

Reflexive Inquiry, Artistic Selves, and Epistemological Expansion

Heather McLeod, Cecile Badenhorst and Haley Toll

Introduction

As university educators, we are aware of the constant negotiation of selves – home-identities, teaching identities, professional identities – among others. While the systemic conditions in which many of us work provide strong pressures to produce a neo-liberal self that becomes appropriated by others, we believe that being reflexive about the construction and re-construction of selves is an important part of our ethical practice. Reflexive inquiry recognizes our capacity to acknowledge the socialization processes we experience daily and to act with agency to resist these processes if need be. In addition, deepened self-knowledge and critical renegotiation contributes to further reconstructions of self (Lyle, 2013). Reflexivity allows us to view the intertwining of selves, to question how institutional demands shape our pedagogies and often run counter to our values, and to scrutinize ourselves suspiciously for the things we have come to take for granted. At the same time, we recognize the impossibility of the self to be visible and observable to itself and the difficulty of seeing the fleeting, partial parts of ourselves. Identity is inevitably complex, multi-voiced, and always under construction.

In this chapter, we would like to explore the de/construction of our imaginative selves. Metta (2011) argues that imagination has a strong relationship to the assembly of self/selves even as it is part of that de/construction. We suggest that imaginative processes of identity construction create the pathways for the possibilities of future selves while, at the same time, they re-constitute our past selves. These imaginative selves are important for our outward identities as teacher educators because they allow us to speak from different positions: imaginatively, creatively, and artistically. These multiple selves are in a state of interdependence that not only blurs the lines between the professional and the personal, but also actively contributes towards an ethical teaching identity (Allen, 2011).

Through narratives, images, and a post-structural research lens (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016), we explore our hidden art hobbies – home as art and

making paper art dolls – and trouble their position on hierarchies of arts and crafts. We suggest that the de/construction of our artistic selves is imperative for our epistemological expansion and, inevitably, for our engagement with teaching. We narrate self-connections, unstable and fluid as they are, within the discourses that privilege some identities/art and not others. These subjective incursions reveal contradiction and contestation but also sites of rebirth and rejuvenation.

Reflexive Inquiry, Teaching Identities, and Creative Hobbies

With poststructuralism, there is an increasing move towards self-conscious reflexive writing. The urge to turn the spotlight on ourselves as objects of research has become increasingly hard to resist. Yet, reflexivity is also filled with tensions and challenges because it is at the same time both clear and contradictory (Faulkner et al., 2016). On one end of the spectrum reflexivity may be positioned as *realist* where researchers write about themselves and their experiences of being subjects and aim to create an authentic rendition of aspects of their daily lives (Davis et al., 2004). Other end of the spectrum there is no essential self that floats free of discourse. Discursive work is always at play in any act of writing/analyzing, and there are limits to self-consciousness (Lather, 1993). Here, the subject is deconstructed to the point that it is no longer visible. The difficulty is trying to find a middle-ground. We are subjects who read, analyse, and are self-reflexive, and who draw on our own experiences to make sense of the world. We are realists in the sense that we create linear narratives. But we are also aware that, as discursive subjects, we often cannot see beyond our subject-space. There are no secure footholds to both gaze at oneself as the subject as well as to be the object gazed upon. As teachers, we feel it is important to grapple with reflexivity, however elusive and intangible. We recognize and acknowledge that we are always in our texts (and our classrooms) no matter how objectively we try to write or how professionally we perform our teaching. Our struggle is to “avoid realist claims and the reproduction of narrow and oppressive frames that hold social categories in place” while at the same time recognizing that we too are shaped, constructed, and reproduced by language and discourse practices (Davis et al., 2004, p. 368). To do this, we accept that the “self both is and is not a fiction, is unified and transcendent and fragmented and always in process of being constituted, can be spoken of in realist ways and cannot, and that its voice can be claimed as authentic and there is no guarantee of authenticity” (Davis et al., 2004, p. 384). We cannot see ourselves in the multiplicity of fragile, contradictory, and shifting identities but, through continued self-reflexivity, we can begin to know our own positionings – both

constructing and constructed. We can begin “seeing what frames our seeing” (Lather, 1993, p. 676).

In this hall of mirrors, we turn our reflexive inquiry to the selves we usually keep hidden from our academic colleagues. Here we tell stories we were not willing to tell previously (Adams & Holman, 2011). We do so because we want to explore our imaginative artistic selves in relation to our teaching selves. Through this process of narrative and reflexivity, we want to inform our educational practice (Attard, 2012; Lyle, 2013). We move into non-linguistic knowing that does not “owe its life to verbal experiences” (Blumenfeld-Jones, 2016, p. 323). We explore our hidden hobbies as a revealing way of knowing, “the shadow” (McNiff, 2011, p. 393), the parts of ourselves that are not fully understood or incorporated into the selves we show the world. Metta (2011) suggests that imagination is strongly connected to the dis/assembly of selves, especially, we argue, to our teaching selves. Like Snowber (2017), we contend that “wandering into wonder is the art of being, living, teaching” (p. 1).

If leisure involves temporarily escaping, our leisure activities are sources of comfort, pleasure, well-being, and distraction; they can be meditative and soothing, helping us to develop ideas and problem solve (Moddle, 2017). As women who generate domestic arts, we are often told that our work is frivolous and unnecessary. Shame comes from the different regimes of value socially attributed to art/craft (Christensen, 2011) that we have unquestioningly accepted, as well as gendered notions of leisure/craft (Bratich & Brush, 2011). Framed as play, these types of hobbies are frequently seen as trivial, fragmentary, superficial, and separate from serious issues in real life. However, as Christensen (2011) argues, “hobbies are neither as trivial nor as ideologically neutral as they appear” (p. 200). Feminine creative leisure pursuits exist on the sidelines of leisure research and questioning the validity of women’s leisure activities with their domestic qualities can serve to limit women’s choices and identity (Moddle, 2017). Domestic arts and crafts have historically been delegitimized as not being *high art* because of their association with women’s traditional household work (Auther, 2010). Domestic arts have only recently been accepted into privileged art spaces of galleries and museums (Robertson & Vinebaum, 2016). We argue, however, that our projects are on a different level than everyday tasks, and they do not need an explanation or justification. Within these spaces, the construction and re/construction of self can blossom and the dissolution of the self-object dichotomy can occur, creating space for deeper metacognitive meaning-making (Flavell, 1979).

Research Process

For our process, rather than selecting a stable methodology, we used Lather's (2013) metaphor of escape. Our escape involved assuming a post-structural lens to sit with notions of ourselves and our identities. We began in the middle of the entanglement and resisted the urge to create beginnings, boundaries, and borders. We also acknowledge the fluidity inherent in researching the self/selves and the necessity of being comfortable with uncertainty, not knowing, and ambiguity. Additionally, we acknowledge the impossibility of finding closure, stability, and permanence through this research exercise (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016). We worked within reflexivity but also in the open spaces beyond what we can know. In doing this, we followed Koro-Ljungberg's (2016) suggestion to sketch thoughts on a map and then travel across backwards and forwards. Sometimes, we sat still on our map and thought for a while. This type of research does not present answers or solutions but "breathing pauses, halts and energy voids that initiate new series of moments and extensions of thought" (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016, p. 4). Heather and Cecile wrote personal narratives to capture significant moments, thoughts, and processes of their imaginative selves. The narratives, although short, provide detailed bursts of how bodies/objects/spaces act and enact identities and portray lived experiences that might otherwise remain hidden, even from themselves. They use narratives to moor the parts of themselves that are not easy to understand or explain, so that they can turn their gaze on them, albeit briefly and partially. They added images to access knowledge that is impossible to verbalize and to enable them to engage sensory experience about the subtle but meaningful aspects of their narratives. Haley's role, as an art therapist, was to see what they could not see so they could stay mobile in their understandings of what they experienced and wrote about. Instead of seeking *Truth* in this process, we collectively placed "an emphasis on inquiry, a tolerance of ambiguity, a preference for what is open-ended, a desire for what is fluid rather than what is rigid" (Eisner, 2008, p. 22).

Home Décor as Art: Heather's Narrative

While I was a child my mother would sometimes move the household furniture around and change the function of rooms. One day I arrived home from primary school to find that what had been our living room was now the children's bedroom. So, my aesthetic world, defined by adults, was now altered – I grasped the idea that home objects and functions could be given new meanings. Other things might change, too. Sometimes a room one colour when I left in the morning was, when I returned, a different hue, the house strong with the odor of oil-paint and turpentine.

Now I often like to spend hours working with visual balance, functionality, comfort, colour, and the textural weight of objects to make my home or office feel right. When I grant myself the time and permission to gaze with a critical artist's eye, ugliness and deficits seem unacceptable. Then one action leads to another – it's a puzzle consisting of the physical limitations and affordances of the space, the potential of the materials at hand, and possibilities for their creative reuse. I might start with a small change in one room and end up many changes and several hours later in another. The goal is to create a pleasing aesthetic environment for me and my imaginary guests.

I easily become wholly involved, and the activity can take over my day. It helps put my teaching and research in perspective. The physical movement and visual judgment enable me see my work at arm's length while concerns simmer on the back burner.

I've learned that domesticity was suppressed in modern art and architecture (Haar & Reed, 1996). Nevertheless, many unexceptional things can be seen as art and are worthy of study where the value is not merely financial but, rather, is in the process of creating (Pocius, 1995) including home objects and their



FIGURE 5.1

Heather's home décor as art: this table, often moved by my mother to gain a new perspective, is now a feature of my domestic compositions

arrangement (Lackey, 2005; Lai & Ball, 2002; Leach, 2002). Like Garvey's (2001) Norwegian participants, for me, moving furniture is akin to organizing my thoughts. A material culture perspective considers objects in relation to the lives of the makers and users (Glassie, 1999), and objects are often imbued with symbolism and meaning (Knappett, 2005).

Paper Art-Dolls: Cecile's Narrative

I gravitate towards particular forms of art/craft-making. I'm not sure what to call them except that they are mostly private and non-functional. I'm drawn to scrappy bits of left-over paper that I collage into messy post-card combinations or journals that rarely result in anything useful. I keep them for myself and I enjoy looking over them but don't show them to anyone.

After a long day crammed with teaching, marking, revisions on papers, administrative meetings, and supervision emails, I collapse in my chair in the living room and engage in an activity that I rarely share with others. Around my chair, I have created a hamster nest with various containers of supplies – collections of odds and ends of paper. There, I huddle over a small side table, armed with glue and scissors, and make paper dolls. I call them "art dolls" to give them some dignity but they really are just dolls made out of scraps of paper. I started making them some months ago and they have now become a compulsion. Ostensibly, I watch TV, but it's nothing that requires my total attention. As I watch, I piece the doll together.

I begin with the face, drawing in the features with black markers and filling with water colours. My drawing skills are limited so I can only draw one type of face, although I love making different noses and I'm experimental with skin colour. Once the face is done, I find hair. From the hair, her shape takes form. I sift through the scraps of papers until something catches my eye. As I cut and glue, the paper doll comes into her own. Simultaneously, I can feel the tension ease and my mind clear of its clutter. The process is mostly unconscious although I do make some deliberate decisions. I might see a flower on a scrapbook sheet and think hair and build on that. For one doll, I found paper that had a 1960s look to it and created a sixties doll. I generally draw the arms, legs, and shoes free-hand. When I first began making these dolls, the arms and legs tended to be straight up and down because this was the easiest for me but, lately, they have become more free-form. The hands are also simple mitten or claw shapes. I did try to make fingers at one point but this became too much like work. The end product is by no means neat and tidy but I always feel a stab of pure pleasure as the character materializes – a feeling that continues each time I look at them.



FIGURE 5.2 Cecile's paper art-dolls: Becoming in the world of imagination

I have learned that what I do in my art-making is a form of collage. I do not repurpose commercial images but it is collage because bits of paper are glued together. Collage is a form of remixing, altering, and bricolage (Scotti & Chilton, 2018). By piecing together colour, image, and other elements into a new unified form, new associations and meaning are created. These items evoke an aesthetic, emotional response linked to an expression of non-verbal personal values (Gerstenblatt, 2013). Significantly, the essential property of collage is its physicality, its materiality – it becomes tangible (Chilton & Scotti, 2014). Davis (2008) suggests that collage is a metaphor for *becoming* because of the continual deconstruction and reparation of objects. As for doll-making, this craft has a long history in cultures all over the world as sacred items in religious ceremonies and as objects of intense cultural value. Dolls tend to reflect societal roles, values, and consumption patterns, and continue to be prevalent in popular culture (Reifel, 2009). More recently, dolls have been used for their transformative power in therapeutic circles (Alander, Prescott, & James, 2015; Bisiani & Angus, 2012). Particularly relevant is the idea that dolls “stimulate the realms of fantasy” and “let us stay in the world of our imagination” (Feen-Calligan, McIntyre, & Sands-Goldstein, 2009, p. 168). In making a doll, doll-makers often experience their own re-creation.

Haley's Analysis

The artistic hobbies, described in Heather and Cecile's reflexive narratives, are necessary for identity de- and re-construction and personal wellbeing; they can also holistically influence teaching practice. These artistic hobbies

bridge the mind and body to gain deeper knowledge through two different neurocognitive processes (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016). First, they help the creator process internal implicit knowledge gained through *somatosensory* experiences of touch, pain, temperature, body positioning, and muscle tension (Smith & Lane, 2015). In addition, *interoceptive* knowledge describes information gained through felt sensations that arise within the body and are linked to intuitive *gut-feelings* (Smith & Lane, 2015). These nonverbal ways of knowing can create spaces for broader metacognitive understandings by evaluating arising emotions to gain personal meaning (Brosch & Sander, 2013). Through integrating the mind, body, emotions, and imagination, new ontologies and epistemologies can be created. Two issues emerging from the narratives are worth exploring further: sacred spaces and flow; and embodied knowledge.

Sacred Spaces and Flow

Without validating spaces that allow for creativity, rest, and contemplation, one cannot *let go* – an action necessary for recreation, restructuring, and re-storying our lives (Moon, 2001). *Heather's Reassembled Rooms* and *Cecile's Hamster Nest* invite fluidity and non-judgment of the self(ves) through fashioning a sacred physical transitional space. Imagined guests and created figures are invited into the creative space where they present a validating gaze. These imagined beings are mirrors to the selves. Winnicott (1951) coined a transitional space as a place where both reality and imagination coincide within a third transitional space of playfulness and creativity.

Sacred spaces can be elicited through the psychological process of creation itself. Through embodying her mother's process of creating a new home-space of colourful possibilities, Heather is re-enacting her mother's motions and values, while engaging in a family tradition of *décor* magically passed down from mother to daughter. The ritualization of a daily practice that transitions Cecile from work to home life can underline its sacred and vital nature. This psychological transitional space can be elicited through the *flow* state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). *Flow* describes when someone feels fully absorbed in a project that is energizing and enjoyable, while dissolving the sense of self, space, and time by mixing action with awareness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). This dissolution of self-consciousness can deconstruct the "I" and create space for new epistemologies to emerge.

This concept of engaging in flow through meditative ritual practice to overcome the duality of self-and-object has been performed within religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Sufism (Mirdal, 2012). The process of flow is described in mindfulness as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on

purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 147). When one is open to intuitive choices between patterns, shapes, and colour, the effervescent artistic process unfolds moment to moment.

Embodied Knowledge

Psychiatrist van der Kolk (2014) discusses how the body is imprinted by lived experiences, particularly deeply emotional ones that shake the core of our existence. If identity is the integration of experiences, our bodies are vital spaces to feel the *self*. Neoliberal teachers and academics are often referred to as *talking heads*, presenting a disembodied state of engaging in cerebral routes of writing, reading, analyzing, and presenting information. This disembodiment may intensify with increased use of technology. When engaging in creative action through kinaesthetic and sensory movement, art making activates different forms of unconscious emotional knowing while simultaneously allowing for metacognition to take place. As Heather stated, she sees her work at arm’s length. Metacognition is the ability to be thoughtful about one’s own thinking patterns, which is beneficial for reflexive processes (Flavell, 1979).

Recent literature describes how art making can be relaxing and reduce cortisol levels (Henderson & Rosen, 2007; Kaimal, Ray, & Muniz, 2016). Stressors that build throughout the day can be released through physical motions of cutting, gluing, moving furniture, etc. (Levine, 1997). Thus, while creating, our body self-regulates. This relaxed state can allow for the creator to trust in new intuitive ideas and for the possibilities of symbolic, sensory, and nonverbal thought to appear through the artistic process without judgement (LeDoux, 2000; Lusebrink, 2004; Walsh, Radcliffe, Castillo, Kumar, & Broschard, 2007).

Academia often prioritizes knowledge developed and disseminated through language, yet the “limitations of introspection through solely verbal aspects have long been recognized” (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016, p. 69). The English language privileges linear thinking process, which is helpful in generating some ideas but can be limiting when drawing larger connections between concepts and allowing for understandings to organically and cyclically deepen. When creating embodied art, one is no longer limited to language and can work within the realms of other intuitive ways of knowing (Allen, 1995).

Visual images can contain many dichotomous symbolic meanings at the same time, while three-dimensional spaces allow for embodied possibilities to emerge (Finley & Knowles, 1995; Weber, 2008). By creating dolls and bodies, Cecile can metaphorically reflect the multiple past, subconscious, and potential future identities of the creator. They have the potential to

evoke sacred ritual objects, while simultaneously bringing forth fantastical childhood remembrances (Feen-Calligan et al., 2009). The creator and objects are both one and separate, simultaneously creating and re-creating one another through each scrap paper added to the bricolage (Barad, 2007). The faces of the dolls become tiny mirrors to Cecile's multiple I's. The potential of each object and colour in the domestic space can reflect Heather's family heritage, sacred memories, or exotic potential spaces of home and office. She can travel through space and time by arranging and changing her home. She can bring forth spirits. Through co-construction, the space, objects, and identities are interdependent and ever-evolving.

The artistic and embodied processes of co- and inter-creation can form connections that may never have felt possible otherwise. They simultaneously generate boundaries and both re-form and reinstate authentic momentary identity that takes into account the full human being and intricacies of existence (Barad, 2007). Perhaps in some moments, the fluid identities of academics, researchers, women, teachers, and artists are consolidated, when the time seems suspended in creation. This is done within a sacred and safe space of non-judgement, created by both Heather and Cecile. These spaces of validation and self-care can also extend to the teaching of students.

Final Thoughts

In this chapter, we have explored the influences of art in the formation of our worldviews and how artistic and aesthetic experiences shape our thinking (Finley & Knowles, 1995). In our safe spaces, and through engaging in embodied practices, we expand our energies and imagination. These imaginative selves create the possibilities for future selves. We argue that these imaginative selves provide the substrate for our professional teacher identities because they allow us to connect to students from a creative, artistic, imaginative space. As Snowber (2017) suggests, "the alchemy of our lives occurs in the cracks. Light is in the cracks, places of brilliance dwell there too" (p. 3).

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