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Painting research practice: how exploration of a 'painting as research' metaphor can be used to refine approaches to conducting research.

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Abstract

This paper examines how metaphor can be used to shape methodological choice and research design in the exploration of the construction of artist and teacher identity. In doing so, I detail how a 'painting as research' metaphor was used to guide my choice and understanding of how to utilise a combined autoethnographic and a/r/tographic methodology within my doctoral study. In investigating the applicability of a 'painting as research' metaphor, I was able to identify and explore synergy evident within and across my art and research practices and identities. In doing so, I elaborate upon the metaphoric parallels I drew between my artist, teaching and research practices that enabled me to clarify the research methods utilised within my doctoral study.

In this paper, I provide detailed insights into how metaphor analysis provided opportunity to clarify and further refine my choice and application of the research methods autoethnography and a/r/tography, and also allowed me to identify both unique and like strategies inherent to artistry, teaching and research that could be applied to bolster and further the development of each respective practice. Ultimately, this paper highlights how the expressive tools and concepts of art processes can provide endless possibilities for exploring new ways of thinking, imagining, communicating and making meaning for those in the process of negotiating artist and teacher identities.

Key words: Artist, Metaphor, Methodology, Beginning researcher.

Introduction

Establishing competency across multiple identities and practices simultaneously constitutes a key challenge for those attempting to negotiate balance between the identities and practices of artist, researcher and teacher (Bickel, 2005; Irwin & Springgay, 2008; Sameshina, 2008). Frustration can also ensue for those working towards establishing a research practice and profile (Murray & Male, 2005; Laudel & Glaser, 2008). The same can be said for beginning art teachers who may be experiencing difficulty establishing consistency within their teaching practice, whilst negotiating balance between their artist and teaching practices (Churchill, 2011; Marsh, 2010).

It has been said that for the researcher who also identifies themselves as an artist and a teacher, much can be learnt about how to conduct quality research through the closer examination of practices inherent to their work and lives as artists and teachers (Irwin & Springgay, 2008; Leggo, 2008). Gillespie (2005) proposes that metaphor analysis encourages the depth of introspection required to reflect meaningfully and purposefully on evolving identities and practices inherent to these identities. Within this paper, I elicit how in exploring the metaphor of 'painting as research' I was able to reveal how my practices as an artist could inform my approaches to conducting research and refining the methodological framework of my doctoral investigation.

Context

This paper is bolstered with autothnographic accounts and a/r/tographic renderings of events from my professional life as an artist and doctoral researcher. The accounts given here constitute both personal accounts and creative metaphoric writing, and are presented in an

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attempt to elucidate the specific ways in which artist practice contributed to shaping my approach to undertaking autoethnographic and a/r/tographic research. To provide further professional context, I interweave reflective autoethnographic accounts and excerpts from my a/r/tographic metaphor of 'painting as research' into the 'grain and weave' of this paper. These excerpts are intended to exemplify how insights obtained through exploration of my arts practice contributed to or detracted from my research practice throughout the four years of undertaking my doctoral investigation.

What I present here is reflective of my own unique experiences and it is intended that others will bring their own interpretations and responses. This detail I offer is intended to create opportunities for the reader to access and explore the data, methods and decisions inherent to the construction of this paper, inviting multiple interpretations and viewpoints (Seale, 1999, Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In doing so I hope to have provided a variety of gestures, or 'footprints that allow others to judge the utility of the work, and to profit from it' (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p. x).

In this way, I acknowledge the importance of individual reader response to make meanings from the accounts I present, and that this text does not stand alone; it is intended to provide a place where the perspectives of the authors and readers can converge, all of whom bring myriad perspectives and have the potential to construct multiple interpretations (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

Theoretical Background

A beginning researcher who is also a teacher and an artist may be considered as having an advantage in their possession of these pre-existing professional practices. The creative problem solving practices inherent to artistry and teaching can be of use to the beginning researcher as they negotiate the complexity of constructing researcher identity and practice. Knowles and Cole (2008) describe artists as embracing means of investigation and expression that allow us to follow the "natural internal flow of individual inquiry" (2008, p. 66). The things that artists do all the time are things that researchers need to be able to do, such as collaboratively form alternative solutions to problems, be persistent and prepared to make adjustments after making a choice, taking responsibility for decisions and looking at all options (Sinclair, Jeanneret & O'Toole, 2009; Rabkin & Redmond, 2004). Such examples are indicative of the modes of investigation and inquiry pertinent to the work of artists, which can also be effectively utilized to inform and shape approaches to research.

Stewart (2003) suggests that artists bring to their practice an array of complex skills, perspectives, interests and talents. It is also acknowledged that arts practice in itself is "a dynamic process and complex activity that is socially constructed" (2003, p. 2). We can elicit a deeper understanding of these skills and their applicability to research through exploring the specifics of an artist's practice and their approaches to practice. In relation to practice, teachers are expected and encouraged to engage in continuous learning and development for the benefit of their teaching practice and student learning (Churchill et al., 2011; Kind et al., 2007). Zwirn and Goetz (2010) explore how teachers' personal artistry and artistic activities beyond school can effectively contribute to other areas of their own and their students learning.

In considering how to overcome challenges inherent to determining appropriate research methodology, the creation and exploration of a personal metaphor can make ideas and the potential approaches to investigating them "more transparent and easy to understand" (Chen, 2003, p.24). The exploration of metaphor is endorsed by numerous researchers in order to effectively facilitate deeper and more meaningful reflection (Bullough & Stokes, 1994; Carlson, 2010; Chen, 2003; Dooley, 1997; Gillespie, 2005); which is crucial for the beginning researcher whilst they are learning how to conduct quality research. In the context of this paper, the word 'metaphor' is not used in "its historically narrower sense, as restricted to

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figurative language" (Gillespie, 2005, p.139), but in a cognitive conceptual context (Hornbacher, 2009). It is in this context that metaphor can be applied more broadly to deepen understanding of research methods and the ways that our existing practices and propensities might be used to inform and shape an evolving understanding of how to engage in research. According to Gillespie (2005), "although metaphors can operate explicitly on surface levels of description in speech or writing, they often carry complex and deep implicit inferences with them" (p.139), providing opportunity to clarify vague concepts and encourage divergent thinking.

Metaphors are often utilised within both auteothnographic and a/r/tographic research, functioning as objects around and through which readers are invited to engage deeply with the researcher in the explicit contexts of their research. Muncey (2010) uses the metaphor of 'a full circle' and a 'bridge' in her richly rendered stories of making sense of the interstitial spaces between her personal and professional selves. She suggests that autoethnographies should be organised around certain features or objects, such as portrayals, allegory and metaphors to further elucidate "tiny fragments of the continuous flow of a greater journey" (Muncey, 2010, p.16). Metaphors are often interwoven into the 'warp and weft' of autoethnographic stories to help activate reader transferability (Huberman, 1995; Webster & Mertova, 2007) through engaging imagination. Gaut (1997) uses the example of a Kandisnky painting to demonstrate metaphor's capacity to activate imagination, where she attests that if she were to describe the painting as being 'alive with movement', she would in effect be *imagining* that this is the case, and inviting others to do the same. The power of metaphor to enact and engage cognition and imagination has been widely conceptualized (Baxter, Lopez, Serig & Sullivan, 2008; Carlson, 2001; Hornbacher, 2009) to guide us in subsequent meaning making. In this way, metaphor exploration is purported as being a highly beneficial exercise for novice professionals such as beginning teachers and researchers, as they grapple with conceptualising 'the journey' to establishing a research profile and practice (Harrison and Mckeon, 2010).

Further to this, metaphoric exploration and analysis provides opportunity to make meaningful connections between 'the new and the known' (Irwin & Springgay 2008; Pourchier, 2010), and as artists thread connections between their thinking, ideas and experiences, as they engage their senses to deconstruct and reconstruct meaning (Irwin & Springgay, 2008). According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman-Davis (1997), metaphors are embedded within a deliberate contextual frame and have the potential to facilitate powerful connection making. Abilities such as being able to make connections between the seemingly unconnected is a skill that can greatly assist the emerging researcher in the visualization and enactment of their research, thus demonstrating the pertinence and capacity for arts practice to positively inform and contribute to shaping research practice. The application and consideration of metaphor can assist entry into deeper exploration of practices inherent to both artist and researcher identity. This aligns with what Leggo (2008) describes as constructing and celebrating knowledge in creative ways, where engagement in creative practice can be used to "inform on the one hand, and then transform on the other" (2008, p. 9).

Metaphor analysis provides opportunities through which one can come to better understand how various identities and their inherent practices can inform and contribute to the shaping of each other (Carlson, 2010; Chen, 2001; Irwin & Springgay, 2008). Within a/r/tography, Sameshina (2008) indicates that the exploration and analysis of metaphor provides opportunity to "pull together shards from other lives and makes something new" (p. 45). In a/r/tography, researchers engage in processes of "artful crafting and creative researching" (Sameshina, 2008, p.51), which Knowles and Cole (2008) declare as appropriately "honouring the metaphorical and geographical places where we each dwell, work, and recreate, greater understandings of self in relation to a complex world" (p.1). Such conceptual metaphors 'organize cognitive processes, including perception, memory, concept formation, and behaviour' (Gillespie, 2005, p. 128).

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In unpacking the metaphors that we construct, Muncey (2010) suggests that transparency and clarity into a variety of facets of their practice can ensue for the researcher. Through the creation and exploration of conceptual metaphoric constructs, we effectively produce objects around which rigorous reflective and reflexive introspection can occur, which can be used to inform and structure our perceptions of understanding (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Methods and Techniques

Within this paper, I interweave excerpts from my metaphor to provide insight into my 'painting as research' metaphor, and to facilitate subsequent discussion pertaining to how the exploration and further unpacking of this metaphor informed and guided my understanding of my doctoral research methodology. I also interweave contextual extracts from my autoethnographic reflective journals, which was where I executed the critical analysis, or 'unpacking' of my metaphor. The insights I provide here both reflect upon and are constitutive of the research methodology of a/r/tography (Irwin & Springgay, 2005; Leggo, 2008) and autoethnogrpahy (Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Hayler, 2011; Muncey, 2010). The framework for this paper reflects a distinctly constructivist paradigm, aligning with naturalistic qualitative methods approaches (Hatch, 2002) which autoethnography and a/r/tography are particularly suited.

My creative metaphor writing was informed by critical reflections upon my approaches to both painting and conducting research throughout the course of my doctoral investigation. I maintained a variety of journals, both written and visual, into which I critically reflected upon my journey to learning how to conduct research throughout the four years of undertaking doctoral research. Engaging in critically reflective practice enabled me an opportunity to deeply examine the origins of my understandings and assumptions (Brookfield, 1995) pertaining to my undertaking of this research. For Hickey and Austin (2007), such reflection creates possibilities for critical reflexivity, wherein self and agency come to be understood in terms of the social processes that mediate the lived experiences. These critical reflections upon my research and painting practices were used to inform the construction of a piece of writing around the metaphor 'painting as research'. I approached the crafting of my metaphor in the same way I approached creating a painting; the metaphor I crafted provided a picture or capture of my personal expression and experience of engaging in painting and research. This approach reflects what Leggo describes as "engaging in an ongoing performance in writing, a performance that informs on the one hand, and then transforms on the other" (2008, p. 9).

The crafting of my 'painting as research' metaphor constituted the narrative field text, from which I then engaged in unpacking, writing into, and about the features of the metaphor in rich narrative detail to create the interim text. The interim research text constitutes a specific step of the refinement process that is "situated in the spaces between field texts and final, published research texts" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 133). I then critically analysed the interim text (Polkinghorne, 1995; Suldana, 2009) to discern potential for interaction between features of my art and research practices within my metaphor, drawing and exploring parallels between my approaches to undertaking painting and research, which allowed me to "establish and elucidate equivalency between two (seemingly disparate) things" (Hornbarcher, 2009, p. 183). This exploration and refinement of the interim text allowed me to resolve the 'painting as research' metaphor towards the final research text. It was within this final text that I began to identify and consider the in depth strategies and approaches that had the potential to be transferable to the context of my research. Of particular interest were any identified strategies and approaches which were either transferable or provided specific insight into how I might overcome difficulties and uncertainties pertaining to the design of my doctoral methodology.

In this discussion section of this paper, I provide insights into the unpacking of this 'painting as research' metaphor research text, detailing the richly layered procedures inherent to my creation of a painting. The analysis of this metaphor is interwoven into broader critical

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analytical discussion to further illicit how the research methods and the ways that our existing practices and propensities might be used to inform and shape an evolving understanding of how to engage in research. I utilized critical analysis (Carlson, 2010; Polkinghorne, 1995; Suldana, 2009) of my metaphor to elicit deeper understanding of the abstract concepts and qualities inherent to my painting practice that could be transferred to helping me refine the research methodology and framework of my doctoral investigation. In this way, exploration of my painting practice as a metaphor for undertaking research greatly informed my approach to resolving and refining appropriate choice and application of specific research methods (Carlson, 2010; Chen, 2001).

This research gained ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network and was given the approval number: H0010864.

Discussion- Unpacking the metaphor

Within the discussion section, extracts of contextual critical reflections upon my 'painting as research' metaphor are presented in ***Bold Italics***. Contextual excerpts from the metaphor writing itself are also included in the form of quotes that serve to punctuate and guide the direction of the discussion as follows.

In approaching the methodology for my doctoral investigation, ***I found myself struck 'dumb'; I was uncertain of how to proceed in any direction***. Through rigorous critical reflection, I elucidated that this barrier to further progress was self imposed and stemmed directly from my fear of 'doing the wrong thing', thus revealing perceptions of my own inadequacy as a researcher.

> If I make a mistake, I can easily wipe it off
> But echoes of that first mistake will always remain…
> > Faint stains embedded within the canvas weave
> > > > Still lie beneath
> The chance of this fuels my reluctance
> To make the first mark
> To write the first word

> (Painting as research- MacDonald, 2012)

This fear of inadequacy and incompetency was not unfamiliar to me; ***I had experienced similar feelings in my undertakings of artwork when pressed to justify the broader significance of my artwork***. Similar to my experiences in exploring self portraiture in my painting practice, I knew that I would need to address this fear of inadequacy and perceived self- indulgence in relation to my research if I were to effectively justify the broader significance of my investigation into artist and teacher identity. In considering the 'painting as research' metaphor, I could see how autoethnography, in sharing similarities in approach to self-portraiture, could elicit similar criticism. Having already grappled with justifying self-portraiture in painting as a purposeful investigation that extended beyond superficial vanity, I would need to be confident in my conviction that I was applying autoethnography in such a way that demonstrated self-respect and self-sacrifice (Sparkes, 2002) as opposed to self-indulgence.

> A blank page   A blank canvas
> Unmarked
> Uncomplicated
>
> Expectation is lurking
> In the paper grain   The canvas weave

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Make your mark   Speak your word
Reveal something of yourself

(Painting as research- MacDonald, 2012)

In order to overcome the potential for my auteothnographic investigation to be labelled as 'self-indulgent' (Sparkes, 2002), *I reflected upon my research motivations as an artist, and spoke explicitly about the various ways artistry, be it through written prose, oil painting or narrative sketching, contributed to and drove the investigation*. Given that this investigation was concerned with and borne of artist, researcher and teacher practice, it was an important and deliberate methodological decision to scrutinise and represent aspects of the research findings from and for each of these perspectives. This could be perceived as enabling what Hayler (2011) describes as 'practicing what I teach' (p.3). It was in this way that *I came to understand my research as not only constituting a rich source of researcher artist professional development, but also offering an insightful contribution to elucidating beginning researcher practice* through rich and thick descriptive detail that enable judgments of and for transferability to be made (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Webster & Mertova, 2007).

I find myself reluctant to mark this surface
So much care has been vested in its preparation;
I apply the first or daub of paint
And I am released from the mesmerising flawlessness
Of the blank canvas

(Painting as research- MacDonald, 2012)

A/r/tographic exploration and rendering provided an opportunity for me to consider and 'explore the research findings through my artist self' (Bickel, 2008, p. 133). I sought to demonstrate within this layer *how I could use my art as a means of representing the transformative and evolving aspects of the research findings*. To do so, I reflected upon relationships between thought and expression, writing and painting and research and artistry to aid my identification of 'shifts', or alternative readings, interpretations and representations of the research findings. I was compelled by the notion that the subtle nuances of narrative research approaches can become richly complex when the researcher experiments with arts-based presentational and representational forms (Cahnmann- Taylor & Sigesmund, 2008; Knowles & Cole, 2008).

Syrupy waves roll across the canvas
Over thin coats of diluted pigment
Finished off with slick licks of lustrous glaze.
Layer upon layer
I build a richly decadent surface

(Painting as research- MacDonald, 2012)

I set about building a richly detailed 'picture' of engaging in painting and research. I likened the layered and dimensioned aspects of a/r/tographic and autoethnographic research to the decadent layers of painted oil glazes, or the strategic arrangement of textured collage pieces to create richly tactile surfaces. Ontologically speaking, *I came to see how my perceptions of the research processes adopted for this study were characteristic of the bricoleur,* inter-weaving various aspects of the study (both methodologically and

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metaphorically) together into a collage of detailed rhizomatic complexity, or a sequence of interpretive representations connecting different parts to a whole, interconnected across and within itself. Bricolage resonated with me ontologically due to the very practical and explicit parallels I could draw between visual arts application of bricolage as a process of piecing together works of art from 'the bits and pieces' around us, and the above mentioned research methods and approaches I utilised for this paper.

Wiping back

Smudging
Patting
Flicking and fluttering the brush

This process of applying, then wiping back and reworking the paint mesmerises
me.

The process of writing, deleting and re-writing frustrates me

(Painting as research- MacDonald, 2012)

I could now see how ***my approach to conducting research could benefit from the influence of my propensity towards rich and vulnerable expression within my creative art practices of writing and painting***. It was here that I began to see within this section of my 'painting as research' metaphor an unfolding disparity between how I problem solved within my approaches to painting and the writing up of research. I loved to work in oils as I perceived them to be forgiving, due primarily to the flexibility as a medium and adjustability in drying times to suit the various style in which I chose to paint. ***I was much more willing to experiment with paint; moving pigment and textures into and around each other, exploring in creating new tones and surface textures with every brush stroke***.

Like many novice researchers, I found myself becoming frustrated by the awkwardness inherent in my synthesis and expression of data analysis (Murray & Male, 2005). I had never really stopped to consider how forgiving my word processing technology was, nor how accessible the rich variety of research tools and information I had at my disposal actually were. ***I reminded myself of this fact when I found myself growing frustrated with what was simply a case of my expectations exceeding my capabilities***. I found it easy to forget that ***my identity and practice as a researcher was, unlike my arts practice, still very much in the formative stages of 'coming together'*** within the 'apprenticeship' of doctoral study (Laudel & Glaser, 2008). I reminded myself of this as I was grappling with the "complexity of the relations amongst things and people" (Carson and Sumara 1997, p. xv), as I sought to express my understandings in and of my research practice. Consequently, I ***sought to consciously embody the willingness to explore and experiment inherent to my painting practice when I found myself struggling to synthesize and express understandings in my research writing practice.*** This change in attitude toward my research writing practice saw me resolving problems much quicker and more creatively.

Creative works of word and brush both wrap around and are interwoven into the very fabric of this investigation. ***Metaphor and creative prose allowed me to resolve points of confusion and conflict inherent in my methodology***, and to explore divergent interpretations and representing insights into my problem solving processes. The various creative works that this investigation generated did not occur 'after the event'; slapped on the research findings as a decadent yet superficial 'layer of icing'. Rather, they are embedded into each layer of the research processes, serving as a vital evidence of my critical-analytic thinking, providing another avenue of access for interpretation and meaning making.

I use trowels, pallete knives or big house paint brushes to apply my base

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Big sweeping gestures activate the painting
Transforming it from something blank, empty and lifeless
into crackling activity

(Painting as research- MacDonald, 2012)

The application and exploration of metaphor is embedded within both the conceptual framework and methodological processes of this investigation. My metaphor of 'painting as research' *helped me conceptualise the framework of my doctoral investigation by providing an opportunity for me to 'test', or practice and familiarize myself with autoethnography and a/r/tography research methodologies*. This was an important opportunity as it allowed me to 'try the fit' of these research methodologies before 'fully committing'.

The exploration of metaphor came to serve me in further aspects of my doctoral investigation, where in justifying the integrity of the research, *I applied the metaphor of a crystal to reflect the multidimensionality of the research methods and multiple perspectives utilized within it.* According to Richardson (2000), the metaphor of a crystal aptly reflects the 'multidimensionality of qualitative research, and accepts and takes into account a variety and complexity of views inherent' (p. 934). Further to this, Knowles and Cole (2008) suggest that in honoring the depth of "metaphorical and geographical places where we dwell, work, create and recreate, greater understandings of self in relation to a complex world in which we exist can be had" (p. 1). In this capacity and through this perspective, *I utilized crystallization* (Richardson, 2000) *to increase and demonstrate the trustworthiness of the study*.

Conclusion

And so I step back
To scrutinise the image before me
Strokes of heavy paint
Sweeps of subtle glaze
Slices of texture
A composition of complication
Where thoughts as theory and action as practice
Converge and interweave

(Painting as research, MacDonald, 2012)

In investigating the applicability of a 'research as painting' metaphor, I was able to identify and explore synergy evident within and across my painting and research practices and identities. Metaphor application and analysis provided rich insight into how I negotiated complex transitions and transactions between my artist and researcher practices, and in doing so allowed me to further refine the research design of my doctoral investigation. This allowed me to elicit the creative, relational, generative spaces of intra/inter-personal multiplicity (Sameshina, 2008) inherent to the researcher and researched, self and other, being and becoming, artist and researcher.

The insights provided within this paper contribute to the growing body of research into the construction of researcher profile and practice being undertaken by those within the process of learning how to conduct research within their 'doctoral apprenticeship' (Laudel & Glaser, 2008). Up until recently, research focussing upon the experiences and challenges unique to those working toward becoming researchers has largely been conducted, often retrospectively, by early career and/or established researchers (Harrison & McKeon, 2010; Laudel & Glaser, 2008; Murray & Male, 2005).

This paper demonstrates how through the unpacking of metaphor, strategies and approaches

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inherent to the work of artists can be identified and then used to guide the doctoral researcher through the tribulations of refining methodological approaches to research. The paper attributes itself to 'the intellectual, imaginative, and insightful work created by artists who identify themselves as both educators and researchers, and is grounded in ongoing forms of recursive and reflexive inquiry engaged in theorising for understanding' (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p.109). Research practice, similar to arts practice, evolves through processes of practice and reflection (Carroll, 2006). Metaphor analysis can provide an excellent means for the artist and researcher to reflect deeply upon how strategies inherent to their established art practice can be applied within the context of their emerging research practice to further its development.

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