

The Graduate School of Education  
at The University of Melbourne present

# UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts

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SPECIAL ISSUE

## A/r/tography and the Visual Arts

Volume 3 | Issue 1 | 2013

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Guest Editors *Rita L. Irwin*  
*Anita Sinner*

Editor  
Associate Editor  
Designer

*Lindy Joubert*  
*Naomi Berman*  
*Rosie Ren*

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## EDITORIAL TEAM

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## ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

*The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is based within the Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne, Australia. The journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.*

*Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.*

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# Special Issue: A/r/tography and the Arts

## Guest Editors

*Rita L. Irwin | Anita Sinner*

### THEME

To be engaged in the practice of a/r/tography means to inquire in the world through an ongoing process of art making in any art form and writing not separate or illustrative of each other but interconnected and woven through each other to create relational and/or enhanced meanings. A/r/tographical work are often rendered through the methodological concepts of contiguity, living inquiry, openings, metaphor/metonymy, reverberations and excess, which are enacted and presented/performed when a relational aesthetic inquiry condition is envisioned as embodied understandings and exchanges between art and text, and between and among the broadly conceived identities of artist/researcher/teacher. A/r/tography is inherently about self as artist/researcher/teacher yet it is also social when groups or communities of a/r/tographers come together to engage in shared inquiries, act as critical friends, articulate an evolution of research questions, and present their collective evocative/provocative works to others (see <http://m1.cust.educ.ubc.ca/Artography/>).

This special issue of Multi-Disciplinary Research in the Arts invites original creative and scholarly inquiry that engages in critical debates and issues regarding a/r/tographical methodologies; are exemplars of critical approaches to a/r/tographical research; and/or extend the boundaries of inquiry-based research. Contributions are welcome from disciplines across the arts, humanities and social sciences and in a wide range of formats including articles, essays, and artistic interludes, which explore diverse forms of the arts from drama, dance, poetry, narrative, music, visual arts, digital media and more.

# Text and Texture: An Arts-based Exploration of Transformation in Adult Learning

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## ABSTRACT

In this research I explored transformational and co-transformational potential of a collagist methodology in an accelerated undergraduate adult course on imagination and creativity. My methods were arts-based, artist-teacher inquiry within a constructivist art class with ten female adult learners. The research drew upon emergent and interpretive analytic processes based on multiple perspectives of artwork and reflections by the students and myself through the multiple identities and artistic creations of artist-teacher-research. Deep learning in the studio provided new paradigms from which to deconstruct and reconstruct frames of references, adjust my emotions, and alter habits of mind and practice, while deepening my understanding of the role and impact of arts in adult learning.

Collage, a malleable concept, provided a metaphor and analogy for adult learning and modern living while simultaneously providing students with an opportunity for stimulating discovery, profound pleasure and energized spirit. The collage process increased the student's sense of agency in dealing with unfamiliarity in the educational setting and identified impediments to transformational learning.

## KEYWORDS

*transformation, co-transformation, artist-teacher research, artography, collage, living inquiry, autoethnography*

## INTENTS

This research is focused on the phenomenon of transformation and on exploring the potential for arts and creative processes in transformational and co-transformational learning in adult education. A primary objective is to increase understanding of realities and factors in transformational learning - that is, of perspective change or even deep, paradigmatic change - into clearer understanding and practical usage for adult learners and educators through a deeper understanding of creative art processes in adult learning. How can I be better equipped to recognize, facilitate and manage learning at the edges of knowing (Eisner, 1998; Berger, 2004; Diaz 2004) in constructivist learning environments (Hein, 2002)?

I identify myself with “life history researchers with deep roots in meaning-making systems that honor the many and diverse ways of knowing - personal, narrative, embodied, artistic, aesthetic - that stand outside sanctioned intellectual frameworks”(Knowles & Cole, 2007, p.7). My research began with autoethnography – a living inquiry of myself as a self-taught artist, a teaching artist, an artist scholar. Each of these archetypes respects the learning experience and growth of one who learns through experience, and who then shines light on the paths of others coming along on the learning journey. I wanted to learn from my most solid point of authority, my own personal experience and rendering of Self, because I wanted to be better able to validate and facilitate my students’ knowledge, as it can be gained, from their own rich, personal experiences.

My studio exploration was an exploration in epistemology - that of constructing and validating learning derived from collage and studio methods. Sullivan (2005) affirms that art is more than a rite of passage of personal discovery. The studio experience is a construction site of knowledge-making. But what artists do in the practice of creating artworks, the processes, products, proclivities, and contexts that support this activity, is not well studied from the perspective of the artist (Ibid., p. 82).

Auto-ethnography, as a study of Self in culture, also brought me into direct contact with *prima materia*, the primary material of our lives, which is perhaps the most potent stimulation in that it is generated from within (Jung, 1961), which also renders it an element feared and less welcomed in higher education (Biddle & Locke, 2007). The autoethnography became the genesis for research on living inquiry via

collage in an adult art class in imagination and creativity. Might the same tenants apply to adult learners?

## AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

My living inquiry was seeded during a potent encounter with *prima materia* in a visit to the Gustav Vigeland Sculpture Park in Oslo, Norway, an 80-acre, 600 figure, open-air depiction of human lifespan development. The statuary have characteristics of human beings caught in a 'freeze-frame', or an act or moment that is archetypal and larger than the actual moment. They have a quality of truth, of "that's how things are," if we were to authentically and honestly portray internal or external realities of human experiences. My culturally conservative, immigrant, mid-west, American-Norwegian heritage did not echo this authenticity. I wept with longing to be that close to the bone in my artwork, in my capacity to work with students' artwork. I realized I had missed something vital from my heritage. My need for that form of authenticity flashed into my consciousness as a deep, burning need and desire.

Images 1  
Vigeland Sculpture Park



In that museum park I stumbled into a disorienting dilemma, which, in transformative learning theory, Mezirow describes as a situation of disorientation when an experience does not fit with our assumptions and expectations and becomes a catalyst for exploration (2000). I felt as if my *prima materia* (Jung, 1969) had ignited into an inner fire, a situation which carries indeterminate potential for both renewal and destruction; one that benefits from conscious exploration. My experience is also reminiscent of the alchemical process in individuation of Self that requires *prima materia* be submitted to a series of processes in order to be transformed into The Elixir of Life, or the universal medicine (Edinger, 1994; Jung, 1969).

I chose an art-based process of educational research in living inquiry, an educational experience of alchemy, to distill my disorienting experience. I projected my fiery passion in the artful construction of a papier mache vessel as a place to metaphorically hold, simmer, incubate, nurture, manage my passion, which I later represented in a photography series.

Images 2  
Papier Mache  
Vessel: "The Inner  
Fire." 10 "x 10".



Through that vessel, I experientially and metaphorically learned the meaning of collage as a fine arts genre, vessel as a universal symbol for containing aspects of the learning process, and edges of learning as potent sites for transformation.

## A GROWING SENSE OF AESTHETICS: RUINS

Paper fragments quickly grew into a recognition of modern ruins. My favorite material was rusty, metallic, and wooden ephemera collected from roadways and sidewalks – washers, nuts, bolts, slivers, and slabs of rusty iron, aluminum, wire, broken and worn glass. They excited my imagination with their mineral textures, earthy, rusty, silver, coppery colours. I worked in ruins and fragments, raw edges, worn textures, layers, torn edges, showing things as they are and reassembling them to extract meaning, create new stances, find new perspectives. Ruins became a core aesthetic of my research and narrative writing. By definition, the ruin is more than a fragment (Makarius, 2004):

*"The ruin conjures up absence. And yet in the same breath one might say that the presence of a ruin creates a world with colors, atmosphere, and ghosts of its own, tearing itself off the past like a page ripped from a calendar. Hence the ruin is more than a fragment. By freeing it and endowing it with autonomy, writers and artists made it a genuine work of art; and by the time the ruin concept of the fragment arrived as a literary form, it was the ruin that served as its archetype". (P. 147)*

Images 3  
Metallic ruins



## DECONSTRUCTION OF BOXES

I also became inexorably drawn to boxes. Not intact boxes, but the torn, ripped edges and fragments that resulted from ripping boxes apart. I generated piles of fragments of all sizes – rolling, spiraling jags, chunks, fragments, parts, and pieces.

Each fragment had its own beauty, abstract, simple and elemental, as did the rusty environmental ruins and ephemera. Again, I let my mind play with the forms. I revelled in the sheer beauty of the scrolling, rolling, unfurling, curling strips. I stacked shapes just to contemplate the abstract forms and sculpture of the interrelating ripped, torn, textured edges. I revelled in their beauty, each a paper ruin with textures, scrolls, and edges that quickened my senses with memory and possibility.

I continuously ripped and rearranged them– all the while wryly noting that, after having created a metaphorical vessel to hold my process, I was now revelling in taking apart the quintessential, contemporary, work-horse vessel, the cardboard box.

Many times I felt awash in data in my prolific use of things and ephemera to contain, make meaning, and explore my world. I got lost in the chaos of abstract torn configurations that refused to come together in an aesthetic or meaningful assemblage. I willed with doubt and uncertainty about how to organize my distillation into valid, legitimate research. What meaning can possibly come from my eccentric, odd, but passionate practice? How can this be helpful to my students? What value could this possibly have for academia?

For the first time, I considered stopping, quitting the entire enterprise. While I knew there was value in taking boxes apart and putting them back together in a new way, I was experiencing the difficulty of that enterprise. The Academy and all that implies, is, perhaps, one of the biggest boxes of all.

## ORGANIZATION OF CHAOS

Once again, I derived affinity and understanding from Makarius (2004):

*“The task of the artist is to go back to the original chaos and gradually transform it, within the work of art, into conscious chaos, into organized confusion (p.149). “We need to understand the artist’s relationship to chaos is in the context of a desire to synthesize contradictory forces and a conviction that truth itself is inevitably fragmentary” (p.148).*

One day I lined up my metallic ruin ephemera on a 12-foot sheet of white paper. The individual pieces of ruins instantly became a new art form. I attached a thin gold wire to each one, constructing a tiny hanging loop for hanging. I wrote:

*“The broken off, lost, discarded pieces are beautiful in their own right, but when sorted and organized, they became calligraphy that is uniquely my own. Thoughts and ideas emerge out of the strange but beautiful encryption.”*

My own personal calligraphy! I realized I could now reorganize the ruins endlessly. So, too, my thoughts and ideas.



Image 4  
Ruin calligraphy



It was not practical to leave the fragments and ephemera on my floor. I looped them on a wire for storage and instantly experienced yet another cascade of neurological firing, cutaways, breakthroughs, and breakouts. The creation of art is also a neurological event (Ratey, 2001). I wrote:

*"I liken the wire loop to a large sweeping dragway and the neurological activity that navigated from my limbic system to my frontal cortex as a vehicle that ran over and flattened my blank-eyed, nail toothed inferiority complex while simultaneously scooping up and organizing all my jagged, unorganized, twisty, fragmented parts and pieces of emotions and experiences."*

Image 5  
"The Necklace."  
Mixed media.



OK, it was just a necklace. But I instantly knew it was more than a necklace and an object of adornment. New possibilities and ideas tumbled out before me. In my exhilaration and 'aha' moment, I knew I had made a giant leap of consciousness and aesthetic discernment. I was witness to my own shifts of perspective and cognitive reorganization that jettisoned forward into further exploration and learning.



I formed the piles of ripped boxes into a flag-like assemblage that was aesthetically beautiful to my eye, albeit a bit forced and intellectual. I had closely attended to collagist design elements to create an abstract wall sculpture intimating unrolling and unfolding narratives. It was not until I contemplatively rotated the entire assemblage ninety degrees did meaning unfurl before me.



I saw yet another ruin – the capital portion of an iconic column replete with crown molding of traditional architecture. I saw architectural ruins of Greece and the foundations of civilization and formal, organized knowledge. I saw the Academy made visible through its numerous institutions, degree programs, research, publications,

and professors. I saw knowledge and life – simultaneously enduring, tentative, and transitory. I also saw my narratives, unfurling, unfolding, bridging down from the capital.

*Images 6*  
*Iconic Ruin –*  
*mixed media*



## TRANSFORMATION BECOMING VISIBLE

Despite chaos and confusion with artistic and imaginative studio processes, I felt my Self evolving, slowly transforming. I became cognitively more organized. I felt affectively quieter, my persona reconfiguring. I felt identified with the organized, compacted aesthetic intensity of the necklace assemblage. I became capable of seeing my Self with my personal and professional Vigeland life contexts in more sympathetic, empathetic and wiser terms without retreating, withdrawing or burying my messiness. I experienced shifts of stance and perspective in construction of the iconic column fragment and I took my place in the aged traditions of Academia as a contemporary artist-teacher-researcher. In so doing, I felt ever so much closer to my truth. I became a more authentic person. I wrote:

*“Authenticity is a requisite for being successful as a human being, whether as an administrator, a writer, a visual artist, or a researcher. I began this study feeling fragmented and broken off from my own authenticity and I am completing it closer to my own truth.”*

Self-study, in any form, can be powerful and potentially transformational. Auto-ethnography, as a research genre, evokes new questions about self and subject, reminding us that our work is grounded, contextual and rhizomatic. My transformations can be identified within dynamic, interconnecting continuums of cognitive, affective, sensorial, spiritual, and relational ways of knowing - traditional ways of learning, perceiving, experiencing, and functioning drawn from developmental research (Erickson, 1959). These continuums of human experience are concepts and means that are not mutually exclusive, but rather overlapping and intersecting, much like assemblage and collage. As discontinuous ways of knowing, they activated, functioned and impacted each other simultaneously, presenting possibilities not envisioned when the work began.

The research method of visual auto-ethnography allowed me to find my voice, exercise my words and validate myself as an educational researcher and as a visual artist. Sullivan (2005) affirms that art is more than a personal rite of passage of personal discovery. The studio experience is a construction site of knowledge-making, but what artists do in the practice of creating artworks - the processes, products, proclivities, and contexts that support this activity - is not well studied from the perspective of the artist (ibid, p. 82). Through using an arts-based method to gather my data, I thereby, extended the genre of auto-ethnography to include auto-ethnography through visual arts. What followed - living inquiry through visual art-based auto-ethnography - became both the method and the meaning-making of my continued research with my students.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As I conducted my visual auto-ethnography, I wondered how the concept of collage might translate to arts-based research in the context of living inquiry in an adult learning art class. From that point of insight and query, a collagist methodology conceptualized, organized and powered the entire research inquiry - including syllabus construction, class delivery, collection of data, data analysis, and research presentation. The multiple identities inherent to the artist-teacher researcher genre aligned with the concept of collage and bricoleur in that it privileged multiple perspectives within the research process (Vaughn, 2005).

Research methods that draw from the long history of anthropology and sociology do not fully satisfy the interests and concerns of visual arts researchers (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Sullivan 2005; Springgay, 2008). Typically, anthropological and sociological traditions emphasize researchers as editors rather than artistic practitioners, tilting towards critique and analysis of phenomena, with little to say about the creation of new knowledge using visual means. However, visual artists, building on traditions of social critique, make use of circumstances, settings, and technologies to ask questions that might affect the way people think, feel, and act as a result of their encounters with art (Sullivan, 2005).

Advancing Dewey's declaration that the purpose of art is to defamiliarize the familiar (1934), Geichman & Fox (2001) state that a function of art in modern conversation must be to expand art processes and perspectives into conventions of qualitative

research in such a way as to disorient and redirect reigning perspectives in educational research and educational practice.

Qualitative researchers have identified collage and assemblage as a method to evoke new ways of knowing in postmodern, postcolonial manuscript (Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Biddle & Locke, 2007). Braque and Picasso, at the beginning of the 20th century, experimented with collage and assemblage as a means to portray more than one point of view at a time (Ferrier, 1999).

*Images 7*  
*Collages. Picasso. Glass*  
*and Bottle of Suze*  
*(1912); Guitarra (1913).*



Collage is a fine arts practice with a postmodern epistemology based on the idea of spontaneously layering images and symbols (MacIntyre Latta, 2001; Diaz, 2002; Vaughn, 2005) through which traditions and experiences can be reinterpreted and connections can be forged between the seemingly random or disparate (Hartigan, 2007.)

The value of collage to transformational learning lies in many qualities inherent to art images and processes of creating collage. By definition, collage implies and requires working with parts and pieces of disparate materials, applying and removing layers, changing forms, creating multiple dimensions, thereby, both implying and creating texture. Collage makes connections in which the art product reflects, reveals and documents the process of its own creation (Diaz, 2002; Vaughn, 2005). Collage is a malleable concept with a core framework and established design elements: overlap, connection, focal points, tonal values, scale, yet remaining extremely accessible to unskilled engagement.

Working with images has the possibility to increase our agency with disorienting dilemma in that imagination is a conduit between the known and the unknown. Moving away from certainty takes us to the growing edge, the threshold of our

thinking and sense-making (Berger, 2004). Berger describes the liminal space of the edge of knowing as unfamiliar, potentially uncomfortable ground, making it “the most precarious and important transformative space” (ibid, 2004, p. 343).

As educators, we encounter learners’ growing edges continuously. Education is optimal ground for challenge to assumptions and possible transformation of ideas and perspectives. The edges of knowing is where action in classrooms occurs through cognitive stretch to ideas and thinking and through interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics. If we teach for transformation, we encourage learners to embrace what they do not know.

## TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

An assumption in this research is that transformation is never just one thing nor is restricted in time. Transformation is defined both as change that occurs through shifts in perspective such as Mezirow (2000) portrays through a sequence of cognitive responses to disruption and disorientation of assumptions, and secondly, to shifts to a core sense of Self, such as Jung (1969) portrays through individuation.

Transformative learning theory has been viewed as a cognitive process that interdisciplinary contributors are challenging and developing to increase its validity across a wider range of contexts and audiences (Mezirow, 2000). The theory is criticized as branded, rationally driven, and limited to consciously rational processes, therefore limited to learners with cognitive, rational preferences for learning. The theory suggests that the meaning schemes we construct from our beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions are based upon experiences that can be deconstructed through critical reflection and acted upon in a rational way (Taylor, 1998). York and Kasl (2006), more recent researchers of the theory, assert that transformative learners move in and out of the cognitive and the intuitive, of the rational and the imaginative, of the subjective and the objective, of the personal and the social (p.89).

The value of art and creative processes to transformational and co-transformational learning lies in the many qualities inherent in art images and in the process of creating images. Art and creative processes reveal the complexities of transformational learning while also providing additional lenses through which to view possibilities and potential in disorienting dilemma. While the arts bring up nuances and subtleties that may be difficult to speak in words, shifting media enables us to shake off the trappings of that which holds us down. Transformational theory increases its applicability to a more diverse group of learners through focus on consciously non-rational processes related to art, methods of creative processes, and to extra-rational sources such as symbols, images and archetypes.

Transformations may be arduous and harrowing. They can push us to the edges of our knowing (Berger, 2004). It is not a matter of whether chaos will be present in transformational learning, but rather a matter of how chaos will be encountered, engendered, contained, and processed to facilitate the goals of the class and the needs of the students. Chaos is inevitable in transformation and it may be one reason why educators avoid transformational practices. Dewey warned us, however, as both

learners and educators, of the dangers of becoming complacent with life, of over-comfort in living with recurrence and complete uniformity and the routine and mechanical. Complacency is an anesthetic in experience that numbs and prevents us from reaching out, from launching inquiries (Dewey, 1934; Greene, 1988).

## RESEARCH METHODS

As faculty of a Creative Arts Program, I designed this course to enable undergraduate adult learning students to have an encounter with art that would include development of art skills within the medium of collage, to have an experience with art and aesthetics, and to facilitate recognition of art concepts that could apply to the whole of their lives. This research explores the transformational and co-transformational potential of these components in learners re-entering the formal setting of a college classroom.

Art-making was the primary source of data for both the students and me, the artist-teacher researcher. An emergent approach allowed for guiding questions and prompts that initiated exploration and analysis while simultaneously allowing questions that evolved through continued engagement during and following the course time-frame.

Within an accelerated model of programming for undergraduate adult learners, a 400-level art course at a small liberal arts college on the northeast coast of the United States guided students in an exploration of living inquiry and rendering of Self while simultaneously exploring the potential of collage as a way of being in contemporary life. The syllabus was a textual collage - constructed as a collaged, curricular road map, simultaneously interactive and constructivist.

Data gathering included weekly art assignments that coincided with weekly topical readings, student reflections in the form of free-writes, weekly response papers, class critiques and discussion of student art-work and presentations, a student-driven final art project, a final reflection paper, and participant observation. Student output and input occurred on multiple levels, continuously, at each and every class.

While neither the course nor the research was gender limited, gender representation in the research was homogenous. The research participants included ten female adult learners who represent a broad age spectrum of female adult learners – young adult, mid-life and older adult, ages 23 -72. The participants represented single women and wives, single and married mothers, widow, grandmother, divorcees.

## THE ANALYSIS PROCESS

An arts-based method assumed the students' art work as the starting point for analysis. Process was an interpretive, analytic tool. Drawing upon the analogous, connecting function of collage, I envisioned identifying relationships among and between ways of knowing - an epistemological approach drawn from the visual auto-ethnography. Transformation in the students was identified within dynamic,

interconnecting continuums of cognitive, affective, sensorial, spiritual, and relational ways of knowing – the five traditional ways of learning, perceiving, experiencing, and functioning drawn from developmental research (Erickson, 1959) and core to analysis of my visual auto-ethnography.

These ways of knowing activated, functioned and impacted each other simultaneously, presenting emerging possibilities that were not envisioned when the work began. Adjustment, alterations, shifts between and within ways of knowing occurred simultaneously. Activation of some or all of these areas stirred and challenged latent (or undervalued) aspects of self to participate with favored (or valued) aspects in a dynamic interaction and integration.

I examined and looked for connections and themes in my students' artwork through a process of introspection of my own artwork and writing, identifying mutual transformations. The multiple sources of arts-based, oral and written data by both students and me, the facilitator, together with repeated contact during the course delivery, provided face-to-face opportunities to check and confirm my observations and provide checks and balances for my assumptions, biases, and interpretations.

Drawing from a rhizomatic conceptualization of arts-based research (Deleuze & Guittari, 1986; Paley, 1995; Irwin, 2000; Springgay, 2000), a collagist approach to the research also privileged all entrances to the students' work without assigning positional value to any particular way of knowing. Any point of entry enabled discovery of new connections, new meanings and linkages within Self without reductive analysis. Each portal opened up new ways to perceive, experiment with, and assimilate their learning - adding, subtracting, changing - while maintaining the essential core sense of their Self.

As a component of the artist-teacher research experience, my simultaneous artistic process experiences included the research tools of field/process notes and art-making before and during the course delivery. In class, through my field notes and back in my private studio, I created my own art as part of the analytical process, paying particular attention to places of my discomfort, to areas where I felt tweaked or drawn, for the purpose of deconstructing my own assumptions, as I had in the visual autoethnography. The interplay of images and narrative created the ethnographic field for both the students and me to portray the analysis of our work.

The adult learning classroom is ripe for images and symbols by virtue of the volume, breadth and depth of experience that accompanies adult learners. This classroom was the embodiment of many archetypal situations, relationships and contexts originally depicted in the Vigeland Sculpture Park. Through artful encounter with collage and assemblage, the curriculum and studio experience of the class engaged the students to thoroughly, deeply, explore collage as a route to exploring and developing their imagination and creativity while also providing a framework from which to perceive and respond to their personal worlds and the world at large – an accelerated experience of living inquiry. What follows are a few examples of specific activities and experiences with this course. I included images of student work to illustrate the analysis process. (All names are pseudonyms.)



## ETHNOGRAPHIC ARTIFACTS

The first assignment, *Bring an Object to Introduce Yourself*, was an invitation for the women to introduce themselves to each other through personal objects of importance. Ethnographic artifacts, as introductory objects of value and affection, created a non-traditional, imagistic and accelerated way of saying “Hello, my name is\_\_\_\_\_”. The students engaged immediately through mutual curiosity at the idiosyncratic nature of each other’s objects, which, clustered together, might look like a shelf on a thrift or consignment shop.

Images 8  
Student  
Ethnographic  
Artifacts



The oddities and deep personal meanings provided each woman with means to cross over from her individual world of meaning-making and inducted them to the concept of world-making and symbolism by bridging to meaning-making in the classroom. The artifacts provided a relational challenge to accept ideas and experiences alien to one’s own while shortening the route to recognizing and appreciating symbolism. A precious artifact worked faster than words.



Anita, who had taken the class by default and within minutes wondered how she could get out of it, found herself “becoming intrigued by the stories of the women.” She added in her final paper, “It appears that maybe on the very first night, introducing ourselves through items that meant something to us, and adding to each other’s ideas, may have helped us to bond.” Anita resonated with the compassion and empathy between the women. Relationship and sharing of feelings kept Anita in the class instead of withdrawing as she was planning.

## THE VESSELS

The artful encounter with imagination and creativity was an experience in defamiliarization and disorientation for the students. Every student disclaimed creative abilities or declared an impediment in their creative life. In the spirit of alchemical transformation, I invited the students to create their own metaphoric vessel, a symbolic holding environment for their worries, desires, and hopes. The

oddity and enormity of the concept initially flummoxed them but their interpretations became representations of personal containment and holding for the remainder of the course.



Carol was surprised and amazed at how seriously the students took the project and what emotions were evoked by her and the other women's vessels. The diversity, but similarities surprised her, too. "Everyone used different approaches, however, when listening to the meaning of the students, the themes that emerged were so similar."



Rachel found each woman interesting and was curious to hear more of their stories. She described the class as "a group of strangers who quickly bonded by reflection on art. Art was our common bond. Art brought us together." She recognized that "Art brought empathy to the room" despite different backgrounds, ages, and living situations. She was left wanting to know more about art and her classmates.



Deep sharing emboldened and enabled Leah to take the risk of sharing her addiction history through her Vessel: “I am just going to get this out of the way. I am an addict. I am in recovery. I have been clean for two years and almost nine months.”



Doris, as an older woman who admittedly had lived through many difficult life experiences, portrayed the vessels as “small microcosms of a larger life, and whether that was their purpose or not, they managed to absorb us into the lives of their creators. We got to know each other a little better without hours of endless questions and answers. We learned more from the vessels than we would have been allowed to see by delving into each other’s minds with mere words.”

The students discovered their own ability to create and respect emotional safety and boundaries, to have a place to explore their passions, instill the concept of nesting and incubation, or create a place for rest and rejuvenation. In between bouts of laughter, there was considered reflection and wonderment.

When the vessels were paired with the narratives, the students metabolized the metaphor of vessel and we were all propelled into a deeper vessel - one of the group making. They grasped the concept that, as a class, as a learning community, we were simultaneously creating a vessel for the whole of our intense, short-term learning time together. A place to respectfully tend each other’s imaginations, experimentation and tentative expressions.

As educators, we need to be always mindful of creating spaces of activation, respect and safety for students. How much better that the women could participate in that creation through a deep understanding of their own and each other’s interpretation of a safe, generative site for creative exploration and growth.

By the end of the second class, the students started to challenge each other’s self-perception of non-creativity. The vessel projects had been executed with great imagination, care and intuitive nuances. Students were struck by the fact that most of them had claimed no artistic talent but agreed with Emily’s observation that “creativity lies dormant in all of us until it is presented with the right opportunity.”

## DEFAMILIARIZATION/DISORIENTING DILEMMA/CHAOS

Defamiliarization, a necessity in transformational learning, was an artistic and pedagogical technique to inject a dose of generative disorientation into the student's familiar and comfortable frames of reference. Defamiliarization discloses aspects of experience that we do not ordinarily see (Dewey, 1934). Rejection, avoidance and devaluation are possible responses in the classroom, as well as curiosity and imagination. Defamiliarization, too, may be experienced as disorienting and therefore, avoided or minimized. Empowering students to welcome and manage the stimulation of unfamiliarity, as opposed to warding off or avoiding challenge, is an essential challenge for transformational educators.

The collage assignment - Impediment/Inner Critic – was a challenge to each student. Anita was a weary adult learner and possibly shut down to manage her anxiety. But she was certain that time was her impediment. “Time is the thing that hinders me, the one thing that there never seems to be enough of so that I can do the things that are expected of me, and also pursue the things that I want to do.” She was dogged by a harsh internal over-seer “You don't have time for that ” to which she lamented “Where do I find time to do all the things that are expected of me?” She was unsure how to represent this underlying thought process in a collage and utterly convinced of her lack of imagination to figure it out. Her negative internal, cognitive script was an impediment to idea formation.

With the timed exercise pressing on her, she quickly slapped down “things that eat up all my time” in lush, formal, airy, white and golden symbols of cultural and traditional expectations. One orange color block stood out - distinct and separate, lively and vibrant, individualistic and rebellious. Anita perked up when fellow students noticed it and called it such. Students need to be seen and accepted for their authenticity. Sometimes authenticity emerges so obscurely, it can almost be missed. The bright color orange became a portal to further self-exploration.

Image 10  
Anita: Collage  
#1, Impediment/  
Inner Critic



In Collage #2 - Free Exploration - Anita continued with the theme of time - feeling and exploring the compression of time and expectations in daily life. Her white aesthetic became a field of energetic, vibrant colors. She depicted expectations and desires through images and prayerful text, and then again, ran out of time. She threw up her hands and quickly glued on the images, adding the text Just do it on a banner of the feisty, vibrant color orange. Affixed front and centre was an image which Anita described as a “self-determined woman with attitude”.

Image 11  
Anita: Collage #2,  
Free Expression

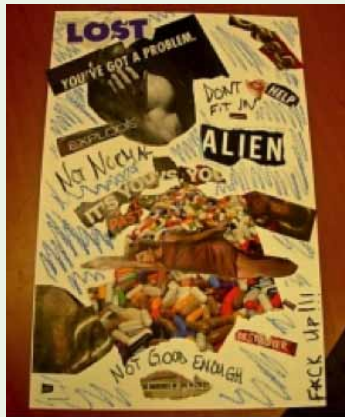


Despite her resistance to the class, Anita found herself musing about Collage #1 during the following week, considering ideas and ways to better display how what hinders her most. Between classes, she began to integrate her experiences to her work and personal life. She adroitly told her fellow classmates, “This class kind of sticks on you and I am going to remember it for a long, long time.” Anita referenced time, now as a friend, not an enemy, as providing her with perspective and the possibility of longitudinal reflection and integration.

Through the collage experience, Anita’s lethargy or resistance shifted into action. Anita became behaviourally activated to problem-solve. She reported extending her transforming cognition into daily life, a cognitive skill of transfer of learning, an objective of adult education (Knowles, 1990). She articulated how the work and discipline of artists is the same as work of any professional, just though a different medium (Booth, 1998). She found herself “looking at the way I perform tasks at work, and how I can be more creative and mature some of my amateur abilities. This is a reason I returned to school.” The discovery that she was capable of constructing new ideas and self-perceptions and could induce change through creative engagement was revelatory to Anita. She was happy she stayed in class. She stated: “Learning how to learn is the ultimate goal of education. I feel I reached that ultimate goal. I have learned and received an education here.”

It was valuable to address student's objections to creativity and learning up front - to invite impedance and resistance and give it creative expression and value so it would not unknowingly undermine the learning process. A negative thought form, an inner critic, a crushing idea, was thriving in every student. In some instances, it was so dominating, it threatened to overwhelm and sink mood and spirit, as in Leah's encounter with her post-heroin addiction inner script of "Lost. Alien. Not good enough. You've got a problem. F\* up. Don't fit in." If we do not acknowledge the presence of impediments to creative process, they will make their presence known anyway, typically in disagreeable or distracting ways.

Image 12  
Leah: Collage #1  
Impediment/  
Inner Critic



Working with images has the possibility to increase our agency with disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 2000) in that imagination is a conduit between the known and the unknown. Dewey (1934) and Greene (1995) assert that imagination is the portal for integrating the meaning of past and current experience. The exercise of imagination provided a way to approach what was unfamiliar and a way to navigate through disorienting situations. The students could entertain ideas and affect with immediacy and distance simultaneously, extracting and integrating understanding and meaning, when they were ready and able.

## A DIFFERENT FORM OF LITERACY

The student's experiences with imagination and creativity supported a different form of literacy, an embodied literacy conveyed through the aesthetics and expressiveness of art (Diaz, 2002; Springgay, et.al., 2008). Kelly food-collaged through progressive, performative explications of homemade pizza toppings before arriving to an abstracted glass vessel assemblage of colorful sand striations representing an integrative symbol for her journey in higher education.

Images 13  
Kelly: Final Free  
Expression –  
Food Collage and  
Assemblage



Dewey provided foundational recognition of the expressiveness of art as a language that is comprised of many forms, asserting that “each art medium says something that cannot be uttered as well or as completely in any other tongue” (1934).

Rachel was an adventurer with a self-declared desire for the aesthetically unique and extraordinary in life. However, she was in a messy, chaotic transition while moving in with her fiancée and step-children, dealing with his problematic ex-wife, her problematic parents, and loss of her beloved condo.

Rachel stewed over her first collage, gluing clumps of paper with fist thumps, pounding the stapler to attach the random, wildly circling raffia. Text and images hung over the torn edges of black paper. In the end, the collage looked like Rachel felt, and she was very pleased.

Image 14  
Rachel: Collage  
#1 Impediment/  
Inner Critic



After her expulsive expression, Rachel quietly settled into constructing a thoughtful and intentional textured map of the seaboard with a big red heart and symbols marking sites and actions of her life and loved ones. Rachel reestablished a sense of individual Self in the midst of joining with loved ones in her new relational setting.

Image 15  
Rachel: Collage #2  
Free Expression



Rachel then stapled Collage #2 over Collage #1, allowing looping raffia to hang over the edges. Collage #1 was present and not to be dismissed, but it was not permanently affixed. Provisional staples were a strong binder between elements, and if removed, she noted there was less damage than separating glued paper. Rachel was very pleased with her creations and the symbolism that expressed her Self and the ambivalence of her life-changing transition.

It would seem, mid-course, that Rachel's transformational learning was emerging along cognitive, symbolic, expressive, emotional, if not even therapeutic lines. Her collages were spontaneous, authentic expressions of internal and relational disorientation and cognitive and emotional reorganization during a significant life transition. But Rachel's final *Free Expression* project took everyone by surprise and jettisoned her aesthetic sensibilities into a new stance.

In *Free Expression*, Rachel attempted to paint a beautiful beach from a photo but lacked skills to create a representational painting to her liking and her inner critic screamed "Ugly!". Longing to follow her senses and desires, she set the photo aside. In changing her mind, a signal of a cognitive shift, she chose, instead, to let the brush just flow. Broad, loose brush strokes created a sense of wind that follows, pulls, lifts the eye up the hill of flowers. Incrementally-sized brush strokes and varying tones of green created an intimate, then kaleidoscopic perspective from behind succulent grass. A white frame connects the viewer's eye to the lightness and brightness of the horizon.

Image 16  
Rachel:  
Final Free Expression





In a process of portraying extreme situational, relational, and internal disorientation, Rachel's series of art projects became aesthetically ordered and meaningful, as did Rachel. She stated that creating and comparing naive but imaginative art awakened her mind about what is beautiful in life.

*"I have taken from this class the ability to look at moments from an artful experience. The class awakened me to the ability to see beauty in simple everyday things. The simplicity in ordinary items and occurrences is to be cherished. This class taught me that there is beauty in the ordinary."*

In response to the concentrated, intense encounter with new aesthetic expressions, Rachel collected experiences that changed her perception of beauty and outfitted her with changed cognitive and emotional responses. Multiple collagist sensory exposures triggered a different idea about beauty, one she loathed to appreciate.

From the approach of artist-teacher research, value is less on the actual art product and more on the experience of making the art (McIntyre-Latta, 2001; Diaz, 2004), which enlarged Rachel's possibilities of what defined beauty. Process was now a possibility. In awakening the ability to look at life through a different literacy and an appreciation of simplicity and process, Rachel had, perhaps, achieved the extraordinary - a transcendent experience of transformation.

## TRANSFORMATION MADE VISIBLE

Transformation in the students was identified within the same dynamic, interconnecting continuums of cognitive, affective, sensorial, spiritual, and relational ways of knowing (Erickson, 1959) as within my visual auto-ethnography through shifts of perspective, changes of affect and behavior, heightened aesthetic appreciation, and spiritual expression, and their concomitant effects on a core sense of self, evidenced through artistic, textual and verbal responses. Their transformations were characterized by movement of some sort –enlargement, contraction or shrinkage, emergence, disappearance, shifts in different directions, adjustment to ideas and changed feeling states; in many ways, a collagist experience.

In the vernacular, the collage experience may be considered an educational engine with six cylinders - an accelerated experience of perception. Through collage, the students accessed multiple perceptual modalities (visual, aural, sensory, olfactory, taste). They experienced and witnessed multiple ways of knowing (cognitive, affective, sensorial, spiritual, and relational). They collaged increasing layers and aspects of experience. They made choices about what to do with their perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and behaviour on a continuing basis, portrayed with life ephemera. The students layered, de-layered, painted over, stapled, glued, sewed, ripped, cut, and texturized their art work while communicating, altering, and adjusting their thoughts, ideas and emotions. Springgay (2004) states art allows us to have the direct experience of being in multiple places at once, feeling multiple emotions, and holding contradictory opinions.

## EMERGENCE OF TEXT AND TEXTURE

Transformational teaching may also include chaos experiences for the teacher. Teachers must be willing and able to participate in not knowing while simultaneously maintaining the learning space for the students.

During the research, in response to student processes which included unnerving complaints and critiques of the textbook and traditional classroom learning and increasingly self-confident declarations of their experiential learning, I unexpectedly began to doubt the credibility and veracity of my assumptions. Academic traditions assailed me. In response, I began studio construction of an art text, generated from a traditional textbook shipping box. The text cover is a layered assemblage of elements that created numerous tiny places and spaces of containment for intimate exploration and storage - itself, a vessel. The unbound pages are textural sheets from the students' and my multitudinous chosen materials in the collage process.

Image 17  
"Art Text". Collage.  
14" x 20".



In my artful and analytic response to the students, I extracted the emblematic symbol of the research, the blank white page (initially extracted from the white papier mache vessel), for which I created a lexicon:

*everything*  
*nothing*  
*beginning*  
*end*  
*all color*  
*no color*  
*finality*  
*possibility*

Together, we arrived full circle to the edges of learning on my metaphorical papier-mache vessel, this time dancing with a new-found sense of Self, initiative, and direction. The students and I experientially and visually portrayed thoughts and ideas – the process of cognition made visible. As the white papier mache vessel transformed into another textural, textual collage book form with numerous pages for actual filling, I bound it with a running stitch that evokes a spiral, returning quality of learning and experience, made visible through ever-evolving layers of experience.

Image 18

Textual, textural book/  
assemblage. 12" x 20".



Despite my collagist living inquiry and co-transformational, artist-teacher research, I recognized I had underestimated my words and my own art as valid and valuable contributions to the students and to the Academy. I am not apart from this research endeavor. Teachers and students alike bring their life, work experiences, and elements of knowledge to the classroom, which they then, piece, patch, glue, sew, staple together. Together, we construct the evolving formation of students' knowledge. This is what this research and construction of knowledge is about - the texture and text of our lives constructed from shared experiences. We are learners together.

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