

Forming knowledge with new shapes: What arts-based research methods can offer

individuals

communities

education

industry and professionals

Dr Ali Black



Enormous potential

There is an increasing recognition that the future requires a 'conceptual and creative workforce' where 'artistic and aesthetic ways of knowing' are highly valued and where creativity, innovation, design and meaning are cherished aptitudes.

As a result, many industry leaders, organisations and researchers are also starting to recognise the potential and significance of the arts and creative forms of knowledge. Especially as they seek to fully understand and address the complex realities and dilemmas that constitute educational, business and everyday worlds, and that face individuals and communities.

There is a growing awareness that knowledge can be developed and formed in new shapes, and that these new shapes allow us to think and therefore see in new ways.

Arts-based inquiry (research inquiry which embraces the language, practices and forms commonly employed in the arts) is offering new shapes and innovative opportunities for learning and meaning-making, and for shedding light on the particular experiences, dilemmas and situations we care about.

Arts-based research methods and practices are increasingly being recognised for their transformational and unique ability to both 'access and represent' knowledge and multiple personal and professional meanings.

As well as encouraging a creative inquiry process, arts-based methods can make visible the way knowledge and meaning is constructed while simultaneously offering representational shapes, forms and products for reflection and action. They can be used during 'all phases' of the research endeavour from data collection to analysis as well as continuing to serve as a subject of inquiry and a pedagogical tool.

Arts-based methods have enormous potential for engaging and transforming the lives and work of both individuals and communities and for opening up public discourse.

For individuals, arts-based practices support inquiry into personal and professional meaning-making with products of reflection capturing aesthetic responses, revealing previously held tacit knowledge, communicating stories of experience and offering new possibilities for action and agency.

For researchers, arts-based methods are proving to be a legitimate and robust research methodology that transcends the limitations of traditional approaches to investigate and explore educational and social questions in personal, engaging and connected ways - ways that reach, and are accessible to, wider, diverse and non-academic audiences.

For communities, arts-based methods support research that cares about who people are, what they know, how they experience their world and how they make meaning. Arts-based methods support the telling and understanding of human stories - stories of identity, knowledge, context, place, experience and relationships.

What might these shapes look like?

An example: An early childhood educator uses arts-based shapes to make sense of her work:

Drawing, metaphor, photography and story helped this teacher access, represent and see what she was thinking about her work. In terms of story, she found benefits in writing the stories of her own life experiences and also in listening to the stories of others.

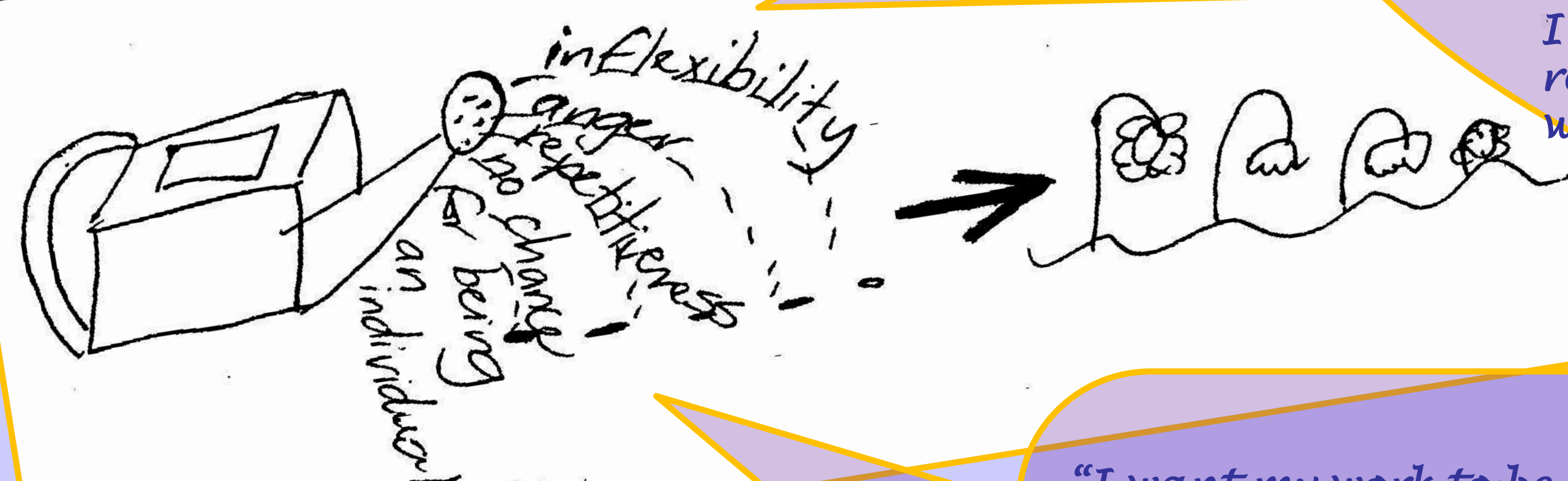
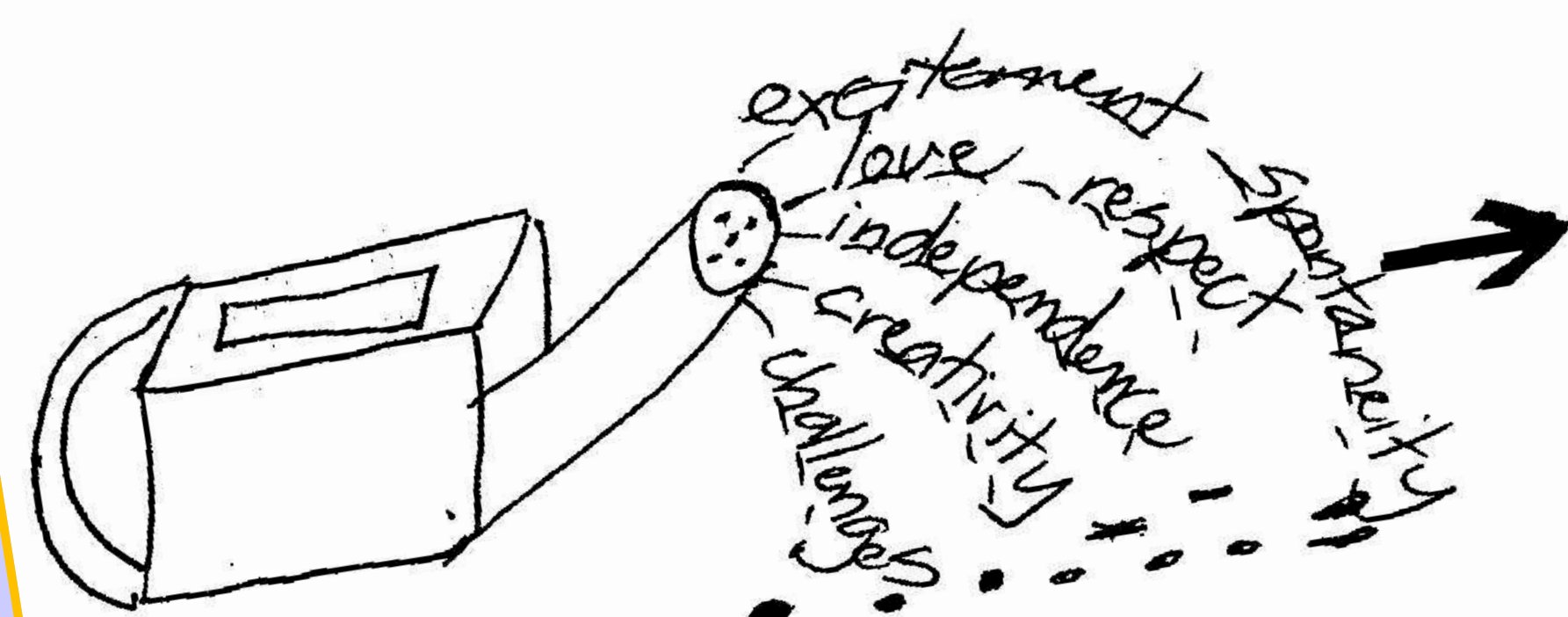
These arts-based shapes helped her get in touch with her knowledge and meaning making. They helped her to see and articulate what was important to her. (We can see and respond to the meaning she is making as well.) These shapes then became products for reflection, and she began to think more deeply about the relationships she had with children and families, about her own family experiences, and about the hopes and dreams she held for children to 'blossom and thrive'.

photography



story

drawing



"Something I have picked up from looking back at my life story and listening to other people's stories is the fact that I have come from such a stable nuclear family and I think it was a shock for me when I came to work at my centre. It has caused me to think 'well what is a family now?' I really need to think about what children's home background are like - maybe they haven't been brought up in the same conditions that I have. We have one child whose behaviour was really difficult last week and it was topped off on Friday when he wee-ed in our playhouse and then decided to mix sand in with it. I got so angry. But then I recalled Sandy's story and I thought further - this child is actually in foster care and his mum is schizophrenic - I realised there was a lot more for me to think about. I need to be mindful about what he has had to go through and be more understanding. There isn't just nuclear families any more and I now realise I find it hard when I have come from such a normal family to suddenly be confronted with these children who have such different backgrounds from what I had as a child. I need to think about what is coming out of 'my watering can' - Inflexibility? Anger? Respect for children as individuals? Am I really helping children to flourish? Or will they end up being these wilted individuals?"

Metaphor

"I want my work to be like a metaphor of gardening where I am encouraging children to grow and thrive."

"I think about how we are like gardeners and the children are like the seeds. Our job is to nurture these seeds and make sure they grow into strong healthy plants. If we don't give them the right ingredients then they will be weak and won't thrive. We need to be ensuring that we are giving the children the best possible ingredients and nutrients so that they CAN thrive."

Arts-based shapes make visible:

- Being, knowing, living
- Personal and collective stories
- Relationships
- Place and context
- Identity
- Tensions & dilemmas
- Ways of knowing and understanding

Visual art, collage
self portraits,
sculpture

Multi-media and
documentaries,
movies,
photostories

Dance and
Movement

Music
and
song

Poetry

Performance

Scripts

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