

# Arts-Based Research: Systems AND Strategies

**S**cience has been defined as “a dynamic process of experimentation and observation that produces an interconnected set of principles, which in turn generates further experimentation and observation and refinement” (Hoy, 2010, p. 4, emphasis in original).

Arts practices are no less dynamic, experimental, and deeply observed; they are organizing systems for the most human information of all—data impressed with social imperatives and emotional meaning. The idea that scientific knowledge is *best* is a powerful story, but science is only one story of many that may be told about how humans have historically created and recorded new knowledge about the world we experience and the elements and relationships that comprise it (Rolling, 2013). Human beings are immersed in and sustained by systems. In her remarkable book *Thinking in Systems*, Donella H. Meadows (2008) defines a system as a “set of elements or parts that is coherently organized and interconnected in a pattern or structure” that becomes more than the sum of its parts and “produces a characteristic set of behaviors” classified as its “function” or “purpose” (p. 188). Meadows eloquently describes how many kinds of systems surround us everyday and how simply and elegantly they behave:

A school is a system. So is a city, and a factory, and a corporation, and a national economy... A tree is a system, and a forest is a larger system that encompasses subsystems of trees and animals. The earth is a system... so is a galaxy. Systems can be embedded in systems, which are embedded in yet other systems... When a living creature dies, it loses its “system-ness.” The multiple interrelations that held it together no longer function, and it dissipates... Systems can change, adapt, respond to events, seek goals, mend injuries, and attend to their own survival in lifelike ways, although they may contain or consist of nonliving things. Systems can be self-organizing, and often are self-repairing over at least some range of disruptions. They are resilient, and many of them are evolutionary. Out of one system other completely new, never-before-imagined systems can arise. (Meadows, 2008, pp. 11–12)

Why does art matter? Art matters because the processes and products of arts-based systems for making our socially agreed meanings, acquired knowledge, and cultural values visible and transferable surround us. Across time and geography, our varying approaches for arts and design practice constitute a distinct

system of “adaptive, dynamic, goal-seeking, self-preserving, and sometimes evolutionary” activities (Meadows, 2008, p. 12), creative endeavors perpetuating the humanity of our species. Every moment spent advancing ourselves through creative activities, from the visual to the architectural to the performative, is time not spent advancing ourselves through scientific endeavors; we would not do so if both the arts and sciences were not proven to be equally life-sustaining and necessary.

Hence, I claim the arts to be much more than a universal language for self-expression or a means of crafting beautiful objects and forms with technical precision. Looking deeper, the arts are also a sociobiological imperative through which to aggregate, accommodate, and assimilate ways of thinking not our own, while also disseminating the best of our own resources to others. Governed by principles, values, laws, and practices that differ from the sciences, the arts also allow a wholly different character of investigation and interpretation of the human experience.

Ultimately, the purpose of research is to illuminate and activate the systems that sustain you—those evident and those still hidden—calibrating your position and agency in the present world as well as your fulcrum points for leveraging and unpacking prior knowledge into future possibilities... and vice versa. There are at least three working paradigms for asking meaningful questions about the systems that sustain us: the **qualitative** research paradigm, richly descriptive of qualities of systems as they relate to each other and we relate to them, inducting “differences in kind” (Sullivan, 2010, p. 58); the **quantitative** research paradigm that classifies and measures only the known or observable indices of systems and their interrelated elements, deducting “differences in degree” (Sullivan, 2010, p. 58); and the **arts-based** research paradigm abducting from lived experiences and contextual relationships what I would term as “differences in interpretation” and thereby privileging improvisational *creative activity*—the most apt extrapolation of the term “creativity” that I can think of.

A first grader at a local student teaching placement was asked to interpret an inkstain, blown across a white sheet of paper through a straw, as a living creature. After adding additional marks to the page, the ink stain was named a Big Nose Monster. Photo by James Haywood Rolling Jr.



Of course, at the crux of all our arts-based meaning-making activity are acts of interpretation. According to art educator Michael Parsons, all cognition is interpretation. Parsons (1992) states:

Interpretation is mental activity that results in understanding. It may be conscious or unconscious activity. It may be laboriously self-aware, or intuitive and taken for granted... interpretation is what we do when we try to understand something, to grasp its significance. (p. 76)

Following from this, all re-cognition is re-interpretation—or in other words, “we must identify and interpret before we can perceive and recognize” (Parsons, 1992, p. 77). When art critic and philosopher Arthur C. Danto (1986) says that he thinks of acts of interpretation “as functions that transform material objects into works of art” (p. 39), he is also arguing that without interpretation, there would be no works of art—only materials, objects, and marks on paper. In an arts-based research paradigm, just as a system for interpretation may constitute a work of art, it likewise constitutes a strategy for mediating an initial understanding of an encounter or experience with a natural material, human subject, event or phenomenon.

In this May 2016 issue of *Art Education*, three of our assembled authors—**Jamia Weir**, **Julia Marshall**, and **Chris Grodoski**—each in their own way develop arts-based pedagogical systems for the classroom. Three other articles, written by **Rebecca Shipe**, **Maureen Reilly Lorimer**, and co-authors **Philip Norman Robbins** and **Shaunna Smith**, detail arts-based strategies for expanding the effectiveness and scope of arts and design instruction. Finally, in an instructional resource dedicated to the memory of their late colleague Tom Jungerberg, **Anna Smith**, **Colleen Borsh**, and **Lynda Wilbur** examine the jazz-influenced work of artist Melvin Edwards in his explorations of the cultural turmoil of the 20th century using the medium of welded steel.

Uniquely, the arts and design practices serve as a means to interpret the things that matter the most to us as individuals and local communities. This ability to re-search and document all that we know is what makes art-based research *research*, rather than just artisanship, or the mere application of prior accumulated knowledge. These interpretations—whether wrought from and melded into handmade and manufactured forms, delivered as cultural expressions, or demanded as transformational social critiques—can also be viewed as richly complex heterarchies and networks of data. Arts-based methodologies constitute some of the most dynamic strategies at our disposal for the conservation, organization, and renewal of data that most effectively informs human beings of who we are, where we come from, what our purpose is, and where we may be going (Rolling, 2008). ■

—James Haywood Rolling Jr., Editor

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