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A Dialogue in Words and Images between Two Artists Doing Arts-Based Educational Research

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Abstract

Over ten years ago, Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner (1997) described seven features of existing artistic approaches to educational inquiry. Their chapter dealt primarily with written, prosaic forms of Arts-Based Educational Research, or ABER, particularly educational criticism and narrative storytelling. In their concluding section, Barone and Eisner recognize the limitless possibilities of utilizing non-linguistic forms of representation to conduct ABER. It is the thesis of our paper that such forms might be considered Research-Based Art (RBA), given the shift in emphasis from linguistic to non-linguistic ways of representing what it is that we come to know about our world. While ABER is considerably broad, we seek to apply as specifically as possible Barone and Eisner's categorical structure to our own RBA. We do so by defining RBA, reconceptualizing Barone and Eisner's seven features as they pertain to RBA, and providing excerpts of our own dialog in applying the seven features to a specific aspect of Jamie's doctoral dissertation. Specifically, we discuss how our understanding and use of RBA compares and contrasts with Barone and Eisner's seven features of ABER.

Introduction

A Picture is worth a Thousand Words

In an age-old and overused euphemism, the worth of a picture is stated in terms of language. Educational research has traditionally been ruled by an economy of words. In Figure 1, Jamie portrays himself in a fit of frustration.



Figure 1. One of Jamie's self-portrait drawings from his sketchbook.

The self-portrait was done to illustrate how he feels about “education-ese” (as Jamie puts it . . . big, fancy words strung together into long sentences in passive voice). Jamie also feels that educational research should have more pictures (he also looks like that whenever he finds a text that espouses the value of images and art but is “nothing but words, words, words!”). However, thanks to the work of anthropologists and ethnographers, in particular, pictures and other visual artifacts have come to be considered credible evidence in works of qualitative educational research (Collier & Collier, 1986). In recent years, the educational research community has been presented with alternatives to the more traditional scientific demands of what is considered acceptable in educational research. One alternative is Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER).

In this paper, we discuss our understanding of ABER based on our reading of Tom Barone and Elliott Eisner's (1997) methodological chapter entitled *Arts-based educational research*. We then use the seven features from the chapter to organize our dialog with each other and our work. Specifically, we discuss using visual arts (drawing and painting) in our dissertation projects. Our purpose is to summarize our understanding of ABER as it relates specifically to using the visual arts by presenting examples and excerpts of our own dialog in words and images.

Jamie: Drawing and painting are ways that I make sense of things. Like Milne is doing.

Robbie: Because she was doing the drawings, she began to think about the relationships in her classroom in new ways that she wouldn't have if she hadn't done the drawings.

Jamie: Then, when I have to write it, there's a big leap that is very frustrating, because it doesn't translate the same way into writing. Most of my work in the drawing gets left behind. It will have to be. Just the fact that it will frustrates me already.

Robbie: Yeah, just think about the volumes of text that you would have to write to explain the relationships in the drawings.

What is Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER)?

In ABER, the inquiry possesses certain characteristics that draw primarily from the arts and humanities rather than science. Perhaps most central to this approach is the explicit use of aesthetic qualities in both the inquiry itself and the presentation of the research (Barone & Eisner, 1997), often through forms of written prose and sometimes through poetry (Cahnmann, 2003).

An indication of ABER's emerging status in the field is its inclusion in a widely distributed research handbook (Jaeger, 1997). It is in this handbook that the foundational tenets of ABER can be found in the form of seven features of ABER as they relate specifically to literary forms of art. Barone and Eisner (1997) provide the structural framework by delineating ABER using the following seven design elements: (1) The creation of a virtual reality, (2) The presence of ambiguity, (3) The use of expressive language, (4) The use of contextualized and vernacular language, (5) The promotion of empathy, (6) Personal signature of the researcher/writer, and (7) The presence of aesthetic form. Barone and Eisner also provide examples of their own ABER as they describe the range of literary forms of ABER being widely practiced in educational research, specifically educational criticism and narrative storytelling respectively.

In the concluding remarks of the paper, Barone and Eisner discuss the enormous potential of utilizing other forms of non-literary artistic representation in ABER. They remind us

that we make sense of the world around us in a variety of ways, all of which play a role in an individual's achievement and representation of meaning.

Visual images, for example, make it possible to formulate meanings that elude linguistic description. Humans invented maps to make plain relationships that would be many times more difficult to describe in words or number. Scientists create models whose synchronic features make it possible to grasp relationships that diachronic media such as language find difficult to portray. (Barone and Eisner, 1997, p. 90)

The visual artifacts described in the previous quote are commonly accepted as useful forms of representation in research. What about forms of visual representation that exist outside of the borders of scientific practice? How might other non-linguistic forms of representation, such as the arts, play a role in presenting the findings of research that give the viewer access to emotions like joy and grief? Can the inherent qualities of the visual, musical, or dramatic arts provide an audience with the opportunity to experience research in powerful ways that might allow cathartic response or vicarious understanding? For some, after all, the impact of the work of art on an audience is of utmost importance. According to Michelle Conle (2003), it is this emphasis on the consumers of the products that distinguishes the goal of arts-based research from those of other forms of narrative research. For example, Ansel Adams' photography of the undeveloped and pristine landscape of Alaska was instrumental in initiating President Jimmy Carter to sign legislation that would set apart over 100 million acres of wilderness area there in 1980 (Alinder, 1996). In painting, Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* is a powerful response to the horrific events of the Spanish Civil War that has since served as a symbol of national reconciliation for the republic of Spain (Martin, 2002). In film, Barone and Eisner (1997) point out that *Schindler's List* (Spielberg, 1993) is a work of art that serves an important educational task. "In fact, the Austrian government felt so strongly about the film's educational benefits for the young that it waived its age restriction so that children under sixteen could see it" (Barone and Eisner, 1997, p. 89).

With such examples in mind, Barone and Eisner suggest that educational researchers move beyond the traditional means through which research is conducted and represented to embrace the acquisition and use of the skills and aesthetic sensibilities possible in alternative forms of research. Following are simply a few examples of ABER in order to provide some context before turning to a discussion of our own work.

The Status of the Non-Linguistic Arts as Research

Consistent with Barone and Eisner's suggestion, many educational researchers are exploring alternatives. Performance ethnography provides the means for dramatic portrayals of educational issues (Lincoln, 2003). Saldana (2003) discusses the basis of ethnotheater, which "employs . . . techniques of formal theater production to mount a live

performance event of research . . . for an audience” (p. 218). Other forms of ABER are musical in nature. Erickson (1995) taps his intricate understanding of music to describe the potential for careful applications of musical ways of representing classroom discourse.

What of the visual arts in ABER? Milne (2000) explores reflective drawing as a means for making sense of her experiences as a teacher. Banks (2001) discusses the reading and making of images in visual anthropology for observation and documentation. Ernst (1997) utilizes contour drawing in her classroom as a way to connect teaching and learning through contemplative renderings that allow her to slow down and assess what she sees, hears, and feels in order to make meaning from her experiences.

For the remainder of this paper, we will focus on these and other uses of the visual arts in ABER. Specifically, we highlight our own Research-Based Art (RBA). RBA is defined as visual artwork that is an aesthetic representation of educational research that utilizes non-linguistic forms to communicate to an audience.¹ We will use Barone and Eisner's seven features of ABER as points of departure for our discussion about RBA as it relates to and is distinguished from more text-based ABER. Excerpts of our “dialog journal” will be presented in the context of the artwork Jamie created for his dissertation. These snapshots of our conversation will help to illuminate the ways in which we are grappling with the development of RBA as a unique brand of educational research.

We consider this paper to be a methodological piece, as it focuses not on the subjects of our respective research, but instead on one of the methods we are using in our dissertations. Furthermore, the scope of this paper is not limited to the use of RBA as representations, although our dialog was certainly helpful in informing how the visuals embodied our claims about our work. Indeed, creating and critiquing our drawings and paintings also entailed making sense of our work and expanding our own understanding of our research. In other words, we discuss Research-Based Art in terms of its use as a *representational tool of educational research* and the construction and modification of RBA as an *analysis tool in educational research*. Before we present excerpts from our dialog, we summarize its beginning and transformation.

Our Dialog about Research-Based Art

A Brief History

Meeting through a mutual committee member in art education, we began having conversations about ABER at the University of Georgia Qualitative Interest Group's (QUIG) Interdisciplinary Qualitative Studies Conference held in Athens, Georgia in 2004. In May of 2004, we started our work together with the notion that each of us would

be creating artwork for our doctoral dissertations. As we began to learn more about each other's dissertations, we realized that it was not possible to pursue all of the avenues that creating RBA could take us. Since Jamie had already done a lot of drawings and paintings as part of his dissertation, it made sense to start the dialog with his work.

Jamie used art in numerous ways in his collaborative study with a fifth grade teacher (Annette). Together, Annette and Jamie co-planned and co-taught three science units. Jamie's role was to try to integrate drawing and painting into the science teaching in ways that enhanced student learning. The focus of Jamie's dissertation was not on student learning however, but on how he and Annette collaborated to create and teach these arts-based science units. In the process, Jamie had used art in many ways. For example, he did many field sketches of Annette and the students; he collected the student's artwork and used their (and his) work as interview prompts, and he created visual metaphors as he and Annette discussed their work together in dialog journals.

As we began our own dialog, the work that we decided to pursue was Jamie's use of drawings and paintings to represent each of the major phases of his study. Jamie had already created three large paintings, calling them *methodological murals* because their subject matter focused in large part on methods at different phases of the study. Additionally, Jamie referred to these paintings as murals because they had eclectic compositions, since the goal of each was to try to represent "everything" involved in each phase of the study. The first mural (See Figure 2) was done for Jamie's dissertation prospectus defense and represented (in visual language and metaphors) what he thought his dissertation study would be about and how it would be done.



Figure 2. The first mural Jamie created about his dissertation study.

The second mural (See Figure 3) was done after his first unit, which was taught with Annette, and represented a major shift from a self-study to a collaborative study.



Figure 3. The second mural Jamie created for his dissertation study.

The third mural was created to represent the second unit that Jamie collaboratively taught.



Figure 4. The third mural Jamie created for his dissertation study.

In looking at ways we could work together in creating RBA, Jamie knew he wanted to create at least one more mural. This fourth mural was to show the final unit that Jamie and Annette taught together, which culminated in an art exhibition at the university. As we started dialoging, it became clear to Jamie that a fifth methodological mural was needed—one that represented his struggles to make sense of the entire project in the process of writing his dissertation.

We began to share sketches (See Figure 5) as the fourth and fifth murals developed with the explicit goal of looking at how Barone and Eisner's seven features of ABER could inform and relate to the mural sketches and the murals themselves. We discussed the respective roles each of us was taking. As the dialog progressed, Robbie emerged as the art teacher mostly as a sounding board and supporter.

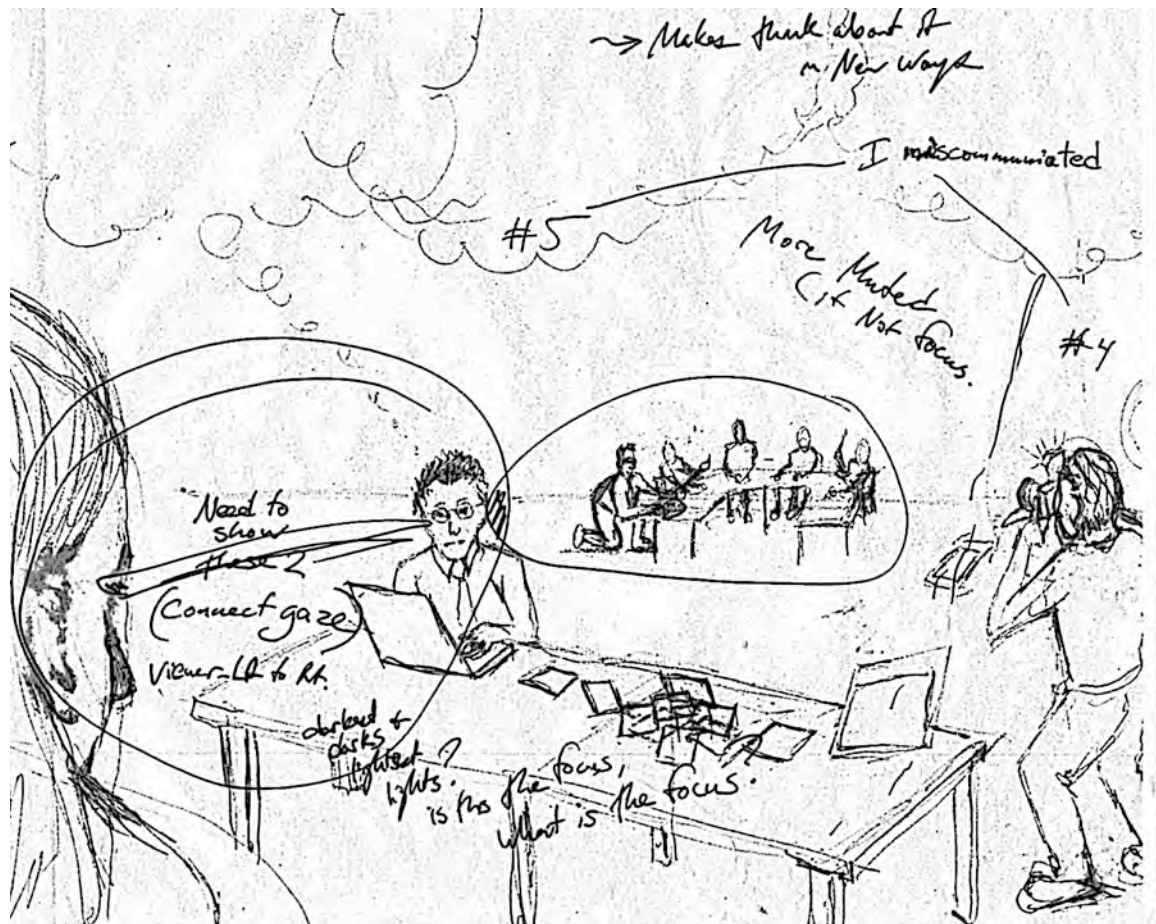


Figure 5. Robbie's sketch for dialog journal, and Jamie's annotated response, week 2.

He also provided many suggestions and feedback based on his knowledge as a visual artist and art educator. Jamie's central role was that of the artist, creating the sketches and paintings and trying to explain each in written and spoken language. Robbie's emerging

role as art critic became clear as we starting formalizing this paper. In other words, Robbie took on the role of making accessible the visual language of Jamie's RBA. (See Appendix A for detailed information about the methodological murals.)

Therefore, our discussion is limited to how the seven aspects of ABER related to our Research-Based Art. Using the notion of dialog—with each other, with the literature, with the art—we present our work together by using the following format for each of the seven features of ABER:

- a) Robbie's dialog about what each feature means, and how the visual examples relate to each feature,
- b) Jamie's response to Robbie's claims and Robbie's response to Jamie's response, and
- c) Our dialog concerning the problems and promises of applying each of the seven features to Research-Based Art that uses the visual arts.

The Seven Features of Arts-Based Educational Research

Barone and Eisner describe seven features of Arts-Based Educational Research as they relate to literary forms of art, acknowledging the value of “non-literary artistic media” (p. 73) but noting that the vast majority of ABER “employed words as their medium of expression” (p. 73).

Feature 1: The Creation of a Virtual Reality.

Works of ABER exhibit *the creation of a virtual reality*. In other words, the text possesses characteristics that evoke physical realities that would be easily recognized by the reader. The reader identifies with the portrayed qualities by drawing similarities between the virtual world and his or her own existence. By doing so, the work of ABER can be seen as a possible and credible construction that echoes the reality of the living world. In Figure 6, Jamie has drawn a sketch capturing a scene of his classroom.

He is interested in portraying a grouping of students engaged in the lesson he is teaching. His notes read, “Me feeling a little nervous”, “Reaching over to show/point to painting while with other hand giving another student a brush.” This feeling of overwhelming fear, pressure, and stress is one with which many teachers would identify. Additionally, teachers are often asked to perform several tasks at one time while teaching as they navigate their roles as instructor, guide, disciplinarian, and motivator. One of the questions we asked is: How can we show these feelings in ways that accurately represent them through only visual vocabulary in order that we can create a scene that is a believable virtual reality?



Figure 6. A page from Jamie's sketchbook.

Jamie: In thinking about this first feature, I immediately feel the need to use representational language. That's what I'm most comfortable using but it's difficult for me since it's people. It requires drawing/painting portraits/figure drawing/caricature (comics)—stuff I'm not practiced at.

Robbie: Maybe you are still developing your figurative renderings.

Jamie: It drives me crazy looking at this sketch because I don't feel like I hit the mark — that is, the key to it is my facial expression...that's what gets the point across . . .at least it's the easiest way to show emotions.

Robbie: Are there other ways to create that feeling you want to show? What about color?

Jamie: Yeah, that's true . . . bright colors.

Robbie: And how about complimentary colors, like blue and orange?

Jamie: Oh, I got you; and, wavy, gesture lines that can show movement and energy.

Works of visual art can be categorized into three broad categories of representation: *representational*, *abstract*, and *nonrepresentational*. Representational art portrays objects in an easily recognizable manner, often through a realistic portrayal of those objects. Abstract art portrays objects in a way that distorts, simplifies, or exaggerates the qualities

of the object. Nonrepresentational art is art that does not portray any recognizable object. Of these three categories of representation, representational art is of prime concern for the educational researcher. This is because the work of Research-Based Art is a presentation of research that is to be presented before a viewer, who is supposed to be able to understand the work and its meaning. Furthermore, the work of visual art is to act as a communicative agent on behalf of the researcher.

For these reasons, we feel that works of visual RBA must represent educational phenomena in ways that are similar to the ways that we would see them in reality. The term used for this truthful representation is verisimilitude. Verisimilitude is not to be confused with a photographically accurate copy of actual objects. It is to be understood as an approach towards a reasonably representational portrayal of the real world. In other words:

It is what a temperament can do to the raw material of sight, that makes the truth possible. It is when Velasquez brushes with a strange transforming passion close, but never too close, to eyesight. Then verisimilitude is truth. . . . Brueghel is universally believed even when Icarus falls out of the sky. (Camp, 1996, p. 72)

The artist's work is to create a visual world that parallels the world the viewer is familiar with, in order that he or she may recognize him or herself as a part of the constructed reality of the work of visual art.



Feature #2:

The Presence of Ambiguity

You must make an overt attempt to provide the viewer with the chance to fill in the blanks for themselves.

One way in which you are allowing for this is by leaving Annette's head sketchy. Are there other places you can use similar techniques?

Figure 7. Robbie's annotations of one of Jamie's sketches.

Feature 2: The Presence of Ambiguity

Works of ABER possess *the presence of ambiguity*. Rather than being final statements on matters of educational research, works of ABER are intentionally open-ended. By providing the reader with the opportunity to engage in a dialog with the text through thoughtfully placed gaps, the researcher invites the reader to make personal meaning from their own experiences. In the intersection where these interpretations and the gaps meet, the work of ABER is the vehicle for multiple solutions to difficult and novel educational problems.

In Figure 7, Jamie has positioned one of the participants of his dissertation study in the lower left hand portion of the sketch. He shows only the back of her head, and renders her form in scribbly, nondescript lines. His notes read, “Back of head signifying voiceless co-researcher/co-participant.” The figure portrayed is ambiguous in appearance, gender, race, and age. This ambiguity is accomplished not only by the fact that the figure looks away from the viewer, but by the lack of solidly rendered form. If we look closely, we note that the edge of the laptop is visible through the figure’s head. We ask: Are there other ways that ambiguity can be made possible in the visual arts?

Jamie: Oh, cool, this [pointing to Figure 7] is great . . . the way you put your text right onto the sketch and used circles and arrows.²

Robbie: It's pretty easy actually. Now what do you think about what I said?

Jamie: Yeah, I agree that not showing Annette's face means the viewer has to ‘imagine it’ – like, “what's her facial expression?”

Robbie: Other ways?

Jamie: For one thing, all the text won't be on the final painting, so viewers will have to decide for themselves what the meanings are.

The visual image is always ambiguous (Penn, 2000). This is one of the features where drawing and painting is clearly related to this feature of Barone and Eisner’s. If anything, images are too ambiguous. One of Jamie’s committee members told him, “You must explain each of the pictures in your dissertation with text. I am not comfortable interpreting your artwork, so all of the meanings you wish to express must be spelled out for me in accompanying text” (personal communication, 2003).

Decoding the ambiguous message of the visual image is the concern of the field of semiotics. Visual artists recognize the role that the viewer plays in the interpretation of the work of art, as each viewer brings his or her own experience with the imagery to the table when viewing the work of art. The multiple possible interpretations of a work of visual art are honored in feminist, multicultural, and postmodern philosophies that pervade contemporary artistic practice (Diamond & Mullen, 1999). This is one of the

engaging things about most visuals—the viewer has to “fill in the gaps.” Robbie helped Jamie by reminding him to explicitly try to create those gaps and point viewers in the right directions.

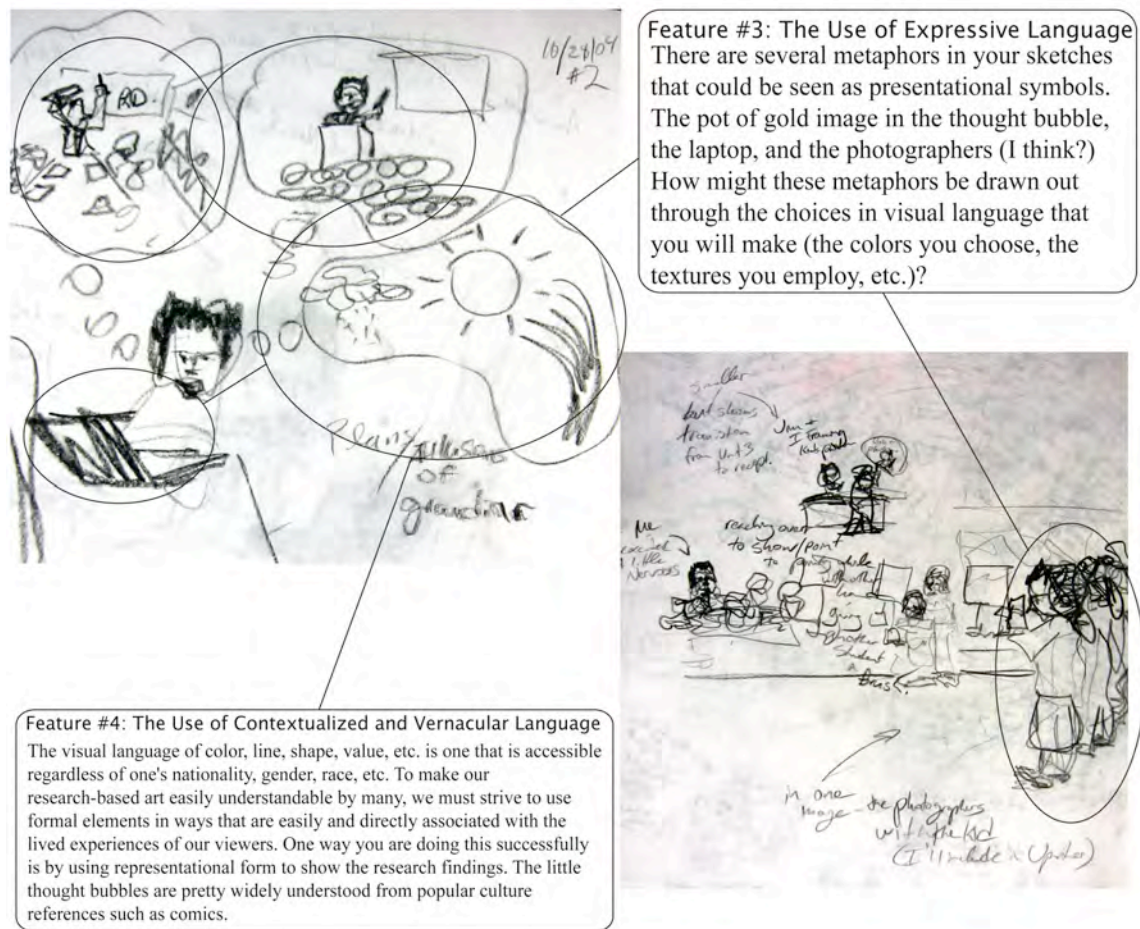


Figure 8. Robbie's annotations of a couple of Jamie's sketches.

Features 3 & 4: Expressive, Contextualized, and Vernacular Language.

Texts of ABER are characterized by *the use of expressive language*. This feature of literary writing necessitates the carving out of broadly connotative rhetoric that affords the reader with the opportunity to experience the metaphors and other literary devices used in fresh and imaginative ways. This artistic expression of meaning is made possible through a fourth characteristic of ABER, which is *the use of contextualized and vernacular language*. By using such everyday speech, educational researchers might enable the reader to feel the tangible expression of language through rich and non-technical forms of speech.

In Figure 8, Jamie's sketch employs several metaphors and utilizes everyday visual devices that can be understood by a wide audience. He uses the metaphors of the pot of

gold at the end of the rainbow, and more abstractly, the laptop computer and the photographers. His sketch also makes use of the thought bubble commonly seen in comics. Simple visual devices such as this can represent a great deal of information through a very straightforward and rich manner. This feature, more so than the others, causes us to ask: How does RBA effectively use expressive and understandable *visual* language?

Jamie: I had a negative reaction to your reference to comics. I don't think of myself as a comic artist. I think of myself as a 'fine artist' – when I thought about it, especially in light of the reference to visual language – I realized that's silly. There's a lot to be learned from graphic arts like comics.

Robbie: Yeah, and the bubbles for your thoughts are very effective, especially since you're using metaphors. That's what the rainbow bubble is, isn't it?

Jamie: Yes, with a pot of gold at the end of that rainbow.

Robbie: What's the gold represent?

Jamie: Finishing! Getting those letters! [Both laugh.]

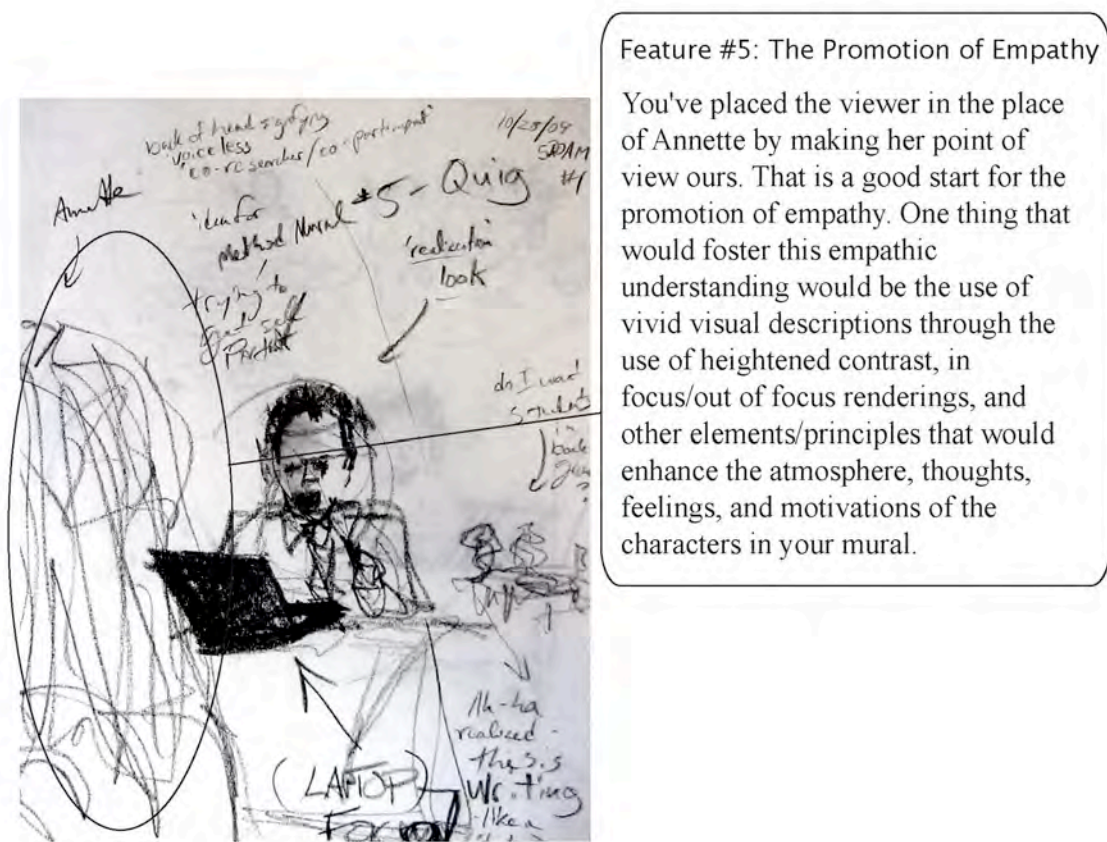
The notion of vernacular language makes us think about comic arts, which are distinguished from the fine arts. Both can be very expressive and powerful—and since we want our images to be accessible and understandable to as wide an audience as possible, both have much to teach practitioners of Research-Based Art. Furthermore, it is a false dichotomy to separate the graphic arts (including comics) from works of fine art. Consider, for example, the work of Roy Lichtenstein. His paintings employed not only the imagery of comics, but the Benday dots technique of color application used by newspaper printers. He fully spoke the language of the mass popular culture to harness global appeal and raise his art to the standards of what is considered fine art.

Feature 5: The Promotion of Empathy

Works of ABER center on *the promotion of empathy*. In other words, the reader of a work is enabled to participate vicariously with the subject of the text. He or she is able to feel the emotions of the students, motivations of the characters, or the thoughts of the teacher. This empathetic understanding is made possible with highly descriptive language that allows the reader to feel as if he or she is in the shoes of those portrayed in the text.

In Figure 9, Jamie's sketch displays an often-used visual device to draw the viewer into an intimate relationship with the subject matter of the work of art. The picture plane disappears as we take our place where the figure in the foreground is. We develop an empathic identification with the figure by adopting his or her perspective on the scene that is drawn in the rest of the sketch. We enter into a dialog with Jamie's figure, as he is seated behind the laptop computer in the center of the scene, as if we were the faceless

figure ourselves. We ask: What role does vivid visual description serve in the provision of a gateway to the promotion of empathy?



Feature #5: The Promotion of Empathy

You've placed the viewer in the place of Annette by making her point of view ours. That is a good start for the promotion of empathy. One thing that would foster this empathic understanding would be the use of vivid visual descriptions through the use of heightened contrast, in focus/out of focus renderings, and other elements/principles that would enhance the atmosphere, thoughts, feelings, and motivations of the characters in your mural.

Figure 9. Robbie's annotations of one of Jamie's sketches.

Jamie: [After reading the last paragraph...written by Robbie] Man, that's good. Yeah. . . . Yeah! Yeah, that's what I meant to do! Boy, reading that makes me want to start on painting the mural [#5] right now!

Robbie: I'm glad you're striving to address this issue of empathy. It's a hard issue to tackle. I think that for a lot of artists throughout the ages, empathy has been of very little concern. Instead, the main emphasis was on self-expression and the masterpiece of the creative genius. Unfortunately, art was and often still is seen as a commodity.

Jamie: That's true. For this sketch, I really want to try and capture the emotions and thoughts I am dealing with, too, as I write the dissertation. I feel responsible to so many people, and I'd like to work on my facial expressions to provide the viewer with a sense of that burden that I feel. Perhaps that way, they can develop some empathetic understanding of the struggle I am facing in this difficult work. This feature fits very well with the visual arts. I think, like the virtual reality feature, this issue of empathy is the paramount goal of a visual artist creating RBA – that

the drawings and paintings pull ‘readers’ into the world of the artist/research. An example for me is Rembrandt’s late self-portraits. After I read about how much sorrow and disappointment was in his life, I looked back at those paintings and was drawn immediately to his eyes. I thought about how I felt (and still sometimes feel) after my son died and believe I know how Rembrandt must have felt – it’s in his eyes.

In considering how we might promote empathy in our Research-Based Art, it might be helpful to attempt to investigate the idea that we are interested in promoting. Empathy is a difficult word to define, because it is most often derivative of the context in which it is used. We most often hear it described as the ability to feel like you can walk in someone else’s shoes. If that were possible, we might all care a little more for each other, and the world might just be a different place. Instead, we must consider the two concepts that comprise empathy: identification and imagination. Phillips (2003) discusses identification as the ability to perceive another human being and connect with them, and imagination as the mechanism by which our perception of this other becomes our reality. This view of empathy places a great burden upon the viewer, who is ultimately in charge of his or her own perception and imagination. However, the visual artist who strives to round out the characters portrayed in the work of art provides the viewer with the extra push toward empathic response.

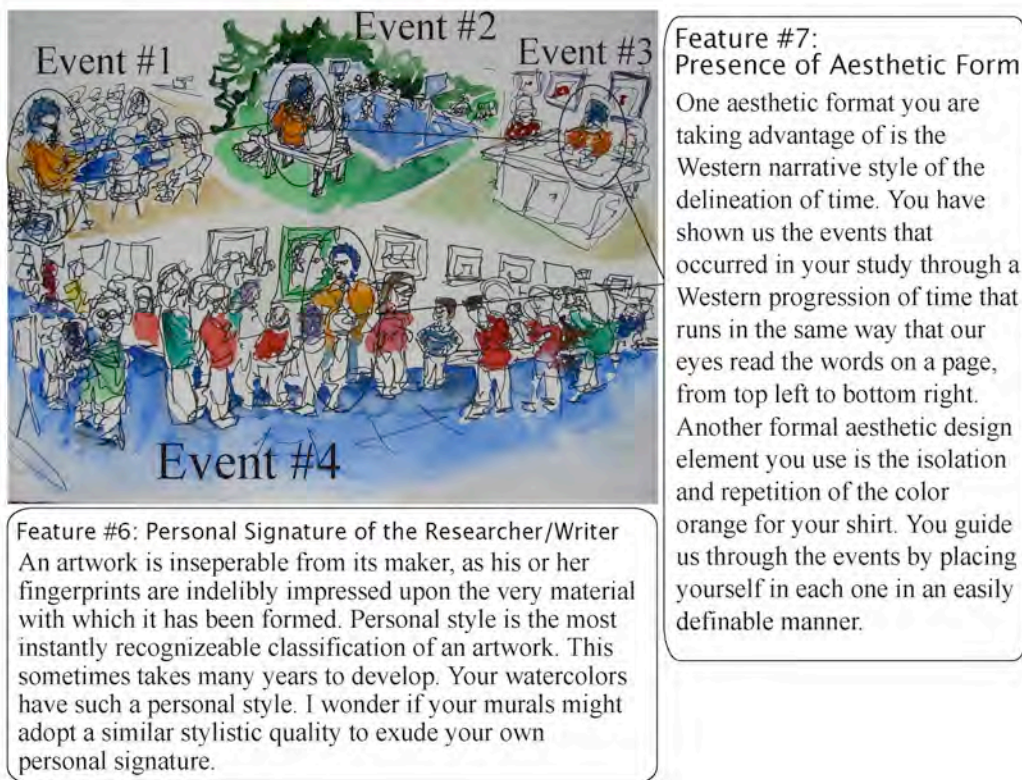


Figure 10. Robbie’s annotations of one of Jamie’s watercolor sketches.

Feature 6: Personal Signature of the Researcher/Writer.

Works of ABER display the *personal signature of the researcher/writer*. The author uses the virtual world that he or she constructs and the characters therein to tell a certain kind of story. Perhaps the inclusion or exclusion of certain details of the setting or elements of the plot is designed to further the thesis of the researcher's work. In this way, the vision of the author is necessarily a major and inseparable component of the text.

In Figure 10, one of Jamie's finished watercolor paintings displays his personal style. He has developed this style over many years of artistic practice. In thinking about the way the personal signature of the researcher/writer translates into visual artwork, we feel that the artist's handling of media, use of technique, treatment of form, etc., all contribute to an artist's personal style. It is this stylistic approach to making artwork that tells a great deal about the way that the artist views, thinks about, and makes sense of his or her world. These concerns lead us to ask: Is the practitioner of Research-Based Art allowed to have the time that it takes to develop his or her own personal style, so that the works of visual art created during the period of development are considered acceptable?

Jamie: When you asked me if I was going to use watercolor for the final pieces [murals #4 and #5], I wondered why you asked. When you mentioned that I had a certain style with the work that I sold commercially, I agreed with you that my first three murals lacked consistency or the 'certain style' that seemed to work well in watercolor. Murals #1 and #2 are in acrylic paint and #3 is in oil paint – neither of which I use in the majority of my work. So I decided to do a large sketch in watercolor of mural #4 when we met that time. It worked so well, I wanted to do the final large painting [mural #4] also in watercolor . . . hope it turns out well!
[See Appendix B for progression of mural #4]

Robbie: Yeah, that was a memorable meeting. It was really fun to talk through the process with you as you were making decisions and describing the artistic choices you were making.

Jamie: I think that I really got a lot out of our dialog that time, even while it was informing what I was doing at that very moment!

Robbie: Yeah, and I saw the unique way that you handle the drawing and painting that is a big part of your personal style.

Jamie: You and I talked about this—the frustration I was feeling that my drawings and paintings required so much effort and the results did not live up to my expectations, especially when compared with my cityscape watercolors—in which I do have a personal style but that I have been working on for many years.

Robbie: Do you think that's the case because the murals take so much planning, and the watercolors feel more immediate to you?

Jamie: Partly, the work is much less intense for the watercolors because I've already made most of those decisions intuitively. Another thing is that this is figure drawing, and that's a whole 'nother can of worms.'

The work Jamie speaks of in this bit of our dialog is the difficult endeavor of developing an artistic style that becomes your own visual fingerprint. Some artists labor for decades before they come to a personal style that suits them. For example, Piet Mondrian was a 20th century modernist whose easily recognizable style developed over a period of twenty years. In his work from this period, it is striking to see his work move from more Impressionistic renderings of living things to his Neoplasticist compositions of red, yellow, and blue rectangles set apart by horizontal and vertical black lines on crisp white spaces. Mondrian's later work is his response to the world around him. He saw everything in nature as an abstraction of form that could be described in the three elements he used. His quest became the perfect composition, which would not only exhibit perfect balance but would become a more pleasing representation of nature.

In literature, the same is true of the stylistic differences between the writing of Ernest Hemingway and William Shakespeare, or Charles Dickens and Mark Twain. It took all of them years and much effort to develop that personal style that is solely their own. In the same way, novice Arts-Based Educational Researchers, using the visual arts or otherwise, need to be patient as they use trial and error to develop their craft. We tend to be our harshest critics. It has been important for us to have supportive people to share, guide, and reflect in our work in Research-Based Art. In this case, Jamie took the step of boldness to forge a path in the methodology and permit Robbie to view and comment on his artwork, and Robbie provided help by being supportive and knowledgeable.

Feature 7: The Presence of Aesthetic Form.

ABER wholly exhibits *the presence of aesthetic form*. The form of texts of ABER is determined by all manner of elements including format and style of the composition, and the manner in which the content is presented. The goal of the author's selection of the aesthetic tools he or she uses is to further the thesis of the work through the arrangement of every part of the text in a carefully planned and purposefully artistic way.

Look again at Figure 10. Note that Jamie's painting displays his working knowledge of aesthetic design elements that are evident in his artistic decisions. He tries to emphasize his role in all of the events portrayed by including himself in a brightly colored orange shirt. He also skews the perspective of the scene at the bottom of the painting in order to draw attention to the importance of his feelings of joy and excitement in the event pictured. These, and other aesthetic design elements discussed in Figure 10, are essential to Jamie's effective communication to the viewer and conveyance of the main ideas of his study. When thinking through this seventh feature of ABER we ask: How can we

strike the balance between getting the ideas of our research across in our artwork and achieving masterpieces of visual art that maintain high aesthetic standards?



Figure 11. Art Rosenbaum, *The World at Large*, 2001, acrylic, 90 ½” x 272.”

Photo courtesy of Peter Frey.

Jamie: The mural needs to connect lots of different things into one composition—we talked about how Rosenbaum [See Figure 11] did it in his work.

Robbie: In Western cultures, we start looking at the visual image at the top left and proceed to the right and then down the page in rows as we would read a page of text. Here’s an example [Shows Jamie Figure 12], Sassetta’s technique is to start the journey of Saint Anthony where the Western viewer would start looking at the painting and then, through the visual devices of perspective, size diminution, repetition, and the winding road, guide the viewer’s eye to the bottom right hand corner where the focus and main point of the painting lies. That kind of aesthetic form requires the visual artist to direct the viewer’s eye through the image so that the rhythm of the viewing complements that of the tendency of the Western viewer.

Jamie: Yeah, and I’m thinking that if it doesn’t work, then I could cheat and use a big arrow. In a sense, it’s more important that the idea gets across than the painting is a masterpiece.

We can consider the form and content of a work of Research-Based Art to be inseparably linked. The form is the total effect of the combined visual qualities within the work, while the content is the message or meaning of the work of art. The content determines the form and is expressed through it. Thus, the work must be arranged in such a manner as to reiterate the content, or the content may not come across as strongly as it needs to. The artist must, then, make aesthetic decisions about everything from scale and media to

execution and presentation. These aesthetic decisions are aimed at creating a new vision about the educational phenomena for those who view the work of visual RBA.



Figure 12. Sassetta, *The Meeting of St. Anthony and St. Paul*, c. 1440, tempera on panel.

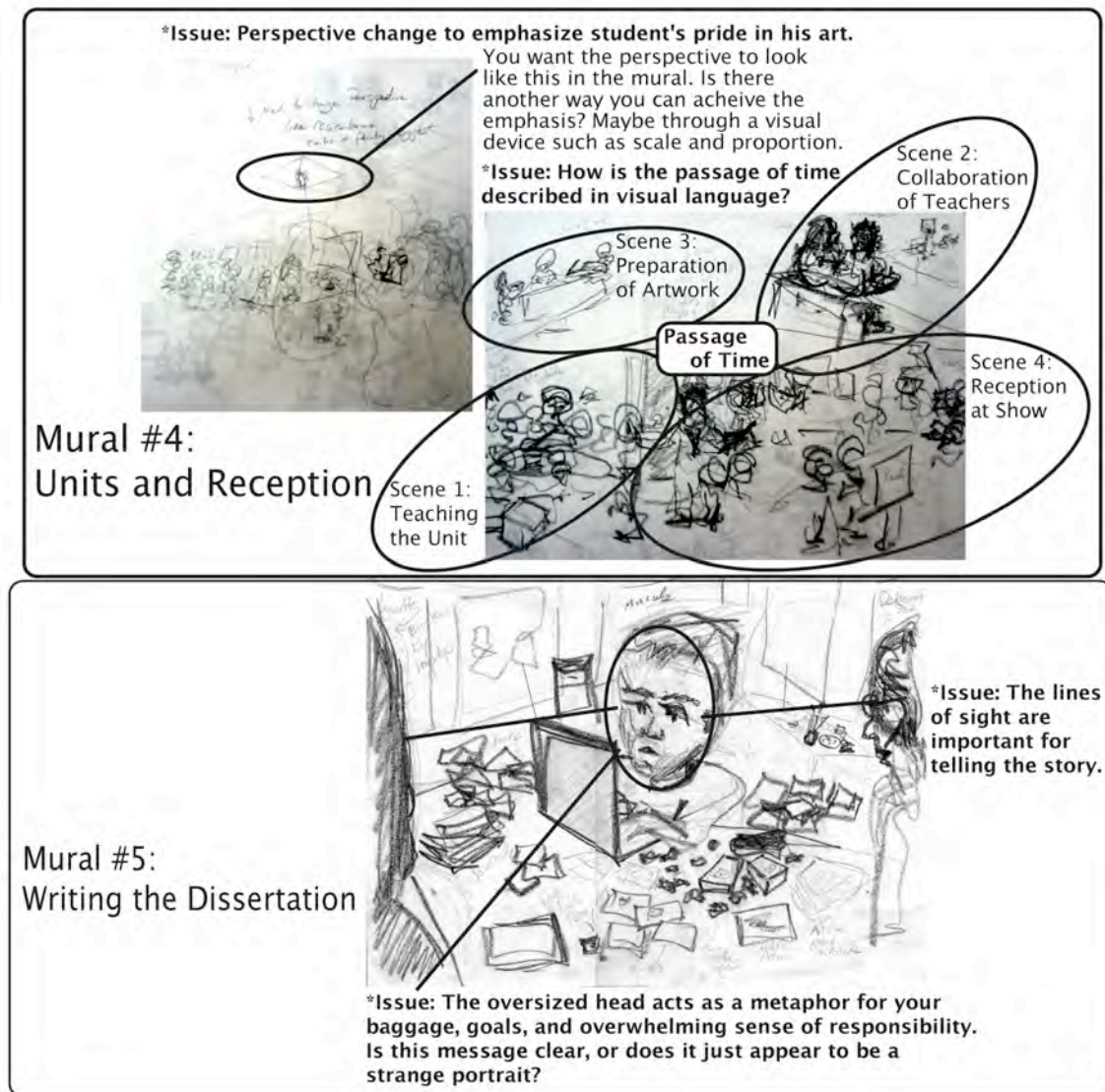


Figure 13. Robbie's annotations of several of Jamie's sketches for dialog journal, week 3.

Implications

Throughout the course of our dialog, we learned a great deal. In collaborating with one another, researcher-artists can see ways that their art doesn't work – that is, unintended interpretations that distract from the message they want to share in the piece. The other side of the coin is that oftentimes during our dialog, Robbie interpreted something in the sketch that Jamie did not intend. For example, in one of Robbie's annotations (See Figure 5), Jamie was thinking about two separate events but Robbie merged them into one. However, that misinterpretation helped Jamie to think about it and, as was the case more often than not, Jamie used the idea—adding it to the next sketch or painting (and sometimes not telling Robbie that it was initially unintended).

Robbie often took the role of art critic – interpreting Jamie’s art in ways that a broader public could easily understand. This was possible because of his extensive background in art and art education. It was also extremely refreshing for Jamie to receive help in this, since up until now, it was his sole responsibility—something often difficult for any artist to do.

Practically speaking, black and white line art is best for dissemination—because often work gets photocopied multiple times. Ink is better than pencil in drawing since shading in pencil gets distorted upon copying. This need for black and white original artwork is very unfortunate—since color can be so communicative. One possible alternative is to post the color images onto a web site. While there are disadvantages (site names change, servers crash, link rot, etc.), it is getting easier and more reliable to disseminate artwork this way. The positive side to the limits of publication and black and white copying is that it forces artists to use creative ways to succeed in communicating their ideas visually. For example, Kate Jennings (2004) claims that one of the reasons for Winslow Homer’s success in his later watercolors was his early work with in magazine illustrations and their requirement of bold, simple compositions.

Looking at resources and especially works from art history can be extremely helpful. However, Jamie found this to be at the same time quite intimidating – while he got a lot of ideas from looking at art books, he also developed some expectations about what he thought his sketches and paintings should look like. Based on what he had seen from the likes of Da Vinci and Degas, he held himself to expectations that were not in sync with his abilities. There is a caveat to this point. Some ignorance concerning what could be done was helpful in *doing* it.

We close with a last excerpt of our dialog. We are thankful to Elliot Eisner and Tom Barone for their pioneering work in Arts-Based Educational Research. Their work has given us much to consider over the course of our dialog. To our readers: Your feedback and insight is elicited for the continuation of this dialog. Please contact us at your convenience and tell us how you are working through the process and creating the products of ABER and RBA.

Jamie: I’ve always been quite cocky about what I thought I *could* do (often too critical of what I have done though) – but in hindsight, this arrogance (combined with some ignorance) was actually necessary or else I would have stopped trying. The seven features have not only helped us to talk about the product, but they have helped in the process of creating our Research-Based Art.

Robbie: I think we’ve been thinking about the features throughout the process, and they’ve been informing what you’re doing.

Jamie: When I'm not thinking about them, once we do it really helps to make it explicit. Because I think there's a fair amount of pressure to claim that I'm thinking about them. Sometimes I am, and sometimes I'm just doing.

Robbie: And I think that Barone and Eisner might argue that these kinds of things are always present in the mind of an artist. Even though you're not verbalizing it, those things were informing you all along—because of what comes out of the process—and I think any artist would tell you that when they do a painting, those things are back there in their mind somewhere, but they're not thinking, “Oh my gosh, I've gotta think about contrast right here, because I have an area down here that needs...”

Jamie: Yeah, you just know something's wrong. You fix it, and then you move on.

Notes



1. The distinction between ABER and RBA was discussed in Robbie's personal communication with Pamela G. Taylor. She is the first one that we have heard use the term Research-Based Art. As a professor of art education, Pam used her background as a visual artist to make a careful differentiation between process and product in what is considered ABER.
2. Robbie's use of the computer program Adobe Illustrator also made his comments concerning Jamie's sketches not only very accessible to Jamie, but the images (sketch + text) provide useful artifacts for making our dialog more accessible to readers who were not privy to our face-to-face interchange.



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Appendix A: Table of Jamie's Methodological Murals

Thumbnail of Mural	Mural # and Phase of Study (description)	Dates	Study Emphasis	Medium and Artistic Emphasis
	<p>Mural #1 Created for Prospectus. No unit taught, I only observed and helped with individual students and small groups</p>	<p>Nov. 2002- May 2003</p>	<p>To get to know Annette's teaching and her students. Plan for Unit 1.</p>	<p>Acrylic on wood panel Clean planes and stark composition illustrate how neat and tidy everything was in my mind. Large yellow plane (the artist's canvas) is blank, representing the findings/results of a study yet to begin.</p>
	<p>Mural #2 Unit 1 – Oceanography – the physics, chemistry, and biology of Marine Ecosystems; No unit taught. Planning and reflection during the summer. Observation and getting to know the new class of students in September.</p>	<p>June 2003- Sept. 2003</p>	<p>I sought to do almost all of the science teaching with minimal help from Annette. Initially, I set out to do a self-study. I modified the study to include Annette (as co-planner/co-teacher) based on what I perceived to be a catastrophic failure of Unit 1. It became clear as we reflected on Unit 1 in July that I needed Annette. That collaboration became included in my research and guiding questions.</p>	<p>Acrylic on unframed canvas. Sketchy, tentative strokes relay my weariness, lack of confidence, and frustration. Annette (in red) emerges as integral to the study. She takes assertive, confident poses, while I (in brown) am unsure and confused. The painting within the painting shows Unit 1, the figures outside the paint represent Annette and I reflecting on that experience, with the mess of data and teaching supplies piled in the far left of the painting.</p>

	<p>Mural #3 Unit 2 – Ocean Animals – emphasis on adaptations that help animals survive in marine habitats</p>	<p>Oct.- Nov. 2003</p>	<p>Inclusion of Annette into study as co-planner, co-teacher, and (as much as possible) co-researcher. I worked with a combination of small groups (at the ‘art and science table’) and whole group, often co-teaching with Annette.</p>	<p>Oil on unframed canvas This painting was started soon after I went to a weeklong portrait workshop. The confident and detailed figures represent my perception of how well Unit 2 went. I also believed my whole study, as well as my methods, had much improved since Mural 2.</p>
	<p>Mural #4 Unit 3 and Art and Science Exhibition Unit 3 - Landforms (including rocks and minerals, plate tectonics and faults, and landforms specific to our state)</p>	<p>Dec. 2003 – Jan. 2004</p>	<p>Co-planning, co-teaching, and co-reflection... I worked mostly with small groups (at the ‘art and science table’) and less (than Unit 2) with the whole group, when I did, it was co-teaching with Annette. We (the students, Annette and I) spend a lot of time preparing for an Exhibition of Art and Science – in which the class came to the College of Education for an opening reception (1/16/04). The students’ art work, as well as my own RBA at the college through the spring semester, 2004.</p>	<p>Ink and Watercolor on paper This medium is the one I am most comfortable with and was using as a result of working with Robbie. The exhibition reception is the focus, with three ‘scenes’ that ‘lead’ to the success of that event.</p>

Appendix B: Development of Mural #4 (Unit 3 and Exhibition Reception)

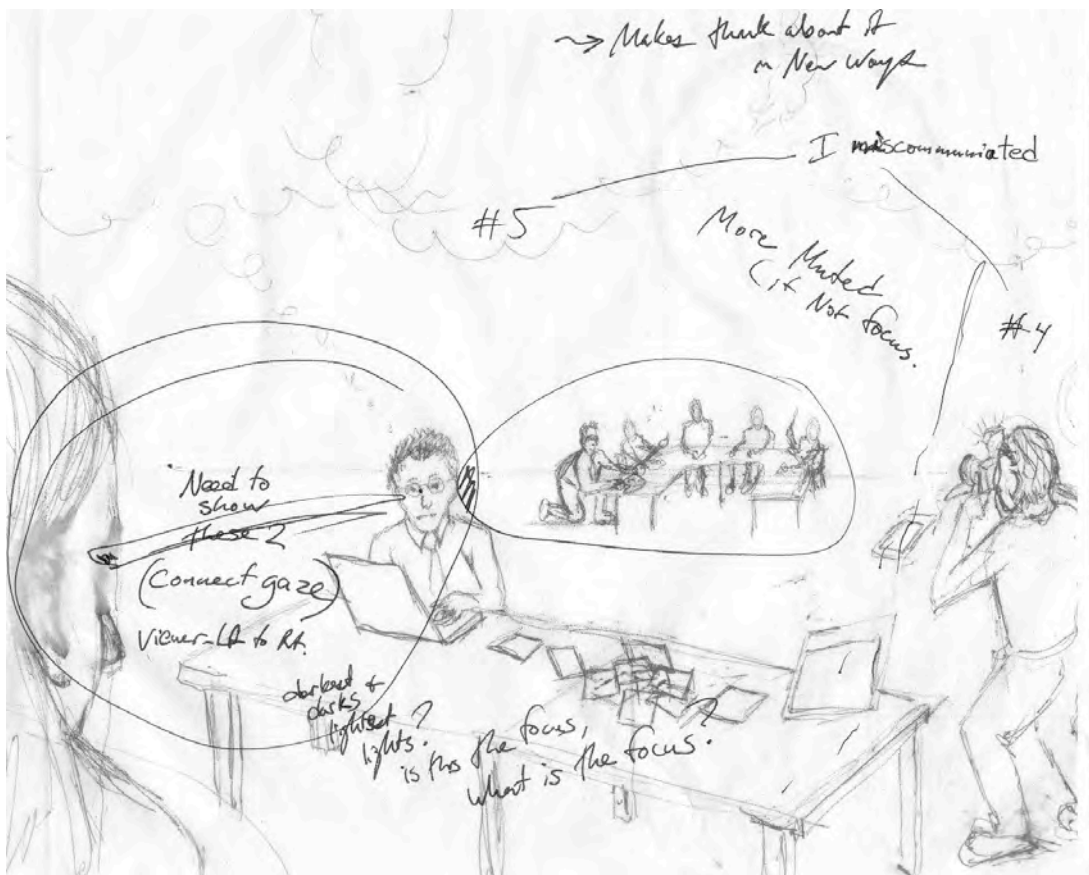
1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



About the Authors

Robert D. Quinn is Assistant Professor of Art Education at East Carolina University. His research interests include online teaching and learning, interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning, and arts-based educational research. He has been an art teacher in the middle and secondary schools and a performing musician.

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