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Abstract

What is the difference between research that uses art, research about art, and research through art? Is arts-based educational research (ABER) a method or medium? What does arts-based research look like? How is it used and evaluated? Editors Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund recruited an arresting array of contributors: paradigmatic pioneers, noted artist-scholars, as well as newcomers to the field. This volume condenses the history, unique features, social contributions, and controversy into a readable, scholarly, and practical text. Each artist-researcher develops a chapter comprised of multiple elements: biography, explanation of intent, critique, photos and open-ended questions. True to ABER epistemology, these contributors cultivate more questions than answers.

Keywords

Arts-based Research, Qualitative Research, Education

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Arts-Based Research in Education: A Review

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What is the difference between research that uses art, research about art, and research through art? Is arts-based educational research (ABER) a method or medium? What does arts-based research look like? How is it used and evaluated? Editors Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund recruited an arresting array of contributors: paradigmatic pioneers, noted artist-scholars, as well as newcomers to the field. This volume condenses the history, unique features, social contributions, and controversy into a readable, scholarly, and practical text. Each artist-researcher develops a chapter comprised of multiple elements: biography, explanation of intent, critique, photos and open-ended questions. True to ABER epistemology, these contributors cultivate more questions than answers. Key Words: Arts-based Research, Qualitative Research, and Education.

Arts-based research intrigues me because my own dissertation incorporates an art format. And yet, until I found Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor and Richard Siegesmund's *Arts-Based Research in Education: Foundations for Practice* (2008a), I struggled to clearly conceive how art and research intersect. Is art the data? The data-collecting instrument? The analysis? What is the difference between art that stimulates awareness or teaches and art that researches? After all, there must be tremendous overlap in formats: performance, film, poetry, painting, sculpture and so on. Clearly, ABER could adapt to almost any qualitative methodology. Narrative inquiry, ethnography, phenomenology and action research are obvious fits. But can a poem be a dissertation? And what about rigor and scholarship? I doubted that I could find one book that could sort all of this out. In the following review, I will share how Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor and Richard Siegesmund indeed do manage this by collaborating with a variety of artist-scholar-researchers to address the history of ABER, its importance as a research paradigm, and its relevance to education and qualitative theory. I will also review some of the authors' descriptions of ABER's unique characteristics and why it requires new forms of evaluation and attention to rigor. The contributors do not shy away from controversy. They admit that paradox and contradictions are inevitable. They even claim that it is desirable for arts-based research have multiple interpretations and generate more questions and reflection.

In just over a dozen pages, Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor (2008) gives a remarkably thorough history of ABER, then notes challenges, makes predictions, and admonishes artist-scholars to aim for quality in both art and science (while making the distinction between a blending of the two and art with an embedded scholarship). She also gives brief synopses of the featured artists' background and work. The ability to parlay so

much information in such short space, while avoiding overly dense or jargon-laden language, is a feature that makes this book both readable and useful.

In his conclusion of *The Enlightened Eye: Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice*, Eisner (1991) suggests that, “Teaching practices . . . that use resources from the visual world, from music and dance, and from poetry and literature can enable children to grasp what cannot be revealed in text” (p. 246). Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund (2008a) extend that concept by adding,

. . . arts-based researchers do more than help us see an external reality that heretofore has gone unnoticed by *reading* images. They actively form a new visual reality by *creating* images. The visual is not just a tool for recording, analyzing or interpreting data; it has become a tool for creating data. The visual has reached a new dimension. It has become *generative*. (p. 99)

Tom Barone (2008) concurs and argues that ABER is not a substitution for quantitative or even other forms of qualitative methods, but is another way of seeing, a way of broadening researchers’ ways of “knowing” and perceiving.

In this volume, Eisner (2008) identifies five tensions:

. . . first the tension between using open forms that yield diverse interpretations and forms that yield common understandings . . . second is that between the particular and the general. We want our single case research to extend beyond the single subject studied. A third tension is between the desire to aesthetically craft form and the desire to tell it like it is; aesthetic considerations can trump epistemological ones. A fourth tension is between the desire to pursue new questions and puzzlements and the need in the practical world for answers. Finally, there is the tension for arts-based research to seek what is novel or creative and the need to create work that has verisimilitude to the furniture of the world. (p. 25)

This tightrope walk will keep researchers mindful of the possibility that we can too easily sacrifice usefulness for creativity. These tensions address some specific ways ABER differs from art and other forms of research, how it expands the scope of research and how validity and generalizability are reconceptualized. Eisner addresses challenges to ABER’s legitimacy by predicting that:

. . . the greatest source of security concerning arts-based research is not in tight rationales articulated by academics who have vested interest in its use, but exemplary arts-based work which is difficult to dislike. In other words, deeds, not words, may be in the end the most persuasive source of support and the source that yields the highest levels of credibility. (p. 19)

In chapter three, Tom Barone (2008) continues the thread started by Cahnmann-Taylor and Eisner, filling in gaps and adding his own experiences and perspectives, focusing on educational reform and activism.

Individual artists' work comprises the bulk of this volume. Each submission is but a few pages long, but again packed with information. The book includes a generous number of photos, including portraits of each artist-researcher. The addition of the photo portraits along with the written biography further illustrates how visual media can add different kinds of information to the text. After a description of the work, its setting and purpose, each chapter ends with a set of questions designed to prompt the reader (or her students) to reflect and expand on the research. Here, for example, are questions from chapter one:

Cahnmann-Taylor distinguishes between hybrid forms and art for scholarship sake. Many others in this volume will make similar distinctions. In what ways are these distinctions helpful? Are there any dangers to making these types of distinctions? Are there types of scholARTistry that defy these binary categories? (p. 14)

Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund (2008) divide the artist-researchers' chapters into three sections: poetry, visual and performance. The artist-researchers come from diverse fields such as visual arts, anthropology, literature, theater, sociology, ethnography and music. This blending of science and art opens new ways of doing and presenting research to broader audiences. Cahnmann-Taylor (2008) writes:

Johnny Saldana (chapter 17) has used his twenty-five years of experience as a theater artist to produce what he calls "ethnodrama," transforming fieldwork data into scripts for live theater. One of Saldana's best-known ethnodramas is his adaptation of educational anthropologist Henry Wolcott's research into a play called *Finding my place: The Brad trilogy* (Saldana in Wolcott, 2002). In this ethnodrama Wolcott, the researcher, and Brad, his research participant, become characters in a script that dramatizes the research findings as well as the complicated and, at times, controversial nature of the research process when the researcher becomes intimately involved with a participant. (p. 10)

The emphasis on the visual, spatial, and aural makes me wish the editors could include other media such this audio link to Cahnmann-Taylor's ABER poetry (2009): <http://www.uga.edu/garev/audio/Cahnmann.mp3> so that the readers, too, could experience arts-based research in dimensions other than text and photo. Perhaps if the book is published in an ebook format this will be possible; ejournals such as *The Qualitative Report*, already have that capability.

The fourteen artists' chapters provide examples from diverse disciplines, and they help illuminate just some of the ways that arts-based research can be situated. But the major themes are to be found in the beginning chapters and the editors' conclusions. First, ABER is different than other forms of research and those differences add to the fields of knowledge and practical application by offering broader ways of perceiving.

Second, it is essential that arts-based education researchers be continuously reflective and critical regarding the quality and rigor of their processes.

It was serendipitous, then, that in the time between my readings and writing of this review, I attended a panel discussion “On Rigor in Arts-Based Research” (Bresler, Cahnmann-Taylor, Erickson, Garoian, Ho Sik Ying, & Siegesmund, 2010) that included both editors. Several of the artist-contributors were also in attendance. Discussions about how research rigor is achieved and evaluated supplemented debates regarding the quality of the art and the sophistication of the artist-researcher. While some believed that quality art and “connoisseurship” (Eisner, 1991) ensure rigor, others wondered if leaving out the novices and children might eliminate those voices. This debate illustrates a third point: there are no definitive answers to vital questions such as these. So, as new knowledge is generated, new and more complex questions develop. It is just this reflexivity, triggered by these new questions, that supports the rigor of arts-based research.

This text will appeal to doctoral students and faculty, including those from disciplines other than education. The multi-voiced and diverse artists’ offerings make it a useful resource, and the chapter-end questions lend value as a workbook. *Arts-Based Research in Education* (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008) is an important addition to qualitative theory. It provides clear explanations of arts-based research, its history, and ethical contributions.

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