

# AN ARTISTIC CONTEMPLATIVE INQUIRY: WHAT ARRIVES IN CO-CONTEMPLATING ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

MICHELLE SEARLE AND LYNN FELS

## ABSTRACT:

Contemporary arts-based inquiry invites us to linger in moments, to reflect upon our lives, our encounters, our relationships within the grander context of the worlds within which we dwell and those that we co-create. Here, we explore the landscape of the arts in relation to assessment and evaluation. Through a collaborative artistic contemplative inquiry, an emergent dialogue exploring assessment and evaluation is recorded and presented as a found poem, "What Arrives." Our hope, when we embarked upon this artistic contemplation, was that we would evoke, provoke, and interrupt each other for the purpose of creating possibilities of alliance and (re)cognition when thinking about the arts, assessment, and evaluation.

## BIO:

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## An Ontological Introduction: In the Dragon's Belly



March 28, 2008, at 9:04 PM:

Hi Michelle,  
delighted to hear from you after all these years –  
evaluation is a critical piece to education and arts education  
smart move, really, to get a handle on it, so you  
can begin questioning our assumptions and presumptions in this area...  
you are wise to take your time, give yourself permission to breathe,  
and let the work come to you...

Lynn

Figure 1: Photograph of Michelle and Lynn at the Story Dragon in London, Ontario (Photographer unknown, 1994)

July 27, 2009, at 9:16 PM:

Hi Lynn,  
It was nice to see you at the CSSE.  
I have attached a copy of the paper I wrote –  
trying to figure out  
where this work was going and how I was to navigate the space between  
the arts and evaluation.  
I used an imagined conversation between you and I  
because I felt that our discussion  
really helped me to breathe - a story of realization.

Michelle

November 15, 2009, at 2:10 AM

Dear Michelle,

I am curious to know how your research is unfolding;  
evaluation is an area that I am currently exploring, and I am intrigued by your ideas,  
and wondering how you imagine them in practice

You under-estimate the learning and impact that working with you brought to me, a gift,  
that continues in our conversations around your ideas and work.

with care, Lynn

December 12, 2017 at 9:15 AM

Hi Lynn,  
How are you?  
I am thinking of submitting for this Artizein special issue... are you?  
Maybe this would be good project for us to pursue together!  
My thinking was along the lines of the arts or creativity in  
evaluation/applied research as a provocateur of space for contemplative practice.  
Early thinking! Let me know if you are interested...

Talk soon (I hope)  
Michelle

Relationships matter. The emails above provide a glimpse into the relational history and interests we share, which has led to this opportunity to create together once again. As educators, researchers, and artists, we are both curious about the intersections of arts, assessment, and evaluation. Figure 1 represents our first encounter from decades past, when Lynn

was engaged with Michelle in an arts-based community experience in London, Ontario. Michelle was a grade twelve student exploring theatre and play creation. Lynn facilitated the co-creation of a readers theatre with narrative orchestration which engaged high school co-op students and audiences of young children in an immersive experience inside the belly of a large inflatable dragon. This performance was workshopped in area schools and then performed for many years at the London International Children's Festival. After this first encounter, Michelle eventually took flight to teach internationally, and later received her doctorate from Queen's University, specializing in arts-informed inquiry in program evaluation; meanwhile, Lynn journeyed through a doctoral program at the University of British Columbia, motivated by tugs on the sleeve, stop moments, and children's wisdom that led to performative inquiry.

Decades later, we reconnected at educational conferences – finding connections and disconnections in the places and processes of the academy.

*"Do you want to skip out of this session?"*

*"Do you think anyone will notice?"*

*"We can make a dramatic exit. Meet me in 15 minutes at the reception desk."*

*"I can't sit still another minute...on the count of three: one two three!"*

Conversations have unfolded on meandering pathways in parks, via long distance over the phone, and most recently, through Skype, as we connect to share lived experiences, engage with new ideas, encounter each other's understandings and push each other towards broader understanding of what matters. We are informed by our relationship and by a multiplicity of our experiences as women/artists/educators/mothers/ daughters/ sisters/friends, as we attempt to view and participate in the world thoughtfully, creatively, and expressively. We align our work to that of Freire (1993) when he indicated that the purpose of our work, as educators, researchers, and evaluators, is "to stimulate doubt, criticism, curiosity, questioning, a taste for risk-taking, the adventure of creating" (p. 50). We invoke and evoke artistic practices in pedagogy and research to provide an authenticity where experience and embodiment co-exist in knowledge creation and representation. We seek as artists, and educators

A space that creates a place of intimacy

Where you are safe to explore the possible

and the 'impossible'

To test the boundaries

Safe in the knowledge of

make-believe and creativity and compassion

The dragon won't eat you  
But rather, welcome you inside –  
To tell another story  
To pick up where you left off – or  
Begin another adventure, completely afresh  
– An excerpt from Michelle's commonplace book<sup>1</sup>

Through walking together in conversation and sharing articles we have individually written, we have become increasingly aware of how our experiences in the arts, assessment, and evaluation have prepared us for engaging in new ways of creating, appreciating, and inviting communities to explore artful practices as contemplative processes for meaning-making (e.g., Cole & McIntyre, 2004; Costantino & Greene, 2003; Dart & Davies, 2003). Our challenge, in our teaching and careers, and in this, our first artistic contemplative inquiry, is to create and dwell in spaces of possibility as sites of inquiry in search of resonance, possible dissonance, and learning.

As co-authors, we embark collaboratively here and now upon a contemplative journey that spans decades, focusing our inquiry on the integration of the arts within assessment and evaluation practices as we engage in the external evaluation of our careers in the academy and our assessment of the students, and programs, that we teach. We view this first artistic contemplation as an action site of collegial meaning making, in which our emergent dialogue arrives through art making. For us, artistic contemplative inquiry is a multi-stage endeavor, beginning with collaborative art making, during which a conversation arrives as we contemplate a chosen topic, in this case, the role of the arts in assessment and evaluation, followed by shared reflection, a recognition of themes, and finally, poetic response, presented here as a poem. Thus, inquiry through artmaking and conversation makes visible what matters, both in our aural and artistic explorations. Then, through reflecting upon our conversation and the artistic artifacts that we have co-created, and through poetic engagement with our words, we arrive at a possible new *interstanding*<sup>2</sup> of assessment, evaluation, and the arts as experienced in our everyday lives. Oddly, in writing this piece now, what arrives foremost upon reflection is the *woundedness* of assessment and evaluation, where too often an offering is ignored or refused, where expectation dismisses the unexpected. And we surface, in this space of artistic contemplative inquiry, the loneliness of an academic's burden and a desire for co-creation and belonging.

In the following artistic contemplative inquiry, we explore in conversation tensions we have experienced and continue to experience in our practice to connect the arts, assessment, and evaluation. Our ideas about evaluation and assessment resonate with our shared values and those that pull at our hearts; our collaborative contemplative inquiry invites us to linger, to be present with each other, to be mindfully aware – in conversation, in artmaking, in reflection of our lives – of the gaps, tensions, and resistances that we encounter. We offer,

*What Arrives in Co-Contemplating Evaluation through Artmaking*, a found poem, created from the recorded notes of our emergent dialogue, interwoven throughout the text as an invitation to the reader to engage with us in this inquiry, as we seek, to “enlarge the space of the possible.”<sup>3</sup>

### **What Arrives....**

Our working together then and now  
Questions and compliments!  
“you look the same!”

Memories  
laughter and tears  
time going so fast  
wanting to be present in each moment  
lingering  
holding the space      open

### **Contemplative Inquiry through the Arts**

We encounter each other on Skype at a designated time, with a promise to engage in collaborative artmaking, as a catalyst and provocation. Using the arts genre of collage (Butler-Kisber, 2008), and attending to our emergent dialogue, we record what emerges through our shared artmaking. Robertson (2002) explains that, “collage reflects the very way we experience the world with objects given meaning not from something within themselves, but rather through the way we perceive they stand in relationship to one another” (p. 2, as cited in Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2011).

During our encounter, we attend to our artmaking, dialogue, and the emergent learning that arrives in textual interplay: interruptions, fragments, images, in seeking to make visible our learning, as we engage together in our inquiry. The multiple layers of words, images, fragments of conversation evoked are spatial and temporal artifacts of meaning making, memories, experiences, as we engage in a unique opportunity to explore what matters in regard to assessment and evaluation and the arts. Meaning making and resonance, awakening to what is of importance, occurs – but not easily. We find that we are required to move at a slower pace as we come together in artmaking and dialogue: deliberation about colours and placement of ribbons, and words, and buttons, and feelings. Our conversation invites revelation.

## Artistic Contemplation: Collaging Dialogue through Skype

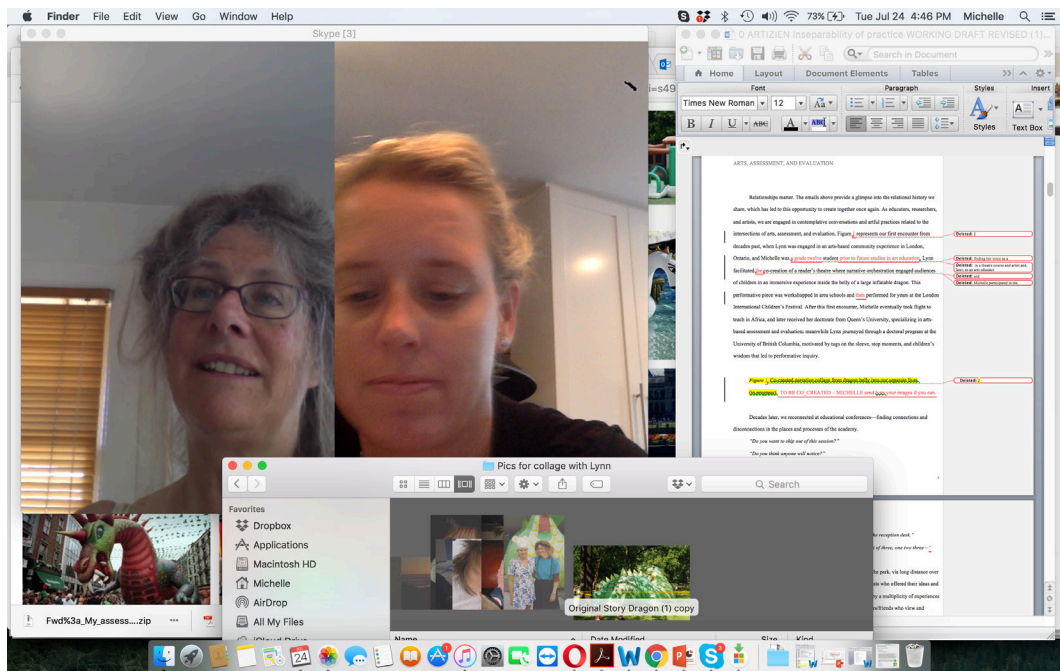


Figure 2: Screen shot moments before our artistic co-contemplation of assessment and evaluation through the arts begins (Searle, 2018)

As Walsh, Bickel, and Leggo (2015) remind us, “contemplative and arts-based practices merge, emerge, and resonate in our work as artists, researchers, and teachers” (p. 1). In this contemplative journey, we gift each other, as co-authors and colleagues, the opportunity, space, and time to think about, question, and try out ideas of possible arguments, reflections, and concerns regarding concepts that are infrequently interconnected, namely, the arts, assessment, and evaluation. By drawing from and positioning ideas from our practices, we arrive at new connections that are both reflective and generative as we surprise ourselves in the direction our artistic contemplative inquiry takes us.

Our conversation is rife with frustration about our demanding careers, about lack of understanding in our respective fields, about the harm that arrives in the marking of students, about what drags us underwater, as we struggle to breathe. Our conversation is pedagogical as we share ideas, experiences, stories, positioning ourselves anew in relationship to each other as educators, colleagues, friends. Time eludes us, and yet, as Michelle cuts and pastes, as I ponder colour, working from a distance, offering words; the tyranny of the urgent begins to disappear, we fall into an easy rhythm of simply being present and thinking through ideas together. Although Skype does not seem like the ideal or most appealing medium in which to co-create, we are required to bracket off time from within our worlds to be enlivened together.

**What Arrives ...**

Meaningful...

Evaluation is exhausting....

Assessment and evaluation is there to "do to" students

Disrupt that notion,

What if we engage with them?

More fluid...

Who is responsible for whose evaluation?

What is it we are evaluating?

We recognize, the fullness of their knowing can't be captured in a single artifact....

One moment in time.

Standardized testing....

Should Should Should Should Should

Artistic contemplation through inquiry invites us to linger in moments, to reflect upon our lives, our actions, our relationships within the grander context of the worlds within which we dwell and those that we co-create, with deep listening and heart.

**What Arrives ...**

Counting

Evaluation focuses capacity

Reminds me of a student who refused to answer a question,

"Why should I answer you? You already know the answer!"

Isn't it more interesting to look into those spaces and voids and gaps that we don't know?

Who you work with has meaning and value -

In our field of education

the solo author has more weight

we work collaboratively with colleagues

and encourage our students to collaborate...

How are these collaborations and co-authored papers assessed?

**What Arrives ...**

Tenure

The ultimate evaluation

Or is the ultimate evaluation an unexpected hug

from a child in New Zealand after  
we participated in  
a playbuilding activity together?

Reminds me of my student in Sri Lanka –  
He couldn't accept the utopian world we were creating in theatre class –  
couldn't wouldn't engage in class,  
Our utopian world (what education could be like)  
made the juxtaposition impossible  
to navigate the world outside  
Like he had an awakening

His mother asked me why I was ruining school for her son by questioning it  
Maybe that's not what's ruining it...

Trungpa (2008) likens the influence of the arts as a way of “paying more attention to the space that exists around us” (pp. 22-23). What can we learn about artful forms of research and pedagogy that can enhance learning in assessment and evaluation? What are the values related to the arts in education and research, and how are these sustained when we move into the worlds of assessment and evaluation?

### **What Arrives ...**

Evaluation

Who is surveillancing whom?  
and for what purpose?

We're in the process of dismantling  
our competitive based merit review system  
changing it to a professional development model – unique to each person....

Humanizing

“not that we have to do all the things on the list,  
but recognizing that there are many possible ways to be in action”

Comparative Merit  
IMPACT!!

Playfulness, creativity, and imagination have long been recognized as key contributors to learning (e.g., Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 2002; Piaget, 1951; Thomas & Brown, 2011). Walsh, Bickel & Leggo (2015) suggest that contemplative practices offer a chance to be both present in the moment and awake to the possibilities of the unknown. The arts help to create and represent



understanding or meaning making as well as act as catalysts for experiences of abstraction and knowledge formation (e.g., Gaut, 2003). Thus, our artistic contemplative inquiry, in which the artmaking and emergent conversation become both artifact and catalyst, evokes further reflection, meaning-making, and action, as we move forward into our teaching and research. A flurry of names, concepts, ideas tumble out, unharnessed as Michelle places buttons, like beacons on the collage— *(in the midst of our artmaking, we are suddenly compelled to send each other a blizzard of emails, sharing all the pieces, papers, ideas that we want the other to read)!*

### What Arrives ...

Evaluation -

Collection of postcards about narratives of learning (Fels, 2015)

A quote, an image, a tug on the sleeve, and why the learning matters

From postcard to letters talking about school to sharing their lives

Raising Creativity -Zak - a five part video (Zak, 2014)

Reciprocal Vulnerability (Thomasson, 2017)

Shame and Intimacy (Brown, 2010, 2012)

Complexity thinking... contemplative practices which we are falling into....stops....  
(Sumara and Davis, 1997; Walsh et. al., 2015; Appelbaum 1995)...

Contemplating, wondering

talking tangents,

feedback loops

recurse learning

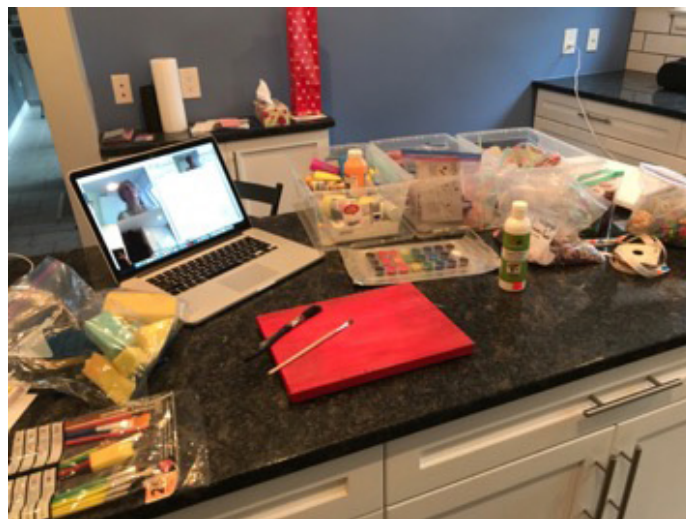


Figure 3: Photograph of art making in progress for this paper (Searle, 2018)

Through our artistic contemplative inquiry, we are reminded that O'Donoghue (2009) described arts research as being rooted in the "belief that the arts have a unique ability to contribute particular insights into and enhance understandings of phenomena that are of interest" (p. 352). The arts are an example of visible imaginative intellect; they are also processes for inquiring and a means of understanding (e.g., Barone & Eisner, 2006). Arts-inspired research is flexible and can provide multiple entry points (Knowles & Cole, 2008). Through the use of arts practices in contemplation, in pedagogy, and in our research, we model that there is more than one single, linear path. Rather, the arts offer holistic processes that unite theory and practice, connecting the personal and universal, bridging individuals from various communities of practice. This holism may reveal previously unrealized, shifted, or new perspectives, and may lead to experiences that garner insights through reflective practice. In addition, the arts can provide contemplative spaces where exploration with creativity, curiosity, and wonder promote dialogue that may stimulate new knowledge or ways of knowing.

Although each visual and performance arts genre has distinctive elements, we know that the different genres also share a view that encompasses creative processes and media as a means of communicating. The variety of arts genres might include, but are not limited to:

- literary forms (e.g., Barone, 2001; Dunlop, 1999; Richardson, 1994);
- visual art (e.g., Butler-Kisber, 2007, 2008; Sullivan, 2010);
- performance (e.g., Frantzich & Fels, 2017; Miller, 2001; Shigematsu, 2016).
- dance or folk art (e.g., Bagley & Cancienne, 2002; Ball, 2008; Cancienne & Snowber, 2003).

In our artistic contemplative inquiry, we use collage and poetic techniques while experimenting with materials for the purpose of engaging with each other, our ideas, and lived experience.

During our artistic contemplative inquiry, we agreed that one of the core values across these artistic forms is being attuned to cognitive, affective, and aesthetic dimensions, which are intertwined in contemplative, creative, and dialogic action. These dimensions are heightened and given voice through the qualities, properties, materials, and capacities that artistic forms enable. Looking back fondly, we can see that in the decades since the adoption of different research genres, such as performative inquiry (e.g., Fels, 1999, 2010, 2012), research-based theatre (e.g. Belliveau & Lea, 2011), a/r/tography (e.g., Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008), narrative inquiry (e.g., Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), poetic inquiry (Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009), embodied inquiry (Snowber, 2016), and arts-informed research (Cole & Knowles, 2008), these expanded arts approaches illustrate the methodological pluralism in social and educational research that has been realized (Barone, 2008).

**What Arrives ...**

You used red – why?  
Red is the colour of anger  
It is also the flip side of passion and love  
We can't do the work we do as scholars  
    as women, as mothers, as artists  
        without passion  
Because the work simply requires it  
It's a colour to be present with.

**What Arrives ...**

Our presence  
I feel a sense of responsibility for this course  
  It's a practice  
to have student teachers experience

Classroom management  
Lesson planning  
Unit planning  
Assessment  
Practicum, as we sit at the back at the room and judge them  
And tell them what they're not doing right.

Or our responsibility is to tell them what *is* going right,  
To ask what's possible –  
    why and where they are going with their thinking,  
    and if anyone else wants to go there?

Gallagher (2000) cautions, “the wrong kinds of assessment can halt a process and arrest its movement” (p. 109). It seems oppressive to think about or to allow an assessment-oriented educational culture to limit the generative potential of the arts in education (Gallagher, 2000; Goodwyn, 2012) or in research. The danger is that the one being assessed, and the work being offered becomes under-valued in the strictures and expectations of the conventional evaluator or evaluation structure. As arts educators, we recognize that there are multiple pathways for artful explorations and contemplations that reflect the possibilities for “seeing” differently (Lather, 2007). Park and Rabi (2015) speak to how the arts can infuse both courage and energy into inquiry. Both of these qualities are essential in the work of assessment and evaluation as well as in teaching and research, more broadly.

### What Arrives ...

Headmaster made me change the evaluation, assessment  
Wasn't giving grades  
Feedback, journals, co-constructing learning together,  
Off the wall stuff!

Stopped putting marks on papers that I would spend hours on in commenting  
I watched them look for the mark.  
I stopped doing the marks so they would listen  
to the comments  
to my response to their work

Judgement comes in many layers  
from everywhere

What was that student resisting?  
You took the ground away from him  
And opened up the sky....freefall  
Like the wild coyote in The Road Runner –

What do we do with our anger?  
What do we do with our hopes?



Figure 4: Photograph of mixed media piece on canvas created by Michelle Searle in artistic contemplative inquiry with Lynn Fels (Searle, 2018)

Figure 4, created during our contemplative artistic inquiry, illustrates how the collage was impacted by our emergent conversation, and vice-versa; materials chosen interact with written text— ribbons and buttons weave a meandering path through words, questions,

frustrations. The collage shows our hope: that when imagined holistically, assessment and evaluation have the potential to be transformed from being judgment-focused to pedagogical and transformative. Our conception of assessment and evaluation is one where educators encourage students to take risks and invest in the experience of learning — especially if the bringing together of assessment, evaluation and the arts move toward creating a culture of creativity and collaboration, where accountability for learning is a reciprocal responsibility. Our fear is that, too often, the mark of assessment and evaluation imposed on colleagues, students, upon each other, bruises hearts, limits motivation, and fails to celebrate what each individual has to offer. What might happen if individuals, collectives, are given voice, agency, and opportunities to engage in assessment and evaluation activities that are pedagogical, arts-generated, and enlivening?

Just make a mark and see where it takes you.  
— Peter H. Reynolds, *The Dot*

Throughout our artistic contemplative inquiry together, we explored how, although conceptually different, the arts, assessment, and evaluation are inter-connected because they all contain elements of ideas and action, of theory and practice, and of emergent possibilities. These linkages are metaphorically illustrated in each of the buttons and ribbons on the collage above. Like many artist-scholars, we hold a desire to engage in and create work that has the potential for transformation. This transformation may be physical, emotional, or intellectual; when there is space for hope, inquiry, and learning, there are no limits.

### What Arrives ...

Evaluation can be interruption

conversation  
pedagogical  
intervention

Evaluation provides/requires/invites/offers  
opportunity for introspection  
collaborative evaluation as shared responsibility  
how can we understand that evaluation is a co-construction.....co-creation

*what I'm paying attention to is your language*  
language reveals one's positionality

what is the fundamental difference between

co-construct?  
criteria, finite, leverage                      and co-create?  
emergent, open-ended, emergent, reciprocal, relational

authentic learning....  
I don't know how many students I have...

It all comes back to counting  
I want to do work that is meaningful,  
fun, engaging, and real

I don't know how to access the system  
It is so locked in...

How to evaluate— an accounting of what matters?  
Failure to launch is not an option....

Failing, you learn a lot, maybe you learn the most....

Throughout our artistic contemplative inquiry together, we speak to the value of and need for assessment and evaluation processes that allow diverse individuals to show up, to be acknowledged, to be visible for the contributions they make. By exploring our ideas about assessment and evaluation as an artful and dialogic encounter, we created opportunities for ourselves to participate in a process that sustains and nourishes the energy with which scholar-artists engage within the world. The artmaking and dialogue through this artistic contemplative inquiry allowed us to explore how the arts play a viable role in invoking and evoking new thinking about assessment and evaluation. And yet, through sharing our stories and feelings, evident both in the artmaking and our emergent conversation, we also came to understand how disturbed we are by the level of resistance we encounter as artist scholars seeking to make a difference in conventional ways of assessment and evaluation. The interweaving of artmaking and conversation alerted us to what we have yet to say, yet to learn. We recognize that we want to explode the idea of what counts as *impact*. The word *impact* makes us recoil. From this artistic contemplative inquiry together, we learned what becomes possible and enlivening when we take the time and opportunity to engage with each other in a meaningful and artful way. Assessment and evaluation was our *raison d'être* for engaging in this artistic contemplative inquiry together; we have however, come to realize how isolated we are in our scholarship and how much we value the gift of each other's companionship, here and now.

### **What Arrives ...**

Relaxing, this artmaking, our talking  
channels my anger into doing something

Are academic journals by which we are judged  
a way of silencing our anger?  
of taking away action?

Journals impose a distancing world  
They divorce people from themselves  
from each other.

We want it to be real –  
but don't make it too vulnerable  
Because it makes the rest of us uncomfortable

This poetic and playful writing reveals what arrived through artmaking and collegial conversation, reflection, and poetic response. Our artistic contemplative inquiry enabled us to question one another about a troubling issue to which we are both deeply committed, and in doing so, created a space to share stories of failure and hopefulness that spoke to our tensions, experiences, and the challenges we encounter interweaving the arts, assessment, and evaluation within the multiple structures where we work and have worked as educators. Perhaps, most importantly, our artmaking as collaborative contemplative inquiry has given us time to immerse ourselves in our ideas: to talk and be together. This time, to be in relationship, to play with ideas, to co-create and contemplate what matters in an artful way, is a gift to ourselves and, possibly, one we can offer to readers. We have learned through our time together that we need to value what we bring to evaluation and to appreciate the reflective time that evaluation demands, yet is so often forgotten. Assessment and evaluation offer pedagogy, intervention, possibility, inspiration, and occasionally, heartbreak. By engaging the arts within a dialogic contemplation of ideas, feelings, stories, a playfulness emerges, memories are evoked, tears shared, and we are further encouraged and determined to hold fast to our commitment of reimagining assessment and evaluation as an artful endeavor.

### What Arrives ...

What is all that typing?

*I am making a record of our conversation*

... we didn't talk about time, resistance, the heartbreak

*time, resistance, and heartbreak, arrive here and now  
in this moment, tugging at our sleeve, we'll add it into our text*

... playfulness, and inspiration, that's missing from our conversation

*yet we have been playful and inspired in our artistic contemplation  
together in inquiry....*

What would happen if we engage in another artistic contemplative inquiry on motherhood and the academy? Or on classroom management?

Or let's explore the unspoken angst and anxiety of our students

artistic contemplative inquiry makes visible  
feelings, ideas, and concepts, questions, that shape our actions  
and, in their absence the gaps that call us to attention.

Let's give ourselves an A plus and fill the space with words

*let's not give ourselves a mark, don't we leave enough marks on our students?*

It's end of term. Students are asking about criteria, final marks, missing assignments.

*Let's fill the space with silence and see what arrives.*

How do **you** decide what matters?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>A commonplace book is a text where the author compiles and generates knowledge, it pulls together pieces such as quotations, poetic verse, passages from texts, questions, doodles, notes, reflective sketches in one space. Read more about this contemplative practice here: <https://evernote.com/blog/taking-note-commonplace-books/>

<sup>2</sup>Taylor & Saarinen (1991) suggest that understanding is impossible, as nothing stands under; that rather meaning-making is created between, thus the word interstanding.

<sup>3</sup>Sumara & Davis, 1997.

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