

CRAFTING A/R/TOGRAPHIC SPACES FOR NEW ART EDUCATORS THROUGH
VISUAL JOURNALING

By

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Abstract

My thesis is a multimodal project inspired by a/r/tography, a theoretical framework that involves thinking holistically about art educators as artists, researchers, and teachers who navigate these identities fluidly in their lives within and outside of school settings. The core of a/r/tography is a way of thinking about these three main (overlapping) arenas that art educators move in between and the unique and unpredictable possibilities that emerge from practicing in these ever-changing spaces. My aim was to use a/r/tography as a point of departure for crafting resources and spaces that new art educators can utilize to better understand and navigate their multiple identities. I believe that nurturing each of these identities has the potential to make us better teachers capable of thriving in the often-challenging world of public education. The spaces I hoped to cultivate encourage reflective practice, sustainable art making, and connecting with other art educators. This project involved several moving parts that support my goals, including: my own first-year teaching journal, a website, digital documentation of the first-year journal, and this written component that provides the theoretical frame for this project.

Crafting A/r/tographic Spaces for New Art Educators

As a preservice art educator I have been told many things about what the first year of teaching is like; however, every account reiterates the immense challenges that face new teachers. I have been keenly aware of these challenges— challenges that I surely cannot begin to tackle until I am in the classroom. And yet, I want so much to try to understand and break down these myriad trials to make that first year more manageable. I have anticipated the challenges of classroom management, of continuing and sustaining my studio practice, and of furthering my research interests. These unknowns aside, I also have come to know the amazing gifts that balancing these forces brings. One of the many blessings of balancing art making, research, and teaching, as I have in my preservice studies and in this project, is that these facets intermingle and inform each other. In this way, how I approach a fibers project or how I communicate with students or how I navigate research are all very much connected. I learn lessons from each of these spaces and bring them together in the performative pedagogy of a/r/tography. This is how I entered the process of writing this thesis, which has very much informed the path of its development as a project.

My aim was to use a/r/tography as a point of departure for crafting resources and spaces that new art educators can utilize to better understand and navigate their multiple identities. I believe that nurturing each of these identities has the potential to make us better teachers capable of thriving in the often-challenging world of public education. These challenges include the rising tide of standardized testing, budget cuts, and lack of administrative support. The spaces I hoped to cultivate encourage reflective practice, sustainable art making, and connecting with other art educators. This project involved several moving parts that support my goals, including: my own first-year teaching journal, a

website¹, printable journal prompts, as well as this element that explicates the theoretical backbone of these components.

The first year journal I have constructed is a 6-in by 8.5 in, 48-page hand bound book, which provides enough room for one weekly entry each week of the a/r/tographer's first school year of teaching. Each page has a prompt of some kind in the form of a question, a pertinent quote, or an art making challenge.

The digital copy of the journal is essentially a scanned copy of my journal. These images can serve as a resource for other teachers as they envision what kind of form they want their own journal to take. I made this book for myself, but it is equally important for me to make this something I can share with others. I feel strongly about sharing this work because I believe that all art educators should have access to thoughtful journaling resources that are specific to the needs of their field. I also feel that the shared experience of visual journaling has the potential to bring educators together to form communities that transcend school walls and strengthen their practice.

The other major components of my project include a Wix website, where the downloads of the journal prompts as well as tutorials of how to construct handmade journals are located. The website also features a reference page that lists the art education readings that I cite in the journal. Through this website, I hoped to curate a space for other art educators to engage with the ideas and questions I took on in this project. My goal was to create a moderated discussion forum on the website so art educators can remain connected once they enter into school settings. I have also crafted this paper as a written component, which presents the theory behind the project, provides space for my own personal reflection

on actualizing this project and lists big questions that continue to guide my research interests in the field of art education.

The Journal

My first year teaching journal is both a carefully crafted artifact of my research as well as a purposefully un-precious utilitarian object that is designed to be used. This journal embodies many things: it is portable, it is sustainable, and it is simple. The journal is made of primarily repurposed materials; it is made of all scrap or leftover paper I have collected over the course of my years in the Appalachian State Department of Art. It is small and therefore more portable than a full sized 8½ by 11in journal. The journal is constructed using a simple pamphlet stitch, a bookbinding method that requires only the pages to be bound, a bookbinding needle and bookbinding thread.

In keeping with a/r/tography I have included several photographs of the journal in addition to descriptive text. Irwin, Kind, and Springgay (2005) explain the interplay between image and text as “a process of double imaging that includes the creation of art and words that are not separate or illustrative of each other but instead, are interconnected and woven through each other to create additional meanings” (p. 899). I feel this is an important consideration for the viewer/reader as they engage with the powerful combination of both image and text in the following passages.



Figure 1. The First Year Journal. Here one can see the whole journal and the reclaimed aesthetic it embodies.

My journal is not pristine. As illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, some pages have rough, uneven edges. I manipulated most of the pages in some way with a sewn seam, ink border, or collaged paper shapes. It is a container that is “lived in.” I personally feel more drawn to this worked-in aesthetic than pristine white pages because I feel freer to experiment, make

mistakes, and figure things out. The marks I apply to the pages now interact with my future self. I feel somewhat anxious about maintaining and balancing my artistic identity as a first year teacher and so marking these pages in small ways, I hope, will remind me of how and why I make art.

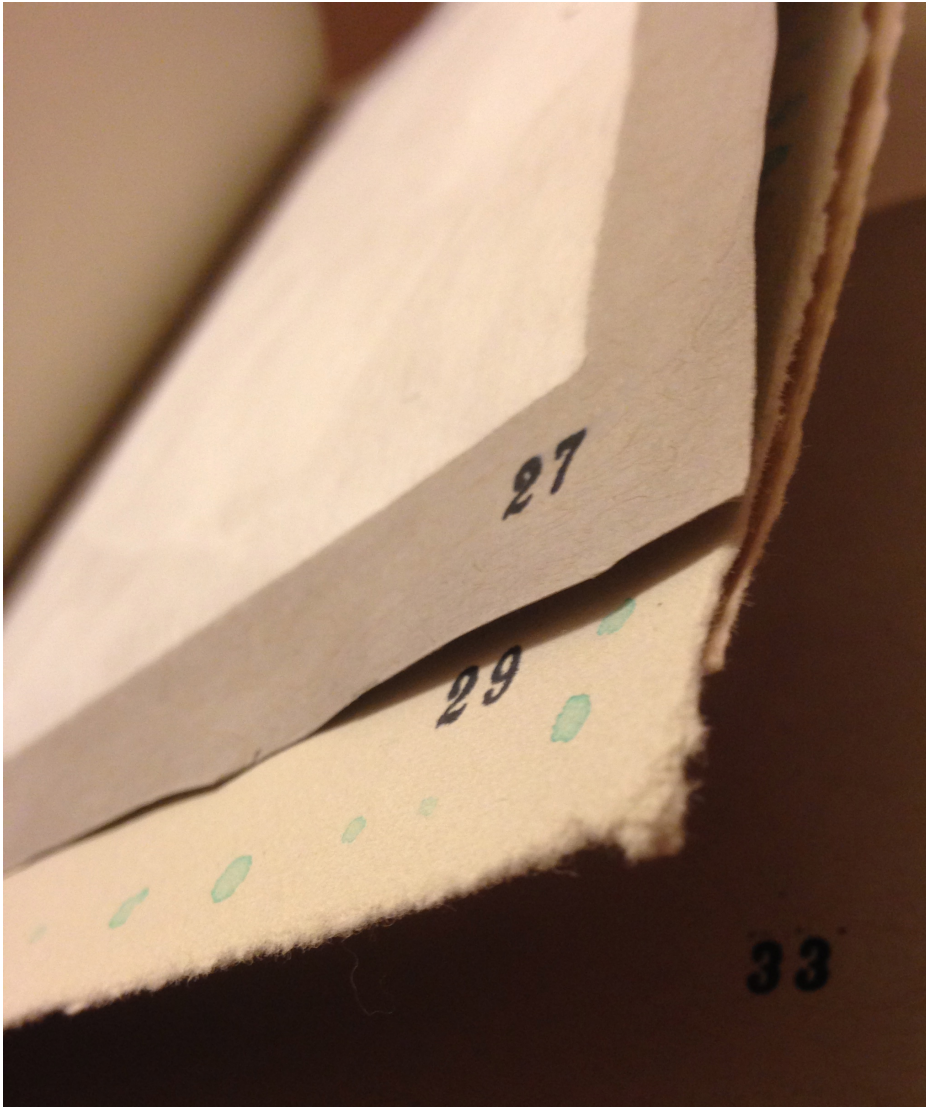


Figure 2. Detail of open journal. Here one can see the varied papers and textures that make up the journal.

The journaling prompts that fill the pages are designed to support new teachers by giving them space to create as well as prompting them with questions that may help them to

learn and derive meaning from the challenges of first year teaching. The prompts also serve an important purpose in making the journal a space for ritual. As the dancer/choreographer Twyla Tharp (2003) wrote: “It’s vital to establish some rituals—automatic but decisive patterns of behavior—at the beginning of the creative process, when you are most at peril of turning back, chickening out, giving up, or going the wrong way” (p. 15). Tharp writes this in reference to the creative process, which is of course tied to the creative needs of art educators; however, this sentiment has broader applications as well. Journaling on a regular basis is a ritual habit that, as Tharp suggests, must be part of an almost unquestioned schedule that becomes ingrained in oneself if one hopes to thoroughly engage with this practice.

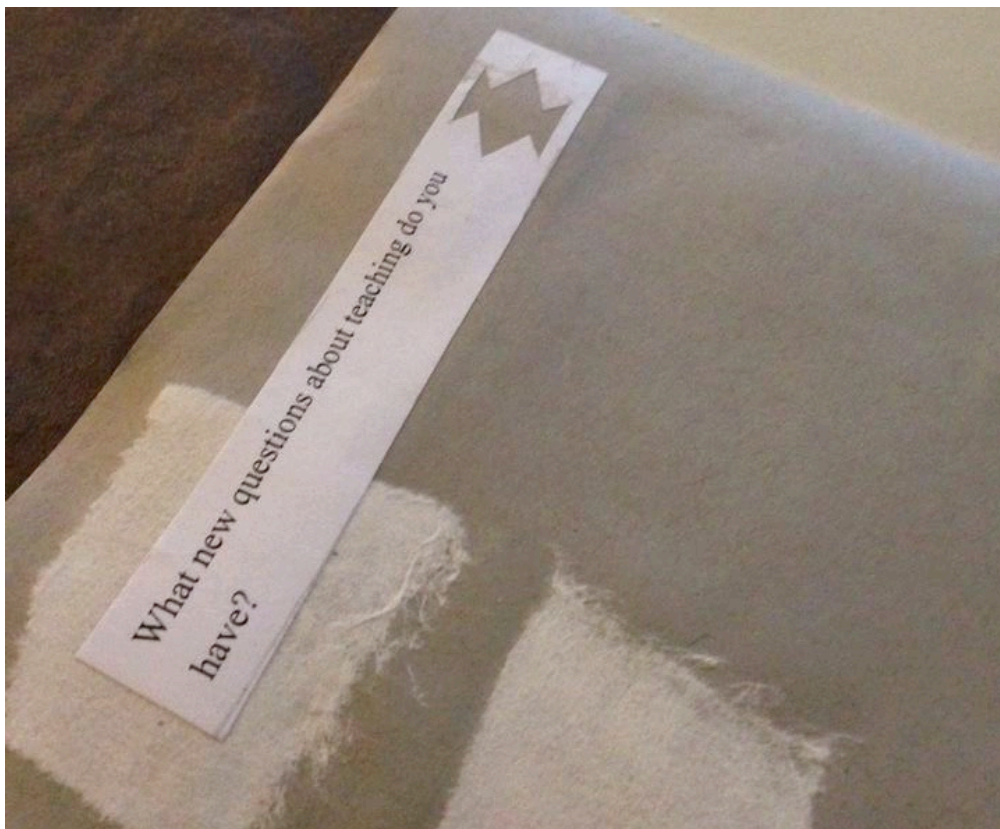


Figure 3. Journaling prompt. This reflective prompt from page 28 of the First Year Journal shows how one could cut and paste the prompts in any journal.

Prompts in the journal range from brief lighthearted art making challenges to deeply reflective questions about teaching and learning as shown in the example in Figure 3. The wide breadth these prompts encompass reflects the needs of teachers in the sense that I feel teachers can benefit from reflecting on both small everyday events as well as loftier guiding principles because the space in-between those things is rich with possibility. As I drafted these prompts, I drew on narratives of first year teaching including *Educating Esme* (Codell, 2009) to inform my perspective on challenges I have yet to face. I also drew from *Teaching with Fire: Poetry that Sustains the Courage to Teach* (Intrator & Scribner, 2003), a volume of inspirational poems and accompanying stories submitted by teachers. These resources allowed me greater perspective on the realities of teaching from the small moments to the big picture.

The Website

The website I created offers a digital platform for the scanned images of the First Year Journal, journaling resources, as well as a space for an online community of practice. This website has a blog and commenting feature that will allow participants to play an active role in a community of art educators that transcends geographical boundaries. One challenge particular to art education more than other disciplines is the isolation of being one of the only teachers of your kind in your school. Art teachers, even more than other educators, have reported feeling like they have no one to talk to. Art educators have questions specific to the field related to curriculum and goals of art education that go unshared as a result of this isolation (Cohen-Evron, 2002). This makes it all the more important to maintain and build connections with other art educators. While conferences, workshops, and other events are invaluable in this respect, they are infrequent and removed from the daily realities of

teaching. This website, and the community I hope it will foster, has the potential to keep art educators connected to each other on a more regular basis. Building this community is so important because many new teachers who do not feel supported choose to leave the profession as reflected in high attrition rates. However, as Fox and McNulty (2013) observed in a case study of a first year teacher, a key factor in her success was her informal conversations about her experience in the classroom. This study shows how important simple reflection and conversation can be as spaces for analyzing and finding meaning in the challenging first year. This, I feel, emphasizes the way simple measures have the potential to support struggling first year educators.

Besides the community of practice I hope to cultivate via the website, I also feel it is important to use the platform to disseminate journaling resources. On the website I have included a gallery of images of my first-year journal as well as printable documents containing journal prompts and quotes from key art education theorists. The website also presents instructions and tutorials for constructing a handmade journal. This component of my thesis is particularly important to me because it embodies many of my opinions about technology, pedagogy, and access. I feel that no matter how beneficial my journal would be for me, it can do so much more good if it is shared with others. The journaling resources I provide are designed to fit into and enrich existing journaling practice as well as support teachers who are new to journaling. Teachers are encouraged to take what is personally useful from this project and incorporate it into their teaching and journaling practice. This emphasis on sharing knowledge embodies the pedagogy of a/r/tography. It is not enough for teachers to simply teach and go home, rather, teachers ought to share the knowledge with others in their field.

Context and History

In this section, I will first describe the scholarly context surrounding a/r/tography and in doing so recognize the ways that this framework best suits my needs in this project. Enid Zimmerman (2010) chronicles this context in “Creativity and Art Education: A Personal Journey in Four Acts,” tracing ideas from theorists starting with Viktor Lowenfeld in the 1960s to Holistic Art Education to Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) in the 1980s and evolving trends into the present day (p. 84).

In the Lowenfeld era, as Zimmerman calls it, art education was considered a useful tool for promoting creative self-expression for all students regardless of artistic talent. This is often referred to as the child-centered approach. It was thought that students move through developmental stages linearly and are primarily influenced by individual experience rather than culture. Then in the 1980s came Holistic Art Education, which drew on Lowenfeld but responded to cultural influences more. Later in the 1980s and 1990s DBAE rose to prominence and divided art education into several fields of study (production, history, aesthetics, criticism). This framework for art education also accompanied an effort to standardize art instruction and assessment, acting as an opposing force to Lowenfeld’s ideas. DBAE essentially asks students to participate in an adult art world (Zimmerman, 2010).

Choosing A/r/tography

My thesis is a multimodal project inspired by a/r/tography, a theoretical framework that involves thinking holistically about art educators as artists, researchers, and teachers who navigate these identities fluidly in their lives within and outside of school settings. As Irwin (2013) explained:

A/r/tography is a research methodology, a creative practice, and a performative pedagogy that lives in the rhizomatic practices of the liminal in-between (Irwin, 2004). These in-between spaces of becoming prompt disruption of duelling binaries, conceptions of identities, and the rush to certainty. (p. 199-200)

While this concept may appear somewhat inaccessible, the core of *a/r/tography* is a way of thinking about the three main (overlapping) arenas that art educators move in between and the unique and unpredictable possibilities that emerge from practicing in these ever-changing spaces. Later I will introduce and discuss the six renderings of *a/r/tography*.

A/r/tography has proven to be a useful framework for me in so many ways, including how it encompasses the multiple roles that art teachers balance and because it allows room for the many complicated unresolved and unexpected moments that are inherent to teaching. *A/r/tography* does not demand that we make those sticking points disappear or give them a category and focus on other things. Instead, the framework prompts us to acknowledge the totality of the classroom, the studio, and the research process and not try to make it something else, something neater and less complicated. I think if I approached this work with any other framework I might not have felt justified in spending time practicing and reflecting on self-care. I also would likely have felt compelled to make the research fit into a more rigid structure and in doing so lose valuable moments of exploring openings. For example, if I approached a project like this from a DBAE perspective, I would structure it very differently in a way that would not attend to the complex identities of artist-teachers. Instead I would need to make the work fit into the four designations in DBAE: production, history, aesthetics, and criticism. Such a perspective would also not accommodate shifts or movements in the research process as *a/r/tography* does.

Renderings of A/r/tography

A/r/tography is not defined by criteria; rather it is supported by a collection of renderings. The renderings of a/r/tography include: contiguity, living inquiry, metaphor and metonymy, openings, reverberations, and excess. Irwin, Kind, and Springgay (2005) explained the nature of renderings as:

Renderings offer possibilities of engagement. To render, to give, to present, to perform, to become—offers for action, the opportunity for living inquiry. Research that breathes. Research that listens. Renderings are not methods. They are not lists of verbs initiated to create an arts-based or a/r/tographical study. Renderings are theoretical spaces through which to explore artistic ways of knowing and being research. (p. 899)

In what follows, I explain how each of these a/r/tographic renderings manifested in my thesis project.

Contiguity

Siegesmund (2014) summarized this concept as: “That which lies adjacent but juxtaposed, and unresolved” (p. 5). In any research undertaking, one inevitably bumps up against other ideas and sites for inquiry. In this project the scope of my work is adjacent to more robust plans for building an online community of practice as well as spaces for deeper research into regular journaling for both teacher and students. There are many more sites for inquiry that fall alongside this project; these are just a few examples.

Living Inquiry

This second rendering Siegesmund (2014) explained as: “Change is continuous and we live in ever-changing organic cultures that never establish into the comfort of best practice”

(p. 5). The journal embodies the idea of living inquiry in the way that it supports continuing reflection and re-examination of teaching practice. The dynamics of an art classroom are always in flux, always moving, and as such match the kind of continuous inquiry that journaling supports.

Metaphor and Metonymy

Siegesmund (2014) clarified this pairing as: “We make meaning by bricolaging that which is familiar to us into new understanding” (p. 5). Metaphor and constructing meaning are deeply ingrained in journaling practice in the way that journaling prompts the a/r/tographer to reflect on new and confusing experiences and how they compare with past experience and knowledge to move to a space of greater understanding of teaching and learning. These embodied metaphors are not restricted to academic dialogue but rather seep into all the ways we make meaning.

Openings

This rendering Siegesmund (2014) described as: “Experiential tears and ruptures force the imagination into new constructions” (p. 5). As I worked on this project I myself often felt overwhelmed and recognized the need to organize and lock myself into a rigid pattern for what my experience of this research would be. Ultimately, the course I took was nonlinear and fluid. I responded to my own experience of research and it led me to a deeper understanding of the importance of self-care in the face of overwhelming work. This, I can now see, may bear some similarities with the challenges of first year teaching. Teachers navigate many challenges and constraints and because of this they may sometimes feel that they are failing even when they are doing the best that they can. My experience of being challenged with both completing my thesis and my other coursework helped me to access

this idea.

Reverberations

This concept Siegesmund (2014) defined as: “Forces that cause disequilibrium and require the research to shift” (p. 5). Particularly in the early stages of this project, I responded to reverberations that shifted my research towards providing resources for visual journaling. I responded to reverberations that forced me to reassess my approach to journaling. At first I felt compelled to produce more structured tasks and materials for teachers; however, after reflecting on both the strain I was placing on myself and the way I was approaching teachers’ ability to manage their own artistic self-care, I shifted the focus of the project to providing resources rather than rules.

Excess

Siegesmund (2014) interpreted this rendering as: “Pushing past form, not simplify to achieve clarity, but to more willfully trouble and make messy in order to unsettle the comfort of understanding” (p. 5). I continue to work towards greater understanding of the challenges of first year teachers; however, I know well that some things can only be learned through the experience of doing it. I can’t say what the future holds for me or any other pre-service teachers. Our challenges and experiences will be unique and difficult to compare; no one system of support or practice will work for all of us. I am constantly unsettled by the knowledge that I cannot know or prepare enough to dodge the challenges of first year teaching. I know I will encounter situations for which I have no protocol, no plan. All of these places of ‘not knowing’ are not going away, and so I will journal about them and try to make connections as I uncover more unknowns.

As I reflect on how these renderings apply to my work, I find that this project has left me with more questions than answers and a sense that I have only scratched the surface. I will return to the renderings of a/r/tography as I contemplate the growing list of questions this project has awakened for me. As I consider contiguity and the possibilities adjacent to this work, I wonder how these resources will function for other new teachers and myself. How will face-to-face community and online community interact? What is possible in a classroom where both teachers and students are thoroughly engaged with journaling? I also consider living inquiry and ask: how will this intersect with journaling in practice? In considering metaphor and metonymy, I wonder how this concept might manifest in studio practice. The prospects for openings related to this project are exciting indeed; I think of all the openings sure to emerge in my first year of teaching and ask: how will my imagination respond to them? How can I be attentive to these opportunities for inquiry? I continue to think about reverberations and ask myself: how I can remain open to and respond to these unexpected moments? Finally, I consider excess and inquire: how to maintain the energy and courage to resist the comfort of ever-incomplete understanding?

While this project focuses on a/r/tography and art teachers, I also ponder questions about the applications this work has beyond art teaching. While this project addresses some of the professional development needs specific to artist-teachers, many of these resources could be adapted to reflect the needs of other educators. Journaling is a healthy creative practice that is already widely used in teacher education to support reflective practice. This would be a useful addition to any teacher's reflective routine. Prompts could be adapted to address the needs of all kinds of educators as they balance the unique gifts and stresses of their subject area. How can history teachers continue to be engaged historians? How can

English teachers continue to study and produce literature? How can music teachers remain active musicians? I feel that the guiding principles of this work apply to these educators as well in supporting the balance of all of us who live between categories. All of these questions and others that have yet to emerge continue to shape the dialogue on teaching and learning. It is my hope that the resources and spaces I have developed in this project will contribute to this dialogue and offer support to new artist-teachers as they embark on the challenging but rewarding journey that is teaching.

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Footnotes

¹ Personal website titled: “First Year A/r/tographers”

<http://lamairerj.wix.com/newarteducators>