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Weaving Theory/Practice for Art as Knowing in Early Childhood Education

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Early childhood education has a tradition of arts based pedagogy. Current emphasis on high stakes testing and test scores as evidence of learning, even for young children, has educators moving away from the arts as academic learning. This visual essay is an a/r/tographic inquiry with woven threads of theory/practice from this moving fault zone that support the arts as a way of knowing for the early years. Making and writing with woolen fibers and feathers form a mat as a surface that is thinking with encounters from teaching pre-service early childhood educators with art. The weaving is an opening to understanding that falling, fear, and knowing are temporary and can provoke what might be next for pre-service teachers and young children using art as learning.

Keywords: early childhood education, arts based pedagogy, weaving, knowing in the making

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On Uncertain Ground

As an academic working at the intersection of early childhood education and art I am acutely aware of pressures on educators to highlight academic learning over playful and creative knowing. This is not a new dilemma. The emphasis on test scores as evidence of children's learning also impacts university students in early childhood education programs. The early childhood education theory that supports play and learning with the arts is disconnected from practice when assessment is driven by academic testing. There can be spaces for effective pedagogy that is arts based while in a high stakes testing environment in a general classroom context (Eldridge, 2012). I affirm my "commitment to sound pedagogical practices" (Eldridge, 2012, p.71) and theory using the arts as I work with early childhood pre-service educators to value creative knowing. As an early childhood artist/researcher/teacher-educator, my personal responses to the shaky ground arising from the theoretical disconnect that privileges academic learning over playful and creative knowing provoke making. The following assemblage of threads, research, images, poetic and academic text are a woven conversation in a climate of uncertainty.

Teaching with Art in Early Childhood Education

The importance of the use of art in children's educational contexts is well demonstrated (Eisner, 1990; McArdle & Piscitelli, 2002; McArdle & Wright, 2014; Olsson, 2009; Tarr, 2008; Vecchi, 2010; Wright, 2003) and art has been a large part of early childhood education for many years. Children and those who teach them can produce and engage with artworks to create effective pathways for exploration. Children's ideas can be accessed and expressed with art as educators attend to process and product using inquiry learning in early childhood education (Griebeling, 2011). *The Hundred Languages of Children* presented by

Malaguzzi allows children to see themselves as artists (Rinaldi, 2006). Enjoyment, motivation, and engagement in art can transfer thoughts into materiality with a product. Even so, the process is of great importance. Drawing and making, when children use tools and artistic methods, is a becoming (Knight, 2013). Children can also use art to explore materials and think in active ways as they interact with things, art processes, people, and words (MacRae, 2007).

Learning in, about, and through the arts (Chenfeld, 1995) has potential for effective teaching and learning throughout the curriculum and this learning is imperative for young children (Ewing, 2013). In theory, art making is an important part of early childhood pedagogy in Australia (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) and in the United States with the focus on *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009; Copple & Bredekamp, 2013). However, art making is not always viewed as an important part of early childhood pedagogy. In my experiences with children and pre-service teachers in both Australia and the United States, I have seen that using art provokes thinking about the potentialities that can open through making: making *and* writing that shift thinking and bring about transformation. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) advocate that "writing [and making] has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come" (p. 4-5). Surveying these realms with shifts and shakes as I use early childhood education practices in higher education can open chasms to sit and walk beside and even fall into. Falling into an opening can be a disaster, but might also be an opportunity to fly!

There is a need for teacher education "that weaves together theory and practice" (Mascio, 2016, p.21). As I ensure that requirements are met for my students to qualify for state licensure, I struggle to find enough space for reflective and artistic aspects in the curriculum. As I integrate the arts in my teaching of early childhood theory

and practice I find ways to incorporate playful and creative practices for knowing. Lenz Taguchi (2010) proposes an intra-active pedagogy that calls for rejection of a theory/practice divide that requires us to notice this false binary. My pedagogical wonderings and struggles to weave theory/practice for early childhood education draw me to materials and surfaces that can transform. My surfaces emerge with a/r/tographic living inquiry (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Springgay, Irwin, Leggo & Gouzouasis, 2008) as I am making to think. Loom, wool, fibers, feathers, fingers, thoughts, thinkers, and doers combine with knowing in the making and making this art that traverses the grid and the gaps (Ellsworth, 2005).

In this making, threads are supports for thinking pedagogically. I am taken back to feathers I gathered while walking that help me think about teaching pre-service early childhood educators. Here I am weaving thoughts, words, feathers and fibers. Thinking theory/practice as I am making and writing to reflect on my work as artist/academic. Weaving threads, making fabric of thought, gives some ground – a safety net as I connect strands I find important. My process and product with respect to effective teacher education brings openings; fault lines (un)known for moving on as I am teaching and learning, while pre-service early childhood educators are learning, then teaching, with art. The weaving of threads makes meaning and moves my thinking.



Moving this thinking

I am

threading the loom

finding the thread to weave

early childhood education and arts
pedagogy.

Threads smooth and tangled

tangles
I am entangled...

what *am* I doing?
I am (at) fault

It is my responsibility
I am
responsible

though there
are

serious
consequences

consequences for
children and their learning.



Education *and* art and/or
teaching to the test

push down

get ahead
behind
getting lost...
in/through/with art

I am found

reflecting

(re)cognizing
with materials on hand and found
enacting
practice *and* theory

intertwining warp and weft for intra-
active pedagogy.



My loom, a gift when I was a child,
brings me back
to arts and learning,

looming *developmentally appropriate
practice...* and more

with these materials.

Children learning using materials and
knowing in the making.

Feathers fly.

It is flighty and messy.
Chaotic.
Exciting.



My weaving in and
acceptance of fault and slippage.

Gaps are surveyed,
mapped.

There are always missed threads
to hold the flighty thinking and different
practice

the arts threading it together

loose at the edges

bound and open

sitting with/in the mat

I feel threads of teacher and children's
stories
stories of and from and with materials
weaving lives and fabric

fabricating pedagogy with the arts.

Here there is room to take lines of flight
smoothing the lines and the space
and making knots
using the grid to notice and make use of



the gaps
they hold
grasping temporarily
softly beckoning

see and feel what happens;
what might be next

for pre-service teachers
and
for me
and
for young children using art
as learning.

Weaving

a material reminder
to sit with the mess
the fear
the gaping holes
the mistakes
and use these...
momentum in the quake,
shifts
moments
for moving and mapping
with
through
on
in
the arts

and early childhood education.



And now...(in)conclusion...

Pre-service early childhood educators are becoming generalist teachers who often find themselves in contexts that value rigid testing. I am an art teacher who is now teaching general early childhood courses in a Teacher Education department where academic testing is part of practice. Even so, I am teaching with art. There are shifts and holes that I fall into as I support and practice teaching, learning and assessing with art. This can cause fear and immobility, but when I am lost or frozen, I can walk, wait, collect and begin to make. My practice and pedagogy weave playful and creative theory/practice as I (re)thread

making *and* reading *and* writing for thinking. Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (2014) explains, "When I don't know enough to write the next sentence, I stop to read. Reading and writing, then, are not separate practices but a simultaneity" (p. 377). When lost, I wander *and* I stop. I stop to gather and I find myself making. Knowing comes. It is in the making (Ellsworth, 2005) and in making art. Then I can feel what might be next pedagogically for pre-service teachers and young children using art for their learning. We are making to know in the moment with/in the theory/practice of early childhood education.

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