Curating the Abandoned School: Voices of Youth in an Alternative High School Art Class

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Curating the Abandoned School: Voices of Youth
in an Alternative High School Art Class

Kellie Marie Fay

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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Department of Art
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ABSTRACT

Curating the Abandoned School: Voices of Youth in an Alternative High School Art Class

Kellie Marie Fay
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Master of Arts

An art teacher at an alternative high school examines how self-study and narrative influence art making in the classroom. This teacher-researcher-artist uses a/r/tography to study more deeply her role in creating curriculum that deals with students’ stories as a meaning-making device. The a/r/tographer identifies herself as a type of teacher-curator of student narratives and explores the nuances of her particular research site. As the researcher more closely examined her own identity as artist, teacher, and researcher, she came to understand that this research was largely a study of self. Specifically, she more closely scrutinized her struggle with the role of artist through art production that aligned with the studies she was engaging with in the classroom. Even as student understandings shifted as a result of the curricular focus on narrative, so did that of the researcher.

Keywords: alternative school, at-risk, a/r/tography, teacher as curator, self-study, narrative
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Chapter 1: Introduction

I work in an alternative high school. My students are perceived by society as the failures and the rejects. They are teenage mothers, struggling to support children, while, according to the law, still children themselves. Many of my students are about to be, or have been, high school dropouts due to failing grades, poor attendance, or drug use and violence. In a last attempt at preventing this end, the school district sends these failing students to my school in increasing numbers each year. Some students are glad to come to this new school, excited for another chance at getting that slip of paper that says they have graduated. Other students drop out before they even give it a chance. For many, the demands of life surpass those of school, and their new alternative high school is simply another obligation. Additionally, these at-risk youth tend to feel betrayed by an institution that has let them down so many times already. Little exists to attach these adolescents to schools and learning in the classroom.

At-risk is a controversial term that can be defined in many ways. It can be controversial because some definitions focus on negative qualities in the students themselves, such as deficiencies and destructive behaviors, while others focus on life circumstances and environmental elements, and yet others look at the school system itself. McCann (1991) writes that “these multiple definitions, with their multiple components have led to fragmentation in educational delivery systems” (p. 15). In the next section I will provide a more in-depth discussion on the definition I have developed for my own students, those who have, in a sense, been abandoned by a school system that has been thrust upon them. My students come from diverse backgrounds, but they all have the same thing in common: somewhere in their lives, a major obstacle exists that has prevented them from achieving the level of success many high school students experience.
The purpose of this research was to improve my teaching practices within this unique and challenging learning environment, by investigating the personal narratives of my students as individuals and as part of a collective group. In such a situation, I began by getting to know my students individually. I learned about their lived experiences, heard and saw their stories through art, writing, and daily interactions. In turn, this information was used to inform my curricular practices.

During this research, I also made discoveries about my own self and narrative, a natural occurrence within the research methodology I used, a/r/tography, which is discussed briefly at the end of this chapter and again, in-depth, in chapter 2. My personal discoveries, in turn, informed my research and shifted my understandings of this entire thesis, as examined further in chapter 4.

Alternative and At Risk, A Brief Discussion

The varied meanings of *alternative* and *at-risk* are contested. *At-risk* is a particularly controversial term (Hixson & Tinzman, 1990). Depending on the source, *at-risk* could be one of a number of diverse definitions, some of which are focused on environmental influences and others on the personal traits of the students themselves. Yet other sources even cite a unilateral definition that “all students are at risk in some way or another” (p. 13).

My school district uses a broad statement to define at-risk. They assert that the students sent to the alternative high school are those who are at-risk of not graduating. While district officials do not go much deeper into what that means exactly, my understanding of at-risk is based on my daily interaction with the students. It aligns with the views of Frostig and Essex (1998) in that at-risk students are inclined to academic failure due to a variety of risk factors that include emotional disturbance and/or social adjustment difficulties that are further compounded
by family issues of neglect, violence, and/or poverty” (p. xvi). Based on my experience, many of my students are dealing with such all-consuming issues that school is a low priority. Conversely, some students at my school were simply bored with the coursework at their previous school and failed out due to apathy. Other factors also exist, such as personal and family illness, language barriers, and job demands.

**Teacher as Curator**

I see teaching as being like a museum curator. Curators are both collectors and custodians of collections. They do extensive research to discover not only the obvious facts, but also deeper nuances of a work. Often, curators use these nuances to guide the themes for exhibits. Likewise, teachers can allow the deeper nuances of student narratives to determine the focus or direction of classroom instruction. These nuances may not be immediately obvious. In fact, it might take prolonged or concentrated research to uncover this important information.

As a teacher/curator, I focus on my students’ stories and lived experiences as art(ifacts). I am an art teacher/researcher/curator of students’ stories, their lived experience. My classroom is a collection of the unique circumstances of each student. Like artwork or art(ifacts), my students have powerful narratives on their own. When they come together in a collection, new meanings are made and the narratives take on a unity that can only be achieved with all of its individual parts. In other words, like an art exhibit where the works are brought together from numerous people working in separate environments, my classroom consists of multiple narratives that come together in one space. This space can be reduced to the size of one group of students at one table in a single class. Or, it can be enlarged to encompass all of my art classes at any given time, or further enlarged to include the stories of all of the students who, over the years, have attended the high school where I teach.
Curating and Collecting

I mentioned that my classroom is a type of collection of student narrative. Curating and collecting are similar undertakings. In fact, a curator generally is the person who gathers and arranges the artifacts for a collection. Alternately, those who create collections could be called curators, whether they are in a museum or not. The curator or collector may seek to form an understanding of self through this juxtaposition of objects/artifacts. Moreover, the collection forms its own identity as a summation of these objects/artifacts. Individuals create collections all the time in an act of “defining identity, a self-defense against the spectacle of commercial consumerism, and a nostalgic gathering of the familiar to reassure or shore up a sense of place and value” (Martin, 1999). Curators might create a collection in order to preserve a memory or even to safeguard the objects themselves. Collections can be a means to fend off the chaos of the infinite material world, the loss of memory, the passage of time, and the passing of objects into oblivion (Karp, 2006).

Collections at once reveal and conceal meaning and draw new or significant connections between objects. A few contemporary artists, such as Fred Wilson, Mark Dion, and Jason
Lanegan have made use of this in their work. Lanegan’s work draws from notions of nostalgia, identity, and memory to create elaborate reliquaries. He will be discussed more in-depth in chapter 4. Mark Dion deals more with the medium of collection as means to comment on our assumptions about scientific objectivity and our relationships with the non-human world (Sollins, 2009). Fred Wilson reconceptualizes objects in museums, rearranging or re-displaying them to construct new or different meaning. He seeks to reveal the biases of cultural institutions in regards to truth, history, place, power, and privilege. Although his work involves objects, Wilson asserts, “museum people are mistaken when they believe museums collect ‘things’. They collect memories, meanings, emotions, and experiences” (Graham, 2007, p.213).

Likewise, my students are not “things”. Their artwork, memories, and narratives are not “things”. They and their art are the physical manifestation of these meanings, emotions, and experiences that Wilson refers to. It is the teacher’s role as a curator to encourage, create space for, and assist students in understanding the meaning-making power they have as artists and human beings.

The Research—A/r/tography

My students represent a population that some might say has been overlooked. In order for me to better serve them as a teacher, I need to learn their individual stories. While my research is viewed through my personal lens of understanding (D. Barney, personal communication, November 24, 2014), I seek to act as a collector of students’ stories through investigation of their art, writing, and performance. It is my goal to establish a connection with my students that will foster trust and attachment to school and lifelong learning.

How can an educator create a meaningful curriculum without knowing who their students are? By tailoring lessons to individual experience, it was my belief that the students involved
would not only care more about the art projects they made in class, but they would also infuse more personal meaning into their work. Further discussed in chapter 3, the use of a/r/tography as a research methodology lends itself to unanticipated potential outcomes and understandings. Even as I was in the middle of my research, I was uncertain what exactly it was that I wished to know. A/r/tography is well-suited for such a scenario. It deals with questions that are asked in search of deeper understandings and engages with a recurrent progression of not-knowing (Irwin, Kind, & Springgay, 2005). Much of the value of such research involves the notion of the multiple roles of an artist, teacher, and researcher and, as such, innately seeks to improve curricular practice as the researcher goes through similar scenarios of art making and exploration as the students.

Many of my students feel like unwanted castoffs, overlooked by mainstream society. With this goal in mind, I asked the question: how can I create a space that allows youth to engage in the making and voicing of their personal narratives? What curricular practices can I employ that will encourage this to occur? By undergoing this a/r/tographic study, I responded to these questions as they transformed and shifted throughout the research.

Looking Forward

This thesis is divided into several parts. Chapter 2 begins with a personal narrative that touches on an early source of my interest in themes of abandonment and exploration. I then go further in-depth with a literature review that discusses at-risk students, my teacher-as-curator approach, and narrative inquiry, a method that has been woven within my overarching methodology, a/r/tography. Chapter 3 examines this methodology, explaining its usefulness as not just a research design, but also as a means to collect data and make personal meaning through the creation of artwork. I also examine certain projects that resonate with mine. Chapter 4 delves
into the actual research within the classroom and without. A sampling of artifacts/artwork produced during the research is also included. Chapter 5 consists of my responses to the major research questions and an explanation of how they shifted as I delved into my inquiry. I close the thesis, not with a conclusion, but by looking forward to the possibilities opened by this research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter discusses my personal and curricular motivations for this a/r/tographical exploration of the notion of abandonment. I begin with a narrative from my childhood, explaining a little about how my curiosity as a young child has formed the foundation of my research interests today. Next, I will provide an overview of my particular teaching site at an alternative high school for at risk youth. This will lead into my research aims in this particular study as related to a teacher-as-curator approach that facilitates an environment where students used art and text as a vehicle for telling their personal narratives.

My Interest in the Abandoned

Since elementary school I have been interested in deserted places, devoid of human life, yet rife with signs of their former occupants. If you had an attic full of old junk, I wanted to see it. From there it transitioned to curiosity about vacant homes and businesses. Whether it is a broken house or a shuttered business, there is something compelling about exploring abandoned sites. Where did the owners go? What will happen with the empty space? Most importantly, what got left behind, physically and psychologically? It is crazy what I find in these places—clothing, toys, furniture, and documents. Psychologically, I feel a type of sacred reverence for the spaces I have entered. It is as if the ghosts of former occupants linger, residual traces of the past. I often attempt to discover the history of a place through online research or interviews. Sometimes I find it. Sometimes I am left to create my own narratives of the place.

One particular instance of my urban exploration (the in vogue term for it) is especially poignant. It was the first time I was inside an empty house. Empty of people, that is. It was full of stuff. I was in late elementary school or early junior high. A home in my neighborhood had stood empty for years. I think the owners had passed away and their children lived far away.
There was some dispute over the property rights, or so was the rumor. As a result, it was not listed for sale, nor did anyone come to stay in it.

I discovered the house during one of my many wanderings through the woods in my backyard. We lived on a small hill a street away from the Mississippi. The farmer who owned the property on which my neighborhood was built had planted a thick line of trees along the hill as a windbreak. Over time the trees expanded and became a long, skinny wood that backed multiple properties. I would walk the length of the woods (people hardly every went back there), lost in my own imaginary worlds. I would sneak into peoples’ backyards and ghost through their gardens. Looking back, I probably was not as sly as I thought. How could the homeowners not see the little girl tramping around their lawn?

One house towards the end of the woods seemed empty. Weeds choked out an old garden. The windows were always dark. I imagined it was like The Secret Garden, a forbidden place. I passed by it multiple times before I thought to look in the windows. A huge snow had fallen the night before. It was one of those days when the sky and ground blend in a wash of hazy white. I did not have school that day and was out when many were still at work. I slid along the top of the snow, trying not to fall through. The air was so crisp that it froze the inside of my nose. So focused on my feet, I was unaware of how close I had gotten to the house until I ran into the tall shrub that bordered it.

Surprised, I flinched back. Through the fragrant branches of the shrub, I saw an uncovered window. How could I not look in? It was difficult to see with how dim the interior was. Everything looked shrouded in white sheets. Lumps of what I assumed were furniture filled the room. I had to get a better look. Most of the windows were covered in ugly gold damask curtains. When I got to the back garage door, I tried the handle just for fun. It opened.
It took my eyes a bit to adjust. The one-car garage held little more than old buckets stacked next to a pockmarked workbench. Not too interesting for a kid. I attempted the door into the house next. Hey, the garage was unlocked—why not the interior door? As luck would have it, with barely a sound that door opened as well. I was fortunate to encounter this home in the winter. Whatever was rotting in the musty structure was less pervasive in the frozen air. Indeed, the entire house seemed frozen. As I ventured through the dim rooms, it became apparent that the homeowners had stopped renovating after the 70s. Hideous orange carpet and brown linoleum covered the floors. Under their shrouds the furniture was ratty velvet and wood. I was worried about leaving identifying fingerprints in the dust so I used only my knuckles to twitch the corners of the dusty sheets. Old paintings that looked like the result of someone’s paint-by-numbers fixation lined the walls. I was too scared to dig far into the furniture, so I never knew what treasures they held, if any. Surprisingly, I did not feel like an intruder. It was sort of like being at a museum, viewing a time capsule from years before. The chilly air lent to the impression of preservation. The house was frozen, but would thaw and disappear in the spring.

When I finally decided to look out a window, I realized how long I had been in the house. The sun sets early in Minnesota in the winter. The spell broken, I rushed out of there, certain someone would discover my trespassing. I forgot about skating across the snow and instead sunk in up to my knees with every hurried step. When I took a last look at it from the woods I felt uneasy. Who was watching me from the dark windows? Was it haunted? Was that why no one lived in it any more? Whatever the case, I got home just in time to do my chores before dinner. I turned my thoughts to other things and pushed the house to the back of my mind.

From time to time I would think about the house. I heard something about there being a property dispute between siblings. A few years later it was resolved and the house put up for
sale. I moved away to Arizona and left all thoughts of it behind. One time when I visited, I asked my dad whether or not it had sold. He said he thought it had, but that it had been put back on the market soon after. No one wanted to do the renovation work on it and so it remained empty. I was lucky that day, to be able to see a property that had been largely untouched since abandonment. I do not know now what ultimately become of it. I only go back to Minnesota every few years now. But every so often I will think about the house and how it kindled my fascination with the notion of what people leave behind.

Figure 2: Scenes I documented at another abandoned home, years later

(At-Risk) Students of the Abandoned School

Young people are in the K-12 system for only a fraction of their lives. Some make it through until the end with a relative amount of ease. Some barely squeak by. Others never make
it at all. Why the disparity? High school is a time when teenagers are figuring out who they are and beginning to discover who they want to become. They are about to break ties with a system that has been a part of their lives for over a decade. This system has played a large part in their formative years and, while individual experiences differ, the overall result is similar: graduation and ensuing adulthood. But what happens when this system fails, or abandons, these young people? Notions of abandoned places are the subjects of my own artistic and written explorations. However, they also apply to my situation as an art teacher at an alternative high school in Utah Valley.

The school itself is uniquely situated as an alternative high school for students at risk of not graduating. While we are in a fairly innocuous suburban location, in a predominately middle-class, white area, our demographic is closer to that found in an inner city, urban school. We have been lovingly termed the “bad kid school” by both our students and others. However, it is so much more complex than that. Through conversations with students, administration/faculty/staff, and some parents, I have learned that the majority of our young people come from less-than-ideal circumstances. Consistently, home life is not conducive to the success that is considered “normal” for high school students. Beyond poor home conditions, some students are simply uninterested in high school curriculum and reluctant to jump through whatever hoops the school system requires of them (Tanner, Krahn, & Hartnagel, 1995; Denton, 1987).

Dr. Brett Blake (2004), associate Chair of the Department of Early Childhood at St. John’s University in New York City, writes extensively about the challenges urban youth face. In particular, she writes about young people who are:

shut out of the central public space in which they are supposed to be equal participants in their social and literate selves—school—[and] find their own public spaces in which to
live and to become literate. These public, cultural spaces operate outside of the classroom and are deeply embedded in an alternative culture (p. 1).

So many of my students have other demands on their time, whether they working until 2 AM every night to help mom pay the rent or spending their nights going to raves/concerts or drinking or doing drugs. Their lives outside of school often take precedence over the hours they spend at a desk five days a week. Based on my and my coworkers’ interactions with our youth, it would seem that school is a low priority compared to the other demands of their alternate lives. How can we expect a young person to focus in a classroom when they are hung-over or combating waves of morning sickness? Furthermore, on any given day, one-fourth or more of my students are absent. Of those who are present, a few individuals sleep all class long or intentionally do not participate. How can I more effectively teach this type of population?

I am aware that I have a skewed sample, since all of the youth at my school are at risk of dropping out or not graduating. My students travel a long distance to attend school. Their art, reading, and other academic skill levels vary from beginner to advanced, yet they are all lumped into one class. Many of the students lack hope and are tired of the daily battles with school, work, and family. Many begin to believe that they truly are the “bad kids”. Dr. Blake (2004) writes that the excluded youth who find alternative cultures are ones who are angry and disappointed in a culture that has “eroded any sense of hope” and they explain that they cope by “channeling anger and disappointment into nonparticipation” (p. 1). Art teachers are, perhaps, uniquely situated to provide a forum for students to include their alternative cultures in the classroom. The art making process is one well suited for authentic and meaningful conversation (Cummings 2012). It gives people an opportunity to tell their stories, whatever they may be. As Gude (2008) observed, “This meaning-making capacity is the ability to engage and entertain
ideas and images; it is the ability to make use of images and ideas to re-imagine one's own life experiences. It is the ability to investigate and represent one's own experiences” (p. 102).

**Teacher-as-Curator (of Student Narratives)**

The purpose of my research and this thesis was to create a similar situation to Diane Conrad’s, examined in detail in chapter 3. Conrad worked with incarcerated youth at a detention facility in Alberta, Canada. She developed a theater program that “engaged the youth in expressing their experiences prior to and their experiences of incarceration, in examining their understandings and the consequences of their offending behaviors within a social context, and in searching for options for change in their lives through enacting their visions for the future” (Conrad, 2006). I wanted something akin to Conrad’s program for my own students—a situation that allowed for meaning making through exploration of life experiences and narrative. What follows is a description of the progression of my plan for this situation and my overall thesis.

People are natural narrators (Frykman, 2009). We learn by sharing and listening to stories. Think about anecdotes, vignettes, parables, and great works of literature. Although the characters and exact situations can greatly differ from one’s own experience, we can draw parallels to our lives. How much of our daily conversation involves relating experiences we have gone through or heard from others? How many autobiographical books line the shelves of bookstores and eBook libraries? It would appear that humans put a high value on lived experience and on narrative. Being such an integral part of our society, it is reasonable that the use of narrative would be valuable in schools and other places of learning. By connecting to narratives, students can learn vital information about who they are and who they are becoming. As they learn, they can also become empowered by sharing their personal stories, a practice
which allows students to find and hold onto themselves in a rapidly growing context of family, friends, community [local and online], school, and work (Leggo, 2007).

As an educator, how can I create a space that allows youth to engage in the making and voicing of their personal narratives? What curricular practices can I employ that will encourage students to share their narratives through art, text, and performance? Is it possible that my students are already doing these things without my being cognizant of it? Through an a/r/tographical, inquiry-based approach to research (Conle, 2000; Beattie, 1995; Bell, 1991; Irwin, 2013; Li, 1998; Mullen, 1994), I seek to experience this voicing of narrative alongside my students. What we create is steeped in our personal experience. We gravitate towards themes based on what we have encountered in our lives.

When searching for an approach to my curricular practices that allowed for the voicing of narratives through art, I came to a realization that I felt like a museum curator as much as a teacher. And that is when I understood a major root of what I wanted my research to be about: a teacher-as-curator approach to the unique perspectives of my students as unique individuals and their stories as part of a collection.

Let me establish what I mean when I use *curate* and *curator*. To do so, some groundwork must be established. First, what do *curator* and *curate* mean from an etymological viewpoint? The Latin *curator* refers to an overseer, manager, or guardian. It is based on *curare*, which means to put in charge of minors, lunatics, or incompetents. While humorous, this definition may not be the most flattering way to refer to a curator’s charges. Alternately, the word *curate* came about in the mid 1300s, indicating a person who was responsible for the care of souls, particularly in regards to a parish priest who would have, literally, been believed to save peoples’ souls. (“Curate” & “Curator”, n.d.).
Eventually, as museums were opened to the public, what many consider a traditional notion of the *curator* came about: an object and subject specialist, responsible for determining the focus and content of exhibits (Haas, 2003), a teacher, researcher, and transmitter/translator of information (Gurian, 2006; Haas, 2003), a producer of significant, meaningful, and well-maintained collections (Davis, 1980), and, in the case of more contemporary exhibits, a critical judge about which new art or artists to include, a booster of talented, young artists (Tannenbaum, 1980). According to a contemporary notion, a curator is a well-trained individual, often with several degrees to prove it. This position takes time and intense research, as a curator plans, designs, acquires pieces, markets, maintains, and documents an exhibit. By the time the public is allowed into an exhibit, curators have moved on, working oftentimes years in the future, performing the aforementioned steps with other projects.

Thomas P. Campbell (2012), director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, explains that the job of a curator is not just selecting art objects, but also placing them in a way that allows viewers to learn their stories. His view is that art is a storytelling vehicle (Ames-West, 2012), and a museum is a situation that allows for both viewers and curators alike to use narrative to make sense of the art and, ultimately, the world (Bedford, 2001; Silverman, 1993). According to Campbell (2012), the role of a curator is integral to the presentation of art objects: “there’s nothing that compares with the presentation of significant objects in a well-told narrative, what the curator does, the interpretation of complex, esoteric subject, that…unpacks it for a general audience” (n.p.). This is a powerful argument for the role of the traditionally defined curator in the presentation of objects. Just as an art educator connects students with art media and art objects, curators are a bridge between the public and museum objects and vise versa—after all, a bridge allows for travel from both directions. Similarly, a teacher is at the same time a student
and a teacher. Additionally, a teacher’s role goes beyond being an imparter of information. Like Campbell’s *curator,* a teacher’s role is to unpack with his or her students a variety of obscure or previously unrealized information.

However, just as language is forever changing, the term *curator* has recently evolved further. In fact, we are in some kind of in-between time, a liminal space where the term means something different to various groups. The influx of digital technologies, especially the internet and websites [i.e. Pinterest, Instagram, Tumblr, Spotify, the Chive, and so on] has led to a new fluidity of the definitions. *Curate,* a guardian of souls, becomes *curator,* a keeper of a museum objects, to new ways to think about a curator. For example, one can now be a curator of delicious holiday recipes or piano-playing cat videos. One can curate a selection of photos or music playlists. Even job descriptions have changed to reflect this in-vogue term: a book editor no longer acquires, edits, and publishes books, but instead he is a content curator (Simon, 2012).

While some people are bothered by this shift, others are glad to see the term lose some of its perceived stuffiness (Borelli, 2013). According to waywire.com, CEO Steven Rosenbaum (2012), curating is “the act of individuals with a passion for a content area to find, contextualize, and organize information”. This new definition has some parallels to the museum curator, but it has more to do with being a sifter of information, an editor of content, someone who uses discernment based on interest, aesthetics, and perhaps, some knowledge, to present information to an audience. It pushes out the education or training required of most museum curators and skims over the deep research involved in an art exhibit. However, by widening the use of the *curate* and *curator,* it allows for a wider audience to comprehend the ubiquitous term.

Regardless of the current disparity in the meaning of *curator* and *curate,* I tend to gravitate to the 20th century definition in regards to my teaching practice, the definition that
places curator in a museum setting. George Shackelford, deputy director of the Kimball Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, writes that to curate is “truly taking care of and taking stock of something original or valuable…we take responsibility for things”. A teacher-curator similarly takes stock in the value of his or her students and the unique experiences each brings to the classroom. Educators take responsibility for student learning and, as art teachers specifically, for the meaning individuals instill in creative work. Correspondingly, as the roles of museum curators shift from transmitter of information to assistor and guide (Gurian, 2006), so, too have teaching models allowed for more learner-centered (Schiro, 2013), or de-centralized network architectures (Davis & Sumara, 2006). Such systems allow for student-driven curriculum, facilitated by a teacher/researcher with a deep awareness of inquiry-led instruction. Like a museum curator’s study of objects and context, the teacher must know, or come to know, about his or her subject matter, both the curricular content and the students.

In my research, what little I found relating to a teacher-as-curator approach has largely dealt with this concept from a curricular point of view (Boss, 2009; Riley, 2012). Similar to this are the alternate positions of curator-as-teacher and artist-as-curator. These individuals curate the content they present in the classroom or elsewhere. They select the artifacts, artworks, handouts, presentations, and so on, that they show students, and they tend to direct the lines of inquiry and critical thinking. This mode of thought places educators within a centralized network architecture (Schiro, 2013), as the imparter of information. It seems rather controlling. Conversely, a teacher-as-curator approach has the potential to open up learning for students, broadening possibilities. For example, contemporary pedagogical practices have come to include the need for providing opportunities for students to conduct exploratory learning: “There is increasing interest in the field of art education to shift from a solely skills-based curriculum to a space for students to
build their skills while investigating and shaping themselves, their interactions with the world, and their ways of knowing” (Walker, 2014).

My purpose as a teacher-as-curatur is deeper than the information that I present in my lessons. While an aspect of my concept-based inquiry research did employ tangible artifacts and posed conceptual questions, I focused more on my students’ narratives as the actual artifacts. I am an art teacher/researcher/curator of students’ stories, their lived experience. My classroom is a collective/collection, of the unique circumstances of my individual students. Students, like artwork or artifacts, have powerful narratives on their own. When they come together in a collection, new meanings are made and the narratives take on a unity that can only be achieved with all of its individual parts. In other words, like an art exhibit where the works are brought together from numerous people working in separate environments, my classroom consists of multiple narratives that come together in one space. This space can be reduced to the size of one group of students at one table in a single class. Or, it can be enlarged to encompass all of my art classes at any given time, or further enlarged to include the stories of all of the students who, over the years, have attended the high school where I teach.

*Figure 3: Glazing ceramic “free choice” projects*
Potential Risks of Curating Narrative Inquiry

Gude’s (2008) description of art’s meaning-making capacity as the ability to make use of images and ideas to re-imagine one's own life experiences is what I ultimately intended as a teacher-as-curator. I was most interested in each person’s story, his or her background and lived experience. Rather than acting as the voice of the students in our classroom, I sought to simply allow them to voice their own stories in whatever form they choose: visual art, poetry, writing, music, or performance. As a museum curator nurtures artists and creates a bridge between artifacts and the public, I, a teacher/curator endeavored to present the voices of the alternative youth in my classroom by creating this thesis and also by presenting their work in a show at the front of our school. During the month that the show was up, it was not only viewed by the members of my immediate school community: the students, teachers, and staff. It was also viewed by many parents, community members, school board members, principals from the high schools the participants once attended, the district and state superintendents, and a state senator.

In one particular situation, the former principal of a student came in while that student and I were setting up the show in my school’s lobby. She did a double take and remarked that she was astounded that, not only was this student actually at school, but that he was helping a teacher. He proudly showed her which work was his and explained that he was doing much better in school now. After she left, he confided in me that she was the person who originally sent him to the alternative school. She had told him that his behavior and grades were too poor to be successful in his previous school.

My research approach does not come without some risk. While I operated under an overarching a/r/tography methodology, which I will discuss in-depth in the next chapter, my students and I each pursued narrative inquiry on some level, be it overt or subtler. Narrative
inquiry is well suited to uncovering the nuances of human experience. It allows for issues of complexity and human centeredness (Meier, 2013; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Such a situation, while deeply meaningful, can create potential obstacles. Minors and expecting mothers are protected groups, rightfully so. Furthermore, students might be put in a situation where they wish to please the teacher/researcher so that they receive a good grade. One way to avoid this situation is to mine past work, rather than assign new tasks that align with the research. Also, students and parents, once assent and consent to participate is given, should be allowed to opt out at any time. Additionally, students should be allowed to select their own nom de plumes and, if desired, gender, in order to protect their identity. This may seem a bit contrary to a research that centers on individual experience, but I pose that the truly important information will not suffer from this necessary protection.

Beyond protecting students, other difficulties arise when curating others’ narratives. For one, there is an issue of authenticity. As a teacher-curateur, I interpreted someone else’s meaning, and so I depended on my familiarity with the narrators to guide my research decisions and questions. Researchers have a bias based on their own lived experience and must make decisions about how to represent this in relationship to participants’ experience (Meier, 2013). How much distance should exist between the researcher’s commentary/analytical texts and the participants’ life stories? Can they be separated? While Barone (2001) thinks so, as outlined in his book *Touching Eternity*, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) call this situation a “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” (p. 60), where there is a shifting back and forth between the narrative inquirer and the participants. Chase (2005) poses that it is in the structure of interview questions that researchers ensure that the participant is the narrator of his or her own story. Eisner (2007) suggests “The very conditions that make a study arts-based are conditions that
personalize the study or the situation by allowing an investigator’s thumbprint to work its magic in illuminating the scene” (p. 30). While he is referring to arts-based research, the idea is applicable to narrative inquiry. Perhaps the best solution is for the researcher to identify which approach or approaches he or she will take and to acknowledge the caveats associated with each.

Another risk of including narrative inquiry, or any qualitative research method, is its ability to translate to other circumstances. Eisner (2007) cites a tension between focusing on a particular situation in order to elucidate its particulars, while also forming insight that extend to a wider audience. In some kinds of quantitative research, specifically statistics, research is done with carefully selected sample groups that are meant to represent a large number of people who are not part of the individuals being tested. Outliers are usually removed from the results. This allows for researchers to be confident in the applicability of their data.

In qualitative research, samples are generally not so rigorously selected. In fact, it is the particulars of a site that catch a researcher’s interest in the first place, and that instigate the desire for inquiry. Sometimes the outliers are the most important participants in research. One might think that a peculiar circumstance, or outlier, is of little consequence. Sometimes just the fact that such a circumstance is foreign or less understood is enough to prompt interest. Many people, however, seem to be most concerned with the applicability of research. With this in mind, how can an outlier apply to many if it is unique? And why should we even care about generalizing? By acknowledging that the particulars of a situation may differ, but that the overall understanding can apply, one can find value in studying the outliers. Eisner likens the situation to literature: “great works of literature teach their lessons in ways that go beyond the particular circumstances they address. Their lessons are general” (p. 31). Not only can narrative and other qualitative, arts-based inquiry methods translate to other circumstances, but also they can do so
in a way that engages diverse audiences emotionally, experientially, and emotionally (Conrad, 2013).

As a teacher-as-curator, I focused predominantly on individualized situations. The stories shared by my students were their own. Yet these stories were invaluable to an assortment of audiences. As outlined previously, the applicability of our small sample to other groups could be extensive. Another audience, and in my opinion, the most important, is the student group included in my research. As the makers of the art/text work that I curated, students at my alternative school attempted their own kind of self-discovery inquiry that I as a researcher was also endeavoring. Students were engaged in a critically reflective way that was respectful of their views, giving them a means to tell their personal stories (Conrad, 2013).

Another intended audience is the various communities we reside in—immediate school, school district, city, county, and state. As previously mentioned, a number of individuals viewed the final show. My school has only been open a few years and represents the interests of several stakeholders. A major focus of my district and the state is to reduce high school dropouts and increase the graduation rate. My school was established as a solution to this perceived crisis. Although several other alternative schools exist in the state, ours is in the largest school district and has had a direct improvement to the bottom line that lawmakers and school officials seem to be focused on. On a more personal level, the parents and families of my students are excited to see their children involved in school in a positive manner. They are not only glad to see their own child succeed, but typically are proud of all the students at my school. Even though each student comes from a different family, everyone sort of bands together in forming a new kind of family in honor of these kids who are all struggling together.
The final audience is myself. As a teacher, research/inquirer, artist, and curator, I, too, have the potential for vast growth on multiple levels and will benefit from this research experience. One level is that the insight gained as my research evolved over time (Ames-West, 2012; Buffington & McCay, 2013; Conley, 2000; Eisner, 2007), will lend itself to a more socially, culturally, and student-informed pedagogical practice. Another level of growth is more personal. In conducting my hybrid narrative and arts-based research, I needed to look internally at my own lived experience. Carl Leggo (2007), poet and professor in the Department of Language and Literacy at the University of British Columbia, as well as renowned scholar on narrative and arts-based research methods, wrote the following:

If we do not learn to appreciate the significance of our own lived experiences, then we will always live in the frustrating illusions of fictive creations shaped in the images of popular and dominant cultures. In order to know the possibilities for our unique presence in the world, we need to be connected to words that represent as well as challenge our daily understandings of who we are and who we are becoming. (p. 94)

These words empowered me, as researcher, to share my own story. I had to answer some significant questions, including the following: What is my purpose as a curator of narratives in my classroom? How has my unique situation led to my desire to undergo these particular lines of inquiry? How can I use my own experience to create a space in my school that allows for students to share their narratives through art, text, or performance? Not only did I curate the lived experiences of my students, providing a forum for them to share their particular voices, but also I underwent a journey of my own through living inquiry, both externally and internally.
Chapter 3: Methodology

An Introduction to A/r/tography

A/r/tography is an arts-based methodology that involves a living inquiry through both art and writing (Irwin, Kind, & Spriggay, 2005, p. 899). It references the artist, researcher, and teacher as connecting identities:

To be engaged in the practice of a/r/tography means to inquire in the world through an ongoing process of art making in any art form and writing not separate or illustrative of each other but interconnected and woven through each other to create additional and/or enhanced meanings (Irwin, n.d.).

Adding to the layers of art and text is the notion of the viewer/reader as a maker of meaning (p. 900). With all its intermingling layers, a/r/tography is a complex system that is employed to make sense of or explore complex subjects.

Just as the layers of a/r/tography are significant, so, too, are the overlapping roles of artist, researchers, and teacher. By distinguishing each role, the point of a/r/tography is not to create boundaries, but to “speak of their interrelatedness, their shifting, transitory nature, and to make visible the spaces in between the roles and the activity inherent in practicing these roles” (Irwin, et al., 2005, p. 900). With a/r/tography, the researcher is able to work in a place of inquiry that attends to feelings of ambiguity, blurred experiences, the unknown, and the temporal (Richardson, 1994).

According to Spriggay, et al. (2005), an individual engaged in a/r/tography, or living inquiry, is one who “lives full of curiosity by questions searching for deeper understandings while interrogating assumptions… refuses absolutes; rather, engages with a continual process of not-knowing, of searching for meaning that is difficult and in tension” (pp. 901-902). Through
all this, the inquirer is searching for new meanings with which to engage. The inquirer’s whole existence is caught up in what he or she knows and does (Sumara & Carson, 1997).

A/r/tography Projects that Overlap with Mine

In their ongoing collaborative “City of Richgate” project, six of the leading a/r/tographical researchers are working with a community composed largely of immigrants. Although the residents were originally from a variety of locations, they now form a new collective comprised of each individual’s experience. They are united in their histories of dispersal and displacement (Irwin, Beer, Springgay, Grauer, Xiong, & Bickel, 2006). This relates closely to the situation of my students, who have been displaced most recently by their previous schools and experience ongoing difficulties associated with notions of failure, flagging self worth, overwhelming vices, and perception of how outsiders view them.

Like the participants in the City of Richgate study, my students are a population that is often overlooked by society. Alternately, the coming together with others in similar situations creates a unique site of community and empowerment. My students transfer from all over our large district, from nine different high schools. They bring their individual experiences with them and create a new collection/identity as a group. The state of these types of populations “is thus constituted both negatively by experiences of discrimination and exclusion, and positively through identification with world-historical, cultural, or political forces…of being able to shuttle between worlds/cultures/locations” (Irwin, et al., 2006; Clifford, 1997; Sontag & Dugger, 1998). In other words, although the displacement and subsequent gathering in a new locale causes any number of difficulties, there are also benefits to these scholastic emigrants.

In the City of Richgate project, the researchers seek to discover what artistic products can be created through a community-engaged process that engages participants’ experience in a
culturally-hybrid place (Irwin, et al., 2006). The project is largely focused on themes of identity, place, and community. So far, the project has yielded visual narratives of participants’ experience with immigration or profound change and their struggle to deal with the three themes (p. 9). Many participants have discovered that they are proud to represent their old and new cultures. They are able to share their stories with people in both similar situations, displaced individuals, and people in entirely different situations. Additionally, the idea of site or place as a geographic location has been challenged by this project (Kwon, 2002). Site has more to do with a reflection of the “narratives of individuals living in a psycho-geographical region” (Irwin, et al., 2009).

My own research aims also went beyond the physical location of my school, though it cannot be ignored entirely. School as place has distinctive qualities that lend to unique social situations (Zur & Eisikovits, 2011). A school environment simultaneously dictates the actions of its inhabitants and the inhabitants dictate the school environment. Of course, there are other factors, such as state and district policy, core standards, and the belief systems instigated by individuals teachers and staff, based on systems that were passed to them in other school environments.

Despite all this, the purpose of my arts-based research was to provide the means for my students to give voice to their individual narratives and unique stories. It was my goal to discover my role as an art teacher at an alternative high school and to improve my curricular and artistic practice through my own narrative inquiry alongside that of my students. I am an art teacher/researcher/curator of students’ stories, their lived experience. Like the Richgate project, the participants created visual or creative artifacts of their narratives. Unlike the Richgate project, I was the sole a/r/tographer and my students were a source integral to my study. I
explored my own experience in connection to the inquiry—most of the Richgate a/r/tographers seem to have done this as more of an afterthought.

In my study, each participant interacted with the inquiry on an individual basis. In the Richgate project, each family collaborated throughout the study. Indeed, it appears that the family component was center to the Richgate project. It was about collective identity between families that comprised a larger whole. My inquiry focused on, first, the individual and, second, the group.

Additionally, while there is a definite parallel between my students and the immigrants in the Richgate study as marginalized populations that have been displaced and misconceived by society, the community formed in my classroom is much smaller. Most students come from the district and still live within the boundaries of their home schools. By home school, I mean the high school that they were attending previous to the alternative school. While they attend school in the same place, many of the students participate in completely separate lives once the bus drops them off. This, perhaps, is even more confusing for my students, to live in the same location as before, but to partake in a completely different situation than previously.

Now, not all of my students are new to alternative schools. In fact, many of them have participated in learning at group homes, treatment facilities, and juvenile detention centers [“DT” as my students call it]. It is common to be picked up by the big white vans after to school to be shipped to various programs. We all know when court dates have arrived, as stress levels run high, students wear their best clothes, and they half-jokingly say they will see me in 30 days [the average lockup time].

One teacher/researcher who deals with such populations is Diane Conrad, Associate Professor of Drama/Theatre Education at the University of Alberta. A self-described critical
educator, Conrad (2006) uses participatory arts-based methods to investigate how performance serves as a powerful way to promote positive change in incarcerated youth. She seeks to “recover participants’ lived experiences, to interrogate meanings that emerge from research, and provide an alternative way of engaging diverse audiences with the research in ways that are emotional, experiential, embodied, and intellectual” (n.p.).

While my school is not actually a jail or detention center, many students view it as such. Some are court ordered to be there. Others are given little choice from their home schools that refer them to this school. They are offered an ultimatum: go to the alternative school or do not graduate. Some, particularly the young mothers, were ostracized by their peers and choose to come to my school. Conrad (2013) notes that for some at-risk students, school is perceived as a prison (p. 5). Furthering that notion, Foucault (1979) posed that prison was comparable to schooling in that both were based on disciplinary bodies, devices of power and punishment. Furthermore, Foucault (1991) “outlined governmentality as a focus on the collective, taken-for-granted ways of thinking behind the institutionalized practices to normalize individuals’ conduct…the way that power is wielded in these institutions engender[s] attitudes of resistance” (Foucault as quoted by Conrad, 2013). So, although my school is not literally a prison, it can feel like one, based on the governing body, the administration, its policies, and the policies and actions of individual teachers.

Conrad’s research is centered on challenging notions of rehabilitation and coercive environments in order to use affirmative possibilities of incarceration. This was accomplished through a drama program intended to engage youth in exploration of “options for change through enacting their visions for their future” (2006, n.p.). Ultimately, Conrad circumvented censorship issues—jail administration banned many topics from discussion, including criminal activity,
drugs, and gangs—and created an evocative situation for meaning making as individuals and as a
group.

Indeed, the inquiry process and final products or visual/creative data are much more
meaningful when participants are invested in the research. Given the opportunity to share their
own stories is an authentic experience that can be empowering to overlooked populations. In
turn, audiences will be able to interact with the work on a deeper level. A deeper emotional
reality, achieved because the content of the inquiry is centered on real lived experiences (Conrad,
2013). Although I would note that an outside audience is not necessary for the practice-based and
self-empowerment aims of my own research, it does add an important element to the
investigation. Not only would the visual/creative data from the inquiry process benefit the
students’ peers, but it would also allow for administrators and staff to see the youth in a different
way. Beyond, that those removed from the site could see the alternative students as active,
productive, and emotional individuals (p. 12).

Conrad puts an emphasis on creating an environment that truly respects and
acknowledges at-risk youth (p.14). In the classroom this can take on a number of forms. For one,
curricular activities can be open-ended, giving opportunity for self-directed inquiry. This allows
students to research what interests them and can engage them in meaningful ways (Cummings,
2012). Another way to create a nurturing environment for at-risk youth is the presence of a
genuinely interested mentor—a mentor who looks both internally at self and externally at
practice.

In her various articles and projects, Conrad focuses a great deal on the concept of
restorative justice. Restorative justice is a system of criminal justice that focuses on the
rehabilitation of offenders through reconciliation with victims and the community at large
(“Restorative Justice”, n.d.). This is where our practices differ. While a major portion of my students has committed actual crimes, these crimes are generally a non-issue in the classroom. Very few students were court ordered to attend my school. Rather, the reasons they were sent there involve poor grades and/or a lack of attendance. These, and any crimes committed, I allege are symptoms of larger issues. Issues that involve some kind of obstacle, somewhere in these young peoples’ lives that has prevented them from achieving the level of success that is common with other high school-aged youth.

While my students may not be able to currently change their situations or circumvent the obstacles that dictate the state of their lives, they can change how they interact with them. This process involves learning more about who they are and where they want to go. While I acknowledge and even practice in some of the methods of social change associated with a social reconstructivist ideology, my purpose is more learner-centered, focused on the needs of the individual, rather than the needs of society (Schiro, 2013). I am most interested in each person’s story, where he or she is coming from, and lived experience.

![Figure 4: During an informal interview](image)

Beyond their applications to education, stories of alternative or at-risk people are present in the inquiry of artists. One such artist is photographer Zack Taylor. For his final BFA show at
Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, Taylor presented a documentary-style exhibit of Mormon ex-convicts. In his artist statement, Taylor (2008) writes that:

There is a certain social stigma that follows Ex-Cons. Many who have served time refer to themselves as being ‘locked out’ of mainstream society upon their release from prison. Using photography as a vehicle, I wanted to address this gap between society and its criminals within the scope of my religion…Their appearances vary greatly, as do their histories and current situations. They share the common task, however, of reconciling their criminal pasts with the LDS culture in which they live. (n.p.)

Like many of my students, these ex-convicts feel separated from what society deems as normal. Taylor not only photographs participants, but he interviews them and includes these interviews with viewers alongside the photographs.

An interesting part of Taylor’s process is that he recruited participants by posting flyers with parole offices and rehabilitation groups. He records that he had no preconceived notions of what his subjects would look like, that he simply photographed anyone who wanted to contribute to the project. By doing so, researcher bias was greatly reduced, although not random, since he did select the locations where he recruited. Additionally, it opened up his inquiry to unanticipated tangents and connections, as Rita Irwin and her colleagues (2006) discuss in their writings on a/r/tographical research. By allowing for the unforeseen to inform research mid-inquiry, investigators are allowing for deeper, richer meaning.

One major difference between Taylor’s work and my inquiry is the role he himself plays. He is the artist, documenter/reporter, and curator. But what about his own personal story in relation to the stories he is sharing? How does his particular narrative influence his research? Where does he connect? Is it simply a phenomenon that he observed and desired to bring to
light? It is my opinion that there is room for Taylor to engage more meaningfully with his work. And that is my hope as I undergo my a/r/tographic inquiry: that I will be able to engage with the research in a way that helps me improve my practice in my layered roles as artist, teacher/learner. By embracing the rhizomatic nature of a/r/tography (Irwin, et al., 2006), I will allow for the unanticipated and come to a more full meaning of my students and myself. The creative works we generate in this inquiry will facilitate new insight. The power of art to transform students (Dunn-Snow & D’Amelio, 2000) and self is integral to the narrative.

**Study Participants**

Much of my data for the research comes from day-to-day interaction with students, rather than formal, predetermined interviews/scenarios. The study participants came from my Art Foundations 2 class. They were juniors and seniors, both male and female, aged 16-19. Approximately two-thirds of the class was male. While my students come from various socioeconomic backgrounds, over half are on free lunch and fee waivers. Additionally, these students came from all over the school district, residing in a variety of cities. The students in an Art Foundations 2 classroom generally represent beginning art students, though the experience levels found in this particular class ranged from beginner to advanced. Additionally, many of these students were in several of my art classes in addition to Art Foundations 2. I selected this specific class for its allowance for a variety of art mediums, as well as its representation of such a wide range of experience levels. All students within the class participated in the same curricular activities, whether or not they agreed to participate in my study. My research, however, was limited to those who opted to be a part of it.

All told, eight of the class of twenty-six assented/consented and turned in the parental consent forms. Such a number worked well for my particular needs. In arts-based research the
number of subjects can vary, as it is based on the specific needs of the study (Robson, 1997). In her doctoral dissertation for Northern Illinois University, Lisa Kay (2008) researched a similar population to mine, using arts-based research methodologies to understand the phenomenon of art education and art therapy with at-risk students in alternative school settings. She describes the sampling size to be both purposive and convenient, based on the researcher’s judgment (p. 53). However, in my case, it also involved student judgment on whether or not to be involved. Schwandt (1997) explains that an arts-based researcher may select the most convenient and fitting sample to the researcher’s interests. Additionally, the number of subjects is small in this type of research in order to gather more in-depth information of individual subjects’ experiences, rather than measure specific variables (Creswell, 1998).

**Data Collection/Tools for Analysis**

While I specifically used a/r/tography as a methodology, it falls under a larger umbrella of arts-based educational research, or ABER. ABER is a type of qualitative inquiry that uses art production—be it visual arts, poetry, narrative, dance, film, and so on—as a means of exploration of a situation, both in reaction to the situation itself and as the source of new understandings (Hafeli, 2013). While traditional research methods tend to seek findings that establish certainty and applicability to a large group, ABER pursues an “enhancement of perspectives” (Barone & Eisner, 2006) and allows for researchers to interact with the study as a lived experience. Dewey advocated that human beings are actively sentient creatures who assemble sensory experience as learning. ABER follows this notion of sensory experience.

ABER is a methodology that encourages a researcher and artist to create and organize research in an idiosyncratic, personal, and local way to draw from other established methods that fall under the umbrella of arts-based and qualitative research (D. Barney, personal
communication, June 4, 2015). In my own research, I used a/r/tography, which is a type of ABER. According to Irwin (2013), in a/r/tography the process of inquiry is as important or more important than the representations of understandings. In other words, the investigation process can be more significant than the artifacts produced during the inquiry. Furthermore, these artifacts become the research data and the inquiry process and data analysis (p. 105). One must not discount the value of the art or creative work produced in a/r/tography and ABER, however. Susan Griffin (1995), author, poet, and social activist writes about art created as research: “[it] does not describe. It is the thing. It is an experience, not the secondhand record of an experience, but the experience itself” (p. 191). This is especially true for a/r/tography, where the roles of researcher and teacher are overlaid with artist.

Under the framework of a/r/tography, data was gathered through multiple methods. For example, a process journal of the principal investigator and observational notes were generated. Additionally, my students and I created artwork/artifacts. Finally, I interviewed my students and recorded and transcribed their responses. The questions I asked were both planned ahead of time and generated organically as interviews were conducted. The data was then coded into different concepts that helped put information into categories, which informed my research.

The end product of a/r/tographical work is as unique as its process. No template exists for how to present a/r/tography studies. Depending upon the art form chosen and its inherent aesthetic qualities, processes and products will vary significantly and, therefore, the design of the project will also vary (Irwin, 2013; Knowles & Cole, 2008). For me, the design and presentation were unknown until they had already occurred. My understandings shifted, settled, and expanded even as I created this document, this thesis.
In Summary

I would assert that the exact scenario that I seek to describe has not been studied before in the field of education. Other arts-based researchers have approached narrative arts-based inquiry from an autobiographical stand (Barone, 2001; Kind, 2006) or from a standpoint of expressing narratives based on a school environment framework, such as experiences with the first day of school, bullying, and other school-constructed culture (Emme & Kirova, 2013). My own research centered on a/r/tography and narrative inquiry. Similar to my aims, art therapist Lisa Kay studied the role of art teachers in alternative high schools. However, her approach sought to identify the intersection of art therapy and art education. And, while I may draw some conclusions and relate insights gained from my inquiry, the essential questions that I asked are unique to my classroom:

As an educator, how can I create a space that allows my students to engage in the making and voicing of their personal narratives?

Starting out, I knew that I would need to work with students that I already knew for at least a little while. This allowed me to have some level of trust already established between each student and myself. Most students who participated in the research were ones that I had known for at least a few months. A couple students were more recent additions to my class. One student was even placed in the class in the middle of the unit. Sharing trust in the classroom has always been very important to me and I have consistently made efforts to create such a space. For my research, I chose to pay more attention to my actions in this regard so that I could reflect on them. One of the methods I use to establish trust in my classes is to get to know my students as individuals. A lot of my teaching occurs while interacting with students a small groups or one-
on-one. As such, the majority of class time is studio work time, rather than me addressing everyone at once.

Other ways I establish trust is to share parts of my own narrative with my students. They need to know that I am a person, too, and that I view my role as a teacher as more than just a job. I also employ positive reinforcement when students share their ideas and strive to expand their art making skills. I balance this with honest critiques in regards to aspects of their artwork, both conceptual and physical. My students tend to be least trusting of adults, especially teachers. This is understandable, based on the experiences many of them have had with school. When I give a positive critique, many of my students are wary that I am just being nice. To show them that I really do mean what I say, I also make sure to address any concerns with quality of work or improvements that could be made. Although some may complain that I should just let them be finished with the project—I always communicate that it is up to them to decide when they are done—they usually appreciate that I am urging them to improve.

**What curricular practices can I employ that will encourage students to share their narratives through art, text, and performance?**

Beyond establishing a space where students felt comfortable sharing their personal stories, I also needed to construct curriculum that allowed for or encouraged this to occur. I laid the groundwork with my students by discussing the notion of identity and how it is constantly shifting, rather than fixed. We viewed several artist examples. I showed them some of my art. My students and I each spent time writing about and creating visuals that represented our narratives. I then had my students create art in relation to their narratives. This will be examined more closely in the next chapter.
Is it possible that my students are already doing these things without my being cognizant of it?

When I began my research, this was the question that I asked. For all my desires to facilitate for my students a meaningful experience of self discovery or, at the very least, a better understanding of who they are, I knew that I had to at least acknowledge that these things could already be happening. In fact, I sort of knew that they were already happening on some level. I had only to observe the artwork that students were creating separate from my research to see what they were creating on their own. As I will relate in the last chapter, I amended this original question to better fit my research aims.

A final question—what is my role as an teacher, artist, and researcher?

In the process of my inquiry, I also added a fourth research question. As I delved deeper into my research, I realized that I was not just seeking to learn about my students, but I was also seeking to learn about my self. This question, listed below, is further discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 4: Findings

Shifting My Lens

At the beginning of my research, I thought I was researching my students—how to create curriculum that allowed them to add personal meaning to their art. While this is still true, I have come to realize that what I actually pursued was to understand my role as an artist, researcher, and teacher. I wanted to better understand self. While the basic premise of my investigation was the same, the lens through which I viewed it was different than what I originally believed. Even as I sought for my students to undergo a journey of self-discovery in their work, I realized the same for myself during this living inquiry. To an outside source, this fact might have been obvious. But it took me almost a year to figure it out for myself. Luckily, arts-based research
allows for one’s research questions to shift during the inquiry process (Irwin & Springgay, 2007).

Self-study is an essential part of being an educator. It is similar to autobiographical inquiry, which “opens us up to the ways we are formed and transformed, in turn helping us to better attend to and empower those in our care [such as students] that are also in the process of self-construction” (Kalin, 2013). While self-study is usually most valuable to the researcher, others can identify with aspects of the work. The nuances of one person’s experience can resonate with another and open them up to new understandings (p. 236). Additionally, by centering my self-study on my curricular practices at my particular research site, I could find and share alternate ways of conceptualizing art education (p. 236).

In the midst of my investigation in my classroom, I uncovered a personal crisis. A crisis that, if I had been honest with myself, I had been dealing with for years. I am a pretender (Francis, 2012). I am an art teacher, yet I have never truly felt like an artist. For all of the studio classes I have taken, the numerous sketchbooks I have filled, and the countless hours conceptualizing art, what have I actually done? I did not even take art until late high school after I moved to a new state—one of several moves as an adolescent—and the orchestra at the new school was barely functional, so I had an open slot in my schedule. In college, I was an English major for a while before I switched to Art History and finally Art Education. At that point, I chose not to get a BA in 3D studio, even though I was accepted into the program.

My artistic practice has been one of inquiry into themes of abandonment, place, and absence. My sketchbooks are filled with notes and drawings that relate to these themes. I have planned out artworks to create. Yet, I have difficulty transitioning the act of planning to the act of making. Instead, I feel that I have sold out in a small way by creating kitschy décor pieces that
are easy sells and, therefore, help pay the bills. While I do not condemn myself for creating items that mean little to me, I do feel a dampening of my own artistic inspiration. By the time I am done creating these items and working a full day at my high school, I have little energy for anything more inspired. “A recurring problem for arts teachers is balancing an identity as an artist with their identity as a teacher” (Graham & Goetz-Zwirn, 2010).

Just as I am seeking to create a space that allows my students to engage in the making and voicing of their personal narratives, I must do the same for myself. A/r/tography is centered on the overlapping/merged roles of the artist, researcher, and teacher. How can I exist as merely one or two of these roles? Art making could, and should, be a practice that renews an artist educator (p. 227). In turn, art making is a natural and integral part of a/r/tography.

To illustrate my struggles with the roles of artist, researcher, and teacher, I created a work that engages all three. It is a telescope of sorts, with a lens pertaining to each of the three roles (figs. 5, 6 and 7). When an individual lens is placed on the end of the telescope, a viewer sees a symbol that I have chosen for each role. The artist is represented by Pictor, or Equuleus Pictoris, the ‘painter’s easel’ constellation pierced into leather. The researcher is symbolized by a layering of notes and illustrations from my sketchbook. By layering them on vellum paper, the notes become difficult to decipher. Readers eventually give up on trying to make sense of individual phrases and instead view the lens as a collective of words and images. Finally, a tree of wisdom or tree of life representing the role of the teacher is etched into glass. Students and teachers come together in creating a shared knowledge, establishing a place of life and learning.
When all three lenses are placed together, the view through the telescope changes. Reflected along its sleek glass sides is a kaleidoscope of chaotic images. While the text and images are indecipherable as such, a new image is created altogether. Similarly, being an artist/researcher/teacher is not just the summation of all of its parts. It equals a different entity entirely. By gauging how I fit into each of the roles, I realized that the roles are not so much side-by-side, but are on top of one another—enmeshed, entwined.
A Visual Narrative Map

The most difficult part of my on-site research with my students was deciding at what point in the curriculum and with what strategies/approaches to begin. Even though I mined some artwork and observations of my participants from before I officially started my research, I wanted to make sure that I had a clear direction starting out. This thesis is kind of a big deal and I did not want to mess it up. On the other hand, I did not want to force results in a study that was intended to occur as naturally as possible.

My school has what they call “mini terms”. Every five weeks, students earn one-eighth of a credit. Four mini terms are in a semester, eight in a year. While my classes are semester-long, class populations switch drastically from mini term to mini term. I may have a student for just one or several mini terms. Oftentimes a student who is transferred out will end up back in the class at some later point. New students transfer to my school all the time and may be placed in my class well into a mini term, despite the frustration this puts on both teachers and students.

When I began my in-the-classroom research for this thesis, I had just received an influx of new students, many of whom I had taught in other classes previously. I desired to ease students into the main curricular goal of the term—exploring personal stories. With this end in mind, I looked at many artists who explored similar topics. The following artists particularly inspired me: Don Moyer, Trent Alvey, Do Ho Suh, and Joseph Cornell.

What inspired me about graphic designer Don Moyer was a timeline he created, *One Page Autobiography* (2010). Moyer is an artist known for using visual thinking as a method to address and solve problems. In this timeline, he depicted his life so far (fig. 8). His focus was on typical events such as schooling, hobbies, and employment. Although these events are less deep or meaningful from an artistic or narrative point of view, the idea of easing students into a unit
on personal identity and narrative was one that appealed to me. I did not want to overwhelm students by going too conceptual too quickly.

So, while Moyer’s visual autobiography was based on a timeline of his career and life since college, I had my students take a slightly different approach. Without explaining why, I began class by asking students to create a list of 10-20 moments, people, and events in their lives that contributed to who they are now. I gave them the example of when I was a child and discovered the abandoned house, as described at the beginning of chapter 2. Unbeknownst to elementary-aged me, the event marked the genesis of my intellectual and creative exploration. I asked students to consider, similarly, what has impacted them the most and helped form who they are. As they looked over their lives so far, what most resonated with them? Students were then to depict in a visually interesting way these events as a map or timeline.

Because I had already been interacting with these types of themes for so long, I felt a level of comfort or understanding that my students did not likely possess. As such, I did not have as high of an expectation for the time and care my students would put into this. It was my hope,
however, that they would put sincere thought into it because they knew it was important to me. I am blessed with many students who, while they may not care about the actual content of a lesson, care when I believe the assignment or unit is important. Adding to this the fact that most adolescents enjoy focusing on themselves, I was hopeful that students would do their best to take it seriously. Many of them did.

One student, Kumi, depicted his narrative map chronologically (Fig. 9). He divided his life so far into four sections: Youngin’-Life, still a Youngin’, Thug-life, and The Good Life. Kumi’s focus was on a lot of positive memories, such as his experiences with sports and places he had lived. What Kumi did not write on the timeline was that he is a ward of the state due to some crimes he had committed. After his incarceration, depicted on timeline, Kumi lived in a proctored home and was required to spend his evenings after school attending numerous therapy sessions, doing community service, and team-building activities. When I asked Kumi why he had come to the alternative high school, he said that he had struggled with grades for a while. When he spoke with the counselors at his home school about it, they suggested that the rigor of the school was too much for him. According to Kumi, these counselors suggested that he would not graduate if he stayed at that school.

Understandably, he was frustrated with this response. He was at a public school that supposedly offered students of all levels the tools to be successful. Instead, he told me, he felt like the school did not want to help him. Kumi gave up his sports to come to the alternative school. Despite that, he was positive about his future. He looked forward to graduation and eventual termination from the court system. He was excited to be reunited with his family and be able to hold a steady job to help them out financially.
Another student, Lauren, designed her narrative map to look like ocean waves (Fig. 10). She was constantly talking about the ocean. She wanted to live there some day. A lot of Lauren’s map focused on positive events, like her trips to California and love of going to concerts and meeting bands. Hidden amidst the more joyful events were two statements that, as her teacher, I knew were much more major than they appeared on the map. When Lauren came to our school in later fall last year, she was full of self-doubt. Every learning activity was a struggle for her. She truly believed that she was worthless and could not accomplish even simple tasks. I spent many hours those first months working with her during studio time to develop even a minimal level of comfort with art. Over those hours, Lauren opened up to me.

She expressed to me how dissatisfied she was with her home situation. Without revealing more than Lauren would be comfortable with, I will write that she was unhappy with the decisions her parents had and were making. She did not agree with their beliefs and felt like she was a stranger in her own home. Additionally, Lauren suffered from a crushing depression. She
alluded to it on many occasions, but one day communicated to me just how serious it was. Whatever prompted her to confide in me that day probably saved her life.

It is not my intent to focus on the terrible things that my students deal with on a daily basis, but to emphasize the importance of coming to terms with one’s past. By exploring one’s own narrative, a person can begin to understand who they are and, perhaps, why they are. I am by no means qualified in art therapy, but I see how the experience of making art has provided moments of healing for Lauren. Although we still take each day at a time, her overall demeanor has changed as she explored themes relevant to her life in her art.

Lauren still struggles every once in a while, but her confidence level in my class and with her peers has improved drastically. The treatment she receives has helped her deal with repressed feelings and her anger towards her family. I do not know if she will ever be truly happy with her life as it currently is, but she at least has supportive friends and teachers at school to get her through the bad times.

Figure 10: Lauren’s narrative map
My Narrative Map

Not only were my students beginning to explore their narratives, but I was as well. According to Kalin (2013), self-study requires individuals to attend to their processes of becoming through writing and the creation of art. As with a/r/tography, artifacts and memories are carriers of story and indicators of time and place (p. 237). As such, I endeavored to also create a narrative map (fig. 11), hoping to use it for my research, just as I planned to do with my students’ maps.

I was surprised by how difficult it was to avoid listing more cliché things that fit better on a chronology than on this list. I had to delve deep and ponder things for a while. I could not simply sit and think and write it all at once. Over the course of a few days, I added items to the list until I felt mostly satisfied. Already somewhat introverted, I found that I withdrew even more from those around me as I focused introspectively rather than on external happenings. Overall, the process was one that simultaneously clarified and clouded my understandings of self.

Figure 11: My notes for a narrative map
In deciding how I wanted to depict this information visually, I felt drawn to a 3D manifestation, rather than the 2D maps I had my students create. This draw was most likely influenced by a class I had recently taken in partial fulfillment of my Graduate degree. It was a studio class in which each member of my cohort was asked to create a reliquary under the tutelage of Jason Lanegan, a mixed media artist and gallery director at Brigham Young University. Lanegan (n.d.) studies similar themes to my own—memory and abandoned spaces/objects. His focus is on objects as means to share or create a memory and to evoke a sense of nostalgia. The interaction I had with the reliquary focused more on formal qualities, as I was new to this type of art and just learning how to build it, let alone infuse it with personal meaning. I am pleased with how it looks (fig. 12). As for significant meaning, it has none.

Reliquaries are elaborate containers created to house holy objects. This notion appealed to me as I planned my narrative map. Each event, memory, moment, and person was significant in a way that felt almost religious to me. The use of a reliquary as container/display felt right.
Indeed I was relieved to use the objects in my reliquary as symbols to both represent and obscure my meaning. Sharing my self with others is intimidating. I am an extremely private person and struggle with revealing deep things. As a result, this self-study was a hugely intimidating, but essential, process.

As I created this second reliquary (fig. 13), I felt stirrings of hope. Perhaps I really am an artist. I have always known that I can “do art”, but, as mentioned before, I have not felt like an artist in a long time, if ever. I wanted to create something that gave voice to who I am, where I have come from and lived through. While this is impossible to depict in a single rendition, the process allowed me to more profoundly understand the significance of my own lived experience, to “appreciate the extraordinary in the ordinary” (Leggo, 2007).
Preservation for the Soul

It was in the later part of my undergrad experience that I took a class from Dan Barney, entitled “Issues in Contemporary Art”. Such a broad title for a class. Among the profound discussions, research, and meeting of minds that we had in the class, Dr. Barney also had us create art. A memory of one of these projects came to me as I was planning the next step in my curriculum/research for this thesis.

Preservation for the Soul was first used in Dr. Barney’s high school classroom in the mid-90s. He had been inspired for the project by Andi Pitcher-Davis’s show at the Truman that referenced canning. Years later, Dr. Barney revived the project for my undergrad class. While my final piece was not all that great, the premise of the project was an appealing avenue for my own curriculum.

Preservation for the soul explores the notions of canning and preservation. Traditionally, this process is done with food, allowing a person to enjoy it months or years later. Canning can be done for fun or it may be done as a necessity, a fortification against starvation. When canning was first invented, it changed how people traveled, stocked up for winter, and even how they fed themselves during battle. What if the idea of canning was applied to art? If you could preserve one meaningful thing, what would it be?

That is the question I asked my students as a prompt for this assignment. I showed them examples from Trent Alvey, an artist who examines the practice of canning food. She scrutinizes the role of women and experiments with situations in which the mundane becomes the spiritual and the spiritual becomes the mundane. Her work, Shelf Preservation (Fig. 14), was at the Brigham Young University museum of art in 2013 and was a valuable discussion point for my students and I as we began the project.
My students were eager to begin this project, though a few were bewildered at the thought of using actual jars to create artwork. Instead of focusing on one particular medium, they were being asked to conceptualize an idea and then explore the manner in which they could best depict it. Each student was given their jar early so that they could visualize the space they were working with. Some individuals knew right away what they were going to do. Others struggled. The latter I worked with individually to help them develop ideas they were more or less excited about. I started piling random objects on a counter—I keep a fully stocked junk drawer—that students could use for their jars. My custodian gifted us with a box full of electrical parts from old fire alarms. Students walked the perimeter of the school grounds to find pebbles, dirt, garbage, and twigs. Miraculously, none of them got into trouble out there on their own during class—at least, none of them were caught doing anything wrong.
While students were focused on creating a visual manifestation of a concept, they were learning a number of valuable art-making skills and processes that were based on their individual needs. This was not a project where everyone was completing a similar artwork, using similar materials. The only consistency between them was the jar itself. My Art Foundations students, many of whom professed their open dislike for art, engaged with their work on a deeper level than I had ever seen with an entire class. They were totally occupied with depicting in a tangible manner an aspect of their personal narrative. It was one of the most significant experiences I have ever had as a teacher.

I have included a few of the Preservation for the Soul jars below. As a class we displayed them on shelves at the front of our school, coupled with artist statements. The students were proud to show off their work. Even Lauren, who was nervous to display anything she created, agreed to do so.

Figure 15: Student show Preservation for the Soul
Figure 16: Taylor, *Preservation for the Soul*
Artist statement: “This guitar is almost exactly like the one I own—this one only has four strings. I’ve always loved guitar. My brothers taught me, so it means even more to me. Guitar takes me to a different place when I play. It’s part of my soul.”

Figure 17: Olivia *Preservation for the Soul*
Artist Statement: “My jar represents my child, my soul. He is the most important thing in this world. Here he is sleeping under the stars.”
Figure 18: Alex Preservation for the Soul
Artist Statement: “I chose to preserve my dreams. Dreams can take you anywhere. They can be an escape, taking you away from the worries of when you’re awake. Dreams are important. When I forget them by the time I wake up in the morning, it makes me sad. I like to remember my dreams—they help me feel well rested.”

Figure 19: Lila Preservation for the Soul
Artist Statement “I chose to preserve my memories. This jar represents the memories I have with my family members, especially with my dad—he always takes me huntin’.”

More examples of students’ Preservation for the Soul projects are displayed in the appendix.
Chapter 5: Reflections and Going Forward

In Response to the Research Questions

I asked three main questions in the early stages of my research and added a fourth as I was in the midst of my inquiry:

1. As an educator, how can I create a space that allows my students to engage in the making and voicing of their personal narratives?

2. What curricular practices can I employ that will encourage students to share their narratives through art, text, and performance?

3. Is it possible that my students are already doing these things without my being cognizant of it?

4. What is my role as an artist, researcher, and teacher?

What follows is a response to each of these questions through an altered point of view, or lens, from when I first asked them.

**How can I create a space that allows students to engage in the making and voicing of their personal narratives?**

The main concern I had with creating a space for students to share their stories is that it be a safe environment. If students were not comfortable speaking up in front of the class or, at the least, did not trust me enough, this research would have turned out much differently. I purposely chose a class comprised mainly of students that I had known for at least a little while. This ensured that I already knew about them and vice versa.

Additionally, while I encouraged authentic responses from the students, I did my best not to overwhelm them with my aims. Ideas of identity and conceptual art were relatively new to most of them and they had less time to delve deeply into the research. Additionally, I understood
that some of these adolescents had severe trauma and it might have been overwhelming for them to confront it.

I did, however, encourage students to stretch beyond their comfort zones at least a little. “Anxiety is a necessary component to a truly creative experience” (Gude 2010), and some of my students were certainly anxious. They had expressed concerns at the beginning of the term that they were not artists and “cannot even draw a stick figure”, echoing those terrible words we have all heard before. Some students had even told me that they had been kicked out of previous art classes for misconduct and so had not really taken art before. When they came to my class and were asked to push themselves further artistically than they had ever anticipated. In some cases, it was almost better that many of these students did not identify as artists. Students began to realize that art did not consist solely of drawing and painting, but involved many mediums and processes. It was rewarding for me to watch their elation as they realized that they were, indeed, making art.

What curricular practices can I employ that will encourage students to share their narratives through art, text, and performance?

Beyond the issues of anxiety, comfort, and safety, I needed to facilitate actual curriculum that focused on narratives. My students and I spent a significant amount of time discussing how identity is ever changing. We looked at several artists for inspiration and examined how people’s understandings are based on their experiences. I shared a few of my own stories and encouraged students to do the same.

As far as utilizing curriculum focused on exploration of self, I am not convinced that it should be unit dedicated solely to that aim. Instead, it might occur more naturally as a thread that is referenced and explored throughout the year, alongside other foci. Several students were
saturated with the topic and eager to move on after the *Preservation for the Soul* project. I attempted to continue exploration following the success of that project and was met with some resistance. Students had put their all into the work and needed to be rejuvenated. Perhaps I simply needed to modify my approach to keep the teenagers’ interest. Then again, most of these students were new to art making and would benefit more from moving on with their studies to other aspects of the class. Whatever the case, there were moments in these several weeks that I felt a level of synergy that I will remember for the rest of my teaching career.

**Is it possible that my students are already doing these things without my being cognizant of it?**

This is kind of a tongue in cheek question. Of course students are infusing at least a portion of their work with personal narrative. It is a natural occurrence when a classroom is open enough and avoids prescriptive projects. A better question for me to have asked is: how much or in what ways are my students already exploring self and sharing their individual stories in their work?

When I interviewed my students, I asked whether or not they thought it was important for an artist to focus on their own lives as inspiration for their art. These particular interviews were conducted mid-project. I got a variety of responses. Many students vacillated between saying that personal meaning is and is not important. One student wrote that “when art is personal, it is better”. Another mentioned that while it was important, other aspects, such as art that others are doing and being inspired by nature are equally so. One student mentioned that, by focusing more on personal experiences, people would like making art more.

I asked a similar question in other interviews: what inspires your art? I was curious how many students would mention their life experiences versus other sources. Some of the most cited
inspirations involved nature, beauty, music, unconventional/quirky things they see, family members, and other artists. Several also brought up life experiences, whether they described specific event or the idea in general.

Additionally, I have only to look at student work and read their artist statements to see that they often are inspired by personal experience. One student, in particular, went through a huge life change over the nearly two years that I knew him. When he first arrived at my school, Justin was a fairly clean-cut young man who just was not interested in consistent school attendance. He came to my school for that reason only. He was a good kid who wanted to eventually become a tattoo artist or work in some other profession that involved art. It was a slow transition, his shift to drug addict and thief. After being caught smoking pot and shoplifting, Justin’s mother kicked him out of the house. He no longer had a consistent place to sleep each night, alternately between friends’ homes and parks. He became addicted to harder drugs and his whole attitude changed. Throughout it all, he somehow kept a job, which enabled him to eat dinner each night. I was privy to this information because Justin confided in me. The school was aware of this and doing their best to get him a more stable situation. Justin missed a lot of school during this time and during each long absence I would wonder if he would return. Luckily, he always did, eventually.

Justin’s transformation was evident in his art. He originally created beautiful, mimetic paintings of animals. They were not conceptually meaningful, but were something Justin enjoyed creating. He consistently asked to do alternate assignments so that he could continue in this strain. Then, as his life changed, so did his paintings (Fig. 20). They became darker, more sporadic. His absences made it more difficult for him to finish his art. His goal of being a professional artist seemed to be less important to him. The work he did complete, however,
reflected an altered perspective on life. I am not sure if the recent painting (fig. 20) is a self-portrait, but I suspect that it might be. Now, I am not seeking to deeply analyze Justin’s life shift. Instead, I am merely observing that the shift was evident in his work.

Fortunately, Justin was eventually able to move in with his uncle who, while not a great influence on him, was able to enforce more rules and inspire Justin to finish high school. Justin would pop in every day he made it to school to tell me that he was there and he would be in my class later—many of my students do that, actually. They are proud to announce their presence in the morning and throughout the day. This past year’s graduation was a joyous occasion. I am elated to say that Justin walked across that stage and received a diploma, as did over 100 others with struggles of their own. Whether or not the quality of life will improve for Justin and the others, I can only hope for the best. At the risk of sounding cliché, I hope that their experiences at this particular alternative high school and in my classroom were ones that strengthened and inspired them.

Figure 20: A comparison of a painting Justin created last year (left) and a painting he recently completed (right).
What is my role as an artist, teacher, and researcher?

As I have watched my students cope with issues and explore elements of their personal stories, it has inspired me to do the same. I am incomplete when I neglect my artist role and solely focus on the other two. It is essential to my role as teacher to also create art. On a surface level, such a practice enables me to better perform demonstrations and instruct on technical difficulties. On another level, being a practicing artist allows me to engage with ideas. I focus on a problem or question and develop it over time. “Teachers who (are) engaged with the problems arising from their own artwork (are) sensitive to the artistic challenges of their students” (Graham & Goetz-Zwirn, 2010). If an art teacher is not able to do these things in their art, then how will they genuinely assist students to do the same?

Another benefit to being an artist teacher is that it engages student interest. Most students quickly lose respect for a teacher who cannot demonstrate a deep knowledge of their subject matter. Along with being capable of doing the thing that they are teaching, or at least knowing where to attain the necessary knowledge, it is also important for an educator to show some of their own work to students. That way students view their teacher’s “willingness to work alongside (their) students and be more than the expert critic” (p. 224). Also, students will have a better understanding of where the teacher is coming from both artistically and conceptually.

Looking Forward

Previous to this thesis, I pushed my own art making to the side. I did not have time for it. Between graduate coursework and my full time and online teaching jobs as well as my little home décor business, I was physically drained. The thought of trying to make meaningful art on top of that was overwhelming. I barely had time for my family, let alone my art. By selecting a/r/tography as a methodology, I knew that I would need to create actual art. The act of creating
was something that I did rather casually, at first. Many of my projects remain unfinished. However, once I finally began conducting my on-location research within my classroom, things changed for the better. The experience meshed my research interests with my teaching practices and I found my artistic motivation growing. It is as if it came naturally with the other two. As I mentioned early in chapter 4, I have come to realize that the roles of artist, teacher, and researcher do not exist as separate entities. They are not garments to be worn at certain times, only to be exchanged for another if an occasion calls for it. These roles exist on top of one another, commingled, more like a root system than lenses on a telescope.

By conducting this a/r/tographical research, I have begun to identify myself as an artist. The process is ongoing and I may never be completely satisfied with what I produce. However, the pressure is off. I no longer feel compelled to be a producing artist for its own sake. Rather, I seek to be an artist because that is how I wish to express my story of self. For me, the process of art-making is synonymous with self-making. The issues I explored in this thesis will not disappear now that this study has concluded, but will continue to be a source for reflective practice. In fact, rather than coming to a summative conclusion, this thesis is closes on a formative conclusion. What I have studied and learned in this thesis has at once clarified my academic and personal roles and expanded my awareness of possibilities.
Appendix A

*Figure 21: Student Work, Preservation for the Soul*

Artist Statement: I chose to preserve the idea of Home. I grew up in Utah, surrounded by mountains. They are a symbol that I’m home, whenever I see them.

*Figure 22: Student Work, Preservation for the Soul*

Artist Statement: I chose to preserve the idea of my brother’s bravery. I’ve always been supportive of gay rights, ever since I was a little kid. My brother came out of the closet when I was nine, and I have had a better understanding of the issue ever since. I just feel like everyone deserves love and happiness, regardless of their sexual orientation.
Figure 23: Student Work, *Preservation for the Soul*
Artist Statement: I chose to preserve motivational words. It helps the soul in the way that you need motivation for everything. To me, you need motivation to play basketball. That’s the #1 thing. My whole jar is focused on phrases/motivational words to help you out of a slump. Remember who you are and you will do well in ball and in life. Always remember your past to make your future stronger.

Figure 24: Student Work, *Preservation for the Soul*
Artist Statement: I chose to preserve nature. The tree is all alone and shows a few things in nature that I enjoy. I like being alone in nature—it’s peaceful.
Appendix B

Consent/Assent Forms

Research Study Student Consent Form

Introduction
My name is Kellie Fay. I am a student at Brigham Young University. You are being invited to take part in a research study. I am conducting this research under the guidance of my faculty mentor, Daniel T. Burney, Associate Professor of Art Education at Brigham Young University. You do not have to be in this study if you don’t want to. To join the study is voluntary.

Purpose of Research
The purpose of the study is to help the researcher deepen her understanding of her role as an art teacher and to learn about how personal stories influence artwork and experience in the art classroom. You are being asked to take part because you are a student in the Art Foundations II art class and you have a direct association and experience within the art room several days a week. This form will tell you about the study to help you decide whether or not you want to be in it.

Procedures—What are you being asked to do?
If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will happen:

- You may be interviewed for approximately five minutes every week about your experience with personal stories and art making.
- The interview may be audio or video recorded to ensure accuracy in reporting your statements.
- The interview will take place in the art room or a quiet space in the media center at a time convenient to you during school hours.
- The researcher may contact you later in class or by email to clarify your interview answers.
- The total time commitment for you individually will be about 20-30 minutes per month until the end of the school year.

Potential Risks/Discomforts
The potential risks of taking part in this study are:

- Some social discomfort, emotional stress, or other forms of psychological distress.
- You may feel embarrassed to answer some of the questions, or feel strange having your answers recorded.
- You will have access to the counseling office if you feel overly burdened with any of the procedures from this research.

Benefits
There will be no direct tangible benefits to you. However, it is hoped that through your participation in this study, the findings from this research may influence your art making and learning experience in the classroom. Additionally, it is hoped that the research in the study will benefit the future art students at Polaris High School.
Confidentiality
When we tell other people or write articles about what we learned in the study, we won’t include your name or that of anyone else who took part in the study. You can choose a pseudonym, or codename to be used. If you don’t choose one, the researcher will do so. The data for this study will be kept by the researcher for 3 years in a secure location. The researcher won’t tell anybody that you are in this study and everything you tell her will be private. When the researcher reports what she has learned in the study, she won’t include your name or that of anyone else who took part in the study.

Participation
You do not have to take part in the study. The choice is up to you. No one will be angry or upset if you don’t want to do this. You can change your mind anytime if you decide you don’t want to be in the study anymore. You may choose not to answer any questions you don’t want to answer, and you can change your mind and not be in the study at any time without affecting your grades or standing at school.

Photo/Video Release Form
As part of this project, I will be taking photographs and video of various aspects of the research process. A release form asking for these items will be given to you.

Questions about the Research
If you have questions at any time, you can ask Kellie Fay, (801) 610-8180, kfay@alpinedistrict.org or her faculty mentor, Dan Barney, PhD, at (801)422-1581 or danielbarney@gmail.com. You can also talk to your parent about the study. We will give you a copy of this form to keep.

Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant
All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at 801-422-1461 or by email to irb@byu.edu.

Statement of Consent
I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free will to participate in this study.

Name (Print): __________________________ Signature: __________________________ Date: __________________________
Research Study Student Assent Form

Introduction
My name is Kellie Fay. I am a student at Brigham Young University. You are being invited to take part in a research study. I am conducting this research under the guidance of my faculty mentor, Daniel T. Barney, Associate Professor of Art Education at Brigham Young University. Your parent, or guardian, needs to give permission for you to be in this study. You do not have to be in this study if you don’t want to, even if your parent has already given permission. To join the study is voluntary.

Why is this study about?
The purpose of the study is to help the researcher deepen her understanding of the role of an art teacher and to learn about how personal stories influence artwork and experience in the art classroom. You are being asked to take part because you are a student in the Art Foundations II art class and you have a direct association and experience within the art room several days a week. Your parent(s) knows we are talking with you about the study. This form will tell you about the study to help you decide whether or not you want to be in it.

What am I being asked to do?
If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will happen:
- You may be interviewed for approximately five minutes every week about your experience with personal stories and art making
- The interview may be audio or video recorded to ensure accuracy in reporting your statements.
- The interview will take place in the art room or a quiet space in the media center
- The researcher may contact you later in class or by email to clarify your interview answers.
- The total time commitment for you individually will be about 20-30 minutes per month until the end of the school year.

What are the benefits to me for taking part in the study?
There will be no direct tangible benefits to you. However, it is hoped that through your participation in this study, the findings from this research will influence your art making and learning experience in the classroom. Additionally, it is hoped that the research in the study will benefit the future art students at Polaris High School.

Are there any risks to me if I am in this study?
The potential risks of taking part in this study are
- Some social discomfort, emotional stress, or other forms of psychological distress.
- You may feel embarrassed to answer some of the questions, or feel strange having your answers be recorded.
- You will have access to the counseling office if you feel overly burdened with any of the procedures from this research.
Will my information be kept private?
When we tell other people or write articles about what we learned in the study, we won’t include your name or that of anyone else who took part in the study. You can choose a pseudonym, or codename to be used, if you like. The data for this study will be kept by Mrs. Fay for 3 years. We won’t tell anybody that you are in this study and everything you tell us and do will be private. Your parent may know that you took part in the study, but we won’t tell them anything you said or did, either. When we tell other people or write articles about what we learned in the study, we won’t include your name or that of anyone else who took part in the study anymore.

Do I have to be in the study?
No, you don’t. The choice is up to you. No one will be angry or upset if you don’t want to do this. You can change your mind anytime if you decide you don’t want to be in the study anymore.

Photo/Video Release Form
As part of this project, I will be taking photographs and video of various aspects of the research process. A release form asking for these items will be given to you.

What are my rights as a research study volunteer?
Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You do not have to be a part of this study if you don’t want to. You may choose not to answer any questions you don’t want to answer, and you can change your mind and not be in the study at any time without affecting your grades or standing at school.

Who can I talk to if I have questions?
If you have questions at any time, you can ask Kellie Fay, (801) 610-8180, kfay@alpinedistrict.org or her faculty mentor, Dan Barney, PhD, at (801)422-1581 or danielbarney@gmail.com. You can also talk to your parent about the study. We will give you a copy of this form to keep.

What if I have questions about my rights as a research participant?
All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at 801-422-1461 or by email irb@byu.edu.

Statement of Consent
I give my voluntary consent to take part in this study. I will be given a copy of this consent document for my records.

Signature

Date

Institutional Review Board

Student Assent Form

4-3-2015  4-2-2016
Approved  Expires
Voices of Youth in an Alternative High School Art Class

Parental Consent for a Minor

Introduction
A research study is being conducted by Kellie Fay, a Graduate student at Brigham Young University. She is conducting this research under the guidance of her faculty mentor and thesis chair, Daniel T. Barney, Associate Professor of Art Education at Brigham Young University. The purpose of the study is to help the researcher deepen her understanding of her role as an art teacher and to learn about how personal stories influence the art making process and curriculum in the art classroom. Your child is being invited to take part in this research because she is a student in the Art Foundations II class and because she has a direct association and experience within the art room several days a week.

Procedures
If you agree to allow your child to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- This research will take place in the classroom as part of my normally scheduled curriculum
- Your child may be interviewed for approximately five minutes every week about his or her experience with personal stories and art making
- The interview may be audio or video recorded to ensure accuracy in reporting your child’s statements.
- The interview will take place in the art room or a quiet space in the nearby media center
- The researcher may contact your child later in class or through email to clarify interview answers.

Risks/Discomforts
There may be some discomfort caused by being asked some of the questions. Your child may answer only those questions that he or she wants to, or your child may stop the entire process at any time without affecting his/her standing in school or grades in class.

Benefits
There will be no direct tangible benefits to your child. However, it is hoped that through his or her participation in this study, the findings from this research will influence his or her art making and learning experience in the classroom. Additionally, it is hoped that the research in the study will benefit the future art students at Polaris High School.

Confidentiality
The research data will be kept in a secure location and only the researcher (Mrs. Fay) will have access to the data. At the conclusion of the study, all audio-recorded interviews will be deleted and the data will be kept in the researcher’s locked cabinet or office.

Compensation
There will be no compensation for participation in this project.

Institutional Review Board
BYU
4-3-2015 4-2-2016
Approved Expires
Photo/Video Release Form
As part of this project, I will be taking photographs and video of various aspects of the research process. A release form asking for these items will be given to you.

Participation
Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your child has the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to participate entirely without jeopardy to his or her class status or grade.

Questions about the Research
If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Kellie Fay at (801)610-8180, kfly@alpinedistrict.org, or Dan Barney, PhD, at (801)422-1581, danielbarney@gmail.com.

Questions about your Child’s Rights as Research Participant
If you have questions regarding your child’s rights as a research participant, you may contact IRB Administrator: (801) 422-1451, A-285 ASB Campus Drive, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602.

Child’s Name: ________________________________

Parent Name: _____________________  Signature: ____________________  Date: ____________
Photo/Video Release Form

Kellie Fay
Voices of Youth in an Alternative High School Art Class

Photographic Release Form

As part of this project, the researcher will be taking photographs and some video recordings. Please initial in the spaces below to indicate which uses of these photographs you consent to, and sign at the end of the release form. Photos will only be used in the ways you consent to. Your name will not be identified in these photos.

Student Parent (if student under 18)

1. ___ ___ Photographs/video can be reviewed by the research team.

2. ___ ___ Photographs/video can be used for project illustration.

3. ___ ___ Photographs/video can be used for classroom presentations.

4. ___ ___ Photographs/video can be used for academic conference presentations.

5. ___ ___ Photographs/video can be used for fundraising presentations/proposals.

6. ___ ___ Photographs/video can be used for newspaper or magazine publication

__________________________________________
Student Name

__________________________________________
Student Signature

__________________________________________
Parent Signature (if child under 18)
Recruitment Announcement and Email

Kellie Fay
Voices of Youth in an Alternative High School Art Class

Class Announcement for Recruitment

As many of you know, I'm currently in Graduate school at Brigham Young University. As part of that program, I must complete a research-based thesis under the direction of my faculty advisor. My thesis involves a research within this class.

The purpose of the research I've chosen to do is to help me deepen my understanding of my role as an art teacher and to learn about how personal stories influence artwork and experience in the art classroom. You are being asked to take part because you are a student in the Art Foundations II art class and you have a direct association and experience within the art room several days a week.

We will all be working on the same projects, whether you're part of the research or not. The major difference is that those who choose to be part of the research will also be interviewed and the information I learn will be included in my study.

You do not have to take part in the study. The choice is up to you. No one will be angry or upset if you don't want to do this. You can change your mind anytime if you decide you don't want to be in the study anymore. You may choose not to answer any questions you don't want to answer, and you can change your mind and not be in the study at any time without affecting your grades or standing at school.

I have a few forms for you to read and discuss with your parents. If you are under the age of 18, you will need their permission along with your own in order for me to include you in the research.

Thank you for your time and consideration.
Recruitment Email

Today I made an announcement in class in regards to research I’m conducting for my Graduate thesis. While I’ve given your child the pertinent forms for you to review, I am also emailing them to you.

The purpose of the research I’ve chosen to do is to help me deepen my understanding of my role as an art teacher and to learn about how personal stories influence artwork and experience in the art classroom. Your child is being asked to take part because he or she is a student in the Art Foundations II class and has a direct association and experience within the art room several days a week.

All students in this class will be working on the same projects, whether they’re part of the research or not. The major difference is that those who choose to be part of the research will also be interviewed and the information I learn will be included in my study.

Your child is not required to take part in the study. The choice is yours and theirs. You can change your mind anytime if you decide you don’t want your child to be in the study anymore. Your child may choose not to answer any questions that he or she doesn’t want to answer, and he or she can change his or her mind and not be in the study at any time without worry of it affecting grades or standing at school.

I have attached 2 forms for you to read and discuss with your child. One is a parental consent form, the other a photo/video release form.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Mrs. Fay
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Broadcasting Service.


Peter Lang.


