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“I Contain Multitudes”: The Challenges of Self-Representation in Arts-Based Educational Research

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Abstract

We believe that the best arts based research aims to make a difference in the world.
(Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 153).

Revelation of self can be argued as one of the central concerns of art. Self-study has informed art making to some degree for as long as we can know. Aesthetic philosophers, art critics and artists themselves have recognized self-portraiture, autobiography, memoir and confession as legitimate and often potent topics for artistic exploration. With this history of art practice in mind, what problem can there be for an arts-based educational researcher who wishes to engage in self-study? Of course, the artworld is not equal to the world of educational research, the latter of which is charged with the overarching social and ethical responsibilities to critically understand the problems within and work toward the improvement of teaching and learning. The rise of narrative inquiry, autobiography and arts-based educational research has opened up welcome spaces for the lives of teachers to be viewed as valuable and illuminating topics of investigation. That said, arts-based

educational researchers who do not make clear and consistent connections between their life stories and the potential improvement of the chronically impoverished (if not in some places wholly broken) public education system could be critically viewed as side-stepping or shirking their core social and ethical responsibilities

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

from *Song of Myself* by Walt Whitman, Verse 51

[O]ne cannot reflect on self (radically or otherwise) without an accompanying reflection on the nature of the world in which one exists. And one's reflection on both one's self and one's world cannot be one's own alone: you and your version of your world must be public, recognizable enough to be negotiable in the "conversation of lives." (Bruner, 1993, p. 43)

This essay participates in the "conversation of lives" that makes up the small but active community of arts-based researchers in education. Donald Blumenfeld-Jones posed the overarching topic that was the catalyst for this set of related essays in the wake of his jurying of a number of dissertation studies for the Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER) Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association. I was co-chair of the dissertation award at this time, and Donald and I had some lengthy email dialogue around his growing concern that a number of the studies he was reading were self-studies that he saw as having little or no relation to the larger issues of education. The end result of that string of emails was Donald's idea to propose an ABER panel on the topic of how autobiographical or autoethnographical arts-based work serves, or fails to serve, the mandate of educational research to strive toward the improvement of teaching and learning.

My own research on poetic inquiry (Prendergast, 2007, 2009; Prendergast, Leggo & Sameshima, 2009) has shown me that self-study is undeniably a prominent, if not dominant, method in ABER praxis. To illustrate, almost 50% of the 182 peer-reviewed journal articles featuring poetry as part of their methodology I surveyed in 2006-2007 were coded as autobiographical or autoethnographical, at least in part (see Prendergast, 2009; Prendergast, Leggo & Sameshima, 2009). A 2012 survey update on the same topic shows a similar result (Clement & Prendergast, 2012). If this finding holds across other arts-based research approaches, then we can begin to 'see' ourselves as educational researchers who are deeply interested in and committed to arts-based forms of self-study. Yet the question arises: How does this interest in self-study serve, or fail to serve, the interests of the field of education and

the mandate of educational research to work toward the improvement of teaching and learning?

This essay consists of two sections followed by a brief conclusion. In Section One I consider the role of self-study—also called reflective practice, autobiography, autoethnography and life writing—in educational research in relation to how autobiography, memoir or self-portraiture plays a role in the artworld (Danto, 1964). I do this by placing a range of ABER practices on a continuum from more to less interested in self-study as a focus or component of a study. Section Two offers an autobiographical/autoethnographical poem I wrote as part of a previously published collaborative essay (Prendergast, Lymburner, Grauer, Irwin, Leggo & Gouzouasis, 2008). I am pulling the poem out of its prior context here to reflect on as an example of ABER self-study that might also be seen as doing the work of contributing to the betterment of understanding how education works...or fails to work. The conclusion invites readers to consider how a critical perspective on these issues may assist arts-based educational researchers in side-stepping charges that might potentially be directed at the ABER community of elitism, solipsism and navel-gazing from within a larger North American culture arguably addicted to confession, self-revelation, narcissism and voyeurism.

Section One: Self-Study in ABER and the Artworld

The world has to be ready for certain things, the artworld no less than the real one.

(Danto, 1964, p. 581)

Educational research has only relatively recently validated the practice of self-study, primarily through the development of *currere* and narrative inquiry, and more recently through the development of life writing. *Currere*, as theorized and practiced by Pinar (1975a, 1975b) created a radical shift in curriculum studies: "By taking oneself and one's existential experience as a data source and using psychoanalytical technique of free association, one can build not only a linear but a multidimensional biography based on conceptual and preconceptual experiences" (1975a, p. 1). Pinar and Grumet's (1976) theorizing and practicing of *currere* has phenomenological roots in Merleau-Ponty's (1962) call to "return to things in themselves" (p. ix) that, as a research method, "[requires] knowledge of self as knower of the world, attempting to trace the complex path from preconceptual experience to formal intellection" (Pinar et al., 1996, p. 415). This move to autobiography unfolded over the subsequent decades (and remains in flight in contemporary curriculum studies), and was joined in the 1990s and 2000s by narrative inquiry and its interest in shifting the discourse away from "measurement of student responses... How did educational experience come to be seen as something that could be measured in this way?" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxii). Clandinin & Connelly turned their focus toward the lives of teachers in schools: "There is no better way to study curriculum than to study ourselves" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p.

31; cited in Pinar et al., 1996, p. 515). Many other curriculum scholars added their voices to the work of understanding curriculum as autobiography: I refer the interested reader to Pinar et al.'s (1996) synoptic text and chapter on this topic (pp. 515-566).

It is relevant to note that the subsequent chapter in *Understanding Curriculum*, cited above, is titled "Understanding Curriculum as Aesthetic Text" (pp. 567-605), within which the path toward ABER can be traced and followed through the works of John Dewey, Elliot Eisner, Harry S. Broudy, Maxine Greene, Madeleine Grumet, Tom Barone, Elizabeth Vallance, Jan Jagodzinski and Donald Blumenfeld-Jones, among others. Speaking autobiographically, it was the reading of this chapter in my first graduate course in curriculum studies—taught by Pinar himself at the University of Victoria in 1999—that allowed me to begin to 'see' myself within this new field of study. As a theatre artist and high school drama teacher, the notion of studying curriculum was anathema to me: Curriculum was the enemy in efforts to free myself and my students to create theatre outside of the constraints of aims, outcomes and assessments. Reading through this chapter, and experiencing the whole course with Pinar, helped me understand that curriculum lives inside each teacher and student in more profound ways than it does in government documents or district policies. I was liberated to explore both curriculum and research as lived experience, and to begin a shift in career path that has led me to become a professor of drama/theatre education and a specialist in ABER methods, poetic and performative approaches in particular. While there are multiple historical pathways of ABER that are possible to trace (see Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008, pp. 3-15 for an alternate ABER history), my history is marked with these thinkers and practitioners, these milestones.

Pursuant to my first encounter with curriculum as autobiography and aesthetics were two years (2006-2008) I spent engaged in postdoctoral research on poetic inquiry at the University of British Columbia (UBC), supervised by prolific and influential arts-based/autobiographical scholar, life writer and poet Carl Leggo. Leggo's (2008) commitment to living poetically in the world resonates throughout his writing:

Poetry is a way of knowing and living, a way of examining lived experiences by attending to issues of identity, relationship, and community. Poetry acknowledges how the heart and imagination are always integral parts of human knowing. Poetry seeks the truth about human experience. (p. 171)

Leggo is a member of UBC's A/r/tography group, led by Rita Irwin (Irwin & deCosson, 2004; Irwin & Springgay, 2008). A/r/tography's development as an ABER method has created welcome space for artists in education to employ their artistic practice "as enacted living inquiry" (Springgay, Irwin & Kind, 2005, p. 899):

Artists, researcher, teachers engaged in a/r/tography are living lives of inquiry: Lives full of curiosity punctuated by questions searching for deeper understandings while interrogating assumptions. ... Living inquiry refuses absolutes; rather, it engages with a continual process of not-knowing, of searching for meaning that is difficult and in tension. (pp. 901-902)

There is an assumption built into this method that researchers engaging with it have some kind of background in the arts: "In a/r/tography, this living inquiry is an aesthetic encounter, where the process of meaning making and being are inextricably connected to an awareness and understanding of art" (p. 902). While this has led to some charges of elitism against Irwin and her colleagues and students (see Jagodzinski & Wallin, 2013), a/r/tography has been defined and delineated as a method designed ideally for arts educators (although welcoming to others at all times).

The development of *arts-informed* ABER methods by adult educators Cole & Knowles (2008) at the University of Toronto created a middle ground for the use of the arts as a component of a research project without the prerequisite of mastery:

The central purposes of arts-informed research are to enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry, and to reach multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible. The methodology infuses the languages, processes, and forms of literary, visual, and performing arts with the expansive possibilities of scholarly inquiry for purposes of advancing knowledge.... (p. 59)

If this development of ABER can be viewed as a continuum of sorts, with arts-informed research in the centre, then Susan Finley's locating of *arts-based inquiry* (2003, 2005) sits in counterbalance to a/r/tography. Finley (2008) posits that arts-based inquiry is less interested in the life of the researcher and more focused on how the arts serve oppressed or marginalized participants as forms of expression or liberatory praxis. "Arts-based inquiry is uniquely positioned as a methodology for radical, ethical, and revolutionary research that is futuristic, socially responsible, and useful in addressing social inequities" (p. 71). For Finley, the self-study aspects of ABER, along with interest in artistic process, are of less value than being part of "a revolutionary pedagogy to confront the oppressions of everyday life" (p. 73).

Artists who live and create outside of the academy, in the artworld, can be seen as more or less interested in self-study or in political activism on a continuum of their own. Setting aside the commonplace understanding that all art says something about the artist, a cursory survey of art practice in the western world reveals artists exploring the self as well as artists exploring

politics and society. Sometimes these processes occur concurrently, as in the work of visual artists Frida Kahlo, Robert Mapplethorpe and Cindy Sherman, for example. In the poetry section of the artworld, the anthology *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*, edited by poet Carolyn Forché (1993), contains many autobiographical poems that illuminate human atrocities of war, injustice or degradation that were part of the poets' lives (see also Forché & Wu, 2014). "Poetic language attempts a coming to terms with evil and its embodiments, and there are appeals for a shared sense of humanity and collective resistance" (Forché, 2014, p. 24). The works of literary artists such as Charles Dickens, Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, Vladimir Nabakov, Maya Angelou and Maxine Hong Kingston, to name only a very few, are rooted in the contexts of these authors' actual lives. They may also weave themes of education, social equity and justice into their autobiographies or memoirs, as seen in Wole Soyinka's many books, or those by Frank McCourt or Taslima Nasrin. These writers' life stories echo with the socio-historical and cultural presents in which they were/are embedded, whether in Africa (Soyinka), Ireland and America (Mccourt) or moving from Bangladesh, to Sweden, America and India in the case of Nasrin. Thus, self-study in the artworld can be seen as, at times, focused on the larger responsibility of social science research, which in turn is tied to that of ABER; to understand and thereby potentially improve the social conditions, processes and practices of ourselves and others.

Section Two: A Reflective Case Study of an Autobiographical/Autoethnographical Poem

Barone & Eisner lamented in 1997 that "more discussion of arts-based research occurs than do actual examples of it in action" (p. 76). While this scenario has markedly improved over the intervening years, it remains a good reminder from two founders of ABER methods to practice what we preach. This section of this paper presents one of my autobiographical/autoethnographical poems that is then considered for both its aesthetic and educative potential as an ABER 'creation'.

The poem below was previously published in a collaborative article written with a UBC graduate student in art education, Julie Lymburner, and a number of art education faculty members (see Prendergast, Lymburner, Grauer, Irwin, Leggo & Gouzouasis, 2008). The essay is titled "Pedagogy of trace: Poetic representations of teaching resilience/resistance in arts education" and focuses on how the dialogue around teaching stories of difficulty (Fowler, 2006; Walsh, 2006)—rendered as autobiographical narrative, poetic transcription and poetic response—may lead to new insights into how both arts education teachers and faculty members encounter opportunities for resilience and/or resistance throughout their careers. My poem was written in response to a painful teaching story told by Julie (pp. 60-63) that I poetically transcribed (pp. 63-67) as a kind of 'coding' then responded to with a story of my

own, in poetic form:

fat cow

in 1998
i left teaching
after only five years
in the classroom

the sense
of failure
in me
to live
as a teacher
to survive
is strong

a crack

i plaster over
this pain-filled
 fissure
with teaching
outside the system

in theatres
in universities

but
a crack
is a crack

a stigma
a scar

like the blackboard
it is never
quite erased

white shadows
of smeared words
leave
their chalky traces

like fat cow
that's what he called me
my grade 10 English student
in venomous careless
teenage fury
out loud
in front of the class

because i what?
asked him to move
to another desk?

the details fade
but
not the shock
and
the flinch

then the absurdity

he is sent
to the VP
who calls
as i struggle
not to cry
but
rather to teach

she asks me
over the phone
to tell her
what was said

to repeat the injury

to scar myself
 with its
encore performance
 out loud
in front of the class

she needs to know
in order to punish

in order to punish
she needs to know

i refuse to say
the wounding words
targeting my body
 not my person

so i write them
on a slip
of paper
fold it
maybe tape it
closed

send it
to the office

my punishment?
to write myself
into being
as a fat cow

not a teacher
not even
 a person

i am erased

replaced

by someone
who is always
on her guard

who becomes guarded
who becomes a guard
not a guide

i left teaching
not because
of this event

but it is the crack
the scar
the stigma
the stigmata

that marks
my failure
to remain
resilient
&
resistant
in the classroom

to weather
the disinterest
and casual cruelty

of those few
who
so trapped
in their own
furies
refuse
to see

the humanity
of those

who teach

who

refuse

to be taught

(pp. 67-70)

My interest in reprinting this poem here is in reframing it as a way of addressing the concerns of this essay and the ones grouped around it. How can this poem be seen as an example of ABER that holds aesthetic/poetic concerns in balance with an autobiographical/autoethnographical focus that also makes a (small) contribution to educational research; that is, to the ongoing mission to improve teaching and learning? Ultimately I am not in the best position to respond to this question, but I will make a couple of tentative remarks. First, the poem has consistently garnered not only a positive but visibly affective response whenever I have shared it at conferences or in classes. Women in particular seem to 'get' the poem at a more visceral level, sometimes accompanied by tears, which I find understandable given the nature of the student's insult replacing my female human body with that of a female bovine. Women in our culture are subjected to this kind of judgment and erasure daily. I have had a number of female colleagues and students seek me out to tell me, most often in private, that they too have had experiences similar to mine, and how damaging this kind of careless cruelty can be. I commented when sharing the poem during the ABER symposium at the American Educational Research Association conference last year (2013), as part of the group of essays published herein, that these colleagues and students almost always touched me on the arm, hand or shoulder as we spoke. There appeared to be a felt need to connect in a more intimate way than words alone could do. I am grateful to a colleague at the ABER symposium who noted in discussion that this act is a kind of validity for the poem, an embodied testament to its affective impact.

But the poem is not intended for women alone—men can be bullied by their students and the system as well—and its critical perspectives open up the personal event to the political contexts of discipline and punishment in education (see Foucault, 1978/1995), and to a kind of theatre of the absurd in the demand that I repeat the injury in order that the student be 'dealt with' by my vice-principal. In this way, the poem moves beyond the autobiographical/autoethnographical narrative of trauma and toward an analytical view that holds the system to account as much as (if not more than) the student who caused me harm. In another way, the poem also opens up a space for the sharing of difficult teaching stories; by taking the risk to share my story, I have found graduate students respond in kind and share stories in narrative, poetic, and/or dramatic ways that they tell me have been buried deep, sometimes for years.

This work is not intended to be therapeutic, although artistic process often has this ‘side-effect’. Rather, I see this work of using “fat cow” in my teaching as critical pedagogy in its attempt to illustrate that a) power dynamics in classrooms can cut both ways and that b) a prison-like system will engender prisoner-like responses of resistance (of course!) from students who are c) often very well aware of the snake oil society is selling wrapped up as medicine that is good for them (see Giroux, 2013). This is not to let this student off the hook in his actions; he was suspended from school and removed from my class. Interestingly, he showed up a couple of years later in a senior English class and although he was not a stellar student, we had no further problems between us. I cannot recall if he ever actually apologized to me. But the writing of the poem, many years later, engaged the workings of empathy that art making opens up; while I may always feel the pain of the insult, the larger perspective that revealed itself in the writing has had an ameliorating effect on me and on others. I might call this forgiveness.

To conclude this reflection I reiterate that, in a small way, this poem has done the layered work of a successful piece of ABER. It seems to have garnered the affective response of an effective artwork. It has a strong autobiographical/autoethnographical focus, as does much work in ABER, particularly at the a/r/tography end of the ABER continuum. Finally, it has done some good in the wider world of educational research, teaching and learning through my use of it as a prompt that invites graduate students to share their own teaching stories of difficulty (see also Fowler, 2006; Walsh, 2006). These stories, shared in creative ways in a safe space, allow students to better see their embeddedness in a system that needs lots of fixing, and also to find solidarity and strength in the collective determination to continue teaching, in spite of it all.

Conclusion: Self-Study in Narcissistic Times

Is narcissism the “pathology of our time” (Tyler, 2007, p. 343)? There is no doubt that we in the developed world currently live in a popular culture obsessed with confession, voyeurism and rampant self-promotion. But there is also a case to be made that focus on emotional expression and therapeutic sharing is ‘good’ for all of us, in the act of repressing repression; masculinist and patriarchal ways of being have maintained a lack of affect as ‘appropriate’ behavior over many centuries in the west. There can be no doubt that educational research needs and benefits from the stories of lived experience offered in artful ways by researchers, teachers and learners. However, the vibrancy of the field of ABER practice is at risk if it falls into the seduction offered by a larger culture of rampant individuality that pervasively and persuasively suggests My Story is The Story.

I have attempted here to offer an historical perspective on the development of self-study in

educational research and a spectrum of ABER approaches that move from a greater to lesser focus on autobiography/autoethnography. I have also made some connections between self-study practices in the artworld as sources of *ars poetica* that Faulkner (2007) advocates with some force: "What I am arguing is that poetic truth is not only some extraction of exact words or phrases from interview transcripts or our personal experience but rather requires a more focused attention to craft issues" (p. 221). Cahnmann (2003) and Piirto (2002) make similar cases that attention to poetic craft when creating poems for research purposes serves the art form in tandem with the inquiry. These three poetic inquirers of note all offer autobiographical/autoethnographical poems to illustrate their positions in these articles; my use of a self-study poem in this setting resonates with their call for an attention to craft in ABER.

But craft, aesthetics and affective power should not be the sole goals of an arts-based researcher. Attention to how one's own story calls and responds to others and how these interconnected stories provide a deeper and clearer understanding of teaching and learning is part of our shared responsibilities as educational researchers. An ABER self-study that does not sufficiently and vigorously make these critical connections may be seen as having failed on the social science side of the doubled challenge of arts-based research, even if the artistic quality of the work may be deemed quite high. I agree wholeheartedly with Walt Whitman's world-enfolding *Song of Myself*, and can think of no better exemplar of an ABER praxis that generously opens up the Song of the Self to the Song of the Many and the All:

A learner with the simplest, a teacher of the thoughtfulest,
A novice beginning yet experient of myriads of seasons,
Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion,
A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker,
Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.

I resist any thing better than my own diversity,
Breathe the air but leave plenty after me,
And am not stuck up, and am in my place.

from *Song of Myself* by Walt Whitman, Verse 16

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