

Touching uncertainty with arts-based research

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The 6th Conference on Arts-Based and Artistic Research, 2019
The University of British Columbia,
Vancouver, Canada

Abstract

ABR, as understood through *a/r/tography*, is always in a state of becoming (Spinggay 2008; Irwin and O'Donoghue, 2012), and when taking on an *a/r/tographic* disposition I too am in a state of flux with the research process as waves of uncertainties disrupt assumptions and expectations, and *touch* un/know possibilities. Events from two recent ABR projects reveal disruption, flux, and shifts as ABR, provoked by important current issues, moves into action. The *Plastic Pacific Provocation* (in which educators/students from Tokyo Gakugei and Monash University explore the materiality of single-use plastic and the plastic/ocean that joins Japan and Australia) has congruences with the *Museums, Arts and Wellbeing Project* (Robert Blackwood Seed Grant, 2018 with Monash University and Museums Victoria) in the context of "an understanding of interdisciplinarity not as a patchwork of different disciplines and methodologies but as a loss, a shift, or a rupture where in absence, new courses of action un/fold" (Spinggay, Irwin, Wilson Kind, 2005, p.898), and affects how I think of ABR for myself and the academy.

Moving into action

Since 2017, I have been teaching/researching with a host of participants (colleagues, community, students) in events that attempt to move art into action, and have provoked, participated and observed shifts in our thinking about art education and its ability to enact consequential ecological thinking. The first event took place in the Cook Islands where as visiting educators we were encouraged to (re)think our part in plastic pollution issues from a local/visitor perspective as we examined our own responsibilities with throw-away single-use plastics. This experience provoked me, as a university/community educator, to energise my thinking in/with sea/land assemblages to explore our region through ecological intersections with art education. These investigations continued when I instigated the *Plastic Pacific Provocation* (PPP), an event where educators/students from Tokyo Gakugei and Monash University meet and continue to explore the vital materiality (Bennett, 2010) of single-use and washed-up plastic while thinking on the shared plastic/ocean that joins Japan and Australia.

The second event is *Museums, Arts and Wellbeing* (MAW), a spearhead project funded with a 2018 *Robert Blackwood Seed Grant, where I worked in a research team with colleagues from Monash University and Museums Victoria* to draw intergenerational connections between museum and community for health and wellbeing. Our aim was to build a pedagogy of restoration among seniors and school children while connecting community and museum contexts. Both events share common attributes as they deal with important current issues, but originate and proceed differently. In the telling they reveal ways that arts-based research (ABR) moves into action through participatory engagement as a means “to jar people into seeing and/or thinking differently, feeling more deeply, learning something new, or building understandings across similarities or differences” (Leavy, p.3).

The following vignettes explore attributes, congruences and forms of thinking that are common to the PPP and the MAW project. Although the initial intentions of each project are different, they each reveal the potential of being open to uncertainty as an ABR device. The paper presents evidence of ABR enacting change through material and relational assemblages where uncertainty and disruption of previous learning experiences create trust in the becoming/uncertain as a both/and way of thinking. As Rasmussen (2014) asserts, arts-based and practice-led research enable the “formulation of life’s complexity” which “might be as valuable as the finite finding. Sometimes both/and knowledge is ‘truer’ than either/or knowledge” (p. 27).

Despite different starting points and intentions, the PPP and MAW projects enact change through a team-based, issue-centred, transdisciplinary approach to arts-based ABR (Leavy, 2018) that requires “innovation, creative thinking, emergence, experimentation, flexibility, and cross-disciplinary support and collaboration” (p. 707).

** The Museums, Art and Wellbeing project was supported by a Robert Blackwood Seed Grant (2017/18) as part of the Monash University and Museums Victoria seed funding scheme. The Research team consisted of: Laura Alfrey, Geraldine Burke, Clare Hall, Justen O’Connor (Monash University) Alexandra Price, Linda Sproal and Nadya Tkachenko (Museums Victoria).*

Plastic Pacific Provocation

Together as a group of Australian and Japanese educators/researchers/students, we use single-use plastics from our everyday lives along with washed up plastic debris collected from the sea as a catalyst for creative imagining. Our art/s making through face-to-face workshops prompt participatory engagement as we reconceptualise our waste together – we ask “what can plastic/we do?” as we interrogate the material possibilities, or not, that upcycled plastics afford. We challenge our roles as artist/educators and as concerned citizens.

We ponder the creative potential of upcycling, trouble the ‘out of (our) sight’ action of recycling and work on a greater awareness of life cycle thinking. We ponder if creative upcycling makes a difference in the short/long term. We respond to the complexity that the plastic offers us as we (re)think, share and discuss our regional plastic/ocean connections. Generative activities grow from our initial investigations and energise us to (re)explore the PPP through a range of art forms. As a consequence PPP activities spawn into arts-based teaching/learning with pre-service teachers – and grow across teaching/research/art making actions. PPP flows across shared research and crosses into diverse formats as we move back and forth through face to face workshop scenarios, online chats, zoom meetings, shared meals and ongoing writing.

Museums, Arts and Wellbeing

Seniors and school children work together with the shared purpose of exploring wellbeing assets of relevance to their lives through the nexus of their local community and the Melbourne Museum. They undertake surveys, interviews and asset mapping about their local community, along with a series of arts-based workshops. The workshops investigate places and objects that elicit a sense of wellbeing with similarly felt possibilities within the museum. For instance, seniors and primary school children share artwork about their love of particular trees that offer calm respite, which then forms a link to shared walks in the Rainforest Gallery at the Melbourne Museum.

The project tugs at traditional social barriers around age/stage-based learning by asking participants to work ‘in common’ with each other, and to be open to intergenerational ways of learning together. In the process, participants experience aspects of wellness through sharing, through gratitude, through kindness. As they create and gift memories of their shared experiences through artworks, stereotypes about age and associated capabilities are challenged, while capability reinforcement and social inclusion become part of the learning. Throughout, the museum becomes a contact zone that brings focus to the event and moves wellbeing experiences and explorations to and from personal to local to cultural connections.

Table1: Notes on how the PPP and MAW projects move into action

The pedagogical drive for PPP and MAW is social even though the investigations are provoked by art making. In each project we come together through real world concerns such as plastic/ocean pollution and social connection/isolation. In each, we are learning from each other as we are moved by and transformed by each other. Our work together brings up the notion of transpedagogy (Chalklin & Mulvey, 2016; Knight & Stewart, 2017) as we move from one understanding to another. For instance, the children report that they are not so scared of seniors anymore (Burke, Hall, O’Connor, Alfrey & Hardie: 2018), while the PPP participants show they can experience plastic waste as dirty, and yet beautiful, with lots of creative potential. MAW participants move beyond the existing age/stage boundaries of their school, university and senior settings as they experience the social possibilities of intergenerational art making/meaning.

The PPP project shifts locational perspectives about plastic/ocean through thinking/making with land/sea, local/international and trans/cultural insights. Each project aims to go beyond existing boundaries so that our questions and ideas shift us into new possibilities. In the process we come closer to Helguera's view of transpedagogy (2011) as a "collective construction of an art milieu, with our artworks and ideas" working with our "collective construction of knowledge", and the belief that artwork "is a tool for understanding the world" (p.80). Although these two projects do not fully embrace transpedagogy as explored by Truman and Springgay (2015) where "the pedagogical process becomes the artwork" (p. 151), both projects do reveal the power of the pedagogical event which calls participants to be artists/researchers/teachers (Springgay, Irwin & Kind, 2008) together as a means to shift thinking.

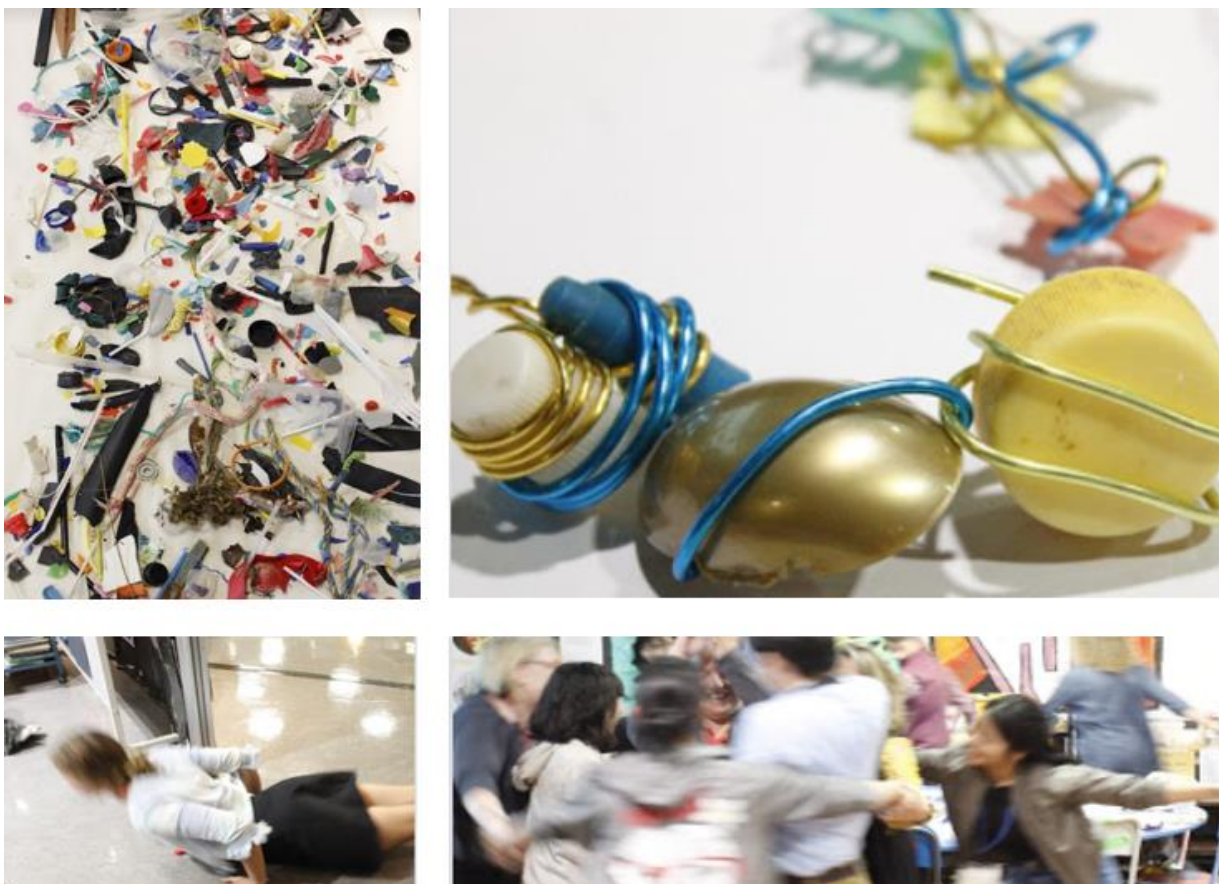


Figure 1: *Moving plastic/ocean debris, becoming plastic ocean, and amulet*

Materiality

In both projects material engagement with objects trigger associations and memories that enable stories, insights and further questions. Material engagement is experienced as an enticing and engaging entry point for generating creative possibilities and potential inter-corporeal sensibilities.

Plastic Pacific Provocation

Throwaway plastic is brought back onto the art room tables – literally, physically, conceptually, ponderously. Active now, we touch an assemblage of reclaimed plastic from our art room, the local café, and our everyday lives. Fascinating throwaway Japanese yogurt containers that travelled here with participants are placed alongside cleaned and sterilised Australian sport drink bottles. We investigate shards of brightly coloured beach debris, same colours piled up from a 3 1/2 hour walk across an ‘unpolluted’ 5 kilometre stretch of local beach.

We are full of intense curiosity and dismay. What plastics are safe to touch? with/out gloves? What does plastic bring with it? What are the affordances for upcycling clean/dirty plastic through art? What/how can the plastic/ocean be in art education, and art education in the plastic/ocean? Our creative upcycling intentions shift between excitement and discomfort, just as the plastic is at times exquisitely beautiful and terribly disturbing. We engage with the waste in immersive and sensory ways (Burke, 2013). Touching, being touched, finding unique features in pieces of plastic. Weather/time obliterate/expose the original purpose and relevant PETE markings (or not). The plastics prompt playful making; squashing, bending, cutting, piercing, they suggest and change shape. They intra-act with wind, light and shadow as we find toys, inventions and story possibilities. We ask what these plastics are capable of as we construct, join and upcycle plastic affordances into creations.

We move through the making as generative. We create diagrammatic investigations of how our waste enters the sea. One participant calls out “we are the plastic” as we dance, swirling together through choreographed pacific gyres and ocean currents (Michelle Ludecke). Narrative scenarios emerge through plastic/ocean stories as we explore jewellery, sculptural forms, and view artworks by other groups in the world. Our plastic/ocean debris merges with everyday throwaways and become domestic amulets for the mindful daily use of plastic.

We find more and more ways to explore and diffract the PPP - through haint blue protective insights rooted in Gullah culture that shift us to sense the powers of trickster folktales and found poetry (Denise Chapman); through sandcastle problematics (Jacqueline Young); through art-making Japanese/Australian plastics together; and by discussing the merits of social/ecological connections in art education (with Koichi Kasahara). Asking questions together we call the throwaway plastic back into our practice-making-research.

Museums, Arts and Wellbeing

Even though isolation and connection are a central concern in the MAW project, the uptake of object based learning (Chatterjee & Hannan, 2016; Hardie, 2015) and immersive art practice shows us the importance of sensory engagement for evoking connections between people, objects, community and the museum. The MAW project engages participants in a continuum of touch as they investigate and find links between favourite and evocative objects from their home life, outreach objects from the museum, as well as objects and sensory displays at the museum. These experiential triggers provoke affective participation as seniors/school children share emotive connections and memories as a consequence of their engagement with objects from the ‘everyday’ to the ‘rare’ and museum-worthy. Other forms of social connection are fostered as seniors help children expand their vocabulary to describe their objects – cool, dusty, faded, spiky.

“Look, it’s as if there is a galaxy in this shell” says Bill as he learns to take a microscopic photo of a local shell using a smart phone. (field notes)

Senior: “This stuffed bird reminds me of childhood ... there were so many magpies about.”

Child: “Yes, I know a magpie that follows me around.”

Senior: “I have a magpie friend too, we sing songs together when I’m in the garden.” (field notes)

Material engagement with a variety of art forms and associated tools becomes another feature of the project as participants build their artistic repertoire, and confidence. They capture their designated wellbeing objects, and wellbeing experiences through transparency drawings, animated Ipad art, paper clay constructions, water brush painting, silk-cut and foam printing, water colour painting and collaborative drawing.

Yet these art activities serve another function – as we progress from individual to shared art practice, and from analogue to digital art forms, and challenge ourselves to engage with different levels of dexterity, the participants need to work together, they share their knowhow, work in teams, explain procedures to each other and help each other through processes. Wellbeing is at work here. The importance of touch/hand/sensory-knowing/drawing/printing/immersive learning is itself a porous conduit that enables participants to interlink with community/museum/self/and each other

Table 2: Touching materiality through plastic and through a community/museum nexus

Through PPP and MAW participants are thinking, making and feeling their way into the call of collected/discarded things. Plastic, stuffed animals, and dog leashes become the vital matter (Bennett, 2010) that brings potential for affect, and capacity for connections (Bennett, 2011). Through our bodily encounters with these distributed vibrant materials—such as the feel of plastic to our touch, the body/plastic dancing imagined oceans, the aromatic call and associated memories of a brocaded diary. Like Bennett’s description of the hoarder and the artist who creates, we join our “sensuous bodies” with these objects “as perceptual comportment” (15.30 – 16.10). We play aesthetically. We work collaboratively towards “listening to the call of things” as we explore “non-human components in social practices. We are taking on the idea of *porosity ... inter-corporeal infusion*” as we work with the *“imprint of the other”* (37.10 – 44: 00) as a way to move into questions, provoke insights and generate possibilities through our making. The active *“creative power of thingness”* (9.50 – 10.00) is at play in these projects. The agency of our coming together in select places with given things swirls through our material engagement.



Figure2: *Exploring favourite objects from home contexts and imaging links to the Museum*

Relationality

These projects allow for, and negotiate, layered constellations (Aitken, Fraser & Price: 2007) across people, place, materials, time and formats; they welcome hybrid ways of learning in relation with each other.

Plastic Pacific Provocation

Our PPP workshops prompt a group of us to start on a collaborative paper – we communicate through ongoing emails, writing on line, with and without live chat, over coffee ... over time. People come in and out of the writing ... Another workshop takes place, and again we write and communicate across different formats. Together we build a PPP trajectory. Through this writing, (in progress Burke, Kasahara, Chapman, Adams, Ludeke, Young and Anderson) we are creating collaborative - autoethnographic (Hernandez, Chang, & Ngunjiri, 2017) ABR.

Over a dinner meeting we talk about how our research moves like the plastic/ocean currents swirling through our knowledge in the making (Ellsworth, 2005). As we write we think about how this type of ABR across multiple formats has a joining capacity, just like the sea and the plastic that we explore together—we are across/within different countries and art education contexts that prompt us to think differently, yet together, about our emerging paper. Different ones bring relevant theories and curriculum documents that could intersect with our work; some of us ponder further a/r/t investigations of the PPP in our various contexts. We know that the topic is open, forever diffracting as we struggle with how to write it up in ways that keep the energy open and not closed off.

Museums, Arts and Wellbeing

The MAW project moves across individual sites of learning until participants come together in shared sites. This enables the children to host the visiting seniors (with a sense of pride truly evident), and for the children and the seniors to be welcomed by the Museum as they share outreach and in-house collections and experiences with the group. There is an effort to open up institutional boundaries and practices and to share hosting and visiting roles as ways to experience reciprocity and gratitude.

The learning becomes inter-positional and across ages. For instance, the children investigate health assets in their community, as do the seniors; they come together to make art, and show and tell and discuss together what places and experiences from there locale make them feel a sense of wellbeing. Each generation gifts the other an insight into their wellbeing practices through their art and stories—a walk along the river, being close to the sea, going to the skate park, swimming, designing the layout of their bedroom. After they have shared and discussed drawings of their favourite health assets with each other, they design a series of wellness questions that could be employed in their joint visit to the Museum. These shared wellbeing questions form the basis of a Wellbeing Trail Guide for their joint investigation of the Museum. Rather than being of age-set minds, they relate together in the Museum through shared intentions.

Table 3: Relationality – layered constellations with people, place, materials, age, formats...

As per Bickel, Springgay, Beer, Irwin, Grauer & Xiong (2011), PPP and MAW enact a type of radical relatedness that “calls for a priority valuation of intersubjective coexistence with others, the environment, the community and the world”. Each project aims to move beyond singular, mono and age/stage mindsets to value “interrelational attunement of mutual respect and care” (p.87). Working with pedagogy in relational ways like this means that although there are planned sequences to our research, the path is not pre-set, rather there are openings that respond to and are led by relational, diffractive approaches that build energy – in complex, and sometimes unforeseen ways.



Figure 3: *Exploring Outreach and Museum objects/materials and finding links to community*

Uncertainty, disruption and trust

ABR, as understood through a/r/tography is always in a state of becoming (Spinggay 2008; Irwin and O'Donoghue, 2012). PPP and MAW embrace an a/r/tographic disposition by valuing the input and directions that diverse participants bring through living inquiry, even if these inputs are unexpected. As a participatory arts-based researcher working into these projects, I too am in a state of flux within the research process as waves of uncertainties disrupt assumptions and expectations, and touch un/known possibilities. I encounter disruption and flux in moments where uncertainty challenges my current knowing in arts-based research.

Plastic Pacific Provocation

The plastic/ocean is the meeting point for our research into art education in relation to this pressing current issue. Through participatory ABR, we are encountering our region differently as we reimagine the capacity of a large connected-sea-force (after Epali H'aufa, 1993) as a way to think in/with our sea and in/with our plastic together as a community of artists/researchers/teachers.

We have come together across various forms of media, place and time, but at times our data set seems untenable, and untameable. The intensity of our research action ebbs and flows, and we each bring different theoretical insights, language and practises to the mix. How can we explore our diverse data and work together/apart? How can we account for this seemingly slow scholarship among the expectation of quick publication outputs? We have other publications to write and the pull of other deadlines, but this is a groundswell project that won't go away—just like the plastic/ocean itself.

Barad's (2007) views on diffraction seep into our plastic/ocean thinking. For her "diffraction has to do with the way waves combine when they overlap, and the apparent bending and spreading of waves that occurs when waves encounter an obstruction" (p. 74). As we encounter each other's creative input we know and don't know, then know again, how to write our paper. We draw out the flow, intensity, parallels and differences of our diverse perspectives. In this fluid, amorphous context, we trust the creative process as we let go of predetermined thematic boundaries, and the expectation of knowable conclusions—we are trusting the uncertainty of both/and ...

Museums, Arts and Wellbeing

Despite planning a sequential series of workshops in liaison with the research team, the project has many unknowns. Will a sense of wellbeing occur? Not just as a subject of knowledge but as a felt experience between participants and as evoked by intergenerational learning and the museum context? Will meaningful relationships form through intergenerational art? How will I know what to plan for in each session? What are the links between art and wellbeing?

As a participatory arts-based artist/researcher/teacher I devise a structure for workshop interactions that prompt inquiry and seek to tune into moments of wellbeing ... but these prompts flow and bend with the participants making. Before long it is the participatory engagement that determines the next line of inquiry that in turn builds momentum and further insights. As Irwin (2018) states "It is the engagement of practice that transforms our ideas into further practice" that (as Trigg's suggests), ensures further forms of vitality (p.37).

This felt sense of vitality or lack thereof helped determine intensities and resistance among participants. For instance, when mindfulness was explained in scientific ways to the children, one girl rolled her eyes and flopped on her desk. Yet when she was asked to express wellbeing assets in her life, she enthusiastically drew her favourite calm places and eagerly discussed her insights with seniors. It was crucial to tune in to moments of non/vitality and be open to in-situ uncertainty.

Table 4a: *Uncertainty, disruption and trust – showing a shift where new courses of action unfold*

Plastic Pacific Provocation

A/r/tographic ABR means giving over to insights that come through our lived inquiry. There is a sense of trust together through the arts-based experience. We enter a becoming space that we forge together in action—it's about letting go of the pre-ordained self before the plastic/ocean experience to a sense of what Sinner, Irwin and Jokela (2018) define as enfleshing ... to the "opening emergent scholarship that is embodied engagement, an incarnation of self-in-relation to post-humanist becomings ... of (u)nfolding spectral social imaginaries of when is art by seeking sustainability in uncertainty, where intellectual value resides in our nomadic wanderings (p.90).

Museums, Arts and Wellbeing

A student picks up a shell – it is part of the outreach collection from the museum. Curious about the information card that dangles from it, he declares the shell as, "Fake! Fake news!" and gestures as if to drop it onto the table like a rubber toy. A Museum staff member and I explain that the tagged card attached to the shell explains the shell type and where it was found. The student has not experienced objects in this way before. Gently, the Museum educator explains how the tag makes it possible to keep track, and learn more about this type of shell. The student asks whether he can draw the shell on the iPad rather than in the group activity – as if to recollect his focus. I set him up with an iPad and show him how to add layers to his image. He creates an exquisitely detailed and carefully rendered artwork that shows a reverence to the shell. (Field notes)

Trust, present in both projects, is revelatory

Our focus on an asset-based rather than deficit view of health and wellbeing (O'Connor, Alfrey, Hall, Burke, in press), and the working of art towards a salutogenic (Huss & Samson, 2018; Mittelmark, Bull & Bouwman, 2016) experience, sits well with an asset-based view of our participants as capable artists/researchers and teachers. And yet exploring art through wellbeing attributes caused me to reframe my everyday teaching practice. It was a revelation to see how their art-making enabled, enriched and amplified the qualities and value of sharing.

Attributes such as giving and receiving, empathy, gratitude, sense of identity, mindfulness and trust were evoked through our making and sharing of stories and insights about health, gratitude-artworks and attentiveness.

"You made me feel I can do anything," one of the students wrote to the seniors in her last workshop. "At first I was scared of you but now I know you I'm so very happy that I met you. Thank you for sharing your drawings and stories."

Table 4b: *Uncertainty, disruption and trust – showing a shift where new courses of action unfold*

Inspired by Spinggay, Irwin, Wilson Kind, (2008) these projects take up the call to move "toward an understanding of interdisciplinarity not as a patchwork of different disciplines and methodologies but as a loss, a shift, or a rupture where in absence, new courses of action un/fold" (p.898). The PPP project is generative and diffractive. The MAW project softens institutional divides, rethinks professional age/stage learning experiences and, through openness and inclusiveness, values what each generation brings to the making; each contribution is a giving and receiving of gifts that creates community and capacity.

What does ABR do to the academy and what does the academy do to ABR?

What does ABR offer me, and how does it impact future thinking about my teaching/learning/research events with students/colleagues? How might each (or not) shift the academic situation within which I work. What does ABR do to my local experience of the academy? What does the academy do to ABR within the local, everyday situation of lecturing creative/arts/design with pre-service teachers in early childhood and primary contexts? There is an energy about undertaking ABR as 'event'. Collaborative inquiry with colleagues/community/students builds the opportunity for generativity and ideas flourish. Sharing days together creates shifts in our thinking, and the days are uncomfortable/uplifting/enjoyable because of their relationality. Likewise, the energy of participants coming together through intergenerational learning works on aspects of enjoyment and pleasure, while creating a context for new futures that employ intergenerational and lifelong learning. These event-based projects have the capacity to address real world issues while simultaneously building substantial relationships through ABR.

Creating the field in which we work...

As an Australian from the South there is a new energy about what our local situation has to say in the world. Through generative, diffractive, energetic, productive, problem-solving engagement, ABR can hold up real-world problems for our interrogation to reveal and engage people in solving/resolving action. This type of research feeds into my teaching and inspires me to teach for *the shift* ... where teaching and research entangle, and art moves with the world in optimistic ways. These research projects shift the possibilities of art education by fostering a broad sense of ecology—a *being with*—albeit through the plastic/ocean, or through being socially and culturally connected across age, across institutions and through the museum.

Funding forward

There is funding to support these initiatives, for example, the academy helps sustain the research by supporting a memorandum of understanding between Monash and Tokyo Gakugei University so that more academic connections are made possible between our Universities. In turn, the academy opens up an opportunity to directly embrace the wider community. When the academy embraces ABR it builds its own future in creative and critical ways by building real world connections that sustain all participants in fundamental ways, and ABR becomes an agent for expanding the opportunities and connections that move art into action.

Acknowledging Participants

PPP: 2018: Tokyo Gakugei University educators and students; Monash University educators and students; Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery educator

PPP: 2019: Tokyo Gakugei University staff and students; Monash University staff and students; Writing team: Geraldine Burke, Koichi Kasahara, Denise Chapman, Megan Adams, Jacqueline Young, Jill Anderson

Photographer: Melanie Attard

MAW 2018

Monash: Laura Alfrey, Geraldine Burke, Clare Hall, Justen P. O'Connor, Sara Hardie

Melbourne Museum: Alexandra Price, Linda Sproal and Nadya Tkachenko

University of the Third Age Frankston, Victoria

Kananook Primary School, year 5 and 6 students and teachers

Photographer: Sara Hardie

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