The people of the school: Problematising remote teacher educator identity, reflexivity and place

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Abstract

This paper offers the research story of my artistic and analytic practices in a remote Indigenous teacher education setting in Central Australia. In this hybrid arts-based research text (Barone & Eisner 1997), I use portrait painting, narrative and analysis to explore my encounters, as both teacher educator and visual artist, with the people of the school, and examine the impact of shifting between these identities on my pedagogical practices as a teacher educator. I explore the ways in which operating as an artist problematised my educator identity: how it embodied my knowledge of the dynamic, social and multiple nature of identity (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011) and challenged the tacit knowledge and perspectives I brought to the remote setting and to my interactions with staff, children and families.

The three pairs of paintings and narrative fragments presented derive from a portraiture project undertaken in 2014. The pairs and commentary present a range of perspectives on the complexity of professional identity and practice, and offer insights into the experience of thinking differently through arts-based research practices. I draw out three dimensions of thinking differently – looking differently, seeing differently and being differently – and highlight the value of foregrounding such perceptual and ontological questioning practices in our work as teacher educators.

Figure 1: Canasia's Picture: Oil on Linen: 60x90cm

Narrative 1. What I thought the project was going to be about – Growing our Own room, October 2011

We're poring over a sprawling concept map that's edging off the sides of the A3 paper and snaking around its title: Communication Systems Analysis of Ltyentye Apurte Catholic Education Centre. I've taught the communication unit to urban students and wasn't prepared for the energy that's building during this task as the six Indigenous preservice teachers add more and more boxes for parents, siblings, clinic staff, new teachers; as they draw arrows between the boxes and within them too; as they discuss how to show how some people are in more than one box; as they colour code and size the arrows to show how important the communication between different groups is, and how well it's currently happening.

'Don't forget the Sports and Rec people, the pool!' Marcus says. That was his job before he started work at the school.

Kirsten finds a spot to write it in, and more connections are made. We pause and look at all the people of the school.

'That's massive,' I say.

'Of course,' they say.

Figure 2: *Anna and the Bush Medicine (Aherne Intenke): Oil on linen: 76x51cm*

Narrative 2. Anna, assistant teacher and ex-preservice teacher, 2014

We're walking around the school at recess and find a small clump of mistletoe that has some old berries still clinging in places (snotty gobbles, people call them here). Years before, Anna had her own class, Year 4s, which some of my preservice teachers were in. They told me how inspiring she was, taking them out bush to teach them about the bush tucker and bush medicine, bringing things back to the nature table, writing labels in Arrernte, learning. I want to paint that into her picture somehow.

'This is no good,' Anna said, flicking at the dusty plant.

So we drive out at lunchtime to find somewhere better, where there might be flowers as well as berries and bush medicine as well as bush food. I'm full of attention driving these unfamiliar bush tracks, not going too fast, not missing the fork Anna directs me down with a flap of her hand. I'd have no idea how to get back if I was on my own.

'Here's good.'

We pull over by a larger looking shrub. I can't see any flowers on it but there's some mistletoe with bright red berries close by.

'With these behind,' she raises her hand towards a ridge line of hills, 'They've got lots of meaning to people here.'

Figure 3: *The Conversation:* Oil on linen: 51x91cm

Narrative 3. Breakfast

I'm turning left and walking towards the canteen, a different route from the usual right turn towards the staffroom. I'm strangely nervous: it feels like my first day here. Juggling cameras (is two too many? do I have the right lenses on? should I keep it on aperture priority or play safe and just go to auto?) and sketchbook (is it too big? what other images are in it?) and phrases to introduce who I am, what I'm doing. I'm not exactly regretting starting this thing, but really want the beginning part to be over.

There are children and dogs around the picnic tables and along the canteen wall by the hatch. Inside, shadows of adults serving out mugs of milo, bowls of cereal, plates of toast. I nod as I get closer, smile.

'Werte,' I say, nodding again.

'Hello,' one of the medium-sized boys says.

'I'm Dr Al,' I say. 'I've been working with Marcus and Viv and Kuman,' I say.

They wait.

'But I'm also a painter.' There, it's done now.

Rationale for this approach

Blurring the boundaries between the arts and sciences in educational research allows for different insights and for accessibility to people beyond the traditional research audience. This fits with my aims to speak to an expanded audience of educational practitioners and participants and to try to see with eyes other than those of a researcher or teacher. Arts-Based Research in Education (ABER) offers new perspectives and generates new questions. It has its foundations in John Dewey's contention that we need to recognise the emotional and experiential basis of knowing as key for learning (Dewey, 1934) and reflects the post-modern turn in its hybridising of the arts and science genres in order to gather data and present findings in more penetrating and widely accessible ways (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008, p. 3). The aesthetic design qualities that characterise both the research process and product in ABER, foreground the embodied aspects of thought that are neglected in most traditional research processes. In tune with its post-modern context, ABER does not search for universal certainties, but *“moves to broaden and deepen ongoing conversation about educational policy and practice by calling attention to seemingly commonsensical, taken-for-granted notions”* (Barone & Eisner, 1997, p. 96). By looking at things differently, spaces and depths open up in which we can ask previously unasked questions and see previously unacknowledged connections.

My work on this project follows contemporary Australian artist and theorist Ross Gibson's (2010) formulation that art as research occurs when we intentionally seek a purposeful experience which results in a shift in understanding and a capacity to account for that shift. This research text uses a modified form of Eisner's educational criticism framework (Eisner, 1991) which first works to make vivid an experience, then interprets, evaluates and attempts to draw out broad themes and to locate the experience in the context of such wider concerns. While educational criticism traditionally uses narrative as the vehicle for depicting experience, my pairing of paintings with narrative fragments aims to fulfil Barone and Eisner's criteria for effective arts-based educational research: to illuminate previously unnoticed phenomena, to promote questions, to tightly focus on educationally significant issues and to be relevant to things beyond itself (Barone & Eisner, 1997).

Background and context

The forty paintings and sixteen narrative fragments of the 2014 project came from my observations of, and participation in, the complex web of identities that constitutes a school. I have been delivering undergraduate and continuing teacher education on site at Ltyentye Apurte Catholic Education Centre in remote Central Australia since 2010 as part of the Catholic Education Office-Charles Darwin University partnership offering remote Indigenous preservice teacher education, *Growing our Own* (GOO). During this time the richness and diversity of the individual and social identities of the children, staff and families were revealed through their embodiment in the day to day interactions in the school setting. I embarked on the project because I was interested in looking at the school and its people differently, through a lens other than that of the teacher educator which was my role there. I wanted to see another side of Ltyentye Apurte and its people, and to connect as a painter, as well as a teacher, with a place that had become a significant aspect of my work and commitment to Central Australia, its people and their educational opportunities. I was surprised to find that my own encounters with the contingent identities of teacher educator, and teacher and painter became central to my exploration of the people of the school: I began to see in different ways the places that I inhabited as one of 'the people of the school', and the ways in which my different identity positions affected my work as a teacher educator there.

The leadership of the school supported the project idea, so I talked to staff and families about the project, the exhibitions and the consent form they would sign if they were interested in participating. I arranged my weekly workshop timetable so that I could spend time drawing and photographing during the children's classes and other activities. I also worked with some classes on interpreting images I'd created and creating their own representations of their relationship with the school. I talked with people about their attitudes towards the school community and made notes of what they said. I held three mini-exhibitions at the school; near the start, towards the end and at the end of the project, set up to coincide with family days at the school, so as many people as possible could come. I also used these events as an opportunity to talk with families about the project and gain consent for paintings I wanted to work up from my sketches and photographs. Two further exhibitions occurred, one at the regional Araluen Arts Centre in Alice Springs and one at the Nan Geise Gallery at Charles Darwin University in Darwin.

Findings: Looking, seeing and being differently

I chose these three images from the collection because they spoke strongly to me about the relationship between my teacher educator and painter identities at different stages of the project. All have subjects in them who were preservice teachers at some point in my work at the school, and chronologically they come from the start of the project (Canasia's Picture), the middle (Anna and the Bush Medicine [Aherne Intenke]) and the end of the project (The Conversation). The narrative fragments I paired with the images have correspondences of theme and subject matter and set up a range of resonances that intend to open up and deepen the reader's interpretive response. I want to avoid positioning either the narrative or the image to operate as explication of the Other, but to offer a range of embodied ways of thinking about the content and themes presented. They are not intended to offer universal truths but offer opportunities to *"see educational phenomena in new ways, and to entertain questions about them that might otherwise have been left unasked"* (Barone and Eisner, 1997, p. 96). From my own interpretations of the pairs, the themes of looking-differently, seeing-differently and being-differently emerged as a valuable frame through which to think about the ways in which educators' professional identities impact on our professional knowledge, engagement and practice and how problematising professional identity can enhance our work.

Looking differently: 'Canasia's Picture' and 'What I thought the project was going to be about - Growing our Own room, October 2011'

'Canasia's Picture', of a former student of mine and her daughter, was one of the earliest paintings I made. Karina left the course because of family demands but still worked as an assistant teacher in the classroom next door to Canasia. I asked Karina what it was like having her youngest child next door and painted some of her words into the image. I was less confident with text in this first attempt, experimenting with size, shape and clarity, as while I was determined to inscribe her words and the feeling in them for me, I was unsure how authentic or appropriate this might be. As Barthes cautions, I wanted to avoid simply turning her subjectivity into an "object at the disposal of the Other" (2000, p. 15). I wanted her view of the school community as well as mine, so the painting would offer multiple angles on the relationship networks that made up the school. I also wanted to look differently myself, not only as Dr Al from the university who came once a week with all her papers and books to teach the teachers, but as a painter and drawer with a camera and a sketchbook. I wanted to look at the relationship between Karina and Canasia differently. Not just as something that may have led to Karina dropping out of her studies.

There's a network of gazes within 'Canasia's Picture', and between the image and the viewer. Karina is intent on Canasia, who is contemplating the viewer with a mixture of apprehension, enquiry and confidence, confident in the embrace of her mother, and firmly and evenly holding up for view her own image of a person looking out. We wonder who the person in her drawing is, how she expects us to interpret it. The image of Karina seems to be missing so many of the elements we might usually expect to convey her identity: she's turned away from us so we can't see into her eyes and much of her body is obscured by Canasia and her picture, but she is nevertheless very strongly there in her relationship with her child and her child's relationship with the viewer.

The feeling in the narrative is very different from the quietness of the painting. Here there's an energy that builds in the students creating the network that seems almost overwhelming for the narrator. The extended sentence describing the scale and complexity of the map is exhausting to read, as exhausting as the awareness of how much there is to see when you look differently. And perhaps that's one of the reasons we often don't look differently, because of the vulnerable position it puts us in, of suddenly noticing things we haven't seen before, inhabiting a perspective that shows us different things and which demand a different kind of response.

Looking differently was the start of everything. At a simple level, I found myself looking differently at the people I was talking to, even when it was not about my art project. I was mapping the contours of their face, registering a distinctive gesture or stance, noticing the colour and shape of a shadow thrown by a nose or a bottom lip. I think I started speaking a bit less too, and listening differently, listening with my eyes as it were, in these conversations. It made me think of a comment from years before with the GOO students, about how many words white people use, especially in staff meetings, and how we're not so good at paying attention to the small gestures and other communications that all the Indigenous staff would pick up on. When drawing or painting, I was noticing that I was looking. As a painter I had to choose how to look, as a primary decision. As an educator, choosing how to look seemed a secondary thing, or something I would take for granted. As a painter I was not 'looking for' something, in the way I did when working with students, when I would look to see how they were responding to a particular learning activity. By not 'looking for', I was creating space for things to draw attention to themselves, things I might not have otherwise paid attention to, things that perhaps challenged what I thought I was looking at. Edward De Bono (2015) contends to be innovative in our professional practice, whether it is problem-solving or working to add value to what we do, we first need to perceive differently. Without such a first step in the way we organise our encounter with the world, we will stay trapped in automatic ways of thinking about things, or what De Bono calls the "rock logic" of information processing as distinct from the "water logic" that is the fluidity of multiple perceptions (2015, p. 98). Working as a teacher I need to be wary of such automatic thinking, the tacit knowledge and assumed norms that are a barrier to my engaging effectively with my students, especially in a bi-cultural setting. When looking as a painter, I had intended to serve the first of bel hooks' functions of art as "aesthetic intervention" (Leavy, 2015, p. 228): I had wanted to present images of how social life was for people differently located in the social order. I had not expected this other way of looking to also serve hooks' second function: to defamiliarise and create space for alternate ways of knowing (hooks, 1995).

Seeing differently: 'Anna and the Bush Medicine (Aherne Intenke)' and 'Anna, assistant teacher and ex-preservice teacher, 2014'

Anna's words in the narrative are evaluative, and concise to the point of terseness: "no good ... here's good ... lots of meaning to people here". They contrast with the language of the narrator,

which is descriptive, working hard to evoke a picture of the scene with strings of common nouns, adjectives and metaphors, and also conditional, *“I want to paint that into her picture somehow”*, foregrounding the narrator’s unsureness, and her attentive silence in response to Anna’s statements. The narrator’s response to the unfamiliarity of the bush track can also read as a metaphor for other journeys this painting project is taking her on. Her attentive silence in response to Anna’s words keep open the interpretive spaces and depth Anna’s few words create. In the painting too, Anna’s words occupy multiple spaces concurrently: the story they tell seems first to be almost lost in the bush, whose name figures so prominently in the painting’s title. Their neutral colour tone, like that of the bush medicine, is in quiet contrast to the vibrancy of the magentas and blacks of Anna’s figure. And yet these words and the bush cover nearly two thirds of the canvas; the viewer cannot help but see them, even when looking directly at Anna, who is positioned behind, and partially obscured by them. The looseness of the painting of the foreground foliage and the ridgeline in the background contrasts with the precision of the human figure these elements envelope. As the eye moves between the three elements, the landscape, with all its spaces, seems to become more and more integral to what this image is saying.

Looking differently gave me new things to see, and often I was not sure what to ‘make of’ what I was seeing. I would shake my head and say to myself, “I really don’t see”. I knew I did not understand things in the way I usually understood things. As a teacher, I needed to feel I understood things in order to interact with them: I didn’t feel comfortable with not knowing, and would question and reformulate in order to ‘work things out’. I could empathise with my preservice teachers’ anxiety about ‘knowing enough’ in order to teach. And yet I would challenge them about ‘how much was enough?’ because teaching is so much more than being knowledgeable. Working concurrently as both a painter and a teacher made me confront the fact that I didn’t need to understand in order to ‘see’ Anna’s relationship with the land. She didn’t need me or want me to understand it in the way she understood it, knowing that was beyond my understanding because of who I was and where I came from. She just wanted me to see it. Similarly, I didn’t need to understand her story about teaching bush tucker and all the ways it connected in order for it to change what I knew, what I saw. I could encounter something that I could not make clear sense of, and instead of striving to make it fit my understanding, I could let my not understanding work to broaden my knowledge. The knowing and the not-knowing could co-exist. The Romantic poet Keats valued this state of apprehension, calling it the “negative capability”, *“when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”* (1899, p. 277). More recently, Helen Verran describes a similar experience, as an interruption of *“disconcertment”*, of *“registering both sameness and difference, of being like and being Other ... source of both clear delight and confused misery”*, which, she contends, *“must be privileged and nurtured, valued and expanded upon ... as a sure guide in struggling through colonizing pasts and in generating possibilities for new futures”* (Verran, 2001, p. 6). We need to accept and embrace these ambiguous moments of disconcertment in our work as teacher educators: to avoid giving in to the need to explain them away and offer simple solutions, either to our students’ quandaries, or to our own. We know the complexity and conditional nature of professional practice means there are no silver bullets or effective rules-based decisions. We are in Schon’s swampy lowlands of practice, unable to see very far in any direction, as distinct from his high hard ground of theory where we can see so much more (Schon, 1987). We need to know this differently, however, to be reminded of this in an experiential and embodied way in our day to day practice in order to operate more effectively and authentically as teacher educators.

Being differently: 'The Conversation' and 'Breakfast'

It was Viv who suggested his portrait should be of Marcus and him: if the paintings are all about the school community, he said, then some of that community happens when he and Marcus meet with each other at recess or lunch for a coffee and a chat about the day. I knew then that the words of their conversation were going to be integral to the painting. So as they sat at the picnic table outside the staffroom I audio-recorded their conversation about their hopes for the school's future. I had intended to use this time to plan the composition and make some sketches and photographs, but ended up simply listening to their talk about their own plans and intentions for the following year. Both were at turning points: Viv as a newly qualified teacher, about to "step up" in his words, into a new position of responsibility in the community as well as at the school; Marcus as a recent new father, taking a break from his teaching degree, thinking about the school as a future prospective parent. As I painted, I realised I wanted their words to be distinct as voices but also to flow together in the painted text, each contributing to the others' emergence and meaning. And I needed a lot of white space, behind the words and in the under-painted shirts of both men to emphasise some sense of the openness of future possibilities in the moment of this image: the myriad of possibilities for the men, for the school, for any viewer's interpretation of this image.

There's a pause in the conversation between the two men in the painting: Marcus turns and glances out towards the viewer, friendly, mildly expectant, comfortable. Viv looks off into a private distance, clear eyed but less relaxed somehow. We wonder what he is looking towards, what he is leaving behind. Their words are suspended, quietly striping the open white spaces that surround them. No punctuation separates the words from each participant in this conversation, but a rhythm of contrasting tones and diction suggests the backwards and forwards movement of speech, shared yet separate. Is the conversation at the start of something, or the end? For one or them, for both? The cross-roads in 'Breakfast' is clearer: the physical route change, the different 'kit', the unfamiliar phrases, the feeling of being new at a school, of stepping out of a known space. The relief evident in the final few, short sentences is palpable. And yet we ask, Is it really 'done now'? The stepping away that is signified by the clear noun, 'a painter' seems qualified by the 'also' and the 'but', and is not, perhaps, as certain as it first appears.

'Being differently', operating as a painter as well as a teacher educator, positioned me to be able to look and to see differently, and made me experience in an embodied way the impact of professional identity on professional knowledge and practice, both my own and that of the preservice teachers with whom I was working. My personal experiences were replicated in terms of my social identity: all the time I was concentrating on looking and seeing differently, I was being looked at and seen differently by the people of the school: I was seen 'being' differently, operating as a painter, and as a result, being seen differently as an individual in broader terms. I was Dr Al from the university who came once a week with all her papers and books to teach the teachers and also now, Dr Al the painter and drawer and asker of questions she didn't know the answer to, the holder of a sketchbook that had images of local people in it. This state of 'being differently' when undertaking arts-based enquiry described by Christine Sinclair as "metaxis", a way of "belonging completely and simultaneously to two different autonomous worlds" (Sinclair, 2015, p. 90), also helped me grasp the complexity of professional identity - its provisional, contingent and changing nature (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). I understood in a new way, how important it is to recognise that because "we teach who we are" (Palmer, 1997, p. 15), we also teach where we are and where we're from. I began to think about the implications of the contingent and contextual nature of professional knowledge and practice, based as it is in professional identity and our relationships with others. I thought of how often as teacher educators we offer our students academic knowledge and then ask them to apply this to their practice, and wondered how I might flip the learning, so preservice

teacher identity and context function explicitly as the foundation and organising feature of the academic learning. This change of emphasis seems particularly crucial when working in a remote Indigenous setting, when the identity shifts involved in these individuals' journey towards professional teacher identity and practice occur within the complex and significant network of their social existence in the community, and make it a challenging and often fraught process (Strangeways, 2015). Such student-centred pedagogies exist, in problem-based learning, place-based learning, case-based learning and others, but often seem tricky to integrate in a coherent way with the traditional content of the teacher education curriculum. The experience of 'being differently' as a teacher educator raised questions about the place of teacher identity development in the teacher education curriculum and has prompted me to look again at, and understand differently, my practices, my context and my professional identity, and so continue what has become for me a productive form of enquiry that involves looking, seeing and being 'differently'.

Conclusion

I started the painting project thinking it was going to be an exploration of the people of the school, with my role that of observer, interpreter and conduit through which their interpretations of the school community would flow. By the time of the final exhibitions, I realised the enquiry had become a reflexive one. Beyond simply being aware of my position as interpreter, the whole focus of the project had become centred on understanding the complexity of my personal and professional identities and the implications of this on my practice as a teacher educator. I had expected the project to operate in parallel to my work as a teacher educator and undertaker of practitioner research, but it ended up happening simultaneously with it. It was the arts-based enquiry approach that effected this unexpected shift, and this is ABER's strength: its capacity to make me question how I look and see and be, and its provocation to do these things differently.

Looking differently created spaces for new ways of perceiving or noticing what was going on around me and with me. Seeing differently prompted me to embrace uncertainty and suspend my desire to explain things away. 'Being differently' reminded me of the significance and complexity of my own and my students' professional identity and the implications of this awareness on my teaching practice. Using an arts-based enquiry approach enabled me to understand these implications in an embodied and context-specific way by accessing the *"complex network of understandings, dispositions and competencies (of teacher practice) that are not easily named or measured (but which must be) ... experienced – seen, heard and felt"* (Davis & Renert, 2013, p. 3).

This experience of embodied learning really foregrounded for me the key difference between intellectual knowing and experiential knowing, the theory-practice disjunction that is at the heart of much professional learning (Argyris & Schon, 1974), and which results in the current concerns about the 'classroom readiness' of graduate teachers that is shared by policy makers, stakeholders and graduate teachers themselves (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014; McKenzie, et al, 2014). It emphasised the necessity of finding new ways to connect the rule-based and abstract kinds of knowledge with the conditional or "context-dependent knowledge" (Flyvberg, 2004, p. 421) and dispositions that teachers need to operate effectively as educators in the ill-structured domains (Spiro, et al, 1987) of our contemporary complex educational settings. I'm wondering now how I might transpose some of these recently encountered arts-based enquiry approaches into my pedagogical practices, blurring another boundary, not this time between the arts and science genres but between methods of enquiry and pedagogical approaches, inviting my preservice teachers to join me in an inquiry process that is founded on, and furthers the development of, professional teacher identity.

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