

# Tapping into creativity

## a/r/tography as a research methodology underpinning teacher education

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### ABSTRACT

Educational research within teacher education has become a must, where there is emphasis on 'Teacher as Researcher', with Action Research as the methodology. Yet, many teachers may not have embarked on any form of research prior to educational programmes designed to enhance their pedagogy and impact their practice. This article introduces the concept of **a/r/tography**, a methodology in use in art-based education, but one that may also be deployed as a practice-oriented, Action Research-based methodology within teacher education. Also, the approach need not be confined to dissertations, but could underpin all programme curriculum and pedagogy designed for the education of teachers.

### KEYWORDS

TEACHER EDUCATION

A/R/TOGRAPHY

CREATIVITY

RESEARCH

HYBRID

METHODOLOGY

PEDAGOGY.

### INTRODUCTION

Teacher education has a long tradition of being recognised as an area of study (Evans 2002: 124). A multitude of research, policy initiatives, books, journals and key experts in the field has emerged. There are also entire degree courses and modules dedicated to the education of teachers, beyond just initial teacher training, all with the ideology of improving the profession, and, in turn, the schools the teachers serve – a debate in itself. The Master's in Education at the University of East London is one such degree programme, designed to encourage teachers to reflect on their practice, and in turn, to have a direct impact on their approaches. It also aims for teachers to become more rounded and reflective practitioners (UEL 2018). Policy, theory

and research is explored, where analysis, critique and development of teaching through research is at the core. There is an emphasis on Teacher as Researcher, and Action Research as the methodology, with educational research integrated into the work of the teacher in schools (Hammersley 1993). This perspective views teachers as active participants in conducting research to enhance their working conditions, revise their curriculum and assist in professional development planning (Muirhead 2002). The programme of study ends with the submission of a dissertation: a document presenting the teacher's research and findings from their practice.

Yet, many teachers may not previously have embarked on research of this type. My own supervision of teachers' research has shown methodologies to be restricted to 'those that work', and those that help teachers keep a focus and structure against maintaining their full-time role in the classroom. I have observed teachers trying to grasp alien concepts, rather than working with methodologies that can home in on the 'golden thread' of their profession (in my opinion, at least) - creativity. Here I explore the concept of a/r/tography - a methodology from art-based education - proposing to use it as a hybridised, practice-oriented and Action Research-based methodology within teacher education. This, not just for dissertation or research purposes,

but as something that should underpin all programme curriculums and pedagogy designed for the education of teachers.

## A/R/TOGRAPHY AS METHODOLOGY

The theory of A/R/T was developed by Irwin and de Cosson, professors at the University of British Columbia, Canada, as research within arts education (Irwin & de Cosson 2004; Springgay et al. 2005, 2008). Research requires the building of knowledge, and Irwin (2004) reminds us of Aristotle's 'three kinds of "thought": knowing (theoria), doing (praxis) and making (poesis); the latter including poetry as well as other productive arts' (p.27), all of which constitute the epistemology of A/R/T, that should then be used in research. Springgay et al. (2008: 103) explain a/r/tography to be a methodology associated with living inquiry under the umbrella of practice-based research, as having multiple ways of being explored and discovered involving art (any art) and education. It requires working outside the conventional methodological boundaries, in order to present research that might impact upon, and extend our ideas about, education. A/r/tography, is similar to Carson & Sumara's (1997: xvii) understanding of Action Research, that of being a living practice, where one is completely caught up in what one knows and does. In this case, it is about education, teaching and learning, in the lived experiences of the day-to-day work of teachers and students and all the interactions they encounter. A/r/tography is advocated by Springgay, et al. (2005: 898) as something to be taken seriously in emerging fields within educational research, and understood as a methodology in its own right. - not just as an extension of Qualitative Research. There has been a progressive development from how it was originally

conceived, as a mode of inquiry in arts-based research by artists, art teachers and art programmes, to being redefined by scholars as a potential future pathway into everything that constitutes education; an evolution of a/r/tographic theory and practice (Sinner 2017).

## A/R/TOGRAPHY AS A HYBRID METHODOLOGY

Action Research is often employed in teacher education programmes as a way of encouraging enquiry. Gouzouasis et al. (2013: 8) argued that a/r/tography offers a materiality, a physicality, and an embodied approach to learning that are not addressed by many teacher education researchers. Although rooted in the arts, it offers processes - ways of thinking and knowing- that would benefit teacher education.

The rapid evolution of technology in recent years has given rise to a wealth of new concepts, including the notion of 4.0 as the fourth revolution, which makes it more vital to empower 21st-Century educational researchers to expand the form, content and process of what constitutes 'research'. Gouzouasis et al. (2013) offer a/r/tography as a hybrid form of research methodology along with Action Research that embraces both art and education as forms of inquiry. The term 'hybrid methodology' is simply a combination or mixing of more than one methodology, approach or conceptual framework, in research. The term 'triangulation' or 'mixed methodology' – quantitative and qualitative - is commonly used in its place. The main advantage of hybridising with methodologies from other disciplines is the interdisciplinarity itself, which can yield richer data and enable the researcher to layer their experience and enhance their understanding (Grant et al. 2015). This

produces better insights and more in-depth learning for the teacher researcher and helps them get as close as possible to reality.

## WHAT IS A/R/TOGRAPHY?

A/r/tography as a term is developed purposefully to include the '/'. The '/' is used to present an equality and interplay between the three identities that place the positionality of the teacher in research – artist/researcher/teacher. Here, teachers anticipate aesthetic inquiry as they move from one role to another, learning through the uniqueness of each role in interaction with the research they undertake in their classrooms. It is where they bridge the gap of theory, practice and creation through:

1. Theoria – knowing, researching, theory;
2. Praxis – doing, learning, teaching; and
3. Poesis – making/creating.

Alongside this is the notion of 'graphy' which makes associations between imagery and text, aligning art alongside the narrative as a joint initiative – the coming together of art and graphy, or image and word (Springgay et al. 2005: 900). These are not separate or discrete from one another, but rather working together to create new understandings (Leggo et al. 2011: 240), an interconnection, an embodiment of image and word. It requires employing visual and textual forms of research, where the term 'conceptual practices' is used to describe the possibilities, characteristics and affordances of a/r/tography in order to escape the traditional notions of methods. This means focusing on the processes of constructing new knowledge, and closer examination of practices inherent to the teacher's work, rather than following the specific criteria of an established research methodology.

## TEACHERS AS A/R/TOGRAPHERS

Teachers do not teach art to students for them to become artists. It is the experience which is essential to the continuum process of *becoming* in any profession (Vasconcelos 2015). For this reason, a teacher does not have to be an artist to undertake a/r/tography in their research and learning. The term can easily provide a notion that art is done by 'artists', or 'art teachers', and traditionally it has been. However, it can be a mode of research available to us all. According to Eisner (2003: 373), artistry 'is not limited to the fine arts, but to everything made well'. Teachers have great ideas, creative approaches, processes, experiences, and pedagogies, that they use in their day-to-day work, and therefore the artist in a/r/tography is broadly defined, where one attends to the process of creativity and to the means through which one inquires into an educational phenomenon through any artistic, creative and aesthetic means (Springgay et al. 2005). Teachers are asked to become educational researchers, and this dual role provides the lens through which they may frame their research and practice. The lens of creativity, if nurtured and reinforced throughout teacher education programmes, allows for enriched dialogue between theory and practice, and the continuing construction of being and becoming teacher/artist/researcher. It is the experience of the role in the process of teaching and learning that is essential, in which, as Dewey (1934: 84) proposed, that creativity promotes 'variability, initiative, innovation, departure from routine, experimentation, and the manifestation of genuine *nisus* in things'.

Gouzouasis et al.'s (2013) research into teacher education further adds to this understanding. Student teachers explored pedagogy through a/r/tography, by actively being involved, throughout the programme of study, in arts-based research workshops, the development of an art exhibition, learning to infuse

creative pedagogies across the curriculum in their schools, and then using this experience and tools in their research dissertations. Although, the cohort was of student teachers in arts, the process of the research concluded that teachers who embraced a/r/tography – as a mode of artistic [creative] expression, and as reflective–reflexive inquiry – experienced the most success during assessment, during practice and well into their teaching careers. They are more open to change and professional growth. Moreover, being and becoming was a strong influence in the identities of those individuals as teachers. The researchers suggested a substantial, artistic, creative shift in the conceptualisation and practice of the teacher's education, where they can engage in inquiry through a/r/tography that uses their artistic [creativity] and pedagogical sensibilities and capabilities in ongoing, disciplined, community-engaged, dialogic forms of research (p. 2). Irwin (2013) highlights that a/r/tography is not only about research, but a creative practice, and a performative pedagogy of the teacher. Reason & Marshall (1987: 112) further stated that the motivation to do research is personal and often expresses a need for personal development, change and learning. At the same time, it is a cooperative endeavour which enables a community of people to make sense of, and act effectively in, their world. A/r/tography allows for such expression of a teacher's development in the classroom, where it adds to the diversity and complexity inherent in understanding about education and pedagogy (Gouzouasis 2011).

## A/R/TOGRAPHY AN EXAMPLE: MEMORY BOXES FOCUS GROUP METHOD

*Annalee is a teacher in a Key Stage 1 classroom. She has been teaching for four years, and her school has invested in her undertaking an MA in Education. Annalee questions the notion of 'professionalism' and sees teaching as a*

*lived experience, with the personal lives of teachers interwoven into the day-to-day unfolding of their work. For this reason, Annalee decided to explore how teachers' personal lives manifest themselves in their professional lives. She did not want to have a focus group just for dialogue and discussion but wanted the participants to really connect with the research. Annalee asked the teachers in Key Stage 1 to create a memory box. This box should be a shoebox or equivalent, decorated how the teacher wanted, and include three items that represent something about them. These items were then shared in a focus group. The boxes were decorated with many crafts, often about them: for example, a butterfly because they had liked them since childhood and it gave them a sense of freedom. Some memory boxes were playful in that they were interactive and engaging. Types of item in the box included those that defined a bond with someone in their lives, to items that represented a hobby, to emotional objects that were a significant part of their being and becoming. Each discussion unfolded as a narrative around objects that were being handled, with stories being told of their significance.*

Reilly (1962: 87) has shown how the use of our hands, mind and will can creatively deploy our thinking, feelings, purposes and even health. Annalee's use of memory boxes was a conceptual practice as part of a/r/tography, with narrative being the result. Narrative is acknowledged as a powerful tool in the study of teachers and teacher education (eg Chan 2012); however, a/r/tography extended this traditional notion of narrative, into a broader spectrum of creative representation. This one aspect of her research turned into a visual inquiry, to help understand teachers' personal lives not just through words alone. And although the narratives and dialogues aided the understanding and meanings behind the items, the primary source of information was contained in the memory boxes themselves. Annalee found the manipulation of the rich 'data'

received much more relatable, tangible and workable where she was able to review the boxes and interpret the rich dialogues, looking for the themes that represent teacher lives in teaching. She was able to group the items, move them, re-group them to form understandings. Her data took the form of a journey map for each teacher, pinpointing key words, which were then used as images in the submission of a visual journal for assessment.

## A/R/TOGRAPHY AN EXAMPLE: ILLUSTRATED BOOK

*Naadar is a newly qualified teacher in a Reception classroom. Having young children in the classroom means that most of his planning and delivery contains visual elements, which he has learnt to master through digital technology, and the traditional method of using his hands to create. Through a module on his programme of study on assessment, Naadar reflected on the use of classroom observations in written form. He explored the concept of written narrative but felt that images and videos said more. He based this on the fact that seeing something visually grabs attention and engages us cognitively. When seen together in collaboration with other teachers, alternative perspectives of children's observations are provided, which the original observer may not have seen the first time. Often words, yet again, cannot capture the depth and quality of what is seen, and the observations can be revisited as often as possible for accuracy. Naadar also accepted that he cannot convey his thoughts into written essay form; he found it difficult to articulate in an academic context what he was trying to say. He turned his learning from the assessment unit into research for his dissertation on classroom observation episodes. His submission was an illustrated book, and not a traditional teacher essay. He had explored children's expressions as a sign of how engaged they were in what they were doing, which can be difficult to*

*capture in written form. The illustrated book had many forms of these expressions and linked to narrative from Naadar, something that is a norm in his teaching practice, as well as relevant literature to support. The research brought forth that children's visual images and videos are viewed for what they are doing and learning, but not really on the body language displayed by children and what this may mean in terms of engagement with their environment, and the activities and lessons we, as teachers, set for them. He coined this as the hidden language of children.*

The use of photography and video stills in the book made the information more meaningful; it presented modes of knowledge representation other than in writing (Hickman 2007). Naadar was able to present visual arguments in the form of a photo essay within the book. It allowed for visual interpretations and explanations of educational problems and facilitated the use of *theoria*, ie Naadar knowing, researching and theorising; *praxis*, where he was able to do the photography, learn from it and teach to his colleagues; as well as *poesis*, where he created the illustrated book, but also impacted his and others' practice through it. On the back of this, a digital movie was created as a training resource for induction of new teachers to the school. The impact of research is clearly visible.

## CONCLUSION

A/r/tography does interact with traditional and modern paradigms of teacher education research. Yet, it opens space for creative imagination and endows features of teachers' experiences with more than a single meaning (Barone 2001). It connects theories and practices from art and education to offer teacher researchers embodied hybrid methodologies through which the known and unknown can be explored by 'searching, questing and probing' (Springgay et al. 2008). Research becomes playful, exploratory and expressive, just as the nature and unfolding of teaching in the classroom

does. Not only this, using such creative endeavours is where creative teaching and opportunities for creative learning can be maximised. Those in charge of designing and delivering teacher education programmes need to consider creative methodologies themselves to underpin teaching and learning, the curriculum offered and their pedagogy, where teachers can then explore, learn, try, and be comfortable with them in order to utilise this nurturing of creativity to produce impactful research. It is about teachers reshaping research in new and innovative ways with the notion of hybridised methodologies, through artistry, teachistry and researchistry. After all, the classroom is not only our research field, but also a place for creativity and practice (Jung 2015). ■

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