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Synchronized Swimming: Arts-based Approaches to Teaching Novice Researchers

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Abstract: For graduate students, learning about research is often confusing and mysterious and, as a result, anxiety producing. This paper explores our experiences of using the arts and embodied creative activities to help novice researchers understand the nature of knowledge and to engage with some of the fundamentals of research, such as epistemological and ontological claims underpinning different methodologies, and in the collection and analysis of data. We suggest using arts-based pedagogical approaches provides an alternative to hyper-rationalist ways of teaching qualitative research.

For graduate students, learning to become a researcher is often a confusing, mysterious and anxiety producing experience. The stereotypical image of a “researcher” often conjures up pictures of humorless men and women in white coats holed up in a laboratory. The idea of qualitative research can also be scary as it is often messy, ambiguous and requires critical reflexivity on behalf of the researcher as interpreter of the data. What if learning research could be interesting and fun, honoring one’s innate creativity? Synchronized swimming, also known as water ballet requires technical skill and strength to perform. It also requires great artistry. What if we taught research like synchronized swimming, emphasizing artistic processes (visual art, theatre, music, poetry etc.) to teach skills? How can the arts and art-making activities encourage graduate students to consider the artistry and aesthetic dimensions of research while learning about the process? In the words of Elliot Eisner (2002, p. 382): “Artistry requires sensibility, imagination, technique, and the ability to make judgments about the feel and significance of the particular.”

The purpose of this collaborative reflection is to describe our experiences of bringing arts and art-making to the work of teaching research to graduate students. These creative activities provide an alternative to hyper-rationalist ways of teaching qualitative research that fail to tap into the embodied and emotional aspects of learning. Literature on teaching research methods in the social sciences is growing. For example, Barraket (2005) focused on student-centered approaches, and Schober et al (2006) explored blended learning approaches. In 2006 *The Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research* was published in recognition that “social science research involving the arts is an emerging, expanding research genre” (Knowles and Cole, 2006 p. xii). While many graduate programs still do not accept art-based dissertations and theses that significantly differ from traditional written documents, they are at least beginning to acknowledge that the arts can and do have a role in the research process.

This paper explores using the arts to help novice researchers understand two key aspects of educational research: a) the co-constructed nature of knowledge and b) how researchers’ social locations and worldviews are central to interpretive act of inquiry. We describe some of our creative activities we used in our classrooms and some of the outcomes. Our goal is to share with our colleagues, who teach research methods courses, the value of artistic processes, and how these activities provide “a broader palette of investigative and communication tools with

which to garner and relay a range of social meanings” (Leavy, 2009 p.11-12) thus critiquing and challenging mainstream methods of teaching research.

Interpretive Framework

Our arts-based pedagogical practices are informed by feminist critical pedagogy (hooks 1994, 2003; Ellsworth, 1989; Luke and Gore, 1992; Johnson-Bailey, Baumgartner and Bowles, 2010) as well as feminist approaches committed to creating inclusive democratic spaces that focus on disrupting hierarchical and oppressive power relations. We also draw on the growing body of literature on arts-based research (Eisner, 1995; Knowles and Cole, 2006; Cahnmann-Taylor, and Siegemund, 2008; Leavy, 2009) because “At the heart of arts-based inquiry is a radical, politically grounded statement about social justice and control over the production of and dissemination of knowledge”. (Finley 2008, p. 72)

In addition to how art creates spaces for more students to participate and name their experiences, art-making can also serve to deepen analysis of inequalities and power relations. Greene (1995, p. 19) speaks to imagination, a key dimension of arts-based teaching.

To tap into imagination is to . . . break with what is supposedly fixed and finished, objectively and independently real . . . to see beyond what the imaginer has called normal or “common-sensible” and to carve out new orders in experience . . . to glimpse what might be, to form notions of what should be and what is not yet.

We see art making as an anti-oppressive pedagogy that can serve as a form of “social acupuncture”, an idea generated by O’Donnell (2006) an actor and theatre director concerned with creating theatre processes that bring people together in unexpected and sometimes uncomfortable ways. He argues that these processes can open up the blockages in energy and communication in social systems.

If we think about chi in a social context, excess might be the presence of a coercive force, such as the state of other forms of authority, blocking healthy interactions, while a deficiency might be a situation without community links, networks or social capital. Acupuncture is used to break system-wide holding patterns that are compromising the function of nervous, muscular, vascular, organ and psychological systems – these never viewed separately but always in totality. (p. 47)

While we don’t claim that art-making in our research methodology classrooms can break system-wide patterns, we have seen how it can interrupt what might be seen as holding patterns, or assumptions about research and the position of the researcher that limit the possibility of research being a form of inquiry that as Greene (1995, p. 19) argues, can “carve out new orders of experience”.

Reflective Collaboration

We are both professors of adult education who regularly incorporate arts-based processes into our teaching. The students we work with (adults between the ages of 25-65) all enrolled in masters or doctoral programs where research plays a large role. They are not studying, art, music

or theatre yet they engage in processes that tapped into their natural creativity, which is indigenous to all cultures and traditions. We incorporated a series of activities into our research courses using visual arts, poetry, body movement and music to teach about the nature of knowledge as well as the practicalities of conducting research interviews, observations and data analysis.

Our methodology for this project is a collaborative reflection inquiry. Collaborative inquiry assumes that knowledge is constructed synergistically through reflection and dialogue among the researchers who are also participants in the research. Collaborative inquiry relies on stories, metaphor and various forms of artistic expression; what Heron and Reason (2001) refer to as presentational knowing. Collaborative (also known as cooperative) inquiry involves iterative cycles of action and reflection.

The action or experiential cycles involved the implementation of artistic processes to teach research in our respective classrooms. The reflection consisted of individually and collectively constructing narratives to make sense of what occurred during the action cycles and plan for future actions. These modes of inquiry allowed for a synergistic understanding of the power of the arts as a teaching tool.

Individual classroom observation and personal reflection were analyzed through dialogue and reflection that occurred through email exchanges, telephone and face to face meetings. Through telling stories about our respective teaching practices, themes emerged which revealed how these expressive processes enabled both the participants and the researchers to expand their thinking about the research process and art-making as a form of knowledge construction. In the following paragraphs we recount four representative examples of art-making activities that we have used to teach students about: understanding the nature of knowledge, interviewing, observing and analyzing data. We then discuss how these expressive processes enabled students, as well as ourselves, to expand our thinking about the research process and its contribution to knowledge.

Our Arts-Based Practices

Understanding the nature of knowledge

We do not construct knowledge through rational discourse alone. Knowledge is constructed through visual imagery, music and through our bodies. Encountering the arts is a great way to illustrate how knowledge is constructed. For example, Randee explored how using visual art, such as Picasso's *Guernica*, followed by a focus group discussion, led to deeper understanding of how an image can generate a diversity of experiences. Students were asked to view *Guernica* on a large screen and silently reflect on thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations that immediately emerged. They then shared their individual impressions in a large group where they were able to build on one another's understanding thus helping to raise questions about the interpretive power and responsibility of the researcher in the process of co-constructing knowledge. This type of activity has also been conducted using music such as Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit*.

Interviewing

Shauna used theatre processes such as body sculpture in her research classes. In one course focused on interviewing, students worked in small groups where they briefly discussed the notion of interviewing as a co-creative event. They were then asked to create silent and still

images by using their bodies and putting them into different shapes, all in some relation to each other. The small group conversation became spaces where students shared their assumptions about interviewing and their concerns as to their abilities to ask the 'right' questions and to really listen. These images were shown to the large group who offered interpretations about what they saw. This form of image creation, using students, bodies led to a deeper conversation about the embodied and relational dimensions of qualitative interviewing, challenging the idea of the objective and distanced researcher. In particular, images illustrated power relations between the researcher and participants.

Observation

Learning to observe requires looking at phenomena from multiple angles and perspectives and noticing the labels or preconceived ideas that shape what one thinks he or she knows in order to truly see. In this lesson Randee sought to provide an experiential process that involved taking the students outside to a natural area. Using their hands to simulate various camera lenses (wide angle, zoom, close-up and panoramic) the class practiced observing their environment. Upon debriefing the experience, students became much more conscious about the presence of preconceptions and how they shaped in powerful ways what gets noticed. Students realized that there is much more to observation than what appears on the surface. As a collective activity, students' understanding of differences in perception was deepened as was the realization that research is not simply about observing what exists 'out there', rather it is an interpretive encounter.

Data Analysis

In this class on data analysis, Shauna brought in stones, shells, buttons, beach glass and beads and had students work in pairs to begin a preliminary sorting of these objects. In pairs, the students discussed their selection process how they created categories based on patterns, colours, textures, and shapes. They shared with each other what influenced their decisions about the categorizing of data. The large group then examined each pair's sorting and heard from the pairs about their categorization process which brought into consciousness how decisions and interpretations about the meaning of objects and data are sometimes made subconsciously and how they occur repeatedly throughout the research process. Students also noticed how they negotiated with each other and how they reached decisions. This discussion led to comments about participatory oriented research and the need to be mindful as a researcher of those forces that make participatory practices challenging. Worries about meeting deadlines, wanting to control the process, dealing with changing agendas of communities were discussed.

Discussion

Research is both an art and a science. It is an embodied and emotive activity, not simply a cognitive process. Using arts-based and creative activities enables students to experience these dimensions. Emotions surface during these activities and the creative process helps students to recognize that emotions are part of learning and sources of knowledge. As Jaggar (1992) argues: "Accepting the indispensability of appropriate emotions to knowledge means no more and no less than that the discordant emotions should be attended to seriously and respectfully rather than condemned, ignored, discounted, or suppressed" (p. 163).

Arts-based research processes offer creative ways to assist students to understand the epistemological and ontological dimensions of research as well as to teach the technical skills of conducting research. Arts-based activities create spaces for students to recognize the multitude of decisions and choices they make when engaged in an inquiry process. Bringing arts-based processes into the classroom, aids students to reconsider notions of rigor, and enhances understanding of the relational dimensions of research as a process of co-construction of knowledge.

Arts-based activities help to provide classroom environments that support a variety of learning styles. Many students prefer a more visual and embodied approach to their learning. Arts-based activities, along with the traditional reading and discussion, create more inclusive classrooms. Arts-based and creative processes bring playfulness back into the learning process, which can lessen students' anxiety.

Arts-based activities help to build connections between the academic research process and students' existing skill sets. Research is often viewed by graduate students as something very foreign, with which they have had no experience. Arts-based activities enable students to see that there is some crossover of problem solving processes they already know, demystifying the research process.

Arts-based research can illustrate how rigor is as much a component of creative processes as it is of traditional scientific methods. Indeed, rigor is enhanced when creative processes are employed because they engage heart and spirit, mind and body in such a way that deepens students' understanding of the research process and their role and responsibility as researchers. Rigor is also enhanced through arts-based processes because they support students' critical reflexivity, encouraging them to listen and consider their embodied knowledge, an arena of knowing that is often silenced in hyper-rational discussions and considerations.

Arts-based processes enable students to share multiple and differing perspectives, thus shedding light on the interpretive power and responsibility of the researcher. Like synchronized swimming, arts-based processes help students to see research as a combination of technical skill, rigor and artistry.

An Invitation

The arts provide an interesting and creative alternative to what is often a fixed and dull process. The results of this research have implications for both teachers of research and adult learners grappling with the sometimes daunting task of understanding how to conduct research. We encourage our colleagues teaching research courses to play with various creative activities to help demystify the research process and illustrate the artful and embodied aspects of research. Using these kinds of activities in our teaching has taught us both to be open and curious for you cannot predict what ideas will be generated. Some students may feel uncomfortable 'playing' with these activities. They may recall previous moments when their art-making was judged harshly or regard these approaches as not serious enough. While encouraging our students to participate we do not force them into these activities. Some of our students confess only after the events that they felt uncomfortable but they also are glad they participated. Most students find that working collectively helps them feel less exposed and they usually find many of their peers share similar cautions as well as excitement.

Synchronized swimming requires technical skill, however with over reliance on technique it is nothing more than athletic exercise. The movements may be correct but the dance

lacks heart. Attention to artistry makes the choreography come alive. One can learn to become a researcher using more traditional approaches to be sure. We are suggesting that art-based processes open the door to more possibilities for teaching research that are fun, engaging and rigorous at the same time. They speak to our desire to both demystify research and to help students consider the aesthetic and imaginative aspects of inquiry.

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