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## How I Learned to Swim: The Visual Journal as a Companion to Creative Inquiry

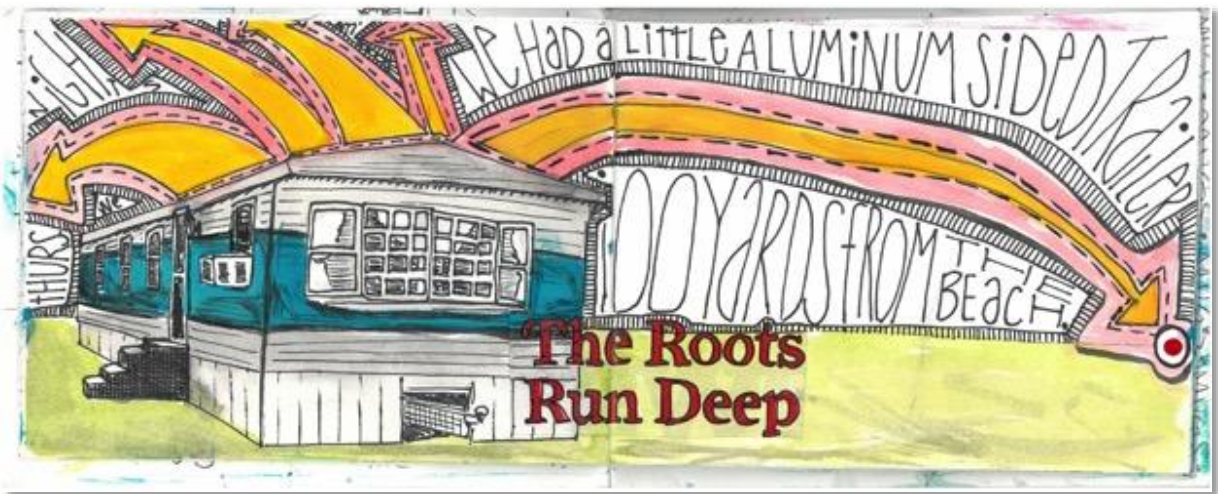
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### Abstract

In this paper, I discuss my engagement with a visual journal as a companion to creative research practice during my dissertation research. Grounded in arts based research methodologies; I explore visual journals in relationship to research, reflection and analytic processes. I begin with a discussion of the visual journal as an artifact of qualitative thought, including its epistemological, theoretical, and methodological undercurrents. Next, through a series of visual journal examples, I discuss how this methodological engagement influenced my research trajectory. I close the paper with a discussion of the implications for using a visual journal in research and offer suggestions for how to start your own creative research endeavors.

## Introduction



*We had a little aluminum sided trailer situated 100 yards from the North Carolina coastline. Thursday nights were filled with the sounds of scratching pencils racing to finish homework and the high pitched zipping of suitcases being packed, and Friday afternoons the whine of our conversion van could be heard during the four-hour car ride to our trailer at the beach. I learned to swim in the waters of North Carolina and every substantial memory from my childhood occurs near water, so it seems fitting this theme has endured into my academic career.*

My experiences with graduate school echo learning to swim with my father; where someone was always close enough to keep me from drowning but willing to let me flail. My engagement with research parallels body surfing; where most of the time you patiently wait for the perfect wave, then suddenly, for just a second, you feel like you are floating and falling all at the same time. Now as a teacher, maker, researcher, and assistant professor situated firmly in the world of art education, I find myself constantly searching for ways to allow my visual and written explorations to enter into a rhythmic tidal motion, working together to dictate the course of my research. This convergence, overlapping and rushing of ideas is much like the ocean, constant but always changing - a cacophony of elements colliding, creating an ebb and flow of thought.

Arts based educational research (Barone & Eisner, 2012) has allowed me to begin to find my voice as a scholar, but more specifically, the practice of visual/verbal journaling has allowed my writing and making to enter into a rhythmic pulsating motion propelling me outward. This paper is about my engagement with a visual journal as a companion to creative analysis during my dissertation research. I begin with an exploration of the visual journal as an artifact of qualitative thought, discussing its epistemological, theoretical and methodological

undercurrents. Following this, I discuss the context my interest in visual journaling emerged from and close with recommendations for engagement with a visual journal.

### Watch Out for Undercurrents



*Walking into the surf, surrounded by calm and quiet, I close my eyes and let the water engulf me and then, ever so softly, I feel a tugging. Forceful and purposeful this tugging is an undercurrent, running below me in opposition to the surface, sweeping me away, far down the beach. My dad taught me about undercurrents. I hear his voice vibrating in my chest as he said, “when caught in an undercurrent you should never panic, instead let the water sweep you out and then calmly swim parallel to shore until you are out of the undercurrent. And when all is clear begin to make your way back on the beach to safety.” I stopped, felt my body whoosh out into the ocean and then begin swimming sideways, fearful and nervous. I hear him whistling, the signal that I am too far out. I remind myself to be calm, breath and swim, the tugging stops. Emerging safely from the ocean my heart is racing, I am exhilarated and terrified all at the same time.*

Much like my childhood experience of being caught in an undercurrent, my engagement with the visual journal often came with undercurrents of its own. These were times that I felt epistemological, theoretical and methodological undercurrents tugging beneath the surface of my work, motivating a movement of thought, pushing and pulling. I see this paper, as a recollection of the parallel swimming I did when exploring the undercurrents of the visual journal as a creative companion to analysis during my dissertation research. These undercurrents were often overwhelming and at the same time monumental. In this paper, I hope to travel parallel to the shore, as I recall my experiences as a researcher using a visual journal to aide in creative analytic movement.

### **Epistemological Undercurrents**

The visual journal is different for everyone, and as such merits clarification in an attempt to create a backdrop for understanding it in relationship to this particular analytic process. There is a growing body of literature on the visual journal (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005; Costantino, 2013; Costantino, Guyotte, Kellam, & Walther; Gouzouasis, 2011; Irwin, Kind, & Springgay, 2005; Jones, 2008; La Jevic & Springgay, 2008a; Sinner, 2011; Wilson, 2004) with Kit Grauer's work as an early influence (Grauer, 1984; Grauer & Irwin, 2005; Grauer & Nath, 1998). As early as 1984, Grauer was exploring the combination of images and words in her article "Art and Writing: Enhancing Expression in Images and Words." Grauer (1984) observed a changing trend in British Columbia's elementary schools, English and Art were blurring the lines between their subject areas. She writes, "Art does not always illustrate language any more than language can always explain art. They are two different modes of communication that can, however, be used to complement and expand understandings" (Grauer, 1984, p. 32). The idea of combining the written and the visual continued to be of interest to Grauer, and in 1998 she, along with Anami Nath, published an article titled "The Visual Journal in Context". In this article, they explored a shared interest in images and words.

Image development is a constant challenge for artist and teacher alike. The type of record keeping, encouraged by the use of a visual journal, is not only used by artists. History shows that great thinkers have been recording, documenting and reflecting on their ideas using a variety of visual forms. One easily envisions Edison's light bulb sketches, Da Vinci's flying machines and, recently, Hawking's space-time diagrams. This recording of image making is a record of thinking, and step towards reflection and metacognition. Thinking about how we think moves us out of the world of reflex and allows us to look beyond the immediate situation (Grauer & Nath, 1998, p. 14-15).

Beginning in the late 90's, the concept of visual journaling began to have mass appeal as artists, teachers and researchers adopted the method for everything from arts based research to art therapy (Ahmad, 2011; Bieg, 2011; Deaver, 2009; Gouzouasis, 2011; Hall, 2011; Kierans, 2011; La Jevic & Springgay, 2008; Millian, 2012; Sanders-Bustle, 2008). Regardless of the environment, exploration of experience remained a fundamental goal of the visual journal in the classroom, therapy, and research settings.

#### *Recording Experience*

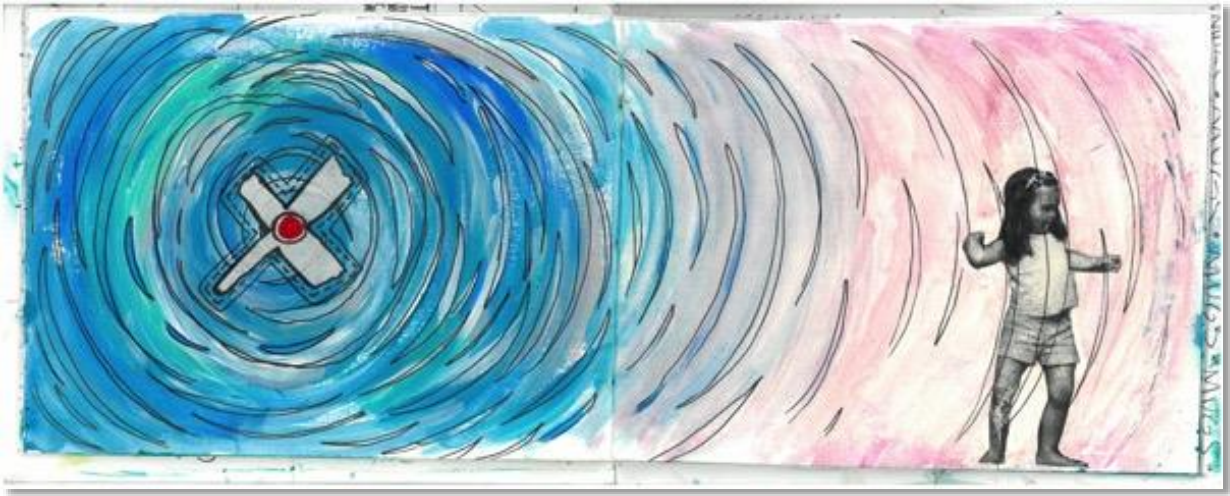
The journal is a place to record and explore ideas through text and image in an attempt to create tangible evidence of understanding as a process not a product (Grauer, 1984). "Art communicates by generating, recording and transmitting ideas...In very general terms, the arts

contribute to our personal efficacy as well as our interconnectedness with all living and spiritual entities” (Irwin, 2005, p. 3). In the visual journal, drawing, collage, painting, doodling and playing with materials are ways to see what someone is thinking and to document metacognitive processes (La Jevic & Springgay, 2008). When paired with textual and verbal tools, the visual journal “become[s] a compelling means to collaborative research” (Theron, Mitchell, Smith, & Stuart, 2011, p. 5). Visual journals are a place to engage and reflect on the world around you — you can write, draw, doodle, paste, rip, tear, crumble, or scribble all you want. The only limitations in the process are self-imposed.

### ***Studying Self***

Using the visual journal as a form of self-study is another common theme in many of the empirical sources cited herein. Roberto Millan (2012) explored the visual journal as a mode of artistic research. He found visual journals “illustrated forms and reader interpretation can be broadened and extended...as a narrative document of the artist’s personal experience” (Millan, 2012, p. 72). Using journals as a tool for qualitative research, Judith Davidson (2012) set out to explore the commonalities between technology and arts based research pursuits in what she titled “her journal project.” Davidson (2012) found evidence of five stages of visual activity within her eighteen-month exploration of her personal journals. These five stages, “creating data, organizing data, primary responses, secondary responses, and curation” (p.1), illustrated the connections between arts based explorations within a journal. Continuing to explore visual journals as a tool for researchers to engage in the research process creatively and reflectively, Sarah Deaver (2009) found visual journals to be an effective tool for her art therapy and counseling students to engage in professional research and growth. In Michelle Hersh’s (2012) dissertation, she explored the role the visual journal played in the art and research processes. Her findings indicated the journal is an effective means of engaging in self-study through art.

What this and other literature shows is the process of visual journaling as a form of creative self-study (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Embracing the postmodern assumption that the identity of the researcher can never be removed from the context of the research, self-study utilizes “biographical, autobiographical, and narrative forms of data collection and analysis” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p.40). While there is an abundance of research surrounding the visual journal as a tool artists and researchers to work in, I have not encountered the same swell in interest surrounding the visual journal as a more integrated companion to the research process; specifically, researchers using the visual journal to turn inward and engage in a creative practice focused on both the advancement of a research agenda and development of a researcher identity.

***Developing Researcher Identity***

*Standing on the shore looking out over the slick surface of the ocean I can feel the rock slowly rolling around in my hand. My brother taught me to skip rocks. When I was a kid, he carefully explained how to make dense beach stones appear weightless as it fluttered across the surface of the ocean. Each time the rock kissed the surface of the water, it created little ripples; resonating outwards these ripples became part of the ocean. Then, in an instant, the stone vanished, sinking to the bottom of the sea. Today I find myself standing on the beach smiling, still feeling the ghost of the stone rolling around in my hand, because secretly I know I have given something to the sea, as if a part of me is now sitting quietly on the ocean floor.*

When experiences begin to transform into thinking and reflection about an event or idea, the pages of the visual journal have the potential to create these same ripples of analytic and reflective thought. This reflection then moves from the pages of the journal and affects the trajectory of the researcher. Like the sensation of a stone that is no longer there, the journal becomes a reminder of the creative engagement and the image(s) continue to create and recreate understanding. Because visual journaling as a method of creative inquiry allows for researchers to look at their experience in detail and from different vantage points, it can prompt them to become more aware and reflexive of their own viewpoints, feelings, and actions as well as the impact of the creative work on self and other (Pithouse, 2011). “But more than this, I like the immediacy of drawings and their potential to move audiences” (Theron et al., 2011, p. 2). In this form of creative inquiry, the researcher engages in the creation of artwork as a way of creating meaning and knowledge, creating ripples in the surface to spread out and move away from the point of impact.

It is through this process of throwing the stone - of creating and engaging with data that knowledge begins to be constructed (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998). Process-based knowing

moves out of the realm of reflection as an scripted activity and into one where the whole body and mind respond to creative impulses (Sullivan, 2010). “Where others may talk of reflective action as a procedure or a protocol, artists’ practice, with less concern for functionalism, can be seen as a metacognitive and reflective response to the impulse of creativity” (Sullivan, 2010, p.86).



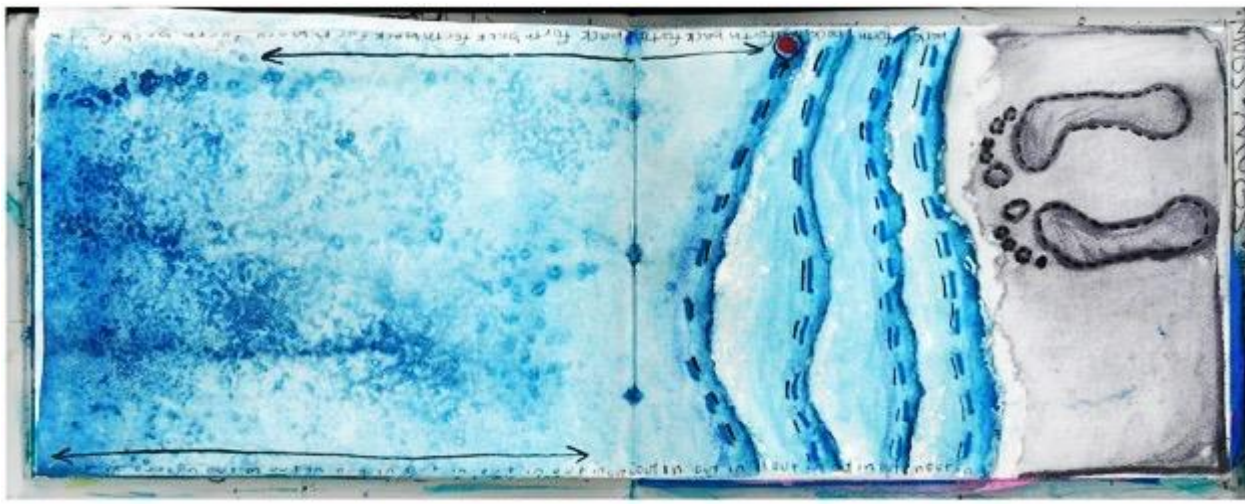
Like rock skipping is reliant on the wild-eyed child with a pocket of stones, this process-centered approach to research puts faith in the producer of the thing. When an artist creates, it is often someone else who interprets, but in creative inquiry in the visual journal, the producer is also the perceiver - the one that throws the stone also watches the ripples. This process/product relationship allows the knowledge gained through the process of creating to emerge with/through the interpretation. This form of creative inquiry includes the artwork as evidence of knowledge and at the same time moves beyond the page and gives the opportunity for meaningful contextualization of the

image. This contextualization allows for both artist and audience to gain understanding, while at the same time gives voice to the process the researcher moved through when creating. Image and the text work in tandem to reinforce emergent underlying meanings (Sullivan, 2010). It is this creative action of knowing through making that pushed me to consider the relevant theory surrounding my epistemological pulls.

### **Theoretical Undercurrents**

*We always had to wait for low tide. This was the best time to find shells and that was my mother and sister’s favorite thing to do at the beach. I often remember wondering why the beach was abandoned at high tide. In my mind, high tide exemplified the beach experience; the water and the sand no longer divided making it impossible to walk without the wetness finding your toes. High tide is the only time the ocean appears to devour the beach, washing away the footprints, sand castles, and moats, providing a much-needed reprieve from the busyness of the day. The tides move in and out, slowly, and predictably. If you have ever stayed on the beach during a tide change you know the feeling, how all of a sudden the sand is*

*consumed and the air is filled with the screams of children racing to keep their beach bags from getting wet, then just as quickly and unnoticed it falls back, leaving little lines, foamy traces of the edges where waves once kissed the shore.*



These reminders of the tide, subtly left on the shore are the remnants of an event, and serve as a fleeting reminder that life washed this way or that. Research experiences are like this. We spend time observing and thinking, writing and recording. We create our own remnants of the researched event. Through our research, these lived experiences transform into recorded moments, leaving foamy lines on the pages of the visual journal. Understanding knowledge as fleeting, experience as temporal and thinking as rhythmic, like the tides, brought me to the work of John Dewey and Hans Georg Gadamer. Dewey (1934) believed “[a]ll direct experience is qualitative, and qualities are what make life-experience itself directly precious” (p. 305). At the core of Dewey’s explanation is a conceptualization of qualitative inquiry not solely relegated to the scientist or philosopher, rather qualitative inquiry is a part of the rhythmic tidal pulls of experience as a whole. Considering qualitative thought as a rhythm of interactions between individuals and their environment allows an understanding of experience as a part to whole relationship - an understanding of knowledge as a churning, tidal pull, not a linear trajectory or finite outcome.

Like Dewey, Gadamer believed qualitative experience shaped our understandings of the world around us. However, for Gadamer understanding occurred through a three-part relationship among intellect, application, and agreement (Grondin, 2002). Gadamer believed agreement was a harmonious act (think tides); through language, we seek to create a harmony between what we know through intellectual and applicable knowledge. Gadamer wrote about the act of agreement occurring through conversation, dialogue, or other forms of language (Grondin, 2002). For Gadamer (1986, 2004), language was at the core of experience because to move



towards knowledge or understanding we must be able to put that understanding into words. This formation of language communicates to others and pushes knowledge out of the self and into the world. Essentially, language is what creates the foam lines on the shore. Language solidifies experience into something

These convergence points are not a thing or a place; unlike a point of reference, they are constantly shifting, never really existing, but somehow existing all at the same time. Similar to the idea of tidal lines, Dewey and Gadamer explore understanding and knowledge as a movement, a convergence of plains, constantly fluctuating in response to our engagement and exploration. This focus on reflective action and experience as evidence of thought has been a theoretical undercurrent in my conception of the visual journal as a companion to creative research. What is important in the process of visual journaling is the maker “be taken up by what he seeks to understand, that he responds, interprets, searches for words or [visual] articulation and thus understands”



(Grondin, 2002, p.42). Through the act of creating, we attempt to keep track of our thinking, creating lines of convergence where our ideas meet and bump up against one another. This documentation is a matter of reflective review, in which there is both discrimination and record of the significant features of a developing experience, and these all emerge from the creative mess that is the research process.

The visual journal is a place to document the knowledge found through the act of creating and playing with art in response to the messy act of research. These creative acts become both the vehicle for action and the collector of knowledge derived through action. By capturing the activity, we create a point of reference to return to, something documenting our understanding. This documentation of knowledge founded through action now brings me to the methodological undercurrents in my understanding of the visual journal as a companion to creative research endeavors.

### **Methodological Undercurrents**

Arts based research (ABR) is based in the practice of art making and recognizes that knowledge is multifaceted and grounded in sensory experiences informed by active involvement with subject matter (Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008). Most importantly, arts-based research pursuits, like visual journaling, are not constituted by an interweaving of established qualitative methods, but rather, recognize the emergence of a different kind of research based in the practice of art making (Irwin et al., 2005). Positioned at the place where image and text meet, visual journals explore the push and pull between these two modalities, insisting the complexity of these relationships is what constitutes meaning making. A central goal of this methodological practice is to understand research as a process instead of the predominate notion of research resulting in a product. Additionally, within this paradigm attention is paid to perception, rather than measurement, allowing for intuitive and sensual knowing to find a place in the research process (Rolling, 2013). As more is written about ABR, there is a growing acknowledgement that this paradigm addresses different research interests than its more traditional qualitative and quantitative counterparts. Simply put, ABR presents yet another way of knowing within the broad field of social science research (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Rolling, 2013).

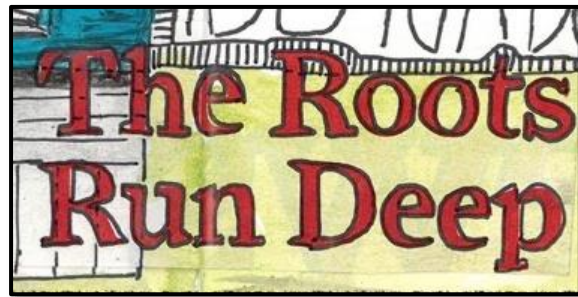
With an established understanding of the broader epistemological and ontological concerns of the ABR paradigm, I now want to situate myself within this paradigm. The goal of this section is to provide a methodological starting point for situating the visual journal as a method of creative inquiry honoring the epistemological and theoretical undercurrents previously discussed; one valuing knowledge acquired through the act of creating and maintaining ties to the hermeneutic principle of questioning and dialoging towards understanding. Within this section, I will explore the methodological work influencing my development of the visual journal as a creative companion to research activities. As a hermeneutically informed artist/teacher/researcher, I looked to Harold Pearse (1983, 1992) and Laurel Richardson (2005) for a framework to understand the role of art making and writing in this form of creative inquiry.

#### ***Interpretive-Hermeneutic Artmaking***

Harold Pearse has written about interpretive-hermeneutic art making as a theoretical understanding of arts based research and art education. Interpretive-hermeneutic art making is concerned with understanding the essence of human experience through a “meaningful, authentic intersubjective understanding” (Pearse, 1983, p.160). Drawing from Habermas’ (1971) interpretive-hermeneutic orientation, this focus acknowledges our relationship to the world as a reflective one. Within this mode of thinking about research, there is an emphasis on situational knowing through “grasping the structure of interpretive meaning” (Pearse, 1992, p.

245). Research informed by this interpretive hermeneutic stance sees art making as interested in “experientially meaningful, authentic intersubjective understanding which is an understanding based on the integration of many individuals perceptions” (Pearse, 1992, p. 245). Thinking in this way allows me to view the visual journaling process as a research endeavor attempting to dialogue with the ideas present across multiple data sets.

Emerging from the roots of hermeneutic philosophy, the interpretive-hermeneutic art-making paradigm acknowledges the core of research can be found in interpretation and process of art-making (Rolling, 2010, 2013). As a researcher interested in this kind of creative inquiry, I am seeking to understand and interpret each individual interaction with the visual journal as a unique occurrence rooted in research experiences. My fundamental goal is achieving a better understanding of and improving my practice through careful observation, interpretation, and creative analysis within the visual journal.



#### *Writing as Creative Analytic Practice*

While Pearse (1992) provides a comfortable place to situate the art-making element of visual journaling, writing is another key component of this form of creative inquiry. Laurel Richardson (2005) explores writing as a mode of inquiry and a key constituent in creative analytic practice. Creative analytic practice situates itself at the intersection of traditional social science goals and gives power to the narrative voice through reflexive forms of writing. Writing as a mode of inquiring into the world around us has become a key feature of Richardson’s work. She acknowledges the poststructuralist shift towards self and research as coexisting. “Knowing the self and knowing about the subject are intertwined, partial, historical local knowledges. Poststructuralism, then, permits – even invites or incites – us to reflect on our method and to explore new ways of knowing” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 962). I see the visual journal as a way of creatively inquiring into our own understanding. Embracing the power of writing towards a sense of becoming and not a sense of knowing absolutes is central value of the visual journal (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

*I am  
(researching)  
the process  
of my own doing*

(Irwin & Cosson, 2004, p. 18)



Furthering this “document[ation] of becoming” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 967), I have found meaning and understanding manifest through the juxtaposition of images with text, creating a physically and conceptually layered exploration of who we are becoming inside of and in relationship to our research projects. As a companion to exploration and research, the visual journal embodies the practice of embracing text and image to create new, more complex understandings. Much like my relationship with water, my connection with research is entrenched in a need for new experiences. As researchers, we are collectors of these new experiences; sifting through our senses we navigate the research carefully and thoughtfully, and for me this is best achieved through art and writing activities, like those present in the visual journal.

### Never Swim Alone

*Me: “I’m headed to the beach.”*

*Mom and Dad (in sync): “With who?”*

*Me: “uh....no one? I’m just going to jump in before I go to work”*

*Mom: “why don’t you see if Elizabeth will go?”*

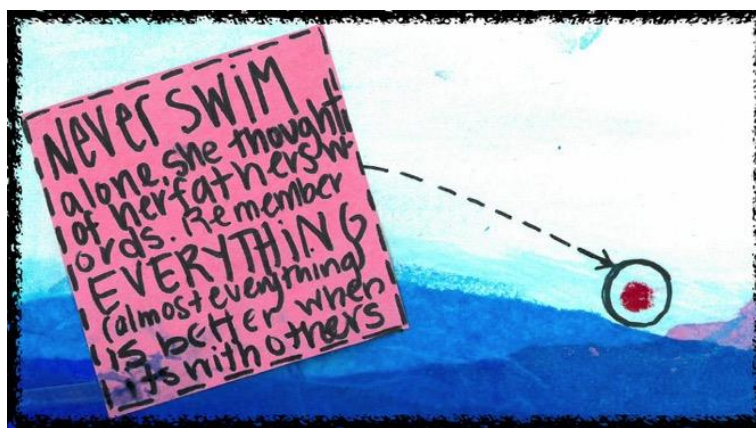
*Dad: “yeah! Never swim alone, you know better!”*



The research project this methodological discussion stems from aimed at exploring the visual journal as a companion to a course focused on art in the elementary school. I conducted the study in a large southern university and selected nine female participants from a convenience sample drawn from a pre-service education course focused on integration of art concepts in the elementary classroom (note no males were enrolled in the course during the semester of study). Students completed and submitted course assignments, their visual/verbal journaling activities focused on the development of a teacher identity through visual and verbal thinking. The study focused on the role of visual/verbal thinking in a higher education context; however, an additional aim of the research project was to explore and develop the visual journal as a method of creative inquiry. This article is interested in the latter.

While the initial goal for the study was to explore my students' work in a visual journal, I cannot help but draw connections between the themes from my dissertation research project and my own creative work in the visual journal. During the research process, I found myself using the visual journal as a creative companion to data collection and analysis. The warning of my parents reverberated in my head, *never swim alone*. Research is like this - chaotic, rough, disorienting, but also calming, cleansing, and clarifying - both experiences best shared with others. I found myself viewing the visual journal as a research companion; one where I was using the same tools, concepts and techniques my students did, to dialogue with their practice and course concepts. While we were looking for different things, we both shared in a search for understanding, and it is through this that we both came to know things about our practice and ourselves, and subsequently found a companion for our thinking, ensuring we would never again swim alone.

What I have discovered through my work in the visual journal is that it served as an outlet for research envisioned as a creative

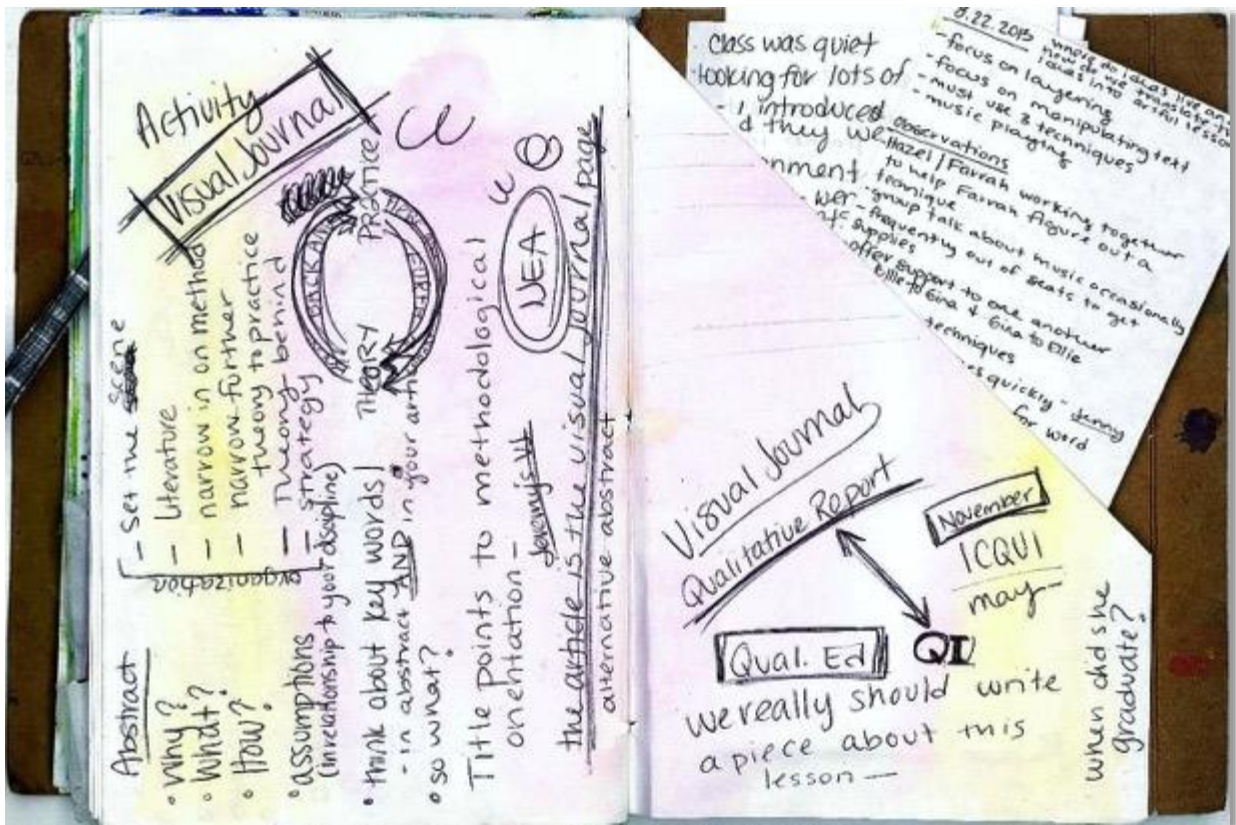


practice. Much like my students, I found myself using the visual journal to make sense of ideas and concepts, but also to make those ideas and concepts visible to others (Rolling, 2013). These are the private and public movements of research, both making sense of and making visible; however, in traditional research, we are often first making sense of, and then through our writing making our understanding visible to others. As an arts based practice for researchers to engage in creative analytic practice (CAP), I believe the power of the visual journal is the opportunity to engage in practice that works through both of these processes

simultaneously (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

Like other means of ABR and CAP, the visual journal creates a space where the process of thinking is inherent in the end product, and unlike more traditional means of visual thinking (painting, sculpture, etc.), combines the planning stage with the final product. Many artists use a journal to plan for final work; however, when thinking of my work in the visual journal during this research project, I realize the journal became a place to first plan and then produce. These processes happened on the same page and often in tandem with one another. The images and descriptions that follow show the various ways I used my visual journal as a companion to creative inquiry in my own dissertation research project.

***The Visual Journal as a Companion to Writing***



During the research process, specifically in the planning and write-up phases of the project, I found myself using my visual journal as a place to explore ideas through writing. The journal I worked in was filled with blank, line-less white pages, offering me a space to engage in non-linear writing focused on planning and thinking through both the research process and what would happen once my dissertation ended. The page above shows not only my planning for

organizational elements of my dissertation, but also shows my active thinking about what would happen to my research once I graduated. In the pocket to the right, I kept little pieces of paper with notes and observations, creating written cues for me to return to later; in fact it was in many of these memos and notes that I stumbled upon became the warranted assertions (Boyles, 2006) I elaborated on for my dissertation work. Much like Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) discussed, the “writing process and the writing product [as] deeply intertwined” (p.962), within this process and product relationship, thinking through writing is as important as final recorded thoughts. I would challenge other researchers to begin by writing things down; write them this way and that; write them the way they float around in your head. It does not matter how you write them, or even if you can read all of them later, but rather the importance lies in the practice of writing through our thinking, writing towards an understanding, writing around, under, over and between ideas. “There is no such thing as ‘getting it right,’ only ‘getting it’ differently contoured and nuanced” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 962).

*The Visual Journal as a Companion to Practitioner Inquiry*



As an artist/teacher/researcher grounded in both hermeneutics and arts based theory and methods, I found the visual journal to be a place to dialogue, question, and creatively engage my immediate observations and field notes. While the initial goal of my journaling was to improve my teaching practice, I found that the journal pages documenting my observations and critical thinking surrounding the classroom environment possessed valuable visual data. These pages provided a starting point for moving theory into the realm of action. In the image above you can see how I explored the lesson, practiced with materials, documented observations, asked and answered questions. The page shows the thinking I documented during one day, and later, when I returned to these pages, I could not only see my inner dialogue and initial interpretations surrounding classroom encounters, but I also found valuable feedback about how to go about teaching the course in more effective ways. Often as a teacher, I can feel when a class is spiraling outside of the prescribed agenda; however, once I pack up my books and close down my computer, I return to my normal life, pushing that experience away until it becomes a silent and fleeting thought. The result being a repeating of past mistakes, but by documenting my internal dialogue with my field notes and observations, I am able to actively engage in my pedagogical choices and allow the practice of teaching to change and grow.

**Visual Journal as a Companion to Field Note Exploration**





While developing my own practice is a central tenant of the artist/teacher/researcher stance, I also acknowledge that some researchers are exploring research settings that they are not directly a part of. For these researchers, journals can still be a valuable resource once the writing (see previous recommendation) is complete. By having a space to informally write, draw, and think around ideas or observations, I was able to actively engage my data during the research process. Thinking through my data with images and words offered me a space I could close and walk away from or even paint and collage over. This opportunity to strike from the record or layer emergent meanings allowed the opportunity to make mistakes. Rather than thinking of these instances as mistakes, I found they began to present themselves as layers of thinking. In the example above, I explored the relationships between student responses to an activity by mapping out the themes I saw in my writing. The drawings, collages, and paint became layers of my own thinking process. After each class session, I took 10-15 minutes to review my notes and then an additional 20-30 to journal around those ideas. This process brought me closer to my data and documented my immediate thinking and brainstorming. I would challenge other researchers to do the same. Once you are comfortable with writing outside the lines, begin to collage, make connections, and map your experiences.

### *The Visual Journal as a Companion to Theme Development*



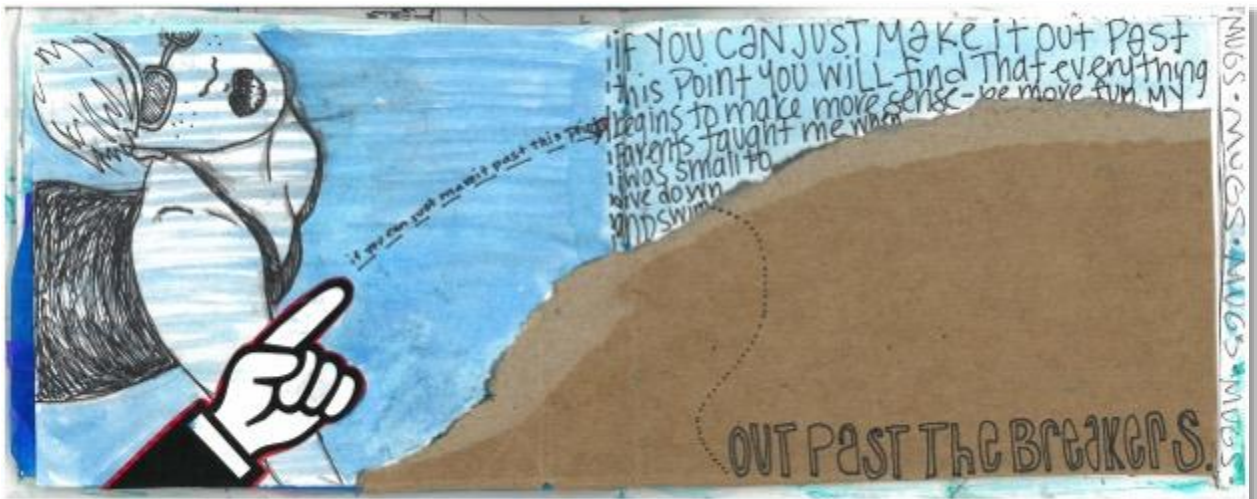
Mapping the experience of research allowed me to see connections in my work I would have not been aware of otherwise, and it is this connectivity that aides in the development of emergent themes or warranted assertions. When I code and categorize my data, I often find myself naming characteristics and titling themes; however, might we be more open to identifying and locating patterns in our research if we resist the urge to name them? In my own work with visual data, I often find it difficult to name a category because the naming occurs through language, and the data exists in images. This frustration with the naming of a theme continues to push me to find new ways to create connections and develop assertions in my research. The image above shows how I used my visual journal as a place to collect images I was seeing in my student's work, to collage words from my own reflections and ruminations, and then to create visual connections between my words and student artwork. Through this visual-verbal theme development, I noticed my openness to considering how ideas fit together and built towards an overarching concept, rather than forcing images to fall under a specific language driven code. This specific realization forces me to consider the power of the visual journal as an artifact that moves beyond just representing data. Instead, it becomes to a place to dialogue with your data and to use both words and images to find and express what the ideas in your research mean. More specifically, my work in the journal allowed visual data to accumulate and collect in visual ways; processes that I found mirrored the data itself and lead to insightful realizations about the work of my participants. Essentially the process allowed my analysis to move beyond what existed and represented in the data as generative and fluid.

### *The Visual Journal as a Companion to Theory and Practice Relationships*



I have found the visual journal goes beyond theme development and reflection by providing researchers the opportunity to consider the complex and ever evolving relationship between theory and practice. When working within a research project, it is often helpful to step outside the collected data and field notes to consider how your research is informing your practice at large. I have found in these spaces of deep thinking and conceptualizing theory, new insights into what research can look like emerge. While a specific research project often has a primary focus, how our methods and theory fit within the broader field of ABR pursuits should also be at the forefront of our thinking. Through intense consideration of how our individual projects and theories influence the broader world of research, we can try to push our own work into other fields and other spaces. Research involves a reciprocating movement. We create our work. We collect our data. We disseminate our findings. Others read that work and move towards their own projects; our collaborations are what grow the field of arts based research. The image I chose for this section is my exploration of how my practice, product, and process fit within the world of ABR. While working on this page, I began to see how my work fit into a world that may share some common ground with qualitative work; but is also deeply entrenched in an understanding of art-making as a way of coming to know the world. Through frequent explorations of theory and practice relationships, perhaps we can access new ideas about our work and begin share those ideas with others in visual ways, ensuring the ripples continue outward, and we are never caught swimming alone.

### Get Out Past the Breakers

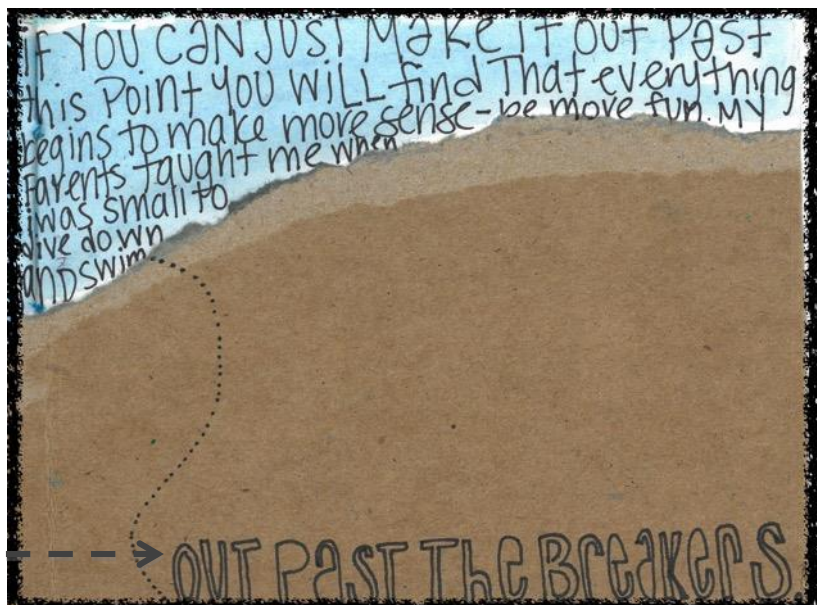





*The waves are moving up and in, followed by down and out. I can feel the water pulling me and pushing me, crashing over me. My eyes are watering. Cough. Sneeze. Sand. Shells. My knees scratch the bottom, the fine sand has turned to rough sand paper, and compacted on the ocean floor it now grinds my body to a halt. I stand up, disoriented, look around. I see*






them in the distance, slowly floating up and down, waving for me to come out and join them. I hear someone yell, "you just have to get out past the breakers, and then it's calm!"

Often, I read articles about methodological activities and once I finish, I find myself wondering how would I do this in my own research. What would this process look like in my setting, with my participants? When embarking on any new research practice I return to the feeling of being knocked down by waves, seeing the goal in the distance but meeting resistance in my attempts to reach them. These questions and frustrations are what motivated the final section of this paper. In an effort to provide guidance to those who wish to begin maintaining a visual journal, I have developed a list of several recommendations for taking up the visual journaling process in your own work. I see this final section as a challenge to see beyond immediate constraints and provide an impetus to find the time and space to create in a visual verbal journal or even just to begin to explore research in new, creative ways.

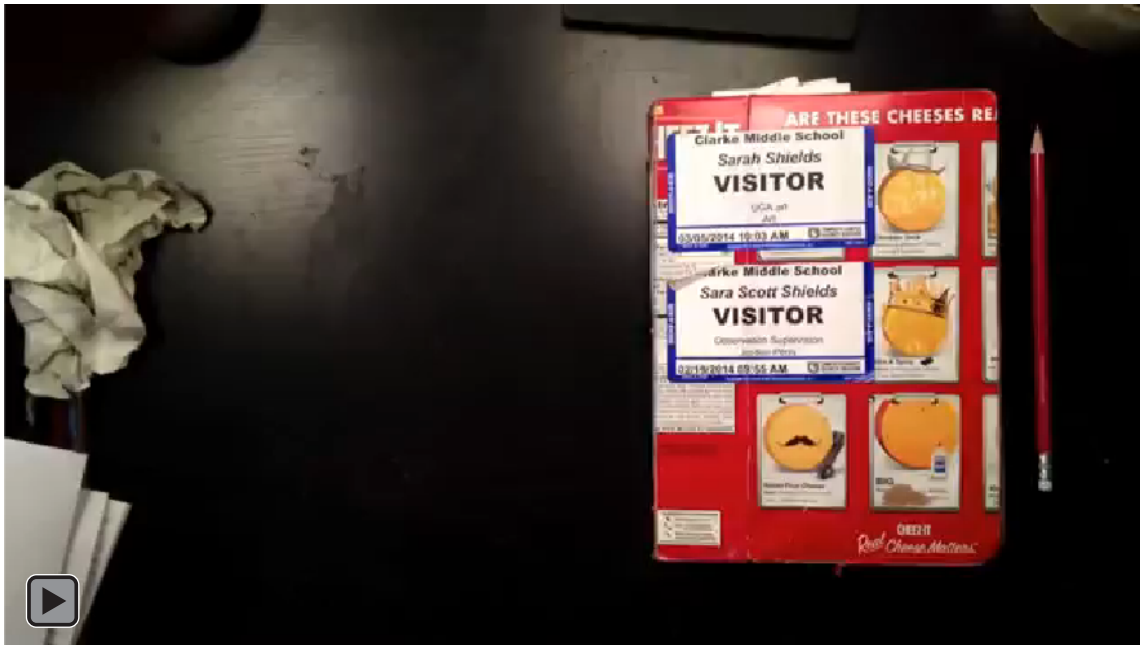
What follows are my own suggestions for swimming out past the breakers. New research practices are difficult to navigate, and creative activities are sometimes even more cumbersome, so I hope these recommendations push you to swim



-  Consider using the visual journal to explicitly discuss and engage the topic of your process of inquiry. By reflecting on and documenting your process, you will create a point of reference to return to in later stages of your work.
-  Consider using a wide range of techniques and mediums in the visual journal. This literal layering of materials allows you to conceptually layer your ideas. Push yourself to discover new techniques, and think of how the technique itself can serve as a representation for what you are trying to understand.
-  Often it is helpful to begin a journaling exploration with a question, but remember the goal of the journaling is not to answer the question, but rather engage the question in search for new understandings.

-  *Be open to the process of questioning within the pages of your visual journal and allow new questions to emerge and guide your work in the journal. Through this process of questioning, consciously seek out and find ways to foster an appreciation of intuitive knowing.*
-  *Use the visual journal as an opportunity to trust your instincts. Allow art materials to speak to and through you; trust your body and follow your gut; these felt ways of knowing can often lead us towards new vantage points to view a topic or idea through.*
-  *Be sure to remember that not every page has to be finished and perfect. As a researcher working in the visual journal, the goal is not to create finished and refined pieces of art to display in isolation of one another; rather, you are creating a collection of experiences that represent your thinking and feeling during the research process.*
-  *Give yourself time! Be sure to give yourself dedicated work time. It is easy to underestimate the time needed to really think through an idea or concept visually. Just as you allot adequate time to your writing and analysis, also commit time to your visual journaling explorations. Research happens in layered and gradual ways and so does the work in the visual journal. Start a journal at the beginning of a research project and commit to working in it 30-45 minutes at a time.*
-  *The most important advice I could give any researcher wanting to begin working in a visual journal is to keep it with you always, because like creative endeavors (and all the best seashells), you never know when images or words will wash ashore. Take it with you to research sites; keep it beside you while reading relevant literature; put it in your nightstand for those midnight epiphanies; place it in your car to write in after interviews, and most importantly, be faithful to it. Use your visual journal often; engage it, paint in it, tear things out, glue things in, dialogue with it, and one day you may find, as I did, that you learned to swim in its pages.*

To see a time-lapse video of one of the pages from my dissertation work, visit [THIS LINK](#) or play the video below.



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