

## **Teacher as Researcher: Stepping in and having a look**

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### **Introduction**

In the following paper I will relate my experiences as a teacher researching one of the areas in which I have taught. I will document the experience of changing hats, going from the classroom back into the industry that my teaching is all about: children. I want to tell you about:

- Why I did this research: the rationale
- Wearing two hats: where I fit as a teacher/researcher
- How I did it: the challenges of methodology
- What I found: keeping my head above water

I am a teacher. Currently I am working as a researcher with the Centre Undertaking Research in Vocational Education (CURVE), at the Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT). For the past 8 years I have worked as a teacher with the Child Studies Department, CIT. I have taught the Certificate III and Diploma in Community Services (Children's Services) programs - teaching students who want to work with young children.

### **Why I did this research: the rationale**

This project developed as part of my professional development, the Research Project component of the Graduate Diploma in Tertiary Teaching and Learning.

The project was developed in this area primarily due to my interest in arts curriculum in general, that is, music and movement, dramatic play, language and literature and visual arts. In my teaching practice I focus on creativity and aesthetic awareness. Students initially explore their own creativity and aesthetic awareness, then move on to the theories and body of knowledge behind these ideas and then develop strategies to foster these ideas in the environments and programs they develop for young children.

The niggling concern that prompted the research originated from conversations with a colleague sitting opposite me. We started to question whether what we were teaching was generally being transferred out into the child-care industry. We sometimes felt

that the students we visited on practicum placements were not putting into practice their knowledge about creative, aesthetic and sensory development. Their programs were sometimes lacking in the realisation of this knowledge, not connected to it, it was not part of their thinking. Sometimes we also felt that the children's services we visited lacked this connection. We began to wonder:

- How is what we are teaching being manifested in actual child-care services?
- Has there been a transfer of knowledge into practice?
- If not, have we got the teaching strategies right?

This reflection is different to what Schon speaks about in his paper *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (1987:3). Schon refers to a teacher's *capacity to respond to surprise through improvisation on the spot* as *reflection-in-action*. The reflection my colleague and I encountered was a reflection-post-action. Patton (1990:7) refers to the nature of research questions when he quotes from Halcolm's Evaluation Laws: *When in doubt, observe and ask questions. When certain, observe at length and ask many more questions*. I was certainly concerned and this prompted many more research questions, including:

- What perceptions of creativity do child-care professionals have?
- How do they perceive aesthetic awareness?
- How do they develop creativity and aesthetic awareness in young children?
- How in particular, do they develop creativity and aesthetic awareness in their visual arts programs?
- What do they perceive as the value of visual arts for young children?
- What do they do in visual arts?

My purpose in opening this Pandora's box of questions was to find out not just what happens in services, but to examine the thinking behind what happens, that is, what drives child-care practice in the creative arts area. This was where the help of my teacher was useful, chiselling the project down to a more manageable size. To explore what was happening in children's services in relation to creative and aesthetic development, was just too big for the scope of the research project I was to undertake. The solution was to narrow the study down to look at creativity in relation to visual arts: to understand what was happening and why it was happening. What do child-care professionals think creativity in relation to visual arts actually is? My research project became - *Creativity in visual arts: perceptions of child-care professionals*.

### **Wearing two hats: where I fit as a teacher/researcher**

In order to find the answers to my questions I had to don another hat. I had to become a researcher. It is this dual role, or identity that I would like to explain here:

- What do I as a teacher take with me to the research field?
- How I function as both?
- How I manage the two hats?

In my first experience at the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA) conference earlier this year I attended a workshop presented by Mike Brown. Brown presented a framework to guide VET teachers in their postgraduate efforts as *practitioner researchers*. He handed out a very useful paper on his topic to which I now refer (2004). What is useful about this framework

(figure 1) is that it acknowledges the unique context of the VET teacher/researcher and the *competing discourses* in which this creature exists. The teacher who does research goes into the field with their own values, work practices and knowledge, they cannot be separate from who they are. They go in with an essentially subjective view that cannot be denied. Brown's framework brings the teacher, as a subjective package, out into the open and by doing so helps to justify their unique position.

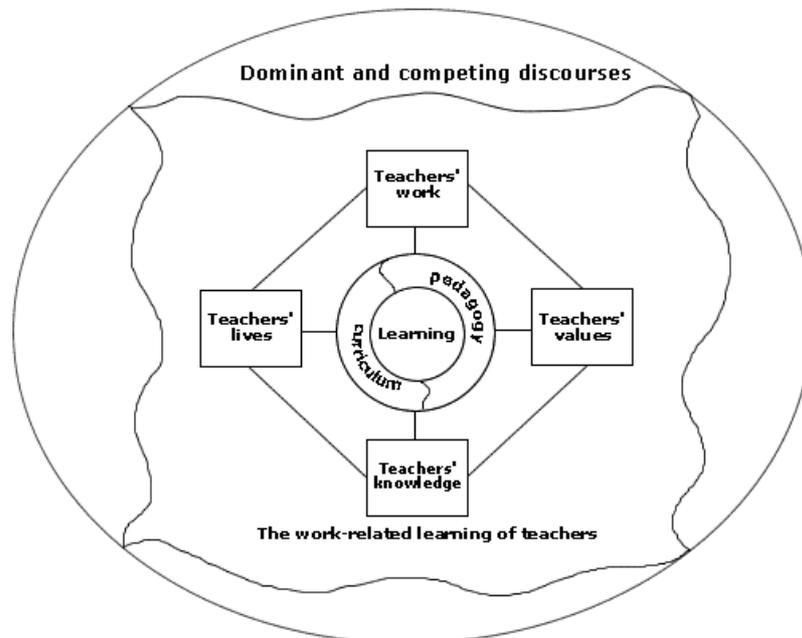


Figure 1: *Proposed framework to guide the practitioner research of VET teachers (Brown, 2004:7)*

### **Learning**

The core of this framework is learning. My central concern is also learning. More specifically: has what has been taught actually been learnt, taken on-board and practised? This central point of learning can also be viewed in a cyclical sense, where the findings of my research will influence future teaching and learning practice in the classroom.

### **Curriculum and Pedagogy**

The next section of Brown's framework (2004:2) describes the dual role of curriculum and pedagogy. These terms are directly connected to the learning, they are the planning and doing of learning. The goal of the curriculum or plan of my Visual Arts classes was to achieve the competencies around fostering children's aesthetic and creative development and providing opportunities and experiences to enhance children's development (Child Studies Department, 2003). The pedagogy, putting the plan into action, the teaching and learning strategy was the niggling concern that prompted my research.

### **Teacher's Knowledge**

In his framework Brown (2004:3) also refers to the specialist knowledge teachers have when they interpret, develop and enact the curriculum. In terms of this project, this is my knowledge of child development, the importance of play and how children learn. But it is also my knowledge and experience of engaging young adults in the learning process, that is, catering for learning styles and the communication and

transparency of assessment tasks. Brown also talks about the interpretations teachers make about what the learning outcomes *actually mean in a range of workplaces* (2004:3). What guided the learning experiences I set up for the students in my classes has been my experience working in a child-care centre, visiting students on practicum placement and delivering in-services to child care professionals. This has added to the complexity of what knowledge means for this VET teacher and researcher.

### **Teacher's Work**

In addition to referring to Chappell and Johnson's (2003, in Brown) research into the changing nature of VET practitioners' work and the expansion of job roles, Brown also refers to their discussion about the dual identity of VET practitioners. This dual identity separates the complexity of teacher's knowledge as discussed previously, so that VET practitioners have an educational identity and an industry identity. Not only am I, for instance, an educator revelling in theories of pedagogy and best practice, but I am also preparing learners for the practical realities of the child-care industry. This duality of identity is part of what I have found difficult when discussing the meaning of my research project findings: being faithful to both identities.

### **Teacher's Lives and Values**

Here Brown (2004:5) talks about the disposition of the teacher, their interest, attitude and values. What, of a teacher's life history, experience, and social interactions, makes them who they are. Brown also points out the importance of the connection between the question the teacher is researching and their disposition. The content of what I am researching, that is, children, creativity, learning and visual arts matter to me. I also value early learning and how children learn. Prentice (2000:147) talks about the necessity of *early years educators to articulate the significance of early learning in the wider context of lifelong learning*. Prentice explores the notion that young children need to be initiated into the ways of learning, so that they are equipped with an understanding and a capacity to learn. It's not just what you learn, the content, it's how you learn, how you are taught, what you experience as part of that learning process.

The other point I value and take with me as a researcher, is a creative approach to learning, particularly at a young age. Defining what I mean by this creative approach to learning is difficult. Prentice describes this very difficulty by referring to creativity as *a complex and slippery concept* (2000:145). Due to the difficulty of defining it, creativity is also used as an excuse for having an *ill-disciplined, anything-goes philosophy* (Guardian, 1999, in Prentice). Fryer (1996, in Prentice) identifies the relevant criteria of creativity as including *a sense of curiosity and wonder, inventiveness, flexibility, exploratory behaviour, imagination and originality*. Having a creative approach to learning, therefore, involves an open-ended process of exploration, playing with and manipulating materials, engaging with what is real and what is imagined and reflecting on what you've done. If you equip young children with a creative approach to learning they will not only use this strategy to cope with the changing world of work and society, that Chappell and Johnson refer to, but actively, positively contribute to it. De Mille talks about the characteristics of creativity in terms of abilities and his words although from 1967 have particular poignancy today.

*Good judgement, originality, fluency and flexibility of thought, the ability to redefine situations or see their implications – such qualities are prized in human society. In everyday life, they reap rewards of wealth, responsibility or prestige. In times of peril, they may determine who will survive and who will not. Teaching these abilities should be a major purpose of education. (de Mille, 1967)*

## **How I did it: the challenges of methodology**

### **Quantitative versus qualitative**

As I wanted to understand what was happening in relation to creativity and visual arts in children's services and why it was happening, I felt I was already leaning towards a qualitative approach. But before coming to this decision I also investigated what the quantitative approach might look like. I thought about:

- designing a questionnaire around the issues identified in the many research questions
- sending this out to a large number of services in the ACT and then
- trying to make sense and gain value from an analysis of the data I might collect.

But I then considered the nature and typical working day of the child-care professionals I would be surveying. Many child-care professionals are in the industry because of their practical skills and abilities in working with, caring for and educating young children. The emphasis of these skills is practical, hands-on, verbal rather than written. Would I get accurate, complete and in-depth answers to my questions by using a style of research that does not connect to these skills? Also would a piece of paper, another form to be filled in, be as effective as personal, face-to-face interviews, brief chats on the job and observations of their programs in action? I thought not.

### **Establishing the Parameters**

I'd established the core question: What perceptions do child-care professionals have of creativity in relation to visual arts? And I'd established that I wanted the rich detail to help me understand the what and the why. The other parameters that I had to consider were the age groups, i.e. infants, toddlers, pre-school or young school age children; and the number of services in the ACT. The alarm bells of size were ringing in my ears, but I still wanted to capture a feeling of the place, the context for the answer to my question. I decided to look holistically at two services. That is, asking my question across the infants, toddler and pre-school age groups in two different children's services.

### **Ethnography: the best fit**

*Qualitative inquiry cultivates the most useful of all human capacities – the capacity to learn from others.* Again dipping into Halcolm's Evaluation Laws quoted by Patton (1990:7), this rationale of utilising what is human to learn from others links to the nature of what I wanted to research. Guba (1981:77) also discusses the importance of matching the method of research to the nature of the research topic. Which assumptions inherent in a particular method of research *offer the best fit to the phenomenon under study?* Glesne (1999:9,10) describes the ethnographic form of qualitative research as being immersed, or *hanging out* in the community in which the research is taking place. This form of qualitative research, being immersed in the

setting, seemed to fit best with what I wanted to explore. By setting up camp, being part of the services, albeit, for a limited time, I hoped to be able to:

- find out the thinking that is behind the programs that are developed
- see the implementation of these programs within the setting of the individual services
- observe the participation of the children and the carers in the programs' experiences and
- observe how the carers and children influence each other through their involvement in the creative and aesthetic processes of the visual arts experiences.

The direction of these ideas follows, in part, Glesne's description of an ethnographic research style. Glesne talks about the ethnographic research style as including the following elements: the motivation and perceived rewards of the participants; the cultural context of the study; and the participants' cross-cultural experiences (Glesne, 1999:10). The areas I wished to explore paralleled Glesne's discussion, for example, the motivation point linked to my wanting to understand the thinking behind the programs that had been developed; the cultural context connected to my observation of the programs in the individuality of different services; the cross-cultural aspects would be explored as the carers, the designers of the programs, interacted and reacted to their colleagues, the children for whom the programs were designed and to the expectations of the parents and broader community.

The intention of this study was not to provide conclusive data from which broad statements could be made for creativity in relation to visual arts across children's services in the ACT. Rather, the intention was to explore the perceptions of creativity child-care professionals in two services had in relation to visual arts. The qualitative approach will enable me to explore these perceptions within a specific context, rather than developing statements that have general applicability.

### Triangulation and credibility

Triangulation was used to provide the required credibility for the study. Guba (1981:87) discusses the use of triangulation to establish credibility, particularly for qualitative methods. Guba states that *collecting data from a variety of perspectives [and] using a variety of methods* is part of providing credibility. In my study I used this triangulatory approach by including the different perspectives from the carer, the program and the child (figure 2).

What perceptions of creativity do child-care professionals have in relation to visual arts?

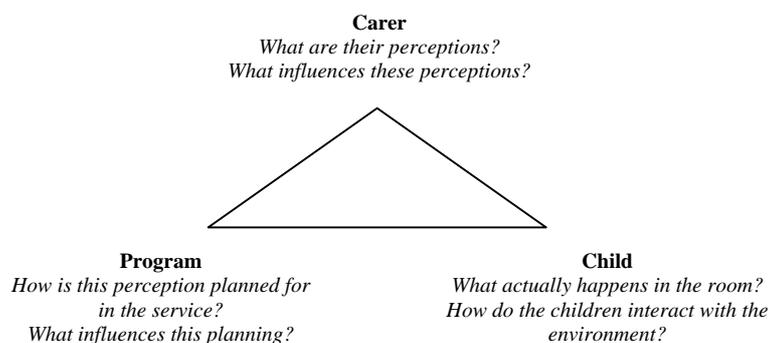


Figure 2: Triangulation of questions

The perceptions of creativity in relation to visual arts the carers described initially were followed up by questions about the influences on these perceptions. The carers were then asked to describe how their perceptions were planned for in the service, the influences on this planning and examples of actual programs were collected. Finally observations were taken of programs in action. I recorded examples of actual environments, experiences and the interactions children had with each other, the environments and the carers.

### **Ethics**

The ethical issues that emerged in a study such as this were varied. In the first instance informed consent had to be obtained from the services willing to participate, to allow me to be on the premises, taking time to observe, take notes, discuss with and possibly photograph what I saw. Informed consent was also required from the parents of the children who might be involved through conversation, photographs and my presence in their lives. Glesne (1999:116-129) describes the empowering nature of such consent, that the participants are not only aware of the study and what their involvement means but that there is a mutual respect.

The other main issue concerned my reasons for doing this research. The directors and child-care professionals needed to be assured that their integrity was not under threat. They needed assurance that by consenting to be involved in the study they would not be deceived by any misuse or misrepresentation of what they were prepared to share with me (Glesne, 1999:124-125). This issue also added complexity when I later recorded my findings and attempted to discuss what it all meant.

### **What I found: keeping my head above water**

#### **My experiences in the field**

In order to conduct my research I spent 8 blocks of time, 3-4 hours each, in 2 child-care centres. These blocks of time were spent walking around the services, taking photos, speaking to child-care professionals ranging from Level 1-4, full-time and part-time, as well as Directors and children, looking through programs, evaluations and service philosophies.

Collecting information whilst child-care professionals were feeding children, setting up environments, washing dishes, changing nappies, programming and spending time with children, proved to be a time consuming task. What was useful about this approach though, was that I felt more and more part of the furniture, as I would retrieve lost balls, help set up high chairs and talk to children about the flowers they were admiring from the garden. The ethnographic approach does take time, but the time spent produced insightful information about the services culture, the child-care professional, the children and the environment in which they work.

Technology has been a useful and frustrating tool. The tape player that stopped recording, another that sped up too much so that when transcribing what was recorded the voices evolved into high pitched squeals. The camera was useful, although children want to perform in front of it, which sometimes skewed the objectivity of what was captured. The most useful tool was the pen and paper, although I could never write fast enough.

### Establishing the categories

Transcribing the discussions of 25 carers was a daunting task. Whilst transcribing, I started to see glimpses of possible categories and themes that ran through much of the talking. I ended up with 50 pages of transcribed notes. The approaching task of writing up my findings was akin to an acute sense of drowning. It was then that I was directed to the writing of Margot Ely et. al. I found solace and comfort in the idea that I was not alone in my procrastination or my *skilfully organised avoidance*. (Hinojosa, 1993, in Ely). Ely's chapter on interpreting was useful, particularly the sections that discussed how to establish categories. *Creating categories, subcategories, and discovering their links brings a researcher into intimate re-acquaintance with the data* (Ely, 1993:145). In retrospect the idea of pre-organised categories seemed a good idea. But as I did not have that luxury I started the reading and re-reading process that helped to identify the underlying similarities.

### Some examples of the findings

It is not my intention here to provide the complete details of my findings, but rather my experience of being a VET teacher and researcher. With that in mind I would like to share some of the examples I witnessed when I was part of the furniture. These examples also demonstrate the challenge I have had to face when attempting to categorize such diversely detailed responses to the 3 points of triangulation.

#### Carers

Comments by child-care professionals on their perceptions of creativity in relation to visual arts:

- What is pleasing to the eye is individual.
- Children turn it into what they see.
- Visual arts is everywhere, it is part of daily life, the natural environment, eye-catching clothes, books, the colours on the toy trucks, even the colours and textures of the fruit bowl.
- Being creative in visual arts is being prepared to get messy, making something out of nothing.
- Open.
- The senses.
- It's important that children make decisions about what they like, that it is not made for them.
- They just do it.

#### Programs

Child-carers' recollections of previous experiences:

- Exploring soft and hard by eating and squishing the sultanas.
- Handprints in the bathroom after finger painting. *Child*: I just put my hand there to see what it looked like. Children seeing the colours mix, watching the paint run off their hands under the tap.
- Making play-dough with the children – warm in the winter morning.

- Figure 3 - *The Canvas* started as education process for parents valuing toddler's work. It developed into a group project where the children talked about and tried colours, used brushes and their hands. In small groups the children reflected on what they had done.



figure 3 - *The Canvas*

#### Program evaluations:

- Too much paint was used in the tennis ball prints, need closer supervision, one child painted the couch.
- A child was very interested in the Aboriginal art exhibition, she talked about her favourite pictures.
- Reminders not to eat the textas.
- Some of the experiences did not eventuate due to lack of time and the immediate physical and emotional needs of the children.
- Drawing – lots of controlled movements, a child zig-zagged across the page as if writing, another child was interested in the carer's pen.

#### Children

*The Paint Pot* is an interaction with a child, the carer and the black paint pot being used for cotton bud painting. A child was using the container to explore the paint and was putting his hands in the pot of paint – covering his hands.

*Carer:* Do you want to see what happens when you put your hands down? *The child had painted his hands with the black paint.*

*Carer:* How does it feel?

*The child was looking with intense concentration at his black hands, turning his hands over. He then started to apply the paint up his arm.*

*Carer:* When you start painting your arms we have to stop – it's finished now.

*Collage Collaboration* was a collaboration between 2 children at the collage table.

This was their dialogue:

That one.

Ha ha look at this jungle.

There rip!!

Now another one.

No not yet, me!! I've still got this. (*a purple ribbon*)

No that's too long.

Oh!! That's beautiful.

What about this? (*shiny yellow paper*).

Then we put that there!! (*the purple ribbon*)

We need to do yellow.

## Conclusion

My next challenge is to finish the report, do battle with the *competing discourses* (Brown, 2004) and discuss what I have found with my colleagues in the Child Studies Department, with carers in the child-care industry and people who work with young children. I have operated as a VET teacher, with pedagogical and industry identities and as a researcher. My dilemma in writing up the report has been how to remain ethical and true to all the hats. This dilemma has forced me to ask the following questions:

- How do I stick to my ideals as a teacher wanting to enhance the creative and aesthetic awareness of young children?
- How do I provide constructive support to child-care professionals who work in a poorly paid, low status job that much of society still perceives as babysitting?
- How do I report the breadth of my findings so that they can be of use?

The Pandora's box is still being opened. I have learnt much and am still learning from working on and trying to complete this project as a teacher researcher. The essence or core of my learning has been about people, learning from them, trying to understand them and how they deal with what Prentice (2000, p. 145) calls that *complex and slippery concept*, creativity.

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