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Research as Art and Art as Research: A Living Relationship

BY CAROL S. JEFFERS

At the 1991 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), Bruce Uhrmacher and Gaye Green posed the question, "Why not express research as art?" Their presentation, "Educational Criticism and the Theory of the Avantgarde," constituted a unique response to this question; Uhrmacher and Green claimed that research can be expressed as installation art exhibits (or art that is context-bound, experienced at local sites), and that such exhibits might be installed in schools so that teachers can engage in dialogue as a part of installation art seminars. (Uhrmacher & Green, 1991).

As an example of how research expressed as art might promote dialogue among teachers and researchers, Uhrmacher and Green closed the AERA session with their own installation art exhibit — a slide-tape presentation involving multiple projectors and a dozen or so screens, made of large sheets of hand-made paper, configured as a horseshoe. Those in attendance immediately felt the tension created by the taped voices speaking of excellence in education as multiple images of children living in poverty and newspaper headlines telling of depressed economic conditions rippled in and across the horseshoe. For those experiencing these provocative audio-visual juxtapositions and finding themselves caught up in the ensuing dialogue, the epistemic function of the exhibit was clear.

At the same AERA session, Linda Beath offered yet another response to the question, "Why not express research as art?" She suggested that the written products of research can be viewed not merely as narratives, but rather, as drama or created dialogue. For Beath, it is the use of dialogue that distinguishes dramatic forms of research from narrative forms. Beath's views of research as dialogue or drama may prove to be quite useful, as "drama allows us to think of the role of the reader in the creation of educational criticism" (Beath, 1991). Educational criticism, like aesthetic or literary criticism, offers us an important way of understanding educational practice.

In this paper, I join Uhrmacher, Green, and Beath in offering some responses to the question, "Why not express research as art?" In addition, I respond to the question, "Why not express art as research?

The purpose of this paper is to briefly explore a living relationship of educational research to art and of art to educational research, while recognizing that such a relationship may not embrace all forms of educational research or art. More specifically, this exploration is of the ways in which pre- and in-service teachers might live this relationship while conducting their own research in art and education.

For the purposes of this paper, a hermeneutic phenomenological

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approach to human science research (van Manen, 1990), will be offered as a means by which the relationship between research, art, and education might be explored. Deeply rooted in philosophy, this methodological approach combines the description of phenomenology with the interpretation of hermeneutics. This approach is well suited to the teacher-researcher who wishes to describe and make interpretive sense of the things, or phenomena, of students' experience in order to see the pedagogic significance of these phenomena. Not only does this approach encourage the teacher-researcher to express research as art and to make methodological uses of art in carrying out research, it also invites the teacher-researcher to live the relationship between art and research.

In this paper, then, I offer a brief description of the van Manen approach, an approach which seems to encourage artistic efforts and to yield artistic products and which might persuade us to view this form of *research as art.* Because this approach advocates the use of art as a part of methodology, I shall also present it as a way of viewing *art as research.* Then I will describe my use of the van Manen approach and the ways in which I have come to look upon research as art, art as research, and finally, research as art as education.

RESEARCH AS ART

Like Beath, Uhrmacher, and Green, van Manen sees research as art. Indeed, much of the language and activities associated with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to research are those associated with art or artistic inquiry.

For van Manen, "phenomenological inquiry is not unlike an *artistic* endeavor, a *creative* attempt to somehow capture a phenomenon of life in a linguistic description that is both holistic and analytical, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and sensitive" (1990, p. 39, emphasis added). In such an endeavor, the phenomenological researcher, like the artist, attempts to uncover and describe the internal meaning structures of lived experience. Lived experience, when described in its most basic form by van Manen (1990) and others, involves an "immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life; a reflexive or self-given awareness, which is, as awareness, unaware of itself" (p. 35).

Van Manen (1990) offers this hermeneutic phenomenological approach as a "pedagogically-grounded concept of research that takes its starting point in the empirical realm of everyday lived experience" (p. ix). Typically, this is the starting point of the artist's inquiry, the realm in which the artist works.

Through verbal and visual language, the phenomenological researcher comes to understand lived experience and achieves the basic aim of phenomenology, which is, according to van Manen (1984), "to come to a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experience" (p. 1). The task of the researcher, as of the artist, then, is "to construct a possible *interpretation* of the nature of a certain human experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 41, emphasis added.)

To do phenomenological research involves a *crafting or creating* of a text. In creating this text, the researchers may use anecdotes, works of art, and other lived-experience materials to give color, shape, texture to the research.

A minimum of four basic methodological procedures can assist the researcher in constructing an interpretation and in creating a text. In the words of van Manen, these procedures are: turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world (or, turning to the nature of lived experience); investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it (or, existential investigation), reflecting on the



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essential themes which characterize the phenomenon (or, phenomenological reflection); and describing the phenomenon through the art of writing (or, phenomenological writing and re-writing).

The activities associated with each of these procedures are roughly similar to those associated with artistic procedures. Moreover, the procedural activities of phenomenological reflection and phenomenological writing (or, the art of writing), seem to be those which result in artistic expression.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL REFLECTION

As the researcher begins to reflect on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon, he/she conducts thematic analyses. The researcher may use one or more of several available techniques to assist in revealing the essential, underlying meaning structures or themes which characterize the phenomenon. Through thematic analysis, the essence of a phenomenon of lived experience is revealed. As Jackson (1991) and others have noted, the arts assist in revealing essences, *the intrinsic that resides within*. Indeed, Heidegger saw art as a *process of unconcealment* (as cited by Jackson, 1991).

In order to discern the essence of a phenomenon, to reveal a theme, the researcher engages in a "free act of 'seeing' meaning" (van Manen, 1990, p. 79). To act in this manner, the researcher must be free to see meaning. That is, the researcher acts without rules to govern seeing. The researcher must be sensitive to the qualities of meaning so that meaning may be seen.

These actions suggest those of the artist, who acts without rules, who is sensitive to the qualities of meaning and free to see them in an artistic medium. Both the researcher and the artist then create with that which they have been free to see. The phenomenological researcher sees meaning in themes and uses them "to give shape to the shapeless" (van Manen, 1990, p. 88), much in the way a sculptor sees meaning in a chunk of wood and uses the meaning to give it form.

As the themes give shape to the phenomenon under study, the researcher is ready to begin composing linguistic transformations. At this point, the researcher enters into a creative process which allows for the interpretation of thematic statements. Similarly, the artist composes visual transformations of the themes or meanings seen in the medium. In composing visual transformations, the artist interprets these thematic statements and makes a personal statement.

The language and activities held in common between phenomenological research and art may enable us to see research as art. By looking more closely at the common language and activities, we might also see that the phenomenological researcher and the artist seem to share a common mode of being, that underlies the view of research as art.

ART AS RESEARCH

Van Manen sees the artist as one who gives shape to lived experience. Indeed, the artist recreates experiences by transcending them. In this view, then, the products of the artist are seen as "lived experience transformed into transcended configurations" (van Manen, p. 74). The researcher may consider these transformed lived experiences as case material to be used in furthering existential investigation and/or phenomenological reflection. In investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it (or, existential investigation), the researcher may look upon art as a source of lived experience. The researcher who reflects upon those essential themes which characterize a

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phenomenon (or phenomenological reflection), may use art as a source from which thematic descriptions are gleaned.

The researcher may also consider the artist's products as textual resources for phenomenological writing. This is possible when these resources or transcended configurations are seen as visual, tactile, auditory, kinetic text — text consisting of a language with its own grammer.

Van Manen (1990) notes that Heidegger was able to look upon Van Gogh's painting, "Shoes of the Peasant," as a transcended configuration and visual text. Reading the grammar of this text helped Heidegger to reflect on the meaning of truth (1977, pp. 144-187).

RESEARCH AS ART AS EDUCATION

In my own phenomenological inquiry into a group of preservice elementary teachers' lived experiences of art, education, self, and each other, I was able to use Jean-Francois Millet's painting, "The Knitting Lesson" (1869) both as a source of lived experience and as a source from which thematic descriptions were derived. (Note 1). Before I describe the ways in which the painting assisted my existential investigation and phenomenological reflection, it may be helpful to briefly describe the inquiry itself.

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

Turning to this group of preservice teachers' lived experience of an elementary art methods course, asking the phenomenological question, "What is it like to experience this course?", I was able to use the Millet painting to gain insight into the preservice teachers' understanding of correctness and incorrectness and into the ways in which they have used their understanding to structure their memories of art in elementary school. Such a structuring of the past seems to have been accomplished by means of that which I have referred to as a "right/wrong dichotomy" (Jeffers, 1991). Preservice teachers seemed to remember that there was a right way and a wrong way of completing an art project. Certain "correct" procedures, prescribed by the teacher, to be followed by the class as a whole in the making of look-alike art projects, seemed to give rise to this dichotomy.

Not only does this dichotomy seem to have structured these preservice teachers' experiences of the past, but it has also structured the horizons through which they view the current teaching of art in the elementary school.

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This view, as shaped by their experiences of the "right/wrong dichotomy," is likely to shape these preservice teachers' future practice.

The following is offered as an example of the ways in which "The Knitting Lesson" furthered my understanding of the existential and pedagogical implications of a "right/wrong dichotomy."

"THE KNITTING LESSON"

In this 19th century genre painting, Millet offers a keyhole through which we might catch glimpses of an everyday lived experience of two French peasants who look as though they could be mother and daughter. They are seated side by side in a darkened room, perhaps illuminated by the glow of candle— or firelight, where the woman has been sewing and the girl has been knitting. The woman has left the mending on her lap as she turns to consult or console the girl. She gives her full attention and self to the girl during what appears to be a crisis in the knitting. As the girl stares intently at the knitting, her lips parted, her face highlighted — and the compositional focus of the painting — the woman has placed one hand on the girl's shoulder and with the other, she reaches for the knitting needles.

The girl holds the knitting up to her face. Crinkly yarn, as if it has been knit before, dangles from the knitting, forming a loose pile in her lap. Such a pile of crinkly yarn implies that many rows have been ripped out so that a mistake in the knitting can be corrected.



But now the anticipated moment, when the girl and the woman will encounter and correct the exact stitch, has arrived. This is to be an existential and phenomenological moment. Millet has heightened the intensity of this learning experience and made clear the pedagogical significance of the painting. In such a moment, the existential meaning of correctness and the incorrectness it implies are revealed. Such moments were also revealed in the preservice elementary teachers' everyday experience of the "right/wrong dichotomy."

But because Millet has painted the woman with her arm around the girl's shoulders, he shows us that a mistake can be corrected gently, tenderly, meaningfully, and that we can learn from this. From our mistakes, we learn about limits or boundaries, and by implication, then, we learn about possibilities. The transcendent painting is not of a peasant girl and her knitting, but rather of the existential experience of learning to stay within bounds and to see possibilities. Perhaps the pedagogy of this painting is that learning to correct and be corrected, learning to live within the limits and to see possibilities, is a fundamentally human experience. But in a pedagogical context, the quality of this experience depends upon the teacher's willingness to work side by side with the student, to give full attention to the student and to care for that student.

These are the essential and existential themes which seem to characterize the preservice elementary teachers' lived experience of correctness and incorrectness, of boundaries and possibilities. The painting, as a part of my phenomenological reflection in the research process, has assisted in revealing the essence of this lived experience, *the intrinsic that resides within*. In turn, I have experienced both the painting and the research as a *process of unconcealment* which has brought me closer to understanding the nature or meaning of preservice teachers' lived experience. This process has also brought me closer to understanding the relationship between research, art, and education.

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LIVING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCH, ART, AND EDUCATION

As a teacher-researcher carrying out phenomenological inquiry, I found that in a metaphorical sense, I was learning to knit, to stay within bounds and to see possibilities. Different teachers helped me to correct a stitch, or even a row. Indeed, my yarn has become quite crinkled from the re-writing of many drafts. In spite of the corrections and the boundaries, my teachers enabled me to see possibilities; I was free to see meaning within the knitting.

At the same time, I was the one teaching preservice elementary teachers to knit, helping them to correct mistakes and to see possibilities. I have tried to be a teacher, working side by side with preservice teachers, giving them my full attention, and always caring for them. Knitting became the metaphor that allowed me to capture the meaning of the emergent themes of the preservice teachers' experience in a linguistic description that I hope is both sensitive and powerful.

Throughout the preservice teachers' past and present experiences of art, education, self and each other, there seemed to be a knitting together of themes, or strands. Interpreting this knitted text became a matter of tracing these strands from the preservice teachers' experience of the past into their current experiences of the course, "Art for Elementary Teachers." Occasionally, these strands seemed to form knots in the knitting, as when the preservice teachers structured their art-related lesson presentations to the class much in the same way that their own elementary school teachers had done.

I begin to see that the preservice teachers were connected by these strands and in their structuring of past and present experiences: a tightly-knit community of preservice elementary teachers, bound by their experience of the "right/wrong dichotomy" who had formed bonds with one another. For this community, it was important to stay within the bounds and the bonds. As this community of preservice teachers prepares to enter the classrooms of the future, it will continue to knit these themes into its experience. I must look upon this knitting — this research — as a work in progress. These themes live on, both in the art and the research.

Just as my experience of "The Knitting Lesson" has helped me to interpret these essential themes, so, too, has my experience of this research, itself a knitting lesson, taught much to me. My experience of the painting has informed my research perspective as well as my pedagogical stance. It has allowed me to experience a living relationship between art and research, to clarify my view of art as research.

The painting, from which thematic descriptions were drawn and self-confrontation made possible, has served also to clarify my view of *research* as art. Like an installation art exhibit, the painting was context-bound, offering the opportunity to involve itself, preservice teachers and myself in dialogue.

In this knitting, albeit metaphorical, I have seen the intertwining of research, art, and education. In Beath's view, the product is a drama, or created dialogue involving the preservice elementary teachers, the painting, the reader and myself. Each of us has a role to play in the creation of educational criticism. This criticism can help us to understand the practice of pre- and in-service teachers.

Carol S. Jeffers was formerly on the faculty of Wichita State University, Kansas, and was recently appointed as associate professor, California State University at Los Angeles.

Note 1. A reproduction of Millet's *The Knitting Lesson* appears in the Instructional Resources section of the November, 1987 issue of *Art Education*.

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