

RESEARCHING COMMUNITY ART EDUCATION: TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Introduction

Linda Szabad-Smyth

Our research is part of a two-year SSHRC-funded project looking at community art education. We conducted field studies to investigate teaching and learning in various community settings that serve as placement sites for the student teachers in the Major Program in Art Education. The areas of inquiry pertaining to the overall two-year project questioned how might community art education present us with new ways of teaching and learning, how might field studies contribute to our understanding of teaching and learning in the community and how might research-creation help student-teachers learn about themselves through art. This paper is about three research assistants' personal and individual accounts of conducting field studies in the community.

Data collection varied and consisted of interviews, observations, journal-keeping and visual documentation. These field studies looked at the teaching and learning experiences of undergraduate art educators, the teaching styles of professional mentors and the unique experiences of the participants who took part in the art programming designed by our student teachers.

The research assistants' accounts related to their interview experiences included recognizing the importance of trust, establishing a research relationship and being open to making changes to the research method. As far back as 1979, Spradley described "*developing rapport* and *eliciting information*" (p. 78) as "two distinct but complementary processes" (p. 78) related to interviewing. He went on to define four stages of the interview process starting with "apprehension," as the first phase of the process (p. 79). Since then other researchers have written guides that also elaborate on the significance of rapport in the research relationship (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992; Yow, 1994).

Seidman (2013) refers to building rapport as a “balancing act” (p. 98). He notes that “rapport implies getting along with each other, a harmony with, a conformity to, an affinity for one another” (p. 98) and cautions that leaning towards too much rapport can ultimately affect the outcome of the interview (p. 98).

What follows are the accounts given by Rosanna, Cindy and Petra about their experiences of gaining entry into their research sites and their attempts at collecting data. Rosanna talks about her study at the Potter’s guild and her struggle with connecting with the workshop participants. Cindy focuses on her experience of interviewing one participant of the Senior’s art group and how a research relationship was achieved. Petra shares her unique approach to documenting her observations and impressions through journal images and text. She highlights the value of visual journaling as a form of data collection.

Working on “not being there.”

Rosanna Ciciola-Izzo

As a graduate student and art educator undertaking the role of a research assistant for the first time, I did not realize to what extent issues and limitations arise when trust and familiarity are not established from the very beginning. What follows is my account of attempting to gain trust among a group of learners in a community setting.

The study was undertaken within the confines of a pottery workshop during the months of November to April. My role was to observe the teaching practices and learning that ensued between the mentor, the student teacher and adult learners. To my surprise, although I was an invited guest, my very first task was to cope with my position as an outsider. The following excerpt from my journal describes the situation that generated my state of self-consciousness and analysis.

I didn’t know what to expect from the first visit, but I guess the initial encounter was a little uncomfortable for both the site coordinator and myself... The students went about their business as though I wasn’t there, which felt kind of awkward. (Personal journal, Nov.6th, 2012)

Following this somewhat uncomfortable meeting, I sat in a corner and observed the learners. Most were older women. Their quiet conversations

reminded me of a quilting bee: women creating art within a context that allowed communication and bonding. At some point when I stepped outside, I noticed that the conversations became louder and more animated - in the same way that young students become noisier in the absence of their teacher. When I re-entered the room, the atmosphere grew quiet again and each learner re-assumed the “role” of the unselfconscious participant and I the unselfconscious researcher.

It is common knowledge that most people in communities may at times be suspicious of a researcher’s motives. Vast literature from various experienced researchers emphasize the importance of taking careful steps when conducting a study in a community (McDonald, Townsend, Cox, Paterson and Lefrenière, 2008). There is mention of respect and discretion as well as retaining cultural sensitivity when dealing with groups that have different cultural backgrounds (John, 1990; Zajano and Edisburg, 1993; Babbie, 2013). Then again, some studies often state that familiarity with a community’s practices or possessing attributes similar to community members can facilitate acceptance (England, 1994; Reinhartz, 1997; Bhopal, 2000). Ironically, it was this notion that hindered my initial contact with the group. As a white middle-aged mother, I assumed that since I possessed similar traits to the people being researched, it would allow me to create an instant bond. I was wrong.

From their perspective, I was neither a teacher nor “one of them”— I was an outsider from academia and thereby received with skepticism. As a result they were initially wary of engaging in a conversation, let alone of being interviewed. This situation made me reflect on my position as a researcher. I learned not to take anything for granted.

Over time, the learners eventually became accustomed to me. This facilitated communication and led them to be more open. It seemed the more I was present, the less they felt my presence until eventually, it almost felt as though I wasn’t there.

Developing a research relationship

Cindy Walker

One of the many practicum sites for Concordia Community Art Education student teachers is on the University campus. Friday mornings, around 9:00, many white haired (or, at least significantly older) students will be seen heading for the Art Education Undergraduate Studio to attend the “The Concordia Seniors’ Art Class.” These “mature” students are taught by two student teachers learning to become Art Educators.

I was privileged as a new graduate student to be a research assistant and collect data on the experiences of the community art student teachers and their students, “The Concordia Seniors.” I observed both students and teachers, and conducted individual interviews. Though I did not know exactly what to expect, I had my assumptions, having previously taught an art class at a Seniors’ residence. Yet, little did I imagine the rich, meaningful research experience I would encounter.

Each week, eight to twelve students gathered for class; the youngest was 63 years old, and the oldest was 83. The students were all women except for one. I conducted private semi-structured interviews with those who had agreed to be part of the research, totaling two teachers and six students. Each interview was recorded.

While in the classroom, I was very conscious of the fact I was only there to observe, and so I made an effort to refrain from interacting with the students, so not to distract the natural flow of the class. This became an increasing challenge, as I began to know the students and teachers from interviewing them. I would meet before and after each class with one student or teacher. We met in a quiet office, free from distractions. I had preplanned questions to guide the “conversation” and learned to be attentive to openings for further inquiry, but careful to allow the participants to co-construct the narratives being made (Coles and Knowles, 2001; Clandinin, 2013). In a short time, I realized I had been given a great privilege. Through these collaborative interactions, I developed deep respect and relationship with each person. Despite their age, I

began to realize they were very much like me, yet at the same time, they were very different, having experienced more than I could have imagined.

They easily shared their lives, in addition to their class experiences and perspectives. Through this, I changed. Through their honesty, my own bias and false assumptions were confronted (Cole and Knowles, 2001). In my first interview, a student humbly shared how “seniors” are often treated as “kindergarteners” and this was frustrating as a student, and as a member of society. I was humbled. This frankness allowed a new seeing, and an “empathetic regard” was enabled (Ayers, 1989, p. 13). Despite their great respect for my current education, they showed me a wisdom that books and theory could not teach. I grew to care deeply for them. They became not only “research participants”, but people whom I admired and felt honored to have in my life. They said they were “flattered” to be a part of the research, yet my own life was enriched, as I listened to their perspectives, experiences, and stories (Clandinin, 2013). I experienced a research partnership, but even more, I came to know them as friends.

As a qualitative researcher, I came to understand more of the power of respect, the importance of humble vulnerability, and the value of relationship. The research process allowed me to become a fellow student, a co-participant (Yow, 1994). In recognizing my assumptions and biases, new perspectives were discovered for expanded understanding. As “collaborators,” lives evolve and unfold together, and love and compassion become part of education. And so, people and actual living experiences are at the center, not merely data and analysis.

Using the visual journal as a research tool

Petra Zantingh

The YWCA serves as one of the community sites where our student art teachers from Concordia’s Art Education Program, can carry out their teaching practicums. As a research assistant I was asked to observe the student teachers. This involved various responsibilities and tasks. I attended the weekly

classes where I observed the student teachers and participants as they practiced art. As well, I interviewed the student teachers, social worker, and administrator, and transcribed and documented the interviews and classes. Initially this process seemed rather impersonal, detached, and clinical to me. But the open-ended and interesting interview questions helped me achieve a level of professionalism and gave me an overall perspective into this unique community. As I became more embedded in the class and came to know the student teachers and women participants, my position as researcher began to develop in different ways because of the knowledge I had gained from these interviews and conversations.

Because the population in this particular program was considered vulnerable, I was unable to directly interview the women so I had to find a more creative way to document that segment of the data. I decided to use a sketchbook journal as a tool to visually record what happened in the class every week. Working in this journal took the emphasis away from my observing the women and student teachers and became a transparent and participatory activity. In fact as the weeks progressed this visual journal became a point of some significance within the group. Using the visual journal as data collection helped me bridge the gap between clinical observer and participant. By partaking in the art activities, I gained another perspective on the protocols of instructional delivery and curriculum design, and worked from my place as an artist and educator. I often critically reflected on whether or not the art projects were appropriate, relevant, or even interesting to this population, taking into consideration their age and life experience.

The journal/sketchbook or visual journal is an important tool for artists as well as researchers and art educators. For artists it is a place to explore and work out new ideas on a smaller scale without commitment. For researchers and teachers it is a way “to engage in living research and to develop an embodied and relational understanding between self and others” (La Jevic and, 2008, p. 73). Visual journals are spaces for reflection, artistic expression, research documentation, and places to explore graphic and textual ideas (Sinner, 2011). My journal sketchbook entries became an integral component in

the research illustratively and as a “visual phenomenological” response to the teaching (Leavy, 2009). Through my own drawing and art practice I remained connected and embodied in the work that was revealed through conversation, interviews, and the artworks we created, giving me insight into the art-making process (La Jevic and Springgay, 2008; Leavy, 2009; Creswell, 2013).

In reviewing this journal and the observational research process, I reflected on some of the themes that were brought forward by this research such as art production, challenges, and relationships, and the role of visual data collection in field studies like the one at the YWCA. This also led me to consider how observation, interviews, and visual data are interwoven. I question whether they can all be interpreted using the same methods?

Conclusion

All three researchers at the start, claimed to have felt some form of what Spradley (1979) referred to as “apprehension” or “uncertainty” (p. 78-79) in an attempt to establish rapport. Seidman (2013) mentions that “issues of equity in an interviewing relationship are affected by the social identities that participants and interviewers bring to the interview” (p. 101). Added to this, Seidman notes that researchers should recognize the “issues of power” that can exist within the research relationship (p. 101). Lincoln (2001) wrote about “...*the inner tensions between achieving rapport and acknowledging social conflict, and the inability to achieve rapport as an interviewing phenomenon increasingly present in postmodern ethnographic fieldwork*” (p. 3). Lincoln however goes on to say that “When we are working in our own culture, with individual groups like ourselves, rapport, at least in its former psychological sense — a sympathetic relationship — may be possible” (p. 9). We may conclude from these field study experiences that over time, each of the researchers discovered her own personal research approach towards establishing rapport and towards attempting to build a successful research relationship with her participants.

We wish to thank SSHRC for their support in funding this project.

Thank-you to all the members of the research team: Dr. Anita Sinner (PI), Dr. Linda Szabad-Smyth (Co-Investigator), Dr. Kathleen Vaughan, (Co-

Investigator), Research Assistants: Rosanna Ciciola-Izzo, Tyler Hyde, Michel Levesque, Cindy Walker, Jennifer Wicks, Petra Zantingh.

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