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## It Will Always Be My Tree: An A/r/tographic Study of Place and Identity in an Elementary School Classroom

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Brigham Young University - Provo

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It Will Always Be My Tree: An A/r/tographic Study of  
Place and Identity in an Elementary  
Art Classroom

Molly R. Neves

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree of  
Master of Arts

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December 2013

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## ABSTRACT

### It Will Always Be My Tree: An A/r/tographic Study of Place and Identity in an Elementary Art Classroom

Molly R. Neves  
Department of Visual Arts  
Master of Arts

This a/r/tographic research study examines how explorations of identity and place influence a sense of self. An elementary art educator investigated the roles of artist, researcher and teacher by having students create artwork individually and as a class. These pieces reflected their understanding of place and how it contributed to a sense of self. Using the methodology of a/r/tography, this teacher separated her identities of artist, teacher and researcher, and explored the complications and implications of all three in relation to her place as an elementary art specialist and her identity in the classroom. Several important understandings were drawn from this research study, specifically the idea of using art making as a learning tool to uncover identities in relation to place in an elementary classroom, the complications of working with elementary students on a deeper level due to the amount of students and the schedule of an art specialist, and the difficulties of coping with the demands placed on an art specialist.

*Keywords:* Self, place, a/r/tography, process, elementary art education

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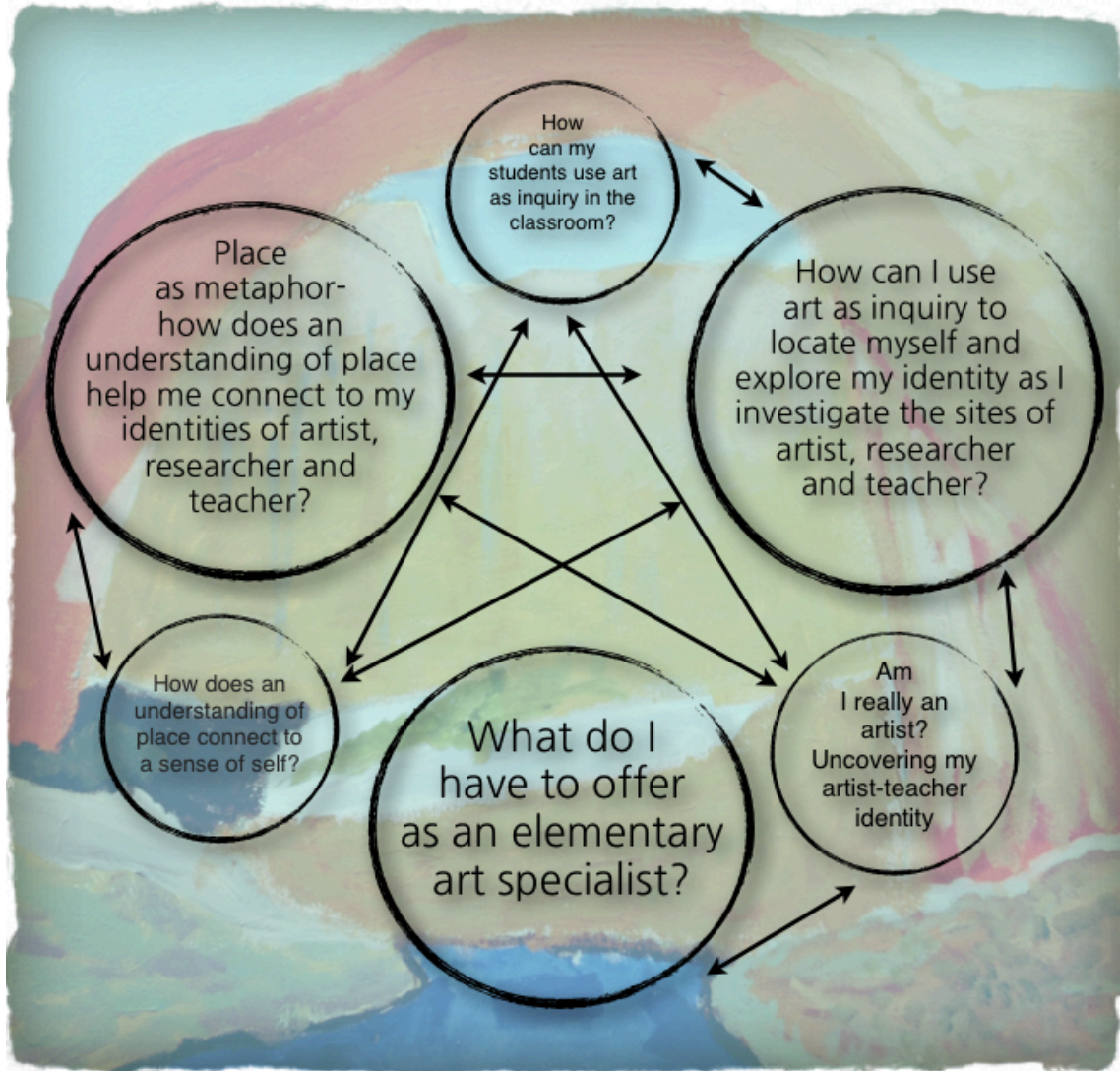


Figure 1: Visual illustration of thesis questions

“I am  
 (researching)  
 the process  
 of my own doing”  
 ( De Cosson, p. 132)

## Chapter 1: Place as Metaphor

I am an art specialist in an elementary school in Salt Lake County, Utah. As a researcher, I encountered many challenges while striving to reconcile the roles of artist, teacher, and researcher to the extremely demanding schedule of teaching an elementary school art curriculum to 750 children. In this thesis, I describe my attempts to understand both my own experiences and the experiences of my students. My guiding research questions, illustrated in figure 1.a, ultimately revolved around our understanding and inquiry into place, place as a location, and place as a metaphor for how identity is both created and shaped. This thesis describes my own reflections on researching, teaching, and re-engaging with my artistic practice, which I documented in journal form. It also describes my students' experiences as they participated in a series of art projects that focused on the idea of place.

As I immersed myself in my research, I found that I had many questions, but few answers. Figure 1 illustrates these connected questions and their complex, interrelated nature. Chapter 4 will explore these questions within the identities of artist, researcher, and teacher. Throughout this research I have attempted to develop new understandings and provoke new openings rather than providing final conclusions. Due to these complications, I have chosen to use a specific type of methodology, called a/r/tography, which I will discuss in chapter 2 more thoroughly and which is the keystone of my research.

### Challenges

I initially planned on providing experiences where my students could assume the role of researcher and artist to a small extent as they re/worked and re/engaged in the criticism process as artists do by collecting the experiences we had as a class and a community of practitioners in an interpretive space and then creating artwork that reflected our experiences as a group. This

endeavor presented significant ruptures in my reality, as I learned that it was not possible to create this experience with my students. This disruption was the first in a series of disruptions that continued throughout the research process at unexpected moments.

To create adequate narrative space in which to explore these ruptures, I have utilized an untraditional organization for this thesis. It includes visual and text elements that provoke openings and reverberate understandings. In my investigations of identity and place, meanings and understandings mingle and collide in a complicated web. While many methodologies focus on the end result of research, this thesis is less an endpoint and more a gateway for my research because I am open to a continual process of questioning throughout this journey (Springgay & Irwin, 2008 p. 161).

Before I discuss the foundation of my research and the methodology that I have chosen to adopt in the following chapters, it is important to define the words place, metaphor and opening and explain how they will be used in this thesis.

## **Place**

Place: *noun*

a : physical environment, surroundings

b. an appropriate moment or point

c. a distinct condition, position or state of mind

(Britannica, 2004)

I have constructed part of my identity in relation to certain places and the experiences I have had in those locations. Each of us connects with a place, be it a hometown, a country, a grandparent's house, or a quiet spot in our basement. The experiences we have in these places are valuable parts of our identities. I decided to investigate how place creates a sense of self. I

was interested to learn how and why we connect to these special places. This investigation of place became important as I started asking difficult questions and began to explore with my students in a collaborative space (Porter, 2004, p. 109). I was interested in implementing what Olivia Gude (2007) called an “Attentive Living Curriculum” (p.10) that encouraged students to pay attention to the locations that were meaningful to them and document these locations through art making. I hoped that this exploration would create “opportunities for students to become grounded in a sense of place” (Gude, 2007, p.10). To acknowledge that where we live should have something to do with what we teach (Duffy, Godduhn, Fabbri, Van Muelken, Nicholas-Figueroa, & Middlecamp, 2011), I altered my curriculum to be mindful of place in my classroom.

I first began discovering how place contributes to a sense of self through my own artistic inquiry as I wrote and engaged in art making to understand my identity. I explored the landscape around me, specifically the mountains in Salt Lake County, through my own art making. As I worked in my studio and sketched outdoors, I investigated why these mountains were so vital to my sense of self and why I felt so connected to them.

In my classroom, I invited my students to collaborate on four paintings, influenced by Utah landscape painters such as Maynard Dixon, Sven Birger Sandzen, and Milton Avery. The intent of these four paintings was to reflect our connection to the state of Utah. Inspired by this project, my students then worked on their own paintings that represented personal spaces that were important to them. I kept a reflective journal in my classroom and a personal journal in my studio as I framed my inquiry using a/r/tographic methods outlined by Stephanie Springgay (Irwin, Gouzouasis, Leggo, & Springgay, 2008) and Rita Irwin (Springgay & Irwin, 2008).



## **Metaphor**

By exploring my identity through art and encouraging my students to do the same, I gained an appreciation for the power of metaphor. Regarding metaphors, Richardson observes, “Through metaphors and metonyms, we make sense of the world and we make relationships accessible to our senses” (2002, p. xxx). As my students and I investigated places by creating artwork referencing these locations, my experience in the classroom became more personal than I anticipated. I began to understand place in a metaphorical sense, and a second meaning began to emerge. Many of my understandings grew as I learned through these metaphors. As Stephanie Springgay states, “[my] struggles in understanding emerge[d] and shift[ed] as awareness [took] place. In these struggles, openings [were] created” (Springgay & Irwin, 2008, p. xxx). My explorations of self and place enabled me to gain a new understanding of my art making, my identity, and the relationship between the two.

## **Openings**

In a similar way, my struggles to understand created openings that enabled me to see what was seen and known in relation to what I understood. However, I detected more potency in the information that was unseen and unknown. As Stephanie Springgay states:

Openings are not necessarily passive holes through which one can see easily. Openings are often like cuts, tears, ruptures or cracks that resist predictability, comfort and safety. It is here that knowledge is often created as contradictions and resistances are faced, even interfaced with other knowledge (Springgay & Irwin, 2008, p. xxx).

Through the difficulties and roadblocks in this thesis, I began to comprehend new information through the cracks in my research that I could not have previously anticipated. This new information and the insights it afforded me have been critical in my understanding of my place as

an artist, researcher, and teacher. This thesis narrates my experience as a reflective teacher, seeking to combine research and artistry in an elementary art classroom.

## Chapter 2: Review of Literature

On my first day as an elementary art specialist, my students excitedly entered my classroom. As I took in the occupants of the little desks and chairs that surrounded me, I noticed that each student had a different way of interpreting the world around him or her. It was apparent as I walked around the classroom observing their drawings that I would not be able to predict the art my students would produce. I needed to know their developmental trajectory. I had been carefully examining the state and national standards for the benchmarks my students would need to reach. After some searching, I found much disconnected information and wondered how to direct my praxis so that it would support my students' development. After looking through various children's art curricula and other resources, I began to understand that many psychologists and educators before me had asked these same questions about the artistic development of children.

### Benchmarks

After perusing several developmental theories, I realized that there are many excellent studies in the history of art education that describe different stages and practices that are important in a child's education, such as those by Jean Piaget, Lucian Freud and other scholars who studied children's development. However, these studies also remind us that these theories of development and art education curriculum are deeply historical. The values and theories of a particular era are not necessarily universal truths; however, they are still important (Gude, 2007).

Patricia Tarr compares these developmental levels to a tattered, old blanket that once was pristine and new but now has several holes in it. She describes watching Japanese preschoolers fold intricate origami shapes, something that we would consider "developmentally inappropriate" in the United States. From that experience, she learned that what we see as

universal benchmarks in reality are constrained by culture and situation, which understanding creates a huge flaw in the argument of “universal benchmarks” in regards to education (Tarr, 2004). Nevertheless, the question still merits asking because it facilitates inquiry and reevaluation.

*How can my students use art as inquiry in the classroom?*

As I perused art education publications looking for studies outlining appropriate benchmarks, I became interested in the pedagogical process that would enable students to create an artwork from start to finish. I wanted my students to consider process in their learning habits. Although art education theory and practices often emphasize product or “benchmark” achievement, I felt that it was also important to value process, especially in regards to artistic practices. As an artist, the process of creating a work of art is important and through the artistic process, I am able to learn about myself and develop my artistic skills as I evaluate and rework each piece. In public education, the journey from a budding idea to the completion of a finished product is often disregarded. I noticed that my students are so quick to finish and turn something in that they neglect the process of creation and investigation as they solve their own problems within the picture plane. I wanted my art projects in my classroom to be used as a tool for sequentially and deliberately achieving understanding and for synthesizing new information, as well as to assist students to understand their artistic identity.

### **Process**

I also wanted to allow my students the opportunity to problem solve in their investigations. I wondered what type of mindset an elementary art specialist should have in her classroom curriculum in order to explore process as well as product. I acknowledged that some sort of structure is necessary in a classroom to facilitate organization, but that a classroom

environment also needs to engender creativity. In my quest to find appropriate structure for my unit that emphasized problem-solving through processes, I came across a theoretical underpinning to frame the basic developmental trajectory of elementary-age children (Donahue & Stuart, 2010), described by Lois Hetland in her book, *Studio Thinking: the Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education* (2007). She outlines her “studio habits” according to the following guidelines:

- Develop craft: Use and care for tools and materials. Learn artistic conventions.
- Engage and persist: Embrace problems of relevance within the art world, of personal importance, or of both to develop focus and other mental states conducive to working and persevering at art tasks.
- Envision: Picture mentally what cannot be directly observed and imagine possible next steps in making a piece of art.
- Express: Create works that convey an idea, a feeling, or a personal meaning.
- Observe: Attend to visual context more closely than ordinary looking requires and thereby see things that otherwise might not be seen.
- Reflect through questioning and explaining: Think and talk with others about an aspect of one’s work or working process.
- Evaluate: Judge one’s own work and working processes and the work of others in relation to the standards of the field.
- Stretch and explore: Reach beyond one’s capacities to explore playfully without a preconceived plan and to embrace the opportunity to learn from mistakes and accidents.
- Understand the art world: Learn art history and current practice.

- Participate in communities: Interact as an artist with other artists within the broader society (p. 7).

Hetland's book explores these principles in the context of secondary art education. However, I chose to utilize her ideas as a resource for elementary art education because I believe that these studio habits emphasize important goals that are needed as structure in any art curriculum or unit. These habits enable each student to learn the processes of art-making and artistic inquiry by following their own interests as directed by a caring educator. A well-educated student is not only one that can only succeed on standardized tests but also one who can observe, reflect, and experiment in the inquiry process (Donahue & Stuart, 2010).

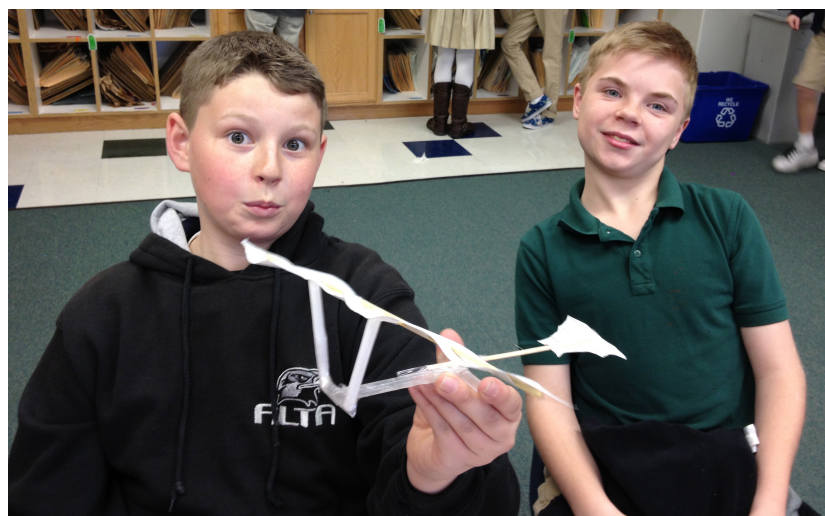


Figure 2: Sixth grade students showing their "flying machine created during a research project. This particular project focused on learning through artistic inquiry.

### **Reggio Emilia**

One of the topics that I was interested in as I began researching was how other classrooms emphasized inquiry in the art classroom. I discovered the Reggio Emilia Model, originating from Italian schools, which emphasizes a structure that encourages students to explore and discover their environment. Children are encouraged to express themselves through

many “languages.” The Reggio Emilia Model sees students as communicators through puppetry, art, sculpture, movement, words, and shadow play as the model focuses students on a systematic approach to symbolic representation (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993).

The Reggio Emilia Model is unique in that it documents the process of art making and not just the product. Children’s artwork is taken seriously. Students are accustomed to using their own sketches to further their artwork. They also rely on their sketches to generate topics for deeper exploration and understanding of the topic they are investigating (Edwards, Gandini & Foreman, 1993 p. 27).

Curriculum development in the Reggio Model is unique in that it is initiated by student interest (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993; Wien, 2008). The model acknowledges that young children are naturally drawn to certain subjects, such as dinosaurs, cars, planets, the weather and other topics (Wien, 2008; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993). The instructor in a Reggio school pays close attention to interests of the students, and those students work together in small groups to explore a particular theme that interests them. These students explore their group’s idea through drawings and discussions, and instructors affirm that the children are genuinely interested before beginning a long-term project that investigates the topic.

Reggio students then begin researching or gathering information on the topic in various ways. These students go to primary sources, books, and experts to obtain knowledge about their interest (Wien, 2008; Schiller, 1995). Adults monitor and record the texts of the children’s conversations to determine which direction to investigate. In the case of the Anna Frank School in Reggio Emilia, Italy, a group of 5-6 year olds were interested in dinosaurs. One theme kept occurring in their discussions: the possibility of constructing a very large dinosaur. These students selected the type of dinosaur to make and chose materials with which to create their

large dinosaur. The *atelierista*, or studio teacher, assisted the students to decide which materials were the best choices (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993). As this example illustrates, the curriculum in the Reggio Emilia schools is student-centered and emerges as a result of conversations and observations from adults regarding student interests (Wien, 2008). It allows students to have an active voice in classroom conversations and curriculum creation.

The design of a Reggio Emilia school is very carefully considered. There is a piazza, or central space that is a place of encounters, friendship, games, and other activities. There is also an *atelier*, or a school studio/laboratory. The *atelier* is a place for manipulating and experimenting with verbal and visual ideas. Next to each classroom is a mini-*atelier*, which allows for extended project work (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993). Student projects are displayed as processes. The documents and images that are displayed reveal how students planned and carried out the artwork. Reggio Emilia schools emphasize the environment of the school as the third teacher, and the aesthetic organization of the classroom and school is carefully designed to engage and inform children and visitors to the school (Schroder Yu, 2008).

The idea of the “environment as the third teacher” (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993) is important in my research. Because children’s experiences are limited by the places where they spend their time, it is of great importance that we pay close attention to the places that are significant to them. Regarding the Reggio Emilia environment, Schroder Yu suggests, “Thinking about planning for teaching as planning for place making can productively support children’s development of community, positive identities, and successful learning” (Schroder Yu, 2008, p. 43).

These methods of inquiry used by the Reggio Emilia model were influential in my theoretical framework for this unit. I referenced Reggio Emilia methods and looked to some of



their structure during the planning and execution of this exploration with my students, and I was able to utilize Reggio Emilia ideas as a starting point for my research.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

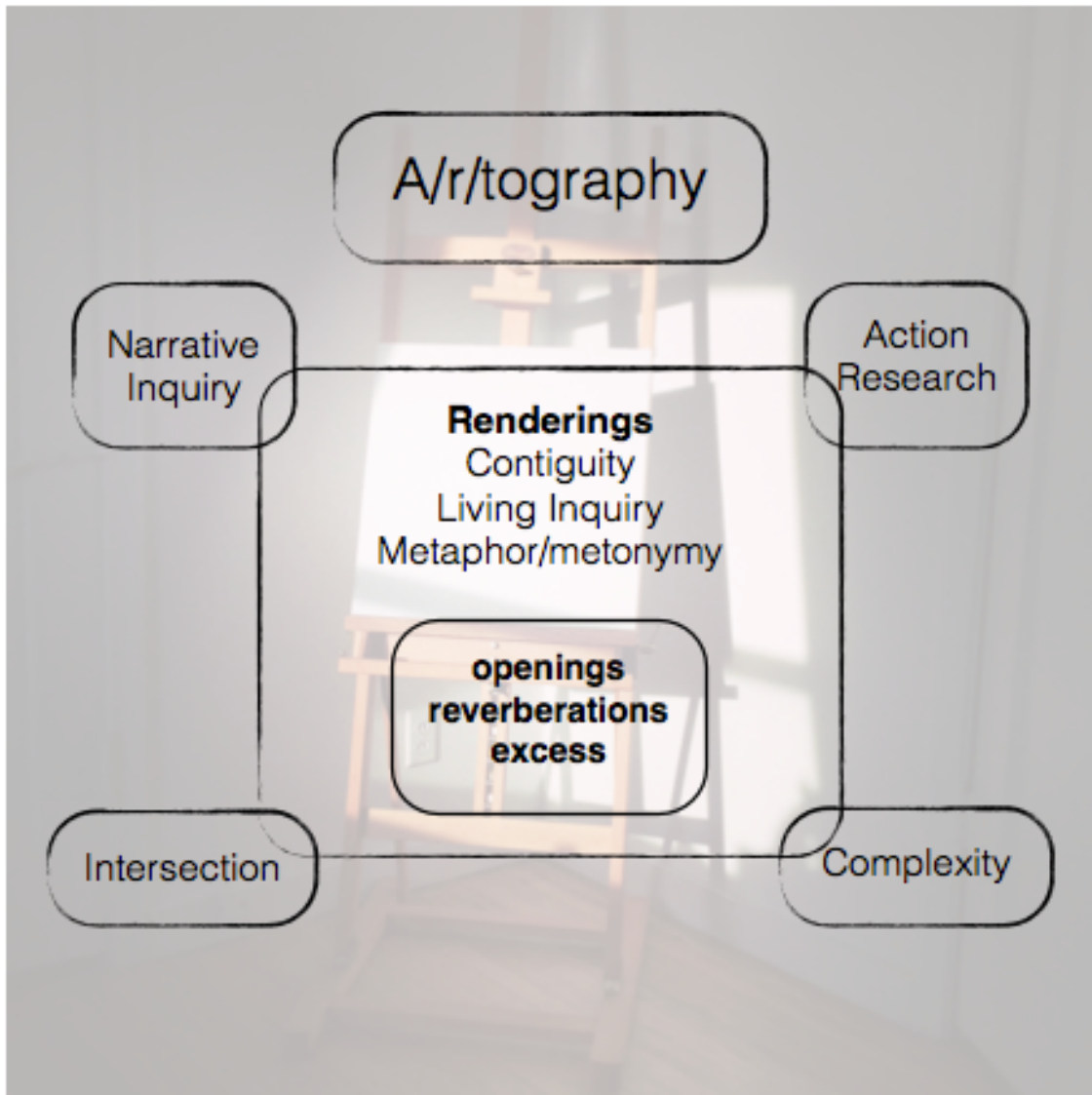


Figure 3: A/r/tography as methodology-illustration of contents of chapter 3

This chapter details my process of selecting a methodology and my reasoning for selecting such methodology. My methodology consists of a mix of action research and narrative inquiry structured under an arts-based methodology called a/r/tography. I will be discussing why I selected this specific methodology and what I believed it might offer my elementary-age

students. I will also address the question of how to judge the quality of my work, and I will offer some criteria that can be useful for a reader who is unfamiliar with my methodology.

### **A/r/tography**

As a teaching artist, I am concerned with connecting my research to my own art making and visual journaling. In this thesis, I used the visual arts to seek answers for questions that I had, and these questions led me to further answers through traditional explorations as well as visual arts inquiries (Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research*, 2005). The path that I took to improve my teaching stems from action research, but I saw that improvement process through a narrative lens. By blending my thesis inquiries with my teaching practices and own art making, I was able to structure my research under the methodology of a/r/tography.

My identity as an artist, researcher, and teacher is the cornerstone in my research. Consequently, I was eager to explore this identity using a/r/tography, which is a form of qualitative research that connects writing with the identities of artist, researcher, and teacher. A/r/tographer Daniel Barney (2009) offers the following description of each of these roles:

An artist is one who uses artistic practices to inquire and present understandings; a researcher investigates directions of inquiry through various methods in order to present new understandings; and a teacher/learner negotiates understandings through a relational dialogue (p. 33).

A/r/tography, as a form of inquiry, seamlessly weaves these different roles together to offer a unified method of simultaneously creating, exploring, and teaching art.

I first learned of a/r/tography while conversing with a cohort colleague about my three identities as a teacher, a researcher, and an artist. I explained to this friend that I was struggling with the various aspects of my identity. I am a teacher and I am a researcher. I also believe that

my processes as an artist inform what I do in the classroom and in my research, and my research and processes are a living inquiry into my methods and practices (Carson & Sumara 1997). To reconcile all three of these identities, my friend suggested that a/r/tography might be the methodology through which I could explore personal narrative and structure my research. This recommendation proved incredibly helpful. I selected a/r/tography as a methodology, and it has become the backbone of this thesis project by helping me to unify and resolve these three identities in my research.

As a studio artist and as an educator, I have consciously and unconsciously brought my personal experiences and ideas on art making into my classroom. I place great importance on working in a studio and engaging with a variety of media as a means for investigation. I relate with Silvia Wilson (2000), who has asserted:

The theory, the lesson planning, the reflective, critical thinking [are] all important. But it [is] the studio experience which [is] transformative for most of my students. It [is] in working and engaging with the art materials, creating, imagining...that hope and possibility, in essence *life*, [is] generated. (p. 31)

My background and my approach to art as an artist-turned-educator have helped me understand Wilson's assertion in my classroom. As I began my research, I became aware that my roles as an artist and teacher need not be separate; rather, they could inform each other. My understanding of art at the elementary level needed to be challenged as I re-structured my curriculum to include what Wilson calls "transformative studio experience" (p. 31). I have witnessed these studio experiences as an artist in my own practice, so why not intentionally bring these experiences into the classroom?

As I conducted my research both in my classroom and out of my classroom, the environment in my classroom began to change. I became less structured and let my students' experiences and their needs guide the learning process.



Figure 4: A student project that was influenced by three other classroom projects. This illustrates the interconnected relations between students in a learning environment.

### Complexity

I have always felt that my classroom and I are dynamic, living organisms. My students are interconnected parts of my classroom that affect each other in unexpected ways. Consequently, my classroom is a complex environment with many moving pieces. Brent Davis and Dennis Sumara (2008) define complexity as a “form that cannot be dismantled and reassembled, whose characters are destroyed when the relationships among components are broken. The components (of complex systems) are dynamic and adaptive” (p. 11). According to Dennis Sumara (1997), “Teaching and research, like all cultural forms, are complex phenomena which resist simplistic reductions or interpretations” (p. xxi). In my research and my teaching, I experienced this complexity firsthand. A thread of complexity runs through all of my research.

Each anecdote and journal entry tells my story as an educator but is also interconnected with my environment, community, culture, relationships, and history. My place and sites of research as an artist, researcher, and teacher cannot be disconnected from the complex web of characters that are part of my environment and culture.

In the classroom, I observed that my students learn best in a non-linear fashion, and my most successful teaching experiences occurred unexpectedly. Figure 3.2 illustrates this phenomenon of emergent learning. The project pictured was specifically influenced by two other projects; in other words, this particular concept emerged as these peers interacted in a networked environment. I was surprised to see this phenomenon naturally occur due to the nature of our study. This study allowed students' needs and questions to gain importance as their inquiry process and subsequent artwork evolved.

My school's art program is an integrated model funded by the Beverley Taylor Sorenson Arts Learning Program. Each lesson is taught side-by-side with a classroom teacher, and the content of the art lesson connects with what students are learning in their regular classroom. As a result of this structure, other teachers and curriculum topics are involved in my art room, and my classroom is a complex environment with a host of dynamic moving parts. I chose a/r/tography to frame my research approach because I felt that the circumstances of my teaching situation could not be simplified to lesson plans, learning objectives, and classroom management. In considering complexity in my classroom, I identify with the following recommendation from Dennis Sumara's (1997):

In conducting research into complex systems, then, it is important to be attentive not just to our own actions. Whether we choose to acknowledge our complicity or not, as

researchers, we are never merely interruptions in the ongoing events of others' lives. We are always and already participating in the unfolding of their lives (p. 304).

My decision to use a/r/tography as a methodology allowed me to accommodate the complexity of my teaching environment and my participation in that dynamic web of teachers, students, and self-exploration.

### **Action Research as a Living Practice**

To further my investigation of place and identity through the lens of a/r/tography, I relied upon action research. Action research begins as researchers plan to implement changes in their practice; take action; collect and analyze evidence; and reflect upon the changes they have made (Lewin 1946). Action research is cyclical in nature and is a tool for improvement and evaluation, specifically in education. The term was first coined by Kurt Lewin and further expanded by Stephen Corey in the 1950s (Lewin 1946). Action research in the classroom has been widely used and implemented in a variety of ways.

Action research as a living practice is an extension of action research. This type of research conjectures that action research practices require more of the researcher than just applying the research methods. Action research is a two-way process. The research shapes the researcher, and the investigation, in turn, shapes the researcher (Carson & Sumara, 1997). Due to this process and as a result of this dialogue, I felt it necessary to involve myself in the research as narrator.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

As I began my inquiry, I connected with the philosophies of narrative inquiry researchers Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (1990) when they stated:

Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the way humans experience the world. This general notion translates into the view that education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and others' stories (p. 2).

Clandinin and Connelly are the primary researchers who legitimized the narrative inquiry methodology in qualitative research. They emphasize that our lives are comprised of stories, and we construct and reconstruct our stories as educators and participants in the learning process.

Identifying the roots of narrative inquiry methodology is difficult. All narratives are comprised of experiences. John Dewey was one of the first to re-contextualize experiences as sources of inquiry. He emphasized the personal and social aspects of experience and that each experience is grounded in a situation and is uniquely personal to each individual. He described the landscape of experience as being surrounded by past and future. As we conduct research, the history behind the experience and the impending uncertainty and change of the future always play a key role in examining these puzzles (Clandinin & Connelly 2000). This methodology has significance in qualitative research because each inquiry begins with an experience. Furthermore, understanding and constructing meaning from that experience is a complex and telling endeavor for every pragmatic inquirer in the process of writing the research story.

For me, the phrase “narrative inquiry” became synonymous with telling a story, asking a question, or solving a problem. As I approached issues in my classroom, I viewed them through a narrative lens. I reflected on a series of anecdotes and moments where my questions and subsequent answers emerged. According to researchers Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (2000), “Life...is filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space,



and reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities” (p. 17). My inquiry began as I collected the narrative fragments in my classroom and then reflected upon them in an effort to understand the questions my moments offered in context with the multiple layers of meaning in my own life outside of the classroom.

Through narrative, I was able to develop a more comprehensive perspective and broader view of my experiences as an artist, teacher, and researcher. In the daily flow of my classes and the weekly construction of curriculum, the self-narrative approach helped me locate myself in the inquiry space. I looked backward and forward, inward and outward. As a result, the space in which I conducted my research became three-dimensional (Clandinin & Connelly 2000).

Sociologist Carolyn Ellis (2003) suggests using “art as a mode of narrative inquiry, as a way of transgressing conventions, as a method for understanding one’s own life...evoking self-understanding, and representing research findings” (p. 506). My own artwork as well as my students’ artwork is a narrative representation of our sense of self and the connections we make to certain places. It is literally a landscape of story. Narrative is a method we use to interpret, understand, and represent new discoveries (Irwin, Gouzouasis, Leggo, & Springgay, 2008), and one I used in my classroom to encounter new understandings.

### **Intersections**

Although separate methodologies, narrative inquiry, action research, and a/r/tography create a dynamic that is essential in my research. Each of these inquiry methods allows for distinct pathways into understanding and change, specifically within my own teaching practices. The intersection of all three methods is where my inquiry will take place.

My action research project that conceptualized place and studio practices in my classroom curriculum was my starting point. Understanding the complexities of my study was

important because I was mindful of my research as a living practice and my role as an artist teacher. Looking through a narrative lens is one of the key practices I used to construct my space of inquiry. Some of this narrative was visual as I documented stories in sketchbooks and through other art forms. I explored questions concerning identity and place in my classroom and personal art making experiences. Consequently, my data existed in stories and experiences. Each of my roles was to be important: I would engage in inquiry as an artist; work on an action research project as a researcher; and teach studio practices and facilitate emergent learning as a teacher.

I discussed my role as a researcher as I related the complexities of action research. I also discussed my role as a teacher and my intentions to focus on process and studio practices in my classroom. My role as an artist intertwines with these roles but also functions as a separate role because I investigate identity and place as it relates to my personal art making experiences. Place, processes, complexity, and studio habits are layers of my inquiry. Layers function as tangible items in my own artistic practice. Understanding the importance of layers to create dimension in an artwork is fundamental to my studio habits. Each artwork I create has many layers and takes time to create. In each painting or print that I make, the layers dry and settle, interacting with each other and creating a new dimension in the visual plane. In a similar way, thinking in layers is a metaphor for understanding how the roles of teacher, researcher, and artist connect with and inform one another. Using these layers as a metaphor is a way of understanding how these identities connect with and inform one another.

### **Revision and Reworking**

In my research as well as in my own art making-as-research, reworking and revisiting are a common theme. In my artwork and in my teaching practice, I constantly rework and revisit ideas, concepts, and images as part of my ongoing exploration of their significance to my

identity. I agree with A. J. Nath (Prosser, 1998), who offered this summary of the non-linear nature of the research process:

Researchers—qualitative and quantitative, observe, record, investigate...cycle after cycle in an effort to understand, uncover, discover and articulate ways of seeing the world. Ideas are revisited, worked over, edited and examined repeatedly. This is not a linear process. It curves in and over itself. As an artist and teacher I am engaged in the same process. The reflective practitioner examines the practice of pedagogy, the artist steps back and goes away, comes back, removes and adds...artists, researchers and teachers give into the dream like quality of their art. We have a sense of what it is and can be... We create images to find meaning, to examine particles and to place ourselves in humanity's story (p. 15).

As I re-worked and regularly re-evaluated my research efforts, layers of understanding began to build upon each other during my evolving teaching practice. As each layer or dimension interacted with another, the interaction created a new space in which to exist.

The interconnected nature of my in-classroom research enabled me to delve more deeply into my guiding research questions. Ardra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles suggest that teaching and research can coexist in their book, *Researching Teaching: Exploring Teacher Development Through Reflexive Inquiry* (Cole & Knowles, 2000). They make the following case for teaching as a method of inquiry:

Teaching is a complex, dynamic, and socially constructed activity, sometimes impulsive, not always logical, often unpredictable, frequently intuitive, and invariably difficult to describe and interpret... If we characterize teaching as a form of creative expression—characterized as a multimodal, nonlinear and multidimensional—then it makes sense to

search for ways of understanding teaching that are also nonlinear, multimodal, and multidimensional (p. 63).

Cole and Knowles demonstrate that recognizing the complexity of teaching is the first step toward greater understanding through this dynamic research medium.

### **Rendered Possibilities**

Due to the evolving nature of inquiry structured under the methodology of a/r/tography, a/r/tographers do not deal with data forms traditionally employed by most researchers.

A/r/tographers pay attention to renderings, which are defined as “concepts that help a/r/tographers portray their work for others” (Springgay & Irwin, 2008, p. 11). I framed my data interpretation using these renderings. The renderings, in no particular order, are contiguity, living inquiry, metaphor/metonymy, openings, reverberations, and excess. Stephanie Springgay et al. (2008) provide the following elaboration on these renderings which summarized below:

Contiguity is found when ideas exist together or lie adjacent to one another. It is found with the artist, researcher and teacher identities as they exist in connection with one another. It is also found in the relationship between art and writing, or art and graphy, as well as the connection between art as an activity or product and art as a symbol of the three identities. Living inquiry is connected to the ongoing living practices of being an artist, researcher and teacher. It is the natural inquiry that is constant as one lives a life committed to the arts and education.

Along these same lines, metaphor and metonymy are also important in a/r/tographic inquiry as metaphors substitute signifiers and metonyms displace subject/object relations. They exist in a connected relationship as meaning is lost, realized or neither. In this relationship and during this process, openings are created. These openings allow for attention to what is seen and

known and for what is seen and not known. Often, knowledge is created as multiple exchanges take place and inform each other as a result of these new openings.

At times in the research, an a/r/tographer might experience a reverberation.

Reverberations happen when an a/r/tographer shifts an understanding of a previously known phenomena, allowing him or her to find deeper meaning in what is being studied or examined. With every process there is excess. Excess is what is leftover, unseen or wasted. It can also be the “as yet unnameable” and the “other than” that occurs in our research (Springgay & Irwin, 2008). These openings represent important opportunities to gain insight, and that insight proved essential to my research. Real learning happens when we as teachers “resist fixities and seek the openings where we relish incompleteness because that signifies that something still lies ahead” (Greene, 2002).

I encountered openings, or “cuts, tears, ruptures or cracks that resist predictability, comfort and safety” (Irwin, Gouzouasis, Leggo, & Springgay, 2008, p. xxx), in my learning experience in my classroom. I found that I was able to discover and create new knowledge as I faced contradictions and resistances. I was attentive to these openings, and I will discuss them in the following chapters.

In my teaching practice, I strive to create pedagogical opportunities that facilitate evolution in learning and that seize upon these openings as possibilities in learning. Rather than focusing on breaking down and pinning down my research into palatable parts, I am mindful of the renderings that occur in my research. I reflect on those renderings in order to reconstruct my curriculum and teaching practice as my understandings shift due to these reverberations.

My research focuses specifically on openings, reverberations, and excess. These are the three renderings that I used as a lens to understand and respond to my experiences during this

thesis project. I also was interested in the metaphor of place and used it as a rendering to frame this thesis. As I delineated my artist, researcher, and teacher identities in order to place them together in chapter four to illustrate my experience, I was mindful of the contiguity that existed between the three narratives. This contiguity enabled me to connect my experiences.

#### Chapter 4: Place as Metaphor—How Does an Understanding of Place Help Me Connect to My Identities of Artist, Researcher, and Teacher?

This chapter will explore the three sites of research in my study—those of artist, teacher, and researcher. Each narrative will occupy a separate section and will explore the questions illustrated in figure 1:a. I will pay special attention to openings, reverberations in my understandings, and place as metaphor. These reverberations will be explored in illustrations.

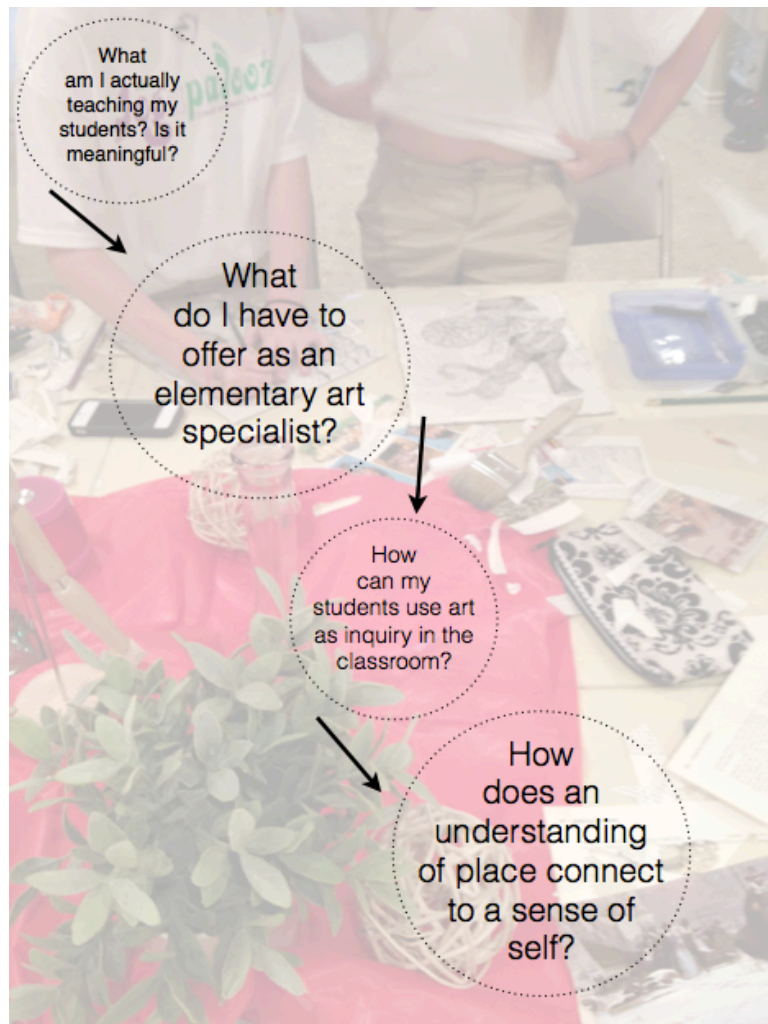


Figure 5: Progression of questions that emerged as I investigated my teacher identity.

**Teacher Narrative: What do I have to offer as an elementary art specialist?**

Throughout this thesis project, I kept a journal to document my thoughts and feelings. In the beginning stages of my research, I recorded the following reflection:

Today I talked with my principal about some interesting topics. We talked about how important it is to have the students think outside the box. I feel like my students are doing prescribed projects that only are step-by-step instructions on what I want them to make. I feel that this is not necessarily art.

As I considered whether or not my lessons were conducive to artistic exploration, I became uncertain about the art projects that I was sharing with my students. Were they valuable? How could I most wisely use the 45 minutes I spent with them each week? Those 45 minutes passed very quickly, and as I accounted for what had been taught during the week one Friday afternoon, I reflected, “What am I actually teaching my students? Is it even meaningful?” This question began to nag constantly at my conscience and gradually evolved into an even more terrifying question, “What do I have to offer as an elementary art specialist?”

This query was an opening that caused a reverberation in my identity. It began to push me to unstable ground: my identity as an elementary art specialist that I had carefully constructed and protected was now unsafe. The more I considered this unpredictable opening, the more it gnawed at my conscience, attacking my self-esteem. It forced me to look inward and examine what my motivations were as a teacher and what types of opportunities I could offer my students.

I started my reflection by considering what type of special knowledge an art teacher would have. This consideration helped me realize that I could expose my students to a great deal of new artists and art forms. Most elementary teachers did not have the background I did in art history. Once I realized this difference, I decided to incorporate an art-looking program into my



teaching. The importance of initiating this program at my school was reiterated as I came across a study that emphasized the strong link between a classroom-based art-looking program and higher standardized test scores (Burchenal, 2007).

Backed by Burchenal's research and my personal resolve to facilitate unique and effective art learning in my classroom, I presented the art-looking program concept to the teachers at my school. I was amazed at how positively they responded to my idea, and I recorded the details of this reception in my journal:

Two weeks ago, I challenged my classroom teachers to share an artwork a week in their own classroom on their own time. I have provided my teachers with a slide of the artwork as well as 3-4 prompt questions to help with writing assignments, smart starts, story prompts, etc. It is great to see the students beginning to look at and talk about art more.

After one week, I have had several teachers comment on how great it was to connect with the artwork as a class and how many insightful comments the students made. I think that this activity really allowed teachers to see the benefits of looking at art. Hopefully I can do a more intensive professional development with my classroom teachers. I feel that it really changes our school environment as we allow some of the focus to be on the arts.

This small step allowed me to begin pinpointing what I could do in my classroom to construct a better artistic experience for my students. I was happy to see my students enter my classroom with an increased "vocabulary" of artists. This experience was the catalyst for a larger exploration incited by another question: "How can my students use art as inquiry in the classroom?"

I began to examine the possibility of art-as-inquiry with my sixth grade students. As I mentioned in chapters 2 and 3, my position is funded by the Beverley Taylor Sorenson Arts

Learning Program. This state-funded program places an art specialist in an elementary school to integrate the arts with the core subjects. Due to the fact that my position focuses on integration, I decided to experiment with a project that was designed to allow students to investigate the culture of ancient Greece, which they were studying in their regular classrooms, as they created their art projects.

I opened up the class by discussing the culture of ancient Greece and by showing the students a few artistic and research materials that were available to them if they desired. I told them that they needed to learn something new and show what they learned through an art project. As I observed what happened in my classroom during this time, I was amazed. I recorded in my journal:

Mrs. McCormick's class did so well with the ancient Greece project! Kate and Ellie created a life-sized Zeus head, Avi and Alyssa are making a dress designed for Aphrodite, and Kade and Cole went home and made a large coil pot out of clay. Everyone was working really hard. I could feel the creativity bubbling over during class time. It was really exciting!

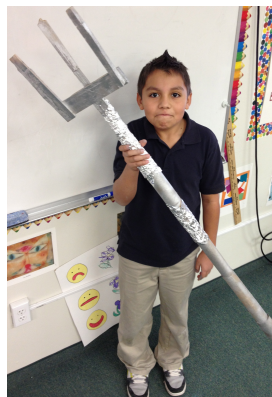


Figure 6: Carlos's large trident he created to symbolize Poseidon, god of the sea.

*How does an understanding of place connect to a sense of self?*

As I continued to provide opportunities for my students to use art as inquiry, I began to consider creating a curriculum that would allow for students to understand themselves in relation to place. I initially wanted to implement this curriculum to bring my artist identity into the classroom. This idea stemmed from my own struggling artistic practice, where I was investigating place as a foundation of my identity. A conversation with one of my students one morning was the event that ultimately tipped the scales and moved me to implement the curriculum I had long been considering and to allow investigations of place and self to cross over into my classroom.

### **Stuart and Wisconsin**

One of my fifth grade students loves to come in before school and help me take down chairs and set up the classroom for the day. Stuart is an incredibly kind and helpful student, but he struggles socially and needs to connect with people during the school day. Every morning as he takes down the chairs, he tells me about his farm in Wisconsin. His father owns a large piece of property and during every school break, he takes Stuart to the farm to help with the planting, harvesting, and other tasks. Stuart loves to talk about his farm. This farm is a key part of Stuart's identity, and sharing his experiences on his farm is a way for him to connect with others and impart a little piece of who he is. As Stuart excitedly talked about his next trip to the farm and the new tractor they had purchased, I realized that my self-centered investigation into place could be a beneficial vehicle for learning and understanding for the students in my art classroom. I commenced outlining my fifth grade curriculum that afternoon.

I began by purchasing three canvases, 36" square. My students and I were going to create one painting in each class. I wanted to take my students through the process of a painting—

discussing, guiding, and critiquing the painting as they learned how to create a finished work of art. In our first class, we discussed and sketched as we decided what we should paint. The students and teachers wanted to paint a site that we were familiar with, so we decided to paint a Utah landscape in each class.

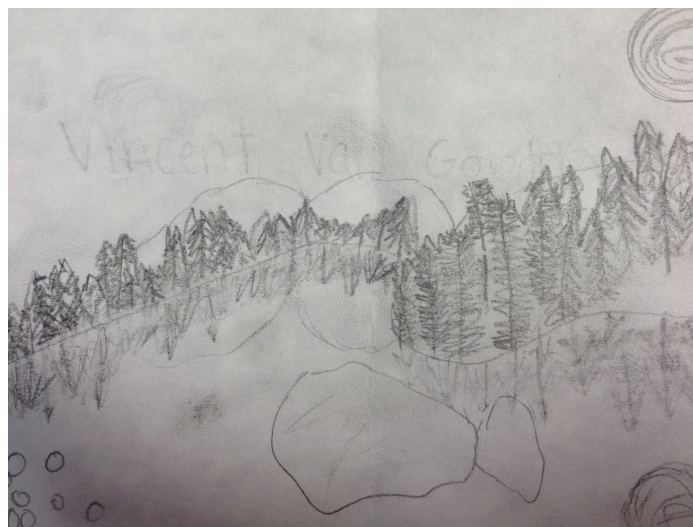


Figure 7: A student's preliminary sketch of landscape compositions

Our first class was memorable as the students began to work together to negotiate their vision for the artwork they would create. I showed my students various artists who painted the landscape of Utah such as Milton Avery, Sven Birger Svensen, and Maynard Dixon. I facilitated the discussion, but I was surprised at the dynamic that emerged in my classroom. We began by looking at the various landscapes and discussing several images of landscapes by an array of artists. I was surprised at the way my students responded to the artwork. Listening to them discuss the various components of the paintings was poignant as I realized that my students were interested in the landscapes that these artists had painted because they were able to recognize places in Utah that they had visited and could consequently discuss the artists' aesthetic choices

with confidence. I believe that this ability developed as a result of the discussions they had in their classes as they looked at and talked about artwork each week.



Figure 8: Students collaborating on a painting of Rainbow Bridge

As we planned the painting we were to create in each classroom, my students were mindful of the artwork as a whole and sacrificed their individual desires to create a composition that was resolved and thoughtful. I was able to take my students to the back of my classroom two at a time and work with them individually, teaching them the basics of color mixing, composition and painting.

### **My Special Place**

While we worked on the large paintings, my students spontaneously began to share stories of places that were important to them and the reasons why those places were special. I watched the class respond to the curriculum I was teaching, and realized that each student had very little time to work on the large painting. I decided to extend the project and allow each student an opportunity to create his or her own painting of a place that was personally



significant. Each student brought an image of his or her special place to class, and we began to create individual paintings. We started from scratch, learning how to gesso and prime the surface, sketch the composition and select the most important parts to paint. We looked at artists and discussed color choices and compositions.



Figure 9: Learning how to gesso

The places that my students were painting brought a new dimension into my classroom. The range of subjects in each photograph were diverse and allowed me access to the personal stories and connections that the students each had with their special place. As I watched the excitement grow in my classroom, I encountered another opening in my research. Teaching and art-making began to work in a cyclical fashion for me. I received inspiration from what I was creating in my studio, and I brought my understandings about place and identity into the classroom. Then, as I watched the students react to what was taught in my classroom and connect

their identities to special places, I was able to return to my studio with a new lens with which to view my artwork, reworking and revisiting uncertain areas of my identity and artistic practice.



Figure 10: Stuart's painting of his farm in Wisconsin

It was an emotional experience to work with the students on this project. I felt drained due to the fact that this particular unit occurred in the last few weeks of the school year and consequently was quite rushed. However, I felt that this project became a catalyst for a much deeper personal investigation. This project forced me to confront some issues surrounding my identity that I had previously swept under the rug.

#### **Artist Narrative: Am I really an Artist? Uncovering my Artist-teacher identity.**

When I began teaching as an elementary art specialist, I began to question my identity as an artist and wondered what it meant to be an artist. Working with my students on their “My Special Place” project forced me to revisit some of these self-examinations. In particular, I found myself returning to the following journal entry, which I wrote in March 2006.

Journal Entry: March 2006



Figure 11: Artist identity

As the snowflakes fall outside my window, I lie in bed and smell a mixture of acetone, roller wash and burnt plate oil on my hands. Inspecting my fingernails, I find a thick layer of black ink caked in crevices I can never reach with a nail brush. The pores on my forearms are black with remnants of the previous day's printing after a thorough scrubbing with vegetable oil. I close my eyes and feel the soreness of my triceps as images of cranking the press wheel burn in my retinas.

As I fall asleep, I am reminded of the events of the day. I woke up, attended classes discussing art and the elements of aesthetics. After a small dinner and trip to the gym, I pulled on an old pair of jeans and headed up to the intaglio lab. Entering the code to the door, I was awakened by the familiar smell of inks and soap. For another night, I am alone in the lab. I glance at my reflection in the large window as I pull the old tape player out from its hiding spot under the sink and pop in the, "jeth-mo" mix for the fifteenth time. I always feel like I am in a fish tank when I am working late. Soon, the Shins, "So Says I" blares from the ancient boom box and I dip my spatula into the ink.



The thick ink is sinewy and sticky as I warm it up on the glass table. Scraping and smoothing it, I finally get it to the perfect texture. It is solid and stiffer than before, I roll the ink out until it has a velvety green texture. I begin to draw vein-like lines in the ink as the shape of a ribcage emerges. Transferring it onto a plate of Plexiglas, I rest a piece of translucent Japanese rice paper and sandwich it with a piece of newsprint. Adjusting the setting on the press, I send my first run through as the wheel creaks to a figurine beat blasting in the background. Three runs later I examine my piece. An organized combination of organic layers juxtaposed with a solid rectangular form combine to create a composition. The green earth tone colors are offset by fading blues. The piece is not finished, and I stand wondering how to resolve it. Intuitively I trace the form of a curved spine onto the rolled ink and transfer it to the upper right corner of the Plexiglas. One run later it is transferred onto the rice paper, and as I separate the paper from the plexi, my eyes rest on the piece, understanding that one more run could kill the piece. I focus on my composition and realize that it has reached its resolution. Hiding it in my drawer, it will wait until tomorrow when I reexamine it and determine if it should be destroyed or framed. I glance at the clock and realize that it is almost one am. I have become lost in time again and four hours have passed without my notice. I clean up and hide the stereo again as I reach for my car keys. I am drifting asleep now and ideas for more pieces wander through my mind as I am reminded of the upcoming exhibit. As days turn into weeks, I am consecutively found in the lab past midnight. The smell of printing on my hands never fades, and I am constantly stopped by clerks examining my ink manicure as I fumble for change in my purse. The question “You’re a mechanic, right?” is familiar to me. My show is up now, and during classes I stop by to soak in the problems I have

solved on paper. This is my mess and I'm not quite sure what it means. I understand that these places on paper are my places, and to be surrounded by them is satisfying. Other people are interested in these places, and questions of pricing are posed during the course of the show. In the weeks following the show, I lose three of my places in return for checks. I understand that these pieces came from my hands, but others communicate with them as well. I understand this more as I look at my stack of frames in my basement, realizing that creations are not for myself. They do me no good in a stack, 3 months later. The days get longer and I catch myself remembering those nights in the studio while I drive home one summer day. The frustrations and stresses that cloud my mind are accompanied by the nagging urge to return to my studio. It has been two months since I have opened a jar of ink and smelled that burnt plate oil that I used to smell on winter nights and I feel the emptiness and urge to create again.

As I re-read this journal entry, I re-traced my steps from that moment to my present situation. I graduated with my BFA in printmaking April of 2009. I had just completed an art show and spent many hours in the studio working on artwork that was meaningful to me. At the time of graduation, I was excited about my future as an artist. In the fall of 2009, I began working in my first teaching position as an elementary art specialist. I was teaching seven grades a week—29 classes and 729 students. This translates to about 273 different art lessons throughout the course of the school year. Within the first several weeks of teaching and to cope with this workload, I morphed into a robot, teaching any and all of the pre-prepared art lessons I encountered. The sheer volume of classes that circulated through my art room was overwhelming. I felt my creative juices literally being sucked out of me. Exhausted, I came home at the end of each day unable to sit down and eat, let alone create any of my own artwork. I

squeaked out a few drawings, but the first year of teaching I felt like I had lost my desire to create. During my first and then second year of teaching, I forced myself to make artwork. I enrolled in pottery classes and watercolor courses. Feeling sick to my stomach, I admitted that I had let my passion turn into just another hobby.

The lowest point happened during a break while I was attending a Saturday morning graduate program class. I was asking my professor some questions and discussing identity. In exasperation, I cried out, “I don’t even know! I’m not an artist!” I couldn’t believe what had just emerged from my mouth. “Wait, what?” I thought to myself. “Did I just say that? I did. I just said that. How am I supposed to be cultivating a hunger for the arts and the confidence to create in my little students if I don’t even identify as being an artist myself?”

That spontaneous and exasperated declaration has echoed in my head during the past six months. My students are just beginning to explore the possibilities available to them as they work in various visual arts media. One of my goals for these young students is to encourage them and build their confidence and love for the arts so that they continue to enroll in courses and engage in art making experiences throughout their lives. How is it possible to instill these desires in my students if I lack the confidence to identify myself as an artist? As I asked myself this question, I connected with the thoughts of Julie Lymburner, who has asked, “How could I empathize with the fears, the discoveries, and the joys of my art students when my experiences were limited to hands-on workshop events, a smattering of random sketchbook entries, and clearly calculated classroom demonstrations?” (Lymburner, 2004, p. 76). I had many questions, but I could not seem to find the answers.

I reached the lowest point in this quest to understand and recover my identity as an artist on March 13, 2013. On that day I recorded the following thoughts in my journal:

Such a push and pull. I want to be making art and be thoughtful about my artwork. I am so frustrated with my job, because it seems as if I am just so consumed with work that I have no time to actually create anything. My work eats me alive, chews me up and spits me out at the end of the day—an empty shell. Sometimes the students are so needy. I have no desire to create anything sometimes and that is sad. I am so frustrated with my identity. I am having such an identity crisis. Why am I not an artist?!!

I drove home that evening from work and went straight to an art supplies store. I spent almost \$300 on an easel and painting supplies. I bought whatever I saw that interested me. After I got home, I set everything up and stared at the blank canvas before me.

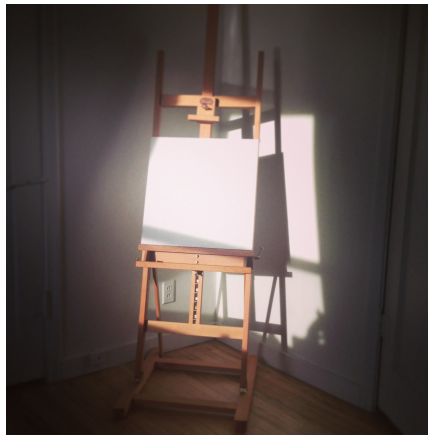


Figure 12: My Purchase, March 13, 2013

I wish I could say that I started making fabulous art that very night; however, that was not the case. It took about three more months to sort out my emotions and frustrations. During that time, I made quite a bit of terrible art. I pushed through quite a few roadblocks and forced myself to set aside time so that I could deliberately engage in daily art making. I took my sketchbook with me everywhere and prioritized drawing and collecting images. Throughout these months, I persevered because of the frustration that I would feel every time I would think about the lack of

consistent artistic practice and drive that I had been experiencing during my teaching years. I was genuinely depressed about the place to which I had relegated myself in as an artist.

As I began to re-immense myself in the creative process, I found that all of my art making began with questions. How can I express how I feel about this topic visually? How am I able to investigate and express the new understandings that I have gained from an experience? I also discovered that I used the very same process I tried to teach my students, however, rather than only helping my students to use art as inquiry in the classroom, I used art to inquire about my sense of self in relation to specific locations that I occupied both literally and figuratively.



Figure 13: An encaustic work, completed in Summer 2013

Summer 2013 was when all of the pieces came together. I set a goal to work in my studio for 20 hours a week. I began to push through my creative blockades and surround myself with people who were actively creating artwork. I took classes, went to galleries, and carried my sketchbook with me constantly. I felt connected to art making again and felt confident in my identity. Over time, I realized that I could once more say with certainty, “I am an artist.”

### Afterthoughts

As a result of my efforts to re-immense myself in producing artwork, I discovered new beginnings. First, I was able to begin working on a series that was personal to me and which reflected my new understandings of place. I was able to learn a new technique, encaustic, which allowed me to express myself in a fresh artistic style. I gained confidence in my skills as an artist and reconnected with my creativity again.

In September of 2013, I had a show scheduled at the Harris Fine Arts Center at Brigham Young University. I decided to combine my artwork with my students' work to curate a show that expressed identity and place. I included the four large paintings and my own artwork that reflected my understanding of landscapes.



Figure 14: A Study of Place and Identity in an Elementary School Classroom

Seeing my students' work and my own work on the wall side by side was a wonderful summary of the journey that this thesis has taken from start to finish. It was a way for me to figuratively "box up" all the information I have learned and step back and look at the contiguous relationship of my artwork and the artwork we made in my classroom. I was surprised to see how



similar the two were. I found that there was a stronger relationship between my artwork and my students' artwork than I previously anticipated, and that my artist identity informed my teacher identity as the two roles had a reciprocal relationship.



Figure 15: My research site

### **Researcher Narrative—Full Circle: “What do I have to offer as an elementary art specialist?” / The Elementary Art Classroom as a Site for Research**

These three narratives of my artist, researcher, and teacher selves are interconnected. My identities in this research project are contiguous, and consequently, my analysis is reflexive and reflective as I consider what has happened in my classroom and anticipate new openings and understandings. However, in considering my sites of research, it is important to remember that the environment in which I conducted my research directly influenced my ability as a researcher. This environment presented problems, which I will address in this researcher narrative.

One challenge of the environment in which I worked was that time constraints and logistical considerations imposed some limitations on my research. One of my journal entries

from April 2012 elaborates on these challenges:

We discussed curriculum that builds confidence in class last week and I made a comment about how students need to be constantly validated and given feed back. I will admit, it is difficult with only 45 minutes and most of the time is spent explaining the project, monitoring messes, wiping up spilled water and leading students in clean up procedures. I am currently thinking about more effective ways to have students clean up and do it on their own accord instead of me badgering them to hurry so they can get out the door in time for the next class to show up. I am going to implement some more solid procedures at the beginning of the school year next year and review clean up procedures on a regular basis. I feel that by April, students should know that their wet painting goes on the drying rack instead of needing to ask me every day. If I have better procedures, then less of my time will be spent policing the classroom during clean up and more of my time will be used to validate and interact with the students on a one-on-one basis.

This journal reflection elicited deeper ruminations on my practices and processes. As I was teaching my curriculum unit, I encountered an unexpected rupture or tear in my understanding—an opening. Several problems that were handicapping my research were brought to my attention because of the curriculum I implemented. My first problem was continuity. I teach my fifth grade students from 8:15-9:00, Monday through Thursday. I have four classes in fifth grade and I see each class once a week for approximately forty minutes. It dawned on me that my intentions for my students might be at odds with the time allocated for our classes. I initially wanted my students to take on the role of a/r/tographers (Irwin, Gouzouasis, Leggo, & Springgay, 2008, pg. xxiv). However, I realized upon beginning this project that I would have some issues with the depth I could achieve with my students. Assuming the role of an a/r/tographer requires quite a bit



of commitment (Irwin, Gouzouasis, Leggo, & Springgay, 2008) as well as writing and reflection. I had very little time to spend with my students. We regularly struggled to finish our paintings and had barely enough time to discuss and reflect on the art making process. Because of time constraints, we lost any deep discovery and investigation opportunities I had planned.

My classroom is a hub for 748 students per week. At times it feels like a busy common area where students congregate for 45 minutes at a time. My classroom door is a revolving door, with students coming in and out, constantly getting pulled out by teachers, parents, and administrators for speech therapy, testing, check-ins and check-outs, and homework catch-up. I was fighting an uphill battle against other priorities that were competing for my students' time and disrupting our classes. In an ideal world, each one of my classes would have 26 students present for the entire 45 minutes of art, once a week. Unfortunately, that consistency is unattainable due to school conflicts, assemblies, and the above-mentioned revolving door phenomenon.

While trying to come to terms with my revolving classroom door, I invited Dr. Mark Graham to come and teach my class about his experiences in Nepal. Dr. Graham had traveled to Nepal to climb Ama Dablam and had some special connections to that location. I invited Dr. Graham to my classroom for selfish reasons: I wanted to see how a master teacher would teach a classroom of elementary students. And I was not disappointed. It was refreshing to watch someone else come and teach—someone who was not connected to the school and who came to teach for fun and not for any other reason. Dr. Graham's visit reminded me that the majority of my students enjoy art class and take valuable experiences from my classroom. I decided to stop worrying that the time is too short and the supply budget too thin.

### **Intersections**

As an a/r/tographer, my work is a cycle of learning and personal growth because my internal experiences influence my teaching and my artwork. As I analyze my experience in the classroom, my pedagogy becomes more deliberate, and I can assume the role of a teaching artist rather than an artist who happens to teach. Through writing and art making, I am becoming more conscientious and reflexive as a result of continuously reengaging in the process of asking questions; setting up and facilitating play and investigation through the activities in my classroom; and reflecting on the outcomes of these activities (Gouzouasis, Irwin, Miles, & Gordon, 2013). Focusing on these three identities or sites of inquiry has created a three-dimensional space in which to learn. I have found that as I center my research in the intersections of these locations, I have been able to pinpoint openings and reverberations that allow me to learn, grow, and confront the issues that challenge me as an elementary art specialist.

### Chapter 5: Analysis and Conclusions—Wrapping It Up

Stephanie Springgay identifies a unique component of a/r/tography when she writes, “While many arts-based methodologies focus on the end result, a/r/tography is concerned with inquiry—the mode of searching, questing and probing—insisting that these elements be informed by and through the arts” (Springgay, 2008). I continue to ask questions about what happened in my classroom during this unit. This continuous engagement with inquiry actually resulted in some troubles while writing this thesis because I feel that I am constantly “in the middle” of my research (Francis, 2012, p. 55).

My research processes and experiences have taught me how much I still have to learn. I have personally observed that a/r/tography is “a tangential thread; perhaps a thread that has become un/stitched, un/raveling its own existence into new beginnings. A/r/tography as such is a methodology of embodiment, never isolated in its activity but always engaged with the world” (Springgay, Kind, & Irwin, *A/r/tography a Living Inquiry Through Art and Text*, 2005). This research process has become a constant unraveling of my teaching practice and philosophy, and I anticipate that I will continue to encounter “new beginnings” in my teaching practice.

In addition to anticipating more “new beginnings” in my pedagogical future, I feel confident that I will have further opportunities to find parallels between seemingly disparate elements of my research. For example, I have gained an appreciation for the similarities inherent in the seemingly unrelated practices of data analysis and the artistic process. They both involve thinking divergently, reasoning inductively, making connections, and communicating meanings. However, the strength of arts-based research lies in its role as what Sylvia Wilson calls the “lived, felt, descriptive nature of experience” (2000). She suggests that researchers “investigate new and alternate methods of investigating and reporting which work specifically and uniquely

within the problem, question or experience being studied” (Wilson, 2000). While working with my students, I noticed that as we investigated subjects in art class by making art, I saw new problems and questions arise that enabled us to continue learning and growing as a class.

### **Benefits**

As my students participated in the artistic process, we were able to investigate how our identities are shaped by the places we inhabit by discussing special experiences we have had in important locations. My identity as an artist was directly impacted by these classroom discussions, and I was able to take these questions into my own artistic practice. I agree with David M. Donahue and Jennifer Stuart, who note, “Asking engaging questions is a rich, flexible and engaging method of taking students and ourselves on targeted quests toward deeper understandings” (Donahue & Stuart, 2010, p. 7). By opening a dialogue through questions and conversation, my students were able to participate as empowered citizens in my classroom (Wilson S. , 2000). They began to have a voice and define themselves as artists as we investigated individually and collectively in the classroom, and I was also able to benefit from these discussions in my studio practice.

As a result, their collaboration in project planning connected them to each other in the classroom, and my students were able to participate in integrating personal knowledge or experience with the experiences of others in the class (Anderson, 1997 ). This collaboration transformed my art room into not just a school space but their space. It helped my students to identify themselves as artists who worked in an art room, instead of passive participants in a weekly art program. It changed my role from just a teacher to a teaching artist, and incited my these experiences I was able to ask hard questions and dig deep into my explorations for greater understanding (Porter, 2004).

Allowing my students more input into the lesson planning improved my teaching practice, which directly affected my students. George Szekely (1978) stated that the artist-and-teacher model is essential to successful pedagogy. Who better to teach our children art than one who is practicing as an artist and a teacher? He reflects, “The artist teacher who is continually growing both as an artist and as a pedagogue, appears to be the best hope in our schools” (p.17). Through this thesis project, I have gathered extensive anecdotal data that supports Szekely’s assertion. I found that I was a better teacher when I was growing and evaluating myself as an artist and as a teacher. This thesis was the catalyst for examining myself and my teaching practice and making needed changes in my artistic identity and classroom vision.

### **Validity**

I am aware that research usually includes significant reflection and that conclusions are drawn from the learning experience. I understand that my analysis methods will be different than the methods of many researchers. A reader of this thesis may question if this method of analysis is valid. Art is by nature subjective, so is there any way of evaluating a/r/tographic research? How can a reader of my thesis discern the value and success of my analysis?

Tom Barone and Elliott Eisner (2012) offer some criteria for assessing arts-based research. They suggest that arts-based research “succeeds in enticing a reader or viewer into taking another look at dimensions of the social world that had come to be taken for granted” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 145). Part of my goal in writing this thesis is to create an “enticing” argument to re/examine elementary curriculum and re/discover ways to improve “school art” (Efland, 1976).

I understand that, for my research to be useful, it must succeed as a work of art, as a work of research and also as an embodiment of good pedagogy. Thus, I had to ask what would make the

research successful. What is the criteria for judging successful arts-based research? Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner offer six criteria in their 2012 book, *Arts Based Research*:

- Incisiveness: My research must get right to the heart of an issue.
- Concision: My research must be concise enough to present a fresh perspective.
- Coherence: Each piece of my research must hang together in a strong form.
- Generativity: The research I am conducting can be useful to other researchers and teachers.
- Social Significance: My inquiry must aim to make a difference in the world, or improve a situation.
- Evocation and Illumination: My research will motivate and invite a reader to think more deeply about a situation (pg.148).

However, in reducing the validity of my research to be defined to a simple rubric, it might become stale. In evaluating student artwork, rubrics are helpful guides to measure whether or not objectives have been met. However, I would argue that some work does not meet all the objectives but is still valuable and excels in its merit.

Because my work is on such a local scale, I would suggest that if my research is successful in my classroom, it is to some extent socially significant. It will improve a situation—albeit small and seemingly insignificant—and that situation would be the students at Summit Academy Elementary in Draper, Utah. I also hope that my work would be useful to other researchers. My research has been personal, but I anticipate that some teachers might be considering the same questions that I have asked. It is possible that some of their questions can be answered through my research or that my research might be a springboard for those who are

seeking ways to improve their teaching practice, specifically those teachers who are searching to understand their place as an art educator.

Lastly, the purpose of my research is to invite a reader to think more deeply about a situation, namely art education at the elementary level. I anticipate that my research will bring new understandings to the discussion surrounding elementary art education, and I expect that my research will provide a new voice or perspective regarding children's experiences in the art room. Sharing my stories in the classroom—my successes and failures and the understandings that come of them—can unlock new possibilities for those who are teaching elementary-age students, and I hope to invite the reader of this thesis to reflect upon and consider the experiences I am sharing.

### **Conclusion**

My research exists in my videos, journal entries, images and photographs. These media unravel an experience, connecting it to an experience or moment that is lived in. These experiences are more than just data. They are the moments that represent art's impact on a student, and they exist beyond recorded information. This process is research as a living practice, with multiple moving parts and places of understanding (Carson & Sumara, 1997). It is a personal and collective journey and perhaps is more meaningful to the participants and myself in that regard.

I chose this methodology because I felt that it offered a more organic approach to research and teaching. I wanted to make sure that my experiences inside and outside of the classroom felt real, had integrity, and were true to what actually happened during my inquiry. I also wanted to assume the role of a teaching artist rather than the role of an elementary teacher who happens to teach art. As a result, this process has been very personal to me. As my students

and I sought to create new meaning in the classroom by using art as inquiry, reverberations occurred during the course of this unit. I gained new understanding in my classroom and pedagogy, and I reorganized my philosophies and curriculum and was able to look critically at what I was actually teaching in my classroom as I made it more meaningful for the students and myself.

By assuming the role of artist/teacher/researcher in the classroom, I observed my students' understanding of the artistic process deepen. They began to understand what it means to be an artist by watching and participating as opposed to acting on direct instruction. In most cases, upper-elementary-aged students need a model to follow when it comes to art (Porter, 2004). I believe my role as an artist/teacher/researcher helped my students know how to inquire as artists do because "as a/r/tographers work with others, the potential exists for many individuals and groups to become a/r/tographers in a way that is appropriate for them" (Irwin, Gouzouasis, Leggo, & Springgay, 2008) (pg. xxiv).

Changing the roles of artist and teacher in the classroom required me as a teacher to address issues of empowerment and authority in collective decision-making within the classroom context. I had to lose control of my class at times to empower them to become their own artists. With these changes in decision-making, my students could become active agents in the negotiating and forging of the visions they wanted to share with others (Anderson, 1997). They were able to include their voices in the planning and executions of the art piece we created together, and they also expressed their understandings in their individual projects.

It is important to note that to some extent, a/r/tography cares more about process than about outcomes. A/r/tographic inquiry, as defined by Stephanie Springgay and Rita Irwin, is concerned with creating the circumstances to produce understanding and knowledge through inquiry



processes rather than reporting findings or finding knowledge that was previously concealed (Irwin, Gouzouasis, Leggo, & Springgay, 2008, p. xxiv). This study focused on creating circumstances: some of these circumstances were unsuccessful, whereas others proved hugely successful.

My identity became the focal point of my research during this thesis. The questions that I encountered during my teaching were catalysts for deeper understanding of and inquiries into my research and art making. Taking an a/r/tographic approach to my study changed the way I saw my research: this project became more than a project for graduate school and transformed into the first phase of a lifelong endeavor. Here at the end of this thesis project, I am less focused on attaining a goal and more focused on the continual process of becoming. Place was important in this research; however, more important is the site or location that I occupy at present. This thesis has forced me to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Though a difficult situation in which to exist, this circumstance has also the best site for production and growth. Rather than finding a location to settle and be comfortable, I have realized that successful teachers must embark on a seemingly nomadic journey so that we can learn and stretch ourselves. In separating my identities of teacher, researcher, and artist, I have come to embrace and love the uncomfortable learning that comes as a result of thoughtful inquiry.

**Epilogue: November 2013**

Figure 17: New beginnings

During this study I have learned more than I thought I would ever learn, and changed and solidified my identity. In Spring, 2013 I began teaching a group of ten students in an after school art class. My after school classes have been growing, and I have realized that I can do much more with students outside of the classroom setting. It has been liberating for me to realize that I do not have to teach in a classroom to be a teacher. I have found that I enjoy being a mentor of a few students and not a director of 30 classrooms of more than 730 students. I connect best with students one on one, and am able to give more of myself. I found myself emotionally drained as a teacher as I tried to connect with each one of my many students and lost my connection with myself as an artist. I believe that a special few are able to maintain this busy schedule, however, I am happiest when I am able to give fully of myself, while still filling my figurative “art cup”. I am excited for my new adventures that lay ahead, and thrilled that this thesis has been a stepping

stone to new possibilities. This thesis project is a study of how a focus on place influenced my students' artwork and my own approach to teaching. It began as a study of my classroom and the curriculum I was teaching and evolved to be a self-study, an exploration of my identity as an artist, researcher and teacher, a narration of my personal journey to feel comfortable in my role as an art teacher in a very busy elementary art classroom.

The most successful part of my research was personal. I was able to identify myself as an artist again, and recovering that identity was an important and unexpected result of this thesis. I anticipated highlighting the difficulties of being a practicing artist and teaching full-time as an elementary art specialist, and in the unexpected openings I found, I discovered my purpose as an educator and was able to define what is important to me in my classroom: a genuine connection with students and a passion for my subject.

**Appendix A:**

Figure 18: An image of Rachel's special place: Goblin Valley

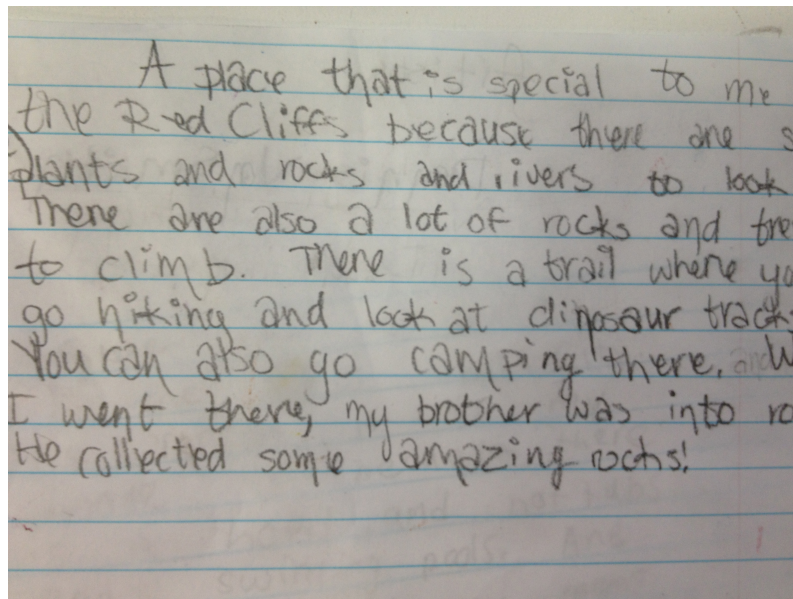


Figure 19: Student journal entry describing their favorite place



Figure 20: Painting in process- Zion's National Park by Mrs. Stewart's class.



Figure 21: Painting in process- Fishlake by Mrs. Seidel's class.



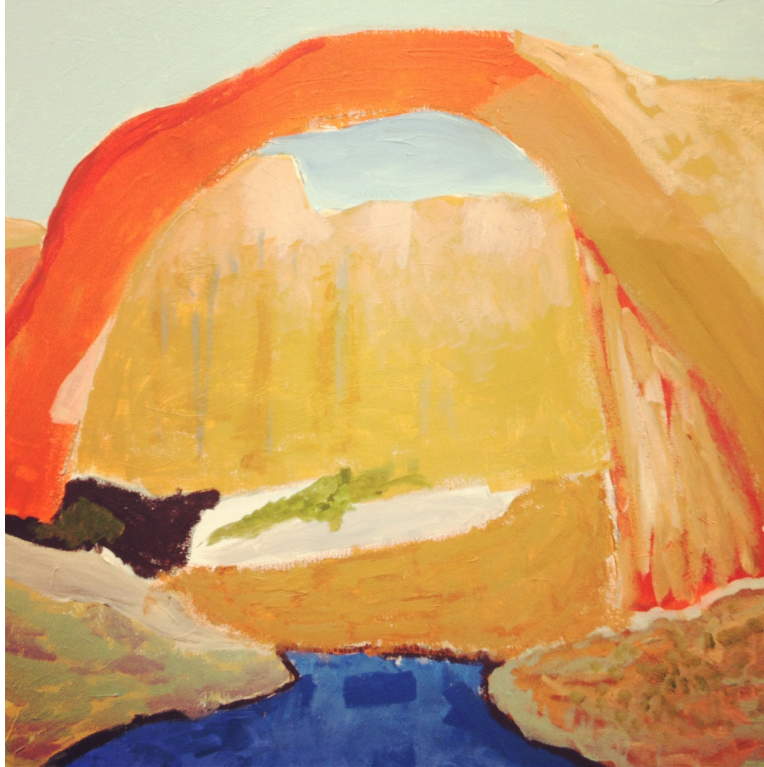


Figure 22: Painting in process: Rainbow Bridge by Miss Bennett's class.

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