Oneiric

Glasshouse Walking
(A Sculpted (S)p(l)ace)

Found

Walking

An Artist-in-Residence
or A/r/tography in Praxis.

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Synopsis

A small opening of words
housing a gentle caress
of digital sculpture
(s)p(l)ace:

‘Oneiric Glasshouse Walking’

A (S)p(l)ace of Sculpted Resolutions

Our research with Learning Through The Arts™ [1] (LTTA) found, among other things, that artists-in-residence change pedagogical understandings of teachers and teacher candidates (Kind, Irwin, Grauer, de Cosson, 2005; Irwin, Wilson Kind, Grauer, de Cosson, 2005; Grauer, Irwin, de Cosson, Wilson, 2001 [2]). In this writing, we explore the development of a project in teacher education that is grounded in our LTTA research yet moves to an innovative and transformative space and place for negotiated meaning making. The project is the newly created Margaret Grauer Teaching from the Heart cohort in the elementary teacher education program at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in which several artists are working closely with university instructors, the teacher candidates and the classroom sponsor teachers in an effort to integrate the arts throughout the curriculum. It is a professional development model that sees teacher education as a lifelong and life-wide journey.
One of us, Alex de Cosson, was not only involved in the original LTTA research but is now one of the artists in this program. As an artist steeped in the methodological and pedagogical implications of our LTTA work, Alex not only brings his scholarly and pedagogical understandings to the project, he also brings his many years as a practicing artist. What follows is a text that moves between Alex’s voice as an artist-in-residence (handwriting and italicized fonts) for this program and our collective voices as researchers and educators engaged in the overall process (regular font).

A (S)p(l)ace of Artist-in-Residence

Images of spiraling Pine Cones weaving throughout this paper are by students from the Teaching from the Heart cohort inspired by the artwork of Andy Goldsworthy.

As I walked the halls of the familiar building I kept my eyes, ears and senses open to new spaces. I walked with my digital camera in a constant rapid-fire state of action. I was interested in trying to see anew a (s)p(l)ace I know well (and yet do not know) having taught here for the past seven years.

Many ideas had been flowing as I embraced my new position as artist-in-residence to the first year of UBC’s Teaching from the Heart cohort, a cohort whose philosophy can be appreciated by reading Kit Grauer’s (in press) “My Mother Wore Pink.” Kit remembers that her mother “never called herself an artist but her life revolved around art.” It is this sentiment of art as a conduit to deeper understanding that plays itself out in the beginning days of the new cohort. We have a dancer, a sculptor and a ceramicist on the team all introducing aesthetic ways of knowing to eager student teacher candidates. We engage early and methodically.
Alex de Cosson on the left, Heather Mackay on the right, and a full complement of the Teaching from the Heart cohort teacher candidates.

The teacher candidates dance and sculpt curriculum from day one of their program. They sing with joy as the sun shines and they are invited to run outside to follow artist Andy Goldsworthy’s example of non-intrusive environmental art making. They are asked to embrace their emotions and to teach with an open heart. It is hoped that the inclusion of artists will help them see the joy of teaching and learning through a holistic lens.

I am the sculptor on the team and I am also their art-methods instructor scheduled in their first semester. I shall be with them throughout the eleven-month program including their nine-week practicum when I will be an artist-in-residence in their classrooms.

A (S)p(l)ace of Risk

To be an artist-in-residence has its risks; the question of how the artist can retain his or her artist identity, while being subsumed into the school culture, is one that Margaret Meban (2002) looks at from an autobiographical perspective with interesting results. For Meban it was a matter of losing her identity as an artist; “My experience as an artist-in-residence reveals a process of enculturation whereby the school’s values gradually took precedence over my values as an artist (np).”

Our LTTA research showed us the importance of artists’ embodied involvement moving through a curriculum (Irwin, et al, 2005). We also had occasion to observe teacher candidates interaction with artists. One teacher candidate commented, “I learnt more from the artists than all my university classes.” [3] She was most probably overstating the fact but it did illustrate the positive pedagogical implications of having artists working with teacher candidates as they navigate their early steps into their teaching lives. In the Teaching from the Heart cohort we chose to start the artist/teacher candidate interaction from the first pedagogical moments of the program and to keep it embodied throughout.
A (S)p(l)ace of (Un)certainties

Still a question nagged at me, “What hat am I wearing today?”

I am used to teaching as an artist in the art-methods class, however this new position forced me to constantly assess my actions. To wear my artist hat with integrity, while engaging in a pedagogical truthfulness, is my goal. It is too early in the process to know how well or honestly I shall succeed, but it is my goal to stay true to my artist self and give artist’s eyes to the teacher candidates of the Teaching from the Heart cohort.

A (S)p(l)ace of Methodological Underpinnings

A/r/tography (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004) allows for new understandings in educational research. It is a methodology that flows from the artist/researcher/teacher in praxis.

Working within a scaffolding of metaphors and metonyms I engage in the three-dimensional (nested) praxis of a sculptor walking/writing an understanding of this active, engaged and embodied working process.

A sculpture defines itself through itself; it references the world as a living embodiment of its surroundings, in relational aptitude, it points to comprehensible (possibilities) for all who seek. Its (possible) simplicity transcends “boundaries imposed by outmoded discipline-based structures” (Gude, 2004, 8). It has a multiplicity of meanings through the lenses of postmodernism and (non)modernism, a pluralistic understanding contextualized by its location and the prior knowledge of a viewer who engages in a dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981; de Cosson, 2004; de Cosson, 2001) viewing relationship.

A finished sculpture sits awkwardly amidst the forest canopy, a (walked) rock entwined in cedar bark, a hybrid (Minh-ha, 1992) of forms, a third space (Bhabha, 1990) of visual complexity, a (s)p(l)ace of mixing and matching, slipping and sliding, through metonymic (Aoki, Low & Palulis, 2001) and metaphorical nuances.

Through a/r/tography a sculpture is engaged in its own (re)creation, articulated through the medium of writing (Richardson, 2000). As nature claims for itself the twines of its existence, so an (inter)relational walking/writing temporal space of being-becoming is in continual flux within each of us as we come to terms with our teaching and learning practices.

A (S)p(l)ace of Finding

It is within a contextualized space of the Neville Scarfe (SCARFE) education building on the UBC campus that I bring myself to question an issue of personal relevance. If, as I contend, it is an artist’s job to see a-new, to (re)engage with spaces known too well by those who inhabit them, then how can my engagement with its spaces bring new meaning, and how relevant may these insights be to others?

What can a sculptor bring to an institutional setting that is different, engaging and challenging? What, in other words, would make for a new learning of the already known? This is an archetypal quandary of education.
It is through a/r/tography, understood as a methodology of walking/writing (de Cosson, in press; de Cosson, et. al, in press; Irwin, in press) through sculpture (a phenomenology in practice), that I track, in three dimensional space, the processes and pedagogical implications of the (s)p(l)aces in which teaching and learning (the spaces that embody the very heart of the teaching soul) manifest themselves. It is in the building/finding of the sculpture in this (s)p(l)ace that the possible underpinnings of meaning have potential to be unraveled. As Gaston Bachalard (1958/1964) reminds us, “here too, as with nests, enduring interest should begin with original amazement of a naïve observer (107).”

I invite you then, to travel with me to a (s)p(l)ace in SCARFE once used, now sitting blocked—no longer active, its potential hidden from view, memories for some, stories and dreams for others. I collect verbal histories and build my own (beginning) dreams as an artist-in-residence into

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The nest may well encompass all...

I walk to see
a world enacted
“I see things I’ve never seen before” (Long, 1988)

I walk to think …

I walk to find meaning through my stepping body.

One after another
my strides define
who I am becoming
opening me
to that which is yet to come.
As our research demonstrated, an artist-in-residence frees the teacher and the student teacher candidate from preconceived notions of school culture to begin new journeys in teaching and learning (Irwin, et al, 2005; Kind et al, 2005; Grauer, et al, 2001). The walking artist Hamish Fulton (1999) says, “Walking is the constant. The art medium is the variable (30)” and on a previous page, “Occasionally I make route-finding mistakes (28).” These are the mistakes that feed the artist self; mistakes that open to new possibilities that are a constant horizon change.

It was with this in mind that I said to the teacher candidates on the last day of their first term, “Don’t cut your threads, you never know where they might lead” this in response to a textiles project they had recently been working on. This is the philosophy I shall continue to walk with.

As we walk together over the next seven months, through the trials of early classroom teaching and many more methods courses I hope the artists-in-residence will help give the teacher candidates the heart they need to face their teacher selves with confidence, joy and integrity, knowing it is a constant journey of discovery and beings becoming. As one school principal said to them on a field trip to her school, “Every child in our school is our child, not just the children in your class.” This was a great moment of securing the philosophy of heart.

References


[1] This program is sponsored by the Royal Conservatory of Music (Toronto, Canada) and is designed to be a professional development model for generalist elementary classroom
teachers wishing to learn how to integrate the arts into all subject areas within the curriculum. The program brings three different artists into a school to work with each teacher and progressively over a three-year period classrooms are added so that at the end of three years the whole school is involved.

[2] We thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their generous support of our research program entitled ‘Learning through the Arts: Artists, Researchers and Teachers Collaborating for Change.’

[3] Quotes taken from interview transcripts and from field notes recorded during classroom observations.

Alex F. de Cosson, Ph.D. (UBC) is an a/r/tographer who has worked as a professional sculptor exhibiting nationally and internationally for over twenty-five years. He recently walked/ran the Victoria International Marathon in 4 hours and 47 minutes; a pedagogy of walking plays a central roll in his understanding of being a teacher. Alex has an MFA from York University and has been on the faculty of the Ontario College of Art and Design since 1989. He is concurrently Artist in Residence with the Teaching From The Heart Cohort and a Sessional Instructor at University of British Columbia, where he has taught in the Curriculum Studies Department since 1999. Alex has been an active member of Inner City Angels in Toronto, dedicated to bringing art to inner city school kids through artist centered programs. He has been awarded numerous grants from the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council and the BC Arts Council. Alex was awarded the Gordon and Marion Smith Award for Excellence in Art Education from the Curriculum Studies Department, in 2003.

Alex passionately believes that art and art making, in the broadest possible terms, are central to a curriculum of well-being in the classroom. His research interests are centered within arts-based and autobiographical ways of knowing and being. He has published in numerous educational journals and contributed chapters to books furthering arts-based forms of teaching and learning. In 2004 he was co-editor with Rita L. Irwin of A/r/tography: Rendering Self through Arts-Based Living Inquiry, published by Pacific Educational Press.