

Reflections from A/R/Tography Perspective to Review Creative Activities with Special-Needs Children

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Abstract

This paper aims to share the process and outcome that two researchers initiated in an arts curriculum in a primary school in Taipei, Taiwan. Twelve postgraduates designed weekly arts-integration activities from February-June 2014. By integrating various creative arts activities, all participants formed a cooperative learning team that guided 15 special-needs children who were maladjusted, emotionally unstable, and so on, in order to help them have longer attention spans regarding learning, and a stronger awareness of themselves, as well as of their surrounding environment.

In response to the theoretical concept of Merleau-Ponty's "Phenomenology of Perception," highlighting the experience and objective thought of body, the spatiality and motility of body, etc., this paper is based on the methodology of A/R/Tography, an action-research model that is grounded in pre-preparation, implementation, and introspection from all participants. The whole process includes class observation, data collection and analysis, expert forums, related literature review, creative arts curriculum design, and teaching practice.

Three primary outcomes have been revealed from the teamwork:

1. Build up the learning community of A/R/Tographer, with each one gradually "becoming" the artist, teacher, and researcher. With this, different models or paradigms for identity through the learning community of A/R/Tographer are provided;
2. Link and deepen Merleau-Ponty's theory with arts-integration activities; and
3. Special-needs children are facilitated to learn and express in their own ways through various arts activities.

Keywords: A/R/Tography, Merleau-Ponty, creative activities, arts-integration, special-needs children

Introduction

This research was undertaken within a three-year curriculum reform project under the framework of a “Society, Humanity, Science” infrastructure sponsored by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan. The purpose of the project is to encourage, in higher education, interdisciplinary curriculum design and co-teaching with more practice-oriented as well as action research-based methods. In order to obtain the grant, Taipei National University of the Arts (TNUA) formed a team to submit a proposal by inviting some faculty members of the National Yang Ming Medical University (YMMU), TNUA’s sister university, to work together. To meet the interdisciplinary requirements, and after a few discussions, this project proposal was entitled “Arts X Medicine,” and “body” was decided to be the theme to develop the curriculum.

This research paper aims to share the process and outcomes that two researchers, Professor Chung-Shiuan Chang and Shu-hwa Jung, initiated in the arts curriculum in an elementary school in Taipei. As one of the researchers, my colleague and I worked with 12 postgraduates to deliver arts courses weekly from February-June 2014. By integrating various creative arts activities, the participants formed a cooperative-learning team to guide 15 special-needs children (10 boys and five girls), who were, among other things, maladjusted and emotionally unstable, in order to help them develop the ability to concentrate on learning, as well as a greater awareness of themselves and of their surrounding environment.

In addition to our response to the theoretical concept of Merleau-Ponty’s “Phenomenology of Perception,” highlighting the experience and objective thought of the body as well as the spatiality and motility of the body, this paper is based on the methodology of A/R/Tography (A/R/T),¹ and employs an action-research model which was grounded in pre-preparation, implementation, and reflection involving all participants. The whole process includes class observation, data collection and analysis, “expert forums,” related literature review, creative arts curriculum design, and teaching practice.

Research methodology

The classroom is not only our research field, but also a place for creativity and practice. A/R/T is a research methodology that comprehends both arts-based and practice-based life inquiry educational research, and the methods can include the exploration of life, dance, drama, autobiography, and narrative. The theory of A/R/T was conceptualized by Rita L. Irwin and Alex de Cosson, professors at the University of British Columbia, in Canada. Irwin (2004) proposed that Aristotle articulated “three kinds of ‘thought’: knowing (theoria), doing (praxis), making (poesis), the latter including poetry as well as other productive arts” (p. 27), all of which constitutes the epistemology of A/R/T. Based on this conception, Irwin and her colleagues have shared the philosophy of Dewey’s theory of aesthetic experience, and Eisner’s efforts to develop a form of art-based research, while actively bridging the gaps

¹ A/R/Tography as methodology will explain in the paragraph of “Research Methodology.”

between theory, practice, and creation.

A/R/T — artist, researcher, teacher — participants are able to adapt these three roles to their professional lives or in a research/teaching community that is composed of a multidisciplinary group. Due to different cultures and aims, the group will interact and exchange thoughts during the process. Three kinds of thoughts will be produced:

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

“Artist-researcher-teachers are inhabitants of these borderlands as they re-create, re-search, and re-learn ways of understanding, appreciating, and representing the world,” say Finley and Knowles (Irwin, 2004, p. 29). “They embrace a métissage existence that integrates knowing, doing, and making, an existence that desires an aesthetic experience found in an elegance of flow between intellect, feeling, and practice,” they add (Irwin, 2004, p. 29). Irwin likens this structure to the social and cultural development that occurs when a new language is developed by a different culture which, over time, would create a third new culture and identity.

Methods

There are three research purposes:

1. To develop a learning community of A/R/T in which each member gradually crosses the boundaries normally found between the artist, teacher, and researcher, and therefore, different models or paradigms of identity are provided through the learning community of A/R/T participants;
2. Link and deepen Merleau-Ponty’s theory in relation to integrated arts teaching and learning (creative activities); and
3. Special-needs children are facilitated to learn and express in their own ways through various arts activities.

Learning community. This community consists of all participants, including professors and postgraduates from the university, Kun-du Elementary School teachers, and elementary school students. We university professors proposed a course-based program within which 12 postgraduates designed “arts-integration activities” for 15 special-needs children to develop their social and language skills. These 12 postgraduates are obtaining degrees in theatre, dance, fine art, music, interactive arts, and social work.

Course's setting. For the teaching and learning program, we used an “integrated arts teaching method” in which all participants worked together. The courses lasted 10 weeks and consisted of 150-minute sessions. The teaching targets were:

- (1) learner-centered;
- (2) arts-based activities;
- (3) learning through aesthetic experience;
- (4) inquiry-based learning; and
- (5) discovery learning.

The course was divided into four parts:

- (1) Forty-minute arts-integration activities for elementary students. This activity had three sections: an 8-minute warm-up, a 25-minute main activity, and a 12-minute ending review;
- (2) Except for the elementary students, all other participants stayed for discussion, dialogue, idea exchange, experience sharing, and reflection-on-action;
- (3) Postgraduates were responsible for reading the relevant literature and articles while also mentoring other students to encourage questioning and discussion; and
- (4) Professors responded and summarized some points in the context of the whole process.

Interdisciplinary cooperation. Postgraduates from different fields made good use of their expertise to contribute to their teaching. For example, a fine arts major might introduce artwork as a main contribution, a dance major might use body movement as a focus, and a drama major may use improvisation in dialogue. Subsequently, they would focus on different professional perspectives in discussion, question the framework of ideas, and innovate new thinking within the project.

Interdisciplinary viewpoints. In this project, we hoped to view arts education from the perspective of phenomenology of the body and the development of children. We did not want to be trapped within a single framework and point of view. Therefore, we invited two professors who specialize in Merleau-Ponty's “Phenomenology of Perception” to give four keynote lectures to the postgraduates. From their lectures, we reflected on how they explained the phenomenology of the body, how to rethink the subjectivity of the body, and their experience with memory. These ideas inspired all of us to modify our understanding of knowledge in relation to special-needs children, making us examine, consider, and observe the body from an altered perspective.

The other professor who contributed to this study was a child psychotherapist, and she informed us of certain points related to psychological counseling, which allowed us to understand why children have such behavior.

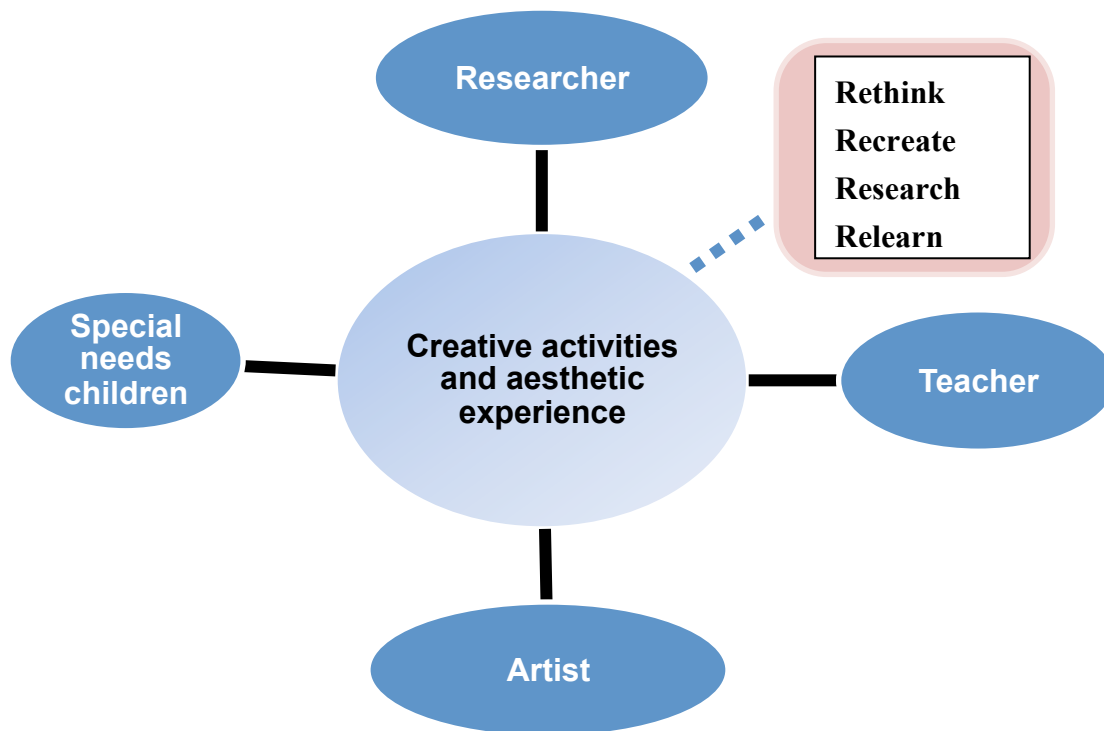
Data collection. Before we started the courses, we, including the postgraduates, observed students' behavior in the classroom, and discussed issues that arose with their teachers. Following this, the 10-week course began (see Table 1).

Table 1: Course Plan

Week	Course Contents	Notes
1	Arts-integration activities for the whole group.	<p>✎ Getting to know each other through group activity.</p> <p>✎ Weeks 1-3 involved whole group work.</p> <p>✎ Activities focused on improvisation involving body sculpture, movement, drawing, and painting.</p>
2		
3		
4	<p>✎ Four small groups followed by four themes: (1) water, (2) fire, (3) wind, and (4) earth.</p> <p>✎ Postgraduates designed arts-integration activities related to the different themes.</p> <p>✎ Children rotated among the activities each week for experience in different themes, topics, and postgraduate personnel.</p>	<p>✎ During weeks 4-9, we divided students into four small groups, each group having one theme.</p>
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10	In the last week, according to the four themes, postgraduates dramatized a story that they named "Seeds Traveling."	

Data was collected during a 10-week period from all participants, including postgraduates' reflective diaries, professors' observation charts, children's artwork and interviews, elementary school teachers' reflective thoughts and interviews, video tapes, and photos. In the manner of A/R/T as a research methodology and its processes of reflective, recursive, reflexive, and responsive practice, there was an interweaving and exchange of thoughts among artists, researchers, teachers, and students. Please see Chart 1.

Chart 1: Four roles, inter- and intra-influence



Data analysis. The research data was analyzed according to the qualitative methods outlined by Creswell (2009). The research targets were special-needs children, so the data was classified according to desirable qualities that they might acquire or develop, such as social skills, communication skills, social cooperation, expressions, language skills, and DIY skills.

Each postgraduate was asked to write a reflective journal using an “objective-reflective-interpretive-decisional”² (ORID) method. Their descriptions were objective. For example,

- The circumstances and situations of the children upon their joining the course;
- Their observations of the individual qualities of these children;
- Was there any reflection-on-action during activities;
- How were the children’s learning conditions interpreted; and
- What were the children’s feedback from this experience?

The final step was reflection-on-action, which led to decisions on how to modify arts-integration activities. These reflective journal entries formed essential data.

² ORID: Christine Hogan in her book *Practical Facilitation: A Toolkit of Techniques* proposing the idea of ORID Focused Conversation Method, which helps people to learn how to facilitate and to enhance innovations in facilitation through reflective practice, networking, and research.

I spent time in repeated viewings of these videos, and readings of the interview manuscripts and reflective journal entries in order to ensure that the important issues were captured.

Findings: Learning and Development

Learning community of A/R/T

Each member of the learning community played together “in the arts.” “Education through the arts” was the core of this teaching process. We used various artistic media to stimulate the children’s sense of body, thus exploring their ability to *touch*, to *feel*, to *move*, and to *play a role* in the space. The children gradually developed and became more stable through this arts experience. Effective arts teaching and learning involves all participants in creative processes. The following quotations from journal entries demonstrate some key issues:

A learning community provides dialogic communication between teachers and students in an interactive relationship in which students’ ideas ought to be accepted, given a considerate response, and leads to helping students to have confidence to face reality ... (PG G journal writing May 1, 2014)

In this week, I guide to discuss the article of a/r/tography, which reminds me to think of a teacher as a researcher who think the meaning of activities, meanwhile he also being an artist who should think how to be a teaching artist. From different role whose function is different, "immediate conversion" is the most difficult and challenging work [*sic*] ... (PG E journal writing April 24, 2014)

Action through the body. Merleau-Ponty stated, “I do so in so far as my body, always present for me,” and, “My body, it was said, is recognized by its power to give me ‘double sensations’ ... in passing from one role to the other” (2002, p.106), which indicates the importance of body awareness. All courses we delivered were designed to cover diverse art forms, and conceived the body as an axis. Multiple activities such as painting, sound design, drama, dance, and crafts gave space and opportunity for students to express themselves in a variety of ways.

Merleau-Ponty (2002) presented the theory of “I do so in so far as my body, always present for me” (p.106). He believed that the perception of the body, through its experience in a variety of situations, leads to an understanding of the unity of things. Once we learn to perceive our body, we can find knowledge in everyday bodily experiences; can appreciate that knowledge is related to our body because “my body present for me” and we use the body

to perceive the world; and the fact that the world establishes contact with the body in physical or perceptual means.

Through the process of arts activities, space, time, and other essential elements, the characteristics of the body interrelate. The body contacts the outside world directly; space allows for this to happen. Physical contact with the outside world is the basis of the relation between humans and the world, which echoes the concept of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. A human being uses the body to see, to hear, to sense, to feel, and how he embodies aesthetics and the aesthetics of experience so that we may understand children's physical and emotional changes during the learning process.

These special-needs children had their own characteristics, and they understood this world through their experiences and interaction with others and with the revelation of meanings. The following quote is from a postgraduate journal and concerns a boy, A-ming. On that day, all participants were attracted by A-ming's words and actions; he debunked the rigid impression, and gave new metaphors and meanings.

At the beginning of the introductions, A-ming asked, "Can I use a fake name?"

The facilitator asked him why he wanted to use a nickname. Afterward, A-ming shared many of his nicknames, but he mentioned one nickname, "Angel," several times. He said that when he helped a friend who had been bullied by classmates, he was given the nickname "Angel" that day. He said, "This is a secret," and made a body movement of angel wings flying. (PG D March 27, 2014)

Visible and invisible. The potential of these children fails to appear in the general classroom, but during the period of arts-integration teaching, we saw some very good performances. These students possessed talents that their teachers were unaware of. The instructors had not known the variety of their students' potential. They finally understood that the arts have features of openness, freedom, and passion, and that adults should give students room and opportunity to express their emotions, energy, and provide a stage for them to display all of this.

In the course of the artistic creation, everyone was given a variety of possibilities to use different materials. Everyone was encouraged to take action and do something. Gradually, we saw the transformation and development of the children.

The group of four children had experienced collaboration for the first time; at the beginning they had done everything alone. Several weeks later, I observed that children can mount activities, they employ their creative thinking to discover more, and the atmosphere of the practice was more relaxed. They were willing to cooperate with others. (PG D May 15, 2014)

Conclusion

This achievement does not mark the end of the journey; the process should be continued as follows:

Create a learning community

Neither interdisciplinary nor intradisciplinary fields are easy to achieve, as each has its own specialty. It is therefore necessary to create a learning community that offers opportunities for people from different fields to work and study together.

Arts have the potential of integration and therapeutic function, which we were able to observe through these children in Kun-du Elementary School. We created a learning community that we studied, read, discussed, and exchanged thoughts on regarding various topics, such as the A/R/T conception, special-needs education, and integrated arts teaching methods, plus phenomenology as a research approach. This procedure lets people from different professional areas, who come together to investigate the topic, share ideas and outcomes as perceived from the perspectives of their different fields, and to seek the opportunity for cooperation and co-existence. This process can lead to the establishment and exploration of a new point of view.

To promote “the integrated arts teaching method” (IATM) needs long-term planning. Education processes usually require long-term hard work to deliver worthwhile results. Educational approaches need time to take root and nourish people during the process of becoming empowered.

Through the strength and quality of arts education, everyone can learn from her/his own ability so that differences can exist. As Merleau-Ponty says, “Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system” (2002, p. 235).

In the process of these courses, we seek every possibility of constructing and blending various media so that children can learn from their own manipulative ability. The course will continue to cooperate with Kun-du Elementary School, and continue to explore and discover more about the uses of the arts in teaching.

In addition, government agencies and schools should have the intention to engage in educational reform and be willing to promote school teachers’ teaching and learning innovations. In-service training programs should be mounted to increase teachers’ perspectives on teaching and learning, and to improve their educational response skills.

In addition to the complement of specialist arts teachers, every teacher could become a teaching artist, employing a range of creative approaches to learning. The training system for

special-needs teachers should have a profound and rigorous planning program that would involve the integration of the arts and IATM into the cultivation of a special education system for teaching and learning. With these capabilities, teachers can help special-needs children development, and through early intervention with those children, achieve enhanced learning outcomes.

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