

Book Review

Seeing Red: A pedagogy of parallax

Reviewed by
Richard Siegesmund

For most of the twentieth century, the metaphor of education as industrial manufacturing drove our theory of schools and teaching (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Through this view, we expected research to provide precisely calibrated equipment and tools that facilitated the highest level of production (i.e., learning) for the lowest cost. In this utilitarian paradigm, human beings were a random collection of gemstones, each properly categorized and efficiently tooled through the proper sequential treatment that produced the greatest value (i.e., societal worth) with the most efficient use of resources.

Elliot Eisner breaks with the technocratic metaphor, as he describes research as the transformation of consciousness (1997). In his view, the task of preparing both educational researchers and classroom teachers centers on engagement with and understanding of heightened states of awareness. Thus, the scope and sequence of curriculum should focus on the ordering of transformational experiences. Research would help us conceptualize such teaching and the learning that occurs through it. However, Eisner expresses concern that technocratic research methodologies are ill equipped to provide insight into these curricular issues. To remedy this problem, he suggests the creation of a new methodology founded in the arts (Eisner, 1991). This new approach is arts-based educational research.

Thus, arts-based research represents a paradigm shift in our expectations of research and is not just another arrow in the educational researchers' mixed-qualitative methods quiver. It abandons the conception of researcher as technocrat. In its place, it suggests that the researcher is a trained artistic professional who, as Tom Barone (2000) puts it, may play two games at once—storyteller and critic. The researcher is both a maker and the reflexive analyzer of one's own work. From that perspective, researchers both spin and elucidate metaphor. Both actions are necessary for a work of arts-based research. Just making art is not enough. Reflexivity transforms art into research. The degree to which reflexivity focuses on understanding transformations that occur in the process of learning is the degree to which we may call a work arts-based educational research.

Pauline Sameshima's *Seeing Red: A Pedagogy of Parallax* is a major new work of arts-based educational research that helps mark and expand this new terrain. Based on her dissertation, which received the 2007 *Arts-Based Educational Research Outstanding Dissertation Award* from the American Educational Research Association, *Seeing Red* has been published as a novel (or more accurately an epistolary bildungsroman¹) by Cambria Press. The novel is bracketed by a Foreword, where individual members of Sameshima's research committee weigh in on why her novel is research, and concludes with an Afterword, where Sameshima's heroine, Julia Quan, makes her case to her fictional committee as to why her writing is sustained, systematic, and reflexive inquiry.²

In between these brackets is a scandalous, if not salacious, story of a married doctoral student, Julia Quan, who is in the midst of a torrid love affair with a member of her doctoral committee. We never see or hear directly from this mentor. We do not know if this mentor is male or female. Julia simply calls her lover *Red*. The novel unfolds as a series of emails to Red. Thus, we

¹ An epistolary novel is a literary form that emerged in the 17th century of organizing a book through a series of letters or diary entries. The bildungsroman is an Enlightenment tradition that tells a coming-of-age story, frequently with the protagonist struggling against conventional society.

² Whereas reflective inquiry examines both the objective and subjective conditions of experience, reflexive inquiry critically questions the contexts in which reflective experience occurs. Thus, reflexive thinking opens multiple layers of reflective inquiry. For example, through Feminist, Lacanian, or Foucauldian analysis, new and multiple ways to framing a single experience emerge. Reflexive inquiry calls for a comparative analysis of these multiple layers of vision (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000).

only hear Julia's side of the story. The reader, who can only form judgments from this single perspective, might begin to suspect that Julia's body is responding more to what is happening in her mind, than to any material physical contact that has occurred between professor and student. While the relationship—to this point—may be Platonic, it appears to be reciprocal³.

What are we to make of this story? Is this a tale of academic taboo, the romancing of a student (married and with two small children) by her advisor? That would be a perfunctory interpretation. A more careful reading recognizes this as a journey upriver into the difficult heart of education where, at the most profound level, teaching and learning is an intimate bond forged by touching minds. This difficult cerebral crossing is risky business. It may generate physical and emotional reactions, even if there is no corporal contact. In these cases, solely intellectual connections may convey an intensity that refutes the conception of the mind as disconnected from bodily sensation. In this way, *Seeing Red* becomes a meditation on curriculum.

Through reflexive practice, Sameshima is attempting to open a discussion on the teaching of teachers, who in turn are responsible to their students for opening pathways of knowledge. It is a story of how we teach to change lives—and how intensely emotional, spiritual, and reflexive (three dimensions of thinking) such transformations can be. It is also a story of the waters we might expect to navigate when the lives we touch begin to change.

This is the kind of curriculum described by Eisner (2002) as the process of learning to recreate ourselves. Julia believes that the most profound role she can have as a teacher is to give her students the tools to reinvent themselves. To do this, in her doctoral program, she must find the tools to reinvent herself—to model the change she hopes her students can take for their own. Julia sees the arts as an important, if not critical, part of her own transformation. She uses her own visual art, dance, and poetry as markers for her felt somatic knowledge that allows her to communicate before language comes to her, recognizing that, in some cases, formal sequential expression through words never comes. Her art, dance, and poetry are a means of stalking—not explaining—herself. She infuses the arts into all aspects of her instruction to allow her students these same opportunities. In her own work, and the work of her students, Julia is seeking heightened awareness of consciousness.

³ Sameshima currently has an open call inviting her readers to write the letters from Red that provoked Julia's reactions. She intends to compile these letters into a second book.

This may appear to be a disjunctive approach to our contemporary concerns for thinking about the educational purpose of art. *Seeing Red* does not discuss disciplined-based or visual culture curriculum. There is no discussion of national or state fine arts standards or *No Child Left Behind* mandates. There is no advocacy for the arts improving language arts skills or math scores on standardized tests. However, as Sameshima's fine-line ink drawings of the wild flowers of the Pacific Northwest indicate, this is a book about learning to pay attention, about learning to see, and about seeing as a supreme cognitive achievement. In this sense, the themes of the book go back to Pestalozzi (Pestalozzi, 1801/1977) and are at the heart of art education as an academic discipline.

To weave emotion, spirit, and reflexivity together to better grasp a process of coming to know is exactly the kind of transformation of consciousness that Eisner claims as a strength of arts-based educational research. It is a subject that traditional technocratic research methods are ill prepared to approach. *Seeing Red* demonstrates how arts-based methodology can open new territory to issues of education that are widely acknowledged as present but seldom addressed.

This does not mean that arts-based methods are epistemologically exclusionary. While news arts-based methods have opened conversations, they do not preclude the possibility of conducting other—perhaps more technocratic—forms of research in the future. The new transformational paradigm can repurpose some research methods from the industrial paradigm. It is a question of finding the right tool for the job and using the tools in an appropriate sequence. However, without the permissions and affordances of arts-based research—particularly the ability to present these lives as fiction, and thereby side step any number of problematic issues that could arise through official human subject approvals—it is likely this story of the passionate metaphoric powers of the arts could not be told. And, if this story were not told, then our conceptions of teaching and learning are the less.

Nevertheless, why should we accept this novel as educational research? Weaving a beautiful, or even a provocative, tapestry may be sufficient to claim the object as a work of art. It may be enough if a work of art is entertaining, unsettling, celebratory, or diverting. However, this is insufficient, in and of itself, for claiming art as research. Following Eisner's definition of research

as transformation, an artwork must set forth the alteration of consciousness. It must provide a *currere*, Latin for the course to be run. That is, a curriculum (Pinar & Grumet, 1976).

Furthermore, to claim the object is a work of educational research requires that the researcher arrange metaphors, symbols, and relationships of qualities—the tools of instruction and guidance, or the *pedagogy*—that enable us to see the world in new feelingful and meaningful ways.

There are no bright lines that demark art, visual inquiry, and arts-based educational research. While many artists routinely engage in research (Sullivan, 2005; Barrett, 2008), it is not a necessary requirement for an artist to describe her or his work as research. For example, the performances of Suzanne Lacy can readily be categorized as arts-based educational research (Garoian, 1999). A work like Lacy's "The Roof is on Fire" is research as it uses aesthetic devices to shape a new dialogue on urban youth culture. It is educational as it has direct implications for how we conceptualize life in schools. One does not have to question the intent with which it was made. The measure is in the work itself and its capacity to help us re-vision experience. As Tom Barone (2000) observes, the most influential arts-based educational researcher of the 19th century was Charles Dickens.

To render a judgment on the validity of a work of arts-based educational research it is appropriate to ask how new metaphors "make sense" of experience. Do these new metaphors help us integrate previously minimized, denied, or unseen aspects of our lives? Can the insights gained be broadly shared? May others benefit? Or, is it an egotistical exercise that, while entertaining, is irrelevant to the lives of others? These questions do not have neat and tidy answers. They open a circle of discussion and a collective probing of the significance of the work. Eisner (1991) calls this process of dialogic examination *consensual validation*.

In response to these conditions of validity, from my standpoint and in a way that I have never before experienced in the academic literature, *Seeing Red* captures the imaginative free-fall that can occur in doctoral study. Julia is in a state of reconstruction. She discovers that doctoral work, at a profound level, is learning how to live in a perpetual state of reconstruction. It is not just a right-of-passage—an entry way into a guild—but a reordering of how she will live from this moment on. One of her realizations is that her advisor

and lover Red is not so much a guide (i.e., a teacher) in this process, but a fellow traveler also engaged in continuous self-creation. Sameshima movingly renders states of exhilaration, emotional exhaustion, and fear of losing a previous world with which Julia is struggling to maintain connection.

Yet, why are such emotional renderings important to research? Hannah Arendt (1968) observed that aesthetics is a means of creating communities of caring by speaking to what is emotionally most dear to us. By confronting tensions in how we make meaning and synthesize the experiences of our lives in a visceral, embodied way, communication can lead to empathetic understanding that is the basis of community. Such communities are not rule-governed—where politically correct dictates control behavior—but are self-regulated through felt concern for others. To begin this process, educational research must address the spirit and emotion of learning. Arts-based educational research can contribute to building such communities. In this sense, arts-based educational research reclaims one of the original—and arguably most significant—purposes of the field of aesthetics, to build deeply caring communities (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008).

The precise perceptions of felt relationships with exquisite attention to nuance often define the highest levels of performance in many professions. Not the least of these is teaching. Expert teachers know how to purposely navigate through felt reactions of students to foster learning. *Seeing Red* is a bold attempt to speak to how significant the stakes and responsibilities are in this effort. Such research can provide metaphoric understanding that helps us understand how excellent teaching engages students in the structures of deep learning. The outcome of such learning is personal agency: autonomous individuals who have the capacity to imaginatively shape and recreate their lives through their own stories.

References

- Alvesson, M., & Sköldbberg, K. (2000). *Reflexive methodology: New vistas for qualitative research*. London; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Arendt, H. (1968). *Between past and future: Eight exercises in political thought*. New York: Viking Press.
- Barone, T. (2000). *Aesthetics, politics, and educational inquiry: Essays and examples*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Barrett, T. M. (2008). *Why is that art? Aesthetics and criticism of contemporary art*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cahnmann-Taylor, M., & Siegesmund, R. (Eds.). (2008). *Arts-based research in education: Foundations for practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Eisner, E. W. (1991). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice*. New York: Macmillan.
- Eisner, E. W. (1997). The promise and perils of alternative forms of data representation. *Educational Researcher*, 26 (6), 4-10.
- Eisner, E. W. (2002). *The arts and the creation of mind*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Garoian, C. R. (1999). *Performing pedagogy: Toward an art of politics*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Pestalozzi, J. H. (1977). How Gertrude teaches her children. In D. N. Robinson (Ed.), *Significant contributions to the history of psychology 1750--1920, Series B psychometrics and educational psychology, Vol. II, J. H. Pestalozzi* (pp. 1-391). (Original work published 1801)
- Pinar, W. & Grumet, M. R. (1976). *Toward a poor curriculum*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Sullivan, G. (2005). *Art practice as research: Inquiry in the visual arts*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Tyack, D. B. & Hansot, E. (1982). *Managers of virtue: Public school leadership in America, 1820-1980*. New York: Basic Books.

2009 Dissertation Award

Sponsored by the Arts and Learning Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association

The Dissertation Award Committee of the Arts and Learning SIG is pleased to announce the winner of the 2009 Dissertation Award.

The mind in motion: An examination of children's cognition within the creative process in dance

Dr. Miriam Giguere
Department of Performing Arts, Drexel University

The award is presented annually to the scholar whose work is of interest to Arts and Learning SIG members, and in the opinion of the panel of judges, bears the hallmarks of integrity, quality, depth of knowledge, style, and significance to the field. This year's competition was open to all doctoral students whose thesis had been completed in the three years prior to the annual meeting. Presentation of the awards will be made at the Arts and Learning Special Interest Group Business meeting in San Diego.

2010 Dissertation Award

Sponsored by the Arts and Learning
Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association

The Dissertation Award Committee of the Arts and Learning SIG invites entries for the Dissertation Award. A paper, based on the author's recently completed dissertation, should be submitted. The award will be presented at the business meeting of Arts and Learning SIG at the Annual Meeting of AERA. The award will include publication of the paper in the Arts and Learning Journal.