Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues

44 Using an Arts Methodology to Create a Thesis or Dissertation

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There is a certain pleasure in leaving one of the first footprints of the day on the sand of a sun-, wind-, and water-washed deserted beach. Similarly, the act of making one of the first morning prints on fresh snow laid in a forest during a quiet, snow-falling night embodies a kind of magic. So it is that opportunities to forge new ground in the academy create similar pleasures for new and more experienced researchers alike. Traversing uncharted territories opens up exciting new possibilities. The growing number of English language, artful theses and dissertations completed over the last 15 years is witness to this (for a very small sampling see Knowles, Luciani, Cole, & Neilsen, 2007; Knowles, Promislow, & Cole, in press). In pockets of creativity and artful energy in far-flung places and disciplines there are new and more experienced scholars making space for the arts to inform scholarly work. Such new work, invariably, contributes to the development of artful methodologies, strengthening and expanding existing communities of arts-related researchers around the globe.

We write this chapter with two main audiences in mind: The first is new researchers, usually graduate students, who are making their way through the labyrinth of institutional requirements and an array of methodologies but have a growing interest in arts-related qualitative research (we also expect that more advanced peers will gain some solace here as well); the second is university faculty who may potentially support the work of new researchers infusing the arts into their research. In this chapter we explore contexts, processes, issues, and challenges associated with developing artful theses and dissertations. To do so, we draw on reflexive accounts by emerging artist-researchers and their supervisors. These comprise excerpts from some of the chapter contributions to Creating Scholartistry: Imagining the Arts-Informed Thesis or Dissertation (Knowles, Promislow, & Cole, in press).
What Do Arts-Related Works Look Like?

Alma Fleet (in press) from Macquarie University in Australia describes her first impressions after browsing through a dozen or so theses on the occasion of a visit to the Centre for Arts-Informed Research at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (of the University of Toronto). Since the mid-1990s more than 50 doctoral theses employing arts-related methodologies were completed under the guidance of scholars in several departments within the Institute:

Physical format varied from the traditional (hard bound in strong red, navy blue, or apple green with single coloured lettering), presenting a solid academic front, to those with small metaphoric individual messages on the cover or frontispiece, to those with fully illustrated covers creating an invitation to the reader to become involved in the text. … Opening pages led to a discovery of individuality in the Tables of Contents. For example, each piece included an analytic frame for an artistic piece, either independently or integrated in the body of the work, depending on the forms being used for representation. Page layouts moved from the straightforward to the poetic, with page placements and white space carrying particular messages, including the use of different fonts and iconic features to guide or challenge the reader.

Fleet’s account speaks of the multiplicity of form and the multilayered nature of research indicative of arts-related theses, where researchers conform to the traditional text-based, bound form of the thesis or dissertation. There are also those who choose to include sound and visual CDs or DVDs (perhaps illustrating elements of the research, making data accessible, or providing some other complementary function). Sometimes these elements accompany more conventional work. Other researchers mount visual exhibitions and performances of various kinds, or develop radio or film documentaries or features or other media productions, and these become the thesis or dissertation itself. The ongoing debate about the extent to which these alternative art forms may be or are the thesis is far from being expressed. A central question relates to whether or not all arts-related scholarship needs to be translated into “book form.”
Throughout the chapter, we refer to (and sometimes describe) a number of works. Nearly all of these authors choose to stay close to bound text. The examples are merely illustrative of the diversity of such graduate work in select disciplines. (They are, however, limited in displaying the range of forms/genre as well as procedural and representational possibilities.) Descriptions of three arts-related doctoral theses/dissertations (completed in three different countries) provide a glimpse of form and content.

Douglas Gosse’s (2005a) award-winning thesis

1 **Breaking Silences: An Inquiry Into Identity and the Creative Research Process** incorporates an experimental novel-thesis (later, partly published as a trade book novel entitled *Jackytar*; Gosse, 2005b). Employing the genre of the *Bildungsroman* to write his fictional novel, Gosse explores intersectional identities in education along the lines of ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, geographical location, language, culture, and disability. He problematizes notions of self, group, and community and gives voice to those often silenced. Like others, such as Dunlop (1999) and de Freitas (2003) before him, his work offers a model, guidance, and inspiration for scholars interested in writing a thesis as novel.

Christina Marín’s (2005) research focused on how forms of theatre and performance give voice and agency to populations often marginalized and discounted. Her award-winning dissertation

2 **Breaking Down Barriers, Building Dreams: Using Theatre for Social Change to Explore the Concept of Identity With Latina Adolescents** employs techniques expressed in Theatre for Social Change and those derived from Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1982) to explore concepts of language, immigration, and teenage pregnancy with a bilingual, youth theatre group in Phoenix, Arizona.

*Figure 44.1 A Thought per Day: My Traveling Inside a Suitcase.*

(source: Photo by Dañis Let.)
A groundbreaking thesis, unique in form and content, is Daria Loi’s (2005) *Lavoretti per bimbi: Playful Triggers as Keys to Foster Collaborative Practices and Workspaces Where People Learn, Wonder, and Play*. It is a “thesis-as-suitcase” completed at the School of Management at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University, Australia. A 13-kilogram, medium-sized, black, apparently well-traveled, cardboard suitcase filled with artifacts and text, Loi’s work explores “how to foster organizational spaces where collaborative activities can be undertaken” (Loi, in press). It is about collaborative practices, participatory design processes, and the active involvement of people. The thesis-as-suitcase emerged from a goal to reach wide and diverse audiences, to embody theory and practice, and to enable collaborative practice through active engagement with the many, diverse elements of the work. Loi's suitcase has “written content and nontextual elements that use metaphorical, tactile, audio and visual means to express meaning,” specifically, employing visual images, CDs, found objects, game-like and sculptural elements, and gifts for readers.

Each of the three above-mentioned doctoral researchers came to the development of their scholarship with sound theoretical and practical groundings in their respective disciplines (education, English literature, and the literary arts; theatre/drama; architecture, design, and management). But they also came to the process with a vision and a determination to create a thesis or dissertation that, in process and representational form, expanded conventional notions of knowledge and knowing. Their acts of arts-related qualitative researching called upon a range of individual knowledge and experience and also demanded the support of peers and supervising faculty within their institutions.

It would be comforting to imagine that this kind of developmental work is plain sailing. But often it is not. In large institutions—even where the arts in qualitative research is supported by a cluster of faculty—it is not uncommon for thesis and dissertation proposals involving the arts in research to be rejected or watered down, or for the new researcher to flounder around in efforts to find a supervisor and supervising committee to support the work. More often than not these new researchers take on educative roles with prospective guides of their work before the thesis or dissertation gets underway.
Supportive Contexts?

Putting aside the complexities of completing any thesis or dissertation, an artful thesis may be developed within the context of any university—and be sanctioned by it—where there are enough advocating or sympathetic scholars to comprise a supervising and examining committee. Such conditions exist at numerous universities within Canada, the United States, Australia, Great Britain, and Ireland, for instance. In this section we focus primarily on a few North American examples of contexts that support emerging scholars who decide to take roads less traveled.

The institutional contexts from which arts-related thesis and dissertation research have emerged comprise groups of like-inspired individuals—faculty and graduate students alike. In North America five contexts bear special mention primarily because of the volume of work supported or sponsored by them. Four are universities, although the first mentioned is a research organization comprised of like-minded scholars that, since the mid-1990s, has been a major source of support for many new and emerging scholars, many of whom work in relative isolation.

The Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER) Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association attracts international interest and membership. Graduate students and emerging scholars comprise a large segment of its membership. ABER “provides a community for those who view education through artistic lenses, who use a variety of arts-based methodologies, and who communicate understandings through diverse genres.” It sponsors a variety of sessions, symposia, and workshops at the annual meeting of its parent body, as well as stand-alone conferences and publications, and is supported by a Listserv, Web site, and newsletter (). Each year it names and makes an award for outstanding dissertations. (There are similar, burgeoning special interest groups associated with conferences and research bodies of other disciplines, say sociology, visual sociology, anthropology, social work, for example.)

The A/R/Tography Research Group at the Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, advocates a particular arts-related methodology collaboratively developed by visual artist Rita Irwin and her graduate students, many of whom are art educators
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Faculty and students alike participate “through an ongoing process of art making … and writing not separate or illustrative of each other but interconnected and woven through each other to create additional and/or enhanced meanings” (Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, Chapter 7 in this volume). Like other supportive contexts, the A/R/Tography group gather[s] together to work on publications, conference presentations, dissertations and theses, research projects and art exhibitions as a way of supporting one another's academic journey [which is seen as] … an integral part of creating and articulating an a/r/tographical methodology. (Springgay, de Cosson, & Irwin, in press)

Within the Department of Communication at the University of South Florida, Carolyn Ellis, Arthur Bochner, and colleagues have, over the last decade, created a context for alternative and arts-related qualitative research. They have fostered inquiry and scholarship at the intersection of literature, ethnography, autoethnography, narrative inquiry, and social and cultural theories. Their Ethnographic Alternatives Series, published by AltaMira Press, for example, provides a venue for new scholars to express elements of their creative scholarship. Recent dissertations from this context include: Moreman (2005), Performativity and the Latina/o-White Hybrid Identity: Performing the Textual Self; Curry (2005), Communicating Collaboration and Empowerment: A Research Novel of Relationships With Domestic Violence Workers; Baglia (2003), Building Masculinity: Viagra and the Performance of Sexual Health; and Leoutsakas (2003), The Orphan Tales: Real and Imagined Stories of Parental Loss.

Graduate researchers associated with the Centre for Arts-Informed Research (CAIR) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto have produced a sizable body of work since the late 1990s. CAIR is a community of faculty and graduate students with a shared commitment to exploring, articulating, and supporting “alternative forms of qualitative research and representation which infuse elements, processes, and forms of the arts into scholarly work.” The Centre sponsors colloquia, workshops, gallery exhibits, performances, seminars, and conference presentations. It also sponsors a book series and an online publication and is the academic home of funded research projects. One of the Centre's goals “is to provide a context for
promoting exciting, innovative, ‘scholartistry’ that forges new shapes of academic discourse” ()

The Image and Identity Research Collective (IIRC; ) was initiated by Sandra Weber (Concordia University) and Claudia Mitchell (McGill University). Its collaborators include faculty and graduate students from both institutions and from other universities, as well as independent artists and researchers. Collectively they share “an interest in developing interdisciplinary, image-based research methodologies as well as exploring artistic forms of representation for the Humanities and Social Sciences …” (Derry, 2003, pp. 24–25).

To imply that bold, creative, arts-related research only takes place in these contexts is incorrect: These particular university contexts and the Special Interest Group are merely indicative of the availability of sustained support and advocacy for the arts in qualitative research. Many authors in this Handbook teach regular or occasional arts-related graduate courses and workshops, relative to their disciplines and interests, and likely have institutional colleagues who support alternative qualitative researching. In addition, various research organizations and conferences offer occasional methodology courses and workshops. To become aware of conferences, exhibitions, and publications that support alternative scholarship is to also network with like-minded new and experienced scholars. Reference lists associated with the chapters of this volume are a good place to start because they evidence glimpses of intellectual paths taken by respective scholars.

New scholars who know in advance that they want to do arts-related research locate supportive institutional contexts and supporting faculty before making graduate school applications. But the reality is that most new researchers do not have such foreknowledge. Most of those who come to use the arts in their qualitative research do so because of inspiration gleaned from peers, networks of various kinds, academic texts, performances, attending conferences, and simply by happenstance. This Handbook also provides a range of support and perspectives to enable arts-related researchers and further develop the expression of knowledge and methodologies involving the arts. The resources of the Handbook and the various contexts previously mentioned are mere starting points to help emerging scholars prepare for their arts-related researching.
New Scholars Employing the Arts?

Sara’s doctoral research journey provides some insights into how individuals and contexts serve to inspire and support the use of arts-related, qualitative research methods. In her thesis, *A Collage of Borderlands: Arts-Informed Life Histories of Childhood Immigrants and Refugees Who Maintain Their Mother Tongue* (Promislow, 2005), she explores the experiences of four adults in and through languages, cultures, and identities. The research representation includes literary genres, scholarly discourse, and the art form collage. Sara’s initial exposure to arts-related research was through advanced qualitative research courses with Ardra Cole at the University of Toronto. Without possessing a substantial background in the arts, her curiosity was piqued and she became involved in the activities of the Centre for Arts-Informed Research. Through the Centre’s seminars and events and, later, becoming the editor of the Centre’s online publication, *arts-informed*, Sara was inspired to infuse arts-informed approaches into the life history method, convinced that the arts would contribute to her work in process and representation.

Decisions about the influence of an art form may be complex, but they may also be inspired by happenstance events or circumstances. Three brief examples suffice. Sara started with the notion of employing diverse textual genres to explore and represent research participants’ experiences. At an academic conference workshop (Butler-Kisber, Bodone, Meyer, & Stewart, 2003) she learned about and experimented with the art form collage. With her supervisor’s encouragement and support she analyzed collected information through collage making. Eventually the collages became integral to the research analysis and representation.

I had gained much insight and understanding through the art form collage and was able to move forward with the conceptualization of my research analysis, with the images I juxtaposed at times when I was unable to move forward with words. My participants’ experiences defied words and fixed categories. Linear analysis served only to block my way. In order to do justice to their experiences I knew that I needed to go beyond … habitual linear thinking and take risks. (Promislow & Cole, in press)
Lynn Fels's (1999) thesis *In the Wind Clothes Dance on a Line: Performative Inquiry as a Research Methodology* employs performative writing to conceptualize performance as an action/site of learning and research. Based on her experiences as a drama educator, Fels examined the possibilities of performance such as role drama, visualizations, and improvisation for learning and research. Wanting her thesis representation to reflect the unique qualities of her research, Fels struggled to find form. “I didn’t want to explain what happened. … I wanted to textually perform moments of learning that emerged from my performative work with my students” (Fels, Linds, & Purru, in press). After 6 months of dwelling with her thesis, unable to write, Fels had a breakthrough during a lecture by Jaques Daignault. Inspired by him she felt “[I am] not alone. This too is possible.” Her difficulties with writing transformed into the challenge of “writing a performative text that listens, interplays between absence and presence, and welcomes the not yet known.”

*performative inquiry*

*a mapping-exploration of space-moments of learning*

*through which action-process occurs utterly through form and*

*simultaneously through the destruction of form*
Sharon Sbrocchi's (2005) thesis *Remembering Place: Domicide and a Childhood Home* “focuses on the relationship between self and place in a rapidly urbanizing world” (p. iii). Sbrocchi's exploration of childhood experiences of a place (which now no longer exists) is structured within and around a simple device—a series of pencil lines on paper, “mind maps” that capture her and friends' memories of their childhood neighborhood. Sharon developed a methodological device and form serendipitously during a meeting with her supervisor. They discussed her childhood home. “Then in mid-conversation, [my supervisor] suggested I draw a ‘sense of place’ map. ‘Right now. At this moment!’ He handed me a sharpened pencil. I looked perplexed. ‘Now?’ I asked. I drew it with ease. I know the place” (Sbrocchi, in press). So began an articulation of place. Drawing the map precipitated a flow of memories and helped Sbrocchi “focus a broad range of stories, emotions and general information from within. … It took less than two minutes to draw the memory map and three more years to complete the thesis.” Moving back and forth from the mind map, Sbrocchi’s thesis became a multilayered text that also included photographs and archival material.

Figure 44.3 Map 16. Zorra Street Memory Map: Hide ‘n’ Go Seek.
To Employ the Arts?

Because of the extensive commitment of energy required, arts-inspired inquiry is something researchers choose to do; they do not take it up by default as the single available methodological possibility (as was often the case in the past with conventional, empirical research). Are the arts seen as a possibility for enhancing scholarship and research? If so: Is the research process and the mode of telling the research story the most effective form given the subject matter, audience, and purpose of the research? It may be appropriate to infuse the arts into researching when

- it is congruent with one's worldview, an acknowledgment that knowing through the arts is more than mere knowledge about the arts;
- it makes inherent sense given the focus and substance of the research;
- it fits one's artistic skills and expertise;
- there is an obvious potential to develop exceptional insights and knowledge; and
- it presents opportunities to reach audiences that are not normally very accessible to academic researchers.

How is It Possible?

To conduct research infused by the arts is to break out of the conventional (as defined by each qualitative research tradition or orientation). It is also to be inspired by the arts, especially, with regard to process and representation. Such inspiration may be serendipitous (see Knowles & Thomas, 2000). To engage in the process of this work is to act as a visual artist, poet, painter, photographer, dancer, dramatist, performer, and so on. Process is informed not only by bringing to bear one's creativity given that art form but also by knowing how it is that artists in that sphere or genre may work. It is about incorporating both the inspiration of an art and the processes that an artist might use. For example, how does the fiction writer work? How does a fiction writer inform herself about the work she is about to do? What are some of the processes involved in readying to write, developing storylines, plot? How does the photographer work? Is it possible to get inside the photographer's mind to bring to bear the intellectual frames
for shooting? And the filmmaker? How does the playwright work? How does the dancer work?

These questions help reveal the essence of what it means to do arts-related research. And so, this knowledge of process is infused into the researching procedures in ways that make inherent sense and enhance the possibilities for gathering a different quality of information and interpreting and presenting it creatively. Although the very questions we ask reveal our orientations, the various chapters of Parts II and III of this *Handbook* provide a sense of the possibilities.

Is it necessary for researchers infusing the arts into their work to consider themselves “artists”? Being a researcher who draws on the arts implies a willingness to come to know the art form (or forms) in some depth and to the degree that makes inherent sense for the purposes of the project at hand. For instance, in preparation for researching there may be no preordained “arts” coursework. Nor are there “standard measures of artistic abilities.” Certainly there are no set paths to becoming competent as an arts-related researcher—although one may do “course-work” or seek guidance from practicing artists of various kinds (who may well be located beyond the confines of academic institutions). Ultimately, knowing how artists of a specific genre engage with and represent subject matter is paramount. To become a researcher who fuses the arts into research processes and representations is to possess a creativity and artfulness. It is to have a willingness to be creative and to not be bounded by traditions of academic discourse and research processes but, rather, to be grounded in them.

Teresa Luciani’s (2006) thesis *On Women's Domestic Knowledge and Work: Growing Up in an Italian Kitchen* explores the knowledge and work of Italian immigrant women through her experiences as a second-generation immigrant and the experiences of the women in her family. The work comprises autobiographical and fictional short stories, lively with detail, affording readers vivid, vicarious experiences of growing up and being a woman in an Italian immigrant family in Canada. Integral and important to the development of her work, Luciani expanded and honed her skills as a short story writer through creative writing courses that afforded critical feedback from a professional writer.
To complete a thesis or dissertation is a formidable task in itself, and new scholars and their supervisors working with arts-related approaches face additional challenges that make the thesis/dissertation journey all the more full of uncertainty and surprises. Risk taking, courage, openness to unknowing, and tolerance for ambiguity—on the part of both emerging scholars and their supervisors—are prerequisites for developing an arts-related project. Securing a supportive supervisor (and committee) is not always an easy task for new scholars. As for completing such a project, there are no models and maps to follow. Indeed, research projects drawing on the arts are likely to be entirely idiosyncratic endeavors, especially with regard to process, form, and representation.

Creativity is at the heart of the enterprise. This may be scary for a novice researcher unsure of her step and whose first socialized action is to seek reassurance from completed theses already stacked neatly on university library shelves. “It is not easy to work against the grain. The usual tensions get tenser, and new ones add sparks. Responses at times vary wildly” (Norman, in press). Such circumstances may even evoke nervousness on the part of a novice supervisor who questions: “How do I judge the work?” “What will my colleagues think?” and “Will ‘the institution’ approve?” Pat Thompson says of the experience of the first arts-infused thesis she supervised: “I was worried about the conservatism of the university in considering alternative thesis forms” (Baskwell & Thompson, in press), a not uncommon position. Those forging new ground will need to be able to respond to the question “How is this research?” and to take on an educative role with some committee members or faculty.

To Supervise?

The journey towards becoming a helpful, challenging and creative supervisor of arts-informed inquiry seems to me to contain two elements. Firstly, there is the essence of being an empowering, nurturant, informed supervisor, and secondly, there is the extension of that role into a way of being in relationship to a graduate student interested in alternative representation. (Fleet, in press)

Supervisors come to the role with different perspectives. In his role as thesis supervisor, for example, Gary is interested in supporting new researchers who show
confidence in research traditions that intersect with his own research expertise (such as phenomenology, life history, ethnography, narrative inquiry, or, say, a qualitative interview study) and his disciplinary interests, broadly defined. He gets excited when new researchers have visions of stepping out of their comfort zones and of forging new approaches to the topic at hand. In essence this means that creativity and confidence are forefront. He sees one of his roles as being a supportive curator and guide. The fine line walked is between that of nurturer of creativity and conceptual editor. Ultimately, though, the emerging researcher has to be trusted.

Antoinette Oberg has a unique perspective. Her pedagogy and coursework orientation, “inquiry-without-method,” is productive for supporting artful inquiries:

This pedagogy begins with the question, What interests you? and proceeds by means of an ongoing series of written exchanges between teacher and student as the student seeks to articulate her not-yet-imagined interest. Each piece of student writing calls for (and calls forth) an imaginative response from the teacher intended to provoke a further act of imagination by the student. (Oberg & Cranmer, in press)

An illustration of the potential of Oberg's pedagogy in supervision is her work with Laura Cranmer (2002), whose master's degree thesis, DP's Colonial Cabaret, is a two-act play. The action follows DP's struggle with substance abuse and ends with a confrontation between Anomie and Mother Bond, two characters competing for his allegiance. Led by Oberg's question “What are you in the midst of?” Laura explored forces that contributed to her identity as a colonized ‘Namgis woman. With Oberg's initial “patient, non-judgmental acceptance of whatever students write,” she opened “a space of possibility for creative processes to unfold” (Oberg & Cranmer, in press). Her ongoing affirmations enabled Cranmer to be confident in pushing the boundaries of her comfort zone. Oberg's reflective questions inspired Cranmer to move more deeply and explore alternative possibilities for the representation of pain and hurt. “The process of writing the play became [Cranmer's] way of rewriting, in essence, purging [her] blood and bone of the colonial script.”

Bronwyn Davies “provoked, inspired, cajoled and challenged” doctoral student Suzanne Gannon. Of this Gannon said, “Most of all, she trusted me. Sometimes she frustrated
me. Sometimes I wanted simple answers, shortcuts or linear thinking. She answered my questions clearly and promptly, but always refusing binaries and clichés" (Davies & Gannon, in press). Gannon's (2003) work is an exploration of the possibilities of poststructural theory in writing and research. Her own textual performances and processes of writing are at the root of her inquiry and its representation. The work weaves creative and analytical genres of writing around each other in textual performances. Davies recognized that Gannon began as a practiced writer and saw her role “as lending active support for [Gannon's] initiatives; as giving strong encouragement for thinking outside the usual bounds of what a ‘thesis’ might be … what a thesis will look like.” Integral to the supervisory role, Davies facilitates “collective biography” workshops where she and her students write and share memory stories and learn a range of writing skills through collaborative projects. “Arts-informed practices such as voice work, assemblage and visual arts practice became a part of our way of working together.”

One aspect of supervision not discussed thus far is the role of external examiner. Many North American universities do not require such a role for the completion of master's and doctoral degrees; however, in other national contexts it is not the case. Most Canadian and Australian universities (in addition to English language universities in many other countries), for example, require the work of a supervising committee to be supplemented by an external examiner's report. Such a report makes a critique of the research, providing an examining committee with an outsider’s point of view. It highlights the strengths, weaknesses, and contributions of the work and is usually written by “an expert from the field,” someone of renown. A challenge for new supervisors is to help locate suitable scholars matched with the research being examined. Given that their contribution to the successful completion of a thesis or dissertation is pivotal, this reasonable match is essential.

**There Are Issues and Obstacles?**

There are numerous obstacles and challenges to those choosing to incorporate the arts into their research methodology. Some are individual and others institutional. Individual obstacles and challenges include
becoming confident about stepping into the unknown; 
melding research methods with processes and representations; 
developing related artistic skills and knowledge; and 
having the energy, time, skill, and technical and, perhaps, financial means associated with “doing” the work.

Others obstacles and challenges are institutional. They include

• locating a suitable supervisor who resonates with arts-related approaches who can, perhaps, suspend judgment and trust the process; and
• negotiating real and imagined institutional constraints such as perceptions that the form, structure, and medium for graduate thesis and dissertation work is solidified and preordained by universities.

The persistent dominance of conventional views of empirical research is, perhaps, the greatest obstacle to arts-related research. Despite the fact that alternative research methodologies proliferate, books are available on arts-related inquiry, and journals increasingly publish articles employing alternative approaches to qualitative research, incoming graduate school students enter with limited notions of what constitutes research or knowledge of the range of epistemologies and methods possible. In some institutions, where faculty actively support arts-related research, there are concerted attempts to make known alternative possibilities, but for the most part, this is sporadic. In other places, students may become independently aware of arts-related research and seek out supportive faculty. In the latter cases, faculty may not promote arts-related work either because they think it not credible or appropriate at their institution or because they lack the expertise needed to supervise sound arts-related research. Consider, for example, a music professor’s wonderings about the arts and research

[Arts-related inquiry] seems somewhat … subversive. … Research needs to be systematic. … There must be a sense of rigor, a clearly defined purpose and problem, a certain structure—an introduction, a literature review, a methodology and tangible results and conclusions, and all of those components linked through various substructures in the thesis … I mean, how can you hand in a thesis that’s merely a series of stories? (Gouzouasis & Lee, in press)
Taken from a reconstructed conversation with Karen Lee (2004), a doctoral student (now graduated), Peter Gouzouasis (who, at the time, was “new” to the idea of arts-related research but now employs it himself) voices common concerns about alternative forms of dissertations that draw on the arts. The paradox is, however, that the very elements of traditional research and resulting theses that Gouzouasis implies are the “standards” for judgment are also the essential qualities of a thesis or dissertation informed by the arts. In other words, the hallmark qualities remain, but the process, structure, form, and representation may be quite diverse depending on the art genre involved. Possibilities abound because the range of methodologies available for new researchers has multiplied in recent decades. So, also, has the available literature within which to theoretically ground new innovative work.

Creation Completed?

One of our hopes for this chapter is that it may assist in making it easier for emerging scholars to complete arts-inspired theses and dissertations. We see it as a reference point offering a checklist of sorts, highlighting relevant issues important for researchers to consider. In providing snapshots of what some arts-related research looks like, we are mindful of the myriad examples of innovative work completed and not acknowledged here. There is no one model to follow. It is evident that the distinguishing features of this work relate to the qualities of researchers: vision, perseverance, and commitment to form. There is support for arts-related work, whether it be in universities or professional/research networking organizations although, often, new researchers have their work cut out as they locate and often educate supervisors, and debate the value, process, structure, and form of their work.

The paths taken by arts-related researchers are largely idiosyncratic but often hinge on serendipity, exposure to other like-inspired scholars, grounding, or experience in the arts so that the art or arts become as a catalyst and vehicle for the work. To employ the arts in research is for the arts to make inherent sense in researchers’ orientations and for the purposes of the work. New researchers may need to look beyond universities for opportunities to develop their familiarity and competence with art forms although questions about judgment of the place of the arts are likely to be highly debated. Concerns about judging the quality of theses are often concerns of thesis and
dissertation supervisors who have to nurture and foster creativity in new researchers yet make decisions about quality—a demanding, difficult, and sometime confusing task. The ultimate criteria for judging the quality of arts-inspired theses and dissertations may be the responses of audiences to whom the work is directed. Perhaps this is the greatest challenge and hope for arts-related work whose authors are driven to make a difference.

Author’s Note: This chapter includes information gleaned from conversations Antoinette Oberg had with Thomas Barone, Noreen Garman, Rita Irwin, and Carl Leggo about their experiences and insights in supervising arts-inspired educational research.

Notes

1. Gosse's doctoral thesis received the Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER) Outstanding Dissertation of the Year Award for 2005.

2. Marín's doctoral dissertation received the Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER) Outstanding Dissertation of the Year Award for 2006.

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