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## Artistic Methods and Approaches to Research in Education

This brief article describes a selection of arts-based studies in education that illuminate the power and potential of the arts to make and communicate meaning within research contexts. The studies described made use of dance, music, drama, and visual arts practices to investigate a variety of topics in education and arts education. These examples demonstrate how arts practices can support meaning making and communicating at multiple points in the research process: in data collection/generation, analysis/interpretation, and representation. The examples also illuminate how multiple research stakeholders – participants, researchers, and audiences – can engage or be engaged in making and communicating meaning through art.

### Introduction

Arts-based research makes use of artistic practices, processes, or products in data collection, analysis, interpretation, and/or representation. Arts-based researchers move beyond traditional quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches to “produce knowledge in new shapes” (Leavy, 2020, p. 303).

There are many sub-genres of arts-based research, with many varied approaches, but all seek in some way to harness the capacity of the arts to make and communicate meaning. The fundamental rationale for using the arts in research is that the arts are a way of knowing (Bruner, 1979); through art, one can explore and express understanding (Bolden, 2017). Further, the arts can illuminate meanings and deepen understanding in ways that traditional research cannot – the arts can “extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication ... to express the ineffable” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 1). Patricia Leavy suggests a key reason for using the arts in social research practice is that the arts have the capacity to “evoke emotions, promote reflection, and transform the way people think” (2020, p. 304).

Broadly speaking, over the course of a research study, those involved make and communicate meaning at various points. During data collection, for example, research participants often respond to survey or interview questions, making and communicating meaning of a given phenomenon through their responses. Researchers then, in turn, make meaning of the participant responses (data) through processes of analysis and interpretation. Finally, researchers communicate the meanings they have made through their analyses to audiences, via publications and presentations.

Researchers can leverage the arts to support meaning making and communicating at any point in that research process. Participants can make art about a given phenomenon to make meaning of it and communicate that meaning to researchers. Researchers can make art with data that they collect (or generate themselves), and make meaning of the data as they work with it. Finally, researchers can use art to communicate to audiences the meanings they have made through their analyses. Arts-based research can involve participants, researchers, and audiences in meaning-making and communicating through art.

Arts-based research spans arts disciplines and has been used to develop knowledge of phenomena in fields across the social sciences. In the following section, I share examples of how researchers have leveraged dance, music, drama, and visual art to investigate educational phenomena. I then zoom in even tighter to share a selection of arts-based studies that have investigated topics within music, visual art, dance, and drama education.

## Examples of arts-based research in education

Buono and Gonzalez (2017) used dance to research teacher education, addressing “the moves teacher candidates make to take culturally relevant and culturally sustaining stances in their classrooms” (pp. 3–4). Buono translated interview data into movement themes and bodily writing via a “studio-based research practice of interpreting [the participant’s] data in an embodied, artistic fashion” (p. 11). Dance was used to develop understanding of the data through a four-stage analysis process comprising “kinesthetic empathy, embodied explorations, embodied reflections, and work-in-progress-showcases” (p. 11). A finalized representation of the data was performed at an educational research symposium, and photos of the performance were included in the journal publication.

In my own research I have used music practices to analyze and represent interview data. The study *Teaching Lives* (Bolden, 2017) examined the personal practical knowledge embedded within the stories told by experienced elementary schoolteachers. Using digital audio technology, I selected and positioned the participants’ actual recorded words within audio narratives that re-told teaching stories. I experimented with musical framing, underscoring, and commentary to musically explore and commu-

nicate the meanings embedded within the participants' words. The final audio pieces (re)present the teachers' stories *and* my interpretation of the meanings within them, communicated through my identification and highlighting of salient themes with musical motifs. The audio files can be accessed via links in the journal publication<sup>1</sup>.

Ludecke (2016) used a theatre-based research approach to investigate the identity transformation of twelve first-year teachers. Drawing from interview transcripts and email communication, she created a script that focused on participants' epiphanic or revelatory moments of teaching. Ludecke crafted the script by combining verbatim language (used in the dialogue and stage directions) with rhetorical strategies and devices and context specific information. The script-writing process encouraged her to "plunge into the depths of the data for a deeper analysis" (p. 7). *The First Time*, with a run-time of 40 minutes, consists of a prologue and twelve vignettes representing an epiphanic moment experienced by each of the teachers.<sup>2</sup> The participants did not perform – instead, their roles were played by teacher-actors with drama backgrounds. Ludecke (2016) invited the participants to attend a validation rehearsal, and modified the play in response to their feedback. The play has been performed for teachers, pre-service teachers, teacher educators, and teacher administrators, inviting audiences to "question, recognise and respond to the lived experiences of first-year teachers" (p. 11).

Eyers (2019) employed visual arts practices to examine disengaged and disenchanting adolescents' experiences of school. In sessions that Eyers facilitated, participants created visual art individually and collectively in response to prompts such as, "Create something about what you will never forget from school," "Depict your future," and "Represent your ideal school." The participant artwork served to elicit expressions of school experience, represented in the artwork itself, but also in the recorded conversations that Eyers held with the participants as they worked. Eyers analyzed the artworks and transcripts with standard qualitative coding and theming procedures. However, she also supplemented her meaning making by creating poems:

I used poetic inquiry ... in order to mine the data for different meaningful understandings. While transcribing and coding, I paused when an idea for a poem occurred to me, or when I felt the transcript was failing to represent some aspect of the moment it was meant to record. I used poetry to convey what was missing from the prose. (Eyers, 2019, p. 37)

Eyers' thesis includes the participant-created images and her own poetry. Together, they provide a powerfully evocative representation of the participants' perceptions and experiences of school.

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<sup>1</sup> Listen to the piece *Magnified Pond Creatures* here: [www.dropbox.com/s/xe4k3ev92xqrt46/MagnifiedPondCreatures.mp3?dl=0](http://www.dropbox.com/s/xe4k3ev92xqrt46/MagnifiedPondCreatures.mp3?dl=0).

<sup>2</sup> Access a video of Ludecke's play here: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLB1EDoFDE-F2AA8836>.

## Examples of arts-based research in arts education

Migdalek (2015) used a “danced form of inquiry” (p. 8) to problematize and explore his own embodied gender behaviors as an educator, performer, and everyday person. The research involved three stages. First, Migdalek invited 29 performance arts educators/practitioners to improvise movement to a sound collage. Migdalek observed that the participants used “common gendered repertoires of motion” (p. 9) in response to strong, powerful “masculine” music and delicate, lilting “feminine” music. He also noted the physically-portrayed awkwardness and embarrassment of male participants as they made “feminine” movements. Next, Migdalek explored, workshopped, and eventually developed and choreographed a dance performance piece, *Gender Icons*, in which he embodies the notion “that biologically sexed bodies are restricted by firmly embedded iconic semiotics of femininity and masculinity” (p. 11).<sup>3</sup> Finally, Migdalek performed the piece – with some trepidation – for high school students, as a dance intervention to encourage critical inquiry into their perceptions of gendered embodiment.

Music-based studies that investigate topics in music education are difficult to find. Instead, I offer an example of a multi-media arts-based study focused on music education. Manovski (2014) carried out an autoethnographic investigation of finding his voice as an artist, singer, learner, music teacher, researcher, and of his experiences of being marginalized and harassed for perceived effeminate characteristics. In this powerful work Manovski used transcribed recordings of voice lessons along with artistically rendered autobiographical stories and photographs to serve simultaneously as generated data, an artful process of analysis, and compelling representation of his experiences and how he has made meaning of them.

Sills (2021) used drama-based methods to investigate the experiences of students with physical disabilities in secondary school drama education. Her data collection involved three semi-structured interviews with each participant. Sills also invited the participants to write a monologue based on the prompt, “What does drama mean to you as someone with a physical disability?” In addition to traditional qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts and monologues, Sills studied, rehearsed, and performed the monologues herself. She then shared a video of the performance with the participants, for validation, and incorporated their feedback in a final performance.<sup>4</sup> This drama-based practice enabled Sills to bring her artistic background and skills to the analysis of the monologues, deepening her understanding of what the participants wanted to convey.

<sup>3</sup> Access a video of the dance performance here: <https://player.vimeo.com/video/336932377>.

<sup>4</sup> Access a video of Sills performing Leah’s monologue here: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1S-B9RCg1\\_bxLUN2O6yN4cW2oETh4pSles/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1S-B9RCg1_bxLUN2O6yN4cW2oETh4pSles/view).

Kukkonen and Bolden (2017) undertook a participatory visual arts-based research initiative to explore the notion of emergent curriculum. My colleague and I were inspired by an interview with an elementary teacher who took delight in seeing the varied ways her young students responded to the prompt: “Draw a tree!” We decided to re-present this narrative to pre-service teachers in the faculty of education where we work. We invited them to contribute to an art installation in the main foyer of the faculty building. Over a number of weeks, we left index cards, drawing materials, and a “drop box” on a table. We asked the teacher candidates to draw trees in any way they saw fit. We then posted the small tree drawings together on the wall, in the shape of a large tree. In total we added 250 individual drawings to the collective tree. The diversity of offerings illustrated to us, and (we hope) to the pre-service teachers who stopped to have a look, the unique offerings each individual brings to a collective learning context.

## Conclusion

In this article I described a selection of arts-based studies in education that illuminate the power and potential of the arts to make and communicate meaning within research contexts. The studies described made use of dance, music, drama, and visual arts practices to investigate a variety of topics in education and arts education. These examples demonstrate how arts practices can support meaning making and communicating at multiple points in the research process: in data collection/generation, analysis/interpretation, and representation. The examples also illuminate how multiple research stakeholders – participants, researchers, and audiences – can engage or be engaged in making and communicating meaning through art.

The *International Journal for Research in Cultural, Aesthetic, and Arts Education* offers great promise and potential to the field. I commend the journal for inviting and disseminating work of this nature – contributions that leverage the tremendous power of artistic processes and products to generate and communicate new knowledge in new ways.

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