L/I/N/E/S: AN EXAMINATION OF PERSONAL ART PROCESS

by

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Abstract

In this thesis I examine my own personal artistic process and how this exploration came to enrich my teaching. I use an arts based methodology and represent my findings in both a written text, and as an art exhibition (April 22-25, 2003) at the University of British Columbia’s Alma Mater Society Gallery. I have included images from that show as well as the theoretical underpinnings to support studio based ways of understanding and representing knowledge. The complex relationship between art, research and studio practice is examined and deconstructed with the notions of experience and dialogue emerging as key. As I studied my own artistic processes and found ways to make links visually and for providing opportunities for student growth and understanding of their own artistic processes are discussed.
Examining Personal Artistic Process

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Masters of Arts Thesis, The University of British Columbia
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Introduction

Inspiration may be a form of superconsciousness, or perhaps of subconsciousness – I wouldn’t know. But I am sure it is the antithesis of self consciousness.

Aaron Copland (cited in Cameron, 1996, 14)

Articulating artistic processes is a difficult endeavor. Indeed, the term “artist” often conjures up notions of a mysterious synthesis of ideas on a canvas amidst stories of emotional turmoil and eccentric habits. The value of an artwork is often inflated to correspond with the colourful life of the artist, not unlike our more celebrated artistic forbearers. It is the concept of exoticism and rarity of circumstances in which a piece is created that makes the art processes engaged in rendered unrepeatable. We must not forget that a good story sells. It is precisely this mystique that often convinces students they can not be an artist or enter into authentic artistic practice based on stereotypical prescriptions. The commerce of the art world is designed to be elitist and hierarchical in nature.

But what if we are in the business of teaching art and not selling it? How can we find ways to help students tell their own stories as artists and consider their work as art and not just a school project? What circumstances can we provide for students to engage in authentic artistic practices? How can we guide students through art making processes that are difficult to understand and articulate?

As a high school art teacher for eight years, my research concerns are not so wrapped up in the processes described in the curriculum. Although there is much value in teaching
about materials and equipment, elements and principles of design, image development strategies, historical, social, cultural and personal contexts, I was looking for something beyond that which I could evaluate. I was seeking to understand how to teach or more likely facilitate deeper understandings of creative processes for my students. The “foundations” I could already provide, but how to reach beyond? First I needed to examine the problem.

How does one describe inspiration? How does one explain the dark moist parts of our hearts and minds that produce imagery? How can we understand that which emerges without our conscious consent? There is surely a form of learning, of self discovery, that reveals itself only through art making. Can this self discovery be taught? What kind of environment must we provide to achieve this kind of goal?

Creative processes take many forms. As individuals we perceive the world around us and process that information in different ways. The scope of this paper can not possibly deal with all of the varied ways of art production; instead I have chosen to closely evaluate my own art processes in the hopes of understanding myself and my pedagogy in a deeper way.

The middle of my thesis is the heart of my explorations: the artwork. This is the site that embodies my discoveries about my own artistic practice, examines the nature of research through studio based inquiry and acts as a record and illustration of what follows in this text. Other colleagues who have dealt with similar arts based research (Springgay, 2001;
Wilson, 2000) have interspersed their work alongside their written text. Wilson offers these words to help build a context for viewing:

In the narratives/art included in this thesis neither the images nor the text is meant to be read alone, rather together, each resonating with each other, reflecting and offering continuously evolving interpretation. There is no one fixed interpretation or response. The images are not intended to act as an illustration to the text and neither is the text offered as an explanation to the image. (pp.24-25)

The notion is to weave together text and imagery as equal entities instead of allowing the images to become the handmaiden of the written word as a traditional illustration might. Although I admire this notion and considered this strategy, I decided I wanted the reader (of text and image) to experience the artwork in a concentrated way. I wish to provide an opportunity to examine the work as a private event, a solitary and personal connection through focused viewing, much like the show L/I/N/E/S (2003) would have provided viewers in the AMS gallery. Rita Irwin often used a phrase while instructing a course that she felt she “was in the presence of research” when referring to a particular artists’ concentrated visual exploration of a particular concept. I hope to allow for one to gain insight from the body of work itself, to be a part of the site of my research, the centre of my exploration. I would encourage readers to examine the artwork first and refer to it often as they continue. This would even mimic my process of working on this thesis; the artwork came first, the analysis developed later as the body of work grew. This is not to say the work was created without thought or consciousness, but it is precisely the articulation of what happened during the process that is at stake. I would encourage readers to often come back to the artwork during the reading of this document as a way to keep the research grounded in the artwork.
The thesis begins with an exploration of how my personal inquiry emerged through my practice as an artist, researcher and teacher. The theoretical underpinnings for arts based research and the situated nature of my work are discussed before revealing what I have come to understand about my artistic processes and classroom practices. The writing, much like my process, spirals towards understanding, building notions upon notions in a very complex way. The connections, lines, and threads between artistic, research and pedagogical processes are examined in depth in this document.
Chapter 1

Artist/Researcher/Teacher: Where it comes from

Much of what I know of teaching is tentative, contingent, and uncertain. I learned it by living it, by doing it, and so what I know is necessarily ragged and rough and unfinished. As with any journey, it can seem neat and certain, even painless, looking backward. On the road looking forward, there is nothing easy or obvious about it. (Ayers, 1993, p.1)

As I was completing my education degree, I had an instructor who told me I had to choose between being a teacher and an artist. She said I could not be both as the emotional and physical tolls of teaching were just too high: if I wanted to really be excellent at my craft, I ought to dedicate myself to it fully. I believed that statement for my first two and a half years of teaching and completed no artwork of my own. Indeed, the time and energy involved in education made it difficult for me to rally my artist self to action. I found myself frustrated, unhappy with the constraints of my job, and at a few moments jealous of my own students who were blithely creating art while I suffered the irony of feeling myself unable to engage with that which I taught. Robertson (1997) experienced similar feelings of disconnection and frustration between her artist and teacher roles:

Somehow, I felt guilty if I brought any of my personal ceramic artwork into the classroom. Even if I worked on my own artwork during noon hour breaks or after school, I thought this may be interpreted by my colleagues, my administrator or parents as not ‘doing the job of classroom teaching’. Consequently, my artwork remained for the most part in the silent spaces of my home studio. The longer my artist voice remained silent, the more I began to feel myself less engaged, less passionate, and less enthusiastic about my life; my own becoming. In my reflective moments I would question this marginalization of my artist voice, at times angry and resentful. (p.6)
My own feelings of frustration and longing came and went, growing more infrequent with time. I felt my artist self slipping away. Then one day, a feeling so strong welled up in my chest it brought tears to my eyes. It was like a desperate panic combined with the most acute need to create something. I instinctively knew that I had to act on this deep rooted and foreign emotion. I recognized this moment as a turning point in my life where I could feed my creative self, or allow it to die a quiet death among my day planner and attendance records. The ensuing painting is entitled *Winter Veins* (fig. 29) and was included in my thesis show as a marker of where I started my journey of artist and teacher.

It was much later in my studies as a master's student that the notion of researching this relationship between artist and teacher emerged. I explored student constructs of trust (Porter, 1999) and noted in part that if I worked along side learners and shared my results from various assignments, students were more willing to take educational risks in their writing and their artwork. The idea of modeling the behaviours I was trying to teach continued into other explorations as for a time I moved my studio space into my classroom (Porter, under review). I was taking even greater risks now as my personal artwork was not tied to assignments with criteria and curriculum links; instead the work came from personal and private places, yet was shared in a very public space. I was also sharing the technical processes from conception to completion, including errors and awkward areas as each piece progressed. What I came to understand being honest about my process brought me strength:
There was a switch here, a demystification of the art process and the mythic cult of the artist. The process involved had just become more transparent. A gentle shift of meaning occurred when I relinquished the mantle of art teacher for working artist and learner. This change did something wonderful: it made art, art making and myself, the teacher, more approachable. (Porter, under review)

I learned that sharing my artist self produced a kind of mentorship and camaraderie in learning that students found accessible and encouraging for them to deepen their own artistic understanding. In an interview, one student says:

J: It makes the teacher more of a peer, not a teacher. It is easier to connect on the same level then when you are looking up at them and they are telling you what to do...it brings the relationship closer together (gestures up then gestures down) student... It is like we are all making art instead of you just teaching us how to make art... it leveled the playing field more. It brought up the confidence of the students. Like there are lots of teachers you are intimidated by. This was kind of like “oh, she’s doing the same thing we are”. (Porter, under review)

Thus the notion of fostering and furthering self concepts of students as artists emerged. Freeman (1993) found that artistic identity – an individual’s self concept of what it means to be an artist- significantly affects the ability to create work. Freeman goes on to suggest that for many artists, artistic production is limited by their notions of mythical expectations of what a true artist is and does. His study further revealed that when these constructs of artistic identity are dismantled, it helps many artists to be and feel more creative. Petkus (1996) suggests a cyclical role model and identifies the relationship between a creative teacher producing creative students. From my experience as an artist teacher I would agree that sharing my artistic self helps to encourage young artists to pursue their creative paths. However, the relationship is not entirely direct, but rather more experiential. Zurmuhlen (1991) in writes about particular artist teachers sharing
the creation of their artwork with students states: “This is not an argument for an apprenticeship model of teaching art; it is a recognition of the experiential nature of learning in studio art, for our obligation as artist/teachers to ground the art experience of our students in praxis, in the concrete and particular.” (p.8)

I continue to share my artist self with my students, although I no longer have my studio in the classroom. I bring in work, discuss the work when asked to or when appropriate, and invite students to my art shows. My artist self permeates my teaching self as I continue to encourage students to seek out and nourish their own artistic identity. But with greater depth comes more difficult and complex challenges in pedagogy. How could I teach students about personal artistic process?

**Artist/Researcher/Teacher: Where it goes**

Art? You just do it.

Martin Ritt (cited in Cameron, 1996, 141)

He who knows others is wise; he who knows himself is enlightened.

Lao-Tzu (cited in Cameron, 1996, 175)

As is so often the case, my previous discoveries created a whole other set of questions that begged for exploration. Students asked me many questions about my artistic processes. These included questions that I was prepared to answer like “how did you do
this part?” or “what did you make this out of?” and questions I was surprised and intrigued by like “why do you make art?” and “where do your ideas come from?” and “how do you know what to do next?” I began to really ask myself what I actually knew about my own artistic process. I often tell my student teachers that in order to teach art well, one needs to break down a project into teachable chunks. For example, student teachers who are trained as artists just know colour theory and rarely think about how to mix colours when they are painting. The knowledge has almost become instinctual and they find it difficult to remember that some students haven’t got the slightest idea how to make green. Next they need to find a way to teach the concept and then assess the learning that takes place. I began to realize that I had never examined my own artistic process – I was like the student teacher – I just knew what I wanted to do next, I just knew what idea I wanted to explore and I just knew I had to make art or something vital from my life would fade.

This was now quite a puzzle. Could I articulate this process? Could I break down what I do into teachable chunks? Could I ever hope to assess this learning in a student? Would I want to? With quite a start, I realized the “process” I taught in order to help students to develop ideas (thumbnail sketches, final prep drawings, brainstorm lists, group webs, visuals and discussion etc.) bore no resemblance to my process as an artist. I began by turning my attention to my newest interest in painting – lines. I wrote in a journal early on in my work:

My fascination now is with lines. I don’t know why it is that I have this need to explore them deeply, but I do. Organic, twisting lines that split the page. So simple. So powerful in one long movement. I feel alive when I make beautiful
lines. I think it is important that my lines connect and wrap around each other. My last painting had knots in it. Are they conflicts? Are they connections? Are they both? When I look back on my work of the last few years I see lines and text have often dominated my vision of art. They are often used to connect seemingly different things together: to juxtapose as well as harmonize. Perhaps this is what I am doing in my research. Perhaps this visual exploration is the best way for me to get at new understandings. I reflect before, during and after I have painted. The after always fascinates me - it uncovers that which I was trying to teach myself. Creating art gives me greater understanding and discovery. These are the keys to the purposes of action research. (Porter, July 13, 2003)

What this entry revealed for me were key ideas that were to frame my notions of process. The act of creating a line that split my page and the rush of feelings that accompanied it suggested to me a physical connection to art making. The notion of the lines expressing relationships and later as symbolic representations pointed to further exploration into the idea of metaphor. Previous themes that influence my work today suggest a spiral or cyclical nature of artistic reinvention, and the sense of revelation through artistic process suggests subconscious revelations and discovery. These notions are discussed at further length in chapter 3.

I would go to my studio every second day to work for an average four hours a day. I was teaching at the same time and spent the remainder of my weekdays at school. This allowed me greater insights and opportunity to make connections between my own understandings of personal artistic process and how I might facilitate understanding of those processes to others. Although initial journal entries revealed some promising ideas, the format of the formal journal did not last long for me. I found it too rigid to schedule and too difficult a form to articulate what I had learned. I began to understand my process to be more cumulative in nature. My understandings came in subtle awareness
over time and when I would listen hard to what was happening for me rather than to force writing at moments I needed to be still. I became frustrated with the genre of journaling, feeling increasingly unhappy with the accuracy of what I had written: I could not find a way to write a sentence that embodied the essence of what I was trying to say. I was looking for the right form to follow the function.

It was then that I began to write poetry. I found I was not alone in this feeling as Herivel (1997) wrote about reconstructing a diary documenting her artistic practice. Poetry was “the closest I could get to painting, through written form” (p.55). This form seemed to be the best way for me to not only express these complex notions of artistic practice, but for the viewer/reader to truly understand them. Thus the idea of knowledge as experience - both in the creation and in the imparting - emerged for me, and I began to see my writing, my art and my fundamental notions of research and thesis writing shifting. I looked to the literature on arts based research as a place to begin framing these ideas.
Chapter 2

Arts Based Research: Examining Ways of Knowing and Expressing Understanding

Art is a technique of communication. The image is the most complete technique
of all communication.

Claus Oldenburg (cited in Cameron, 1996, 136)

Science never deals in proofs. Science describes, it does not prove. If anyone
tells you that such and so has been scientifically “proven” all they are proving is
that they have no idea what science is or what it does.

Brother Guy Consolmagno physicist, astronomer, professor, Jesuit priest (2003,
C3)

A picture is worth a thousand words.

Arts based research is a controversial methodology that seeks to redefine our traditional
notions of research. In the ever present debate between art and science, there are many
who would argue that art and science have much more in common than one may first
suppose. It is often the notion of subjectivity versus objectivity that makes those who
wish for the “hard facts” to dismiss alternative forms of research and representation.
Barone (1997) attempts to deal with some of these concerns of reliability, validity, and
generalization by examining how the arts might provide us with different yet no less valid
notions of these traditional terms. Barone begins by stating that “The aim of educational
research is to further human understanding so that the quality of educational practice can
be improved.” (p.85) Given this assertion:

...validity is related to the instrumental utility of the research that was undertaken
to achieve such aims. Artistically grounded research that furthers understanding
and that enables a reader to notice what had not been seen before, to understand
what had not been understood, to secure a firmer grasp and deeper appreciation of complex situations contributes to the end to which educational research is committed. Our concept of validity is rooted in the ways arts based research helps us notice, understand, and appraise. (p.85)

Barone continues by examining generalization and states that a strength of arts based research is the attention paid to particulars in individual cases and that “there are always likely to be thematic outcomes of such attention” (p.86). These observations can help us form a framework of multivocality that allows for new understandings. Finally, Barone deals with reliability and the notions of truth. He describes a changing notion of truth that the history of science can so readily attest.

This view of truth gives the notion a dynamic quality. Truth is not something that one can fix, package, label and ship across the land. It is a living quality of mind that requires the active reflection of an interested party. As such, it is modified by every knower: No two people have the same conception of a state of affairs. (p.87)

Barone furthers this notion by suggesting that the “subjectivity” many critics fear can provide a much needed perspective on the world that an “objective” view may neglect.

The notion of an objectively known world that is somehow experienced independent of our interior life seems far-fetched. What we have is an interaction between ourselves and the world; indeed it is not possible, in our view, to locate a line between them. We are part of all we see and what we see is a part of us. (p.88)

Barone continues by describing elements of arts based research, but his descriptions are clearly from a literary point of view, and not a visual one. If we can establish that arts based research can provide us with legitimate ways of understanding and reporting about the world, are the parameters and processes of visual perspectives different from literary
perspectives? This was a question that held the key to my tentative conclusions, but could only be explored by understanding the theoretical underpinnings and methodologies surrounding studio based inquiry first.

Stewart (2000) feels the distinction between written and visual processes is extremely important as she makes a case for situating studio practice as a legitimate form of research in order to ensure the very survival of the visual arts in a university setting:

The culture of this community is underpinned by notions of the centrality of research as a tool for the ongoing development of, and challenge to, knowledge. As practitioners within this culture we can either join in, subvert or deny these basic assumptions. To deny them may spell our demise, to join them may deny the unique characteristics of the visual arts, to subvert them, by appropriating their accepted processes and restructuring them for our needs, may be the way to go.

My argument centres on the notion that if we, as artists can understand and situate our practice then we own the practice. We can use the notion of research as a way to develop better understandings about the changing and significant roles of artist, artwork and agency in this rapidly changing world. (p.3)

It would seem the study of studio based inquiry itself is an important area for explorations in addition to the research this practice might reveal. As my primary method of inquiry was studio based research, I became interested in the similarities between artistic practice and the basic tenants of research. Jongeward (1997) says “Artistic practice is a distinctive activity of research and representation” (p.1). She goes on to describe this practice by quoting Langer:

Artists engage in experiential inquiry, finding new ways to explore knowledge and meaning as they create. Visual images provide a way to connect with, represent, and give meaning to inner experiences. As non-discursive expressions of feeling, images convey previously unknown ideas in symbolic forms that have
significance and bring understanding and insight. (Langer, 1953, cited in Jongeward 1997 p.3)

It would seem then that Jongeward’s notion of studio inquiry is a changing one where artists are at liberty to change their methodology as they make discoveries. The resulting symbolic representations are then the manifestations of such discoveries. In fact, Jongeward suggests that it is that very sense of freedom that allows visual artists to make hitherto unknown connections:

The process of creating visual imagery probes below the level of the rational mind and reveals what cannot be know from that perspective alone. Unanticipated connections can be discovered as an image creates relationships among diverse elements of form and experience and brings these into a new wholeness. (p.3)

There are parts then to an image and to the experience of image making that forms the whole, the representation of an artists’ understanding of the world. This process is different in that it allows for sources that are subconscious in nature as a source for these new directions. But where then is the rigor in studio based inquiry? If we allow subconscious notions to count as research, how do we examine these notions as worthy results?

Stewart (2000) elaborates on Denzin and Lincoln’s (1994) notion of a bricoleur as a model for artistic inquiry. Stewart’s concept of studio based inquiry should be critical, reflective and investigative praxis but should also allow for multiple methodologies of qualitative research:

The bricoleur appropriates available methods, strategies and empirical materials or invents or pieces together new tools as necessary. The choice of research depends on the questions being asked. The questions depend on their context,
The idea of conscious decision making with a reasoned approach is key to this methodology. The researcher is charged with creating their own framework and rationale for study based on their research goals. Being a bricoleur is a difficult proposition as one must be well read and well prepared to defend their position. Stewart suggests that an appropriate place to begin for many artists is through autobiography. She says that this allows for artists to explore:

...ideas involving self, identity, history, time, narrative, interpretation, experience and knowledge (Smith 1994, p.102), and it allows artist to attend to issues which give meaning to their thought and actions as artists (Smith 1994, p.289) by ordering and presenting personal experience as a way of understanding aspects of reality. (p.5)

This wide range of topics pursued through a conscious personal lens is one that I rely on as I explore my own process and the meanings generated from my studio inquiry.
Arts Based Research: Why Here and Why Now?

Living is a form of not being sure, not knowing what next or how. The moment you know how, you begin to die a little. The artist never entirely knows. We guess. We may be wrong, but we take leap after leap in the dark.

Agnes de Mille (cited in Cameron, 1996, 121)

I cannot expect even my own art to provide all of the answers – only to hope it keeps asking the right questions.

Grace Hartigan (cited in Cameron, 1996, 135)

A discovery is said to be an accident meeting a prepared mind.

Albert Szent-Gyorgyi (cited in Cameron, 1996, 64)

Given my goals of examining studio process and artistic experience, I selected arts based research as my methodology because this method of research would be the best way to examine my problem and method of representation (art show and thesis) is the most accurate form of communication for my ideas.

Using the notion of a bricoleur, I began a difficult journey where there were no set paths, only guiding principles of critical, reflective and investigative praxis to my research. As I worked in the studio, I let my artistic intuition lead me down paths that would best express my findings. At first I was concerned that I was not keeping a regular journal,
that I was writing poetry instead of paragraphs, that I didn’t have a set plan. Frankly, it would’ve been a much simpler, less gut wrenching experience for me if I had a step by step model to work from, but given what I had chosen to explore I knew, just as I knew what colour to reach for next in my box of conte, that this was the right method. It was not neat, or tidy or easy for that matter, but it seemed true and natural a process. This research was organic in nature – evolving and unpredictable. My poetry expresses how conscious thought that can sometimes interfere with the flow of imagery as I work on a piece of artwork. I felt, at times, the same about my research. If I forced a research model, or a daily journal, or a day of working in the studio when I really wanted to be reading articles, or a subject matter for my art that would fit much more easily into this thesis, then I would be compromising the validity Barone (1997) described as the unique “...ways arts based research helps us notice, understand, and appraise” (p.85) I had to trust that the processes in which I was engaged would help reveal that which I was seeking. I was allowing my research process to mirror my studio inquiry, and soon my studio inquiry would reflect my research processes.

I began to see the collage, or perhaps more accurately the montage of ideas surrounding my process. First there was my studio based inquiry, then my research about that inquiry, and then there was this meta-research process where I examined the research methodology used to research the studio inquiry (fig.2).
It was at this time that my studio practice began reflecting these half formed notions in transparencies. I became fascinated with the notion of layering imagery and text – making visible the relationship of my art to my processes of research and creation. The lines between these two seemed blurred and difficult to extract, but I knew I could better deconstruct these complex ideas if I could construct them, and for me that process was visual. The relationships were not easy or clear but had now been juxtaposed as Jongeward suggested in a new and different way to further our understandings. But more than simply compared, by using the visual, they were now synthesized:

...the finished work of art is the culmination of the theory and practice of the discipline. Based on essentially on investigative, exploratory, speculative or analytical processes, the outcomes are a result of synthesizing the problematics of the discipline. (NCHADS 1994, p.3 cited in Stewart, 2000, p.6)
Seeing the work together and envisioning the installation to come, I could better understand not only how I was working, but what I was uncovering.

In examining my studio practice, the art created became much more than an illustration of what I had come to understand. The art embodied the knowledge that I sought to sift through and translate into a thesis. Indeed much of my struggle in creating this thesis has not been in the creation of the art, but in the writing about it. The problem of explaining or stating meaning can be summed up by Dewey (1934) in this way:

A statement sets forth the conditions under which the experience of an object or situation may be had. It is a good, that is, effective, statement in the degree in which these conditions are stated in such a way that they can be used as directions by which one may arrive at an experience.

The poetic as distinct from the prosaic, esthetic art as distinct from scientific, expression as distinct from statement, does something different from leading to an experience. It constitutes one. (p.84)

Clearly the art ought to be included here as a record of what I completed in the studio while studying my process: it is also an illustration of the discoveries I have made about my process. Yet, does this art contain any other quality of constructing knowledge that may be difficult if not impossible to describe in text form? Is there an experience in transmitting that knowledge that is unique to viewing art? Watrin (1999), when discussing art as research, says

The space where meaning or truth of the artwork emerges is located within the aesthetic experience. It is our communication with the language of art, and the artifact itself, that creates meaning. (p.97)
What I find intriguing here is her combination of the two terms “communication” and “experience.” I have already used the word experience several times in this document, but what do I really mean by that term? There is immediacy to viewing art that allows for very powerful reactions. The “experience” of viewing art is situated in specific times and locations when viewers actively engage in creating that experience. There is communication, or a dialogue, between viewer and art. There is a context of negotiation of the meaning or truth that Springgay (2001) beautifully refers to as the “seam of experience, the site of resonation between art and audience where meaning is recreated” (p.34). Watrin goes on to describe this “communication” between viewer and artwork using Csikszentmihalyi’s notions:

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes communication with a work of art as a multidimensional experience that integrates the visual with both the emotional and the intellectual. He claims that the viewer’s memory fuses with the information in the work of art creating an experience that expands the viewer’s consciousness. The interaction is of a highly complex nature...It is a mode of self-understanding where we learn to understand ourselves in and through it. Self-understanding always occurs when we understand something other than the self and includes the synthesis and wholeness of the other...It is through aesthetic experiences that we come to know ourselves in the world we create. (cited in Watrin, 1999,pp.97-98)

The kind of communication creates a collaborative meaning about the art and becomes then part of the findings. Thus art as research has no meaning or only partial meaning without the audience.
While showing some of my work as part of the East Side Culture Crawl studio open house in November, I was struck by the commentary strangers offered up so readily. I observed others considering my entirely abstract work and if they found or "heard" something in it they would share it with me. Memories, feelings, associations were all a part of their dialogue with the work. Their comments were fascinating to me and I began to record their thoughts. Later I wrote:

**REPRESENTATION**

What is it?
What
What
What

I see
adancerwithherarmsspreadwidesheisrunningawayfrommeandthereisanoldseashellthat
aswashedupontheshoreandavaginaswelledwithfemininityandadamagedbutterflywingsspread
Dialogue suggests a situation with experience as there must be a context for the give and take of information. Denzin (1995) writes that this experience is unrepeatable “They are always first-time occurrences; each attempt at repetition creates a new experience” (p.10). Where, when and how I was to construct the space for the dialogue between viewer and artwork became more important to me. It was from this notion that the idea of the installation, where viewers could walk between transparencies within the art itself, engaging in different viewpoints, experiencing my findings and in fact becoming a visual part of the art/research that I could make this complex relationship visible.

The participation, agreement, dialogue that a viewer willingly engages in when viewing art, in this case my research is part of a concept of lived research. This is a concept I first considered when reading Aoki’s concepts around “live(d) curricula” (1996) where he beautifully recounts a description of his wife engaging in what she calls “brush sculpting” or Chinese or Japanese calligraphy. He becomes interested in her process, and the space between her ideographic (writing as thoughts and ideas) and calligraphic (writing as a visual art) work (p.8). Her writing, like my own artwork, is caught between expressing an idea and as a visual experience. Aoki examines the word experience itself:

Let me take a short aside to touch on the split character of live(d) in “live(d) curriculum” of “curriculum as live(d) experiences.” The word experience is a hybrid, including the notions of “past experiences” (lived experiences) and “ongoing experiences” (live or living experiences). But what matters significantly lies beyond mere past and ongoing. (p.10)
Aoki delineates between planned curriculum (for example that which is written in an IRP) and live(d) curriculum (a concrete example of a classroom learning situation made up of individuals with individual needs). Aoki becomes even more interested in the spaces in between ideas and processes, and includes a variety of art forms in his discussion “These words indicate her interest in the creation of newness in that generative space of ambiguity in the space between the texture of the painting and the texture of the viewer.” (12) This ambiguity, he argues, is where the meaning and the inspiration or art lies:

I now see inspired hybrid brush writing that occurs in that space of ambivalence between ideographic writing and calligraphic writing...I see inspired painting as that generative creation in that space between painting an object and painting as living experience. (p.12)

He describes these spaces as edgy and located at the margins or boundaries where “this or that” becomes “this and that” (p.12) And so I ask myself if I can apply Aoki’s notion of research – I now see inspired research as that generative creation in that space between research and research as living experience. This seems to me to be the heart of all I have been exploring, and this stem applies to inspired pedagogy as well, which will be dealt with in chapter 4.

Aoki also allowed me to see the connections and continuum between text and art. At the beginning of this exploration I felt that the two things, text and art, might be different in terms of creative process and understanding for the reader. Watrin (1999) describes the “text” of art by saying that “Metaphors, signs, symbols become the artistic text that
synthesizes the wholeness of the other” (p.98). We “read” both text and art. We experience the elements of a painting and its subject simultaneously just as we experience the “image” of concrete poetry and the imagery that poetry creates. Aoki’s example of an Asian character is the perfect synthesis of text and image. This suggests to me that there are differences yet similarities along a continuum of text to art. We could imagine perhaps an instructional manual at one end, to a novel, poetry, sign, symbol, representational painting, and an abstract sculpture at the other end. In between we would find any number of combinations and experiences a reader might enjoy with subtle differences.

In my own work, text becomes not only one way to express my process, but as a visual element in my installation. The text possesses all the qualities of research, poetry and art. The title of the show was called “L/I/N/E/S” primarily because much of the work used lines as a visual element within it and because of the metaphorical relationship that imagery evoked. However, the inclusion of the slashes was directly influenced by Aoki’s notion of the slash as place of interest, an area of in between, a space undefined. The word “lines” denotes the subject of the artwork, but it also becomes a visual symbol showing lines (the actual slashes) and expressing the difficult notions of process at the same time.
Chapter 3

Dialogues: About the Art

Each painting has its own way of evolving... When the painting is finished, the subject reveals itself.

William Baziotes (cited in Cameron, 1996, 80)

The art show L/I/N/E/S consisted of four parts: oil paintings, acetate pieces, cocoons, and the installation. Each part was linked by the theme of lines both visually and metaphorically. Using lines in my work was something that emerged in my work before I began my thesis, but it seemed to come out of a culmination of experiences including my studies. I wasn’t sure why the theme intrigued me so much, as I have never worked in complete abstraction before this time, but this seemed to be a perfect opportunity to explore that question. In this section I would like to introduce the work and give a brief overview of how the pieces were created. The processes involved will be discussed in much more depth following the section on the actual art itself.

The first piece I created in this series was Linescape #1 (fig. 8). I then worked in tandem between the acetate and oils, building notions of line, movement and form in two very different media. Each oil painting included long hours, as I layered and blended paint to create as lush a surface as possible. The paintings are numbered in the order in which it was created. There was no direct subject that I worked from. Each painting began the same way – I would split the canvas with a line or two in burnt umber and begin building
the forms from that point on. I had a “sense” of where each piece might go, but no concrete preconceived notion of how the work was going to look, and I had no preparatory drawings to work from.

The frosted and clear acetates were comparatively much quicker and more gestural in nature as my goal was to capture the movement of my body and the materials as I worked. I would first draw my lines in conte and then pull out lines using a stiff brush and an oil based medium. Again I had no prep work, although there were times when I wanted to show distinct relationships between lines such as in Knot (fig. 20) and Merge (fig. 21). Later on, the images with ink, gesso, conte and bleach (see Untitled #3 and #2 fig. 22-23) began to blend the processes of the oil painting and the early acetates as I layered and pulled materials forward to create depth. Acetate is either translucent or transparent in nature and posed interesting problems and possibilities as a material. The installation idea emerged from working these materials and thinking about notions of meaning making, communication and audience.

The installation (fig. 24-28) consisted of several paintings on frosted and clear acetate and my poetry on clear plastic suspended from the ceiling and held in place with fishing weights. Each piece was hung at a different angle and height and is meant to be viewed from many different perspectives. The installation in principle was planned before hand, although the actual day of the hanging determined where and how each piece was placed. The installation is a key part of the show and links all other parts together by creating the context of viewing each piece as part of the study of process.
The idea of the cocoons (fig. 12-17) is meant to symbolize parts of my creative self. Each cocoon contains a glass object wrapped with twine. I enjoyed using the twine because it seemed to me that it was a sculptural line I was wrapping over and over again in the creation of each piece. It was a line made physical. The objects inside each cocoon include: a decayed leaf, a broken egg, a transcript of a conversation with my mother rolled and submerged in water, a mixture of attendance sheets, anonymous students from the yearbook, and computerized comments for report cards, and finally my own wisdom tooth. The selection of objects developed as I went along.

My husband was the one to suggest Winter Veins (fig. 29) be included in the show. As I mentioned earlier, this was my first piece I created after I decided to start my journey as an artist teacher. What struck my husband so profoundly was the similarity between the aesthetic developed in this piece loosely based on a tree in a winter sky completed six years ago and what I was currently working on. I realized my work had a cyclical and spiraling relationship nature. What I thought was new was an extension of a continued dialogue between myself and my art. This spiral was to come up again and again in my notions about process.
Dialogues: The Art

Figure 4. L/I/N/E/S Exhibition, AMS Gallery, April 22-25, 2003
Figure 5. L/I/N/E/S Exhibition
Figure 6. L/I/N/E/S Exhibition
Figure 7. Oils
Figure 8. *Linescape #1*, 20"x 30", oil on canvas, 2002
Figure 9. *Linescape* #2, 24”x 20”, oil on canvas, 2002
Figure 10. *Linescape #3*, 24"x 26", oil on canvas, 2002
Figure 11. *Linescape #4*, 24”x 30”, oil on canvas, 2002
Figure 12. Cocoons
Figure 13. Cocoon #2 (detail), mixed media sculpture, 2003
Figure 14. *Cocoon #3* (detail), mixed media sculpture, 2003
Figure 15. *Cocoon #5* (detail), mixed media sculpture, 2003
Figure 16. *Cocoon #1* (detail), mixed media sculpture, 2003
Figure 17. *Cocoon # 4* (detail), mixed media sculpture, 2003
Figure 18. Acetates
Figure 19. *Junction*, 24" x 36", conte and medium on frosted acetate, 2002
Figure 20. *Knot*, 24" x 36", conte and medium on frosted acetate, 2002
Figure 21. *Merge*, 24”x 36”, conte and medium on frosted acetate, 2002
Figure 22. *Untitled #3, 24”x 36”, mixed media on acetate, 2003*
Figure 23. *Untitled #2, 24"x 36", mixed media on acetate, 2003*
Figure 24. *Processes*, mixed media installation, 2003
Figure 25. *Processes*, mixed media installation, 2003
Figure 26. *Processes*, mixed media installation, 2003 (detail)
Figure 27. *Processes*, mixed media installation, 2003
(detail)
Figure 28. *Processes*, mixed media installation, 2003 (detail)
Figure 29. *Winter Veins*, 30" x 30", oil on canvas, 1997
Dialogues: When art talks back

In the brush doing what it is doing, it will stumble on what one couldn’t do by oneself.

Robert Motherwell (cited in Cameron, 1996, xiv)

The noun of self becomes a verb. This flashpoint of creation in the present moment is where work and play merge.

Stephan Nachmanovitch (cited in Cameron, 1996, 54)

The painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through.

Jackson Pollock (cited in Cameron, 1996, 55)

Describing artistic processes is a difficult endeavor. There is a combination of conscious and subconscious, past and present, subjective and objective, self and world. Dewey described these moments of creation as qualitative situations (1946). Dewey and Pepper (1953) argue that there is “fusion” and “funding” in artistic process. The “fusion” is the melding together of seemingly different ideas and “funding” refers to past experiences fusing with present situations. Pepper writes “fusion is the more general term, and funding may be regarded as fusion which involves memory of elements coming out of the past”. (p.169) From theses qualitative experiences come creations that record of a moment or an object without context: the art is visual thoughts made concrete. Brigham (1989) writes:

Any creative thinker or artist energetically and intuitively sorts out and re-organizes the pervasive aesthetic quality of the experiential field of inquiry. The
outcome is a cognition. A cognition is a new structure of consciousness, sometimes termed "idea", or "insight", or "understanding". It also may be termed painting or sculpture if the qualitiveness of relevant art media have entered into and influenced the progressive abstraction of meaningful form [i.e., "an object"] from the dynamic field transaction. (p.15)

So given that my art represents my thoughts about my art processes, what does my qualitative situation look like? What has fused or funded during the course of my inquiry? Earlier I alluded to four key notions in my process: a physical connection in art making, metaphors in art making, spiral or cyclical explorations of themes now reinvented, and subconscious revelations and discovery. The key metaphor that bridges all of these aspects for me is dialogue. Eisner (2002) writes:

But in fact aims, purposes, and ideas not only precede action; they often follow it. The material itself becomes a source of suggestive ideation. The qualitative exploration of a material can generate new ideas or aims. Thus these processes are better thought of as a form of dialogue, a mode of conversation with the material rather than a monologue directed solely by the artist to a compliant material. (p.111)

Like many artists, such as the ones quoted at the beginning of this section, I feel a sense of "otherness" when I work, as if the painting, has a life of its' own. London (2003) describes art as a sacred conversation between oneself and nature:

We propose that the world, all of Nature, is engaged in a sacred conversation, speaking about everything there is, everything there was and everything there will be (thus sacred). All of human history can be understood as an attempt at comprehending that speaking and becoming conversant in word and deed with it. All disciplines of knowledge have employed their particular ways of knowing to break the code and bring the news to bear upon the affairs of man. How as artists do we learn to speak Nature's language? The way any other discipline does: listen and look. (pp.77-78)
In one poem I write about painting with oils, where the forms are lush, have depth, and a “presence”. I refer to the magic of building, making something from nothing, but note the stress on “WILL.” This is not just a prediction, but desire to become.

FORMS

Build
Build the form
Build the form that does not exist
Flat
Flat

See

the curve
the change

follow the thought unbidden

undulating
moving

build
build the form
build the form that is
build the form that WILL be

In my qualitative situation, it is as if I am working to discover something that can only come out through the act of creation. I do not consciously understand it when I begin, but I trust the process will create a new “cognition.” Religious artists have attributed this process of revelation to divine inspiration, or described the artist as merely a messenger. Piet Mondrian once claimed “The position of the artist is humble. He is essentially a channel.” (cited in Cameron, 1996, xv) Although I do not subscribe to the religious
connection for myself, I can not help but note the feelings described in my poetry are intensely emotive and reflective of my spirit. When I paint I am asking for this communication, I am seeking out the conversation, the unexpected thought; I am making a space for the undefined, I am dwelling within the slash.

CONVERSATION

Tell me what I do not know.

speak to me in the space
of surrender

this place of silence
this place of waiting

strike me

with a thought unknown
with a thought forgotten

simmering beneath my tongue

under
in
through

this line
this long beautiful line

my hand shakes

London (2003) stresses the importance of listening in these conversations:

A quieted mind within a body at peace prepares us for perceiving that portion of the talking universe that speaks softly and at a pace beneath and beyond that of ordinary consciousness. Wait. Be unhurried to do and to say what you know. Wait until the chock-full-of-ideas mind that you bring on your visit to meet
Nature turns its attention away from telling Nature what it knows and starts attending to what Nature might have to say. (p.79)

The processes I have explored are very spiritual in nature, but they are also closely entwined with the physical. The act of creation was important. I was acutely aware of the physicality of painting: the weight of the brush, pressure against the canvas, the movement of my arm through space. This physicality felt very elemental and primal, not an intellectual exercise. I felt a great rush of pleasure and urgency as I worked, as if at any moment the feeling might slip away. These emotionally charged moments could easily be disturbed by over analysis or critical thought, making my emotional state too altered to allow further creation. I write about working on the frosted acetates:

LINE

an arc

a breath

my fingers mouth the soft pigment
twist
twist
draw
don
not straight
this line
this thing
lives in my moment

long
long
twist red
twist twist
alive
SWITCH
quickly
quickly
block the thought

59
burnt brown
drift
drift drift
down
join the dance

my hands
so dirty

pull me forward
lift my arm
light
so light
seek the spot
the part.
the whole
unfinished
need
NEED
my touch

my eyes caress
softly
urgently
tell me where
WHERE
to draw the line
next

direction flutters
my eye trails
catch UP
decide
THINK
where to go

stop
The connection is broken.
I felt a connectedness in my body when I worked, as if the instrument of my arm, my eye, and my lungs were working to reveal new understandings through my art that could not be revealed through consciousness alone. Abram (1997) makes the case that it is our whole bodies that create understanding about the world we live in:

In the Spell of the Sensuous, David Abram makes the scholarly and poetically put argument that it is our sensing body, in all of its array of sensing apparatuses, that finally knows, understands, comprehends, appreciates, feels, empathizes, and lives accordingly. Reading is not enough. Seeing is not enough. Hearing, tasting, touching, seeing, smelling, under many circumstances, together with emanations of our inner life, finally make up what we know, what we are, how we live. (cited in London, 2003, p. 89)

The physical and spiritual were important elements to my work, but that does not mean that conscious decisions were disregarded, or had no place in my process. My choice to include and develop specific symbols and metaphors in my work are excellent examples of how deliberate and conscious decisions enter into the dialogue. I carefully selected items to go into each cocoon in the show and brainstormed list of objects that might suit my purposes. However I must confess that the initial idea for cocoons was not a reasoned conclusion. Goldberg (1986) claims that creating the thought of a metaphor is not the product of the conscious mind:

This is what metaphor is. It is not saying that an ant is like an elephant. Perhaps; both are alive. No. Metaphor is saying the ant is an elephant. Now, logically speaking, I know there is a difference. If you put elephants and ants before me, I believe that every time I will correctly identify the elephant and the ant. So metaphor must come from a very different place than that of the logical, intelligent mind. It comes from a place that is very courageous, willing to step out of our preconceived ways of seeing things and open so large that it can see the oneness in an ant and in an elephant. (pp.34-35)
The theme of cocoons initially emerged subconsciously from a drawing one afternoon after walking through a forest in the January rain. I had collected partially decayed leaves and I was drawing lines around them on my page. After about an hour of intense work I took a fresh look at my drawing and was surprised to find some of the lines had connected and wrapped around each other in such a way that they looked like cocoons. This unexpected image so pleased me. The connotative and denotative meanings of cocoon seemed so tied to what I was exploring in my research that I felt it was more than just a happy accident. I looked up cocoons on the web and found that the single strand of silk protecting a larva is approximately a mile long. A long line is wrapped around a living creature in the act of transformation, of re-creation. The strength of protection is not in the simple strand, but in the wrapping. So I began to wonder, to answer back to my "thought unbidden," to begin a greater dialogue. What do I begin with in order to create? What are the things that come before the actual act of creation that are transformed, or re-created through in this case line? What was I wrapping?

I stumbled on to Dewey and Pepper's notion of "funding." I began to consider my artistic identity and the sources of inspiration that drew me to make art. For example, I selected my recently pulled wisdom tooth as the perfect object to represent the physicality in art making. What better object than one which came from my own body? Even better was the lovely bonus that it was not just any tooth, but a wisdom tooth. It was through this exploration of the physical component to my art making that I was beginning to understand the wisdom of the body.
The partially decayed leaf represented my aesthetic. My notion of beauty is one I like to think of as "uncommonly common." I am often inspired by subjects that are weathered, decayed, or eroded by the elements. I wrote about the temporal beauty of one of the leaves I collected that day:

**ABSTRACTION**

these leaves  
glisten with old rain  
suspending their softness  
nourishing the slow meal of the fungus  
tiny black mouths  
palest yellow ring licks the oncoming path  
fading  
with the heat of my hand

The broken eggs represent a previous series of pieces I completed as part of my earlier research (when I brought my studio to the classroom) where in each painting was of a woman holding an egg. The series was part of my interest in changing social notions of femininity. This piece symbolized themes I revisit in a differently in my artwork as continued dialogues. This piece also draws attention to the continued dialogue of my research driven from my earlier experiences of working on my art in my classroom.

The cocoon that held cut and folded attendance sheets, yearbook images and computerized report comments represented school life. These objects roughly deal with the process of being a teacher everyday, the repetition of routine, and the myriad of students who come into my life. This is the business of schools, the job description, and
a valid piece of who I am. These things are what I begin with as a teacher, and they are the basis of what and how I transform myself and my classroom as a place of individual exploration and discovery through artistic practice.

The largest piece, and actually the first that I created in this series of sculptures, was one where I submerged a transcript from an interview I did with my mother much earlier. In this interview she talks of the influence her own mother had on her in encouraging her to quit art school. The words “mother” and “art is useless” appear randomly, but seem to sum my grandmother’s feelings towards my mother continuing in her art education. I submerged the work in water to make it appear preserved. This created a stillness, as if the power of the words were muffled by the passage of time. In her regret, my mother would tell us this story as children so that we would understand we should follow our dreams. This story became much more to me as it helped me to form my own framework of self as artist from an early age that still resonates for me today.

All of these symbols “existed” in my past, but were also present and influential in my work as an artist. I am fueled or “funded” by these notions. The “fusion” of ideas and materials occurs throughout the art process. The dialogue of between my conscious and subconscious, my physical and spiritual, was played out daily as I chose where to go next.

When trying to describe my art show to others, I am often struck by how different the components sound: oils, conte, sculpture, acetate, canvas, abstraction, found object,
framed pieces, and installation. And yet somehow the show hung together. In reflection I realize it is more than the same aesthetic voice speaking through different media: it is the sense of inquiry. By virtue of the fact that the media is different, so must be the message. Each combination, like abstract, oil, canvas or symbolism, found object, sculpture, speaks as subject and also as an object to be studied. Sullivan (2000) writes:

If, however, we are to become literate in a wider range of the forms in which knowledge may be encoded, we must give attention to these forms. We must stare at them, ponder them, arrive at an understanding not only of what the forms contain, but also of how form informs. (p.223)

It is this sensibility I think Rita Irwin was referring to when she said she was “in the presence of research.”
Chapter 4

Classroom Extensions: Moments

Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.

Pablo Picasso (cited in Cameron, 1996, 20)

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious.

Albert Einstein (cited in Cameron, 1996, 195)

When children call us they call upon us.

Max Van Manen (1991, 24)

Amidst my art making, reading and writing, I have of course been teaching. I had no idea how I might make connections in my classroom, I only knew I should trust the process and be open to discovery. My first awareness of the importance of what I was doing came from some unlikely sources. I had a student in one class that was failing my course because she did not submit her assignments. This was frustrating to me because I sensed this student was capable of much more. She was quiet and withdrawn (actually diagnosed with mild Aspergers), thoughtful and interested in art, but failing none the less. And so we would talk. She told me how much she hated school, her feelings of disconnection with other students, her feelings of seeing herself and others seeing her as different. I knew she found these few conversations difficult: she struggled with the right words to express how she felt; she struggled to interact with others at all. She had trouble making eye contact, hid behind dark layers of black and metal and missed a lot of classes.
The course she had selected was designed to be very independent, as students developed themes of their own choice to pursue. I could not understand why this student, who disliked the structure of school so much (she mentioned she was going to graduate the following year by correspondence), would not want to create work entirely of her own design.

At first she told me she just couldn’t come up with a theme. We would brainstorm together and she would seem to be feeling better about her portfolio, and then she would stall. Smaller assignments, designed to help provide stepping stones and frameworks for creating with personal themes, went unfinished. She would sit in front of her visual journal for the period, leaving the page blank. Of course her journal was full of other things unrelated to the course, and I would often find her working in her journal, rather than her assignments. One day she showed her journal to me in frustration, to prove she was capable and interested, but could not do the assignment. She went on to say that she does “her own stuff all the time at home.” It was at this moment a bell went off in my head. I looked at her and asked her to tell me about what she worked on at home. “Oh, just stupid stuff. I just mess around with a digital camera and a computer.” I asked her if she wouldn’t mind bringing the work in next day so we could talk about it. She told me it didn’t have “anything to do” with the assignment and it “didn’t have a theme” so why did I want to see it? I replied suggesting that we may be able to get more ideas about what directions she may wish to pursue by looking at what she was working on at home.
The next day she brought the work with her to class. She did not lay it out on the table, but rather turned her back towards her friends sitting around her and handed the images to me below the desk level so they could not see what I was looking at. I was so proud of her for sharing these images with me. Very quickly I understood why she felt so private about the images. Each one was a self portrait. The images were technically stunning, and visually powerful. She had taken photos of herself at odd angles, with heavy dark makeup, and included text from song lyrics with which she connected. Her exploration was much more than a simple self portrait, as she included objects like gilded and ornate mirrors and references to dolls. Her text was angry and pointed to notions of beauty.

I asked her to tell me about the work. She said she couldn’t explain it. So I asked her about the details – “I find this detail of the mirror so interesting, why did you include it?” “This line about beauty is very powerful, did you write it?” At first she couldn’t meet my eyes at all. But when it became clear that I not only accepted what she had to say, but was interested, she began to speak more freely. I slowly worked my way around to asking about her process. “How do you come up with your ideas?” She said she didn’t know, and that she didn’t have a theme or anything: they were kind of about her, but not. I asked her for permission to put the pieces out on the table so we could look at them more closely to see if there was a common thread among the pieces. She agreed. I started talking about my own process, how sometimes I don’t know where I am going with an image yet, I just do it. Sometimes stuff comes out that I don’t expect. I talked about how sometimes what I do tells me something about myself or the world I didn’t know before. I talked about the value of “play” in art. While I was talking she looked at
me full in the face for the first time. I could see that what I was saying resonated for her. There was surprise in her eyes and also relief that someone understood and validated her process.

It was at that moment I realized how the structure I had set inhibited her particular process. She saw her work as "wrong" because the theme came from the work itself, and was not consciously decided before hand. She saw her work as "wrong" because this was something she did privately at home and not in the classroom. She saw her work as "wrong" because she could not articulate the extremely complex notions of femininity and beauty that she had subconsciously stumbled into. Now, I said, "let's forget about the assignment for the moment. Pretend that I never gave you a single handout, and that this was not for marks. Forget about the course and let's just talk about this as one artist to another." Later I write:

SPEAK

She hands me the images

carefully
blocking
their
view

half formed questions
unfocused anger
emerging wrongness

She can not meet my eyes.

Sometimes
I say
Sometimes there is a pattern
like
Morse code
repeated
and
repeated
until we hear our own voice.

We look together.
Sifting
Sifting
Mirrors
Lipstick like blood
Silhouettes of impossible figures
unconscious thread
She smiles softly
at her
courageous fumbles.

This student ended up completing many more pieces than what was required for the course. Her work continues to grow and she is moving forward in the articulation of personal themes in her work. I told her she should come and visit me next year if she does do correspondence because I'll miss seeing where her work goes. She agreed to visit.

My learning about how this research can be applied is summed up in moments like these.
It was only through my own introspection that I could identify and facilitate new
understandings for this student and her process. Other classroom moments were much less dramatic, but significant none the less. Each student was struggling with some aspect of their process, and in each situation it went much deeper than what the curriculum could prescribe. Like the student who was completely “blocked” emotionally by the idea of creating a series until I asked her to try to work in miniatures as a way to make the project less intimidating and thus allow her ideas to flow. She ended up creating an incredible website with the results. Or the student who was suddenly plagued by self doubt in the middle of a painting when she “felt like” adding colour to a part of her painting, but wasn’t sure she would “ruin it.” We talked about trusting instincts, being unafraid of mistakes and feeling good about where we have taken our art. They were unplanned and spontaneous moments that emerged through the process of teaching, and through the process of knowing the struggles of my students, both personal and educational.

During these moments I was reminded of Van Manen’s (1991) notion of pedagogical tact where teachers react to situations with tools and understandings that could not be imparted in a methods course:

First a tactful person has the sensitive ability to interpret inner thoughts, understandings, feelings, and desires from indirect clues such as gestures, demeanor, expression, and body language. Tact involves the ability to immediately see through motives of cause and effect relations. A tactful person is able as it were to read the inner life of the other person. Second, tact consists in the ability to interpret the psychological and social significance of the features of this inner life. Thus tact knows how to interpret, for example the deeper significance of shyness, hostility, frustration, rudeness, joy, anger, tenderness, grief in concrete situations with particular persons. Third, a person with tact appears to have a fine sense of standards, limits, and balance that makes it
possible to know almost automatically how far to enter into a situation and what distance to keep in individual circumstances. Finally, tact seems characterized by moral intuitiveness: A tactful person knows the right thing to do. (pp.125-26)

I read Van Manen’s words through the lens of this document and see not only that I employed pedagogical tact in the moment I described, but also the connections between pedagogical tact and art processes and arts based research. Examining words like sensitivity, intuition, automatically, knowing, and words like interpretation, cause and effect, limits, and balance strike me as related to this discussion. Perhaps pedagogical tactfulness is the art of teaching, perhaps arts based research seeks to enhance the experience of live(d) curriculum.

Classroom Extensions: Spaces

So you see, imagination needs moodling-long inefficient, happy idling, dawdling and puttering.

Brenda Ueland(cited in Cameron, 1996, 22)

During [these] periods of relaxation after concentrated intellectual activity, the intuitive mind seems to take over and can produce the sudden clarifying insights which give much joy and delight.

Fritjof Capra, physicist (cited in Cameron, 1996, 14)

“How can you teach creativity?” they want to know. Defiance fights with curiosity on their faces.
“I can’t,” I tell them. “I teach people to let themselves be creative.”

Julia Cameron (1996, x)
Earlier I questioned my prep work strategies as being inappropriate tools for the classroom given that I did not use similar strategies in my own practice. I would argue that these strategies are acceptable and helpful to many students, but not complete. Lists, thumbnail sketches, mind maps, final designs, paragraphs are all good strategies to use to assess very particular things based on the criteria of the project. These “foundation” notions based on the elements and principles, image development strategies, contexts and so forth are important to art education, but what about directly dealing with this notion of live(d) art education? Can this kind of learning be entirely based on unplanned moments or can I create frameworks that might encourage self discoveries? How can I facilitate these kinds of understandings and evaluate them?

Eisner (2002) argues that one thing “the arts can teach education is that intrinsic satisfactions matter” (p.202). Why did my student create such a body of work at home that she had no intention of getting any grades for or showing to anybody? Why do I make art when I have could have a much easier schedule and fewer financial obligations without it? The answer is of course, that I experience value beyond external rewards for participating in my own artistic process. We like to make art. Eisner argues that education is increasingly focusing on external forms of rewards, such as grades or test scores. This he argues “takes the intellectual heart out of learning” (p.202). As educators, we hope that we are not only providing students with an opportunity to learn about our subject area now, but also that they will continue to enjoy learning in our field in a lifelong way. If we can agree that the qualitative experience of education is the most likely aspect to facilitate personal artistic process within an individual student, then the
measurement of the success of that environment must come from the individual him/herself. The very definition of this type of learning can not and should not be evaluated with a standard letter grade. This does not mean a teacher using more qualitative observations can not informally assess an individual’s learning, but the individual must self select to go on this journey and the “test” lasts a lifetime. Of course if a student develops a greater understanding of their own process while in the school system, it is likely they will experience greater success producing artwork for class.

So how can I set up the framework for students to enter into? There were three factors that emerged in my classroom facilitating deeper understandings of personal process: time, attitude and opportunity. Self discovery regarding artistic process requires time: both thinking about and making art. It is of no surprise to me that the students who became most aware of their own processes were in the same senior independent course as the aforementioned students. The course is quite intense and required a commitment to one two-hour after school studio sessions every two weeks in addition to class time. There were also strong expectations for students to use their own time to further their explorations. As such, students produced a large body of work in a short period of time. Students handed in their portfolios formally three separate times in the year. In selecting work to be included, students could see growth in technique, but also subject matter. The use of peer and self critiques where students would talk about what they had done and where they were to head next were common. Students understood they had the school year to get the portfolio right before a final evaluation and this gave them the freedom to explore and mature in their thinking. One student reported to me in May that they “felt like a different person” than the one who completed the work in their own portfolio from
September. For students who struggled with their processes, like the student who felt “blocked,” the resolution of those feelings took months to resolve.

Of course the attitude of any student willing to commit to the extraordinary amount of time and dedication that this course demanded is sometimes quite different than students who enroll in “regular” art classes. These students were interested in post secondary entrance, building a portfolio, and pursuing art. These students were more likely to see themselves as artists and were open to exploring their artistic processes. Earlier in this document I wrote about the importance of students being able to break down stereotypes of what an artist is in order for them to feel the role is personally attainable. There are influences such a family (for myself see cocoon #1), friends, and of course instructors. “Attitude” applies not only to students but to teachers as well. Hammer (1984) writes:

I believe in a nondirectional approach to teaching art, wherein the teacher looks for and “sees the artist” in the student. She notices, encourages, and appreciates the unique and particular bent of each personal expression rather than imposing her ideas, projects, directions, and interests on other students. (p.183)

It is important to believe that students are artists. It is the “how” more so than the “what” we teach them that will see students follow their visions. We have a powerful role to play as artist teachers not only as mentors, but as models. Our very way of being communicates a deeper curriculum of values students subconsciously pick up. This seems much easier to do in a course like the one I described. I can help foster understanding of artistic processes much better if students have an opportunity to delve deeply into a particular subject of interest, and are challenged to stretch their skills in
long afternoon sessions. But is there a place for this kind of learning in the “regular” classroom? What might this look like?

I taught another senior level art course that was very different. I had many students in this class who did not have many skills, or an overly positive attitude towards learning. As such for the first part of the year I had been giving students what I call “lock step” assignments with a clear artistic goal with set “steps” to achieve. The idea was to create a climate of success so that I could take educational risks with them later on in the year. I decided to take that risk by opening them up to using their intuitive artistic skills. We began by discussing pattern, organic and geometric shape and abstract art. I was very upfront about how this process was different from the other units we had completed. I told them that we would not have any thumbnail sketches or prep drawing (put cheering students here) and instead they would have to use their “sense of design” to complete the project. I told them it sounded easy, but some would find it difficult to trust their instincts and develop their “eye.” The students were each given a large sheet of black paper (24”x 30”), cutting knife, and a cutting board. I asked them to measure a border around the sheet to keep the design intact and to create a detailed abstract pattern inside. There were no other rules except to cut “where and how they thought it needed it.”


Given the absence of a formula or an algorithm, how are judgments about rightness made? I believe they depend on somatic knowledge, the sense of closure that the good gestalt engenders in embodied experience; the composition feels right. Work in the arts cultivates modes of thinking and feeling that I have described; one can not succeed in the arts without such cognitive abilities. Such
forms of thought integrate feeling and thinking in ways that make them inseparable. One knows one is right because one feels the relationships. One modifies one’s work and feels the results. The sensibilities come into play and in the process become refined. Another way of putting it is that as we learn in and through the arts we become more qualitatively intelligent. (p.9)

I can remember smiling at the silence in the classroom while my students were diligently working on their assignment. This kind of learning took concentration and focus. Some students could identify this process as different and more enjoyable. Other students, with more sequential kind of thinking, struggled with this assignment and ended up creating very symmetrical designs, or directly relating their designs to cultural motifs. It would seem for these students they needed to construct their own rules to help frame their designs. Whatever the case, the pieces were stunning and I had to fight to even get to put them up, so eager were they to take them home to put on their wall. Thus although we didn’t have the same kind of time, or attitude in the room as in my other course, the opportunity I created allowed for at least a cursory exploration. Time and attitude would develop the excellence and life long learning involved in understanding one’s artistic process.

Classroom Extensions: Tomorrow

As I teach, I project the conditions of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. (Palmer, 1998, 2)
As an artist/researcher/teacher I have had the pleasure of examining my practice and bringing it forward in my classroom. The nature of which has been complex and I suspect ongoing with the changes life brings. Greene (1995) describes this feeling of flux:

The quest involves me as woman, as teacher, as mother, as citizen, as New Yorker, as art-lover, as activist, as philosopher, as white middle-class American. Neither my self nor my narrative can have, therefore a single strand. I stand at the crossing point of too many social and cultural forces; and, in any case, I am forever on the way. (p.1)

In recognizing the strands in my life and the changing nature of experience I embrace the everyday of teaching, artistic practice and research. Examining my artist self has been instrumental in understanding my practice and helping students to further their own artistic identity. My experience enhances their experience and becomes joined together with a common purpose. Thompson (1986) states:

If we neglect to exercise our abilities as artists, we are in danger of forgetting what is involved in the processes of conceiving and expressing ideas for use in art works we expect students to undertake. Conversely, when as teachers we continue to produce our own art, we link ourselves to our student in ways that mere knowledge of theories of creativity cannot produce. (p.48)

But art making becomes more than this: it is the joy of creation, the sharing of expression, the discovery of self. Robertson (1997) writes that sharing our artist selves with students can be a transformational experience filled with hope and facilitating change for a better future. Why wouldn’t we want to find ways to enhance these qualitative descriptors in our classrooms and in our lives? Arts based research can be an excellent form to follow this function, and we must not only face the fact that the findings will not be absolute, but embrace it.
Arts based research is thick with meanings. It dwells in uncomfortable spaces, in spaces of uncertainty. Fox and Geichman (2001) write about the power of educational research that explores “boundary conditions” like the avant garde in contemporary art. Contemporary art has much to teach us, as it focuses on the edges and not the center, continuously expanding and challenging what has come before. Eisner (2002) points to the notion of uncertainty as something we should consider central to the philosophy of education:

As I indicated earlier, we place a much greater emphasis on prediction and control than on exploration and discovery. Our inclination to control and predict is, at a practical level, understandable, but it also exacts a price; we tend to do the things we know how to predict and control. Opening oneself to the uncertain is not a pervasive quality of our current educational environment. I believe that it needs to be among the values we cherish. Uncertainty needs to have its proper place in the kinds of schools we create. (p.12)

One can not explore if one knows the road. One can not discover if one does not take a risk. Arts-based research has a place in furthering our understanding of education through educational risk. We ask students to do this everyday in an art classroom – to experience their own artistic process and speak their unique visual voice to others. It is our challenge to do the same.

What I have come to understand about these processes is that I am one in a chorus of Barone’s multivocality. And although meanings of my art, these words, and my stories will forever be interpreted differently by others participating in my invitation to dialogue, it is through these recreations that true meanings exist. This is the fueling and funding of research. This is the true nature of artistic experience. This is the art of discovery. My hope is that when one reads experiences this document they dwell within the slash.
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Appendix I

The following CD contains a recording of the L/I/N/E/S art show and installation at the AMS Gallery during the week of April 22 – 25, 2003. The program used to create this file was iMovie 3 and can be run on any Quick Time program. The film is approximately eight minutes long and contains the following pieces:

Linescape# 1, 20”x 30”, oil on canvas, 2002
Linescape# 2, 24”x 20”, oil on canvas, 2002
Linescape# 3, 24”x 26”, oil on canvas, 2002
Linescape# 4, 24”x30”, oil on canvas, 2002
Merge, 24”x 36”, conte and medium on frosted acetate, 2002
Junction, 24”x 36”, conte and medium on frosted acetate, 2002
Knot, 24”x 36”, conte and medium on frosted acetate, 2002
Tangle, 24”x 36”, conte and medium on frosted acetate, 2002,
Untitled #1, 24”x 36”, mixed media on acetate, 2003
Untitled #2, 24”x 36”, mixed media on acetate, 2003
Untitled #3, 24”x 36”, mixed media on acetate, 2003
Untitled #4, 24”x 36”, mixed media on acetate, 2003
Cocoon #1, mixed media sculpture, 2003
Cocoon #2, mixed media sculpture, 2003
Cocoon #3, mixed media sculpture, 2003
Cocoon #4, mixed media sculpture, 2003
Cocoon #5, mixed media sculpture, 2003
Processes, mixed media installation, 2003
Winter Veins, 30”x 30”, oil on canvas, 1997