

EMBEDDING ART AS A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY WITHIN EDUCATIONAL PROCESSES

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Abstract

The focus of this position paper outlines and explores the way art as a research methodology can be understood and used more fully within the context of education. The paper demonstrates that in art-based research and in the teaching leading to it, art is both the object of investigation *and* the method of inquiry. Art-based research involves deep reflection on the interplay between mental motivations and physical ones that are present through contact with the medium (artform). The world-wide growing appreciation of using art as research within higher education is gaining considerable momentum with the explicit promotion of having the most relevance to artist-educator-researchers and resisting the dominance of social sciences within education which has not adequately served artistic inquiry.

Aim and Objective:

The aim of this paper is to propose that at the centre of art as research, the artist-educator-researcher can bring together the tensions evident in higher education. The principle objective of the paper is to introduce a new concept by the author acknowledging the threefold primacy of art in research and education: art as the topic, process and outcome of research.

Art as Methodology:

In art-based research we can ask what the object or creative expression reveals about itself and what role the artist plays. Rather than providing an accompanying narrative by the artist giving a self-referential, one-sided emotive account of what the artist experienced or intended, art-based research offers a more complete research approach that recognizes the artistic objects of art as 'full participants' in the process. The artefact (e.g. piece of music, painting, dance) and the active interplay between the artwork, the process and the artist (as artist-educator-researcher) define the methodology known as 'art as research' or 'art-based research'.

Findings and Conclusion:

Examples of this interplay will be presented in sharing the multiple outcomes of this method of researching within education. The results of these exemplar approaches reveal that research questions and findings arise in and through practice. Processes, if studied, reveal a great depth of knowledge. Art-based inquiry, therefore, includes multiple ways of knowing, including affective, sensory, creative, observational and intuitional, as well as the use of experimentation, risk-taking, discovery and meaning-making through the process of making art. The findings from the exemplar approaches presented also demonstrate that artwork of any type can be art itself, with responses drawn from poetry, dance, performance and so on. There is tremendous richness and endless possibilities for a researcher in these types of investigations, and therefore the potential for learning and teaching is immense. In conclusion, this paper finds that scientific and social scientific approaches are not fully useful to artists. Rather artists can make use of art as a research methodology to investigate their own practices and outcomes seeing art as the topic, process and outcome of research.

Keywords: art-based research, artist-educator-researcher, creative expression, meaning-making, learning and teaching, knowledge construction, arts

1 INTRODUCTION

The positioning of art-based research has tended to be marginalised in the field of education where there has traditionally been heavy reliance upon social science methodology to investigate questions of practice. This is a curious situation given the poignant writing of John Dewey in 1934 who considerably advanced educational thought from the twentieth century. He addressed the essential qualities of art and wrote the highly distinguished book *Art as Experience* ([1934] 2004) in which he expressed the central idea that art functions as experience itself. Dewey places great value on the

processes of inquiry: looking and finding meaning. He highly values the various components of artistry that involves hard to pin-down qualities such as intuition, impulse, invocation and spontaneity. He comprehensively understood the entwined and embodied nature of meaning contained within art:

As long as 'meaning' is a matter of association and suggestion, it falls apart from the qualities of the sensuous medium and form is disturbed. Sense qualities are the carriers of meanings, not as vehicles carry goods but as a mother carries a baby when the baby is part of her own organism. Works of art, like words, are literally pregnant with meaning. [1] (p.122–23)

The meaning contained within art is not reliant upon rules of interpretation and certainly is not reliant upon other disciplines to make the work somehow legitimate, valued or measured. Whilst artistic research differs from science and the social sciences, it is simply a mode of inquiry that best suits the form, as it is the form that is of empirical interest alongside the artistic process itself. Once this is fully understood within higher education, "we may begin to see the dissolution of those unhealthy divides pitting artist vs. researcher and practitioner vs. teacher" [2] (p.11). These historic divides frequently originate from "the nature of the academy itself, where lecturers largely teach what they were taught and/or operate within research paradigms that they know best through their own postgraduate education experience" [2] (p.4). A consequence of this conservatism is that, instead of furthering development, it can hinder and negate advancement. Henk Borgdorff [3] usefully and tersely suggests:

The debate often concerns issues of institutional or educational politics that are thought to be important for determining whether artistic research can be recognised as a type of academic or scientific research. Prominent issues are the standards needed to assess research by artists, the institutional rights to award third-cycle (doctoral) degrees in the arts, and the criteria to be applied by funding bodies in deciding whether to support research by artists. (p.112)

Given that many of these questions surrounding doctoral rigour have largely been resolved within higher education, it is time to ensure that a wider understanding of artistic research is reached. Importantly there is a double function in what is termed "art-based research" [4] and in the teaching leading to it – art is both the object of investigation *and* the method of inquiry – an important distinction to make in this research paradigm. Artistic objects are made full participants in the research of artists where the interplay between artist and artefact are explored. Fundamentally art becomes the evidence of research (see 3.1.3).

By introducing recent key literature in the field, this position paper advances principles of art-based research, which are sometimes referred to as "practice as research" amongst other variants (Section 2). Section 3 proposes that at the centre of art as research, the artist-educator-researcher can bring together the tensions evident in higher education to successfully make the threefold primacy of art in research and education – "art as the topic, process and outcome of research" [5] (p.47). The summary of conclusions and future work can be found in Section 4.

2 ART AS THE METHODOLOGY

Art as a research methodology needs to be understood and used more fully within education if methodology is to be useful to the artist-researcher. It requires a close connection with artistic practice and product in reaching new understandings for artists. The object or artefact (e.g. piece of music, painting, dance) and the active interplay between the artwork, the process and the artist (as artist-researcher) define the methodology known as "art-based research" [4] or "art as research" [6] [7]. An understanding of this interplay will be developed later in this paper to share the multiple outcomes of this method of researching within education.

One useful definition of artistic research I can offer reinforces the contribution it makes both to the artist and to the field more broadly:

Art as research involves a diverse range of human activities in creating visual, auditory or performed artworks, expressing the artist's imaginative and/or technical skill, intended to be appreciated for their beauty or emotional impact. Art as research uses systematic investigation into the study of process, materials and sources in order to understand art more completely and reach new conclusions. The primary components in using art as research are documentation, discovery and interpretation for the purpose of the advancement of artistic knowledge and furthering understanding of all of life and other disciplines too. [2] (p.3)

Shaun McNiff [8], arguably the father of art-based research, makes the position clear in how artistic research differs from other research methodologies. He also points to current distortion of research approaches with the applied arts that have not served artists particularly well:

The common tendency since the beginning of applied arts research has been to examine art-related questions and issues through the methods, concepts and languages of psychology and social science, resulting in the general use of art as 'data' or raw material for a very different academic discipline. Many assume that this is what we are doing when we talk about art-based research. I define art-based research as the use of artistic expression by the researcher, either alone or with others, as a primary mode of inquiry. (p.xi)

The complexity within artistic research is a result of artists calling upon multiple ways of knowing which are embedded *in* and *through* practice. Much knowledge within artistic practice becomes embodied and highly connected to both the form and the artefact. *The result of artistic expression is the artefact.* Responding to artworks of any type can also be through the artistic mode and not exclusively through the written word. For example, a response to a painting might be through movement or a piece of music through drawing. There are many artforms that resist the reduction of practice to words. Even those artforms that do use words such as poetry, song or drama, words are chosen for particular aesthetic effect. McNiff [8] pertinently asks:

If we advocate for art as a way of knowing that engages realms inaccessible to linear and logical thought, then why is it that we do not use it as a primary mode of inquiry when researching how the arts might enhance human experience? (p.xi, original emphasis)

What we indeed learn from research does not need to be quantified or qualified according to data sets. Art does not need additional "data" to prove itself – the *art* is what we use. Moreover, art is actually empirical as it is verifiable through observation and experience. Artistic research extends beyond theory or pure logic alone and takes us to feelings, through what we term "aesthetics". Art and art processes are felt and are entirely observable, and therefore undeniably researchable by nature. Mitchell Kossak [9], an active art-based researcher, asserts: "in art-based research, the phenomenological experience is represented through the creative act itself" (p.22).

3 ANALYSING ART-BASED RESEARCH

When analysing the use of art-based research the field covers all of the arts, which includes visual art, poetry, dance, music, performance and so on. There is tremendous richness and endless possibilities for a researcher in these types of investigations, and the potential for integrating research approaches in learning and teaching is immense. The literature on art-based research has recently turned its attention to how this can be further embedded into higher education learning and teaching [7]. Within this context art-based research can be extended beyond the parlance of doctoral or masters research and embedded at all levels of education thus enabling artists to inclusively see themselves as active researchers.

3.1 Art As The Topic, Process And Outcome Of Research

In order to resolve a useful approach within the contexts of learning and teaching, this paper offers a paradigm that could be used to more completely understand art as research. I call this the "threefold primacy of art in research, learning and teaching" [5] (p.57) (Fig. 1). Artistic research positions art as the *topic*, *process* and *outcome* of research. Art can form the topic of research activity where much theorizing and cultural analysis may form the basis of the research. The process of art-making is equally a rich source of inquiry that benefits artists in understanding their creative activity. Finally art can even be the outcome of research where the artefacts are the result of research inquiry. These outcomes also lend themselves to a dialectic engagement with the artist (see 3.1.3).

If the concept of "art as topic, process and outcome" becomes the mantra of what we do, then artist-educator-researchers will more fully understand the potential of art in a more cohesive fashion and explicitly value the sum of its parts. It further offers students a way of seeing themselves as active researchers rather than being marginalized by narrow definitions of what constitutes "valid" research activity.

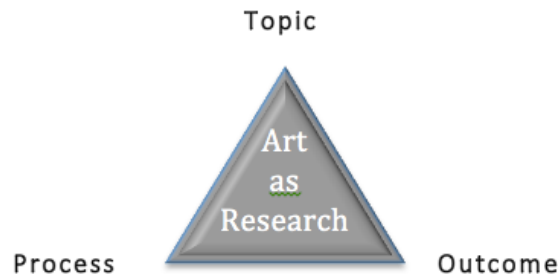


Figure 1. The threefold primacy of art in research, learning and teaching. [5]

3.1.1 Art as a way of knowing

By way of affirming the complex value of practical knowledge extant across communities of practice, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger [10] conclude that:

Knowing is inherent in the growth and transformation of identities and it is located in relations among practitioners, their practice, the artefacts of that practice, and the social organisation and political economy of communities of practice. (p.122, original emphasis)

To these ends “Artists call upon multiple ways of knowing, which are likely to become further enhanced through the experience of practice” [11] (p.162). Artists develop knowledge *in, through* and *about* practice. Studying artistic processes reveals a great deal of what can be called “depth-knowledge.” Art-based inquiry, therefore, as Kossak [9] states “includes multiple ways of knowing, including affective, sensory, creative, observational and intuitional, as well as the use of experimentation, risk taking, discovery and meaning making through art making” (p.22). The possibilities for artist-educator-researchers offer considerable scope in the quest for understanding within practice.

Art must be conceptualized as a process, in which understanding is constructed and co-constructed with others *in* and *through* practice, which is very much at the heart of using art as research. “Whilst artistic research differs from science and the social sciences, it is simply a mode of inquiry that best suits the form, as it is the form that is of empirical interest alongside the artistic process” [2] (p.11) and helps the artist to more fully conceptualize art as a way of knowing.

3.1.2 Embodied knowledge

Complex understandings of practice are entwined within the act of *doing* and *being*, and because they can be so embodied, the outside eye may considerably underestimate all that is involved with being an artist – after all accomplished artists “make it look easy”. Therefore, within this complexity, it ought to be firmly acknowledged that as Eisner [12] suggests: “knowledge is less a discovery than it is a construction” (p.211). Therefore “knowledge acquisition is not linear but is gained more as a web of understanding over time” [2] which to the artist is significantly embedded in what they do. In fact this understanding – also couched as “expertise” – produces considerable tacit knowledge, which is often difficult to put into words.

Artistic knowledge consists of habitual memory, which is embodied in the creative act itself. Instinct and intuition become the intangible aspects of the creative practitioner. In relation to this search, Peter Sinapius [13] asks: “But what about the kind of knowledge that cannot readily be retrieved, as it is closely linked to our experience, that which is locked within our individual consciousness?” (p.32). This knowledge is often deep and profound and certainly may only prove to be accessible through the art itself.

As an example of this deep knowledge, dancers and actors develop particular abilities both through the repetition of their training and through considerable practise. Both develop what is known as “muscle memory” which enables them to repeat actions with precision during performances. In the case of actors, “being in the moment” facilitates believable performances. Yet frequently actors may not be able to verbalise precisely how they achieve their craft since much of what they have learnt is embodied. Through art-based research artists can move to a type of knowing which Sinapius [13]

suggests “is not just the means to an end but an opportunity to appropriate the world through an additional form of knowledge; one that does not fit between the covers of a book (p.33).

3.1.3 *Objects as full participants*

It is the rich interplay between the artefact or the creative expression that provides the opportunity for deep investigation between artist and the artwork produced. “In other words, in art-based research we can ask what the object or creative expression *reveals about itself* and *what role the artist plays*” [5] (p.56–57, original emphasis). In presenting this work for doctoral examination it is not necessary to provide an accompanying narrative to the art by the artist. This runs the risk of giving a self-referential, one-sided emotive account of what the artist experienced or intended in the work. The use of art-based research offers a more complete research approach that as McNiff [4] states; “recognizes objects as full participants” (p.55), *which is a most important distinction here*. Kathryn Church [14] similarly makes a case for the artefact and the active interplay between the artwork, creative or expressive process and the artist as researcher:

[...] taking objects seriously, encountering them directly, proceeding object by object to unfold a study, tracking back and forth in the dialogic space between objects and their makers/users, and working reflexively with our limitations, confusions, and discoveries. (p. 433)

Whilst this concept might seem unusual at first to those more acquainted with social science research, artistic research is heavily reliant upon expressive/felt qualities and value is placed upon artefacts not necessarily as solitary stand-alone-objects/performances but expressions replete with meaning. Carole Gray, Julian Malins and Maxine Bristow [15] suggest an alternative way of considering the role of artefacts/creative works in a doctoral submission by discussing the liberating concept of “epistemic objects” (p.111) – their possible forms and agencies, and the alternative display/sharing of the understandings generated from these through “exposition” rather than a more static exhibition. Gray et al. [15] state: “If we accept that the main function of the doctoral exposition is to reveal methodology, then this aspect must be given great emphasis” (p.122). The exposition offers artist-researchers one method of demonstrating new knowledge – “conceptual, methodological, aesthetic, technical, etc., and these might be embodied in various output forms” (p.122).

3.1.4 *Systematic but flexible inquiry*

In an attempt to cut through the over-academicization within the field, McNiff [16] states; “I prefer to simply talk about all forms of systematic inquiry as ‘research’ rather than add to the increasingly long list of research types existent today in social science” (pp.79–80). To these ends, through the use of systematic inquiry, art-based research seeks to find answers to artistic phenomena of all types. Essentially, this type of research must connect to practices within the discipline if it is to be of use to others. The true value may reside in the depth of observation and value one may give to an object or performance. The development of a creative relationship with an artwork offers students the opportunity of learning something new from both their process and their own artwork. “The outcome of artistic inquiry leads to unpredictability because meaning is created in and through the expressive process” [5] (p.58). Detachment, objectivity, controlled experimentation, random trials and rationality do not reach the heart of artistic inquiry and therefore scientific approaches are not useful. Artistic practice and experimentation tend to place the artist firmly in the middle, and every situation is entirely unique – it is this uniqueness that is celebrated.

Sinapius [13] states that he is “convinced that intensive research and learning begins at the point where we question seeming self-evident facts and venture into unknown territory (p. 38). Any form of research, be it experimental or not, “must be sufficiently open to allow the indistinct to become apparent and sufficient space to facilitate the discovery of what is not yet known” [2] (p.10). Quite evidently ‘this openness and room for not-knowing, or not-yet-knowing, cannot be imposed by stern methodological procedures’ [3] (p.114).

Whilst art-based research does not follow the rules of science one aspect that is akin to science is sometimes the use of repetition as a way of systematically understanding phenomena. According to Kossak [17], artists in their practice also, like scientists, repeat experiments over and over in order to clarify and further their understanding (p.67). Kossak goes on to suggest:

The exploration of art material, whatever the form, may be more similar to a scientist exploring in a laboratory where the essence of the material is examined for what it is expressing or how it reacts with other materials. Visual artists do this all the time with colour and with various media such as watercolour or oil, as do ceramicists where very specific calculations regarding the

firing process have to be employed in order for the clay to harden properly, not to mention the properties of the glaze that goes on to the clay to create the colour, texture, design and to make the clay hard enough to hold liquids. (p. 67)

Whatever the chosen method within art-based research, the importance remains that as research it is “systematic” but flexible in approach. It is systematic in the sense that the method can be documented and repeated by other researchers in their studies as would be expected of all research.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This paper finds that scientific and social scientific approaches are not fully useful to artist-researchers. Many difficulties in the field have been caused by “the art-based researcher trying to fit in other methods [as] they feel that the academy or the so-called ‘authority’ might not really understand art-based methodology” [17] (p.71). Artists can confidently make use of art as a research methodology to investigate their own practices and outcomes, seeing the threefold primacy of art as the *topic*, *process* and *outcome* of research.

Dewey [1] neatly summarizes that the potential limits in aesthetics are determined experientially and by what the artists make of it in practice. He states that: “the *medium* of expression is neither subjective nor objective, but is an experience in which they are integrated in a *new object*” (p.299, original emphasis). Art-based inquiry, therefore, includes affective, sensory, creative, observational and intuitional ways of knowing. In addition the use of experimentation, risk-taking, discovery and meaning-making are all important attributes to research through the process of making art. Armed with the knowledge of artistic research methodology, art educators at all levels can meaningfully embed art-based research processes into learning and teaching and thus give greater confidence to a new generation of artists. In conclusion, “aesthetic education must reject the predictable – the potentially *anti-creative*” [5] (p.58, original emphasis) and embrace art-based research in the artist-researcher’s quest for knowing.

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