

Dreams as Data: Art Installation as Heady Research

By Allen Trent

This special issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly* focuses on “arts based pedagogy and approaches to research in teacher education.” This article describes a collaborative art installation project that I, a teacher educator/artist, executed with a group of my students, elementary education majors at the University of Wyoming (see Figure 1). The project crosses permeable boundaries between research and practice combining arts-based teaching, qualitative research methods, and the presentation of multiple perspectives in an installation as a way of displaying data. The project grew from the following question: How can we (an instructor and a group of elementary education students) combine the following: digital photography; basic qualitative research data gathering, display, and interpretation; and collaborative art making, in a meaningful way that relates to our field, education? This article is my account of both the process and product of this endeavor.

First, this article situates the research methodology and method of data display in qualitative research generally and as an artistic, “mixed genre” display specifically. This article describes an integrated, arts inclusive project approach, at a time when the arts, in both K-12 and higher education contexts, are typically underused and/or marginalized as inferior to other academic content (see e.g., Carroll, 1993; Eisner, 1999). Therefore, I discuss the role of the arts in education and contextualize the arts in teacher education. The

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Figure 1: Art Installation hanging in the University of Wyoming College of Education—digital photo taken by Allen Trent.

project's execution is then discussed, and finally, the collected data, accompanying interpretations, and some reflections on the project conclude the article.

Artistic Qualitative Research

Qualitative research texts, asserts Richardson (1994), are typically boring. She wrote, "I have a confession to make. For 30 years, I have yawned my way through numerous supposedly exemplary qualitative studies. Countless texts have I abandoned half read, half scanned" (1994, pp. 516, 517). However, Richardson asserts that this problem can be averted. "We are fortunate, now, to be working in a postmodernist climate...Disciplinary boundaries are regularly broken. Literary studies are about sociological questions; social scientists write fiction; sculptors do performance art; choreographers do sociology; and so on" (Richardson, 1994, p. 517). This postmodern good fortune recognizes that *all* truth claims are suspect and no single method or theoretical framework can claim singular superiority. This opens the door to alternative research methodologies and experimental forms of representation and displays of data, perspectives, and interpretations.

Richardson advocates the use of "evocative representations" designed in part to evoke "emotional responses" (1994, p. 521). The project discussed in this article is an evocative form Richardson classifies as "mixed genre."

The scholar draws freely in his or her productions from literary, artistic, and

scientific genres... In these productions, the scholar might have different takes on the same topic, what I think of as a postmodernist deconstruction of triangulation... in postmodernist mixed genre texts, we do not triangulate; *we crystallize*. We recognize that there are far more than “three sides” from which to approach the world. (Richardson, 1994, p. 522)

A purpose of the mixed genre research/project/installation described in this article was to produce and display data that was relevant, accessible, and interesting; thus it attempted to minimize the risk of bored and/or nonexistent readers. This project displayed multiple perspectives that collectively tell a story. “Stories can be spoken, written, sung, danced, acted, or portrayed in works of art . . . Works of art that tell stories are called *narrative*” (Siegenthaler & Vihos, 1998, p. 26). Narrative art has been used to tell stories for centuries. Unfortunately, the history and significance of this and other art forms are often neglected or underutilized in our public schools (Eisner, 1999; Fowler, 1990). The artistic method of display used in this project presented narrative data for interpretation by the consumers. Typically, the consumer/reader of education related texts only has access to data exemplars after the “researcher” or “theorist” has “cooked,” coded, analyzed and interpreted. This installation, by artistically presenting a data set in its entirety, allows the viewers entrée into the process, to interpret and analyze narratives as juxtaposed with their experiences and personally held theories. This is in sharp contrast with traditional research presentations that present “findings” that have converged and collapsed around the author’s delineated interpretation.

Arts in Education

I am an advocate for the arts in education. For the last 12 years, much of my professional energy has been spent engaging, alongside students and colleagues, in arts infused explorations. Prominent scholars argue for the place of the arts in our public school curricula (Eisner, 1999; Fowler, 1990; Greene, 1997). Sautter (1994, p. 434) contends that “There is a growing body of evidence that supports the power and value of the arts in education . . . research by academics and practitioners into the effectiveness of the arts as an educational tool has slowly but steadily accumulated.” This accumulation, says Sautter, started with the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts in the early 1960’s. “Over time, a pattern of positive evaluation has emerged” (p. 435). Neu (1990, p. 30) also argues for the inclusion of the arts. “Because the arts constitute a living history of eras and peoples and a record and revelation of the human spirit, they should be basic in the education of every citizen.” Other advocates tout the arts for: promotion of imagination (Eisner, 1999), the arts relevancy to success in the workplace (Packer, 1994), and the arts as ways of making meaning:

In making central to our teaching the arts and the symbol systems that present them, we may render conscious the process of making meaning, a process that has much

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to do with the shaping of identity, the development of a senses of agency, and a commitment to a certain mode of praxis. (Greene, 1997, p. 392)

These arguments seem powerful, but it also seems that too few are heeding this advice. Grumet (1995) asserts “the deep channels of modernity . . . have cut art away from the curriculum, isolating it on an island of professional practice and specialized study” (p. 36). The National Coalition for Education in the Arts finds, “It is decidedly odd that all of the school reform activity of the past decade so deliberately ignores the arts” (in Carroll, 1993, p. 17). Most recently, Eisner (1999) asserts, the focus on “standards” in education has shifted attention away from the arts.

On the whole, in the United States, the arts have a marginal position in schools. The press for what is regarded as academic forms of learning—the attainment of academic standards, for example—has directed the attention of policy makers, school administrators, and teachers toward achievement in subjects that will be or are likely to be assessed. (Eisner, 1999, p. 136)

The Arts in Teacher Education?

Another reason for this exclusion is that, except for those in specialized arts programs (e.g., those in art education, music education, dance education, and drama education), preservice teacher education programs do not expose students to theories and methodologies that address or utilize the arts. Carroll (1993) notes that arts based theory is absent from the texts encountered by preservice teaching candidates. “Arts education researchers have no presence in this material” (p. 18).

Carroll suggests that we “change the paradigm” (1993). “We need to find ways to expand the experiential base in the arts among all our colleagues and forthcoming generations of teachers. We must help reconstruct a theoretical vision of educational practice that is informed by the arts” (1993, p. 20). The collaborative work presented in this article, involving preservice teachers and teacher educators directly, and public school students and other community members indirectly, is an attempt to “expand the experiential base in the arts.” The following is an account of infusing arts based theory and practice into curriculum presented to “regular” (as opposed to arts specialist) preservice teachers.

Talking Heads: An Art, Research & Education Project

The project alluded to thus far, and described in detail in this section, is an example of what Koroscik has called “blurring the lines between teaching and research” (1994, p. 2). A part of this “blurring” is the inclusion of students (in this case preservice teachers) in the knowledge construction process. This inclusion, Koroscik notes, is often rare:

The actual process of creating new knowledge, however, has been principally reserved for faculty . . . Students may engage in exercises and experiments to rediscover existing disciplinary knowledge or to practice problem solving and

decision making in the discipline, but these learning activities are typically not regarded as research that yields new knowledge. (1994, p. 4)

This project germinated from my desires to have my students gain some experience taking and manipulating digital photographs, to engage in collaborative art making, and to be exposed to some basic qualitative research data gathering that related to their major, education. The resultant installation combined all of these elements. Each element was important, in my opinion, because each could later be adapted and used in a variety of ways by these future practitioners.

Emergent Project Design

The elementary preservice teacher participants/artists/data collectors were mostly juniors at the time this project was conducted. In class, I presented them with an initial idea (to combine digital photography, an education theme, and interviewing as a qualitative data collection method into an art installation to be displayed in the College of Education atrium). We had previously viewed and critiqued a variety of installations/public artworks (Sandy Skoglund, Ann Hamilton, Guerilla Girls, Alexander Calder, Barbara Kruger . . .), so the concept of installation art was a familiar one. The students helped me to shape the idea and formulate a series of procedures/steps to complete the project.

We decided that each class member would identify a willing participant and would construct one “piece” of the composition. Students digitally photographed the face of their subject and interviewed the person to obtain a response to this question, “What are your dreams for education in the future?” So, “what are the dreams for education in the future as expressed by the participants?” became another research question we collectively pursued. As we discussed and conceptualized the installation and how it would come together, one excited student said, “If two heads are better than one, then 25 will be great!”

Project Execution

As instructor, I requested and obtained Institutional Review Board approval to proceed with the project. All participants were volunteers and signed consent forms to allow their pictures and transcribed text to be used in the public display. The digital photos of faces were manipulated until they were “life-sized,” were cut out around the perimeter of the face, and then were traced onto ¼” thick pieces of plywood. Each student, using a jig saw set up in a vacant space in the College of Education annex, cut out the plywood “head,” sanded it, and adhered the digitally photographed face onto the wood. The text (the individual’s answer to the question), after the interviews, was then transcribed and word-processed. Respondent’s were given a chance to edit/check for accuracy (member check) before the text was “shaped” so that it would fit on the back of the wooden cut-out and printed on card stock; it was also traced (to match the head), cut out, and adhered

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to the back of the head. Lastly, students drilled a small hole in the heads at the top, and fishing line was tied on so that the heads could be hung from the ceiling creating a room-sized mobile/installation.

Upon completion of the individual pieces, and before hanging the installation, the entire class looked at the heads, discussed the individual narrative perspectives (read from the backs of the heads), and without prompting, we started discussing the emergent themes related to people's dreams for education in the future. I took notes during this conversation. I used the initial categories identified in this discussion as a beginning point for my personal interpretations of the data set (presented later in this article). Analysis with the students incorporated an art criticism approach. This was not the result of planning on my part, but instead was the way the conversation unfolded. Students first described, summarized, and sometimes quoted the data sources. Next, students began to interpret and compare various responses, and finally students started forming categories or groupings of the data. "These all seem to be about teachers in the future," "These seem to talk about things outside of school," and "These people focused on students" were all comments heard during this discussion. In other circumstances (for example in a course with a specific focus on qualitative research), I would have asked students to formalize these interpretations, but for the purpose of this exploration with preservice teachers, my aim was to engage them in the presentation of multiple perspectives that would be open to interpretation by the individual viewers. Still, we were drawn to our interpreted patterns in the data, and these provided focus for our conversations. Additionally, as a qualitative researcher, I was motivated to pursue my own situated interpretations of the data set as well (discussed later in this article).

Heads Up

Using eye hooks and a tall ladder, we hung the installation for public view (see Figure 2). As all of the student participants were education majors, many of them selected subjects who were either fellow students, or college of education faculty. This provided a sample of "insider" perspectives and a readily identifiable room full of heads for others in the college that passed through the space. The College of Education at the university shares a building with the University Lab School. It is a high traffic area, many College of Education faculty and administrators, public school faculty and staff, and K-9 students all move through this atrium space on any given weekday.

Not by coincidence, the installation was hung in front of a series of murals, painted in the early 1950s, that stereotypically depict American Indians as savages, and White university types as the civil, knowledgeable, educated representatives in the work. These murals, like the installation, create a sense of tension in the room. As expected, once hung, the collective impact of 25 heads was difficult to ignore. The heads, hung about shoulder level, fascinated the collaborative installation group, but also those that happened on the scene. Recall Richardson's (1994)



Figure 2: Wide view of *Dreams as Data* art installation in the University of Wyoming College of Education—digital photo taken by Allen Trent.

assertion that evocative representations elicit an emotional response. My observations of interactions with this installation confirmed its effectiveness in achieving responses of this sort. It was difficult for anyone to pass through the space without at least pausing to note the unfamiliarity of the once familiar corridor. After class dismissed on the first day of the installation, two building custodians came through as I was hanging the last of the heads. “What in the world is this?” asked one of them. I explained the project, at first was told, “this is spooky. How do you expect me to work in this building with these heads hanging in here?” Later, after further discussion and the reading of the backs of a few of the heads, the two went on break, made ice cream cones, and spent their entire breaks reading individual’s perspectives and commenting about the content, the similarities, and their personal congruence (or lack of) with the displayed dreams.

Throughout the coming month (the duration of the installation) I had many similar experiences hanging out in the atrium. Public school and university faculty were intrigued by colleagues’ responses. K-9 students wanted to know more, and were excited by the presence of the work, “What’s this about?” “Why did you do this?” and “Wow! This is the coolest art I’ve ever seen” were all comments recorded in my field notes. A College of Education administrator, startled upon unexpectedly approaching the mobile, stopped and perused the room with a puzzled look. “What do you think?” I asked. “It’s kind of disturbing,” was the reply, and I was happy to see that same administrator, later in the week, reading some of the heads with a still puzzled, but intrigued look. This piece, like other aesthetically provocative work,

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created a tension in the space that seemed to demand participatory engagement. A common pattern seemed to be shock, followed by intrigue and curiosity, followed by active interpretation. Many visitors told me that once they started viewing/reading the pieces, they felt obligated to read them all, to “see what everyone has to say about the topic.”

Reflections/Discussion

In follow up conversations with my students, they quickly communicated the benefits they derived from participating in the project and brainstormed ideas for similar projects with their future students. The students were aware that they had learned some new skills that would be useful to them as practitioners. “Until this project I’d never used a saw or a drill. In my house it was the boys that used the tools,” a female student remarked, continuing, “Now I realize that I could do a project like this with students. It was pretty simple actually.” Another student commented that, “Now that I know what I’m doing, I’m using some digital photography in my portfolio” (a welcome comment as we are encouraging students in our program to move to electronic portfolio documentation). “I never realized that by asking someone just one question, and really analyzing what they answer, that I could learn so much about a person’s beliefs” said another. Students talked of other ways to employ interviewing in educational contexts and brainstormed other questions they’d like to have respondents answer.

Additionally, It was evident that students had increased understanding of and inclination to participate in collaborative art installation type work in the future. One student noted “What I really liked is the way we each did our own piece, but it then comes together in this awesome project. The fact that everyone contributed a piece to the final product is what impresses me.” Lastly, a student talked about the interactive nature of the work. “It was nice that every time I went past the heads there were people in there reading, talking about the people’s dreams. It was neat to know that I was a part of putting it together.”

For me, as instructor/facilitator of the project, I shared many of the same feelings. Having taught in two urban “arts magnet” public elementary schools in Ohio, I had experienced the synergistic effects of collaborative art installation work. I have been a part of numerous whole-school, collaborative installations that students have returned years later to visit and “point out” their individual contributions to the collective whole. Like my students, I was pleased to be a part of the project and was impressed by the varied reactions and critiques the work elicited. The fact that people tended to be startled then actively curious when encountering the work struck me as a sign that the work succeeded in creating a positive tension. My initial thoughts were that by examining, and allowing others to examine, perspectives related to the question, “What are your dreams for education in the future?” we as educators, and others involved in or concerned about education, could formulate, speculate about, and plan for our roles in the always dynamic field

of education in general and schooling specifically. As a qualitative researcher, I was equally interested in analyzing the individual responses and exploring them for emergent themes.

Data Analysis: “We Need to Enjoy the Journey”

As a result of early interpretive conversations with students, I had a series of general themes or categories for grouping the responses. I continued to code and analyze this “back of the heads data set,” and in this section of the article, present some of my interpretations gleaned from this analysis. Importantly, those that viewed the installation had access to all the collected data, and therefore were able to conduct their own individual analyses. As mentioned earlier, this differentiated this project from other research efforts that present only analyzed/interpreted data. The data collected for this project, presented in an artistic, interactive display, was provided to consumers/viewers in raw form. Viewers chose what data to examine, the duration of this examination, and constructed their individually situated interpretations. My personal analysis presented here is but one interpretation among many.

Qualitative researchers can interpret meanings using categorical aggregation, “the collecting of repetitive instances of a phenomenon” (Stake, 1995, p. 74). In this section, using categorical aggregation, coding data in an effort to identify repetitive manifestations of thematically similar statements, I highlight some of these themes. Five dominant themes surfaced. The students identified general thematic areas, and I later collapsed a couple of these areas and attached labels to the groups. Each theme is elaborated upon, and exemplars excerpted from the data are provided for each. The broad categories are responses that focused on: (1) teachers, (2) students, (3) environment, (4) external factors, and (5) a category I call goals, big dreams, and hopeful visions.

Teachers

Many respondents had dreams specific to teachers. Most of these centered around teachers being treated as autonomous professionals. Responses often hoped for “qualified” “dedicated” teachers that were well compensated. The following response was typical of this category:

My hope for teachers is that they will be more respected and their responsibilities and skills will be seen as indispensable to society. I hope that the future holds a change in viewpoints that professional athletes deserve millions, while individuals who shape children’s futures are the lowest paid among college graduates...Someday the word professional will truly equate to an educator.

Students

Another clustering of responses focused on students. Often these referred to students’ opportunities to influence curriculum, the option to learn in ways most

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appropriate for them, and a decreased emphasis on standardized testing. A number of responses in this group called for relevant, student centered schools. For example: “Children don’t seem to be a part of the conversation about schooling. As a result, former children are deciding what is best for students based on what did or did not work for them.” Another responded:

My dreams for education are to have less emphasis placed on the standards and standardized tests. I feel that the purpose of education is being lost...If quality teaching is going on, the standards will naturally be met...there are certainly other ways to assess what a student knows other than a test.

Environment

Another dominant theme related to school and classroom environments or what educators might call school climate. Two themes, safety and fun, appeared in the dreams of many respondents. Responses like, “please allow our schools to become safe zones for all members of our community and our communities safe zones for all our children,” and, “classrooms will be fun for both students and teachers. When teachers are having fun, their students can’t help but have fun. By having fun, we all learn more,” typify responses extracted from this thematic category.

External Factors

By “external factors” I am referring to a number of responses that hoped for increased collaboration and participation between “internal” and “external” school community populations, as well as the increase in use of external resources (including funding) to support educational activity. For example, “family and community members will be an integral part of the school. Schools will not operate as castles where the drawbridge is raised each day when school begins,” and “all schools will be funded well and equitably,” Or:

I wish there was more collaboration with parent projects and parent involvement in the schools and having communities embrace the schools. Also having more businesses and communities, and parents all working together to provide great educational opportunities that might replace some of the classroom experiences.

Goals, Big Dreams, and Hopeful Visions

I was struck by the quantity and quality of responses grouped in this last category: goals, big dreams, and hopeful visions. Most respondents, despite the challenges, setbacks, and perceived extant inequities, held out a hopeful vision for equitable education in the future. These are the responses that allow us to envision a better educational, and as a result societal, future for stakeholders. These were among the responses that I’ve revisited countless times, thinking, reflecting, and dreaming alongside. The following three excerpts, when juxtaposed with my personally held theories, capture my dreams as well. These are presented as block quotes to preserve their spirit and contextual integrity:

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Education could change the world . . . teaching for social justice is a primary way to move toward equity. We must inspire hope for teachers and children alike that there will be a positive future. We must prepare for the struggle it will take to make these changes . . . We must not be afraid to love the children we are teaching. We must teach nonviolent ways of resolving conflicts. We must insist on peace in the world, with education for all children . . . Teachers and students will rise to the challenge. We will change the world one student at a time.

* * * *

Almost a century ago, John Dewey eloquently wrote about the need to imagine and create the education that ALL children deserve, not just the richest, the Whitest, or the easiest to teach. At the dawn of this new century, on some mornings, I wake up fearful that we are further away from this ideal than ever . . . Collective action, in a critical, hopeful, joyful, anti-racist and pro-justice spirit, is foremost in my mind as I reflect on and act in my daily work . . . Although I realize the constraints on teachers and schools in the current political arena, I do believe in the power of teachers to stand next to, encourage, and believe in the students they teach-in short, to change lives.

* * * *

My dream for education is that it helps us to: understand ourselves and our identity as constructed in a social context where race, gender, ethnicity and culture matter; look at phenomena from multiple points of view so as not to be encapsulated by one's own ego/ethnocentricity and heed the call to serve; view difference and diversity in the most affirming possible light, especially linguistic diversity; work clearly and explicitly toward an anti-racist agenda; realize the multiple layers of analysis and change that must take place if social justice is to be achieved (individual relationships, institutional structures, and societal values/assumptions); recognize that human agency is mediated by constructive relations of power; and keep reflecting, learning, and growing. We need to enjoy the journey in pursuit of our dreams.

Conclusion/Heading off

As illustrated by the excerpts above, respondents took the question seriously and were thoughtful and reflective in their answers. Also as previously noted, these are excerpts and themes that I, along with my students, identified as dominant. Others might come to different conclusions, and ultimately, the community accepts/rejects interpretive assertions.

There were outlier responses, and an administrator later told me his responses were "tongue in cheek." He called for high SAT scores in order for students to graduate, 8 hours a day of "Hooked on Phonics" for those that couldn't read after kindergarten, and after school work at McDonald's during which students would learn "such important skills as mopping floors, emptying trash receptacles, etc. before moving up to operating the deep fryer."

Additionally, there were responses I personally hoped would be prominent

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that, for whatever reason, got little mention. For example, as an educator focused on arts integration in the midst of an arts integrated project, I expected many respondents would mention the dream of increased emphasis on the arts in education. Only one did, but perceptively so:

Fine arts will be strong. It is my feeling that many districts are massacring the fine arts by removing them completely from their curriculum. To me, fine arts are important because all children learn in different ways. For example, some children have a very hard time comprehending math while they find music and counting time almost instinctive.

I was also surprised by the lack of mention of technology in respondents' dreams. One respondent focused on this, touting himself as a "technology evangelist."

The responses to this project were energizing and illustrate the positive effects of collaboration, arts education, and user-friendly data display. I'm encouraged by the overwhelmingly hopeful visions for education in the future presented by most respondents. Like my students, this endeavor has prompted me to think of countless other possibilities, including an expansion of this specific project to include a wider range of voices dreaming about the future of education. The range of responses to the installation also attests to the power of the arts to allow us to imagine, communicate, and interpret in ways otherwise impossible. Maxine Greene (1995), herself an educational dreamer, explains:

It is not uncommon for the arts to leave us somehow ill at ease, nor for them to prod us beyond acquiescence. They may, now and then, move us into spaces where we can envision other ways of being and ponder what it might signify to realize them. . . I say "we" in the hope that there exists and that I can speak to a community of educators committed to emancipatory pedagogy, particularly in the domain of the arts. Such a community must include in its dialogue women and men of all classes, backgrounds, colors, and religious faiths, each one free to speak from a distinctive perspective, each one reaching from that distinct perspective towards the making of some common world. (p. 135)

My participatory involvement in this project allowed me to observe and experience those "ill at ease" moments. My aim is to engage with a "community of educators committed to emancipatory pedagogy." This article chronicles one small attempt. Other opportunities beckon and need only be dreamed to be pursued. In closing, I'm including one more dream excerpt. I echo the respondent's sentiments and urge all others to do the same:

We need to recognize that there are many paths that help us to realize our dreams. We need to remain cognizant of the role of the teacher/scholar as a model of what it means to teach toward our dreams. We need to bring others, as many others as will hear the call, along in pursuit of our "collective" dreams.

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