arts-based research in that it crafts a description of a situation(s) so that it can be seen from another angle. I began with my aesthetic/emotional/ intellectual response to my own house. Interviewing at least one member of each of the families who have lived in it for any significant period since the 1920s, I gradually accumulated a small archive of photographs and other materials contributed by the participants. These are representations of themselves interacting with/in the structure. For this emerging series of narratives I have used these items as well as powerful quotations culled from my interviews to portray a sense of how each family acted upon the house. Issues of representation are important here; I did not take any of these photographs. Acting as the researcher the narratives were, of course, composed by me, however I worked only with what the participants made available to me. (Although there is also a reflexive element to the research, Dale Vanelli, my partner, took the photos that depict our time in the house.) Because Mrs. Guo was not able to provide any visual records, I have chosen to portray her story only through quotes from her interviews, despite the fact that evocative items, including distinctive Chinese vernacular furniture, tools and shoes remain from her family’s time. Here I am persuaded by Marcoux (2001) who found that when moving, householders reconfigured the narratives of their personal biographies through sorting their possessions, which served as mementos. This was the active management of externalized memory, and that which was left behind was no longer required. Reasoning that this may be so for my participants, it would not be appropriate for me to photograph these items as part of Mrs. Guo’s story. (A yet to be created visual work exploring the house as palimpsest from my perspective might be a more sensitive response to these elements.)

House Very Strong was exhibited in two galleries in Canada (2009 a, b,) and two in South Africa (2009, c, d,) where it was also used for teaching purposes. Later I reflected on the dissertation and the various showings of House Very Strong and how this linked to my current teaching (McLeod, 2011). Additionally, theorizing about the social exclusion of one of my participants became fuel for a fruitful collaboration with another researcher (McLeod and Ricketts, in press).

Arts-based educational research and narrative

Many factors have contributed to my development as a researcher and I’ve analyzed my doctoral journey noting that passion, support and serendipity were crucial drivers enabling me to reach my destination (McLeod, in press). However, on reflection, four years after the completion of my dissertation, I see the significance for me of arts-based educational research (ABER), which encourages researchers, teachers, students and community activists to experiment with materials and techniques to produce creative works (Barone & Eisner, 2006; 2011; Desai, 2009; Eisner, 1997; Huss and Cwikel, 2005; Knowles & Cole, 2008; Leavy, 2009; McDermott, 2010; Siegesmund & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008). Such an approach allows for my abiding interests in visual art, history and social justice, thus it is within this genre of work that I’ve begun to carve out a research agenda within the academy.

Barone and Eisner (2006; 2011) argue for ABER noting that such research can enhance perspectives, however they add that unlike other types of postmodernist scientific inquiry, because form and function are interdependent ABER also attends to aesthetic design elements. These elements include format, language, empathic understanding and virtual realities. The authors note, “ABER at its best is capable of persuading the percipient to see educational phenomena in new ways, and to entertain questions about them that might have otherwise been left unasked” (2006, p. 96). They outline three kinds of ABER: narrative construction and storytelling; educational connoisseurship and criticism; and non-literary forms of arts-based inquiry. Their criteria for appraising such research include illuminating effect, generativity, incisiveness and generalizability.

I note that traditional concepts of ‘worthy’ visual art and what makes one a ‘good’ visual artist are steeped in oppressive colonial value systems, so that processes and products of art making that do not adhere to a Eurocentric aesthetic value system including folk, outsider and vernacular art remain marginalized. In relation to ABER, Huss and Cwikel (2005) stand against this view and argue for art as communication, where reactions to an artwork outweigh considerations of the quality of the pieces measured against external aesthetic criteria. Further, Desai (2009) writes that ABER work must “raise questions of how vision is controlled and disciplined in our society and the ways categories, labels, and discourses order particular ways of seeing in our increasingly image-based world” (p.7). Thus, rather than focusing on debates over the definition of art, what makes it good, or who qualifies as a practitioner, I am persuaded by McDermott (2010) who asks whom and what purpose does a work serve, and whether it contributes to change. She concludes that artistic scholarship is successful if it effects change in either the maker or the audience.

I’m also informed by Yeoman’s (2012) conceptions of narrative rooted in literature and cultural studies. Yeoman argues that from the study of the literature we can learn how to effectively tell stories, including research stories in the most engaging ways possible. Additionally, she points out that from cultural studies we can begin to understand how narratives work in society and how they shape our understandings of the world and our actual and potential roles in it. Further, the two ways in which narratives work are sometimes at odds with, or in tension with, each other. For example, binary oppositions can, on the one hand, produce powerful and dramatic stories, while on the other hand they might also produce division along lines of race, sex and class. Yeoman teaches that the standards for such research are substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact and expression of a reality (Richardson, 1994).

Three tales of becoming a researcher

All kinds of research have a story and inherent drama of some kind, and in what follows I adapt a Brechtian (as cited in Yeoman, 2012) dramatic form where individual scenes are discontinuous. I look at the complex process of becoming a researcher from different points of view. There is an effect of “collage”. While Brecht’s original use of the form implied alienation (Yeoman), it seems appropriate here to represent an evolving and unfinished process. Mine are stories of emergence, survival, trust, and becoming. The arts strengthen my research (Knowles and Cole,

2008) and I argue that the academy and ways of knowing as well as pedagogy are tightly interwoven with the personal (Arnold, 2010; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002).

As an art educator I note that painters often create several works at the same time because they may be exploring a concept, technique or material in various ways. Of all the art forms, painting appeals most to me, and as with painting, my choice as a developing researcher has been to engage in several related projects at once. The common theme between my research initiatives is a focus on experience and an exploration of narrative approaches. For example my current funded projects include a study of children's experiential learning in an art gallery, museum and archive setting; a self-study; two initiatives involving narrative methods to access teachers' stories about dress; and one using narrative methods to explore researcher development, collaboration and writing identity.

Below I tell tales. That is through short pieces of creative writing I work in the genre of art-based educational research to explore becoming a researcher. The first story is about research in a broad sense in my earliest years. The second is about searching through art making. The third involves focusing on what it means to become a researcher as an adult and to work collaboratively within a twenty-first century academic setting.

Tale number 1:

Deciding to talk (to further my investigation of the universe)

In my very early years I made little effort to speak. This was unexpected in a family where my father, mother and sister were in constant conversation. My father was a man who loved to read and talk about ideas. He sought out what my mother called "big discussions" and was the undisputed master of serious remarks. Meanwhile, through chatty stories my mother explained people and Christine, my elder sister by two and a half years, chimed in like an expert, chattering with my mother but also clearly destined to have "big discussions" too because of her affinity for books. Analysing, exclaiming, deducing, declaring, pontificating, conjecturing – the waves of loquaciousness washed around and over me.

However talking seemed to involve sitting and I loved to move, and anyways I was busy, busy, busy, with my heady exploration of the world. I specialized in colour, which seemed to manipulate my very physiology! Texture and smell excited me too. My research involved carefully ripping velvety pansy petals from their stems so that I could concentrate on quietly creating my own purple and white designs on the neighbor's front stairs, and I knew that the flesh of yellow daffodil petals on a brisk Vancouver morning tore easily in a crisp straight line. As well, the peppery scent of the frothy blossoms on our Japanese Cherry tree drew me near, (only to learn that the fragile pink petals bruised easily and disintegrated into mush despite my best efforts to be gentle).

So intrigued was I by my investigations that I got into the habit of flipping out of my crib in the morning and leaving the house before the others were awake to expand my study of the surrounding neighbourhood. Nowadays my mother recounts a story that I was eleven months old when I fearlessly toddled away on a midday journey lured by candy. I headed two long blocks down Lillian Road and crossed a suburban street busy with commuter traffic to the neighbourhood grocery store. There I knew that behind the glass counter laid enticing sweets and

brightly coloured packages that required my close inspection. Luckily the clerk knew me and walked me home. This seemed typical; amused and impressed adults were unfailingly around when I needed them.

I continued to rollick wordlessly through my studies until at sixteen months I was laid low by illness and placed overnight in a hospital ward with other children.

The room is vast and we're all in individual cribs placed against the walls. Small arms reach through the metal bars on the sides of the beds. The cold hard rails are far higher than those on my crib at home. I'm in jail and it's at least a mile to the floor. I know that I'm locked in – there'll be no flipping out of here. My parents are gone forever and I don't have words for how I feel; their absence is grayness. My new world oppresses me; the walls are bland beige and the narrow windows at the top of the far wall allow only a thin strip of sunlight into our cavern. The smells of antiseptic and cooked food are strong. Snuffles and whimpers echo. Like the delicate cherry blossoms when they're touched, I'm disintegrating into mush.

Kitty corner in the expanse of space looms a huge boy in faded blue sleepers who grasps the bars of his crib and shakes with rage - he does NOT accept that his parents have gone! At high volume he indignantly screams for his Mommy! Red face and carrot coloured hair. His loud words scare me. I hope that even a gargantuan boy like him can't climb over the top of those bars, survive the massive drop to the floor and get all the way across the room towards me, but I'm not sure. Maybe he can fly? There aren't any helpful adults in the room - only a bunch of sad sick kids in other elevated prisons. The angry boy has words and so far I've been keeping mum, but now it isn't working. I face life alone.

Continuing gray - I've been abandoned and betrayed by my parents. But the next day, surprise, they're back! Grand relief when Mommy takes me into her arms. Color returns. Once we're home I return to my riveting independent investigation of the universe, however now I know that uttering words might be necessary. Not long after my second birthday I speak in complete sentences. My pronunciation is correct and I've no baby words. But the best part is that I can do it while walking and balancing on the wheel I've contrived by placing a rounded ottoman on its side. I roll expertly around our living room and begin to ride the waves of conversation...

Tale number two:

Searching/painted nails

Whipped by the gale, snow sheets flap and I turn my eyes from the narrows in the St. John's January chill.

I gather brushes, canvas, paints,

And moving loose with hands and arms

I locate joy in swabbing middle yellow and light red stains

Daubing dark red blotches, and scribbling marks of Yellow Oxide,

My pencil drags deep through warm buttery hues.

I dabble in pools of liquid red purple.

I work large.

Later water drips down layers of cool Cerulean and Ultramarine blues.
I smear with deepest green
Fool with rags
Dapple my canvas and
Etch a pretty line.
White pigment seeps beneath my fingernails.

Images emerge
I search.

Tale number three:

Collaborative research as knitting

Just as in knitting where strands of twisted fibers connect, so too I've found that one research project is stitched to the next. For example, in 2011 our faculty writing group conceived of a self-study project in which we planned to explore how making art might foster collaboration.¹ We formed a sub-group of people interested in this idea including myself, Sharon Penney, Rhonda Joy and Cecile Badenhorst and assigned areas for separate literature reviews. I located a call for book chapters that focused on arts-based research and collaboration and which sought to include teams as well as scholars from across Canada. Although we queried whether a journal might be a somewhat more prestigious form of dissemination, we decided to pursue this opportunity because several elements of the call resonated with what we were already doing and the argument we wanted to make. We made contact with the editors and they encouraged us to submit our work. I wrote the chapter reflecting on our process as a group and the other members offered timely edits. We found that the experience of working in a collaborative manner to produce the chapter both added to our knowledge of the topic of collaboration and helped to strengthen the general functioning of the writing group. Sharon used knitting as a metaphor for collaboration: "knitting can be compared to collaboration...When people are missing from the group it produces a different feeling, and the same as dropping a stitch while knitting, it leaves a hole in the product...repairing the holes does take skill and mentorship" (McLeod et al., in press).

We submitted our chapter and it was quickly accepted (McLeod et al., in press). Additionally, all authors were invited to attend an SSHRC funded workshop, *Creating together: Participatory, community-based and collaborative arts-based practices and scholarship across Canada* in Montreal in May 2012, and Sharon, Cecile and I took part. There we engaged in an intensive two days of information sharing and collaborative planning of the book. Together all authors agreed upon a process of peer review involving the establishment of teams based on common themes between chapters. Seven individual peers reviewed our chapter and our group reviewed two chapters. The workshop was flexible and well planned yet one of the most positive moments occurred when Sharon taught us how to knit.

Imagine:

¹ The details of how we proceeded with the art making and reflection involved are described elsewhere (McLeod, et al. in press), while here I describe the process of writing the paper and how the project is connected to my current work.

With the clanging of students' pots and pans protests against tuition fee increases still ringing in our ears, in one of Concordia University's towers situated within Montreal's 'Golden Mile', approximately 40 scholars and students are enthusiastically swapping wool samples and learning how to cast on stitches. Sharon lights up as she shares the use of her mother's collection of knitting needles, and the group comes alive! The activity spills over into the rest of our time together and we craft small bits during presentations and break times. John, a scholar/poet, yells, "Got it!" and then explains that throughout his life he's never before been successful at learning how to knit. Sharon takes the many pieces home to Newfoundland and over the summer she creates an intricate hanging sculpture expressing collaboration. Many small figures peep out at the viewer; no one is alone. A close-up photo of her work is chosen by the editors to appear on the book cover.

An added benefit of collaboratively writing the chapter and working with the larger group to produce a cohesive book was that building on the work that the writing group had already completed on the topic of collaboration (Badenhorst et al 2012; Badenhorst et al, 2013; McLeod et al, in press) Cecile and I conceived a series of initiatives in which we are exploring the significance of a robust connection between collaboration, creativity and developing researcher identities. This is important because in the contemporary academy where much emphasis is placed on researcher productivity, there is potential to make a noteworthy contribution on the topic. These initiatives include a research project using narrative methods for which we have already secured funding, and, along with Rhonda Joy, the co-editing of this edition of the *Morning Watch*. As well, the three of us are working to develop both a writing institute and a book.

It's lunchtime on a Friday in January 2013, and the members of our faculty writing group sit around tables grouped together in a fifth floor classroom in the Hickman building. Dorothy is working her way through a salad and Gabrielle munches on bread and fish while tapping out a written record of our weekly meeting. Cecile acts as chair and Sharon Penney suggests that the check-in question, to be answered by everyone in turn, be "What kind of fruit are you today?" After Xuemei's cheery comments likening her mood to a rosy apple, I chuckle and say that I'm feeling a little bruised like my banana. Chris can relate. Next, our agenda develops from updates on collaborative work for presentation at the annual conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education, the scheduling of presentations of members' writing, questions, and any new or unfinished business. Jennifer queries how to bring a novel aspect into her research. We listen attentively and proffer our insights and resources while pondering research traditions and appropriate metaphors. Listening and occasionally taking part in the discussion I draw and take notes using pencil crayons and pens with ink that flows generously. Our customary one and half hours comes to an end and Jennifer thanks everyone for responding to her question. She declares that she's "itching" to get back to her computer to capture ideas in text! We rise to go but Karen lingers in conversation with Sarah and Rhonda. We missed Jackie and Sharon Pelech today. Mary pops back in the room to share the title of a book her mother has just written. We are loosely stitched as a collaborative entity. Knitted together, evolving and growing. We are becoming researchers...

Pedagogical implications

Working with notions of bearing witness to myself as researcher (Nash, 2004) and that the personal, the academy, ways of knowing and pedagogy are conjoined (Arnold, 2010; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002), I link my research to my teaching. For example, when working with students in ED 6394 *Biographical explorations of teaching and learning* I employ "House very strong": Six families, one house, and the life of an arts-based research project (McLeod, 2011), because it demonstrates the use of the arts to effectively tell a research story, which is one of the goals of the course. Students respond well to this piece and some have found the metaphor of a house to be fruitful when telling their own tales. In addition, I recently used *Tale number one: Deciding to talk (to further my investigation of the universe)*, to model how a graduate class can workshop or critique a narrative. The students gave specific feedback, some of which I responded to by changing the text, and some of which I did not. Because *Deciding to Talk* is an integral part of this chapter the result is a product that better attends to Barone and Eisner's (2006) aesthetic design elements of format, language, empathic understanding and virtual realities. Further, I believe it now holds more potential in relation to criteria such as illuminating effect, generativity, incisiveness and generalizability (Barone and Eisner) as well as Richardson's (1994) standards of substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact and expression of a reality.

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