

# An Arts-Based Approach to Conceptual Educational Practice

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I present autobiographical writing and photographic imaging, an arts-based research methodology, to understand my personal knowledge as a means to understand my professional knowledge. Using my passions for writing and photography, I explore the conflicts, opportunities, and purposes of using a visual form of arts-based narrative inquiry from a postmodern perspective. I demonstrate that the relationship between arts-based narrative inquiry and educator/researcher reflexivity and transformation allows educators to focus their passions towards a greater understanding of what it means to teach.

Keywords: arts-based research; narrative research; personal, professional knowledge development

L'auteure présente une méthode de recherche axée sur les arts, laquelle fait appel à des écrits autobiographiques et à des photographies, autant de façons pour elle de pencher sur ses connaissances personnelles afin de comprendre ses connaissances professionnelles. Passionnée d'écriture et de photographie, l'auteure explore les conflits, les occasions et les buts liés à l'utilisation d'une forme visuelle de recherche narrative dans une perspective postmoderne. Elle démontre comment la relation entre la recherche narrative, la réflexion et la transformation de l'enseignant/chercheur permet aux éducateurs d'orienter leurs passions vers une meilleure compréhension du sens à donner à l'enseignement.

Mots clés : recherche axée sur les arts, recherche narrative, approfondissement des connaissances personnelles et professionnelles.

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Teacher development is a highly, if not redundantly, excavated area of research in education. Current research is now focusing on uncovering an array of creative and personal means to probe teacher professional development. Amidst the possibilities of research methods it can be

difficult to discern which method can be a possibility for one embarking on a study of the self. This article presents the possibilities for educator researchers to question and explore complexities in their practice from a perspective which is meaningful to the researcher. I present the use of personal and creative aspects of the teacher self, proposing an alternative way of researching teacher professional development. I have used autobiographical writing and photographic imaging, an arts-based research methodology, to understand my personal knowledge as a means to understand my professional knowledge. Using my passions of writing and photography, I explore the conflicts, opportunities, and purposes of using a visual form of arts-based narrative inquiry from a postmodern perspective. I have demonstrated that the relationship between arts-based narrative inquiry and educator/researcher reflexivity and transformation allows educators to focus their passions towards a greater understanding of what it means to teach.

As a postmodern educator/researcher, I am willing to examine life, to conceptualize new ways of thinking, and to embrace the subjectivity of experience. I view arts-based, narrative inquiry as a way to explore artistic and analytic practices as they relate to the personal and professional development of the self (Diamond & Mullen, 1999). Using an arts-based and postmodern approach to consider educational practices, I have presented ways that assist educators/researchers in developing their professional understanding. Through my images I have shown that teacher development can be understood through arts-based inquiry to explore the journey of educators who expose questions, confrontations, connections, and purposes within their lives as educators. The images I share reveal my personal, practical knowledge and my development as an educator and student of education.

#### AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

My understanding of narrative and arts-based inquiry is situated in and motivated by the theories of Connelly and Clandinin (1985, 1990, 1999), Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Dewey (1934, 1938), Eisner (1978, 1991), Diamond and Mullen (1999), and Greene (1995). With them, I support the development of teacher knowledge through the use of several

reflective tools to aid teachers in creating their autobiographical stories. The creation and recreation of individual story is part of a quest toward greater self-knowledge.

Postmodern, conceptual arts-based inquiry research allows for multiple approaches to the knowing and telling of a story. With Richardson (2000), I honour the possibilities offered in the ever-shifting multiple realities of a story. For me as an educator/researcher, the core of postmodernism is the doubt that any method or theory, discourse or genre, tradition or novelty has a universal and general claim as the right or the privileged form of authoritative knowledge (Richardson, 2000, p. 928). The use of multiple reflective tools forms a part of my continual process of self-understanding. I consider reflection to be journeying backwards to move forwards (Beattie, 1995). In the text that follows I use my own reflective acts to demonstrate how autobiographical writing and photographic imaging have aided me in my ongoing, moving, and ever-shifting understanding of my personal narrative as an educator and researcher. I move back and forth between the four images of a wave crashing on the shore and story (in italics) to convey my ideas as I pursue the ongoing development of my teaching and learning.

Figure 1 portrays a series of four images that freeze a wave crashing onto the shores of the Algarve in Portugal. The wave is shot in rapid-fire succession. This wave represents my current self-reflection. Through the use of a freeze-frame technique, this dramatic sight, now static, affords time for scrutiny. I desire to revisit and explore, from close up and from afar, to gain a more profound understanding of how my personal knowledge affects my practice as a classroom teacher of English and as a researcher of teacher development. To critique this image as it relates to my own development as an educator I have applied writing to the image to attribute meaning.

*Curriculum is a term I have difficulty defining. A plethora of definitions, connotations, opportunities, emotions, and conflicts are attached to the idea of curriculum. I have often posed conflicting questions about my understanding and use of this term: Is curriculum something hard and impenetrable, inflexible — something I feel constricted by, mandated by someone else? Is it full of hidden opportunities? Is it negotiable and helpful?*



Figure 1

*To make sense of the term curriculum I begin with the first image in Figure 1 where I perceive curriculum as a nebulous form. It may be similar to the term “genre” for the English teacher. Curriculum, like genre, has multiple meanings and presents itself in multiple forms, but it is part of a larger force, similar to a wave, which gathers momentum as it planes forward. With each level of its definition, curriculum creates a wave of greater understanding. To begin assessing my understanding, like the wave portrayed in the first freeze-frame image, I need to freeze the term. I must stop and scrutinize the image and the idea. When the image and idea are temporarily static, I can begin an initial analysis of the term curriculum. It is a schedule educators follow; it is laid out by the government and governing bodies within education. It mandates subjects, content, and delivery. This analysis creates a fairly sterile and concrete understanding of curriculum. As someone who is hopeful about the possibilities in education, I am not happy to let the wave crash to a halt here. I move to the next image of the wave as it curls forward. I stop-analyze the wave against the term. Curriculum also includes the modifications that we make as teachers to attribute meaning to subjects — for example, educators allowing for activities perceived to be useful being added to the curriculum. At this point a problem arises for my understanding: Are these extra elements, extra forces gathered by the wave, part of curriculum? Does this also include the information, ideas, and influences students bring with them into the classroom?*

*To answer these questions, I need the next wave to help make sense of curriculum. I let the image gather force, moving forward again, allowing the definition to grow upon itself as it forces me to push my understanding of the term forward. I stop the image again and more questions forge to the crest of the wave. What about the unplanned events that occur in classrooms? How do they fit in, the spontaneous class discussions or quiet conversations with individual students that occur in and outside of the classroom, on class trips, or on the basketball court, soccer fields, and other places where students and educators meet?*

*When I consider curriculum in this larger, more holistic view, I recognize that both teachers and students make decisions about content and time. These decisions, then, become fundamental issues that are being addressed by the term curriculum as part of the education of each student and part of my development as an educator.*

*As multiple considerations arise in my attempt to understand the term*

*curriculum, I return to the image in Figure 1 to make sense of the multiple factors that come into play when considering curriculum as a concept. Final scrutiny of the four images as a composite creation allowing me to make sense of a most complicated issue in the delivery of education: how we perceive curriculum. The use of multiple succession and freeze-frame analysis has allowed me to view curriculum as a concept that is continually changing and gathering force. Through the use of image and writing I have confronted the ambiguous nature of the term curriculum. The use of image and writing offers a sense of attachment as I have worked through this problem, making use of my passions, attaching personal meaning to professional practice.*

## REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY

My understanding of reflection is shaped by the term *reflexivity*, which I understand as an individual being situated within a personal history and a professional career. I consider the integration of the theoretical, personal, and practical knowledge to be the essence of reflexive practice, an important aspect of developing teacher knowledge because it explains the process of redefining the gap between theory and practice. Similarly, Diamond and Mullen (1999) document self-critique and personal questioning of reflexivity as a central element of postmodern inquiry. I am influenced, too, by the ideas of Dewey (1938), who distinguished reflection based on action from impulsive action, and by Schon (1983), who expanded on action-in-reflection. These authors support the idea that professionals engage in a constant framing and reframing of a problem through reflective conversation and practical situations.

I use the term *reflexivity* to describe the ever-changing, deepening understanding that follows when individuals make connections between their personal lives and professional careers. As such, the purpose and effect of reflexive practice is to increase self-awareness that will manifest itself in an individual's teaching and provide educators with understandings of their own practice as well as the theories they develop; these elements create the basis of my understanding of teacher knowledge. Personal knowledge contributes to teacher knowledge and refers to the lifelong journey of growth that influences our professional practice, yet is largely unexamined (Cole & Knowles, 2000).

For me reflexivity involves a layering and unlayering of the connections between my life and my teaching and research. In my present work with photography, I have explored layered images and the developing process to mimic the multiple layers of reflection and reconstruction involved in uncovering personal knowledge.



Figure 2

Figure 2 represents a kind of personal archaeological process. This time I use the image of an old, desecrated ship moored along the shoreline of Lake Ontario, and quite visible from a busy highway. Although I drive past this ship often, this photograph was the first time I paused to explore it. I have layered images within the photograph, using multiple exposures representative of my experiences and knowledge. I positioned each image so that it can be expressed effectively and independently, yet cohesively for a composite understanding. I wanted to capture the deterioration of the antiquated ship, but also the changes and past motion of the ship. To achieve this effect, I left residue-developing chemicals on the image to mimic the natural process of change. When I apply these same notions to reflecting upon my teaching, I see the

importance of entering the reflective process with a framework for study. This requires attention to positioning of self and event, image and idea under study, as well as accounting for the natural process of change, while carefully considering context, perspective, and subjectivity (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). I have used a similar process of alteration and constant change to confront an inconsistency in my own teaching and learning.

*The division between practice and theory is a hotly contested subject in education research and practice, an issue I struggle with as an educator and a student of education. I feel obligated to teach my secondary English students that they cannot use first person in formal writing; they essentially cannot allow their selves to enter into an analysis of literature; they must omit opinions and personal references. Grade 10 students are expected to exclude personal references in formal writing to be successful on the provincially mandated literacy test. In contrast, my experience of writing throughout graduate school has rejected the sterile notion of the objective eye. I am now accustomed to incorporating my position into my writing; it seems unrealistic, detached, and forced to omit the first person. It is essential to engage personally with the material. I found myself explaining this dichotomy to grade 12 students, who wanted to know why the use of first person in formal writing was not acceptable. I responded in a confused manner, mumbling that I supposed it was a necessity to write formally and perhaps they could think of it as a "rite of passage" — write formally first, then, when they have the literary tools, they can explore perspective in writing. I found this explanation incredibly difficult when it stands contrary to this article, where I am addressing the need to connect personally to develop professionally.*

To begin making sense of this contradiction in education, I turned to the constantly changing image of the ship. I believe the formality in writing and the notion of mandatory testing is a deteriorating practice. There is a natural process of change which is occurring in education. The change is a result of many elements: avant-garde research such as the arts-based notions of inquiry; the influx of technical aspects and specifically the new truncated language of internet correspondence; opposition to the status quo in education, which includes the change from looking at society to looking at the individual.

The ship's image allows me to confront the difficult question of subjectivity in the teaching of English. The transitive image of the ship allows the attribution of this quality to education and the ongoing changes that occur within education



*as part of a natural process. I can now use truthfulness when I confront the issue of subjectivity in writing and look forward to helping the students I teach to view perspective in their writing as an opportunity. Through the use of the ship's image I understand the duality and the transitory nature of practices within writing. I can also help my students to see that the process of change can be found in writing, and also within education, and life.*

#### TEACHERS' PERSONAL AND PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

As I shape my understanding of knowledge in teaching, I draw on the writings of other inquirers. Connelly and Clandinin's (1999) personal practical knowledge reflects an epistemological interest in the personal and practical nature of education. This term allows the discussion of teachers as knowledgeable and knowing and conveys the notion of the inextricable link between the personal and the professional realms of the teacher. They view teacher knowledge as life compositions, interpreted through story. The term *practical* refers to Schon's (1983) epistemological interest in practical thinking. The term *personal* refers to a researcher's interest in understanding teaching acts in relation to self. Connelly and Clandinin (1985) support teachers' understanding of their practice experientially through the use of images, rituals, habit, cycles, and routines. The following autobiographical writing demonstrates how I interpret personal knowledge. Through the use of my camera lens and autobiographical writing I bring the development of my practice as an educator/researcher into focus.

*A 36-by-24-inch replication of sunflowers spills over most of the east wall of my bedroom. The blooms and stems that are captured in the image are from my mother's garden. My mother took this picture from within the sunflowers. The sea blue of the sky composes the background of the composition; the foreground is an array of different greens ranging from deep forest, almost blue black to mossy jade and vibrant emerald. Several stems and leaves are blurred, others are crisply focused. My mother enlarged the image as a gift to me many years ago when I had first left for university, perhaps as metaphor for both the comforts of home and the mystery that life away holds. My mother's love of learning and the creative and intellectual challenges that she pursued influenced my life deeply. Photography was one of the artful skills that my mother possessed and shared*



Figure 3

*with me. The exploration of this image and the clear influence of narrative and photography that is generated from this vignette allow me to make sense of my need to approach inquiry from within, from a first person perspective, that is part of a larger narrative. I can also make sense of my use of image in my teaching and my drive to inspire students to connect on a personal level with the literature they are studying.*

This reflection demonstrates how I understand narrative inquiry to be a way of working out individual, personal, practical knowledge, and how I as a teacher give meaning and direction to my classroom practices. By positioning myself (in a postmodern sense) through this kind of reflective practice, I gain further comprehension of my investment in teaching and research.

When I apply Laurence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis's (1997) ideas regarding portraiture to my photographic imaging, I use their concept that context is dynamic and unfixed and that the actor shapes and is shaped by context. Through the use of image and story I can consider contextual elements of perspective and culture. I recreate segments of

personal narrative, letting the image act as a symbol or metaphor for a larger phenomenon. In my work I use image and story to uncover personal knowledge.

I find the relationship between arts-based inquiry and writing an essential connection to attribute meaning to my practice. Richardson (2000) considers autobiographical writing as an aid to teachers in developing personal knowledge and their practice. Autobiographical writing provides an opportunity for teachers to gain insight into their professional practice and explore how they construct the world as it relates to their practice as educators (Richardson, 2000). Similarly, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) address writing as an ongoing process of self-discovery that can be both product and process. Cole and Knowles (2000) also explain (auto)biographical writing as an act that enhances learning through discovering and examining personal philosophies, theories, principles, and skills that are related to teaching and education. My use of photographic images as metaphor and inspiration for writing motivates the understanding of my personal and professional epiphanies and turning points (Denzin, 1989).

## DISCUSSION

Photographic imaging offers creative avenues for accessing, developing, and representing teacher knowledge. I have chosen photography because of the photographer's ability to mold, experiment, and manipulate perspective, form, and detail. I use form to represent complex ideas, requiring transformation and reinterpretation of knowledge. Diamond and Mullen (1999), in *The Postmodern Educator*, recognize the increasing use of multiform visual methods that are currently used in qualitative inquiry. They refer to the use of perspective to create close-ups as the intimacy of first-person revelations, and long shots as the detachment of third-person reflection (Diamond & Mullen, 1999). This technique is similar to my use of freezing images in Figure 1 to gain perspective on an issue within education that I have found puzzling.

Lawrence Lightfoot (2000), who makes use of close-ups throughout her story of photographer Dawoud Bey, describes his knowledge around

the development of a relationship with the subjects at the centre of his work as an artist. In Figure 1, I look for the relationship between images of seascape and my notions of curriculum. Similar to Bey in Lightfoot's story, I am moving away from literal expression and moving toward interpretation with more depth and complexity. Similar to Bey's work as an artist, I use photographic forms in my work to create themes, and connect of these themes to their shared context.

When attaching writing, specifically autobiographical writing, to image as I do for the purpose of attributing meaning to a question, Denzin (1989) warns a narrative researcher to consider the implications of the subjectivity of the researcher. He thinks narrative, autobiographical, and biographical writing blur the line between fact and fiction. He maintains that all biographical writing is fiction. "A life is a social text, a fictional narrative production" (Denzin, 1989, p. 9). Denzin observes that even biography is autobiography, particularly in narrative inquiry. My writing about past experiences as a student and an educator has aided me to understand my current perceptions of teaching.

Similar to Denzin's (1989) contention that all biography is autobiography, Harper (2000) explains that images produce empirical data. Observation is interpretive, not representative of truth, but it supports the observations that researchers use to redefine their theories. In this way photographs help to build theory. Harper (2000) writes of the importance of understanding the camera in understanding its impact on the research process. Different films, shutter speeds, angles, exposures, and lights create different statements. "The visuals enter to concretize and challenge our stance and agency/powerlessness in the inquiry" (Diamond & Mullen, 1999, p. 5).

The use of image and creative interpretation presents challenges that require consideration for researchers who are organizing a conceptual framework. Diamond and Mullen (1999) acknowledge the demands of the scholarly community, which often expects third-person neutrality. In response they (and many other postmodern educators) acknowledge that they are not objective observers: rather, they study the experience from the perspective of those who live it. Researchers, then, must consider the theory behind the foundation, form, and constructs that

create their intended frameworks. To build these frameworks, researchers need to use several reflective strategies to develop personal knowledge and subsequently the practice of teachers. Narrative, a necessary component, provides structure to the information that reflection generates. Researchers must be aware of some considerations when constructing a conceptual framework and searching for what Denzin (1989) refers to as *method*. These may include the role of subjectivity and approaches to data.

In this context the term *method* is helpful to explain how a researcher uses the reflective tools when conducting a biographical study. Method is the process by which knowing occurs when one moves from subjective personal experience to objective grounds, where understanding occurs independently. The combination of these processes creates *intersubjective* knowing, where an individual combines personal and practical knowledge. Figure 2 and my narrative exploration of the issue of subjectivity in teaching secondary English demonstrate the delivery of English as a subject that is demanding of both personal and practical knowledge areas. The ability to mold subject area knowledge with personal knowledge to make literature interesting and personal to students is a constant challenge for me as an educator. Beattie (1995) refers to the ability of narrative to give order to the *method* Denzin (1989) refers to. I too see this as an event that occurs with teachers and subsequently those they teach. "The narrative methods provide us with different kinds of knowledge and different ways of representing it and have potential to bring new meaning to the experiences of change, growth and of professional development in a teacher's life" (Beattie, 1995, p. 8).

Multiple approaches are required to inspire students and researchers alike in their own personal archeology, inspiring them to connect with the subject at hand. Richardson (2000) refers to mixed genres. "The scholar draws freely in his or her production from literary, artistic and scientific genres, often breaking the boundaries of each of those as well" (Richardson, 2000, p. 934). Richardson refers to this postmodernist construction as *crystallization*, the recognition that there are more than "three sides" from which to approach the world. The notion of *crystallization* confronts the traditional triangulated approach of

qualitative research. A multi-perspective approach is needed both in the study and in the delivery of education. Multiple access points offer individual choice. Dewey (1938) refers to the cumulative effect of experience. I apply this notion to both my practice as a teacher and a researcher. Dewey (1938) explains:

[I]f an experience arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense to carry a person over dead places in the future, continuity works in a very different way. Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward. (p. 38)

Dewey's explanation connects to my image of the wave shown in Figure 4, where I use *image* to refer to my own thinking about my practice as a teacher and researcher. This image represents a first-person account of experience. I am in the foreground, symbolized by the clarity in this area of the picture and the perspective from which it is taken. I have slowed the shutter speed to give the wave a blurred effect. This represents the moving force of experience. The foreground is clear, representing that my subject context will determine the effect of the wave or experience. Dewey (1938) presents the idea in which every experience prepares an individual for later experience, which will provide opportunity for growth, continuity, and the reconstruction of experience.

In my practice as a teacher and a researcher exploring experience, I seek not to search for definitive answers and concrete interpretations. I aim to acknowledge and represent diversity, inconsistency, and change by making use of a postmodern conceptual framework that considers several reflective tools. Interpretations are provisional. Postmodern interpretation rejects all encompassing frameworks in which all problems and uncertainties can be resolved. Maxine Greene (1995) describes and supports the creation of multiple ways of viewing multiple contexts (p. 16). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that researchers must consider the ambiguity of narrative research. To contend with this issue of inconsistency in memory, feeling, and contextual elements



Figure 4

researchers must be acutely aware and acquainted with context and perspective.

Because of the way that qualitative research can be easily generalized, arts-based, narrative researchers must carefully consider the conceptual frameworks they use. Arts-based and narrative researchers may ask themselves the following questions when they are considering their contributions to educational research: Does this research make a substantive contribution? Does it have aesthetic merit? Can it be developed? Is it a reflexive contribution? Have ethical issues been considered? Is there adequate self-awareness? Does the creator hold him or herself accountable? Does it have impact? Does it generate new questions and research practice? Is it an expression of reality? Is it credible and true? (Richardson, 2000) These questions indicate that arts-based researchers have a responsibility to the educational community; they must consider carefully the contributions they are making to their field and how they qualify their research.

## CONCLUSION

It is possible for researchers to make use of other creative forms to make sense of fundamental questions and concepts in education: painting, poetry, dance and movement, sculpture, music, and others. The possibility exists to use elements meaningful to arts-based researchers to further humanize the approach to education. Arts-based researchers access passions, they instill in students the importance of searching for meaningfulness in their own lives as they attach meaning to education.

In this article, I have presented an arts-based narrative approach to reflection and teacher knowledge as a method of uncovering, understanding, and improving teachers' practice. I both present and discuss the role of arts-based inquiry, specifically writing and photography, in the development of teacher/researchers. I raised and discussed several crucial complexities surrounding the interpretation of self, using a postmodern interpretation to make sense of the ambiguities and complexities surrounding the role of the reflective educator. I also presented the importance of constructing a sound conceptual framework for arts-based research, which considers the position and responsibilities of the researcher. Through several personal photographs and references to arts-based and narrative researchers, I have shared examples of how autobiographical writing and image creating contribute to and tap into personal knowledge and develop the practice of teachers. In this article, I situated myself in a postmodern world, which embraces multiple approaches to reflection, to practice, to research, and to life. The research presented in the article strives to communicate the notion of turning reflection into a larger narrative, which ultimately helps teachers and researchers alike to develop personal knowledge and professional practice.

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