

Cleaving to Artistry: A Path in Practitioner Research

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Resistance to Artistry

I begin this paper by admitting that I have never really liked art. I did not like it when I was a preschooler tearing up construction paper to create a mosaic of a clover, I did not like it when I was a middle schooler at the Honolulu Academy of Arts painting a still life portrait of a vase blushing with flowers, I did not like it when I participated in interpretive theatre as a freshman in high school, and there is a part of me that still does not like it very much even today. This is a curious phenomenon, because as much as I profess to disliking art, I have been drawn to it time after time on many occasions throughout my life. In high school, I could not help but to consume the works of celebrated poets and writers. I used to write short prosaic pieces in a journal that I have long since abandoned. I even signed up for several art history courses while I was studying abroad in Paris in college. I still remember how often I would return to *le Musée du Louvre* to explore different artifact, pictures, and sculptures. I would muse about the stories behind the pieces and expressive works that I could connect to, for no particular reason other than that they struck an emotional chord within my cognitive instrument.

So when I read that our first reading for the EdD program was one about artistry and the practitioner researcher, I began to wonder to myself if there was some significance to this particular pattern in my life. This very paper seems to be an autoethnographic exploration of the topic of artistry in my work as an educator and what it means to be that artist given my own history with the concept of art as a strained one. Since the first day of this program, every assignment washed through my life like a wall of a water overrunning an unsuspecting city. The assignments have turned many carefully constructed ideas upside down and caused many buried issues and unsettling emotions to flood to the surface. The grand challenge has been to examine the

aftermath of this turbulence, and reconstructing a deeper understanding of these internal struggles now that they have resurfaced. The search for authenticity seems to be a persistent tale of severing and rejoining, and I find myself again in the second stage of this cyclical process.

I wonder about the deeper implications of my initial resistance to art. I wonder if it is because I equate art to a form of expression, one that necessarily involves extracting elements of the self and, through some form of alchemy, producing a public display of what was once a private matter. I am not so sure that it is the production of art that troubles me as much as it is the digging. In his memoirs, Carl Jung mentions that, “Whenever there is a reaching down into innermost experience, into the nucleus of the personality, most people are overcome by fright, and many run away” (Jung 1989, 141). I am starting to consider that I have been simply running for many years from the exploration of my own self. In my paper *Mo’oku’auhau Reflection #2* (Lin 2017), I described in greater detail the extent to which I felt like I was experiencing my world through a thick glass rather than as an active participant. It was like staring at the glaciers through the windows of a cruise boat and not being able to feel the awakening frosty air. It may be that this is a consequence of trying to escape from the stories of my identity rather than embracing and taking artistic ownership over them.

Art, Paradox, and Leadership

In his memoirs, Carl Jung (1989) makes the case for the importance of continuous personal development, particularly along interspaces between spirituality and personal mythologies. “I have frequently seen people become neurotic when they content themselves with inadequate or wrong answers to the questions of life. [...] Such people are usually confined within too narrow a spiritual horizon” (Jung 1989, 140). In working through all

of the reflective assignments, I have grown to appreciate how much this course has challenged me to see how deeply our professional, personal, and research identities co-exist and also co-evolve. It seems clearer and clearer to me throughout each day of our course that qualitative research seems hopelessly intertwined with the elements of spirituality, emotion, and aesthetics. Research, I am discovering, is in a sense a crafted story or interpretation that is difficult to separate from the identity of researcher. In fact, we lose much of its richness by requiring such a separation. As I challenge myself to learn not just about research, but equally as much about the main participant in activity—my own identities and selves which I have been largely ignoring—I find that in order to grow into a more effective researcher I must also grow in my personal capacities as well, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually. This has prompted me to do quite a bit of deep work on developing and establishing my identity as an educator, a leader, a scholar, and a non-indigenous person living in Hawai‘i. While this work is nowhere near done, and heeding Jung’s words that this work should never quite conclude, I must admit that I feel no less “neurotic” and unstable at this time.

It appears to me that art is the continuous pursuit in the resolution of paradox. The most striking paradox is one of self-discovery—or perhaps *self-recovery*—that in order to become more whole and begin to reintegrate parts of our fragmented selves, we must first dissociate from the parts of ourselves we thought we knew best, perhaps to get a better perspective from a different angle. In the book *The Alchemist*, the protagonist Santiago journeys across the continent in search of treasure only to discover that what he was looking for was the abandoned church where his journey first began (Coelho 1998). This tale seems to suggest a timeless tale of severing and rejoining, of fractalization and reintegration, which ultimately leads to experiential wisdom. What seems to be a classic allegory about the hero’s journey serves also as a metaphor for how art can bring kaleidoscopic fragments of experiences full circle into a coherent web of integrated significance. The resolution of paradox through art embodies the birth of revelation. Meaning is conceived through the union of art and paradox, paradox as the rich womb of complexity and art as the instrumental catalyst for the development of interpretation. Art is making the invisible visible, it is the deliberate practice of peeling

away and unmasking subtle significance within complexity, it is the intentional sculpting and casting of a stone in pursuit of the statue within, it is the amplification of the gentle voice of truth that lives within the blank canvas. Art is the alchemical union between the internal instruments of the artist and external landscape of complexities of reality.

With this suggestive allegory and provocative theory in mind, I too begin my own journey of coming full circle in attempting to reconcile my paradoxical tensions with artistry. When I think about everything that I do and have done, it is all driven by beauty and artistry. I realized that I studied chemistry as an undergraduate because I found tremendous beauty in the deduction of empirical data into crystallized principles of how matter and energy behaved. I saw a spiritual aspect to this disciplined practice of divining of hidden principles that was deeply embedded in carefully collected data and how these principles had tremendous predictive prowess and were instrumental in deepening our understanding of our physical reality. I now see that qualitative research is not so different, except that a) the subject of study is no longer physical phenomena but more anthropological and personal, and b) essential understandings or meaning is not merely to be extracted, but that they are constructed rather than discovered. “Meaning does not inhere in the object, merely waiting for someone to come upon it. [...] Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty 1998, as cited in Merriam 2016, 24). It dawns upon me now that when I failed to continue my PhD in chemistry, my disenchantment was due at least in part to the lack of a sense of personal and academic artistry during my experience at the university. At first thought, I would say that I lost sight of the artistry in my subject of study, but upon deeper retrospection, I realize that I had lost sight of the artist within me, and perhaps even consciously renounced it.

I have never accepted the identity of an artist before, but that may be because I held so strongly to a myopic definition of the term. don Miguel Ruiz (2017) says that “[...] on this beautiful Planet Earth there are seven billion artists. They may not know that they are artists, but every single person creates a masterpiece of art which is the story of their life. They create the main characters of their story, they create many secondary characters, and they create all the rules in that story” (161). At the conclusion of the EdD 2017 summer program, I find that it behooves me to gather

a bit of courage and own up to the fact that there is artistry in the way we make sense of our world, in how we interpret the information we receive and what we choose to make of it through our actions and our understanding. I don't know if I quite understand it yet, but scholarship as a practitioner researcher and educational leader seems inseparably bound to a deeper quest for authenticity.

Research Practitioner

It is a Friday morning and I am preparing to deliver a professional development on science education to a group of academic coaches within our school complex area in the Central school district of Hawai'i. In this moment, I start to wonder about the impact that my own learning has had on my professional practices. I wonder about whether the things I have learned have truly made a difference, whether I have become a more disciplined researcher, whether a summer boot camp in qualitative research methods have suddenly equipped me with the knowledge and skills to begin the apprenticeship to research methodologies of phenomenology, ethnography, case studies, narrative analysis, and grounded theory. While I feel it is much too early to tell since I have not yet even begun my work as a researcher, a few critical shifts in the way that I now think about my work have become much more apparent to me after these summer courses.

Barriers

The first shift in my mindset is a new appreciation and sensitivity to barriers, that is, obstacles that stand in the way of a dream and impede the realization of a vision. I have started to pay more attention to the idea that all barriers exist for a reason, and often they exist for the very purpose of protecting something valuable and close to the hearts of the people who are closest to the issue. I know that I am sometimes inclined to equate leadership with vision and execution, but I sense that this will only lead down a path where I one day question the uni-dimensionality of my work. If we forsake emotions, spirituality, and artistry in our professional work, what will result from this compartmentalization of these aspects of our humanity and would the results be truly worth the cost? I wonder if this fractalization of the self has truly allowed us to serve our people and our communities as agents of change and social justice, or do we unconsciously aid hegemonic agendas that are already in motion. Are we the artists in the work that

we do, or are we the tools in someone else's masterpiece? Artistry is consciousness and reflexivity, and reflexivity is at times a non-attachment to our beliefs. It is one thing to use our beliefs as an instrument, and another thing to become an instrument to our beliefs, and we must be very cautious of our natural tendency for the latter.

Constructivism & Emotions

I now realize that even by writing out this reflection, I am in some ways constructing, in some ways altering, and in some ways erasing aspects of my lived experience in the service of drawing out significance and meaning that may potentially have greater personal as well as academic capital. This is the power of the artist within me, and within all people. Through the lens of critical theory, it is said that all interpretation is political (Merriam 2016, 10). This is a very sobering thought, but also a very stimulating one, because it calls upon us to recognize our influence and impact within education and also to recognize our responsibility to be conscious of and fight systemic injustices. Dr. Kaiwipuni Lipe asks us as leaders to "pay attention to feelings. Feelings can drive us forward, or they can drive us away. We must take the time understand them" (personal communication [lecture notes], July 14, 2017). Given the role that emotions can play in our academic identities and leadership, I have started to note particular reactions, emotions, and reflections in my journal as I observe my external and internal environments in my work and studies. As a practitioner researcher artist, emotions are tools for critical consciousness, social justice, and academic scholarship. As fuel for our ideas and momentum for change, they deserve our disciplined attention and reflection.

Awareness, Appreciation, & Ethnography

I have come to understand that as a researcher, I must start practicing a particular type of awareness, monitoring my impressions and perceptions and attuning them to the nuanced art of seeing the invisible in the visible, the remarkable in the unremarkable (Silverman 2007). At the end of my day, when I seem to have sufficient energy and space to engage in reflection as a researcher, I wonder about the interactions that I have had during the day, the things people have said, the ideas shared, the emotions that arose, and the physical settings where everything occurred. Informally, I begin to grasp at the hints of patterns that begin to emerge and what they might mean, how they

might be able to help us better understand our role and place, and how we can use that understanding to improve our work and better serve our people. I think there is a value in mining our impressions for starting points in research, especially if we are new to our profession as I currently am in my new position. For now, as I prepare to embark on the next leg of my journey, I have made a conscious commitment to honing my skills in observation and reflection, examining my surrounding and internal states with the sensitivity of an artist, the discipline of a researcher, and the wisdom of a practitioner. I am confident that what lies within the overlaps of these three spheres is a work of art, research, and service that is truly worth constructing.

In this paper, I have discussed how my struggle for an identity as an artist in research has led to personal insights about who I am and how I have evolved as a practitioner researcher. I suggest that personal meaning is generated through the process of resolving particular paradoxes that appear as conflicts, and that the resolution requires a form of artistry that utilizes attention to emotions, reflexivity, and consciousness as we better make sense of the complex aspects of our situation with the goal of better serving our people and our communities through education.

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