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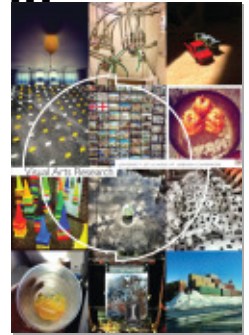
## **A Conversation About A/r/tography: What Are the Qualities of Living Inquiry That Foster a Qualitative Whole in Art Education?**

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Visual Arts Research, Volume 38, Number 2, Issue 75, Winter 2012,  
pp. 71-82 (Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press

DOI: 10.1353/var.2012.0025



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A Conversation About A/r/tography:  
 What Are the Qualities of Living  
 Inquiry That Foster a Qualitative  
 Whole in Art Education?

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*With an a/r/tographic lens, this study renders the journey of five art educators, their first memory of art-related experiences, paths to art education, and teaching through living inquiry. Teachers in this study have had extensive experience as leaders in multiple arts curriculum movements across time and programs. They reflect on art content to examine their own experiences in relation to art practice, evidence provided by high school students, their students' artwork, and historical art references. Key themes emerged concerning how experiences influence and are embodied in beliefs, understandings, and decision-making for our classrooms; how conversations can provide a stimulus for reflection; how thinking about the arts invites ambiguity in understanding; and how curriculum that addresses abstract concepts and thinking skills invites student engagement in inquiry, learning, and being awake to possibilities.*

Looking back at my 25 years as a high school art educator, I am reminded of the power I had in determining what my students would learn and the importance in implementing a curriculum that defined the ideas, values, and skills that students would add to their cognitive repertoire (Eisner, 2000). As I observe teachers in art classrooms today, I see a separation between my path and that of others. It is less clear to me as a visitor why the focus of the learning is selected, how growth is provoked, and if the intent reveals insight or curriculum judgment (Henderson & Kesson, 2004, pp. 4–5). Through living inquiry, I have attended in this study to qualities of experiences that have modified in some way the qualities of those who come after (Dewey, 1938).

Living inquiry provides a process “that lingers in the liminal spaces inside and outside—the in-between—of an a(artist) and r(researcher) and t(teacher). Vacillating between intimacy and distance, *a/r/tography* constructs research and knowledge as acts of complication” (Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, 2008, p. 84). My personal reflection provoked a series of questions that brought me into conversation with other teachers in this study: What experiences have instilled within us the practices of artist/researcher/teacher? What are the qualities that we value in arts education? How might we mine these qualities to bring clarity to the qualitative whole of arts education?

Five artists/researchers/teachers came together to examine their understanding of ideas found within theories of Eisner, Dewey, and Irwin; to consider the potential for those ideas to come to life in classrooms; and to pursue how these ideas and theories might impact student learning. This collaborative conversation group included Amber, a museum educator; Cathy and Jean, long time K–16 art educators; Linda, a K–12 art educator for eighteen years; and Morgan, who has taught K–12 art education for eight years. Each person has been recognized for her individual success in art education locally, statewide, or nationally.

Our conversation topics were selected based on classroom experiences in relation to important current issues in art education. The conversations were framed by Feldman’s (1995) guidelines of interchange, discourse, and talk:

To be considered conversation it must have certain characteristics. First, a conversation occurs between or among people. Second, it is a cooperative venture. Third there is a direction to conversation. Fourth, new understanding arises through conversation. And finally conversations . . . are not governed by the clock. (p. 6)

Feldman’s conversation guidelines offer an entry point to *a/r/tography* as a methodology that embraces relational acts of living inquiry that are participatory and evolutionary, and “it is this relational understanding of community, art, and research that shapes the methodology of *a/r/tography*” (Springgay et al., 2008, p. 84). In the next section, *a/r/tography* “is described as inherently about self as artist/researcher/teacher, yet it is also social as a group of art educators come together to engage in shared inquiries” (Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis, & Grauer, 2006, p. 1224).

### *A/r/tographic Perspectives*

Artists begin their work with a clean two-dimensional surface or an empty space that anticipates a three-dimensional form. A researcher faces a blank computer screen or writing tablet in search of words, sentences, and paragraphs. Teachers in empty classrooms anticipate students rushing in and breaking the silence. Most of

us who have placed ourselves in any one of these roles know the emotion of the person who sits in awe of the work before them. Artists, researchers, and teachers trust in their ability, as Eisner (2002) suggests, to

court the unknown, to work at the edge of incompetence and in the process to find oneself . . . to relinquish control and to surrender to a kind of qualitative envelopment, an immersion in the qualities of the work . . . to relinquish control, if only temporarily . . . to think within the constraints and affordances of a medium . . . ( p. 7)

Artists select their materials very carefully in relationship to the task at hand, inviting words or visual medium to interact with personal experience and known techniques, trusting their ability to create within a format that honors the task.

This study seeks methodological license to honor and allow for the artist, researcher, and teacher to see and act with an understanding of the relationship Aristotle articulated as three kinds of ‘thought’: knowing (theoria), doing (praxis), and making (poesis) (see Sullivan, 2000). *A/r/tography* invites such multiplicities of understanding to come together to explore the parts to the whole experience, working collaboratively, considering images as well as stories as artifact, and weaving them together with the thinking of others. In this way, *a/r/tography* provides access to the contours of this study.

The method of *a/r/tography* is grounded in the work of Irwin and Springgay, among others, and emphasizes “the roles of thought, not as separate entities, but as connected and integrated identities that remain ever present in our work” (Springgay et al., 2008, p. 28). As Irwin (2004) states, *a/r/tography* is about each of us “living a life of deep meaning enhanced through perceptual practices that reveal what was once hidden, create what has never been known, and imagine what we hope to achieve” (pp. 35–36).

This study begins with participants’ contoured memories of art in their lives. As *a/r/tographers*, they transformed their perceptions into experience and experience into perceptions, bringing new understanding to the complexity of artistic inquiry. Our group of five art educators drew upon our experiences of working in relationship with other local, state, and national art education initiatives. We were open to participatory and evolutionary learning, and as a result, our conversations became nonlinear and dynamic (Springgay et al., 2008, p. 84). We experimented with phrases or words that seemed to have escaped definition in practice by examining our personal artwork and learning through the arts, as well as our teaching and student artwork. Moreover, we looked to our experiences in a museum setting, referencing the lives and work of contemporary and historical artists, to generate the contours of living inquiry as artists, researchers, and teachers.

### Perceptions: Experiential Contours

Personal narratives, presented within conversations, became the first contour of our work. Each early memory started a path of becoming artists, teachers, and members of professional communities. Vivid experiences left every participant with details that lived on in their beliefs, understandings, and decision-making in their current classrooms, including stories of visiting a museum exhibit and writing a reflective journal to the continuing work of an artist who from an early age was often selected to represent her school in arts events. Individuals' humor, intellect, insight, and curiosity were woven through their stories of success in their unique yet complex life experiences.

As we approached our collaborative conversation, we asked: What will the role of the arts be? And what kind of thinking and learning do the arts promote and play in our discussions? Throughout my own practice, I have recognized our tendencies in education to be accepting of ideas, content issues, and curriculum adaptations without necessarily offering a critical examination of classroom practice. Linda, for example, selected problem solving as an issue. We later realized the significance of this choice as it is often cited as a necessary component of 21st-century learning and is identified with the National Art Education Association list of Eisner's *Ten Lessons the Arts Teach* (see <http://www.arteducators.org/advocacy/10-lessons-the-arts-teach>).

To maintain participants' words, ideas, stories, and personalities, the text of this work is presented as a script with notations that translate what is not said as well as transitions in time, context, and story. The following selected conversations illustrate the early artist experiences of one participant, Morgan, as well as the memories of another, Cathy, who attends to the complexity of perceptions of her experiences across time and place.

*Morgan:* I know the earliest memory I have of me doing anything artistic was when I was in diapers. I did a series on the circus because we had gone to the circus. I came home and got about ten pages on the different things, like the guy being shot out of cannon. I was really little but my mom saved it and then put it in my baby book.

As Morgan told the story, she remembered the events and the retelling of the event by her mother. She knew how unusual it was and yet saw the humor and specialness of her skill. Morgan was observing action-centered events and recording them within the context of visual narratives. Her comments document observations of nature that were so detailed and vibrant that she was not only recording what a nose looked like, she was also able to articulate why a nose should be drawn as a triangle instead of the schema provided by her teacher and fellow classmates.

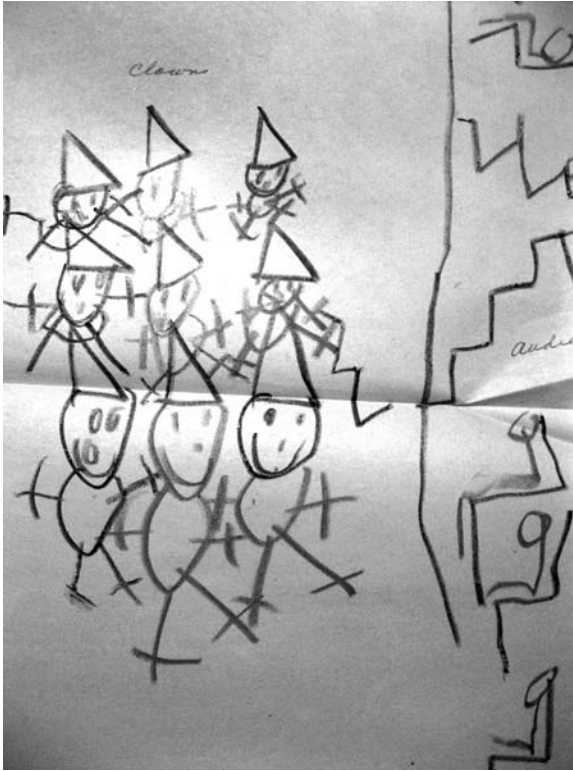


Figure 1. "Art the Circus,"  
Artist: Morgan, 1976. Title  
of Artwork: *At the Circus*  
[Crayon. 18/1 × 12/1].

*Morgan:* I remember an incident in preschool where we had to draw self-portraits and I made my nose a triangle. Students around me, my four-year-old peers, were very bothered by that because we all know that a nose is a circle. Or a half circle. I remember looking around at other people saying, "No, no, look at your nose. It's closer to a triangle." Then the teacher came over, and I remember her saying to me, "Well, your nose is probably more the shape of a triangle, but we draw it like a circle." I remember scribbling over the triangle because I felt a little defeated like, "Okay, so our nose is different than I perceive it," so I have this self-portrait and in the middle there's this big black hole where the nose used to be because I erased all existence of the triangle. . . . Today I'm a better teacher in art areas that I'm not as familiar with. Drawing my first year was very weak for me as an educator, even though it's my greatest strength for me as an artist. . . . It was pretty ugly and I reinvented my drawing curriculum for the next year.

For Morgan, what came easily to her seemed difficult to teach because she had never analyzed it before. The struggles and incremental steps others needed to grow within the discipline of drawing were not apparent to her.

As the conversations turned from first memories to our early thoughts about teaching, Cathy added a personal response that she had been thinking about over time.

*Cathy:* I visualize my experiences as an arc that included knowledge, connections, and empowerment. . . . I had impulses throughout my teaching career starting in 1967 that made me certain that there was more to teaching than that for which I was prepared. . . . Connecting art to my own experience and broader knowledge base was key to my staying engaged as an art teacher. . . . [*Quality experiences* (Dewey, 1938) confirmed my power as an agent of change . . . that once engaged in what I have described, there was no turning back. Teaching had to continue to take new forms and morph into something that was satisfying to me.

For many of us, there is an absence of reflective thinking at this critical time in our field. Once again the arts are being set aside in schools to make way for what is perceived as more important curricular needs of students. As art educators we are reminded, “To see, to perceive, is more than to recognize. It does not identify something present in terms of a past disconnected from it. The past is carried into the present so as to expand and deepen the content of the latter” (Dewey, 1934, p. 24).



Figure 2. “Collaborative Journey Begins,” Artist: Lorinda Rice, 2008. Title of Artwork: *Collaborative Journey Begins* [Acrylic. 30 × 40 in.].

## Conversations: The Contours In-Between

We were only a couple of minutes into our conversation about Eisner's paper when Linda jumped in with a personal connection (Eisner, 2000).

*Linda:* When I was looking back just a little while ago, I immediately remembered the part of the article I liked best was that the arts were the problem-solving piece for students that they don't get in the regular classroom. . . . [W]hen students are in my room, they want to know what it's supposed to look like, they want the answer.

Even though there is a focus on problem-solving skills as a goal for students, it is apparent that individual art educators, other content areas, and/or administrators may define problem solving differently. Linda defines problem solving as learning that involves individual interpretations of experiences, exploration of multiple options, recognition of differences as positive, and personal connection to both problems and solutions. Acknowledging the complexity of knowledge in all content areas, Cathy shifts to recognizing that we may minimize our students' understanding of concepts due to the content instructional models that guide our curricula.

*Cathy:* There are the arts, and there are these other things such as science, the concrete bodies of knowledge, and I think that our systems are making everybody function in terms of concrete bodies of knowledge, things that you can put into quantities.

*Amber:* I think schools are limiting and conditioning young people not to be able to form an opinion on their own, not to explore and discover on their own . . .

*Morgan:* Ultimately, the educational goals at our high school are to increase reading, writing, and problem solving, and art fits into problem solving in the way that they would categorize what we do and how we do it, and so I get a little bit of leverage. When it comes to our school improvement goals and the categorization of those three areas, I at least fit in one [*others say "yes" and nod*] and they will perhaps give me a little bit more support.

*Jean:* How did they see that it's problem solving?

*Morgan:* We tell them [*all laugh*].

An opening was provided for reconsidering the comfortable, known response and to talk about meaning-making beyond the specifics of time and place. As scholars, we examined art and ideas by unraveling their implications relationally. Can we engage in an inquiry process that lingers between artist/researcher/teacher? Through a participatory, living inquiry, can we seek the unexpected, evolutionary thinking and the complexity of ideas? (Springgay et al., 2008, p. 84). Can we continue to be engaged in a conversation long enough to break through the most expected responses to seek insight that will inform our understandings?



*Cathy:* critical thinking and problem solving . . .

*Linda:* So, what would you define process being versus problem solving? How would you discriminate between those two?

*Jean:* Are there any other terms like that that we get hung up on?

*Cathy:* It becomes sort of a general pattern and some of these terms, however powerful they may be, can be just part of the stuff you say because you are trying to legitimize whatever it is you're selling.

*Jean:* Yes . . . I think that we have individual answers that alter teaching practice. . . . I feel they are used without clarity in art classrooms. I thought it would be important for us to tackle . . . so I did a little research for problem solving and found these definitions.

*Linda:* This one says highly interactive and engaging. This is for critical thinking, learning in a multitude of techniques and tools, which would kind of fall under that problem solving or creative process that we define through our district.

*Morgan:* I don't think critical thinking necessarily has a resolution. Problem solving, having the word "solve" in it, leads me to believe that there is a conclusion that is made. Critical thinking, in my opinion, just seems a little bit more open-ended. It doesn't necessarily mean that you walk away with a right or wrong answer . . .

*Linda:* I do not see that creating something is just the craft of putting different materials together to create . . . it's actually deciding where those different materials are going to be placed . . . in a composition . . . and so they're weaving their way through this piece by going through those critical thinking stages. . . . I prompt that thinking through asking questions. "Wow, did you realize that you're going to do that?" And they say, "No, I didn't, but now that I see it, I can think back and do that."

Linda framed the action of learning around the voice of the artist as well as the power of guiding student learning through questions.

*Cathy:* This directional, structural, rational approach typically used involves clarifying the problem . . . describing, analyzing, identifying alternatives, assessing alternatives and choosing one, which is what we learned in high school when we took science. In an experiment you've got to figure what the problem is, you've got to analyze it with details . . .

*Linda:* Our school district . . . was working on the problem solving piece. . . . [T]hose four steps are: Ask the question; then define the problem in that question; and then you do the saturation, you find the information that you need to solve the problem; and then you do an incubation time. For us as specialists, and for me as an artist, that's my thumbnail sketch time when I put down a lot of different ideas that could possibly be the best idea. That's something that I require my students to do.



Figure 3. "Three Dump Trucks," Artist: Cindy Cronn, 2010. [Linocut. 12 × 16 in.].

Cathy went on to examine the emotion and process of creating a print as problem solving. Through this group inquiry, Cathy made an important connection to her work as artist/teacher/researcher. Her thinking, practice, and art process had evolved. Following an idea through the conversational contours of knowing had provided Cathy with a way to articulate relational acts of thinking between artist/researcher/teacher as living inquiry (Springgay et al., 2008, p. 84).

*Cathy:* I think that there are very few times in life, in schooling, where people are confronted by this open space that they have to somehow do something with. I mean mental space as well physical. So to me, problem solving is thinking of a way with a minimum of cues to make meaning. . . . I'm thinking that when we are teaching . . . if you give people too much, they are not solving problems. If you give them too much information, then they are not creating . . . you're answering the questions for them.

When Cathy reviewed the transcript of our conversation, she rethought her comments and moved from artist/teacher to researcher. She made the following notation next to her original statement:

*Cathy:* I do a final process portfolio and I think this idea of living inquiry is significant when doing that kind of processing. We are asking kids to take another look at something, find that spot when they felt good about what they had done in the past, envision what they want in the future, and build from their strengths to work on that vision! Now communicating that meaningfully to students is significant as I prepare to do that final. EGADS!!!!

Participants continued to examine additional student work and historical and contemporary images in order to push our thinking about problem solving. Through time and engagement, we tested our ability to find the complexity of qualities associated with problem solving and the implications for art students and art educators.

### Qualitative Wholes: Contours Always in the Making

Eisner's work has resonated with a/r/tographic inquiry in this study. In *Educating Artistic Vision*, Eisner (1997) describes the complexity of thought, feeling, problem solving, and the act of creation. As Cathy described, when creating her print, she was coping with the interaction of visual qualities as contributing to her thinking through materials, purposes, and processes. Cathy was visualizing the qualities that resulted in the qualitative whole or her print as an art form. As Eisner (1997) suggests:

What is mediated through thought are qualities, what is managed in process are qualities and what terminates at the end of a qualitative whole, an art form that expresses something by virtue of the way in which those qualities have been created and organized. (p. 114)

Akin to an artist mediating qualities within specific mediums and purposes toward a qualitative whole, the teacher mediates qualities of their disciplinary content, and experiences of students, who in turn pursue qualities that arrive at qualitative wholes in thought, knowing, and art works.

Our conversations were often models for making connections between life experiences and a/r/tographic perspectives. Each time we came together, we pushed our thinking and found new ways of describing our ideas and vocabulary. As individual qualities were woven in and out of each other's stories, we discussed the challenges of schools today and considered how our collaborative conversations could lead to enhanced student learning. It was not our intention to arrive at solutions but to investigate processes, current understanding, and possibilities for growth. This study generated key insights into the qualities of living inquiry that foster a qualitative whole in art education:



Figure 4. "Self Portrait," Artist: Amy Oblinger, 2008. [Cathy's Student, Paper Collage, 18 × 24 in.].

- Our experiences influence and embody our beliefs, understandings, and decision-making for our classrooms.
- Conversations can provide a stimulus for reflection when they are focused, guided by emergent questions, and shared with groups interested in providing diverse perspectives and experiences.
- Eisner's nine assertions of the kind of thinking employed in the arts and how they might appear in students' learning or art works are most often accessed through reflection rather than in art classrooms' processes of creating, talking, or thinking.

Our inquiry continues as we contemplate: What are the qualities of thought and process within art education? What terminates at the end of a qualitative whole? Perhaps it is an art form that expresses something by virtue of the way in which those qualities have been created and organized in our thoughts, processes, and art classrooms. These are the next questions that chart the direction of our practices and our movements as artists, researchers, and teachers in challenging times.

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