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Art Education at the Turn of the Tide: The Utility of Narrative in Curriculum-making and Education Research

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Given current developments in contemporary art, learning theory and art education, Julia Marshall (2006) declares the timeliness for substantively new "ideas and models for art education" (p. 17). Clearly, the story of art education practice is ever evolving and has historically given place to new tellings (Hamblen, 1984). On the surface, relating our professional narratives is vital because unless an art educator tells the story of what s/he does and why s/he does it, someone else may tell the story and leave out something important. Collectively documenting and telling stories of our individual pedagogical practices helps educators argue against the notion that that arts learning is less relevant and more expendable than other subjects (Stankiewicz, 1997).

Looking deeper, narrative is a fundamental process of human research and development. Brent Wilson (1997) writes: "I like to think of research as *re-search*, to search again, to take a closer second look. Research implies finding evidence about the way things were in the past, how they are presently, and even about how they might be in the future" (p. 1). Narrative practices are *re-searching* methodologies giving rise to meaningful or useful stories that encapsulate "the entire research process from problem identification to data analysis" (Creswell, 1994, p. xvii). Analyzing and interpreting the data at hand, narrative processes tell a story that informs others of who we are, where we come from, where we are going, and what our purpose may be (Rolling, 2008). Oral

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storytelling, for example, is an ancient re-searching practice that identifies and examines problems of the human condition. Filmmaking is a contemporary methodology that can serve as narration of our experience of the world and the meaning we make of it (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

In the second installment of the popular *Lord of the Rings*[1] film trilogy by Peter Jackson (2002), the tattered Fellowship of the Ring is confronted with the glowing form of their dear friend Gandalf the Grey, a wizard who perished while defending his friends against a powerful Balrog, a large creature able to shroud itself in fire, darkness, and shadow. Upon the occasion of this unexpected reunion, the resurrected wizard—now much stronger and wiser—casually explains that his name is no longer Gandalf the Grey, and is no longer the person they once grieved for, emphatically stating: "I am Gandalf the White. And I come back to you now—at the turn of the tide." The

narrative turned and the sentimental story line of the affable Gandalf that once merely sheltered his friends from danger now shifted. Suddenly, he offered them redoubled strength and the real possibility of fulfilling their charge at the moment when the Fellowship was at its weakest. Likewise, the place of the arts in education has emergent qualities that, from time to time, need to be recalibrated (Hamblen, 1984; Pearse, 1992). If the arts in education now stand before us at the turn of the tide, how ought we to relate to it?

It is useful to note that contemporary art education practice overlaps a unique period of change in neighboring social science disciplines, a turn of the tide that involves the embrace of narrative methods to rewrite prevailing working models and paradigms of social science practice (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). The proliferation of narrative methodologies in social research emerges from what has been called the narrative turn in contemporary life, a clarion call to "look on traditional empirical research with new eyes that see the significance of stories at all stages in the research process" (Day Sclater, 2003, p. 622).

Over recent decades, there continues to be a nagging ill-fittedness about the place of the arts in modern education (Eisner, 1965; Johnson, 1971; Hoffa, 1979; Anderson, 1981; Sullivan, 1999; Stankiewicz, 2004). This article is a narrative of professional practice intended to evoke similar probative rewritings. Unless art educators write and overwrite our stories of K-12, community, and university education practices, making

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the intractability of the positions we often occupy more public, we will remain at the service of paradigms that no longer fit us very well at all. Narrative inquiry practices generate the possibility of new story arcs emerging from reinterpretive acts of research.

Narrative Inquiry, Social Research, and Art Education

Narrative inquiry is a kind of social research, "a collaborative method of telling stories, reflecting on stories, and (re)writing stories" (Leavy, 2009, p. 27). Narrative methodologies have been of great utility to arts-based researchers (Barone & Eisner, 2006; Leavy, 2009). In contrast, the scientific method is most useful for addressing hypothesis-based questions—guesses about what will happen given a particular set of controlled variables and ultimately requiring experimentation to collect replicable data as evidence that the hypothesis is true. Social science researchers face major limitations carrying the success of the scientific method within the physical sciences over to social research since "persons are more difficult to understand, predict, and control than molecules" (Zeiger, n.d., para. 1). Narrative methodologies offer researchers another approach to educational research questions.

A narrative methodology inaugurates an inquiry as it simultaneously seeks to proliferate new tellings, not primarily to redeem a set of "facts," but to articulate "the significance and meaning of one's experiences" (Bochner, 2001, p. 153). As the products of narrative methodologies each tell a story, each product must itself be considered a text or analogous to text.[2] Such text can be collected as data. In this article I examine three narratives that are connected to my practice as an art educator. *The first story is descriptive*. It is a text that tells of a confluence of circumstances that hindered

the practice of art education in a particular school. Narrative methodologies invite the description and meaningful interpretation of experiences, artifacts, phenomena, performances, and events as research data (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

The second story is speculative. Using a particular conflict between two competing notions of art teaching practice as a starting point, this text reflects on the significance of the work of Harold Pearse (1983, 1992) and his suggestion that paradigms of art education practice need not oppose one another, but can coexist, offering vantage points from which to map "the potential space that our own and others' stories provide" (Day Slater, 2003, p. 623). Narrative methodologies capture contradictory texts—abstracted from diverse personal and/or collective experiences, image schemata and metaphors retained in memory, and citations of

prevailing discourse—in order to reinterpret them and render them more easily understood (Johnson, 1987; Turner, 1996).

The third and final story is a negotiation. It is a text that (re)writes the implications of a particular curricular outcome by one of my former 3rd-grade students, negotiating past practice and future pedagogy. Narrative methodologies offer the opportunity to (re)write prior texts—interfacing with and altering the shape of past practices—and thus adding to the continuum of alternative stories.

By telling stories, reflecting on stories, and (re)writing stories of art education practice, I seek to model the utility of narrative research methodologies in analyzing the many facets of art education practice and arts learning as phenomena worthy of study (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 375).

Figure 1. A screenshot of a video taken within our art studio that offers a glimpse of our cavernous unfinished ceiling and metallic surfaces.

Story #1: The Imposed Ceiling

In 2003, just after the completion of my doctoral studies in education, I was recruited as part of the faculty of a new elementary school that launched in New York. I was asked to help lead a staff of visual arts teachers and to pioneer a visual arts program that was thematically linked with the teaching of all other subjects within the school's uniquely designed architecture for integrating the curriculum across all grade levels. As is often the case at the start of large undertakings, there were obstacles. Since the final phases of the construction of our brand new school building were still being completed in the weeks just before the first students were to arrive, the construction workers were using the large art studio space as a staging area. This was a major hindrance to the art teaching staff, who needed access to the space to prepare to open our doors to our first students. In addition, our initial supply and equipment orders were purchased too late and did not arrive until a few weeks after school began. Furthermore, our furniture was selected without consulting the art teaching staff, was inappropriate for the art studio, and new furniture had to be ordered.

Since our school building was built from the ground up in preparation of our launch, the floor plans and room layouts were also configured long before any of the faculty was hired. Our art studio lay beneath a vast and convoluted exposed ceiling intended to be a showcase on the journeys of visiting educators and parents through our school. Ventilation ducts in the ceiling's design, assorted tubes and pipes, and telephone wire bundles were left visible as an architectural novelty, primarily to titillate visiting parents and teachers on their regular whistle-stop tours. Meanwhile, the students themselves rarely paid much attention to the ceiling (see Figure 1).

Consequently, the acoustic conditions in the space ceaselessly interfered with our teaching. None of the walls within the perimeter of the double-height space actually reached the ceiling, and there were metallic sheaths and other hard surface areas in many places that amplified each raised voice, every

bounding footstep, and each awkward shift of stool legs across the floor. These interruptions were compounded by the fact the art studio was designed so that three art classes could be scheduled to use the art studio simultaneously; even if only two different classes were scheduled to use the art studio at the same time, the noise level was amplified to the point of being near intolerable. The architects also designed our floor so that the only route to the music room was through the art studio; that route went right in front of the Smart board presentation technology in the main discussion area!

In this constant din and distraction, youngsters with already short attention spans asked us to repeat instructions simply because they could not hear. We, the four art teachers charged with using that space as our primary teaching arena, asked repeatedly over the 2 years I was on staff that our school administrators support our teaching by hanging a lowered ceiling of acoustic tiles, rather than sacrificing the ability of our students to focus on lesson discussions for the sake of a fanciful appearance. Our pleas for help were addressed with half measures that did nothing to abate the acoustical disruptions. Even when our pleas became demands, it remained clear our needs were not being prioritized. Not only was the physical learning environment ill-fitted in this case—so was the stance of the school administration regarding the professional recommendations of its art faculty. The imposition of a ceiling described in this story is not presented primarily as an indictment, but rather as a metaphor representing the recurring ill-fittedness of the arts within modern educational ventures.

Story #2: Competing Art Education Practices

The visual arts teaching staff was surprised when we were instructed by the school's leadership team to use our first weeks of classes to decorate the corridors of our new school with our students. Why? Because competing models of art education practice do not always live together well. Decorating was just not our first order of business. Our

administrative supervisor was a former art teacher who helped establish a school on the Upper West Side that valued the arts. Yet, it became quickly apparent that her conception of the job of an art teacher reflected a different model of practice than what the other art teachers and I sought to establish.

I find little, if any, relevance in using students' artwork as decoration to remedy bland corridors. Student work should provide evidence of learning, represent curricular connections, and reflect an emerging critical awareness (see Figure 2). Given that we were a new laboratory school wherein each faculty member was mandated to "tell the story" of the learning taking place in our classrooms, I was very conscious of what I wanted to convey. Although a work of art can simultaneously serve as evidence of learning and decoration, at the time this story took place I felt it was more important to prioritize the arts as a unique vehicle for learning and I resisted the administration's effort to use the artwork to beautify the building. But as I reflect back on this story now, how might we have bridged the divide between the stories we wished to tell about the importance of the visual arts in our school?

According to Pearse (1983), there are at least three prevailing models of practice in art education that oppose one another. Each paradigm tells a different story about what the arts are good for. An empirical-analytic paradigm defines art as a *system of production*, a cause-and-effect intervention into a stockpile of material elements, a commodity-oriented process "that has as its basic intent a cognitive interest in the control of objects in the world" (Pearse, 1983, p. 159). In an empirical-analytic paradigm, art practices seek to produce precious objects, using techniques to shape beauty as determined by the arbiters of good taste (jagodzinski, 1991; Stankiewicz, 2001).

An interpretive-hermeneutic paradigm defines art as a *system of communication*, the expression of situated knowledge about a person's relationship with his or her social world (Pearse, 1983, p. 160). Arts practices

Figure 2. Portion of display case of student work with explanatory captions, photographs and text intended to tell the story of learning during that project.

under an interpretive-hermeneutic paradigm express "the ways in which we immediately experience an intimacy with the living world, attending to its myriad textures, sounds, flavors, and gestures" through a selected symbolic medium (Cancienne & Snowber, 2003, p. 238).

A critical-theoretic paradigm defines art as a system of critical reflection, a relativist form of activism, rendering invisible assumptions, values, and norms newly visible "in order to transform" and critique unjust social relations and empower marginalized individuals and communities within the practitioner's social world (Pearse, 1983, p. 161). Arts practices under a critical-theoretic paradigm challenge "taken-for-granted theories and concepts that govern our disciplines and circumscribe our thinking" in order to reveal "the ongoing inequity and social injustice that shape our society" (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 11).

Of these three models, the empirical-analytic paradigm dominates in defining art and arts policies in the modern era (Rolling, 2008). However, Kearney (1988) pronounces that "modernity is where we grew up," but "postmodernity is where we now live" (p. 18). Pearse (1992) goes on to suggest a system for conceptualizing thought and action originated through arts practices that reflects a postparadigmatic era, "one in a constant state of flux, a kind of perpetual pluralism" of competing paradigms (p. 250). Within a more pluralistic conception of art education practice, none of these competing models of art education practice is forced to occupy space beneath an imposed ceiling of expectations. In fact, we may come to expect the unexpected in our visual arts curriculum theorizing, more akin to Julia Marshall's (2008) postparadigmatic definition of arts practice as making "conceptual collages," with the artist and art educator as bricoleur creating ideas from diverse and seemingly incompatible concepts (p. 39).

Marshall (2008) presents the ceramics work of Charles Krafft as one exemplar of an arts practice that juxtaposes, decontextualizes, and blends competing paradigms to work in fellowship with one another in pieces such as "Fragmentation Hand Grenade." Krafft simultaneously produces precious forms through the beautiful craftwork and decorative styling of traditional Delft porcelains, communicates situated knowledge about weapons dealt by arms traders in Slovenia, and critiques "the banality and ordinariness of violence in American life" (Marshall, 2008, p. 41). Reflecting once again on the philosophical conflict between our visual arts teaching staff and our supervisor, Marshall's presentation of Krafft's postparadigmatic art practice also invites a similar reconceptualization of contemporary art education practice, one that accommodates learning outcomes by our students which simultaneously communicate, critique, and decorate.

The narrative turn in contemporary life opens up the space for art education practitioners to invent 'both/and' learning engagements around artmaking practices that are beautifully crafted and/or serve to communicate and/or work as a catalyst for social renewal;

opens the space for art educators to be teachers of the 'arts' in plurality and/or artists and/or researchers;

opens the space for art education to take place on sites in schools and/or museums and/or community centers and/or in the margins of student notebooks when there are no teachers around…

Story #3: Visual Arts Learners and Their Negotiation of Narratives

What might a 21st-century art education curriculum look like with narrative practices in mind? I recall a work of art by one of my past 3rd graders, which started with a book—a family heirloom from which his name was taken—*TAL, His Marvelous Adventures with Noom-Zor-Noom*, by Paul Fenimore Cooper (1929), the great-grandson of the early American novelist James Fenimore Cooper. Tal's project was the outcome of a storytelling assignment using family artifacts, heirlooms, and family stories as the inspiration for artmaking, historical research, and the development and performance of self-image and family identity.

The book was not the only object in Tal's autobiographical bricolage. He also included a baseball; his baseball glove, which first belonged to his father and was passed on to him; a clay jaguar he made specifically for the installation; a rolled paper "chessboard" hand-ruled and hand-inked to replicate the soft vinyl chessboards of the chess program he participated in; a copy of the front cover richly inked by the book's illustrator, Ruth Reeves; poetry and narratives written for the project; and a family photograph with his little brother and parents (see Figure 3).

Tal did not want to permanently affix this deeply meaningful book into a work of art so he instead chose to make a small bookshelf out of some thick corrugated cardboard we had tucked away in one of the art studio storage closets. Tal critically examines his name, his family, and his "being here" in the following in-class writing:

When my mom was a kid her third grade teacher read her the book "Tal;" she thought it was such a great and mysterious book. The only other person my mom knew who read the book outside of her class was her sister Lisa who had the same teacher when she was in third grade. Years later my mom met my dad. He also knew the book "Tal" because his first cousin, once removed [Paul Fenimore Cooper], wrote the book. One of the earliest presents from my dad to my mom was the book "Tal"! My dad went to an out-of-print bookshop, and found the book "Tal" and he gave it to my mom. They decided

upon Tal as my name because they both loved the book. But in the book the boy named Tal actually had blond hair and blue eyes. I have dark hair and brown eyes. (Tal, personal communication, Spring 2005)

We can understand this student's work on three levels significant to our story. Tal negotiated a narrative drawn from all three models of arts practice—art as precious object (the book), art as personal expression, and art as critical examination. But Tal also found a way to tell stories, reflect on stories, and (re)write stories, all in one narrative act (Leavy, 2009, p. 27). On top of this, Tal also managed to describe the story of his origin, speculate on the significance of the elements of the story, and negotiate the incongruence of the blond-haired Tal of literature and his own dark-haired physicality; each of these acts are facets of a narrative approach to understanding. Kieran Egan (1989) challenges educators not to underestimate the sophistication of young learners in their understanding of any given narrative methodology "that holds stories together and moves them along" (p. 13). Visual arts learning and the arts practices facilitate narrative inventions carrying the cargo of stories we each hold significant.

Qualitative researcher Arthur P. Bochner (2001) reassessed the possibilities of social science practice after the turn toward a new narrative paradigm, also offering a seam through which we may move away from a singular conception of art education practice:

The narrative turn moves away from a singular, monolithic conception of [art education] toward a pluralism that promotes multiple forms of representation and research; away from facts and toward meanings; away from master narratives and toward local stories; away from idolizing categorical thought and abstracted theory and toward embracing the values of irony, emotionality, and activism; away from assuming the stance of the disinterested spectator and toward assuming the posture of a feeling, embodied, and vulnerable observer; away from writing essays and toward telling stories. (pp. 134-135)

Arts practices may be organized around canonized art objects and traditional artmaking techniques, and/or the expression of a plurality of cultural tropes and motifs,

and/or iconoclastic themes of social critique in any combination or sequence and without partiality. (Re)writing the metanarrative of art education involves an ongoing recognition that there are new stories to narrate and ill-fitted models of practice yet to be overwritten.

Conclusion

This article explores the utility of narrative methodologies to educational research, teaching, learning activities, and curriculum-making. Narrative methodologies are instructional tools as ancient as those cultures that depended solely on their oral traditions to transmit knowledge and the meanings they gathered to be significant (Stokrocki, 1994). Narratives generate stories that we cling to, live by, and which show us the way to greater understandings (Kellman, 1995; McAdams, 1993; Novitz, 2001). Stories told and retold become frameworks shaping worldviews, conventions of thought, and common cultural understandings. Because of the human tendency to "comprehend time in terms of stories" (McAdams, 1993, p. 27), we cling to familiar stories that are embedded throughout life experience. Once narratives are entrenched, they tend to endure until supplanted by new narratives that bring conventional thinking into conflict with "the mutinous text of interpretation" (Mitchell, 1981, p. 83).

Narrative is thus a conservative tool; nevertheless, it is a transformative tool as well:

> Our capacity to tell a story… is not something that we wish to lose. It is more than just a feature of our childhood because it plays a vital role in adult consciousness and is most active when we begin to learn something new. To put it as simply and straightforwardly as possible, we begin to learn something new with a story in mind. (McEwan & Egan, 1995, p. xi)

The narrative turn in contemporary life opens up the space for art education practitioners to invent 'both/and' learning engagements around artmaking practices that are beautifully crafted and/or serve to communicate and/or work as a catalyst for social renewal; opens the space for art educators to be teachers of the 'arts' in plurality and/or artists and/or researchers; opens the space for art education to take place on sites in schools and/or museums and/or community centers and/or in the margins of student notebooks when there are no teachers around; opens up the space for teaching artists to collaborate with art teachers and folklorists and classroom teachers in the same scheduling block, and for after-school arts instructors to share the art room with the regular school day art teacher; and opens the space for college and university art education faculty to partner with interdisciplinary collaborators in the social and applied sciences, in business and entrepreneurship, in architecture, design, and human ecology.

So, researchers, tell your stories. Teachers, reflect on your stories. Negotiate the narratives of artists and arts learners as "ongoing, if complicated conversation" (Pinar, 2004, p. 188).

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Figure 3. Tal's bricolaged work of identity, assembled in a handmade bookshelf.

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ENDNOTES

1 Based on the writings of Professor of English Language and Literature, J. R. R. Tolkein. See in particular: Tolkein, J. R. R. (1954). *The two towers: Being the second part of the Lord of the rings.* London: George Allen & Unwin.

2 Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1976) suggests that there are multiple phenomena that, although not text, are analogous to text in that we treat them as the objects of our interpretation. He writes: "Interpretation … is an attempt to make clear, to make sense of an object of study. This object must, therefore, be a text, or a text-analogue, which in some way is confused, incomplete, cloudy, seemingly contradictory—in one way or another, unclear. The interpretation aims to bring to light an underlying coherence or sense (p. 153)."