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Research in New Keys

Shaun McNiff

An Introduction to the Ideas and Methods of Arts-Based Research

The guest editors dedicate their work in this issue to the legacy of Susanne K. Langer (1895-1985), a Cambridge neighbor of Lesley University and a major contributor to the tradition of arts-based inquiry

The idea of arts-based research is proving to hold great appeal to scholars committed to using the fine arts in systematic ways to understand human experience and to explore new applications of the creative process to areas outside the arts. It is intriguing to envision how artistic inquiry, a process that researchers have for so long tried to explain according to non-arts disciplines, may begin to influence the larger ecology of knowledge and professional practice. But before the arts can realize their potential within this cross-fertilization of knowledge, we must define and establish their unique ways of researching experience.

Advancing the Vision of Susanne K. Langer

Arts-based research builds upon an intellectual tradition in which Susanne K. Langer merits special recognition. Her *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (1951) is in my opinion the book that lays the most convincing conceptual foundations for our efforts to further the role of the arts in research. Langer's influence can be attributed to the articulation of one essential idea, that all forms of symbolic transformation are not only basic human needs but they are also fundamental and intelligent modes of conception with each characterized by its unique framework of symbols that cannot be reduced to another system.

Well before the original 1942 publication of *Philosophy in a New Key*, Friedrich Nietzsche and other distinguished scholars such as the classicist Jane Harrison, Carl Jung in depth psychology, and John Dewey in education, declared that knowing is a transformative process that transcends the limits of analytic language. Langer's influence resulted from the way she made her arguments within the systematic traditions of philosophy, the arts, and social science at a time when people began to feel empowered to think about all aspects of experience in new ways.

Speaking directly and persuasively to scholars, Susanne Langer championed a more expansive vision of mind. She documented how even studies of knowledge that "regarded mental life as greater than discursive reason" and that made a place at the

table for “insight” and “intuition,” ultimately associated these faculties with “unreason” and “incommunicable” feelings outside the realm of abstract thought (1951, p. 85). Within the philosophical tradition of epistemology, Langer made a forceful case for sensory knowing, perceptual thinking, and the way in which the arts communicate concepts. Like Rudolf Arnheim, who essentially created the psychology of art during the same period within American higher education (1954, 1971), Langer revealed the serious and limiting bias conveyed by the belief that discursive reason was the only road to knowledge.

The significant growth of fields such as the arts in therapy and education has been based upon Langer’s position that people need to express them and transform experience in ways that transcend linear speech and texts. But when it comes to presenting the outcomes of this work and researching artistic expression, there has been a tendency to fall back upon conventional discursive ways of knowing and communicating with others. It is almost as if we do not trust the arts in the area of serious intellectual inquiry and revert to the intellectual assumptions criticized by Susanne Langer, believing that only discursive disciplines such as the social sciences can convey real knowledge. The pattern of reducing artistic expressions to these seemingly more acceptable systems continues today.

As professionals working in the domain of artistic symbols, we have been too quick to explain ourselves within psychological paradigms and research models that do not resonate with our essential nature. When we do not trust and respect the intellectual and descriptive power of our own symbols, how can we expect this from others? Langer describes how “the triumph of empiricism in science is jeopardized by the surprising truth that our sense-data are primarily symbols” (p. 29). It is no wonder that there is confusion about research within the arts-based professions like the creative arts therapies where the attempt to justify ourselves according to social science research methods involves a process of translation from the arts to other symbolic disciplines, far removed from artistic expressions.

It is time to take the more creative phase of action suggested by Susanne Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key*. Strongly influenced by music, Langer metaphorically proposes that rather than laboring tediously in the same key, we can play our instruments of inquiry in more imaginative, complex, and intelligent ways. The mind transforms itself and grows more intelligent when new connections are made amongst disciplines and when we exercise faculties other than the perfunctory ones that have held too much sway over our definitions of knowledge. This expanded vision of research embraces mathematics, language, and science, but it also recognizes that the world of symbols is large and contains many other things.

What We Can and Cannot Describe

When Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “What you do drowns out what you are saying,” he gave one of the clearest affirmations for what we are attempting to achieve within arts-based research where we focus on what people do and how it influences others. But please do not interpret what I am saying as a dismissal of the role of language, the very medium that I am using here to advance arts-based research. As we formulate new methods of inquiry through the arts, analytic language is a fundamental and necessary partner. And I want to emphasize how within the realm of language and verbal expression, we also have poetry, literature, and drama, all of which are essential arts-based modes of inquiry. The issue for me is one of recognizing the limits of description and what can be translated from one realm of experience to another. Analytic language has the same limitations when it tries to describe the emotion aroused by a poem as when it responds to a dance. But at the same time the insightful use of language can further our appreciation of these expressions.

From my personal work with arts-based research in over three decades of studio groups exploring how art heals, I have learned that language is not only an essential contributor to the process but it has been the connecting link to people outside the immediate studio environment. Although participants in my studios often say that their deepest experiences in this milieu “cannot be described in words,” I nevertheless continue to do my best to describe various aspects of the work to others and I find that this information supports the overall enterprise. The words I use are impressions of impressions that hopefully generate further impressions and expressions in others. Although verbal descriptions of experience have limitations, it is clear that we need to talk and write about what we do in our arts-based inquiries. I might be proven wrong someday by a new generation of researchers who conduct studies and record outcomes via symbolic transformations that lie completely outside the scope of discursive language and I welcome these explorations.

A realistic appreciation of language as a collaborator in arts-based research is enhanced by acknowledging what it cannot do. Langer described how an artistic symbol is “untranslatable” with its meaning being “bound to the particular form which it has taken” and inexplicable to “any interpretation” (p. 220). She goes on to describe how art’s “worst enemy...is literal judgment” (p. 223).

In my experience, the way in which people have labeled images and reduced them to simplistic psychological concepts has resulted in the equally one-sided declaration that all interpretation is wrong. I prefer to re-visit the process of interpretation as nothing other than our most fundamental way of understanding experience that by necessity makes use of all of our faculties. The interpretive process integrates all of the senses and it is our most basic mode of orientation in the world. The problem

Langer describes results from absolute and literal judgments that do not appreciate that knowing is a process of constructive and creative interpretation of experience.

The realization that a musical performance can only be grasped within its particular sphere of expression leads to the question of how language might assist this understanding without misconstruing and damaging the core experience. Words draw attention to particular aspects of the music, make connections to similar works and patterns in other spheres of expression, identify unique qualities, and so forth. The key to the intelligent use of language in the interpretation of art and other experiences is sensitivity to the interplay amongst symbol systems and the realization that one domain can never be completely contained by another. When conducting research through other forms of artistic expression, language enables us to have the thoroughly human dialogue about what we experience while honoring what cannot be expressed in words. We also appreciate how artistic expressions stand on their own and we return again and again to them, just as we do with another person, for new conversations realizing that meaning will never be fixed or exhausted.

The creative imagination can be defined as a realm where all of the faculties work together and where no one mode is superior to another. Language furthers the integration of expressive modalities and in so doing generates new ideas and insights that emerge from the process of interaction. Arts-based research can also contribute to enhancing the language we use to describe experience. As James Hillman (1978) emphasizes, psychology has relied too much on unimaginative and lifeless academic language. In addition to affirming the place of language in our work, we can strive to use it more creatively, to take a leadership role in improving the language used to communicate the process and outcomes of research.

Origins of this Project

I am pleased and surprised by the positive way in which my 1998 book *Art-based Research* has been received. I ventured into unexplored territory in this book and was prepared to receive little response or even ridicule by those who consider themselves the guardians of traditional research methods. I had the same feeling in 1992 with the publication of *Art as Medicine: Creating a Therapy of the Imagination* where I used my own paintings as a way of exploring, understanding, documenting, and communicating the process of imaginal dialogue. The response to both books and to Lenore Wadsworth Hervey's *Artistic Inquiry in Dance/Movement Therapy* (2000) indicates a desire for information about how the arts can be used as ways of researching experience.

Readers of *Art-based Research* have described the usefulness of the section listing numerous suggestions and samples of possible research projects--comparative

assessments of how we feel after working with different media; whether the scale of an artwork generates distinct energetic reactions in the artist and/or a person who perceives the work; the extent to which structural and expressive qualities of images generate corresponding effects upon the people who interact with them; how the quality of responses to artworks determines their expressive impact; comparative analyses of how responding to images through different sense modalities enhances appreciation and understanding; and so forth. Therefore, when Bill Stokes, Editor of *The Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism and Practice*, invited me to be a guest editor for an issue of the Journal, I decided that there was a need for samples of research projects initiated by a larger circle of people, and we conceived of an issue providing brief vignettes of studies that have already been conducted and others that might be carried out in the future.

With the goal of expanding my own perspective on this subject, I asked Phillip Speiser to serve as co-editor and to take an active role in planning the issue and selecting authors. Phillip immediately suggested changing the term “art-based research” to “arts-based research.” Although I have always approached “art” as a phenomenon that includes all of the arts, in the tradition of the German word, *Kunst*, I welcomed Phillip’s shift in terminology realizing that it reflects our commitment to all of the arts. We asked the authors to create examples of projects, and their contributions enlarge the community of arts-based research by presenting an exciting spectrum of research methods and innovative literary styles for presenting outcomes. These varied and thoroughly innovative materials affirm that we have only made the first scratches into this rich vein of inquiry, suggesting that the discipline of arts-based research, like art itself, will spiral into many new phases of creation as increasing numbers of people participate.

"I thank the authors for their contributions and I am especially pleased that our group includes two journal editors who have supported the first phases of growth in arts-based research, Robert Landy, past Editor in Chief of *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, and Stephen Levine, Editor of *Poiesis: A Journal of the Arts and Communication*, who have joined together with Gene Diaz, Bethe Hagens, Suzanne Hanser, Lenore Wadsworth Hervey, Lynn Kapitan, Linda Lack, Vivien Marcow Speiser, Martin Perdoux, Zayda Sierra, Susan Spaniol, Nancy Toncy, Phillip Speiser, and me to create this issue. My doctoral advisee, Susan Fusco, assisted me in editing and organizing the manuscripts and her consultation is greatly appreciated and we are all indebted to Leonardo March for his work in presenting the essays on the Internet. Finally, I extend a special thanks to Bill Stokes for honoring us all with the opportunity to create the last issue of his distinguished tenure as Founding Editor of *The Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism and Practice*. And thanks to the new Editors, Gene Diaz and Danielle Georges, together with best wishes for the work ahead."

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