What can a work of ABER teach?

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Introduction

In 2014, Professor Brooke Hofsess won the National Art Education Association (USA) Elliot Eisner Award, and the American Educational Research Association, Arts-Based Research Award, for her dissertation Embodied Intensities: Artist-Teacher Renewal in the Swell and Afterglow of Aesthetic Experiential Play. The dissertation was completed at the University of Georgia (UGA), and Dr. Hofsess worked closely with Dr. Richard Siegesmund throughout her doctoral studies, first as his student while both were at UGA, and afterwards in professional dialogue after he left to join the Art+Design Education faculty at Northern Illinois University. Thus Dr. Siegesmund has a deep structural understanding of this award winning work of arts-based educational research.

This paper proposal for a 15-minute session will be in two parts. First Dr. Siegesmund will review critical aspects of Dr. Hofsess’s dissertation. Second Professor Vasconcellos will discuss how this work influences her own research questions and approaches to her own dissertation.

To begin Dr. Siegesmund can review the important arts-based antecedents that provide a context for this research (e.g. Gosse, 2005; Sameshima, 2007). Dr. Siegesmund can also situate Hofsess’s use of post-intentional phenomenology as a research methodology (Vagle, 2014) and how arts-based educational research is embedded within the larger qualitative methodologies of neo-Pragmatism (Rosiek, 2013), and post-qualitative research (St. Pierre, 2013). This sets the stage for the inquiry of Brazilian Professor Sonia Vasconcellos from the Universidade Estadual do Paraná (UNESPAR) and doctoral candidate from the Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR).

Following Dr. Siegesmund’s opening comments Professor Vasconcellos will present her reflections on how Hofsess’s work informs her own doctoral research. In 2013-2014 Professor Vasconcellos was a visiting scholar at Northern Illinois University, where she studied with Dr. Siegesmund and examined Hofsess’s dissertation with him.

Paper Presentation

Dr. Siegesmund

Post-intentional phenomenology, neo-Pragmatism and post-qualitative research all focus on the future: what the reader can do with a text, rather than proposing confident instructive guidance to the reader. In this regard, Dr. Hofsess’s dissertation is an exploration of what her participants might aspire to become, not an exercise in validity, reliability, and generalizability of past experience. Furthermore, there was no structural, professional, or formalistic assessment of visual forms created by the participants. Visual materiality was engaged to provoke thinking. Can visual
materiality, making special (Dissanayake, 1992), remain separate from what might be considered "art"?

Professor Vasconcellos
My propinquity to the studies focusing on the relations between research, artistic practices and teaching – arts based educational research – started in 2008 with the reading of articles by Elliot Eisner and Rita Irwin, translated to Portuguese, and by Fernando Hernández, in Spanish. Such approach attracted my attention, but remained in a hypothetical realm, not affecting my professional practice as a teacher educator.

In 2010 I took part in a graduate class at the University of Sao Paulo, taught by Sumaya Mattar, which highlighted artistic learning and reflective activity as an educational process (Mattar, 2010), attached to the developmental path of art teachers. The narrative proposals and experience reports had turned into hints to other methods of teaching and learning art, and within this mindset we developed visual and dramatic works to discuss our life trajectory, our impressions and our achievements. In the same year, also in Sao Paulo, I attended a series of meetings promoted by Cecília Sales on the creation processes of an artistic work. The steps, doubts, attempts, and paths which are the very work in motion, in construction, in metamorphosis. Processes which, according to Salles (1998), reveal wefts composed by complex processes of appropriation, transformation and adjustment. As such, the reflections and exercises proposed by Mattar and Salles aided me in reviewing my relations with – as well as my distancing from – the aesthetic and creative processes within art teaching.

However it was a specific situation which brought me to the micro, to my professional daily routine, the educational potential of poetic narrative. Upon being assigned in 2012 as lecturer of Research Methodology, an undergraduate freshmen unit within the visual art licensure by the Parana State University, I requested the students to write their impressions on the act of researching and the reasons for research practices in an art licensure course. The answers raised questions highlighted by several authors (Corazza, 1996; Charlot, 2005) and by students further along their degree:

- that research is a form of work based on authors, and which enables theoretical and conceptual understanding,
- that research enables understanding the past, the history of the arts and thus acts as supporting material for the teacher;
- that “real” research is done by scholars, and that teachers and students should thusly make use of these investigations in order to support their studies and practices.

Such answers were “correct” but, in a way, impersonal, without self-branding, without “screams”. Such were answers which also underlined a distinction between knowledge made by scholars and by teachers, the latter being the intended professional medium of these students. Since this took place within a licensure course in visual arts, I also requested them to discuss these questions on research through an artistic and/or graphic work, which should be presented on the next class. What ensued left me flabbergasted.

In these works, the students, feeling emboldened as authors and inventors of their own opinions, presented their perceptions, some of which were similar to those expressed textually, others of a more intimate nature. Curiosity had been entwined with flavors, fragility joined persistency to soar into flight... revealing perspectives and desires which I did not deem to exist. What now? I leaned
with further breadth over the texts on artistic narratives, foundational experiences and arts based research. Such new found immersion led me to pack and join an internship as a visiting scholar (PDSE/CAPES nº 441213-3) from September 2013 to June 2014 at Northern Illinois University (NIU) in the United States, under professor Dr. Richard Siegesmund.

Such was a time of much experience, reading, learning and discussion. I attended undergraduate and graduate units, took part in workshops and developed works mixing personal narratives with concepts and contexts. One of the papers presented by Siegesmund in his Philosophy of Art and Aesthetic class, in the Spring of 2014, was the doctoral research by Brooke Hofsess. The reading of this work left me intrigued, reflexive, and also disturbed. Some of these impressions I present here, entangled with inquiries on research processes and the production of displacement and of knowledge.

I must, however, issue a warning: as I describe parts of Hofsess’ research, I also change and reinvent it. This is my reading making itself be through words, pauses and impressions. As I discuss some sections under my point of view, I skim over others, thus constructing a different narrative over her work. I wanted to warn you.

What first caught my eye on Hofsess’ work was the writing in the form of letters. The abstract itself is an example, starting with the expression “dear reader” and ending with the term “sincerely”, followed by the author’s name and the words “artist & researcher & teacher”.

This characteristic of ABER, this form of personal writing built from one’s particular styles of reporting, is found throughout her work. The theoretical choices appear in a few letters addressed to the reader and the professors taking part in this work, entangled with queries, communication of situations, and of the researcher’s desires. Reading the letters, the dialogues established between texts and images, make (in a way) tangible the intention and goals of the research: revealing the active and flexible role of the researcher within the investigation process, the mangling between life stories of who researches and of who takes part in it, hybrid games of images and of words as testimonial and voice of the participants, and the diversification of experiences and of presentation of processes (Tourinho & Martins, 2013).

The work begins with the letter from professor “Walker” (who I later find was her undergraduate photography professor) to his former student Brooke Hofsess. “It’s so good to hear from you. I can’t tell you how great it is to reconnect with you, and how timely your return is. 2010 was a difficult year...” And the text goes on, talking about questions of personal, familiar, and professional nature. I feel an intruder reading this report filled with intimacy. I can fell there are various unsaid in this letter, traces of histories connecting Walker and Hofsess. The following letters, addressed to the reader, allude to these traces. In them, Brooke wanders upon being an artist-teacher, presenting queries and intentions while reporting her professional trajectory and the option of crossing aesthetic experience in the composition of her doctoral work.

Then, in one of these letters, Hofess reports the arrival of a package containing her first artist’s book, “full of her adolescent poetry, photographs, and watercolor paintings” (Tourinho & Martins, 2013, p. 4). She writes then that her undergraduate photography professor “Walker” asked her if he could keep it, not to criticize of belittle what lied therein, but to see her as a youngling becoming woman. That package which had arrived was a book that the professor had decided, after keeping it for sixteen years, to return. What he did was to send her a gift, “the gift of finding myself in afterglow” (Hofsess, 2013, p. 4).
Hofsess shows a picture of this book revealing, in these initial narratives, traces of the direction of her work: exposing oneself and the other through confessional records wherein “words and images cross, merge, disguise themselves as one another, dance” (Loponte, 2005, p. 110).

In the letters to the reader, Hofsess reports that the theory of her work explores the letter as a bodily form of writing that exists in a place, creates affection, intensities, and which moves to meet other bodies, all in intense relation with the world. A methodology instigating creative flights of writing and not so much phenomenological description and interpretation. A large extent of her work is the presentation of letters exchanged in a period of sixteen months between the researcher and eight artist-teachers which attended a Master’s unit taught by her, while also being basic education teachers. These are texts, images, knittings, collages which build marks in discourse, dents drawing situations, stories, choices and ventings, and which also reveal displacements and changes brought upon by this mirror exercise (talking about oneself) and of confidences (talking to another).

I can see these marks deepen and intensify in the exchange of letters for several reasons. One of them is through the private, but willing to be shared, space created by each teacher in their writings, drawings and wanderings. They are exhibits of oneself to another on whom they trust, and as such are singular and authentic, as well as painful and hard. There are many writings within these writings – of lived experiences, of school culture, of art, of the relation with the other. Such is yet another important aspect of her work: the attentiveness of the researcher to what the teachers report. Such care and willingness to listen is shown in the reply letters, the inserted drawings, the presentation of ideas by authors and in the exposition of her doubts and intentions. A researcher who also trembles, who, also, is in a process of discovery. And it is in this intimate and poetical context of the letters that revelations are made: of a kind that would hardly sprout from traditional forms of research (Hernández, 2008; Dias, 2011, 2013). Its changes in posture, discoveries, “differences in the way of knowing” (Rolling Jr., 2010) which I gaze in this work of arts based research, among written and drawn ventings.

This investigation built through testimony, through the sharing of ideas and emotions, shows theoretical and personal directions and choices that flow along this place in construction, solitary, and solidary. The afflictions, dreams, fears, and desires become the foundation of the textual and visual narratives presented and allow for a wider comprehension of the teacher’s voice, of their world, of their daily life (Keats, 2009). The language is evocative, using metaphors which invite the reader to fill the text with personal meanings; contextualized, directly related to the lived experiences; and vernacular, using common, everyday language (Pessi, 2008).

Narrative forms often not accepted in scientific writings. Why must there be such a distinction and hierarchization between different ways of representing situations, contexts, and experiences? What confers value to research?

Many investigations intend to analyze a certain phenomenon, improve a practice, but the how and what of what they shall do is determined a priori. Where is the room for listening, for discovery and for boldness in these works? It is in this sense that the breaking of barriers and normatized research formats proposed by qualitative research aim at: broadening the relation between researcher and researched, and making way for the cultural significance of representations and practices, without casting aside the rigor and seriousness of investigative work. The experiences with art, the poetical narratives, are records and reveal points of view which are not passive and purposeless, but discourses filled with meaning and rich with new possibilities for knowledge (Victorio Filho & Correia, 2013). Casting light on these reports is to surface the world views of the
subjects involved that they may discuss, confront, and take stances. As claimed by Eisner (2002), knowledge may also derive from experience and Hofsess' work showed changes, displacements, and openings. The sharing, the authorship of the writings, the revealing of oneself, are the aesthetic itself of the work. An aesthetic fed by experience, without which though would fall into sterile abstraction (Pareyson, 1984).

But what of these changes and displacements is a form of resistance, dangerous acts facing the institutional, the neoliberal discourse and conceptions? What does the emphasis on subjectivity reveal and conceal? What from artistic knowledge remains? This is what I would like to also discuss here, what anguished me in this reading of her work.

The production of affections, the exposition of oneself, the construction of trust relations and the willingness to listen of the researcher are strong points in this work, and are also what bring it closer to practices and goals from art therapy, as previously pointed out by Hernández (2008). These are practices aiming at freeing, exposing, sharing burdens, and joys. But as they make use of the artistic process as a medium for the subject's expression, emphasis resides in the subject's experience, in the reports, and both process and artistic product are “conformed”, presented without questioning. There is no tension in this production, even though the inconformity of art is one of the main keys of artistic knowledge (Honorato, 2011). That is, the artistic process is a resource used to expose ideas and feelings, and not a knowledge appropriated and tensioned by the art teacher. There is a distancing between the knowledge of art and its educational dimensions. As the importance and specificity of arts based research is made evident in the subjects, are we not leaving the art, the visual culture, – and also different ways of appropriation and reading codes – peripheral or subordinate? Are we not replacing field of visuality and its tensions in our contemporary society with a set of artistic procedures and techniques?

This is one of my research inquiries. The student, studying to become an art teacher, takes part in several atelier units, in workshops with artists, in an attempt of broadening the sensibility and intelligibility of artistic codes and processes, but in its condition of force field, of incorporation and unfamiliarity, and as such radically reflexive (Honorato, 2011). But what from these experiences, this approximation with the art knowledge, constitute their praxis as an art teacher? It is the sharing of what is sensitive (Rancière, 2005), a distribution of positions and of what belongs in each field (art and art teaching), that are not explicitly approached in their formation and in arts based research.

Returning to Hofsess’ research, what is shown evidenced? The ponderings and transformations presented by the teachers in their letters and drawings are fed by her listening and by her answer letters, but there is no invigorating of situations to delimit constructs. They are reports of experiences for which the interpretation and possible explanations of the exhibited remain open to the reader. The usage of evocative language in which meaning is not found, but built (Dias, 2013). Evidences, possibilities, potentials, and not conclusions; these are a strong/fragile point of ABR which several researchers have been currently tackling in order to establish legitimacy criteria. A research which, in consonance with other qualitative natured researches, values the ethical and poetic dimension of the activity in which values and principles are what make a process educational, and not observable results (Eisner, 2008).

It’s a research focused on the micro, on detail, on the subjectivity and experience of the subject, and in the range of feelings that art and poetic narrative allow (Eisner, 2002). But the focus on the small, on the micro, needs “taking chances in thinking in the large about things happening in the realm of education and which many consider to be small, particular, infinitesimal” (Veiga-Neto,
In other words, in what does this visibility of the particularities of the other, this latent subjectivity in the verbal and visual narratives, disturb us? I believe this is one of the warnings made by Jagodzinski & Wallin (2013) as they point out the growing apology for subjectivity within neoliberal discourse and the necessity of arts based research to critically enter another level of subjectivity.

Still on the centralization of subjectivity, on self-narratives, it is worth highlighting the analysis done by Ligia Martins (2010) on the growing focus of educational research on personal characteristics, on professional experiences and on the teacher’s construction of personal identity. Martins claims many works fail to clearly present their theoretical-methodological foundations, reinforcing an idealist conception, dichotomizing the subject from society and preconizing the return to a Cartesian tradition: “I feel, therefore I am” (Jacoby in Martins, 2010, p. 7). No broader relations are established with art education field, with the professional market and with the frailty of this field of knowledge in a neoliberal economical system. The paths, the manifested changes, are also political, but how conscious of this are the art teachers?

That is, the aesthetic character, of perception and valuing of the sensorial, which connects what we see, hear and touch with their triggered emotions (White, 2009) is one of the keys for comprehending this work, but the political and economic mediations, which affect the construction of subjectivity, are not discussed. Thus the nodal point is: if the narratives and listening are the essence of this and other ABR works, how can this “experience” be made into something of worth? And if the value of experience is directly related to transformation which experience brings upon those which by it are crossed (Larrosa Bondía, 2002), how does this manifest itself in the objectivity/subjectivity relation?

Yes, I agree with Richard, the ABER works bring more questions than answers and those queries are not directly related to new knowledge, but to new realms of questioning. “Try to love the questions themselves”, reminds us Charles Garoian (2014, p. 385) quoting the poet Rainer Rilke, and perhaps someday you will gradually “live your way into the answer”. And maybe ABER’s strength is in the intensity of doubts and in the depth of displacements, when they occur. The specificities of works, the open-endedness of readings, are “reflexive folds”, and if the multiple is what folds in many ways (Deleuze, 1991), I place my reflections over Brooke's work in these curves, searching for crossings which would allow me to read the revealed subjectivity, the “folds of the soul”, but also the “refolding of matter” (Deleuze, 1991), in the concreteness which is made effective, or may be done so, in the social activity of an art teacher.

In a way, it is in this tension between experience/identity/perception, artistic processes, and destabilization of narratives and points of view that I see a possible strong differential for ABR. It is within this perspective that I learned so much from Hofsess’ research. Highlighting my condition of a beginner in this area, I draw from my curiosity about ABER and from my desire that this research approach install itself more effectively and specifically into the realms of scientific research and both undergraduate and graduate art education programs, and from this perspective I outline my closing remarks.

This and other congresses, by promoting ABER exchanges and reflections, have as a byproduct sets of regulations, attempts to introduce forms of analysis that currently have no place (Bourdieu, 2004), but which are invented from this critical examination proposed here. The regulations under objective parameters can help us to analyze research processes that transgress the hegemonic scientific field and create unique ways to transverse these practices through cultural and
systematic knowledge. I believe the move towards refining analysis parameters may strengthen and consolidate important advances and achievements in the art education field as well.

It seems to me that the resistance to clarify processes, transformations and results, keeping the space smooth and nomadic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1997), is also "shooting oneself in the foot", because the two spaces, smooth and striated, nomadic and sedentary, can only truly exist due to the intermixing of one into the other (Deleuze & Guattari, 1997, p. 180). The establishment of an "epistemology of border" (Santos, 2000), which disturbs comfort zones and the limits of what is instituted as valid and authorized into the science field, should not be an escape from the argument, invalidating demarcations and conclusions.

By not giving visibility and weight to the knowledge that is built from the creation and exhibition of oneself - and that is embodied in the analysis and tension of certain concepts, theories and assumptions – experience is made too slick and slippery, and it is these characteristics, as paradoxical as it may seem, that reinforce the neutrality discourse that doesn't advance in establishing an epistemological field and credibility to ABER, even helping to breast a system (political and educational) that cleverly uses the jargon of “knowledge-emancipation” to maintain and legitimate “knowledge-regulation” (Santos, 2000) as a goal for the learning and teaching of art. And such is exactly the scenario we fight against through ABER.

Questions for Discussion

In the 18th century, the term aesthetics was coined as a new philosophy into the structure of meaning achieved through poetry. ABER returns to this original Enlightenment project. The questions that poetry allows to open, the importance of these questions, more than a pretense of providing answers, become a critical criterion for how arts-based research contribution to expanding knowledge. This opens the question for discussion.

• Can we call a question "knowledge": if ABER produces better questions, can we say that ABER produces knowledge?
• How does arts-based research invite different forms of knowledge to emerge, that otherwise might be constrained through hegemonic research format?
• How Dr. Hofsess's used of narrative format of letter exchange allows not just theory and thought to emerge but the recognition of fear and desire that are present within a space, managed by the researcher of intimacy and trust?
• How does a work of intimacy breakdown a reader's own internal barriers (deeply ingrained) that divides academic, student, intellectual, from the personal, intimate, and emotional?
• How do the structural of aesthetics – the structure of writing, the images, and the construction of the said and unsaid – create opportunities for discovery by the reader?
• Does the post-intentional phenomenological approach of Hofsess encompassed by a/r/tography or does it represent a different methodological interpretation?

References


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