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Arts-Based Research: Weaving Magic and Meaning

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Abstract

What kinds of things do we research when we use arts-based research? And when we apply arts-based research to educational contexts, what kinds of contributions to the scholarship of learning and teaching can we make?

Taking as its basis three case studies in which art processes were used to investigate culture and identity, this essay examines the kinds of questions arts-based research might seek to answer. At the same time as it acknowledges the value of the less definable and often holistic kinds of knowing that may result through the use of art tools and aesthetic analysis, it also argues for the usefulness of strategic focus on specific frames of investigation and specific outcomes. It further examines the relationship between arts-based research and learning.

Introduction

This essay reports three arts-based projects that explored culture and identity, and examines what was, or even might have been, researched. It asks the questions: What kinds of things are we researching when we use arts-based research? And when we apply arts-based research to educational contexts, what kinds of contributions to the scholarship of learning and teaching can we make?

In recent years arts-based research, in education and in other fields, has gained recognition as a legitimate and useful methodological approach. Those of us who have worked in the arts and used one or more of them as an investigative tool know at a 'gut' level as well as at a conceptual one just how effective arts processes can be as exploratory, deconstructive and teaching tools. But while the traditions of the arts as teaching and as investigative tools – as well as tools for entertainment, ritual and other aesthetic purposes – reach back to the roots of our recorded histories, the consideration of art as a formal methodological approach to academic research is relatively new, and we are still in the process of theorising our positions. This essay offers a contribution to such debates. It draws on several recent case studies (Greenwood & Te Aika, 2009; Gažáková & Greenwood, 2010; Greenwood, 2010) where art-based research was used and uses them to examine more closely both the actual and potential research that was involved.

As well as briefly reporting each of these case studies, the essay seeks to tease out and make explicit the possible research agendas embedded in each project. It then opens to some wider questions about the relationship between aesthetics and knowledge, and to the limitations and opportunities that might be associated with 'an aesthetic way of knowing'.

The Why and How of Arts-Based Research

Human beings are complex: we are body as well as mind. Many of us might contend we are spirit as well. We come to know the world through our senses as well as through the verbally coded information we receive. We communicate through our bodies as well as with words. And when we *know* things, we often do that in ways other than just the intellectual. The arts, as Eisner (1998) and a host of artists remind us, invoke multi-dimensional responses both from their makers and their audiences. They allow an engagement of the whole human being. The use of arts-based approaches to research, therefore, has grown from the desire of researchers to elicit, process and share understandings and experiences that are not readily or fully accessed through more traditional fieldwork approaches.

There are two dominant overall approaches within the broad paradigm of art-based research. In the first, one or more of the arts are used as tools to study an issue, perhaps a social or an

educational one. In such cases the art processes could be used for collecting data, for analysing it, for presenting findings, or for several of these purposes. In the second approach, the research is an investigation into the arts themselves, a search for way to understand and describe the complex layers of meaning within an art work or an art form. Of course, in some cases, the research may involve combinations of both approaches.

The three cases examined in this essay basically fall into the first category, in which art processes are deliberately used to study identity and culture. However while arts processes can be used as fine-scrupled tools for specific investigations, the impact of arts processes, as this essay will argue, is more complex, and it is not always possible to fully separate specific cognitive findings from less definable aesthetic *knowings*.

An illustration might be provided by the following photograph:



The photograph is a purely accidental double exposure capturing two quite discrete landscapes. As possible research, each of the separate images captures accurate, distinctive, and potentially quite interesting, details of a promontory. They might be illustrative of

erosion, rainfall pattern, geological formation or vegetation. Together the combined image is no longer so geographically accurate. But is evocative and teasing. We see a reflection and then find it is not one at all. What does that say about the way we see? The headlands that were originally isolated fingers into the sea now form part of a continuum. Is that only illusion or is it part of a larger truth? How could two such different terrains initially look like reflection? And what fluke of film placement and focus allowed such an apparently seamless fusion of shapes?

The three case studies that follow will be examined in terms of their specific research purposes: as each of the separate landscape images in this photograph might be. But each of them also evoke further aesthetic layers of interpretation and provoke the question of whether the overall findings are by design or accident. I will argue that these aesthetic layers of meaning do have an important place in arts-based research, but that it is important for us not to conflate aesthetic and other findings.

Conceptual Framework

While art-based research is a relatively new and emergent field at the academic level, it has a long history within the traditions of making art work. Artists constantly research both previous solutions of form (from the canons and from their own previous work) and the specific elusive relationship between form and meaning that suits their present purpose. Painters and dramatists, in particular, have over the ages used their art to analyse and critically interpret aspects of the society in which they live, and in some cases have deliberately used the art-based report of their understandings to provide a platform for public debate, strategic analysis and provocation for change. Works such as Picasso's *Guernica* and Brecht's *Mother Courage* are notable examples of how art-based reports of investigation are used to provoke public awareness, shifts in understanding and catalysts for action. Boal's work in legislative theatre in Brazil is an example at the highest political level of data gathering and analysis through art (Boal, 1998). Other workers in applied theatre (such as Heathcote, 2008; Millar & Saxton, 2004; O'Neill, 1995; O'Toole, 1992; Neelands, 1996; Greenwood, 2005) have developed a range of complex strategies for collection of data, analysis, and forms of presentation of findings that provoke further collective investigation and analysis.

The contemporary development of the academic domain of arts-based inquiry draws on conceptualisations by Eisner (1998) who argues that there are multiple ways of knowing, that knowledge is made and not simply discovered and that inquiry will be more complete as researchers increase the range of ways in which they can investigate, describe and interpret the world. More recently Finley (2005) has placed art-based research squarely into the area of qualitative research and advocated arts-based inquiry as a means of community inclusion in social investigation and as a tool for political activism.

The UNESCO *Road Map for Arts Education* (2006) endorses the premise that the arts provide a useful means of investigating and knowing by asserting the right of every child and adult to education that “will ensure full and harmonious development and participation in cultural and artistic life”, and will cultivate in each learner “a sense of creativity and initiative, a fertile imagination, emotional intelligence and a moral compass, a capacity for critical reflection, a sense of autonomy, and freedom of thought and action.”

The strategies used in arts-based research might usefully be aligned with investigative approaches that emphasise open-endedness and continuously unfolding inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), with bricolage (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005) and with participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), as well as with strategies of theatre-making.

The Three Case Studies and their Shared Overarching Goals

While quite discrete projects, the three cases studied shared some common elements. Each was drama-based. The processes of applied theatre were manipulated to enable participants to give information about their experience or perceptions through physical images, role and storying, thereby accessing emotional and visceral data as well as that which readily lends itself to verbal expression. Applied theatre processes were further used to analyse the data shifting analysis from an outside researcher’s task to one carried out incrementally and experimentally by insider participants. They also used theatre forms to present aspects of findings, capturing different reflections of the data and ensuring that emergent understandings were regularly made accessible to others in the project. In this way the presentation process served as the initiation of a further cycle of the research.

In each case the participants were members of a clearly marked cultural group, at least partially outside the mainstream culture of the country they were in. In the first they were indigenous New Zealanders, a group of Maori teachers in a language immersion programme. In the second they were second generation immigrants, a group of Roma, or gypsy, adolescents living in a rural Czech Village. In the third they were international students, a group of Bangladeshi educators in a postgraduate programme in New Zealand.

The third characteristic shared by the three cases studied was a research focus on examining, analysing and reporting aspects of the participants’ perceptions of their experience and of their learning. The art-based process was a tool that left more power for self-analysis and self-definition in the hands of participants.

The three cases shared an overarching question: How can art processes facilitate the learning and the development of identity of participants characterised by cultural difference? This

broad question invoked a number of further embedded questions. How do participants interpret their experiences, learning goals, problems and possibilities? What kinds of drama processes and forms best lend themselves to meaning-making? What is the relationship between different readings by individual participants? How might presentation forms be further refined to more thoroughly reflect the findings? And finally, to what extent can research and collaborative learning occur simultaneously? Each project, however, had its own rationale and a distinct particular focus. The following pages examine each in turn.

Working with Maori, and Capacity Building

The first project took place with a group of teachers who were on a year-long programme which immersed them in Maori language and focused on Maori education. Most of the group were Maori and the two non-Maori had strong family affiliation with Maori. The co-ordinator of the programme joined the project, which took the shape of a workshop over two consecutive full days. As a whole, the group had a well developed repertoire of traditional cultural performance styles and a commitment to an agenda of social and economic as well as educational development for Maori. As teachers they were eager to extend their approaches to teaching and learning.

The focus for our project, therefore, was framed in the question: How can we use drama forms to explore Maori issues? In particular the group wanted to explore how traditional stories might have contemporary relevance, especially examining the relations between received traditional meanings and new application to lived experience.

We took as the basis for the work the story of Aoraki, the highest mountain in the range of alps that runs the length of the South Island in New Zealand. The mountain is seen as the real and metaphorical ancestor of Ngai Tahu, the tribal group who claim guardianship of most of the South Island. In the traditional story, Aoraki was the leader of canoe that came down the Pacific in search of the New Zealand coast. As the canoe approached shore there was a carelessness in the incantation of the appropriate rituals and the canoe was wrecked, turning the crew to stone and thus creating the Southern Alps. However, it is the awesomely majestic appearance of Aoraki, always snow-capped, frequently veiled by cloud and snow flurries, remote and hard to access, that creates the force underlying its role as chiefly ancestor and symbol of tribal pride.

Strategies of applied theatre, or process drama as it is sometimes called, were used to explore the meaning of the story, both traditionally and in its possible contemporary implications. Framing, role and image-making were manipulated to engage with different perspectives, and to encourage emphatic speculation about how others might interpret the story. The participants were actively encouraged to explore physical and dramatic forms that come from

the western tradition of applied theatre as well as those that arise from Maori performative styles. They were also challenged to note and further explore issues that arose through working with the story and to note and refine the dramatic symbols that encapsulated them. Among such issues were questions about colonisation and decolonisation, identity, and conservation.

As the work progressed the participants found themselves asking new questions, sometimes introducing complexity where they had initially seen unquestioning simplicity. They also became aware that the art strategies they used and the forms they created influenced the direction of their exploration, and that there were often differences between the meanings that the art-makers intended and those read by the viewers. Their challenge became to find ways of consciously refining the text and images they made in order to ensure that their purposes, didactic or interrogative, explicit or deliberately ambivalent, were achieved. In many cases the different interpretations offered by the viewers were instrumental in helping the makers further refine their intentions as well as their chosen forms.

In simplified terms, the results were that the participants reported acquisition of new skills, and also tracked their own individual evolving understandings of complex issues of postcoloniality, biculturalism, ecology, and Maori self-determination, anchoring these in dramatic symbols, role and text. A detailed report of how such understandings evolved and what forms they took by the end of the workshop would require a considerable amount of contextual explanation to be meaningful to an international audience and so is a subject for another essay. What is offered here is a little further examination of the research process. As a group we found significant parallels between our art-based approach and participatory action research – a methodology with which most of the participants were already a little familiar. Like participatory action research, our art-based approach involved the participants as co-researchers and was expected to result in learning. The fusion of research and consequent action that is a feature of action research was also a strong element in our approach as was successive layering of data collection, analysis and sharing of tentative understandings. It also shared with participatory action research a collaborative engagement by all the participants as co-researchers.

For the workshop to be considered as research, the process of analysis was important. In the first instance each group developed a preliminary analysis of their perceptions and experiences through the processes of changing role and changing frame. Another level of analysis took place as the others in the project viewed the work of the group, and deconstructed the images. Then as each group of makers refined their work in reaction to the responses of their colleagues, a further level of analysis, synthesis and crystallisation took place. It was also significant how different styles of drama precipitated different kinds of

analysis. For example, when the drama strategy called for realism, participants worked mainly with the knowledge and understandings that they already had. When the strategy called for symbolism, they were more likely to explore alternatives, examine contradictions and deliberately cast about for new ways of looking at things.

The recording and reporting of findings is a fundamental component of research. In this case successive understandings were reported through images and texts within the art forms and through verbal and written reflections about the art forms and the ideas that were emerging. It is in keeping with the traditions of applied drama (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995, Greenwood, 2005) that participants work continuously inside and outside the art form, reflecting, deconstructing and planning further developments.

As a researcher, when I shifted position to look at the workshop process from the outside, I was struck by several features of the work. Participants readily picked up and used each other's work. Participants could readily reproduce quite complex sequences of images and scenes and improvised texts: there was a process occurring of 'remembering in the body'. There was also an accelerated pace of conceptual learning. Whereas at the beginning of the workshop participants wrestled quite laboriously with a range of concepts from role to decolonisation, as the work grew, role was adopted more rapidly and with greater complexity and more dense texts evolved to reflect increasingly challenging ideas. These features align with what has been identified (for example, Greenwood, 2002) as distinctive characteristics of learning through drama: the ways it engages intellect and emotion through physicality and the ways in which group collaboration validates individual experimentation and enhances acquisition of new concepts. And, significant in terms of the Maori context of the work, they also align with Durie's (1982) conceptualisation of Maori well-being as a house built on four corner-posts: mind, body, spirit and family/community.

A closer look at who might be researching and what is being researched

Because this essay is concerned with interrogating rather than simply reporting the research that occurs, I will take a further look at what was actually being investigated. All the participants, including both the teachers and me as facilitator, were engaged in exploring issues of ontology and epistemology. What is the *meaning* of the story of Aoraki? How does it relate to the contemporary experienced world? And how can traditional and contemporary meanings be aligned and expressed? All were also engaged in investigating aesthetic issues. In what ways does the use of either traditionally Maori or western performative elements create shifts in meaning? And how can traditional elements of performance be combined with western ones in ways that enhance both rather than diminish one?

In addition, as the facilitator of the workshop I was investigating further questions, particularly about the learning of the teacher participants. The first set involved questions about the art strategies. Which specific drama processes prompted shifts in awareness? And which interventions on my part prompted aesthetic refinements? The second set was about the content of the learning, and particularly learning about postcoloniality. What changes in understanding occurred? What were the changes in attitude?

Working with Roma and winning trust

The second project took place in the Czech Republic and I worked as a distance partner to a young artist and researcher, Eva Gažáková.

Eva undertook a theatre-making project with a group of Roma living in a small village, Dobra Voda. The village itself has ninety-five inhabitants, of which seventy-eight are Roma and who all live in one block of flats at the end of the village. Not only are Roma an ethnic minority throughout Europe, they are often socially excluded. In this village none of the Roma were employed and the record showed significant absenteeism from school and educational underachievement. A few years ago a civic association began working with the Roma community in the village and Eva's project was one that was hoped to assist with 're-socialisation'. Eva's group consisted of thirteen people, from six to forty-five years old with a significant number of adolescents. Eva wanted to offer the group "a different communication mode, and that is communication through drama" (Greenwood & Gazakova, 2010). By working in drama, a field she hoped would align with the Roma love for music and dance, she hoped to develop confidence and increased motivation, and also engagement with critical analysis and problem-solving. I acted as a long-distance advisor and co-analyst through email and Skype. We collaborated in overlays of English and Czech, depending on which of us was leading the discussion at the time.

In practical terms the project led to the successful presentation of an improvised play, *Clever Aranka and Stupid Dilino*, at a Roma Dance Festival. In Eva's words "even though it was not perfect from a technical point of view, it was a success. We succeeded in conveying the story to the viewers and in accompanying it with suitable music. Before the performance I was worried about how it would go. The rehearsals were definitely not sufficient and anything could happen on stage. The result was a pleasant surprise for me" (Greenwood & Gazakova, 2010).

As well as achieving an outcome in terms of improvising scenes, collating music and telling a story, the performance was evidence of developing responsibility to the group and to a rehearsal schedule, and of a growing trust between Eva, the outsider artist, and the group. She describes how she experienced the challenge: "The key issue for me and the group was to

build mutual trust. I had to prove that I really do know something about their world. We had to reach a compromise – their view of drama work is different from mine and they are afraid of looking like fools. Therefore, in the beginning, they were not even willing to try things out. However the trust gradually grew and now we agreed to continue.”

However, Eva felt that only the first of her goals had been achieved. The Roma participants still showed no signs of critical engagement, of willingness to solve problems rather than look for direction, or – in terms of her overarching goal – of analysing their own positions and strategising for change. “I think this will be a long term project,” she reflected. “The group is now comfortable with enacting a dramatic story. Face to face with the audience the actors were even capable of some good and funny improvisation. They are not yet capable of working with all the possibilities offered to us by the dramatic language. We will therefore have to work further on building our drama vocabulary - which means learning to work with different techniques such as image-making, working with dramatic symbols, devising and so on. We have also partially achieved our first goal of building trust and motivation. We have not as yet advanced much towards critical engagement, analysis and problem solving, but seeing their willingness to continue, we still have a chance” (Greenwood & Gazakova, 2010).

Looking into the project from my external viewpoint, I was struck by the way the project exemplified practitioner research: the search by Eva for the drama processes and the strategies of interpersonal engagement that would allow her to work effectively with the group. Often she would come to the Skype dialogues distressed because members of the group had not turned up or because they had not picked up on her artistic suggestions. She felt they wanted immediate results and she considered that a considerable obstacle to serious drama work. I would encourage her to explore more of her own repertoire of drama strategies, such as *hot-seating* and *facilitator-in-role*, and she would try these out with varying results. From the outset she had been aware of the “large difference in culture, history and ways of processing the world”, and as the work progressed, she often found the gap overwhelming. Yet repeatedly, and particularly after the performance which completed the first phase of the project, she felt heartened by their expectation she would come back and that they would continue.

The other thing that struck me was the absence of Roma voices in interpreting the work and defining problems. It seemed that the same kind of obstacles that Eva was encountering in her goal of enabling the participants to take agency in the drama work were operating in the overall communication about what they wanted to get out of the group. As the external partner, I found these features very illuminating in terms of revealing constructs of identity and alienation. And at a surface level I would be tempted to say this project did not achieve

the overarching research aim of using art-based process as a tool that placed power for self-analysis and self-definition in the hands of participants. However, that might be too simplistic.

What was being researched – explicitly and implicitly?

As suggested above, Eva was the most explicitly active researcher. She was researching her own artistic and communicative processes. Her investigation was a form of action research shaped by recurring questions about effective strategies. How do I motivate these participants? What helps them take agency? She was also consistently investigating the learning that was taking place within the group. What social skills, such as punctuality or contribution of ideas to the group were developing? What drama skills were being acquired? And, perhaps most importantly, she was also building knowledge about the participants. What was important to them? How did they regard non-Roma and how did they position themselves in relation to non- Roma? What use could they see for the theatre processes she wanted to teach?

Although the Roma participants did not vocalise their research interests, they no doubt had some. From reports of the work, I saw suggestion of their research into the art making process and into cross-cultural perspectives. The evidence shows that while they often appeared nonchalant about the preparation process, they were keen to do well in their performance and so they actively investigated what they needed to do to effectively perform their role. It seems, from Eva's comments about how they produced funny improvisation in front of their audience, that they were systematically investigating what their audiences liked and how they could adapt their performance to please them. It seems also, from their continued, though not fully committed, participation in the project, that they were researching Eva, the non-Roma. What does Eva want? they seem to have been asking. And what use are her drama ideas to us?

Many of the discoveries in this project were not overtly expressed in rehearsed images, action or text; rather they are embedded in the juxtaposition of lived images and texts, more in the style of the superimposed photographic images described earlier than in that of either of the original landscapes.

Working with Bangladeshi educators and building research awareness

The third case study involved a short workshop with a group of fourteen experienced and fairly senior educators from Bangladesh who came to Christchurch to complete a Masters of Education. They came to New Zealand with professional experience in either a teachers college or a university and with one or more postgraduate qualifications gained in Bangladesh. They came with a shared agenda of education change and development. While

they were proficient in English within the second language context of their homeland, they found its colloquial forms in New Zealand challenging. Prior to the workshop they had completed, or were completing, courses in both qualitative and quantitative methodology. I had offered the workshop to the group as an illustration of arts-based research, and posed the following question: how can we use drama forms to explore your experiences as international students? Embedded in the workshop was a further question: what insights does arts-based research offer about research generally?

The work took place over an afternoon. During that period the participants created physical images of aspects of their experience in New Zealand, deconstructed them, developed a pilot for a collaborative case study and planned further cycles of investigation. In addition they questioned many aspects of the process and probed for deeper understandings of the issues of reliability and subjectivity. Because of the short time frame only a very limited range of drama strategies were used.

Perhaps because the participants actively addressed the nature of the research process as well as participating in it, the workshop, though short, yielded some interesting results. One of the more readily observable features was the way physicalisation bridged gaps in language. While all the participants had an accredited proficiency in English, there is often a gap, as those of us who have learned to speak another language will recognise, between knowing a language and being able to access the right words with the right social and emotional connotations at the speed of conversation with a first language speaker. And sometimes that hesitation leads to constraint or even silence. Moreover my previous relationship with the group had been a relatively formal one, as dean for their programme of study. In previous meetings the tone had tended to be fairly businesslike and some members had looked to their neighbour for translation, either of my comments or of the points they wished to make. In the workshop a different kind of mood developed. I used more illustrative gesture and actively demonstrated the physical imagery I asked them to create.

They took up the challenge with more alacrity than I had anticipated and willingly flung themselves into flamboyantly expressive poses. Still more significantly they were quick to articulate ideas when we deconstructed the images that had been made and very ready to ask questions and argue about the validity of the process as research. And clearly they laughed and had fun. Whether the physicality in itself directly released communicative language or whether the ease came from a change of mode from formal discussion to playful physicalisation does not seem, to me, to be a particularly significant distinction. What was observable was that in the physical context the change happened.

Some of the instruments for creating the communicative flow were the offer of a limited repertoire of drama strategies, particularly the use of freeze frame, with techniques for deconstructing and refining initial offers, for short animations and for developing sequences. These engaged participants in recalling and presenting personal experiences, in inspecting each others' images and interpreting them, and in further refining images to clarify meaning.

Within the workshop these processes were offered as ways of accessing and analysing data and as a basis for the co-construction of meaning. They gave rise to rich discussion about the nature of research interposed between stages of the practical work. How could you tell if you were interpreting the image in the way it was meant? was one of the first questions asked. Surely it was all purely subjective in interpretation? This opened up a conversation about the roles played by objectivity and subjectivity in research generally, with examples from different paradigms they had encountered. From there the discussion moved to issues of validity: given that qualitative data gathering and analysis, in particular, might be significantly subjective, what measures could the researcher use to ensure an acceptable degree of validity?

We then re-examined the processes they had just engaged in of hearing multiple interpretations of the images of their experiences they had created and of consequently further refining the original images to make their meaning more explicit. While I provided some of the initial prompts in the discussion, the lead was soon taken over by individuals in the group who drew analogies to what they had learned in theory classes about constructivism, crystallisation, trustworthiness, informed consent, and co-construction of narratives. In the last stages of the workshop the group joined me in planning further stages for the investigation in which they would explore and record further images of their student experiences, particularly examining moments of frustration, failed communication, anger, dejection, unexpected learning and achievement. A possible ethno-drama was envisaged, and had it taken shape the participants would have become co-researchers of their Canterbury experience. (The further work never eventuated as soon afterwards the sequence of devastating Christchurch earthquakes destroyed most of our buildings and forced us into different ways of working.)

If I try and look at the workshop from the outside, I see agency as the central aspect of the process. While I held power initially to invite and focus the work, as soon as the participants agreed to engage physically they assumed agency not only for the images they created, but also for the energy of the workshop. Individually and collectively they chose how much they would share and how much they would allow others to contribute. And perhaps as a result of taking on agency in the practical work, they became active, individual, and sometimes playful, partners in exploring ideas about research, and potentially academia.

Embedded research questions

Because of the brevity of the workshop only a few of the embedded research questions became explicit.

The Bangladeshi teacher educators overtly examined the potential and value of a new methodological approach using an art form to collect and analyse data. And in doing so they explored several important questions about the nature of research in general. In particular they tackled the timeless issues of *subjectivity* and *truth*, and addressed the question of who owns the data.

In shaping their images they also began a critical reflection about their own cross-cultural adaptations, examining how their understandings and goals had changed during their study at this foreign western university. Had they taken the project to the next planned stages, their investigation might have led them to a critique of the university's programmes and ways of dealing with international students.

As the facilitator of the project I had a number of explicit research agendas. The first, as in the other two cases, was about the kinds of drama processes that would engage these mature international students and would allow them to express and examine their experiences. The second was to investigate how this particular group perceived their experience at the university. Within the practical work few perceptions of the university were explored; most of the images dealt with feelings about leaving home and family, excitement about being selected, anticipation of adventure and opportunity and interest in the differences between Christchurch and their home places. However, the closing discussions of the workshop acknowledged that this agenda could be pursued through similar processes in further work. Indirectly, it led to the development of a further faculty research project that will examine how well the university meets the needs of its international students.

A largely unplanned research track for me was learning more about the members of the group. I had wanted to know about their perceptions of the university. Instead I learned about their understandings of research and their struggles with concepts they found problematic. I found them more playful than I had expected. I began learning about the kinds of situations and interactions that made them laugh, relax, become more confident, and more forthright in their discussions.

Explicit, implicit, and unexpected findings

In the introduction I described the three cases studies as ones that explored culture and identity. In the first, the participants do overtly engage with exploring signifiers of their

identity and of the cultures that frame it: in their content material, in the performance styles they use and the work they produce and in their reflections about tradition, change, accountability, self-determinism and postcoloniality.

In the other two, while it might have been intended by the respective facilitators, there is at most, minimal engagement in exploration of identity or culture. Eva wanted to bring her Roma group to the point where they explore their relationship to, or alienation from, mainstream society through the drama structures she was introducing and she felt continuous frustration that they showed no inclination to do so. So, to what extent can it be said that this case involved research into cultural identity? In qualitative research paradigms we are often as interested in the gaps and silences that emerge as in what is actually said. The gap speaks loudly, though it may require intercultural and emotional skill to understand it. Is it saying that the facilitator and the group are too far apart in their backgrounds and world views for this kind of dialogue to be possible? Is it saying that the Roma participants are so completely alienated from mainstream society goals that they see no point in exploring the relationship? Or is it saying that the participants are not ready yet to touch this kind of work but that they are willing to continue in the art-making process and gradually discover what they are prepared to explore through it? To discover what such a silence in fact does mean would require strategic refinement of the research process, through arts or other means. As in other kinds of research the design requires continuous fine-tuning, and I am suggesting that it is useful for arts-based research not only to identify silences but also to discover what they mean.

In the third case, I am tempted to interpret the apparent non-engagement with cultural identity differently. It seems to me that what participants chose to mark were memories of personal feelings of excitement or sadness and contrasts between their new physical surroundings and those of home. This does not suggest a gap so much as the assumption of a platform of unmarked identity from which they looked at difference. While they did not mark their identity as scholars from different traditions and experience, they used it as a basis from which to make sense of western research approaches and expectations. Again further fine-tuning would have refined this research purpose.

At the same time as I argue for the incremental refinement of particular investigative strategies to achieve specific research goals, I also want to affirm the value of inviting the unexpected and recognising it when it comes. Gallagher (2010), reflecting on the place of the unexpected in arts research, celebrates a range of things she learned when she “wasn’t really looking”. To ignore the latencies, unexpected avenues and intersecting layers that occur within an arts based research project is, to my mind, a waste of opportunity.

Further, an overlay of the three cases provokes a complex consideration of the ways cultural identity is marked or unmarked, of who marks it and why. Just as the superimposed landscapes of the photograph evoke unresolved impressions of reflection and dissonance, of firm ground and chimera, of difference and commonality, so the three studies read together provide, not the triangulation of traditional research, but rather a splintering of fixable notions of cultural role. Is that simply an accident of overlay? Or a useful catchment of data? In this essay I merely want to pose the question, and encourage further exploration of the magic within art-based research as well as its designed search for meanings.

What contribution to the scholarship of learning and teaching can such projects make?

While some traditional models of research separate the researcher from the teacher and position classroom learning as the subject and the potential beneficiary of external research, many contemporary paradigms smudge the distinctions in various ways. For example, practitioner research (Goodfellow & Hedges, 2007) tracks processes by which practitioners develop deeper understandings of their own professional practice in order to further improve it, and a/r/tography (Springgay & LaJevic, 2008) sets out to record embodied practice by distinctly overlaying the functions of teacher, researcher and art maker. The arts-based projects discussed in this essay also merge the processes of research and teaching and, as suggested earlier, the approach they use can track moments of learning opportunity, blocks, and refinements of strategy that can lead to improved practice.

The use of drama strategies offers several further particular potential contributions. As claimed earlier, learning through drama is a process that utilises the energy of the group and that develops meaning not only verbally but also viscerally, emotionally and socially. It is also a process that invites and develops the agency (Greenwood, 2010) of its participants: an agency that includes initiating ideas, giving physical witness to those ideas and critically reflecting on those ideas in order to discard or further refine them. In these ways it allows the development of learning discourses that, far from being repetitions of a teacher's instruction, are anchored in the physical and conceptual interplay of all the learners, teacher included.

The sociolinguist, Gee (2012), explains Discourses as socially constructed physical and verbal codes of communication that are deeply embedded in the values and accredited knowledge of a specific group. The opportunities for agency offered by drama, among other arts, allow the learning group to manipulate and play with given Discourses and in the process deconstruct and realign them.

I see a further contribution to be made by arts- based research to the scholarship of teaching itself. Elsewhere (Greenwood, 2006) I examined the scholarship of teaching as the complex cluster of knowledges and strategies that teachers draw on, consciously and sub-consciously.

While each teacher has their personal repertoire, there is also a significant body of collective knowledge. Much of the knowledge is passed on through interpersonal interactions, in workshops or from colleagues. I argued that the ability to draw on and select effective strategies from this body of knowledge involves a form of artistry, and that the integration of the knowledge, the scholarliness, is craft-based and interdependent with practice. Here I suggest that the tracking of the interactions, successive discoveries, evaluations and decisions involved in teaching is an important form of research because it builds our communal repertoire of practice.

The aesthetic and knowledge

To an extent a consideration of the relationship between aesthetic learning and knowledge is embedded throughout the earlier discussion. Before finishing I'd like to address it more directly. I examine notions of aesthetic learning and learning through the aesthetic in some detail elsewhere (Greenwood, 2010). Here I want to highlight one or two key ideas and relate them more particularly to research.

Firstly, the concept of the aesthetic evades congruent definition. It is a complex and dynamic concept, which is culturally situated, multi-faceted, emergent, ambiguous and essentially non-verbal. Secondly, we need to differentiate – at least partially – between learning about the aesthetic, learning through the aesthetic, and aesthetic learning, a kind of learning that is not predominantly intellectual but that is located in the body, that is visceral, emotional and intuitive. I've examined how the first two might constitute research agendas in projects similar to those I've reported. My tabling of the doubly exposed photographic image, as well as some of the discussion of the three projects, invites further speculation about the robustness and validity of knowledge that is acquired through aesthetic learning. And, in those terms, it invites a further question: is the aesthetic simply another effective way of locating knowledge or it is a form of knowledge in itself? Neither of these questions lead to definitive, or even easy, answers, but it is useful to explore them.

As suggested in the third case study, validity is a concept predicated on relativity. Quantitative studies invariably identify the limitations of the relevance of their data: they make a claim only in terms of the specific boundaries of what was being investigated. Art-based research can be equally clear about the frames within which it engages. For example not all images of illumination (spiritual, intellectual or emotional) can be read as evidence that the participant has achieved such illumination. But they are evidence that the participant at this time constructs illumination in this particular way, or even that such illumination is seen as a desirable goal. And they are invitations to use the work to dig a little deeper. So the validity of particular findings is, as always, situated and partial. Moreover, there is a further dimension to validity in arts-based research. The ambiguities, diverging connections and unresolved

tensions remind us that so called *facts* are only deliberately spotlighted items in the rich and complex web of human knowing. I believe that, for us as teachers, those facts about our students' learning are more valid when we see them embedded in the bigger framework of their emergent knowing. Thus I would describe the robustness of an arts based study both in terms of the rigour with which the research fine tunes the processes in order to probe deeply into a particular issue, and in terms of attention to unintended discoveries and to connections with other concerns of the participants.

As to the second question, it seems evident that working in the aesthetic can be a very effective way of anchoring knowledge, particularly if it involves bodily participation and choice. Knowledge held in this way is arguably more ready to be called into action than if it is purely verbally cognitive. But do we also know something more? With others who educate through the arts, I would argue that there is more, and that the *more* is significant, but that we cannot always explain what the *more* is. It is the *more* that we sometimes call magic. However, while that magic remains elusive, the processes of creating and interpreting the magic can be used to search for and crystallise meaning.

As ontologists and epistemologists we can fruitfully spend time wandering in the myriad corridors of complexity and intertextuality, but as grounded teachers, and as researchers of teaching practice, I believe we need to acknowledge the complex framework of meaning and interpretation in which we work, and then purposively select the frames we will work with. Magic may be what gives us delight, energy and ongoing provocation, but meaning is something we can unpack, play with, and use.

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