Arts-based self-study: Documenting the ripple effect

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Like all forms of inquiry, arts-based self-study research can have unexpected consequences. Although we may start out with a fairly clear objective, the data we generate through arts-based methods might address other questions that are even more important than the ones we thought to ask initially, and our study might have an impact that extends beyond the original parameters of the design. The most powerful results of an arts-based self-study intended to improve our own practice might occur in another arena, a ripple effect that is visible only after our inquiry is completed, and hence, undetected because our gaze has shifted elsewhere. By describing and analysing what happens during and after three self-studies done by teachers and teacher educators, this article illustrates the use of visual and other arts-based methods (photography, video, creative writing and drawing) and explores the challenge and nature of the potential ripple effect in/of self-study for learning and growth for many.

Keywords: Arts-based research methods, critical pedagogy, media education, ripple effect, self-study, visual methodologies

Introduction

Intimately related to issues of improving education, self-study is often a multi-purpose endeavour that simultaneously involves research, teaching, learning, and evaluation. The design of any self-study usually centres on key questions such as: What am I really doing/teaching? What influences my practice? How does my teaching affect others? How might I improve what I do? How might I view things differently? How can I make a difference to others? These questions reflect the hope of touching the lives of students and teachers in positive and significant ways and point to a widespread awareness that the ultimate consumers of teacher education are not only the teachers whom we teach, but also *their* future students, people whom, for the most part, we are never likely to meet (Weber, 1990; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001).

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How do we know if and how what we do in self-study impacts on these unseen others? Is there a ripple effect to our inquiry, a series of ever-expanding concentric circles, gentle or not so gentle waves, which extend our influence outward to others not involved in our initial study? Or do our studies sink quietly without a ripple? The challenge and nature of this potential ripple effect in arts-based self-study is the main focus of this article.

Depending on how a stone is cast into a pond or lake, the resulting ripple pattern will vary according to certain factors and often extends far beyond the view of the person who casts the stone or pebble. Throwing a stone might frighten nearby fish or waterfowl; the ever-expanding ripples might push a child's toy boat farther away from the edge or carry seed pods across to the other side where they may germinate new life. A young child observing someone throw a stone might be tempted to do likewise with perhaps disastrous consequences. Whatever happens and whether or not the person who casts the stone is aware thereof, the thrower, the stone, the pond, the fish, the observers, the ducks, the seeds, the boats and all that the ripples touch are interconnected, are affected in some way. In explaining how sustainable educational leadership is inevitably linked to issues of social justice, Hargreaves and Fink (2006: 16) refer to a ripple effect to show how the fates of schools are increasingly intertwined: "What leaders do in one school necessarily affects the fortunes of students and teachers in other schools around them; their actions reverberate throughout the system like ripples in a pond". Although people unfamiliar with the field of self-study might mistakenly assume that self-study concerns mainly the people studying themselves, self-study has far-reaching effects. As Griffiths, Bass, Johnston and Perselli (2004) and Pithouse, Mitchell and Weber (2009) assert, when done with a critical gaze, self-study facilitates professional growth in ways that not only lead to changing oneself, but also serve as impetus for addressing the wider social problems that contextualise our individual lives.

Arts-based approaches to self-study

The purpose of art, as Dewey ([1934] 1958: 184) puts it, is ''to break through the conventionalized and routine consciousness" so that we might view things in new and perhaps truer ways. As I explain at length in a chapter written for an international handbook on arts-based methods, images can simultaneously present multiple viewpoints and generate multiple interpretations, and can draw attention to the importance of the everyday by making it strange or casting it in a new light (Weber, 2008). Images can be used as elegant and economical representations of theoretical positions by retaining more of the complexity of the whole within less space than words would necessitate. Moreover, images can combine cultural and transcultural elements; they can evoke, but also sometimes transcend the specific context in which they are created, and they can use specific instances to comment on, or illustrate wider generalities (Weber, 2008).

Growing out of the pioneering theoretical work on visual knowledge by philosophers such as John Berger (1972) and educational philosophers such as Elliot Eisner (1991) and Maxine Greene (1977), a burgeoning field of arts-based scholarship and practice has emerged in the social sciences, spearheaded initially by visual sociologists such as Howard Becker (1974) and Doug Harper (1998), and by activist scholars such as Jim Hubbard (1994), Jo Spence (1995), and Caroline Wang (1999). As interest has expanded widely from one discipline to another, visual research is now supported and reported by international handbooks, research associations, refereed journals, and granting agencies. Given the centrality of images to our increasingly visual and digital cultures, researchers are becoming interested in developing more sophisticated understandings of image processes and are almost routinely incorporating deliberate and rigorous uses of images as part of their research methods. As academics become increasingly concerned with issues of social justice and educational reform, they realise the value of image-based modes of dissemination to making scholarship more accessible and more useful to a broader audience. Researchers in this *You Tube* age notice the value of public performance and art installations and are eager to post visual representations of their work on websites and e-journals in addition to (and, in some instances, instead of) the more traditional academic venues. The use of project websites and other approaches to public and restricted digital archives makes this type of sharing all the more feasible, creating a digital memory of arts-based inquiry. An example of this kind of archive can be found at the Image and Identity Research Collective (IIRC) website (www. iirc.mcgill.ca), which features research that serves as a resource (with prompts and exemplars) for arts-based approaches to self-study. In a recent chapter for a book on teacher education, Strong-Wilson, Mitchell, Morrison, Radford, and Pithouse-Morgan (2014) draw together a series of self-study memory-work digital-based projects to highlight the potential for the development of digital archives as a generative tool.

Some scholars might not be familiar with all the complex procedures, protocols, and ethical considerations that underlie a simple listing of the specific art genres and media used for a particular study, and might, therefore, underestimate its value. That would be both misguided and unfortunate. Methodological guidelines and theories for arts-based research in the social sciences have become increasingly detailed, rigorous, ethical, and convincing (see, for example, Coles & Knowles, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Mitchell, 2011; Margolis & Pauwells, 2013).

Although arts-based approaches to research are being used for a wide range of purposes, nowhere, I would argue, are they more useful than in self-study in education. Visual and other arts-based methodologies such as creative writing and performance enable researchers to cast a wider net during data collection and offer a panoply of valuable lenses for analysing experience in meaningful ways that relate back to ethical practice. Arts-based approaches to research expand our knowledge base by including many of the neglected, but important ways in which we construct meaning through artistic forms of expression. In a chapter that I co-authored with

Claudia Mitchell for an international handbook on self-study, we discuss in detail the growing use of visual artistic modes of representation for self-study and describe what we consider to be the key features of arts-based research that make it so suitable to self-study inquiry (Weber & Mitchell, 2004: 979-1036). The more salient of these features could be summarised as follows:

- Arts-based approaches, by their very nature, foster reflexivity. Photographs, drawings, or videotapes of ourselves-in-action force us to take a step back and view our practice from the new perspective provided by the medium itself, increasing the potential for a deeper self-analysis.

- Artistic forms of representation can help capture the ineffable, the hard-to-put-into-words. Sometimes words do not suffice. Eisner (1995: 1) argues that visual forms afford us an ''all-at-onceness'' that reveals what would be hard to grasp through language and numbers alone. This is particularly useful for bringing to light important elements of a situation that we had not thought to observe intentionally. Teaching is a complex act involving many things happening at once. Visual methods such as video and photography help capture that complexity and hold it up for inspection.

- Through visual detail and context, arts-based approaches show why and how the study of the one can resonate with the lives of many. Artful representation works well when it facilitates empathy or enables us to see through the researcher-artist's eye. Hearing or seeing or feeling the details of a lived experience, its textures and shapes, helps make the representation trustworthy or believable, and helps the viewers realise how the researcher-artist's experience relates to their own as well as the ways in which it differs. As Eisner (1995: 3) writes, artistically crafted work creates a paradox, revealing what is universal by examining in detail what is particular. The more visual detail that is provided about the context of the researcher's experience and interpretations, the better able the audience is to judge how this may or may not apply to their practice or concerns, and the more trustworthy the work appears, leaving the reader to decide or 'see' for themselves. This aspect of arts-based methods makes it possible to discern and describe potential ripple effects.

- Arts-based approaches involve embodiment and provoke embodied responses. If educators are acknowledging the importance of the body to models of learning in their rhetoric, it is important to acknowledge that self-study, like all research, is an embodied enterprise (for a detailed discussion, see chapter 4 ''Undressing and redressing the teacher's body'' in Mitchell & Weber, 1999). We are not ideas, but flesh and blood beings learning through our senses. Visual methods help researchers keep their own and their students' bodies in mind and push for a more sophisticated analysis and theorising that considers learning and teaching as embodied.

- Art engages a wider public and either solicits or elicits reaction. An essential aspect of an arts-based approach to self-study is that it is at least partially a collective, participatory process. Visual essays are meant to be displayed; videos are intended for a viewing audience. The feedback and collaboration of others is an integral part of the creation and dissemination of the study. It is perhaps most of all this ability of arts-based self-study to engage others that fosters, what I call, the ripple effects of self-study. Arts-based self-studies often constitute a call to action, whether deliberate or incidental, to others who are not the central participants.

The ripple effects of arts-based self-study: Some examples

Like all forms of inquiry, self-study can have unexpected consequences, not all of them necessarily positive. Although we may start out with a fairly clear objective (for example, what my students are learning), the data we collect might address other questions that are even more important than the ones we thought to ask (for example, what circumstances in their personal lives, or what institutional barriers make it difficult for my students to learn). Equally significant is the impact that an inquiry can have beyond the original parameters of the design. The most powerful results of a self-study intended to improve our own practice might occur in another arena, a ripple effect that is visible only after our inquiry is completed, and hence, undetected, because our gaze has shifted elsewhere. That is the focus in the following three cases. The first two cases show what happens when two teachers, who were also my graduate students, discover some of the unanticipated implications (ripples) of the self-studies they began as part of their university work. The third case is, in a certain sense, itself a ripple effect of the first two cases, documenting the additional ripple effects of a subsequent project I led with one of them.

Case 1: The ripple effects of self-study: Arts-based methods as transformative teaching

A good example of, what we might call, the ripple effect can be found in the changing practice of adult educator and mentor Kathy Childs, documented partially in her Master's thesis (Childs, 2001) as well as in a video from a CD compiled by Weber and Mitchell (2004), and further analysed by her in a book chapter (Childs, 2005). What follows is my own synthesis of some of Child's experience to illustrate how participating peripherally in her work helped me consider the ripple effect.

As the central assignment of a graduate course she was taking on professional development, a high school English teacher, Katharine Childs, conducts a self-study in her Adult Education classroom for disadvantaged, troubled youth who had dropped out of school, but who are back for a 'last chance'. Creative in her approach, Childs explores different uses of various arts-based media in attempts to turn a critical eye towards her own teaching practice. This involves drawing, poetry, taking and analysing photographs and videos of herself in action, her students, her environment, and so

forth. She wants *to see the things that she does not know she should be looking for*, the things she needs to consider in understanding and improving her practice. She engages her students in the process – they too generate art and images and reflect on them. Without her students there can be no self-study. The results are powerful and interesting (see Childs, 2001, 2005). In a compelling video she scripted and shot with the help of her students, she revisits a moment when she was appalled by some of her actions as a teacher, actions that she views as betraying her own pedagogical beliefs which centre on empowering her students. This self-critique led her to consider how she might change some aspects of her teaching, and resulted in an exceptionally fine thesis and subsequent publications.

All of the above is well and good and worthy of reporting. However, what is more central to this article is what happens the year *after* that self-study was completed. Feeling transformed by her self-study, Childs' impulse was to apply the same processes she had used to critique her own practice to the kind of pedagogy she uses in her teaching. As part of her work as an English teacher (she prefers the term mentor), Childs' attempts to empower her own students by facilitating *their* self-studies – in short, she adapts and uses self-study processes as a pedagogical approach, one that could be described as critical in stance. The result is an array of creative self-studies whereby her students produce excellent, albeit sometimes disturbing, work that helped them situate themselves in their community, identify personal problems and obstacles to their academic success, and imagine ways in which they might meet at least some of the many challenges they face. Their self-studies variously draw on poetry, creative writing, journal-keeping, drawing, and photography. Not incidentally, in producing their studies, they also meet the curriculum objectives of the high school English curriculum. In some instances, the students share their studies, making them public. As researchers such as Loughran and Northfield (1998) and LaBoskey (2004) have noted, 'the public face' in and of itself is a critical component of engaging in self-study. By engaging a wider community in reflecting on issues such as drug abuse, violence, and poverty, the self-studies produced by these marginalised high school students can be viewed as a call to action; one that remains too often, by and large, ignored.

Case 2: The ripple effects of self-study: Video as empowerment

As part of her doctoral studies, a high school art teacher, Leanne Levy, learns about arts-based methods of self-study (Weber & Mitchell, 2004) and experiments with them, filming and reflecting critically on her own practice as part of her thesis work. In addition to doing drawings to document her research and teaching, Levy videotapes herself in action during the interviews she conducts for her thesis and reflects on her teaching and research practice. What is most relevant to this discussion in terms of ripple effects is the relationship between the original self-study and Levy's subsequent teaching. It is not simply that Levy modified and refined the way she teaches (that is to be an expected outcome of a self-study); it is what she asks her own students to do a year later as part of their assigned artwork (Levy, 2007, 2008).

PhD in hand, Levy returns to the classroom at an all girls' school, determined to make a difference. And make a difference she does. Like Childs did in the first case, Levy notes the potential of self-study methodology for her students, and actually incorporates it into the curriculum by inviting her students to conduct their own self-studies on topics that matter to them, using new media art techniques, especially video. She frames the process she advocates in terms of three central objectives: know who you are and where you have been; know where you are going and how to get there, or how to change course, and actualise your potential and inspire others to develop theirs. She sums it up with a motto *Own your story, share it for change.*

Although hesitant at first (wondering if she really meant that they could choose issues of personal relevance), her high school students soon respond with enthusiasm, and set out to investigate themes, issues, or questions that relate directly to their own situations. The results are powerful, albeit disconcerting to some, especially to one of the school's administrators: cutting, eating disorders, drugs, sexuality, violence, loneliness, bullying, abuse – these are the sort of socially 'hot' topics chosen. In the face of some administration opposition to the project, the girls remained adamant that their voices be heard, maintaining that studying their own lives (which, I argue, could be at least partially framed as their 'practice') was a significant learning activity that could be crucial to their future. They were of the opinion that critically examining their experience in the supportive environment of the art class was empowering, providing them with insight and inspiration to improve and take charge of their own lives. As so often happens with self-study, there was an element of social critique and reaching out to others. The students hoped that the 'results' of their self-studies might help other girls who struggle alone silently with similar issues. The end result was a collective documentary that was eventually distributed by the National Film Board of Canada (Levy, 2007) and is now in use in some high schools, accompanied by a teacher's manual written by Levy (for an article about the project, see also Levy, 2008). And so, the ripple effect spreads further. Levy's own self-study begets a critical pedagogy that incorporates self-study methods training and assignments for her students. Her students' self-studies are, in turn, being used as a pedagogical instrument in other classrooms. This does not mean that teachers' or students' lives become automatically or magically improved, but it does often mean that people can better identify and articulate the problems and challenges they face and better understand their situations (including both positive and negative aspects). They may feel better equipped to face the future.

Case 3: The ripple effects of self-study: Arts-based study inspires more arts-based studies

This final case describes some of the unanticipated ripple effects that occurred when I ventured out of my more usual university teaching setting into a community institution, a home for pregnant teens and young moms in difficulty. As part of a national team of investigators conducting funded research on arts and media

education for marginalised youth in community settings, I designed and led Project Teen M.O.M. (mirrors on motherhood) to develop and assess pedagogical approaches that might engage and empower young people, helping them develop multi-media skills that could be used for their own educational purposes.

In collaboration with my co-investigator/facilitator, Leanne Levy, whom I hired for the project because of the excellent work I had seen her do with girls in Case 2, we incorporated arts-based self-study into the pedagogical design of a media education curriculum for the weekly workshops that we gave to the pregnant teens and teen moms who agreed to participate in our study. Using drawing (including drawing on their bodies), collage, poetry, and photography, we encouraged these teen moms and mothers-to-be to articulate and reflect on their own situations and experiences. Simultaneously, as the workshop facilitators, we investigated our own practice.

In addition to many other interesting arts-based self-study exercises, the core activity that extended over several weeks was the creation of what Mitchell, Weber and Pithouse (2009: 127) describe as "curated photo albums". These were intended for a vernissage/exhibit that was scheduled to culminate the project. In order to make and curate their individual albums, the participants had the difficult task of choosing only nine of the hundreds of photographs they had taken with the cameras provided to them by the project. They wrote captions or accompanying text for each picture, often turning to each other for advice or feedback during group sessions. Part of the challenge of this activity lies in recognising the potential significance of individual photographs as well as the links between them. Choosing which photographs to include from among the many taken is no easy matter. It forces the photographers to consider and examine how the pictures represent their lived experience. Presenting their work to each other during one of the final workshops, and then displaying these images taken from their lives at the exhibit in their community centre was a way of 'going public', that encouraged them to articulate and take ownership of their images and ideas. Not only were they able to perceive how others react to their work, they were also compelled to step back and almost literally look at themselves. The combination of photos and words within the confines of a small album allows them to express or represent their views in a powerful way. There is an intimacy to their albums that draws the reader/viewer close.

The young women who took our workshops used their albums to deliver messages to other teens and to the broader community about the challenges faced by pregnant teens. As we discuss in detail in journal articles (Levy & Weber, 2010, 2011) and in video and other reports (www.iirc.mcgill.ca/projects/teenmom/), the self-studies done by these young women were powerful and revealed a more varied portrait of teen pregnancy than that portrayed by mainstream media. Of equal importance to the project were the media skills and critical perspectives the young women acquired during the course of the workshops.

Even more germane to this present article are the unintended ripple effects we only noticed towards the end of the project when many of the educators who worked with the young women on a daily basis began clamouring for a professional development self-study workshop of their own. Staff members commented that they witnessed unexpected and positive changes in some of the participants' attitudes and behaviour outside the workshops and speculated that they too could benefit from doing self-studies similar to those the teen moms were doing. They seemed to envy our opportunity to study ourselves in action, and a few of them started hanging around our workspace when they were on breaks from their duties. Some of them even 'crashed' the workshops to get materials and pointers on how to create their own self-study art. They also talked about incorporating elements of our curriculum into their own future programming for teens, noting the pleasure and meaningful learning they saw associated with doing the workshop activities.

The public exhibition of the participants' work produced further ripples. Impressed by the messages and artwork on display, other community organisations voiced their support for the work being done at the community centre that housed Project Teen M.O.M. There were tears as some family and friends of the young women gained more insight and compassion for them. Some of the studies were quite dark and troubling, reflecting the participants' lived realities and reminding us of the barriers society and institutions unthinkingly erect that make it hard for pregnant teens to succeed and of the prevailing prejudices that underlie cultural depictions of youth. This seemed to depress some viewers and galvanise others.

The staff and teen residents (some of whom had not participated in the project) were so taken with the self-studies on display along the corridors and walls of the public spaces of their building that they decided to keep them up for a very long time in order to generate discussion and make new teen mom arrivals feel better understood. The research project literally became part of the institution's décor. Collectively, the self-studies transformed the bare institutional walls into a welcoming and valued conversation. The exhibit that we planned to leave up for two days remained on display for over a year, engaging people in discussions of the challenges posed by teen pregnancy and the merits of such arts-based work. Long after the funded project ended, the ripples continued their outward drift.

The iterative ripple effects of arts-based self-study as teaching

Arts-based approaches, I suggest, help make self-study *iterative*. This type of research tends to be contagious and takes on meanings that go beyond its original parameters. A teacher educator's self-study inspires him/her to show other teachers (his/her university students) how to conduct similar inquiries. Those teachers, in turn, conduct their own studies and notice the potential of the arts-based methodologies for their own teaching, incorporating self-study into the curriculum for their school students who then take up and apply these methods to their own learning and to

their particular life situations. The artwork and digital footprints that often results from this work carry the potential effects even further.

The cases outlined in this article are all based on documented experience. Whitehead (2000) would call this 'evidence', indicating that potential self-study has not only to reach well beyond its initial intent, but also to be transformative:

> *Knowing more about ourselves as teachers and learners changes us, provokes growth, jolts us out of complacency – sometimes radically, in ways that can seem transformative. In the course of examining one's practice systematically, a pivotal 'aha' moment can occur, a jolting of the kaleidoscope that shifts our view when we reach one of those precise or fuzzy points at which we are irrevocably changed" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994: 578). The very process of self-study itself changes its practitioners and their situations (Pithouse et al., 2009: 48).*

By some definitions, teaching is, at heart, a kind of research (Tidwell & Fitzgerald, 2004). The argument made, in this instance, is that the inquiry process of arts-based self-study research is also a kind of teaching. As the cases in this article show, the methods used in arts-based self-study research can also support a variety of curricula. Although critical theorists such as bell hooks (1994), Paulo Freire (1985), and Joe Kincheloe (2004) did not write under the umbrella of self-study, the transformative and emancipatory practice they envision describes quite aptly what sometimes happens in self-study, especially when participants on the outskirts of a self-study take up and use the methods they see in action and adapt them to their own emancipatory purposes. Self-knowledge is power; sharing self-knowledge is empowering. When self-study reveals the connections between personal experience and social action and inspires others to examine theirs critically, it becomes a form of critical pedagogy.

In conclusion, the process of researching our own practice is too compelling and has too much potential to sink without a ripple. What begins as research becomes an extended series of teaching experiences that lead to learning and growth for many, linking personal inquiries to a broader and evolving picture of community and throwing into relief issues that demand attention and action, as the ripples expand outward. The incidental learning, peripheral vision (Bateson, 1994), and unintended consequences of such research may constitute some of the most important yet overlooked knowledge we generate. We cannot know for certain how advantageous or dangerous or benign the ripple effects may be. Although some students may succeed in overcoming obstacles that have previously stumped them, others may find it difficult to improve their situations or be subjected to increased violence as a result of attempting to stand up for themselves. It is not possible to observe or anticipate all the distant ripples, but it is important to try at least to imagine them. Once you toss the pebble, you cannot avoid the ripples.

Endnote

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