

Persistent Tensions in Arts Based Research

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I want to talk to you today about persistent tensions in arts-based research. In many ways, it should be expected that an approach to research that employs new assumptions and methods and has a short history should generate tensions. We would lack vitality if we were cock sure of everything we do. Tensions can be motivating. But before describing them, let me say a word about what I mean by tensions. By tensions I mean a psychological state that creates a feeling of mild discomfort, a feeling that can be temporarily relieved through inquiry. A tension is close to what Dewey means by “disequilibrium.” It can be produced by a sense of uncertainty about one’s work. It can be stirred by the vague feeling that in one’s work something is just not right. It can be the result of being attracted to two incompatible values. But, as I said, it can also be motivating and it can evoke a sense of vitality.

Yet the presence of tensions in doing one's work, though it may engender vitality, does not, by itself, guarantee that as a result one's work will be either theoretically cogent or practically useful. There are tensions that virtually all of us experience in doing arts based research and my aim in this paper is to explore a few of the tensions that I believe to be among the most persistent.

But first, a little history.

It was in 1993 that the first Arts-Based Research Institute was offered to members of the American Educational Research Association. The Institute was held at Stanford and has been offered at Stanford and at Arizona State virtually every other year since then. My aim in initiating the Institute was driven by a tension that I felt personally as a scholar and as someone immersed in the arts. That tension pertained to the idea that the arts might be used in some productive way to help us understand more imaginatively and more emotionally problems and practices that warrant attention in our schools. At the same time the idea that the arts could be at the core of research seemed a bit oxymoronic.

As many of you know, in another life I was a painter so it is not surprising that I was interested in the ways in which the arts generate awareness – wide-awakeness as Maxine Greene might say. At the same time, I did not expect arts-based research to culminate in the creation of paintings, poems, or pirouettes. I thought that the crafting of evocative forms might enable us to address aspects of educational life that normally get neglected. I also hoped our social science colleagues would find such work credible.

The initial iteration of this conjecture of mine about the relationship between the arts and educational research had been expressed earlier in the concepts of educational connoisseurship and educational criticism, two notions rooted in the arts. Could there be, I asked myself, an approach to educational research that relied upon the imaginative and expressive crafting of a form in ways that enlarge our understanding of what was going on, say, in teaching, or in the school cafeteria, or in the high school mathematics classroom.

Educational connoisseurship and educational criticism were in most ways marginal rather than central to the production of an art form. To be sure, criticism and connoisseurship acknowledged, and indeed, employed aesthetic criteria in making judgments about how something was to be

rendered, but it was a tool for seeing and for describing far more than an effort to craft a work of art as such.

In many ways, this ambition of mine, to develop an approach to the conduct of educational research that was rooted in the arts and that used art forms to reveal the features that mattered educationally, was a central ambition. This ambition had ramifications. For example, it led to considerations regarding the role of fiction in educational research. The AERA debate that Howard Gardner and I had about whether a novel could function or serve as a dissertation is an example of the position that I embraced. Gardner argued that doctoral training was essentially that, a training program designed to prepare skilled journeymen in the use of conventional research methods. My argument was 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. You might say I was interested in pushing the boundaries of possibility. It is not necessary to get into the details of the debate except to say that it was spirited and that it represented two perspectives on how research might be undertaken. In neither case, I believe, was either of us looking for a single hegemonic orientation to research methods. I have

always embraced pluralism in method, and I think Gardner does as well even if he didn't argue that position when we shared a session in AERA in Chicago.

To make the case for arts-based research, especially in a research climate of the kind we have today, is as daunting as it is important. The federal government, as almost everybody here knows, has embraced field-based experimental trials as the “gold-standard” for supporting educational research. What this means is that arts-based research as a “soft-form” of qualitative research will have an uphill battle to fight to maintain its place as a legitimate form of inquiry in the educational research community. At the same time, the very position articulated by the federal government concerning what it calls “evidence based research” (implying that other kinds of research do not provide evidence) may ironically strengthen the acceptance of approaches to research that are closer to arts-based research than we have ever had. When your own ox is being gored, you tend to become somewhat more tolerant, maybe even more sympathetic to approaches that you once found problematic. I am saying that the very pressure upon traditional researchers to do experiments may warm them towards non-experimental approaches to research.

In any case, it is still necessary to have arguments that provide support for arts-based research. This is not a new requirement, but it may be, at present, particularly important.

At the same time, the greatest source of security concerning arts based research is not in tight rationales articulated by academics who have a vested interest in their use, but exemplary arts based work which is difficult to dislike. In other words, deeds, not words, may be in the end the most persuasive source of support and the source that yields the highest levels of credibility.

So much for providing a grounding of where I and the field have been. Let's turn to tensions. Earlier I mentioned the existence of tensions. I want to identify them now. One of these tensions pertains to a deep dilemma. This dilemma relates, on the one hand, to the desire to work imaginatively and, on the other hand, as a result of doing so producing material that does not communicate.

How shall we arbitrate differences in our interpretive response to materials that have no clear referents? Surely one of the functions of educational research in general and arts-based research in particular, is to make vivid certain qualities encountered by the researcher normally, but not necessarily in the context of schools. Will the images made through arts-based research possess a sufficient degree of referential clarity to provide a common understanding of the situation being addressed, or is a common understanding of the situation through arts-based research an inappropriate expectation? If so, what are we to make of the well-crafted but ambiguous poem or painting, for example, the expressive painting that we want to connect to the situation we intend to render but which works more like a Rorschach Test? Put another way, how do we deal with referentiality when we do not have no means that enables us to make the needed connections? Should we worry about this?

Just what are the other tensions in arts based research?

A second tension is located between the particular and the general. By this I mean that there is a tension between focusing on the particular conditions of an educational situation in order to illuminate its distinctive features and, at

the same time, developing observations and insights that extend well beyond the particular that was addressed in the first place. As you well know, in conventional forms of generalization in the social sciences, generalizations can be made if the sample drawn from a population is random and, if it is, one is able to draw conclusions from the sample to the larger population of which it once was a part. The procedures are straightforward and almost universally applied in studies that attempt to generalize using statistics.

In arts based research we have no comparable set of conditions. The very conditions that make a study arts based are conditions that personalize the study or the situation by allowing an investigator's thumb print to work its magic in illuminating the scene. Furthermore, the samples in arts based research are typically convenience samples. How, then, given these conditions is generalization possible? One answer, which doesn't satisfy everybody, is to argue that the general resides in the particular and that general observations from particular circumstances is precisely what we do in life. We formulate generalizations on the basis of particular instances, none of which have been randomly selected. But as I said, that explanation, which I find congenial, does not satisfy all investigators. At the same time, it should be remembered that conclusions drawn in statistically based

research that purport to generalize are often generalized to populations that were not a part of the population from which the sample was drawn. In other words, generalizations in the social sciences are often over-generalized given the rules of the game that statistically oriented researchers play. Nevertheless, the fact that statistically oriented studies are often generalized beyond their appropriate limits does not provide permission to arts based researchers to generalize from particulars, unless one's conception of generalization adheres to a different model.

The different model about which I speak is a model that is much closer to literature than to statistical analysis. It culminates in an icon that, let us say, edifies or illuminates. Great works of literature teach their lessons in ways that go well beyond the particular circumstances they address. Their lessons are general. In fact, intelligence itself might be regarded as a process that enables one to see connections between the instance and aspects of the world that were not initially a part of that instance.

As I write these lines in this paper I feel comfortable with a literary conception of generalizability, and yet I well know that for many in the field

of educational research this conception is not persuasive. Hence, the tension.

It may be the case that the tension is inevitable and will be enduring. “You can’t generalize from an N of 1” is an unquestioned mantra in the educational research community. Do we really know that other situations will be illuminated by what we find in the one that we select to study? But perhaps that’s all we can get. Perhaps the function of educational research is not to draw near certain conclusions about states of affairs that generalize, but rather to secure technologies of mind that will enable us to peer more deeply into situations that might not be the same as the one that we study. In short we might say that useful research enlarges our intelligence. In any case, a tension is there and it is one that needs to be acknowledged and addressed using the best conceptual work we are able to muster.

A third tension in arts based research is the tension between the desire to achieve a work product that has aesthetic properties and the desire to achieve at least some degree of verisimilitude in our work. It is so attractive and satisfying to shape a line or a paragraph so that it sings even if it portrays in questionable ways the situation we are attempting to address. In other

words, there is a tendency to allow aesthetic considerations trump the need for an epistemic orientation to disclosure or, if not epistemic, at least one that is phronetic. True and certain knowledge-- the aspiration to achieve episteme-- is, according to Stephen Toulmin, too demanding and unrealistic an aspiration for inquiry into human affairs. It is simply too much to ask for. Nevertheless, aesthetic achievement places its demands upon us; statements about states of affairs can be attractive and wrong. Indeed, the more attractive they become, the more they might mislead. Consider advertising.

But perhaps this, too, is something we should not worry about. After all, in the theatre the individuals portrayed by actors are often larger than life. It is their overwhelming character that awakens us to qualities in the human condition that we often neglect in daily life. In other words, the drama on stage can be more vivid than what one might normally find. Is this a problem? One could argue that it is in the very exaggeration of the features of a situation through which we come to grasp its significance. Put another way, exaggeration can promote understanding.

Perhaps the problem or tension that we experience between the aesthetic and the world it portrays is our belief, often unexpressed, that a correspondence

theory of truth is the model that should guide our work. And yet, if it is not the model that should guide our work, just what is? And if it is something other than a correspondence theory of truth, is it likely to be accepted by our colleagues who have grown up on such a model?

But what if we neglected aesthetic considerations in doing arts based research? If we did, could we still call it arts based research? I have my reservations. For me, the distinguishing feature of arts based research is that it uses aesthetic qualities to shed light on the educational situations we care about. Arts based research is not simply the application of a variety of loose methods; it is the result of artistically crafting the description of the situation so that it can be seen from another angle. To talk about the desirability of seeing a situation from more than one angle is to tacitly acknowledge what I will make explicit.

In promoting the use of arts based educational research I seek no new hegemony in matters methodological. What I believe we need in educational research are multiple perspectives. Each template or lens one uses to see can make vivid what other lenses obscure. Unlike our brethren at the national level who believe that randomized experimental field trials are

the only way to go, I believe there are many roads to multiple Romes. Put another way, I don't think there is one destination that several roads will lead you to, but that there are, rather, multiple destinations which require multiple roads.

A fourth tension in arts based research is related to the features of its "product". For some arts based researchers, the results of arts based research pertain to the formulation of new, more interesting questions than the ones one started with. You might say that arts based researchers are interested in generating puzzlements. Now the generation of puzzlements is an intellectually attractive thing to do. It is questions that many claim are the most significant form of intellectual achievement, not answers. What arts based research should do is to raise fresh questions.

For many of us who love to participate in the life of the mind, this conception of the products of arts based research has an attractive ring. It suggests an emphasis on inquiry, a tolerance of ambiguity, a preference for what is open ended, a desire for what is fluid rather than what is rigid. These are all values that most of us here could subscribe to. At the same time, we must not forget, that policy makers, teachers and parents are not

primarily interested in better questions; they would like to have some answers to questions about the ways in which teaching affects learning, about what their children have learned, the creation or about the discovery of better ways to teach reading. The point is that while questions are just fine for those of us in the academy, they are not necessarily fine to people who have a problem and who wish to solve it and who believe that research may be one way to provide better answers than the ones they had before. Can arts based research provide answers to complex educational questions? Will those answers stand up in court? Is arts based educational research essentially a reconnaissance effort to generate questions that “real research” can secure answers to? Just what is our stand concerning our ability to provide reasonably confident answers to educational questions through arts based research, or is our mission to provide interesting new leads for other educational researchers to pursue?

I know that in making a distinction between answers and questions I am walking on thin ice. One could clearly argue that conventional research is also interested in better questions; that aspiration is not owned by arts based researchers. And yet the kinds of answers that arts based research provides, if any at all, seem much more ethereal, global, impressionistic, than those

secured through conventional forms of research. Now it could be argued that what I have called the ethereal character of arts based research products is a much more congenial fit between situations and ideas about them than the misleading implications that comes out of much traditional research that answers are known and that schools should simply implement “what works”.

Although I think implementing what works if what works, works I do believe that there is a difference and a tension between ideas that culminate in propositional assertions about empirical starts of affairs and those that culminate in qualitative metaphors that may not have the same kind of precision that traditional research provides. Thus, I think there is a tension between the more literal oriented conclusions of conventional research and the more metaphorical conclusions, if they can be called that, of arts based research.

Now many of us here have an affinity to metaphor. I certainly do. Yet research is more, or at least should be more than a Rorschach test. If arts based research culminates in little more than a delightful poetic passage or a vivid narrative that does little educational work, it is not serving its function. In other words, I am trying to remind us here that in the end research is an

instrument, whether arts based or not, that is supposed to contribute to the quality of education students receive and that arts based research must ultimately be appraised on the extent to which that aim is realized.

That this can be accomplished, I have no doubt. When Arthur Powell, David Cohen, and Eleanor Ferrar write of shopping mall high schools and of students and teachers making treaties to enable them to get through the school year peacefully, they employ metaphors. These metaphors have a purpose. They do call our attention to relationships and to infrastructures that we might not otherwise notice. Metaphors can do educational work. We must try to resolve this tension by trying to make sure that they do.

I mention this consideration because in arts based research there is at times, a tendency, I believe, to mistake the novel from the useful. Since research is related to art, I get a sense that there is a tendency to want to make sure that the form and method employed is novel. Put another way, there is a tendency to want to make the work creative. Now novelty is a part of creativity and creativity is important to have, but when it trumps the instrumental utility I just described, namely that it contribute to the enrichment of the student's educational experience, it loses its utility as a

form of educational research. Put in still another way, arts based research needs to pursue novelty without sacrificing utility. It needs to be more than a projective test. And this creates a tension between achieving the shock of the new and, at the same time, genuinely communicating. When novelty out distances a reader, the reader's delight may reside in the aesthetic rather than in the usefulness of the work.

Now it must seem strange to you to hear someone like me talk about the potentially distracting effects of the aesthetic and my belief that the practical utilities of arts based research need to remain salient. I do so because I do not think the future of arts based research will be well served unless its utilities are achieved. Novelty, or should I say "near novelty", is simply not going to be enough to sustain interest and engender high regard among our colleagues.

Another fifth tension relates to the recognition that objectivity is always beyond reach and at the same time the desire that most of us have for our work not to be a projection of whatever we want it to be. Put another way, I am seeking a constructivist orientation to knowledge but a constructivist orientation within constraints. How do we resolve the tension between our

correct belief that meanings are made and that they are made in part with our with our life histories while at the same time recognizing that if in arts based research anything goes, nothing will.

The “solution” that I have wrought in my own work pertains to the relationship between what Stephen Pepper calls structural corroboration which is a kind of circumstantial evidence, a form of triangulation, and referential adequacy, which is the empirical test of one’s observations with respect to the situation that has been described and interpreted. For me, these concepts are useful, although I must confess that structural corroboration is seldom adequately provided for in the arts based research that I have seen. I think the field of law, which in part deals with matters of evidence, can provide some useful leads on how to think about matters of objectivity and matters of verification, circumstantial evidence comes close.

We know that we cannot ever get a comprehensive view that is objective in any definitive sense, and we also recognize that verification – if that’s the right word to use in the first place – will never be complete. At the same time, we don’t want to be pushovers for procedures that will not bear what

our colleagues call rigorous scrutiny. Can arts based research be rigorous?

If so, what would it look like if it was?

These five tensions, and I recite them to you now, penetrate our work—first the tension between using open forms that yield diverse interpretations and forms that yield common understandings is one such tension. A second is the tension is between the particular and the general. We want our single case research to extend beyond the single subject studied. A third tension is between the desire to aesthetically craft form and the desire to tell it like it is; aesthetic considerations can trump epistemological ones. A fourth tension is between the desire to pursue new questions and puzzlements and the need in the practical world for answers. Finally, there is the tension for arts based research to seek what is novel or creative and the need to create work that has verisimilitude to the furniture of the world.

What are we to make of this analysis and can we learn anything from it? I would make three concluding observations about the tensions that I have identified and their significance in education. First, it strikes me that the tensions experienced in the conduct of arts based educational research are not like the tensions that traditional researchers encounter in doing their own

work. The tensions we experience, in some sense, are the tensions of an underdog working in a universe in which we are “the smallest kid on the block.” As a result, it has taken considerable courage on the part of arts-based researchers to stick their necks out in order to do work that fits their way of thinking about the education...

A second observation pertains to the tensions about beliefs about the nature of knowing and the processes of the mind. Convictions about verification, generalization, reliability, and replicability participate in a hard nosed universe of beliefs that we probably know all too well. The concepts and processes that we have used in Arts Based Research are much more likely to work at the edge of possibility and address questions of meaning and experience that are not likely to be as salient in traditional research. Put another way, our basic concepts and methods participate in a new universe. Knowing, for example, takes on the attributes of a verb, that is, a process rather than an object or product that is fixed and definitively knowable. Mind, for us, is much more likely to be a fluid stream rather than a fixed rock. Our minds are always a work in process.

Finally, the tensions and procedures that I identify I believe can provide a general model that, if used in our classrooms, could reshape and advance the practice of education and reform our conception of its proper aims.

Regarding mind as a cultural achievement, knowing as a process that yields tentative resolutions, objectivity as an aspiration rather than a realization, the impact of forms of representation beyond the literal use of text, recognizing the power of form to inform, yet realizing that every form of representation both reveals and conceals, such ideas might broaden our perspective regarding what is worth teaching and learning and through a broadened perspective change the scope of the curriculum and enrich the practices that teachers employ to promote student growth.

Let me conclude by saying that if only a portion of such aspirations were realized, our efforts would certainly be more than worthwhile. After all, the aim of research is not to advance the careers of researchers but to make a difference in the lives of students. That aspiration is not only realized by sharing conclusions about matters of fact, but by changing perspectives on how we see and interpret the world. Arts based educational research can contribute significantly to a re-visioning of education. That contribution could be, in the long run, it's most important.

