# *In Practice*

## On Becoming a Professor: The Use of Paintings as a Method for Self-Study

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### Abstract

Art is an expression of the self and its creation assists in the process of reflectively analyzing one's own practice. Through this arts-based self-study project of myself as an instructor of the course *Narrative Perspectives on Exceptionalities: Cultural and Ethical Issues*, I created a series of paintings that supported the understanding of my own pedagogical practice. The importance of this study has to do with the empathic understanding of teaching teachers and the critical examination of myself beginning my career as an independent instructor in higher education. In order to delineate the nature of this self-study project, Arts-Based Educational Research (Barone, 2001) will first be delineated along with the current practices in arts-based self-study projects, accompanied by connections to theoretical understandings of teaching and learning. The discussion will conclude with an examination of the paintings as they relate to my own practice and the suppositions that I have drawn from this process.

*Keywords*: Arts-based self-study, teacher education, painting

### Arts-Based Inquiry Applied to Self-Study

I remember the first meeting I ever attended as an accepted member of a doctoral program. We were in room 407 with the current faculty members of the department. I was nervous not just because of my own self-doubt, but because I wanted to make a good impression on those I would be working with for the next several years. As part of the meeting, we were asked to write down on a giant Post-It® note what we felt was important in the education of students with exceptionalities. My mind was racing. What could I say that had not been said before? What if I said the wrong word in response to the question?

Immediately my mind harkened back to the day that my mother, due to my gross mistreatment of my siblings, made me look up the word empathy in the dictionary. As I reluctantly read it, something was planted in my mind. An understanding of others does not require pity or charity, but a shift in thought and the momentary removal of self-interest from the situation. So, when I said *empathy* as my word to put on the board a conversation was struck that fueled much of the examination of my scholarly self throughout my first year. Because I had never been a teacher of students labeled with disabilities, I needed to explore these two facets of empathy and disability in education in order to further my scholarly understanding of the seemingly abstract other.

I began this examination of myself as an instructor with this story because it allows for a theme to my self-study research and one that will be sewn throughout the novel project undertaken below. Empathy became an essential component in how I viewed my assets as an instructor and something that I hope to never lose sight of moving forward. In order

to frame this discussion from a scholarly standpoint, I will discuss the basis for arts-based research, the application of this process within a self-study project, its relationship to overall teaching and learning at the college level, and finally present my own artistic renderings and reflect upon these creations to delve into the complexities of what it means to profess.

## Arts-Based Educational Research

The application of arts-based research (ABER) is an invaluable asset to researchers in the field of education. Allowing participants to express their collective "selves" through methods such as poetry, dramatizations, drawing, sculpting, and painting (amongst many other mediums) can provide a level of insight that would not otherwise be wrought with formal questioning and observation alone. Barone (2001) noted that the themes of arts-based educational inquiry include empathy, divergent perspective taking, and a general notion of pushing the limits of what is considered traditional research. Pioneered by the existential and philosophical conceptualizations of Eisner (1991), ABER was constructed as a legitimate method for collecting and analyzing data through various disciplines in the arts. Eisner (1991) noted that ABER should have an illuminating effect, be generative, incisive, and generalizable in nature. This is very similar to the ways in which individuals interpret and understand pieces of art. We all have had those moments where we were emotionally affected by something taken in by our senses and although these notions were often difficult to define, they still had an impact that created some lasting impression.

When conducting research through an arts-based method, there are a number of constructs that are important to understand, as it allows the researcher a tentative framework for delving into this form of inquiry. Barone and Eisner (2006) discussed the purpose of ABER as being a form of inquiry that raises questions instead of seeking answers. The methods employed are not traditional and allow for a certain level of uncertainty. They noted that if all you are examining is validity and reliability, you are missing the point. However, within this open-ended genre, new perspectives are found that allow both the researcher and the consumer to examine the thoughts and feelings projected through images and word play that might not have been discovered otherwise. There are specific aesthetic principles in ABER that focus on the beauty in the creation of art and not necessarily in the conclusions that are drawn.

Barone and Eisner (2006) noted that there are certain design elements that are important to outline in order to meaningfully participate in ABER projects. The format of ABER is less conventional than a traditional research project and this allows for a certain level of freedom when constructing an in-depth inquiry. Additionally, the function of language within ABER is intended to be "evocative, contextual, and vernacular" (Barone & Eisner, 2006, p. 97) as the process of creation relates to a lived experience. This allows the researcher to reach a wider audience and creates a sense of connection with the individual creating the artistic work.

The concept of empathic understandings and virtual realities (or the qualitative method of allowing others to experience a phenomenon remotely) is also

important to note, as the intent of ABER is often to bring what is foreign into a new capacity through artistic expression and create a sense of change that can only be expressed through the arts (Barone & Eisner, 2006). The hope is that some change will occur in the person viewing the concept through its expression in art and come to a new understanding of that concept.  Living vicariously through the aesthetic experience of others can provide insight into not just what happened, but how it impacted the individual, the process they undertook to make sense of events and the ensuing internal conflicts that were created. In order to create a self-study project embodied with the spirit of ABER, empathy, discomfort, and a never-ending quest for the next question was undertaken.

**Arts-Based Self Study Method**

The self-study method in examining one's practice is an invaluable tool for instructors at all levels of the collegiate world (Samaras, 2011). This is because of the personal nature of such projects; the introspection of what is garnered from conducting a self-study method can allow for a clearer view of oneself within a particular context (Craig, 2009). The dissemination of this information to the greater community of practice also enhances others' understandings of their own "selves" and propagates the epistemological and pedagogical empathies of those working in higher education. I decided to adopt these concepts and focus on one particular self-study method related to the use of the arts as a medium for understanding one's practice.

The purpose of an arts-based self-study method is to provide a level of insight and self-reflection within a process of acute examination of one's own practice through the use of artistic mediums (Samaras &

Freese, 2006). Samaras (2010) frames her sociocultural theoretical orientation through the work of Vygotsky and the proposition that theory and practice must be examined in order to build on one's pedagogical knowledge. Arts-based self-study enhances the practitioner's understanding of him or herself in a way that would not be wrought otherwise. Samaras (2010) also noted that being a professor is a give-and-take relationship with colleagues, students, and the greater world of scholarly endeavors. In order to perpetuate these conceptualizations, the intention of this project was born from the spirit of self-exploration and the enhancement of practice in what is a very early career.

**Self-Study Project Rationale**

Undertaking this arts-based self-study project was initially a daunting task. This is because I have never truly considered myself an artist. Additionally, I have always been someone who enjoys a particular kind of abstract art. I see art as something outside the constraints of society, a place where only the expression of the *self* matters. Art allows for an existential connection with those that view it and I believe there are few other things in this world that can strike at the soul with a simple glance of the eyes.

I wanted to involve myself in this process and wondered if meaningful conclusions about the person I am could be dragged out from underneath the pile of articles that sits on my desk and in my mind. The fact that my first independent teaching venture was the course *Narrative Perspectives on Exceptionality: Cultural and Ethical Issues* helped tremendously, as I feel that all artists possess some form of

divergent exceptionality in the way they perceive the world. The following is a description of the process I went through, representations of my work, and the reflective process that allowed for a deeper understanding of my current and future self.

The basic question I sought to answer through this self-study project was: Who am I as an instructor in higher education?  I wanted to know how aspects of my former, current, and future self-intersected and affected the learning in my classroom. This was an important concept to convey, but the difficulty was in how to represent it in a personally meaningful way. Although there are a number of methods that could be used to express this sentiment, I chose to go outside of my comfort zone and undertake the visual representation of my practice through the use of paintings. Honestly, I had not painted a thing since I was in eighth grade. The thought of this saddened me, as I believe the forms of communication we use, as children can get lost in the whirlwind of words and the endless implementation of experimental designs. I sought to understand where all that creativity went and why these seemingly forgotten forms of expression are not used more often.

**Context of the Project**

The process of teaching and learning is a complicated construct at any level of education and one that has been studied in-depth at the college level (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2008; Entwistle & Ramsden 2013; Mckeough, Lupart, & Marini, 2010). Specifically, the examinations of the interactions between professor (or instructor) focus heavily on theories examined by Vygotsky and his conceptualizations about constructivism and social learning as best practices in teaching (Moll, 2013). Although the examination of the learning process between students and professors is not the focus of this project, it is worth noting that this hierarchical theory did lead the way in my understanding of my "self" as a first-time instructor in higher education. In order to express some of these elements, I chose painting as a medium because I felt it would capture what theory and postulation might not within the classroom. Painting was not something I had attempted before and I thought, being a first-time instructor, why not take on a novel task and attempt to make a meaningful connection. What I found through the reflections below directly relates to many of the concepts Vygotsky proposed for teaching and learning.

**Process**

I began my process with a blank slate and the purchase of a Weber Acrylic Paint Set® from Amazon®. Upon receiving this item, I was not sure what I had gotten myself into. My wife wondered the same thing. I knew nothing about mixing paint, brush strokes, or any of the fine elements that go into painting as an art form. I felt like a bit of a fraud. Nevertheless, I cracked it open and examined the relatively basic set up of the canvas and tray as well as about a dozen tubes of colored paint with names like vermillion, burnt sienna, and Hooker's green. I recall owning a 64-piece Crayola® crayon box as a child, but do not remember anything about Hooker's in that particular set. Regardless, I awaited my divine inspiration to hit me like a bolt of lightning (or a ton of bricks—whichever came first).

**First Painting**

The first idea for what I wanted to paint struck me in my class the following week. I noticed that when I want to emphasize a point, I talk with my hands. I

knew this about myself already, but decided that this would be the subject of my first painting. My hands as they swirl in front of the class. I took the blank canvas and outlined my digits, and then drew what I conceived to be the lines of what I wanted to paint. I then began to brush with the colors that I felt represented my mood, the

various aspects of my practice, as well as the students in my class. I also wanted to make it textured. I think this allows for a third dimension of creation and evokes a sense of change and palatable movement. The image in Figure 1 is what I created as my first painting.



*Figure 1.* My first painting.

I will admit this is my pre-natal stage of painting. I was not happy with this product, so much so, that I have not put a name to it and it remains simply as "My first painting." However, the creation of this particular piece taught me a lot about how I wanted to convey a sense of duality in a way that expressed conflict between what one can do with their hands. I used different colors on either side to represent this phenomenon and the meeting in the middle represents the ambiguous conflict that is generated, not just by me, but also by others who seek to hide agendas within certain statements and portrayals of information.

Colors became an important element of setting the mood for my first painting and this bled into the creation of the other pieces as well. Green, blue, and

yellow became positive, perhaps because of their soothing projection or how they occur in nature as hues of comfort. Imagine a sunny day beneath a giant green-leafed oak tree, the sky a seemingly endless light blue. Black and red became the colors of conflict within the paintings. Black represents the void to me. This is the endless space that is seemingly never-ending. I also felt that in this painting red was displayed to be alerting, a stop sign that constrains the flow of information between professor and student.

The circles in the upper part of the painting are the students depicted as more ambiguous figures. What I realized when I examined this painting was how I created a certain perspective around me and not others. I immediately understood why this was so wrong. I am the one teaching, but I

am not the one that matters most. I was so consumed by my own vanity in depicting an artistic representation of my hands that I had forgotten my audience, literally and figuratively. It was at that moment that I sought to create a piece of work that took into consideration the essential and foundational aspect of empathy. Although this is a self-study project, why would I not include the "whom" behind what I am teaching? Isn't this after all why we are here, to be around others? I believe my constructivist mentality was ignored in this first painting. Although in the situation I was depicting I was the more knowledgeable other, I perhaps felt trepidation in taking on that role. So, I painted an image that kept everything under my control. I needed to find a way to convey the interaction between who I was as an interactive instructor and take into consideration my students' perspective. I immediately began to trace out my next couple of paintings and then decided to not rush, but give this conceptualization a little time to marinate.

**Second Painting**

I began the next painting with a desire to flip the perspective of my teaching practices and capture *whom* I was teaching. However, I began to think of not just the individuals in the classroom, but also of the experiences they were having and where they sat in relation to my position at the head of the class. Not everyone pays attention in every class. I have been guilty of this same scholarly crime during my tenure as a student. Often laptops and phones are out and although most students do this in a subtle manner, there are those that blatantly project a sense that they could not care less if they were in attendance.

Perhaps this is something that I need to build upon in terms of my classroom management skills, but my first reaction was that I was the one who is to hold their attention, making the lure to distraction implicitly difficult. Despite these thoughts, I wanted to first depict what I perceived as a student who is paying attention. The painting below in Figure 2 is entitled "Pieces of Information." More than anything it felt like my break through, not as an artist, but as an emerging scholar understanding perspectives.



*Figure 2.* My second painting, *Pieces of Information*.

This particular painting can be looked at from multiple perspectives. I first sought to create a sense of flow between the ambiguous figure in the foreground and the silhouette in the background. However, the more I looked at it the more I realized how the shape in the foreground looks like someone's head and that perhaps this conflict of metaphysical space relates to understanding how information is absorbed by a student. Consequently, I believe the figure in the foreground represents the student and his or her perspective in my class. I am the figure in the middle right, while the screen projecting the lecture is represented by the yellow figure in the middle. The textured dots represent pieces of information being shared between this diligent student and myself. The colors are similar in both me and that individual with the newly acquired knowledge, which is represented by the intermixing of white dots.

I wanted to portray the fact that each of us has an individual conceptualization of the information being presented and if you are paying attention, these pieces of information interact with the heuristics of your knowledge and change in ways that might not otherwise be formed if you are not interacting with the material presented in the class. However, this interaction is more than just paying attention. It is actively attending and shaping your own thoughts and ideas that create a sense of learning. Of course, there will always be pieces of information that are discarded, represented by the white trail of dots off the page. Information being altered is symbolized by the other dots overcoming or mixing with each other, creating a conflict of construed thoughts and representations about the world (a good thing in my opinion).

In many ways, these conceptualizations represented in my painting are related to Vygotsky's theory of social development. Ideally, as a professor, I would want my students to learn through interactions (Moll, 2013). This could include an analysis of the materials presented, discussion amongst the whole class, and collaboration between fellow classmates. If these interactions can be introduced, students have the opportunity of constructing their knowledge on the topic of the course and not simply being filled with knowledge like empty vessels. This variance in lecture was something I loved while I was a student. My love for learning was the product of the exciting interaction of thought and discussion, along with multiple means of representation on a topic of great interest. This is a difficult outcome to achieve for any professor. But if a teacher does not focus on the *how* behind the learning process, little can be achieved in the way of social learning. I believe that this painting represents all that should occur in a vibrant classroom.

Going even further into the painting, the green and blue colors are soothing to me and represent not only the aforementioned vibrancy, but my emotional state while noticing that my students are involved. This is essential to my own satisfaction while teaching, but the more important consideration is how I am changing through this interaction. I depicted different colored dots in my silhouetted image as the active participation of the students altering my knowledge of the material. When this information is exchanged, the process allows me to determine how to present my material in a way that allows for the active engagement of all students. Again, this is a connection to how Vygotsky envisioned the

learning process to take place (Moll, 2013). To me, this painting represents everything I want out of being an instructor. I want to change, I want this process to be fluid, and want to be able to reach out and feel those protrusions of diversified, multi-dimensional communication through interactions with students.

**Third Painting**

There is always a flip side to this sentiment of positive interactions, so for the next piece I did not paint on a new pallet. Instead, I turned the previous painting around and sketched what I felt was a student disinterested and unengaged. This depiction is dark and fraught with colors of black and red. The pieces of information are now going nowhere. They are lost to the sea of emptiness inside of a missed opportunity. The creation of this piece brings to fruition exactly what I do not want to be as an instructor in higher education. Perhaps this is another reason why I painted this on the back of "Pieces of Information." I don't want to discard it, as I

cannot forget that situations such as the one depicted loom in the background. I believe this is the reason why I display the positive side outward. Denial is not something I want to practice; I want to be able to recognize the fact that "Pieces of Misinformation" exist and build upon the ways to alter these occurrences.

The original layout for this painting had the red and orange depicted as a laptop and a phone screen running simultaneously next to one another. However, I decided that these images should be a little more obscure because the information gathered from these tools distorts the information that is being presented in class (this obviously excludes those that are looking up pertinent information or following my PowerPoint). Again, the white dots represent pieces of information being presented on the board and from my discussion, but now they are being completely lost into the darkness on the left side of the painting.
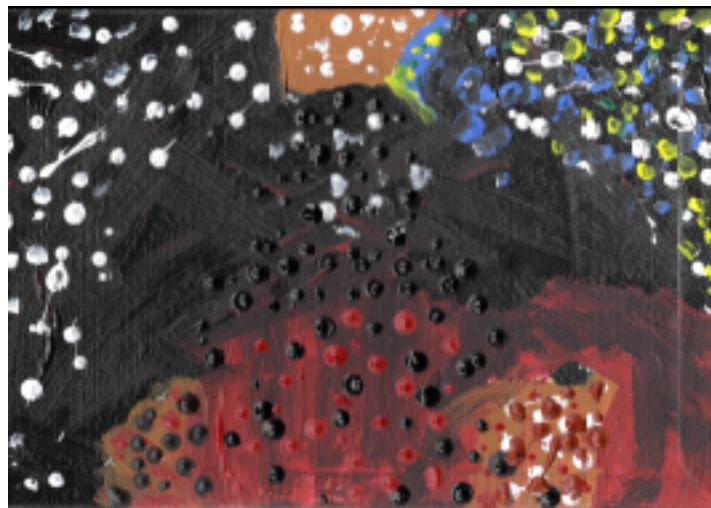


*Figure 3*. My third painting, *Pieces of Misinformation*.

The student is looking at other material and, whether they know it or not, are creating a sense of worry within me as

my hard work dissipates before being received or is overcome by other pieces of information as depicted in the bottom right

side of the painting (the orange dots overcoming the white dots). At the very top of the silhouette of me standing next to a now much blander screen is a little red and black smudge. This represents the consternation felt about those students not participating in class.

My pieces of information are also blown out of the scene and all those comforting blues, yellows, and greens, are now blocked by the disillusion of the student. However, there is still that glimmer (or fleck of yellow in the middle of the silhouette) that retains the hope that the student will mentally return to the class. Again, this is not ignoring the fact that students might have other issues on their mind. The painting depicts a sense of apathy and a lack of desire that has been purposefully implemented by the student. Disenchantment can be a powerful means of separating a professor from his or her class and a student from learning.

### Reflections on Creation

While creating these various works of art I could not help but be emotionally affected. My first painting elicited feelings of frustration and angst in not being able to put forth the ideas and portrayals I had originally constructed. "Pieces of Information" provided me with a sense of pride and accomplishment. I loved looking at it and almost felt that I did not want to sully its back with the darker side representing student apathy. After completing "Pieces of Misinformation," I felt a little sick. Perhaps I was being too insensitive and assuming that I was the center of the students' world. But now looking at what I had created, I realize that these are the two extremes and that most students fall somewhere in-between. We have our good days and our bad days and

the paintings represent a more abstract concept of sentiments held and lost within the context of the classroom.

I believe more than anything this self-study project has taught me to express my thoughts and feelings in a meaningful way and realize that this profession has its ups, downs, middles, and dead-ends. Nothing is perfect or absolute, but that is exactly what I love about higher education. In the true spirit of ABER, I pursued more questions and fewer answers. I created something outside of my comfort zone and believe that I will carry this with me to interviews, perhaps not as a visual representation of my work (unless the situation permits), but as a reminder that I need to consider my students, my passion, and my "self" in the world of academia and hold on to that original dream of being in school forever. I must never forget to first walk a mile in the other person's shoes before examining a perspective. When I was four-years-old I cried on my first day of kindergarten and wanted to go home with my mom. Who would have thought that 25 years later I would still be in hot pursuit of school as my life's ambition and passion? I believe in my aspirations and hope that I never stop exploring my inner artist.

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