

## Chapter 1

# What Is and What Is Not Arts Based Research?

All forms of representation, the means through which the contents of our mind are shared with others, are both constrained and made possible by the form one chooses to use. Sound, which reaches its apotheosis in music, makes possible meanings and other forms of experience that cannot be secured in nonmusical forms. The narrative, as rendered through words, makes possible stories and other forms of prose that are not renderable in music. Arts based research is an effort to extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication in order to express meanings that otherwise would be ineffable. Indeed, an examination of the forms of communication employed in the culture at large reveals a level of diversity of forms that is enough to dazzle the eye, delight the ear, and tempt the tongue. Humans have invented forms within a spectrum of sensory modalities in order to “say” in that form what cannot be said in others. Arts based research represents an effort to explore the potentialities of an approach to representation that is rooted in aesthetic considerations and that, when it is at its best, culminates in the creation of something close to a work of art.

The idea that research can be conducted using nondiscursive means such as pictures, or music, or dance, or all of those in combination, is not an idea that is widely practiced in American research centers or in American schools. We tend to think about research as being formulated exclusively—and of necessity—in words the more literal, the better. The idea that research reports and sections thereof can be crafted in a way not dissimilar from the way in which great novelists write and great painters paint is even rarer. Thus, the idea that we advance is that matters of meaning are shaped—that is, enhanced and constrained—by the tools we use. When those tools limit what is expressible or representational, a certain price is paid for the neglect of what has been

omitted. Yet, in American culture, and indeed more broadly in Western culture, the determination of what is true depends upon the verification of claims made in propositional discourse. We have a hankering for the facts—no ifs, ands, or buts! In general, we don't want our prose gussied up with nuances, qualifications, or ambiguous contexts. The cleaner, the better. The clean methodological ideal is what some scholars want to achieve. Reduction of ambiguity is seen as a paramount virtue. It's interesting to note that William James himself suggested in a lecture given at the turn of the century that we should save some space in our mental life for the ambiguous. Creativity was something he valued.

This preoccupation with what we think of as misguided precision has led to the standardization of research methodology, the standardization that uses the assumptions, and procedures of the physical sciences as the model to be emulated. The experiment, for example, is, as they say, the gold standard, and quantification of data is a necessary condition for conducting experiments or so it is believed.

Beliefs about what constitutes legitimate research procedure have enormous ramifications for understanding human behavior and social interaction. The gold standard that we alluded to earlier not only identifies the experiment as the summum bonum of research method. It, by implication, identifies the approach as being scientific. The idea that research could be nonscientific seems to many researchers as oxymoronic. We argue that a great deal of research and some of the most valuable research is not at all scientific, where science means, in general, quantification of data and the application of statistical methods to determine causal relationships. Such research methods have given us a great deal, but they are far from the whole story. The need to provide methodological permission for people to innovate with the methods they use has never been more important. Yet, ironically, so much of what is prescribed leads to a reduction in methodological innovation, rather than an expansion.

The perceptive reader will note that our ambition is to broaden the conceptions not only of the tools that can be used to represent the world but even more to redefine and especially to enlarge the conceptual umbrella that defines the meaning of research itself.

One might well ask how a symbol system without clear connections to a codified array of referents can be useful in doing something as precise as a research study is intended to be. How can clear, concise, and precise conclusions be derived from the use of forms of representation that do little in the way of precise specification? The answer to that question that we formulate is the clear specification of a referent by a symbol is not a necessary condition for meaning. In the arts, symbols adumbrate; they do not denote. When they adumbrate something important happens—people begin to notice. What they

notice can become, and often becomes, a source of debate and deliberation. In the particular resides the general—after all, Arthur Miller’s (1967) *Death of a Salesman* is not about any particular salesman; it is about middle-aged men who lose their jobs and strain their relationships with their wives and children. The playwright’s skill qualities of life are revealed, and the reader learns to notice aspects of the world.

Thus, the contribution of arts based research is not that it leads to claims in propositional form about states of affairs but that it addresses complex and often subtle interactions and that it provides an image of those interactions in ways that make them noticeable. In a sense, arts based research is a heuristic through which we deepen and make more complex our understanding of some aspect of the world.

This last point is of utmost importance in understanding what arts based research is about and what it is likely to provide when it is done well. Arts based research does not yield propositional claims about states of affairs. It tries to create insight into states of affairs whose utility is tested when those insights are applied to understand what has been addressed in the research. For example, in the film *Schindler’s List*, a set of moving images makes the experience of Nazi concentration camps palpable. We are afforded an opportunity to participate in those events, and we can debate with others the deep motives of those who managed this center for human extermination. The film, as with other works of art, makes it possible for us to empathize with the experience of others. We believe that such empathy is a necessary condition for deep forms of meaning in human life. The arts make such empathic participation possible because they create forms that are evocative and compelling.

One might ask whether we can trust what we derive from such material. We do not seek for any reader to take such material at face value. Such material always provides a starting point for further inquiry. We are not interested in capturing and then belling the cat. What we are interested in is a provision of a new perspective that makes it possible for those interested in the phenomena the research addressed to have a productive heuristic through which a deepened understanding can be promoted. In that sense, our aspirations are far more modest than those who seek to replicate in prose facts, nothing but the facts. The facts, deconceptualized as they often are, are hardly ever adequate for telling the whole story.

One might ask why an approach to research based upon artistic and aesthetic foundations would be important at an age at which schools in particular seem to be doing such a poor job. Don’t we need more rigorous pedagogical methods, more precise quantitative assessments of performance? Don’t we need tougher standards and higher expectations? At a time when the ship seems to

be sinking, why mess around with the arts, a form of experience and action in which surprise and nondiscursive forms are the order of the day?

We would argue that it is precisely during a period in which precision, quantification, prescription, and formulaic practices are salient that we need approaches to research, and we add, to teaching, which exploit the power of “vagueness” to “get at” what otherwise would seem unrecoverable. It makes no sense to embrace plans that win the battle but lose the war. We need to touch the souls of students as well as to measure their sleeve length or hat size.

### THE ARTS ARE OFTEN LARGER THAN LIFE

A second reason the arts are important as a means through which understanding is promoted is because its expansion serves as a marker that diversity in methodology is possible. Methodological pluralism rather than methodological monism seems to us to be the greater virtue.

One of the axiomatic truths in cognitive psychology is that the frame of reference through which one peers at the world shapes what one learns from that world. To the carpenter, the world is made of wood. To the psychometrician, the world is made of quantity. Pluralism and diversity is a virtue not only in race relations but it can be an extremely important virtue in getting multiple perspectives on states of affairs. Without support of the conception of such diversity, it is not likely to be provided.

What sometimes hampers students from getting a handle on arts based approaches to research is a reluctance—or should we say an ignorance—on the part of faculty as to the meaning of the term *arts based research*. Without support from faculty, doctoral students are often left in the lurch. It is demanding enough to do a dissertation well using conventional forms of research method, let alone a research method that is at the edge of inquiry. Yet, it seems to us to be particularly important to encourage students to explore the less well explored than simply to replicate tried and true research methods that break no new methodological grounds. It is better, we believe, to find new seas on which to sail than old ports at which to dock.

The perceptive reader will note that there are two major potential consequences for arts based research. One of these is broadening our conception of the ways in which we come to know. We are trying to open up through this work a new vision of what the arts are about and what educational research can become. We do not see this aspiration as the creation of either an alternative or a supplement to conventional educational research. We do not see it as an alternative because we have no ambition to try to replace conventional

methods of empirical research with arts based research; we are not interested in the hegemony of one method over another. We are not interested in a supplement because we do not wish to conceive of arts based research as something one must do in addition to doing conventional research. Arts based research is an approach to research that exploits the capacities of expressive form to capture qualities of life that impact what we know and how we live. We believe we can find such contributions in the poetic use of language, in the expressive use of narrative, and in the sensitive creation in film and video. These options do not exhaust the ways in which arts based research can be conducted or the media that it can employ. We list them here simply as examples of media that have potential relevance for doing research.

Film, video, and various forms of digital and electronic imagery are, relatively speaking, new means through which research can be reported. The term *report* is somewhat too passive. The availability of new media makes possible the generation of new concepts and the creation of new possibilities. For example, Michelangelo himself could not have conceived of what fluorescent tubing as the substance of sculpture might generate in human experience. The movie camera makes possible slow motion to the point where the path of a bullet can be slowed down to the speed of a butterfly. Our point is that the availability of new means has consequences not only for how one addresses the world and reports its features but it has consequences for features to be attended to that might not have been options prior to the availability of these forms. There is an intimate connection between technology and expressivity, and we are certain that in the future the possibilities of the computer and other electronic devices will be exploited in ways that are even more daring than they have been thus far.

How would our thinking, our understanding, and the knowledge that we crystallize and ship around the globe have been affected had writing not been invented? Winston Churchill once said, “At first we build our buildings and then our buildings build us.” The tools we design have an impact on how we become designed by the tools of our own hand. The arts, like the sciences, remake the maker and the tools that the maker uses has a profound impact on who we become. It is in this sense that arts based research is a means through which we seek new portraits of people and places. An artist, commented Gombrich (2000), does not paint what he can see but sees what he is able to paint. With the invention of the ax head, humans were able to build forms and perform functions that were simply out of reach before. That general principle applies to the resources used in arts based research.

Given the apparently elusive character of art forms, how will we determine the “validity” of what an arts based research project yields? How will we know if it is accurate or inaccurate? Can arts based research be trusted? We will be

addressing these issues more fully throughout this book. But one answer to these questions was alluded to by Wallace Stegner, the American writer, when he was asked what it was that conferred greatness on a work of fiction, he responded by saying that a work of fiction needed to be true in order to be great. The irony is clear. Truth is not owned simply by propositional discourse; it is also owned by those activities that yield meanings that may be ineffable ultimately but that nevertheless ring true in the competent percipient. What we seek is not so much validity as it is credibility. The virtues to be found in arts based research are not located in some isomorphic relationship between a statement and an event; it is to be found in the degree to which, as Geertz says, it makes our conversation more interesting.

What he is driving at is the search for vehicles that allow one into a dimly lit cave that is lightened up—made even bright—by the luminescence of the work. The arts in general teach us to see, to feel, and indeed to know. What we are proposing is that the means through which the arts function as illuminating vehicles may find expression and utility in research activities as well as in the arts themselves.

But what if there are differences in the ways in which different researchers see a so-called common situation or at least a situation common to them? How are differences reconciled? We are reminded of Clifford Geertz's (1974) comments concerning ethnography. He said the aim of ethnography is to increase the precision through which we vex one another. This vexing, this pursuit of intellectual issues, this highly nuanced activity called arts based research, is a way of coming to know that recognizes that differences between investigators is nothing to moan over. Differences lead to challenge, and challenge can lead to debate and insight. After all, one of the characteristics that artists and scientists share is that both groups of individuals are troublemakers. The trouble that they make is trouble for themselves. It is trouble found in the unanswered questions and unresolved problems that serve to animate activity within their field. When there is no problem, there is not likely to be much of an inquiry taking place to resolve it. In short, differences in view may indeed be challenging, but at the same time they may promote precisely the kind of inquiry that expands our awareness of what we had not noticed before.

We realize that the term *arts based research* will appear to more than a few as an oxymoronic notion. Research is the child of science; art is something altogether different. We reject this formulation attesting to the dichotomy between art and science. Science, well done, imaginative in character, sensitive to qualitative variations, and organized according to what aesthetic forms can carry is also the result of artistic judgment. Anything well made, employing skill and sensitivity to form and prized not only for its practical utility but for the quality of experience that it generates can be thought of as an example of

an art form. The borders between art and science are malleable and porous. This means that fields like physics and mathematics, the law and history, are fields in which artists work. The artists we refer to are physicists and mathematicians, attorneys and historical scholars. Our aim is to recognize the aesthetic features of fields and their activities, fields and activities previously assigned to realms that supposedly had nothing to do with aesthetic matters whatsoever.

The important point here is that historical portrayals, whether in narrative texts or in film, for example, are occasions for the arts to shine. How a character is represented in a historical study matters significantly in what a reader is likely to take away from the work when it is read. A legal brief, well argued and artistically crafted, may have the result of saving someone's life or making it possible for the state to take it. Artistry as a general process is found in almost any activity, at least potentially, that humans undertake. The so-called facts are seldom "unencumbered" with rhetorical moves. Rhetoric, the art of persuasion, is ubiquitous in virtually every activity designed to persuade or encourage a particular kind of action or to arrive at a particular type of judgment.

One might ask, if artistry in action is ubiquitous, why make a special case for arts based research, or, put another way, why argue a more or less special case for the arts as the basis for doing research when apparently it already exists?

The answer to that question, it seems to us, is that it doesn't already exist in the robustness that it needs to possess to become a respectable and ongoing part of what constitutes research activity. It has taken nearly a hundred years for conventional forms of research to be refined and broadly accepted as ways of understanding individuals and groups. For arts based research to have an opportunity to develop an equal level of acceptance requires articulation of its distinctive and valued role. That is what we are trying to provide in this book.

There is also another factor that must be considered in any justification regarding the value and uses of arts based research. The reason we referred to is related to the evocative nature of artistic form. Arts based research emphasizes the generation of forms of feeling that have something to do with understanding some person, place, or situation. It is not simply a quantitative disclosure of an array of variables. It is the conscious pursuit of expressive form in the service of understanding.

Consider a film such as *The Godfather*. Mario Puzo (1969), author of the book, provided the material out of which a script was written. He needed to learn a great deal about mafia families living on the East Coast of the United States. He needed to understand how their "business" was managed, how profits were made, how killings were ordered, and what the settings and, indeed,

some of the history of the mafia families unfolded during the 1930s and 1940s. But learning of these facts is not enough to produce a product that will allow a reader or a viewer to grasp the situations being described and the people being portrayed. For the book, as for the adapted screenplay, plots had to be formed, and portraits of individuals needed be decided upon. For the film, sets needed to be designed, language appropriate to the occasion needed to be determined, pace and tempo of action needed to be judged, actors needed to be cast who were suitable for the role they were to occupy, and the history of the period needed to be revealed in a credible light.

It is the evocative utilization of such data that makes the work expressive and affords individuals who see or read it with the opportunity to participate empathically in events that would otherwise be beyond their reach. A statistical description of the incidence of mafia assassinations or histograms describing the growth of revenues over the period in which these families operated would not, we believe, yield anywhere near as lush a rendering. This is not to say that statistics would be irrelevant; it would depend on the kind of questions that one wants to ask. However, for highly nuanced and expressive renderings of human affairs, the arts are of primary importance.

What the foregoing illustrates is the noncategorical nature of educational research. By this we mean that some research projects will fit comfortably on a continuum that is closer to an evocative orientation to the revelation of a situation than others. Other efforts will be located clearly toward the more conventional and most often mathematical or statistical end of the continuum. We reiterate our point that we are not interested in identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for arts based research to be identified. We are trying to describe features of inquiry that are examples of research that enable us to pursue that style of work without the encumbrances of a research tradition that often disallows their use. It is in this sense that the orientation we are developing here is thoroughly iconoclastic in character. For that, we make no apologies. As it is said, you can't make an omelet without breaking an egg.

There are a few other issues that need attention if we are to become clear about what arts based research is and is not. One of these pertains to this question: Are we concerned with arts based research or research based art? A second issue pertains to the issue of what "based" means. What does it mean to say that an approach to research or to anything else for that matter is "based" on it?

For us it means that arts based research is an approach to research that we define as a method designed to enlarge human understanding. Arts based research is the utilization of aesthetic judgment and the application of aesthetic criteria in making judgments about what the character of the intended outcome is to be. In arts based research, the aim is to create an expressive

form that will enable an individual to secure an empathic participation in the lives of others and in the situations studied. In a certain sense, it is like a travel card, something one can use to get somewhere. Where one is to get when doing arts based research is varied, but despite the variance among examples of arts based research, there is a common feature. That common feature, as we have indicated earlier, has to do with the creation of an expressive form.

The idea of an expressive form has been given attention to by Susanne Langer (1957), who distinguishes between discursive and nondiscursive modes of knowing. Her claim, one to which we are sympathetic, is that the arts are vehicles designed to reveal what someone can feel about some aspects of life. The affective domain, as they say in educational literature, is a salient dimension. Literal language, which is discursive rather than nondiscursive, is not particularly helpful when it comes to matters of feeling and their representation. Thus, arts based research is not a literal description of a state of affairs; it is an evocative and emotionally drenched expression that makes it possible to know how others feel. In the pursuit of such an aim, metaphor will be appealed to, analogies will be drawn, cadence and tempo of the language will be controlled, innuendo will be employed, simile will be used to illustrate meaning, and other such devices will be used to create the expressive form we mentioned earlier.

Earlier we raised the question of whether research based art and arts based research were identical or whether there were important differences between the two. We are here to say that arts based research uses the arts as a foundation for creating expressive forms that enlighten. Research based art is the use of research in any modality that will serve as a basis for creating a work of art. Let us return to the example of *Schindler's List*, the novel. The author of *Schindler's List* had to have done a considerable amount of researching and reading to learn about the Holocaust in a form that would enable him to create a novel about Schindler and his list of workers.

To illustrate, imagine two individuals, one a novelist and the other a behavioral psychologist. These two individuals study the so-called "same situation." Let's assume for a moment that what they study is the concentration camps run by the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s. No one would disagree that the product of a novel would have literary features, and the product of the behavioral scientist—that is, the study produced by the behavioral psychologist—would differ. It would probably differ in feel, in detail, but mainly it would differ with respect to the kind of phenomena that each was able to bring to the occasion through the methods and assumptions with which each worked.

Our argument is that the literary as well as the scientific have their place, that these two forms of research—and we do want to call the literary a research effort—take different forms and inform in different ways about phenomena

that superficially are similar but in reality are quite different. Arts based research is aimed at preparing people who can transform situations into a more or less literary “equivalent.” In so doing, the language is likely to be nondiscursive rather than discursive, at least in some significant measure. The criteria for goodness will differ. The prevalence of statistical data would be greater in one form rather than in the other. The kinds of writing skills that one needed to do a literary rendition of the so-called “same” concentration camps would also differ. Our essential argument is that the promotion of human understanding is made possible through the acquisition and utilization of different forms of representation. Some of these forms will be discursive and digital; others will be nondiscursive and of an analog type of language. These forms are nonredundant, and they make possible different forms of understanding. We argue that it is important to have different forms of understanding for understanding complex phenomena that can be viewed in many ways. It is the plurality of view that we seek in the long run, rather than a “monotheistic” approach to the conduct of research.

It should be clear that what we are doing is reconceptualizing the resources that are appropriate for studying human affairs. One can say that we are more interested in paradigm proliferation than paradigm reductionism. We do not believe that there is one road to Rome; there are many, and it is through the exploration of alternative routes—some of which will undoubtedly lead to dead ends—that we exploit our human capacity to experience the world in different ways.

If one looks at the culture as a whole, it becomes clear that in our culture we do use different forms to get on with the business of life and with understanding our colleagues, our families, our friends, in short with understanding others.

Consider the decoding of body language. Here, we observe the visual cues that give us material to interpret. Here, we listen for intonation to decipher meaning that would otherwise be unavailable. Here, we observe comportment, gesture, almost imperceptible visual clues that enable us collectively to understand the implicit as well as the explicit meaning of what is being “said.” If these resources or techniques or means are useful in making sense of the situations in which we find ourselves, might they also be helpful in understanding much of the phenomena we address through conventional forms of research? We not only believe that they would; we have evidence that they have already done so. From the observation of 19th century institutions portrayed by Charles Dickens in *Hard Times* (1854/1964) to the depiction of school life made by Jonathan Kozol (1991), in *Savage Inequalities*, we secure portraits of schools in places that reveal what no numbers are likely to contain. We

believe that these tools warrant a place in the armamentarium we call research methods.

Those even remotely familiar with controversies within the field of research methodology will recognize that arts based research is, in a sense, a species of qualitative research. Conflicting opinions concerning the features of qualitative research as contrasted with what might be called quantitative research are fast and furious. For some scholars, qualitative research is essentially the use of nonquantitative forms of representation to describe, interpret, and appraise the features of some process, situation, or individual. The essential defining characteristics in this view pertain to narrative-like or artistically critical forms of disclosure. Arts based research as a species of qualitative research fits in to that category.

Research of a quantitative kind is represented by the use of numbers. It is more digital than analog, while qualitative research is more analog than digital. But even these differences pale in the eyes of some who believe that the distinction between qualitative research and quantitative research is an empty one. The argument goes something like this: Anytime someone represents an aspect of the world, in whatever form of representation, it must culminate in experience as a display of qualities. Thus, a description of an automobile accident or a home run with the bases loaded, both nonquantitative descriptors, nevertheless evoke in the reader certain quality of life that can be imaginary but that is rooted in the text or in an array of numbers that was prepared. Thus, what we think of as a literal description, using words to do so, culminates in experience qualitatively. Hence, the distinction between qualitative research, some claim, and more traditional quantitative forms of research is a distinction without a difference.

We speak of digital and analog descriptors for a purpose. In digital descriptions, numbers can culminate in arithmetic or statistical forms in any of several ways. For example,  $4 + 4 = 8$  can be represented as  $6 + 2 = 8$ ,  $1 + 7 = 8$ ,  $10 - 2 = 8$ . In other words, there is, literally speaking, an infinite number of ways in which the number eight can be secured without a change in the meaning of the representation. The representation has a form that can be altered without changing its numeric meaning. However, in qualitative descriptions a change in a part is a change in a whole. Changing a paragraph in a novel, the color in a section of a painting, or the texture of a piece of sculpture changes the meaning of each of those forms. When it comes to the number eight, it can be written 8, or written VIII, or displayed as IIII III. None of these representations are the same, but the arithmetic meaning remains the same. As a result, paying close attention to the nuances that flow from the perception of qualities becomes a critical feature in qualitative research. Getting each of the words just right,

managing the pace of the reading, and attending to the music of the language all matter in qualitative research in a way that makes them not as salient an object of attention in a digital display.

These differences in form and function lead us to conclude that the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research is both viable and useful. In one sense, it seems obvious that to paint a picture and to take a measurement are two different processes that yield information for largely different purposes. If they were the same, one would be redundant.