

ARTful Design: Disruptions Within the Dissertation in Practice

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ABSTRACT

A student within a university's Ed.D. program is encouraged by her director to narrow her research focus; however, her interests in Curriculum Studies, Arts-Based Educational Research, and Composition Studies led her to design a practitioner action research study examining intersections between the fields. As she collected participants' data, she experienced poststructural disruptions within all stages of the dissertation process, from designing and collecting data to formatting and identity as a researcher. This narrative, exploratory article showcases how dissertations in practice can follow nonlinear pathways to knowledge when researchers are open to possibilities.

KEYWORDS

practitioner action research; expressive arts; curriculum; poststructuralism; higher education

During my first semester of doctoral coursework, I had so many ideas for my dissertation that I could hardly keep them straight. As I explained several of them to the former director of my Ed.D. program, she stopped me. "Eventually, you will have to pick which camp you belong to," she said with a smile.

I sat back in my chair, contemplating her advice. I knew that she meant well and was encouraging me to focus my energy on one idea, but I had heard a version of this statement all my life when faced with choices: Art or English teacher, Master's in Education or Master's in English, Ph.D. or Ed.D.? To be honest, the decisions I have made, especially when it comes to education, have always been bittersweet. When I open a door, why should I have to close it all the way? What if my journey is nonlinear? What if I want to go into multiple rooms?

Ed.D. programs can feel both intimidatingly restrictive and open all at once. You are provided with so many colors to paint, but are not immune to the pressure of painting what you already know. I came to my Ed.D. program with two degrees in English, knowing that I could write a standard dissertation easily, but my coursework encouraged me to think of different ways to use the paint. My ideas for my dissertation were vibrant, bold colors that I could not imagine forcing into a unified final product. I wanted to splatter the paint.

My two years of doctoral coursework were spent with the bound dissertations of cohorts lined up evenly on shelves before me. Though ranging in size, most uniformly had a gold title on the spine that encompassed the entire study, five chapters within black binding, and so on. I knew what was expected of me, but does a study that truly reflects multifaceted educational leadership completely "fit" in this standard format? I had so many research interests within education that spanned different methodologies, theories, and writing styles. Can someone with so many educational interests really pick a "camp" and never look back? Eisner (2008)

profoundly stated that "universities ought to be places in which doctoral students could explore imaginatively new methods and concepts, and if universities could not provide such a setting, there were few places that could" (p. 18). I needed to utilize my knowledge to manifest this setting for my dissertation study, one that allowed for my research to work within multiple "camps." Once I finished my coursework and no longer had to stare at those homogenous dissertations, I decided, "Perhaps, I will eventually have to pick which camp I belong to. But, not yet." My dissertation journey was one of disruption. By allowing my ideas to splatter, I disrupted my understanding of knowledge, process, and my identity.

DISRUPTION OF DESIGN

When I began designing my dissertation study, I thought that it would fall solely within the constructivist paradigm. Constructivism is utilized to explore how art-making contributes to the construction of reality for those interacting with them. Efland (2002) explains that throughout history, the function of the arts has been to construct reality. Visual arts are representations of worlds, whether they be realistic or interpretive. Dewey (1934/2005) believed that art-making can deepen the construction of reality because "to perceive, a beholder must *create* his own experience" (p. 56). While externally creating, the brain is internally creating as well. In terms of what is occurring within the brain, Malchiodi (2018) asserts that the arts are able to evoke different responses than what language and logic are able to do, as well as "expand the logic of the thinking brain to other possibilities and perceptions" (p. 72); thus, art-making can deepen and enhance previously constructed knowledge as well as provoke the formation of new knowledge. With these theories in mind, I sought to explore how curriculum could be used to facilitate knowledge construction, both knowledge of writing and knowledge of



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self. Expressive Arts theory also contributes to constructivism. It is based on the ancient Greek word *poiesis*, “the act of bringing something new into the world” (Levine, 2017, p. 10), with the “something new” being knowledge/understanding instead of a highly skilled artistic product. Through this construction, or composition process, art becomes a way of knowing (Allen, 1995).

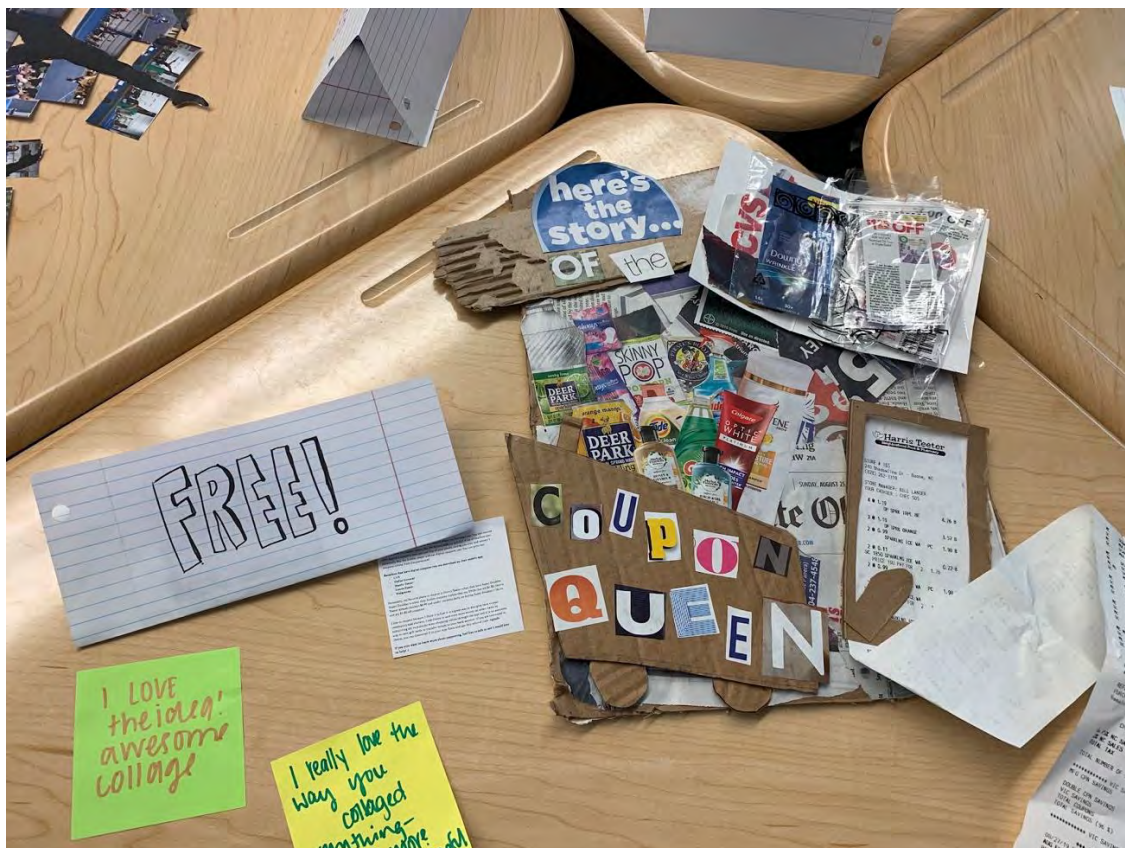
With this knowledge of constructivism in mind, I designed the following research question: How does art-making influence a collegiate rhetoric and composition course? I believed that the question contained enough openness for participants’ individual knowledge construction as well as covered the reason I desired to bring art-making into my writing courses: to support students’ writing skills.

But as I began collecting data, I realized that my original dissertation was not open enough. Even in my first round of participant interviews on their art-making processes, I was collecting meaningful data that did not directly connect to writing skills. The data did, however, contribute to participants’ educational experiences. Figure 1 is a participant’s visual artifact from my dissertation study. Jade chose the topic of couponing for her literacy narrative project, creating art that reflected her experiences with mixed materials of receipts, magazine clippings, and cardboard. With her materials, she formed them to look like the perspective of a person with a full shopping cart, looking down at the items. Jade stated that creating the art supported her writing process through brainstorming of ideas, composing her experiences into meaningful ways, and generating excitement for the written narrative she would

also complete as part of the assignment; however, she also identified other benefits of the art-making, including stress-relief, reflection, and expression of emotions towards her hobby that were not writing skills that I tried to facilitate. In her interviews, it was clear that my arts-based curriculum had an effect that extended beyond writing skills, opening opportunities for Jade to connect parts of her identity with her coursework in a way that created pleasurable educational experiences.

At first, I felt as if I should stick with my plan. I was unsure if I could revise my research questions for my dissertation and recognized that my paradigm would need to move from constructivism to poststructuralism. Although I planned for my dissertation to fall within the constructivist paradigm, I should not have been surprised when my research moved into poststructural ways of knowing. Sullivan (2005) explains that visual arts practice can be described as a form of research from a “sense of knowing and unknowing, and how we deal with it” (p. 115), which is evident in my dissertation’s movements from constructivism to poststructuralism. Because I designed a study that would explore “the intersections between the visual and the verbal” (Childers et al., 1998, p. ix), data relating to students’ educational experiences emerged that I had not anticipated. Students’ visual data is a “[r]epresentation [that] stabilizes the idea or image in a material and makes possible a dialogue with it” (Eisner, 2002, p. 6); hence, the dialogue provided new understandings that emerged once the data was analyzed.

Figure 1. Jade’s Literacy Narrative on Couponing



It was also clear from my findings that I needed to reconsider my research question under poststructural framework. Eisner (2008) posed the question, “Could there be [. . .] an approach to educational research that would rely upon the imaginative and expressive crafting of a form in ways that enlarge our understanding of what goes on, say, in teaching?” (p. 18). The answer is undoubtedly yes, but only if researchers are willing to take risks. My original single research question limited my ability to see the multiple ways art-making was supporting my students’ learning. I thought that my question contained an openness to possible outcomes that is reflective in both arts-based educational research (ABER) and the interpretive or constructivist paradigm, which “examines [how people engage in processes of constructing and reconstructing meanings through daily interactions” (Leavy, 2017, p. 129) as well as the meaning people assign to their experiences. Because I was interested in studying students’ experiences, processes, and reflections, my original research question fell under a constructivist framework. The question prioritized students’ “subjective understandings and multiple meanings in the research process” (p. 129). But as I began to collect data, I understood that my research questions needed to allow for openness, multiplicity, and disruption of my own constructed knowledge. I needed to let go of the rigid structure I created with one research question and be open to poststructural ways of knowing; therefore, I added the following to research questions:

- What kinds of processes do students go through when creating these activities?
- What is unsettled, disturbed, or disrupted when students engage in art-making within a collegiate rhetoric and composition course?

Although it was intimidating to revise my research questions as my study progressed, I needed to let go of the restrictive design I created for myself in order to be open to possibilities. Essentially, I had to disrupt my design in order to fully understand the effect arts-based curriculum had on my participants.

DISRUPTION OF KNOWLEDGE

When I designed my study, I did not anticipate that data would lead me to reshape my research questions that would then lead to an entirely different understanding of educational research. Previous degrees in English and education made me feel that narrow, specific ideas would make for simpler writing processes, and I already had data that supported student engagement and construction of identity. Figure 2 is a word art visual I created by pasting my dissertation prospectus into the program. The shape symbolizes my original study’s design; I thought everything would fall into neat, organized, balanced categories of meaning based on what I predicted before the study began. There would be clear directions, everything would branch out from one unified center point, and it would be symmetrical. I thought that my dissertation research had to have all of those features to be effective, especially since the models I had seen were very much standard five chapter products. But I did not want my research to conform to preconceived notions and predictable themes; I wanted my research to “open up conversations and relationships instead of informing others about what has been learned” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xxx). I wanted to contribute to the growing understanding of composition and the arts, including processes other than “generating words” (Sharples, 1999, p. 90), which meant I had to welcome disruption in my own research process.

Figure 2. Research Prospectus Word Art



Something I would have never predicted before beginning my research was one of my major themes. As stated earlier, I began my dissertation research with the idea of studying how art-making supported my students' writing processes. But I continued to see in the data that my curriculum was not just supporting their writing; it was doing something *more* that transcended outside of writing classrooms. Through participants' data, I learned that my arts-based curriculum was facilitating therapeutic experiences for my students that were unplanned. Figure 2 is Miles's art for his literacy narrative project. He chose the topic of loving himself after experiencing a breakup. Using paint, a foam noodle, and writing, he created a sunflower with leaves labeled with qualities he recognized within himself such as "mature" and "intelligent." Although he admitted that reflecting on his breakup was still painful, he appreciated the opportunity to reflect on it for a school project and noticed that he enjoyed parts of the art-making more than he had anticipated. The art assisted Miles's writing by helping him consider stages of literacy, but it did far more in terms of creating a therapeutic educational experience where he could express, process, and reflect on his emotions.

Like with my research question(s), I had a choice: I could follow the course and stick to only focusing on what my students relayed about art-making and their writing processes, or I could allow for disruption. Triangulating data in the forms of journal reflections, interview responses, and visual artifacts made it clear that students were experiencing therapeutic benefits within my curriculum; and to ignore those in favor of a unified, more succinct study would invalidate everything I was doing; I would not be displaying the full picture of my findings. In arts-based educational research, the researcher must be open to ways data can unfold, allowing for time and patience as she separates entangled threads of meaning and follows them (Hofsess, 2016). Through this process, I discovered that Figure 2 is an inauthentic representation of what educational research should be. Data should instead splatter naturally, and researchers should find ways to involve all the splatters. Figure 4

represents my new understanding: a less unified form with different sizes, shapes, and parts that veer from the main area. Interestingly, the word *art* moved the words "active" and "method" together. Arts-based educational research is a messier process than other qualitative methods where researchers must take active methods to understand splatters of meaning and be willing to shape and reshape ideas.

Figure 3. Mile's Literacy Narrative



Figure 4. Revised Research Prospectus Word Art



DISRUPTION OF FORMAT

Despite the disruptions of design and knowledge I experienced while working on my dissertation, I still originally planned to write the standard five chapter product. But as I began to analyze my data, I found that there were threads of meaning that contributed to different fields of research. Forcing these findings into a standard dissertation format with a “results” section would require me to make overarching connections between findings that are not as specific, useful, or valid for myself as a practitioner learning from her research or an audience; therefore, I decided to write three separate manuscripts that focused specifically on unique findings and how they connected to composition studies, curriculum studies, and arts-based educational research. Through an overarching introduction, chapter introductions, and a coda, I was able to take the reader through my composition process and explain my rationale. I also included that I would submit my manuscript to journals for potential publication, and at the time of writing this, one has been accepted in my first choice journal. Each article also reflects an aspect of my (current) three major educational interests as well as my past, present, and future roles within educational research: I have been a practitioner for some time, I have recently been involved in curriculum studies, and I intend to move further into arts-based educational research.

Along with seeing different threads of meaning across my research, I also noticed nuanced, individual experiences within my research participants. It would have been simpler to force their data into a standard analysis format by making general connections; however, when I attempted to generalize in the analysis sections, I realized that I could not. If I generalized their data based on themes, I would lose participants’ unique voices that reveal the extent art-making influenced them. My study was impactful because it examined how art-making can influence students’ experiences on individual levels of mindset, motivation, personal connections, and therapeutic effects. In order for me to showcase what art-making can do for individual students, I elected to use narrative analysis. This method for analysis enabled me to maintain individual research participants’ voices and experiences.

DISRUPTION OF IDENTITY

Before I began my dissertation, I was kindly advised to pick a camp and stick to it. It may have made for a more linear, less time-consuming process, but I could not pick one camp. Instead, my dissertation manuscripts blend practitioner action research, arts-based educational research, and my personal voice to create a picture of camps in which I am interested but am not willing to be exclusive: composition theory, curriculum studies, and arts-based educational research. Dunn (2001) once explained that she was “still working” on her philosophy of teaching because she was still “working through” (p. 9) her philosophy of life, and so am I. Currently, my life, as with research in education, is filled with constructed knowledge, multiple meanings, and opportunities for surprise; hence, the manuscripts reflect that. Although my dissertation involved disruptions of process, formatting, and knowledge, it was my identity as an educational leader that was disrupted the most.

I defended my prospectus and my dissertation in less than a year of each other, and those months were a whirlwind of research, writing, thinking I understood something, and then realizing I have a

lot to learn; however, my dissertation reflects who I am becoming as a practitioner researcher. Though education often asks students to write to show proficiency in knowledge, I do not think anything is worth writing if the writer does not encourage readers to think differently. My dissertation reflects arts-based inquiry because it is a process of discovery that transforms the participants as well as the researcher. As Leavy (2018) explains, arts-based research and inquiry have the potential to transform because they are creative forms of trial and error where the researchers must be willing to change course based on new insights as well as rely on their own “internal monitor” (p. 11). I took risks by formatting my dissertation in a nontraditional way, but took greater risks in taking on all of my interests, showcasing data in ways that it spoke to me, designing my own customized study for my students, and allowing my findings to move me into new directions of knowing instead of limiting my study to what I originally had planned. Sullivan (2005) describes learning as a “destabilizing process that results in the emergence of an individual voice within a collective agency” (p. 189). I welcomed the disruption that arts-based inquiry provided and allowed it to reveal my individual voice. Content-wise, my dissertation shows readers that art-making not only enhances the classroom as a whole, but offers depth in learning to students and practitioners. Art-making disrupts processes and formats, but most importantly, understandings of knowledge and identity.

My dissertation journey also showcases what I believe as an educational researcher. To a certain degree, it is easy to identify a problem, find a solution, and state that it worked. Prior (2018) explains that students are often encouraged to conduct and display research in “safe,” “unimaginative” (p. 5) ways, but my dissertation took a nonlinear, imaginative format of a journey of knowing. The artistry is found not only within the study, but also in the way the researcher tells the story of constructing knowledge “in and through artistic practice” (Prior, 2018, p. 7). It is far more difficult for an emerging educational researcher to not be complacent with one solution or the first one that emerges. We must push further, re-examining the data for nuanced meaning and meaning that we may have never anticipated. My dissertation is an act of living inquiry (Irwin et al., 2018), showcasing how I negotiated intersecting fields of interest in curriculum studies, composition studies, arts-based educational research, and expressive arts in order to come to an understanding of my emerging personal pedagogy and role as an undergraduate instructor of writing. Knowles and Promislow (2008) explain that the “crucial question of identity for new practitioners” is “Who am I? As a teacher? As a researcher?” (p. 3). My study explores this crucial question through arts-based inquiry within the dissertation as I welcome disruptions and allow for new knowledge to develop.

CONCLUSION

Now that I have completed three cycles of data analysis from my research study, where do I go from here? The simple answer would be that I am going to complete more cycles of the same study with revisions, as called for by practitioner action research. While many dissertations conclude a study, my dissertation keeps the door open for more ways arts-based inquiry can inform my teaching, and I am excited to go through it; however, one of the reasons why I selected an Ed.D. program over a Ph.D. was the flexibility of opportunities it affords. My dissertation committee members spanned three departments, Curriculum & Instruction, English Education, and



Art Education, which created impactful mentoring opportunities that revealed ways my work can contribute to all three fields. My Ed.D. coursework ranged from overviews of many interesting methods to social justice theories in education, and I have already been considering how I can try new approaches to arts-based research as I continue my learning.

Energized from defending my dissertation, I wrote new manuscripts that have recently been published in NCTE's *English Leadership Quarterly* (Hash, 2020a) and the *CEA Critic* (Hash, 2020b). Now that I have more flexibility of deadlines, I am excited to see where my various interests and passions lead me and how I can contribute to knowledge in various fields. In the end, I really did not have to pick one camp; I just needed to thoughtfully consider how to make my ideas work together. Though a dissertation is a "result" of research, it really showcases one journey, and if executed effectively, foreshadows the promise of future journeys to come. I look forward to my next journey.

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