

## Chapter 8

# Dancing with the Data: Arts-Based Qualitative Research

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### ABSTRACT

*Arts-based research is a dynamic approach to conducting qualitative research that expands on how knowledge is produced and communicated, reaching both academic and nonacademic audiences. Arts-based research is described as a political process that creates empathy, raises consciousness, and disrupts complacency. It touches the souls of the reading, viewing, or listening audience, often inspiring social activism. Several ways to use art in research are discussed, and examples are provided, including fiction as research data and expression, performance inquiry, textile art, poetry, and photography. The potential for arts-based research in graduate student research is also discussed. Arts-based research empowers both the research participants and the research audience as collaborative knowledge makers.*

### INTRODUCTION

Many of us began our introduction to research with the scientific method. Research was objective and based on deductive reasoning, with the researcher as an impartial outsider lest he or she contaminate the research. Over the last 25 years, qualitative research, based on rich descriptive data and often centering on the participants' lived experience, filtered through the subjectivity of the researcher, has come to play a prominent role in adult education research. This shift however did not come easy. There was much resistance from the scientific community who did not believe that research with a small sample size that could

neither generalize nor predict outcomes could actually be considered research.

Just as qualitative research once struggled for acceptance, arts-based research continues to fight for legitimacy in the academy. Yet, it is gradually gaining credence and even capturing intrigue. Several publications on arts-based research have emerged over the last decade. (See for example Knowles & Cole, 2008; Leavy, 2009; Barone & Eisner, 2012; Clover & Sanford, 2013).

"Arts-based practices allow research questions to be posed in new ways, entirely new questions to be asked, and new nonacademic audiences to be researched" (Leavy 2009, p. 12). This chapter describes arts-based research as an alternative and dynamic approach to conducting qualitative research.

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## **WHAT IS ARTS-BASED RESEARCH?**

Arts-based research is research using any form of art (visual art, music, poetry, dance etc.) in the data collection, analysis and/or reporting of research. These processes expand the possibilities for accessing knowledge by allowing the researcher a fuller palette of investigative tools to use when conducting research (Leavy, 2009). In turn, artistic expression of research makes research findings available to a wider audience.

Arts-based research opens up intellectual spaces for forms of expression that cannot be verbalized thus challenging the fundamental assumption and stretching the boundaries of what constitutes research (Lawrence & Mealman, 2001). Some knowledge is best expressed through creating a story, writing a poem or painting a picture. Forcing researchers into a traditional written mode poses limitations on what knowledge gets communicated, how knowledge gets communicated and who gets access to that knowledge.

Art is indigenous knowledge (Lawrence, 2005). Every culture uses art as a form of communication and in many cases, art pre-dates language. Art is a way to communicate across cultures reaching out to those who do not share a common language. As Van Manen (1990, p. 74) explained “Objects of art are visual, tactile, auditory, kinetic texts consisting of not a verbal language but a language nevertheless”.

According to Barone and Eisner (1997) there is intentional ambiguity in arts-based research, allowing the reader or viewer of the research to fill in the gaps. In this sense, the viewer becomes actively involved with the research rather than as a passive consumer.

In all qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for the collection, analysis and dissemination of the data. He or she makes decisions throughout the process of what questions to ask, what conceptual lens with which to view the data, and how to present the research. In arts-based research, the research is a personal

statement that holds the signature of the author and embodies his or her unique style (Barone & Eisner, 1997).

Arts-based research can stand alone as a methodology or it can easily be combined with other forms of qualitative research. For example, one of my students (Blockinger, 2007) conducted a phenomenological study on the meaning of intercultural competence to human resource professionals. Her participants drew metaphorical representations of intercultural competence that were “unpacked” with the researcher as part of the interview process. Another student (Simpson, 2007) conducted a narrative inquiry of transformative experiences of people who turned to artistic expression to cope with a serious traumatic event. Her data included samples of their artwork along with collages that were created by the participants as part of the research process.

## **EXPANDING ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE**

Arts-based research expands our access to knowledge, making it more available to community members outside of the academy. As Eisner (2008, p. 5) succinctly states: “These forms of representation give us access to expressive possibilities that would not be possible without their presence.” One goal of arts-based research is to “...shift the dominant paradigmatic view that keeps the community and the academy separate. . . connect the work of the academy with the life and lives of communities through research that is accessible, evocative, embodied, empathic and provocative” (Cole & Knowles, 2008 p. 60).

Most people want their research to mean something, not just sit on a shelf read by academics. Arts-based research connects the researcher, research participants and the research audience in intimate ways, thus sharing the responsibility for knowledge creation. New insights emerge at each level of connection. “In the creative process, the

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