1-1-2016

Arts-Based Educational Research as a Site for Emerging Pedagogy and Developing Mentorship

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Highlighting mentoring roles while relaying accounts of arts-based educational research (ABER) practice, we present a personal and conceptual narrative of emergent epistemological and pedagogical understandings encountered during dissertation journeys. Juxtaposing narratives with dialogue, we share postresearch reflexive work, and present a praxis-oriented discussion of ABER. We discuss implications for art education pedagogy, research, and leadership in the context of professional and personal development fostered through mentorship during this transformative ABER experience.

Two exhibitions represented the first time art educators at the Ohio State University (OSU) used arts-based educational research (ABER) as part of doctoral culminating dissertation research activities (Keys, 2003; Suominen, 2003). Placing artworks in central galleries, we claimed space for ourselves, the research, the department, and the use of ABER practices within academia. This autoethnographic dissertation work was *arts based* in that it involved artistic methods and artistic creation as complimentary and integrated research methods. Exhibited in gallery spaces, these reflexive artistic processes and products, targeting exploration into educational practice, afforded us additional arts-based lenses of inquiry and understanding, and publicly shared art as scholarly educational research.

Continuing our reflective and reflexive practice to the present time, this essay documents and discusses ABER as a site for emergent pedagogy and mentorship. Our essay also uses a strategy of *duography* defined by Diamond and Mullen (1996)

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as "a co-authored form of research" (p. 3) in which the internal and external dialogues about events and insights into/about one's life shared with a research partner serve to develop new understandings of researchers' experiences in larger sociocultural contexts. We practice ABER and *a/r/tography* (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis, & Grauer, 2006; Springgay, Irwin, & Leggo, 2007), a form of "hybrid, practice-based methodology" and serve as "critical friends" (Sinner et al., 2006, p. 1224) in a "synergistic co-mentoring" relationship (Mullen, 2005, p. 73). We began as peer coaches (Mullen, 2005) and through this bond we formed a lasting professional friendship. Searching for authentic artist-educator-researcher selves, these artistic and theoretical journeys are seen as means to explore implications of knowledge gained and the challenging use of artistic research practices for developing art education pedagogy and mentorship. To this end, we connect narratives of coming to conceptual and theoretical maturity from developing ideologies as students in mentored relationships to new mentor relationships with our own students.

We recount parts of our research and reframe this work as a model to inventory and reflect upon dissertation and ABER mentoring, and this work's relationship to pedagogical development and creative practice. To share emergent understandings of pedagogy and mentorship, we portray ABER as an artistic, arts-based educational, holistic, and still alternative form of research; articulate processes and representations through portraits of our dissertation exhibits; and finally present emerging pedagogical and scholarly understandings in relationship to current views of mentorship.

Our Dissertation Research Projects

At a time when ABER was being treated with great skepticism in our graduate department and college, and was a relatively unpublished methodology in art education, we each committed in 2000, with committee support, to embark upon our own potentially risky pedagogical research and personal journeys. Although some scholarly texts about or containing ABER methods were available (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Diamond & Mullen, 1999; Richardson, 1997), overall we encountered little relevant literature and found it necessary to identify relevant texts from disparate frameworks, and to recompose, modify, and creatively merge what was known to us from several fields of inquiry to respond to the specific needs of our work. Bricolage is often necessary and normal in doctoral research, but ABER by nature is not defined by a strict methodological framework or methods agreed upon by practitioners. Rather, ABER aims at constant renewal. No specific endpoints from our research were formulated in advance; rather, findings, recommendations, affirmations, and a gradual solidifying of pedagogical constructs confirming a constantly emergent and evolving process were discovered in process. Instead of outlining predetermined desired

research outcomes, we share our learning, understandings, and stories of personal and professional transformation grounded in educational practice.

We were actively mentored by advisors and chairs Patricia Stuhr and Christine Ballengee-Morris and additional committee members who took professional risks by supporting ideas to examine and later use ABER. They encouraged us as we were challenged by troubling questions such as, How does an artistic research process begin? How do we proceed? How will the work be represented? How will we bridge the formal research writing, other forms of writing, visual work created during the process, and express the emerging pedagogies? By presenting these questions, we wish to demonstrate that the uncertainty we experienced throughout the process profoundly changed our perceptions of scholarship and mentorship. No longer could we see research projects as performed according to pregiven models, and, although our academic mentors were still our scholarly guides, their roles were to support and nurture us through this challenge rather than provide specific answers. We were motivated at that time by the potential of new possibilities and eager to test our abilities to use, redefine, and modify ABER, which we note that now, several years later, is more widely understood in academia as an acceptable scholarly practice (Sinner et al., 2006).

As our essay moves forward for this special issue of *Visual Arts Research* on mentorship, we discuss the art making and exhibitions that were critical parts of our doctoral dissertations in greater detail. In brief, Anniina (Suominen, 2003) represented her life-altering immigration story in an installation of color photographs, narrative writings, and an audio recording. Her dissertation research was a critical study of the construction of cultural, gendered, and professional (scholarly) identities by using artistic and narrative methods of data collection, analysis, and representation. Kathleen's (Keys, 2003) research included participant observations in community arts work, interviews, and written portraits of community arts and art education workers, which facilitated her search for models of community pedagogy praxis. Mixed-media artworks created to explore, understand, and later express the praxis of community pedagogy as a complex and evolving collage were used to further investigate and represent these ideas.

Once introduced to one another by Anniina's mentor, Patricia Stuhr, we became one another's sounding boards, reality checks, and safety blankets. We found intellectual partnership and camaraderie, both of us willing to take significant risks by committing to a scholarly work deemed unworthy and questionable by so many (Keys & Suominen Guyas, 2006). The comentorship nature of our emergent professional friendship and subsequent research is reflected in the following text format to illustrate our emerging shared ideologies while still giving space to our individual differences. As a framework for self and comentoring, we turned to the concept of *self-actualization* (Mullen, 2005), which we understand as an intense

motive to reach one's potentialities, and also what we have named *self-efficacy*, a confident belief in one's capabilities to face rigorous challenges.

Theory and Practice Merge: Inside the Exhibitions

Returning to our exhibition spaces, we explain how we read our scholarly identities through the artistic, spatial, and pedagogical decisions and arrangements made at the time. In this revisitation, we gain insight into our current practices and professional identities, and develop further understandings of how the ABER process (and work with mentors and as comentors) influenced our current roles as young scholars and mentors.

Anniina: Writing with Photographs—Reconstructing Self

The Hopkins Hall Gallery (College of Art, OSU) was the exhibition site for my color photographs hung from the ceiling with barely visible fishing lines (Figure 1). The installation was designed to resemble sheets cut out of a diary hanging independently and in groups. The photographic sheets were sensitive to the airflow and movement of people in the space. Hanging them in such a way signified that I was not exhibiting photographs of my life, but inviting the spectators to walk around while listening to the looped, audiotaped narratives of my experiences. I thought

Figure 1. *Writing with Photographs—Re-constructing Self,* 2000–2003, by Anniina Suominen.

my voice, accent, and emphasis of words and details of stories added another layer of presence, credibility, and sensibility. Viewing pages from my immigration story, part of my personal life-story narrated in a public context, created a feeling of approachability, a sense of presence, possibility of touch, and closeness without a physical touch; a sense of availability and vulnerability.

Although my voice on the audiotape reminded spectators of my presence, my goal was not to invite people to read my stories and live through my experiences in chronological order but to create interactive relationships between different stories and images, and layer my experiences with the spectators'.

The beginning of the research process was marked by my move from Helsinki, Finland, to Columbus, Ohio, in January 2000. Only a few months into my studies at Ohio State, I began to photograph my life. Performing visual inventories and portraying social interactions was my means of survival; an uncensored interaction with myself and my environment offered an escape from my struggles with academic English and the newly introduced social rules (Figure 2). The further I advanced with my studies, the more the artistic processes began to interweave with theoretical and concept development. As I read and wrote about research and theory, I used my photos, "photo-writing," and memory work to ground what I was processing. Simultaneously, I searched for texts, theories, methodologies, and professors who could help me understand what was emerging from my art. The interplay that developed facilitated new constructions of knowledge surrounding educational constructs.

Kathleen: A Search for Community Pedagogy—Collage Reclamations of Space and Self

Exposures Gallery (Student Union Building, OSU) was emblazoned with vivid colors (Figure 3). Large colored paper sheets covered the walls. Nontraditional paintings on wood panels, streaming visual journals (Figure 4), and collaged self-portraits created with acrylic paint, oil and chalk pastels, and various mixed-media objects

Figure 2. *Roof—What the Fuck am I doing here* (2000–2003), digital color print, by Anniina Suominen.

Figure 3. A Search for Community Pedagogy: Collage Reclamations of Space and Self (2003), by Kathleen Keys.

flanked the walls. Narrative reflections were placed close to artworks. I was present in the space in the form of four large photocollaged pictures. Surrounded by paint, pastels, artificial flowers, and other materials, these self-portraits suggested the idea of empowering and celebratory altars to my many professional selves (artist-educator-researcher-administrator). I now assert these identities represented diverse locations of potential power, influence, and empowerment within my art education work.

Above the room in the spirit of *papel picado* (pierced or cut paper banners signifying celebration), multicolored paper flags crisscrossed the gallery (Figure 5). Minus intricate designs, the dual-sided flags contained my dissertation draft, too high for viewers to comfortably read. This placement of the formal text above viewers' heads questioned the exclusiveness and elitism of academic procedures while ironically celebrating the near completion of the formal academic text.

I intended to create a forum, a place of *plazability* (Keys, 2007), dedicated to community building, collective creative production, and the process of generating knowledge communally. The gallery merged from an exhibition/installation into an open studio as visitors added to the evolving collage.

Festive and alluring, the environment offered visual metaphors and narrative examples of working, living, teaching, and learning in community. As an

Figure 4. *Candidacy Exam Visual Journal* (2003), by Kathleen Keys.

artist-educator-researcher-administrator, I attempted to model within this space the key components of community pedagogy. The plazalike setting invited attendees to create and leave visual layerings, thus challenging them to act out against societal and behavioral norms dictating passivity.

Figure 5. *Dissertation Draft Papel Picado* (2003), by Kathleen Keys.

Evolving Conceptual Understandings Gained Through Artistic Representations, Emerging Pedagogy, and Coming to Pedagogical Maturity

The passing years since completing our dissertations have afforded us distance and the ability to reach a certain level of professional maturity from which to glean new understandings from the work we conducted during our ABER-infused doctoral research practice. Upon reflection, it is evident how all scholarly decisions made as students continue to influence our practices today. In the following section, we

make connections between the described exhibits and our current epistemological and pedagogical understandings and praxis.

Anniina

My engagements with art, the act of photographing, and consequent "photo-writing" practices (Suominen, 2003) were crucial. The intercyclical process of concept development and artistic engagement continues to change my vision and understanding of epistemology and ontology. To those unfamiliar with a holistic research process (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004), the validity may be suspect. However, once involved, the deep commitment to the experience often irreversibly changes ontological and epistemological understandings. Within these engagements, an alteration of understanding of self, knowledge, time, presence, and memory is formed (Suominen Guyas, 2008). For example, at the beginning, I experienced different aspects of identity as separate and viewed my inquiry as focused solely on cultural constructions of identity. Once engaged, I began to grasp how these assumed separate identities were constantly shifting and better understood as intermingled and overlapping subjectivities. Also, contrary to my initial perception, my professional and pedagogical

Figure 6. *Twins* (2000–2003), digital color print, by Anniina Suominen.

Figure 7. Series of visual inventories (2000–2003), digital color print, by Anniina Suominen.

identity gained a central role through which all areas of my perceived self could be better comprehended.

My stories and (re)built/(re)directed understandings are created through photography, meditation, and scholarly writings based on these images. The artistic activity (re)directs the development of cognitive understanding, suggesting a relational mode of understanding (Bourriaud, 2002). Through the interplay between the brute title of Figure 2 and the image itself, I hope the different levels and modes of the experience are portrayed. As I stood on the rooftop, the complexity of the experience flooded my senses and awareness: the gusty wind carrying smells from afar, my emotional inability to relate to the flat landscape, the lack of direction I experienced without significant visible geographic landmarks, my exhaustion with trying to express myself in English (so concretely expressed through cussing). Past, memories, current moments, and the future also function in complex layers, making it in part impossible to express the acquired understandings at any given time. Visuals and visuality, to me, enable a different kind of remembering, a complex, nonstatic, incoherent but relational, and fluidly interactive understanding that does not require a commitment to a single, fixed, and logically consistent perception or understanding. This not only leaves space for revisiting the information when new understandings are created, but also allows unspoken fantasy and desire, that which is dared not or cannot be spoken about to gain representation.

Reflecting on the structure, I realize I was looking for solitude and peace through the representational format. Although my goals for the representation were complex and multilayered, I sought to control the interactions between different layers of information in a way that I had not been able to control the complexity of my life as a recent immigrant. I now see a parallel between how I invited people to

view my private stories in a public context and how I as an educator invite students to engage in their private and public educational journeys. As a professor, I respect their educational and conceptual maturity while challenging them to explore beyond what they already know and have accepted. As I claimed a public space for my work, I now affirm my students' individuality while emphasizing communal learning, sharing, and democracy. My course assignments are built with flexibility and open objectives, and multiple ways of conducting research and gaining knowledge are always stressed. As I was present, available, and vulnerable to public scrutiny in the exhibition space, I now attempt to respect, provide space, and value diversity in the classroom. As an educator, I do not represent and promote given knowledge but participate in voluntary engagement in the learning processes, making known my various positionalities and subjectivities.

Kathleen

Creating mixed-media paintings and collages assisted me in seeing, and grasping, a deeper sense of community pedagogy—and a pedagogy using social action as a metaphorical emergent and multilayered collage. Community pedagogy is not simply explained. It is a vulnerable construct in teaching and learning environments that must be continually and reflexively tended. In the gallery, I re-created the multilayered collage of community pedagogy and my role within it in a public forum. Meaningful artistic findings, visual metaphors, and residue resulting from ABER mirrored the need to invigorate communication between arts workers and cultural workers in general, and to foster education from within collaborative contexts.

I realized the intuitive generation of artworks, followed by narrative writing, reflection, scholarly writing and rewriting, interspersed with rich ethnographic data gathered from community arts workers, encouraged my evolving understanding of community pedagogy. Eventual products were meaningful visual constructions of data, knowledge, and residues of thinking processes. The meditative process of creating, editing, and then reflecting on the work not only began to make sense, but offered tangible clues or signposts for the subsequent directions of my research. The work enabled me to see yet-unnoticed connections, causing me to revise my philosophy regarding pedagogy. For example, I committed to exhibiting my individual ABER artwork long before deciding to invite the public into a plaza to create art in and on the exhibition. Once imagined, it became a necessity to extend my search for community pedagogy within the gallery space in this way.

Emanating results reconciled multiple internal and external identities in the text, artwork, and gallery, mirroring what I wanted my academic work to accomplish. Granting permission and inviting me to make sense of my ability to access these diverse positionalities of potential power and empowerment have greatly benefited my art education practice through radically evolving my pedagogy and mentorship.

In process, I examined my relationship to artworks as they related to the visualized facets of community pedagogy. The self-portraits specifically and the meanings I ascribed to them became personal visual metaphors for examining pedagogical building blocks, considering indigenous knowledge sources, locating the self as an activist, and discovering parallels between teaching/learning about art and teaching/learning about life.

For example, my self-portrait, *Very Aloe Vera [?]* (Figure 8) provided evidence of locating myself (as an activist) with a strong, enduring, and life-giving plant. In a journal entry, I wrote, "Ideas about facing the sun and preparing oneself to be more vocal about one's stands and convictions in life [and education] comes to mind." Overall, processes, evolutions, interview data, ABER, and manifestation of the exhibition reflected the theories and performed practices of a lived *community pedagogy* (Keys, 2003), the essence of community pedagogy—and to celebrate this lived community in an environment of *plazability* (Keys, 2007).

This research also explored a pedagogy for social change within art education contexts, focusing on the potential for the arts to empower and develop agency within community arts participants. Similarly, I found the self-reflexive work of ABER performing personal transformation. Its deep introspection encourages growth, awareness, additional questioning, and continuous reflection that foster agency and transgression. Linking this work to active communal change and agency, I see my choice of incorporating ABER as critical and intentional methodological/antimethodological activism. Following suit, Anniina and I both faced cautionary and later disapproving resistance to our explorations and use of ABER (Keys & Suominen, 2006). This ABER action assisted me in creating an evolving self-conceptualization as a resistor and activist promoting arts-based research methodology that, at its core, speaks to why art inquiry is instrumental to learning and understanding.

Developing Personal Roles for Mentorship

Reflecting on the significant role and nature of our mentors to protect, question, and guide us during our insecure, personal, and scholarly journeys enables us to draw connections on how the mentorship experience influenced and continues to inform our current practices and epistemology. Moreover, it suggests connections between the roles of critical scholar and activist mentor emerging from arts-based research as a form of practice, process, and product (Sinner et al., 2006). Additionally, Pat and Christine provided and modeled nurturance, flexibility, availability, critical self-reflexivity, and commitment to lifelong colearning. In the final section, we briefly discuss progressive models of mentoring, leadership, and legacy, and finally revisit our major theme reframing ABER practice as an accelerated site for emerging mentorship and pedagogy.

Figure 8. *Very Aloe Vera [?] Self-Portrait* (2003), mixed media, by Kathleen Keys.

Leadership, Mentors, and Legacy

We believe it is beneficial to explore our mentorship experience and practice through the context of leadership, and agree with Astin and Leland (1991), who describe it as a process of collective effort fueled by shared power. Further, they describe this power as energy rather than control, and equate it to research that affects social change as leadership. Astin and Leland present a nonhierarchical model of feminist leadership portraying "the leader as a catalyst or facilitator who enables others to act collectively toward the accomplishment of a common goal" (p. 11). Additionally, "Leadership is not separate from teaching and pedagogy. As leadership is integral to pedagogy, it must be practiced. Leadership is not just about theory, it *is* practice" (Irwin, 1998, p. 50, author's emphasis).

Recognizing the power of nonhierarchical scholarship, and based on our evolving and reflexive pedagogical practice, we agree with Astin and Leland, who "believe in the power of transforming individuals as the way of transforming institutions and ultimately society" (p. 125). Moreover, believing this to be true of critical ABER and a/r/tography (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Springgay et al., 2007) as a form of leadership, we posit that our continuous engagements with alternative modes of being, understanding, and practicing scholarship through artistic inquiry continue to challenge educators, learners, artists, and citizens, generating changes in institutionalized practices of education and culture. For instance, our inclination and motivation to be the first OSU art education students to incorporate ABER and exhibit as part of doctoral scholarship may catalyze, alter, or increase the exploration of ABER by future faculty and students, gradually altering norms of institutional practice.

In reflection on our experiences, we also find resonance with Irwin (1998), who discusses how "mentors inspire us to reach beyond, to reincarnation, to transformation, to find out who and what we can be" (p. 49). This is true in our relationships with Pat and Christine, who have now become our academic mothers. In their active resistance and questioning of social, cultural, educational and academic norms, both advisors/mentors demonstrated models of scholarship and mentorship we wanted to emulate, such as being activists and "troublemakers" who contest educational, political social, and cultural practice and procedure in myriad realms. Our mentors granted emotional and theoretical protection, provided practical and conceptual guidance, and practiced a form of gentle parenting. Moreover, they were authentically committed to a lifelong learning process benefiting the field through encouraging democratic education, communal generation of knowledge, and the unleashing of power in people to work for change.

Additionally, strong and reflexive mentors do not predict or attempt to place students or mentor them into their exact futures, but rather "help them discover who they are" (Astin & Leland, 1991, p. 124). Our mentors modeled a form of leadership

that translates to mentorship as an insightful and educational practice by encouraging involvement or placement into multiple accelerated learning environments such as in our cases, curating and directing a university gallery, serving as trusted teaching assistants, submitting and presenting at conferences, seeking publication, and taking on ABER.

Anniina

More concretely, Pat helped me form a group of mentors by directing me to take classes with an interdisciplinary group of feminist female professors who were explorers within their fields. This experience and others like it have transferred into my practice by teaching me to identify the educational and mentor needs of my own students and use personal networks to assist them in gaining access to the experiences and mentors they need.

Kathleen

In all relevant activities, Christine shared her powerful energy and cultivated my new leadership roles. She served as an artistic, scholarly, and ardent activist role model. This mentoring relationship framework, initially developed during my master's work, continued into my doctoral studies and dissertation journey on a firm foundation based on mutual regard (Bagilhole, 1990) and within a trustworthy structure (Kouzes & Posner, 2002) of shared personal space. This past cultivation of trust and achieved performance enabled me to wander into new areas, such as ABER, due to a combination of generated self-efficacy and unconditional confidence and support from my mentor. After our initial supervisor-supervisee experience, Christine and I worked collaboratively, implementing community-based curatorial and management practices and writing about community-based art education practices while I was still a graduate student.

These progressively difficult challenges and testing of my capabilities combined with a confidence in my abilities from my mentor have now transferred into my own mentoring practice. I gently push and parent my students a little further than they initially want to reach. Mentoring students through advanced and adventurous teaching assignments, research and writing projects, first-time conference presentations, and new internship development has become commonplace and continues Christine's legacy of mentoring.

ABER as Practice and Emerging Mentorship

It is our intention through this retelling of our formative ABER experiences to explore how our ongoing commitment to "living inquiry" (Irwin & de Cosson,

2004) informs our practices as artist-scholar-mentors. For us, ABER represented a significant missing piece, a lens for increased meaning and interpretative understanding of our professional and personal convictions. We characterize our practice formed through ABER as flexible, adaptable, and evolving. The reflexive and unifying living inquiry simultaneously yields pedagogical awareness, growth, and constant redefinition. As we move forward, personally and professionally, our pedagogy, leadership, and mentoring approaches are continually reincarnated (Irwin, 1998) following the mindfulness of critical reflexivity and reflection. Through experiences of being mentored and transitioning into a space of active mentoring, we see mentorship and the cultivation of leadership in others as a natural, relationally evolving form of continued professional development. Following the tradition of espousing the powerful energies of intellectual nurturance, flexibility, availability, critical self-reflexivity, and commitment to lifelong colearning, we continue to strive to share power and foster agency. We work to readily influence and inspire self and comentoring, self-actualization, and self-efficacy in our students and in ourselves. These evolutions are fueled by our artistic practices and relational reflexivity, leading to new formations of educational praxis.

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