CRITICAL REFLECTION AND ARTS-BASED ACTION RESEARCH FOR THE EDUCATOR SELF

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ABSTRACT
Research suggests many educators are challenged to incorporate self-reflection into daily routines. Most often, self-reflection is practiced as a cognitive and text-based activity. This first-person action research project explores if alternative methods used for self-reflection achieves a more reflexive practice. In phase one, arts-based approaches, specifically photography and unstructured narrative, were employed as self-reflective tools on the first author’s practice. In phase two, principles of autoethnography were used to reflect on and to share the experiences from phase one. The research concludes with recommendations for building a better reflective process and a stronger reflexive practice for adult educators.

KEYWORDS: Autoethnography, critical reflection, photography, reflexive practice, first-person action research

The most common self-reflection formats we have encountered, as both educators and learners, is the practice of recording one’s thoughts in a journal, log, or diary. Yet, we know that confining learning to the cognitive domain will not fully engage all learners, or the whole learner. So, it is not surprising that self-reflection often ends up occurring sporadically, usually in response to an extreme (positive or negative) experience or in
response to a peak of emotion, instead of as a tool for short and long-term growth. Using a combination of memories, photographs, and field notes, the first author chose to explore how the addition of deliberate, consistent, arts-based self-reflection impacted engagement in meaningful reflection that supported a more reflexive practice. Within this work, critical self-reflection is defined as uncovering assumptions through analysis of one’s practice (Brookfield, 2015). Reflective inquiry then questions the assumptions behind one’s practice, and reflexive inquiry explores this same questioning from a more critical perspective within the context of personal histories (Cole & Knowles, 2008). We proffer a window into the personal moments, inclusive of the challenges, benefits, and emotions involved with building an arts-based reflective practice. Photography and unstructured narrative become tools for self-reflection under the guise of autoethnography.

POSITIONING WITHIN THE INQUIRY
Two researcher-artists come together to share the journey and learning experienced while negotiating one’s life as research, described interchangeably by Marshall (1999) as “living life as inquiry” (p.1) or as the space where life and research intertwine through first-person action research (Marshall, 2016). Through artful first-person action research we embrace a non-traditional approach in both the design and presentation of this research. We choose to refer to each other by first name for the remainder of this work. The first author (Amber) currently supports internationally educated health professionals as they pursue licensure in a health profession. She comes to this work having completed her Master’s degree with a final research project exploring first-person AR via autoethnography. The second author (Darryl) is her academic supervisor, an arts-based educational researcher. Their individual voices detail how they come to this first-person AR in the following sections.

Capturing the First Author’s Position
With a personal interest in photography, I wanted to explore how images combined with personal reflective narrative could be used to inspire and enhance daily reflection and the overall reflexivity of my practice. Would arts-based approaches to self-reflection provide me with an opportunity to “explore phenomena holistically, naturally, and creatively, thus deepening understanding of self and the world” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 3)? While aware of the risk of a self-study piece becoming self-absorbed, I was confident that first-person action research would allow me to choose tools that would create an experience that was “critical, challenging and developmental rather than self-satisfied” (Marshall, 2004, p. 307). Hamilton and Pinnegar (1998) note that self-study allows practitioners to “use whatever methods will provide the needed evidence and context for understanding their practice” (p. 240). With support for educators to examine self through a combination of action research strategies, I embarked on what some would consider a non-traditional academic journey.

Capturing the Second Author’s Position
Amber and I met during her Masters studies and her research interests connected to my own research experiences in teacher identity and arts-based educational research (ABER). I advise students that negotiating which experiences to explore and share presents them
with the most elusive and yet pivotal puzzle piece of their inquiry. Notions of experience stem from Dewey’s (1938) belief that experience recounts one’s past with implications for one’s future; in my estimation, continuity and contextualization of experience become the starting line for an arts-based inquiry as a researcher "draw[s] together disconnected experiences including actions or events and provide meanings to them" (Miyahara, 2010, p.6). From here, researcher-artist identity is not fixed; it moves with the inevitability of change including ones within classrooms, students and society. As my students consider a juncture within their professional timeline, they learn to reflect on experiences as they live them (knowing in action as described by Schön, 1983) with the hopes of locating possibility for future professional growth.

Like Amber, I came to this type of “artful knowing” as a graduate student looking for other ways of conducting research. At the time of my graduate school experience, I wanted to create a tapestry of self(ves), my Canadian Teacher Identity, but felt the written word only partially represented my negotiation. With the support of Dr. Diamond, I turned to ABER and found other ways of research writing. As Diamond and Mullen (1999) write:

the effectiveness of arts-based postmodern activity depends upon the degree to which it arouses (rather than ‘transmits’) particular feelings and images and the degree to which it momentarily captures and provokes experiential learning…artistic and social forms of expression can create the conditions for promoting self-acceptance, self-esteem, resilience, and synergy within and between human beings (p.25).

My experiences with journaling and photography in ABER research then connected me to Amber’s proposed first-person inquiry. Her attempts to make sense of her practice via artful first-person action research is no easy feat and readers may take issue with what seems more subjective and personal commentary than objective and traditional research. My role then is to support her artful AR ideas and guide her through times of research doubt. Van Halen-Faber and Diamond (2002) write, “Whenever inquirers do not quite know where they might be going, they will seek refuge, like Hansl and Gretel lost in the forest, by planning for a secure way of finding their way back or out; this they do by regularly marking their successive locations” (p. 49). For Amber, the way out of her inquiry are her photographs marking her thoughtful journaling; these are like beacons along her research path. As added security, I offer my watchful ABER “eye” informed by my past artful experiences. As her advisor at the time of the project and as a fellow arts-based researcher, we walk this unfamiliar terrain together.

THE COLLAGE OF ACTION RESEARCH
Action research, attributed to Lewin (1946), allows practitioners to investigate and problem-solve around an issue within their practice (Cole & Knowles, 2008). Despite its ongoing evolution, all forms of action research remain underscored by the use of action and reflection to solve real-life problems (Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). It is often described as a cycle of planning, action, observation, and reflection
leading to improved practice (Kemmis & McTaggard, 1988; 2004). In the 1950s, Abraham Shumsky was one of the first to articulate the perspective that action research is a form of self-development, “a way for teachers to understand themselves and their work better” (as cited in Noffke, 2009, p. 8). Stenhouse’s (1975) teacher-as-researcher extended the emphasis on self-development; he highlighted the importance of combining action research and reflective practice to achieve a more holistic approach to teacher development (Leitch & Day, 2000).

Action research is further recognized as a functional method for self-study in education. Koster and van den Berg (2014) offer, “Self-study is often considered the study of one’s own practice by the systematic exploration of what is happening, what participants think about their own practice, and what they want to change in their practice (p.86). Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) advocate self-study as a means of negotiating the tensions that exist between “self and the practice engaged in” (p. 15). From here, we sought ways to distinguish how self-study AR informs practice and how to best design Amber’s pursuit.

Noffke (1997) identifies three dimensions of action research as, professional, personal, and political encouraging researchers to place emphasis on categories they feel improve their practice. The ongoing evolution of action research also includes a branch known as first-person action research a self-reflective approach or first-person inquiry (Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Reason & Torbert, 2001) also described interchangeably as self-reflective inquiry or first-person inquiry (Marshall, 2004; Marshall & Mead, 2005). First-person action research critically explores one’s knowledge and practice (Marshall, 2011). Yet, from our viewpoint, this idea of consistently and intentionally negotiating self and practice is not always being actualized mostly due to a lack of time in an educator’s schedule. But what if an educator finds time? How does one begin first-person AR?

Critical thinking and critical self-reflection have traditionally been regarded as cognitive and text-based activities (Bulman, Lathlean, & Gobbi, 2014). Yet, alternative methods for building a reflexive practice exist with much growing support (Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Denzin, 1997; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) suggesting arts-based approaches as invaluable to successful reflective work. While there is a burgeoning emphasis in the literature on including self-study and reflective assignments in pre-service teacher education (Barromi Perlman, 2016; Davis, 2006; Mauri, Clarà, Colomina, & Onrubia, 2016) as well as in graduate courses (Koster & van den Berg, 2014; Shockley, Bond, & Rollins, 2008) there are few practical examples sharing how the arts connect to the daily reflective practices of adult educators.

**ADJUSTING THE METHODOLOGICAL LENS**

Diamond and Mullen (1999) advocate arts-based narrative and storytelling for educator development because both the author and the reader travel closer to the experiences, emotions, and patterns that are often inaccessible in theoretical perspectives. Yet, artistic expression often remains a neglected method of tapping into alternate ways of learning,
knowing, and making meaning (Lawrence, 2005). It may be the “road less travelled” but we wanted to know why.

Arts-based action research, an emerging subfield of action research, calls for researchers to extend action research beyond its cognitive borders embracing the broadest category of the “arts” to include “conversational, written and propositional means” (Seeley, 2011, p. 85). Seeley (2011) credits John Heron’s (1992, 1999) work as foundational to the development of arts-based action research, a space where the researcher is able to create and explore her or his own art (or the art of others) to make new meaning, to illuminate self-knowledge, and to experience transformation. Taylor (2004) describes a presentational (artistic) form of first-person arts-based research as one that allows the researcher to move fluidly between tacit and explicit knowledge, incorporating whole bodied and propositional (intellectual) knowing. The efficacy of arts-based action research is evidenced by the increasing amounts of practitioners employing and advocating this approach (Amerson & Livingston, 2014; Beyes & Steyaert, 2011; Seeley, 2011; Suominen, 2006; Tulinius & Hølge-Hazelton, 2011). As Taylor (2004) advised “When we recognize first person research as an art, we open our research to the full complexity and richness of the human experience” (p. 86). With this in mind, Amber embarked on first-person action research to engage in a cyclical, improvement focused, artful inquiry into her own life and practice. Her artistic tools include photography and autoethnography.

Photography
Through photographs, artists create an opportunity to capture, remember, and revisit something that words alone cannot fully describe (Lawrence, 2005; Taylor, 2002; Velde, Wittman, Carawan, Knight, & Pokorny, 2010). Still images can also serve as an emotive bridge from past to present thoughts, beliefs, and experiences.

Harper (1987) introduced the idea of reflexive photography as a method of exploring the individual-environment interaction as participants reflect on the captured images (as cited in Harrington & Schibik, 2003). Taylor (2002) advocated for adult educators to experiment with photography as a means of exploring teaching beliefs. Similarly, Velde et al., (2010) used photography as an aid to facilitate dialogue while exploring their identities as educators. Amerson and Livingston (2014) found reflexive photography to be “a more robust vehicle for self-reflection than journaling, especially for visual learners” (p. 207). Barromi Perlman (2016) also employed a more whole-bodied approach in her research by using photographs (in visual reflective diaries) as a means to enhance reflective abilities.

Autoethnography
Autoethnography, a postmodern approach attributed to Hayano (1979), allows for the study of self and culture through narrative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). With roots in ethnography, there are two prominent branches. Evocative autoethnography centers on the delivery of an uninhibited, emotional text that prompts further conversation and reflection (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011). Analytic autoethnography may incorporate the emotive aspects but it must provide an analytic, theoretical perspective as well (Anderson, 2006). Autoethnography is often critiqued as lacking in replicability and scientific rigor (Phillips,
1987). Though regarded as less reliable due to the subjectivity of and reliance on personal data (Sparkes, 2000), it allows authors to share and reflect on the whole of an experience.

As Hoppes’ (2014) suggests, “autoethnography’s ‘inward–outward/backward–forward’ storytelling method shines light on meanings that, ordinarily, are not available” (p. 67) and these revealed meanings form the foundations for clearer understandings of changing identity. Autoethnography has also been described as a tool that elicits transformative learning (Boyd, 2008) growing in popularity with pre-service educators (Hermann-Wilmarth & Bills, 2010), with those who seek to improve their own practice (Vasconcelos, 2011; Wijayatilake, 2012) and with educators on a quest to understand self and explore identity (Aitken, 2010; Huang, 2015). This approach reminds us that we must “understand self to understand others” (Ellis, 1997, p. 2) and so, we hope this artful first-person AR demonstrates this essential connection.

**Method of Approach: Two Become One**

Phase I primarily involved the implementation of the acting and observing stages of action research through the incorporation of photography, field notes, and narratives into Amber’s daily practice. To remain as objective as possible regarding her own experiences and practice, and to take her reflections beyond a superficial, descriptive account, she viewed photographs through a black and white filter. The intent of this strategy was two-fold. First, the photos served as a form of photo elicitation, an interview technique used by researchers to help participants to reflect on prior experiences (Tucker & Dempsey, 1991). Then, black and white photography functioned as a visual reminder to view her surroundings from a new perspective, allowing her to merge words with emotions, values, and memories so she could connect more effectively and holistically with her practice.

Phase II emphasized the reflection stage of AR through the writing of the autoethnography. Reflecting upon her lived experiences via an autoethnography created a text that was meaningful, relatable, and fueled change in her practice for all involved (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In the next section, the paper moves towards the artful autoethnography, and so Amber’s voice moves to the forefront as she describes her participant position.

**Amber’s Voice: Framing the Participant**

I am a 40-year-old female from Western Canada, a mother of three working full-time, who (at the end of my Master’s program) chose to interact with my practice and the world in a more intentional and critical way.

During my journey, I protect the identities of those involved by altering identifying details and assigning pseudonyms. I did not use photographs of others or identifying places. I took pictures randomly (within my work environment), usually several times per week, when something caught my attention or when a thought or experience kept circling back into my mind. I wrote field notes in the moment so that my initial thoughts did not become lost in the shuffle of my day. My cell phone quickly became a wonderful visual prompt that reminded me to be observant and to reflect on my practice. Later in the evening at home, I
adjusted the settings for the photos to change them into black and white images. If something particular caught my eye, I cropped or rotated the picture before I transferred the photos from my phone to my laptop.

Aside from the feedback from my advisor, I chose to conduct this research independently. Brookfield (1997) has raised valid concerns regarding this approach: “very few of us can get very far probing our assumptions on our own” and “our most influential assumptions are too close to us to be seen clearly by an act of self-will” (p. 19). However, with the desire to understand if arts-based reflection could enhance my reflective practice, I made the decision not to include others, or a mentor, within my reflective process. Sometimes I would engage in reflection and the writing of a narrative at that same time, but most often, I wrote a few days later. I did not have a rigid schedule for either the photo taking or reflection process.

From here, I offer my narratives and photos — my artful first-person AR.

AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ALBUM

Through the experiences that unfolded in this study, I began to understand on a profoundly different level how reflection is enhanced when it becomes a consistent part of one’s practice and that true change is an evolution. The excerpt below shares my journey toward a new understanding of me, and of my practice.

The first photo (Figure 1) I took for this study occurred after I met with a client in a small meeting room overlooking a parking lot. The small one way sign in the top right corner is what caught my attention. Originally, I was struck by the obvious metaphor that the almost invisible one way sign had with an internationally educated health professional’s (IEHP) pathway to licensure – there is only one way to become licensed. There is one way to provide care, the Western way. I could also see how often many of our systems operate using a series of one way policies, procedures, expectations, etc. However, as I continued my reflective journey, other photos captured more of my attention and the image of the one way sign fell by the wayside. As the weeks rolled by, other significant revelations occurred; other stories were written.

Packages are piling up on the wheelchair that is being stored in the office space I am borrowing. Other than that, it seems to be the same. As I reflect on the photos (Figures 2 & 3) before me I feel a growing pressure to make an astute observation about my practice. Beyond the idea that there is marginalization occurring on a variety of levels, what can I explore? I am frustrated and know I need to look more at myself, at my personal experiences and practice, but I feel like my practice isn’t worth writing about right now, it’s too mundane.
This seems like a bust of a reflection but I stubbornly stick with it reminding myself that not every session will be profound. I stop critiquing and just let my thoughts evolve.

I prompt myself with questions about the ultimate purpose of my practice. I know that my goal is to understand the true barriers of licensure so I can help my participants navigate those barriers successfully. I try different approaches, evaluate results, and revise as needed. Sometimes this is formalized research, but most often I do this "on the fly". I love solving problems. Learning, when I have the freedom to charter my own course, is a bit of a game for me. Thoughts about how this connects to the foundations of adult learning run through my mind but I quickly push them away as I fear they will impede my creativity. I revisit the idea that I love a challenge when learning and I consider those that have not found their own categories, or methods, of “fun” learning. I consider IEHPs who struggle to complete the requirements of their pathway. To be honest, I am somewhat puzzled by people who do not push themselves, who do not try their best. Does that sound harsh? What I mean is that I have trouble relating to those that don’t seem bothered by their lack of success. No, that’s not quite right. I’m somewhat surprised that it is a challenge to articulate what exactly it is I have trouble with. I begin testing different explanations to see what resonates most. I know we don’t all have the same vision of success. Is it more those that are okay with not reaching a goal? Nope; those that lack “fire”? Maybe, it feels like that I am getting closer as I do gravitate toward folks with fire...but what does that mean? I am puzzled by the juxtaposition of what I am thinking. I have no problem working with those that have lost hope which, in essence, extinguishes one’s fire. What is this really coming down to?!? Is it that if I can see or justify a reason, if I can connect a lack of moving forward to a series of events that deplete hope I can accept people not pushing themselves to move forward? But, that clearly means I am defining what is acceptable, and I “give permission” for those that I feel are justified in stagnating. I am judging...
what makes a lack of progress okay. When I am being real, I judge others who come to me for support yet they don’t seem to fully invest in the work of their pathway (not taking advantage of free workshops, courses, and materials available to them).

Feeling as though I am not finished with this topic, I continue to let my mind wander and a poignant memory resurfaces.

“So, how is your new car treating you?” I ask, while silently wondering how much the monthly payments are. I recognize that I am unabashedly judging his decision to buy a new car. Am I fishing for signs of regret or am I trying to guilt him right now, the minute he walks in the door?

“Good, I got in an accident though,” he replies.

“Oh no, everything ok?” I ask, regretting that I brought this up.

“Ya, not a big accident”

“Oh, that’s good,” I say, with an internal sigh of relief. “How is your pathway going? I noticed you didn’t make it to the Time Management workshop you signed up for. What happened?”

“Ya, I’ve been taking more shifts. I have to send extra money home ‘cause my Dad is on dialysis.” I feel instantly frustrated at the repetitive nature of our conversations. He is not progressing on his pathway as he has no time to devote to it because he works multiple jobs to support his family back home. The fact that he also has a car payment floats through my mind.

“I thought your brother was going to help out more. If you keep working overtime you won’t have time to study for your language exam, and if you don’t pass your language exam you are going to be stuck working as a Care Assistant forever. You only have five years to finish your pathway and the clock never stops ticking!” I reply.

I am beyond frustrated that he just doesn’t seem to acknowledge the gravity of the situation. I continue on with one final attempt to summarize, or perhaps rationalize, my perspective, “You have to make a choice, a short-term sacrifice for the long-term gain.” As I stare at him, I hope to witness the lightbulb moment where he realizes he is running out of time to become licensed and starts to take his pathway more seriously. Instead, he replies with his standard, “I know,” and then he adds, “God willing, I will pass my next exam.”

Redeeming myself is wiped off the agenda as I realize that a deep, dark thought (one that I would normally keep to myself as it is not “correct”) needs to be addressed. Why did you come all the way to Canada and then decide that it is mostly up to God to help you to become licensed? I can’t deny the frustration and disappointment I feel when I see IEHPs who do little to no work to improve their language skills, but keep taking and failing language tests. Why
is their answer to continue to leave it in God’s hands? If they are failing their language exams and don’t work on improving their skills, how will God facilitate passing language scores within the tight timelines of a pathway to licensure? Why is there not more ownership for growing one’s own skills? I did not expect this to be my focus, but I know that I must push through my current discomfort in order to grow. Wait. How do I know that they do not own their choice? Perhaps those that choose to leave their pathway to God are very satisfied with their choice. This perspective is so different from mine it is hard to simply accept it. I let out a big breath and wonder how to make sense of this flurry of thoughts.

What I had been considering as a judgment about an IEHP’s level of motivation, work ethic, culture, even levels of hope, etc. is turning out to also be intertwined with faith? Wow. My reflections today were totally unexpected. While I am not happy with my revelations per se, I am glad they occurred. I allow my mind to wander and my thoughts drift back to a time that I haven’t thought of in decades.

I can’t help but stare at the vibrancy of the colors in the windows. I wonder how the church decides what picture to use in each window? Is each picture a “scene” from the bible, or are they just random images? My thoughts are interrupted and I am jolted back to the present moment by the sound of voices around me.

“In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen”.

“Amen”.

After another hymn (for which I don’t know either the words or the tune) I anxiously wait for a moment where I can sit down and shrink out of sight. My head is bowed and cocked slightly to the left, my eyes are fully open. I’m straining to watch and mimic others. At a slightly slower pace than those I am following, I move my hand from one side of my chest to another. I wonder how everyone knows where to start the movement from? Is it always the same movement or does it change? I feel as though I’m the only one that has no idea what to do here. I hate not knowing.

“...Lord be with you.”

In unison the congregation echoes, “And also with you.”

“You may be seated.”

What?! There are group chants too!?

While this moment subsists in my memory like it happened yesterday, it is from my very early teens. I had gone to church with a friend’s family following a sleepover. Religion was not a part of my upbringing and I felt very uncomfortable “in church”. To be honest, this memory still arises in the form of mild anxiety every time I attend a wedding or funeral.

I do believe in a higher power, but I definitely see myself as having control of my actions, my life in general, and my outcomes. I have never felt that my learning was in any way impacted
or determined by God. I am now aware this is influencing me when I work with clients who defer their pathway to God.

Again, my thoughts circle back and I begin to consider my purpose each day, perhaps as reassurance that my intentions are pure. I try to help participants tap into their own sense of confidence, efficacy, motivation, etc. so that they can complete their pathway and become licensed. Am I imposing my idea of success and my way of knowing as the only viable option? How do I know that my way is correct, or best? How will I know when I should try to push others and when to back off? Why do I feel like any of this is up to me? Why do they not feel like any of this is up to them?

With little warning I am suddenly struck by the realization that I have been missing a fundamental piece of this puzzle. This is not just a disconnect I am experiencing with religion or spiritual beliefs, although I certainly don’t mean to minimize the impact of that connection. However, I am awestruck as I realize that through the power and privilege I have experienced throughout my life, because of my Canadian whiteness, I am able to feel autonomy, power, and control. I expect to feel power and control as that is what I have always known. There are no words to express my thoughts as I am overcome by disappointment and embarrassment. All I can muster is a deep sigh. I sit in silence and let the moment be.

Slowly, as my thoughts begin to creep back into my mind I find myself thinking about my original photo of the one-way sign. The one way sign that I originally thought represented the missteps of a system is now challenging me to understand the ways that I operate rigidly and without true understanding, or openness, for the beliefs or situations of others. The profound disappointment I am feeling is unlike anything I have ever experienced. It is heavy and I would think it is palpable to others, I am glad I am alone. In this moment, I am at odds with my own identity, I am unsure of how to proceed. The moment is so uncomfortable I simply want reprieve. I give in. I shut out the lights and climb quietly under the covers wondering what else I don’t know. I lay with my eyes open for a few minutes and silently float a request into the universe, “Please let me sleep tonight.” The irony of my silent request for assistance lingers as I drift off. I enter the security of slumber knowing I am forever changed. Hesse’s (2008) words become my lullaby:

> I have no right to call myself one who knows. I was one who seeks, and I still am, but I no longer seek in the stars or in the books; I’m beginning to hear the teachings of my blood pulsing within me. (p.2)

**AMBER INTERPRETS THE FIRST ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE**

This experience taught me that self-reflection of my teaching practice requires me to go beyond my thoughts and actions in the workplace. In reality, my most profound revelations, the ones that led to transformational change, required me to explore extremely personal aspects of who I am as a person (values, beliefs, positionality, etc.) in tandem with my experiences as an educator. Ellis (2004) warns of the self-questioning that is required within autoethnography, “believe me, honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot
of fears and self-doubts – and emotional pain. Just when you think you can’t stand the pain anymore – that’s when the real work begins” (p. xviii). When I first read Ellis’ comments, I had not yet begun my research journey and I was skeptical that a reflexive narrative would take me to an emotionally painful place. However, when I began to uncover what had previously been invisible to me, as I reflected on the ways that spirituality, power and privilege were impacting my practice, I understood Ellis’ ominous message. My most uncomfortable personal moments became the disorienting dilemmas that precipitated my own transformation (Mezirow, 1991). The findings of this study indicate a range of internal and external forces that both facilitated and hindered my ability to consistently engage in critical self-reflection.

**Facilitating Factors**
The following four themes emerged for me as essential facilitating factors that supported my ability to engage in a reflexive practice.

**Technology.** Art-based self-reflection would have been much more complicated without the ability to take and edit pictures on my phone and then air-drop those photos to my computer for review. I did not have to purchase or use additional software to edit and I was able to eliminate the steps traditionally involved with viewing photos (using USB cords, waiting for photos to upload to a computer, taking or sending the digital pictures to print, etc.).

**Problem-solving.** Knowing that other educators struggle to maintain a critically reflexive practice served as a motivator for me to overcome my own personal challenge with building a reflective practice.

**Feeling of success.** Through the inclusion of art-based methods, I was finally able to consistently and meaningfully engage in a critically reflexive practice. Having struggled with that for many years, I could now see that my creativity and commitment to the process were effective and the resulting feeling of success further engaged me in the process.

**Two levels of reflection.** The use of photography heightened my awareness of, and my ability to, reflect-in-action (Schön, 1987). The additional step of reviewing my photography and my reflective notes a second time as I developed the text of my autoethnography facilitated a way for me to reflect-on-action (Schön, 1987).

**Hindering Factors**
Most of the hindering factors that emerged were consistent with what I anticipated (or experienced) as barriers to building a reflexive practice prior to engaging in this study. The factor that I had not considered was the challenge of feeling vulnerable in the face of exploring my identity.

**Feeling time bound.** Finding time to reflect was challenging despite being somewhat alleviated by the introduction of technology.
**Fear of failing.** Initially, I was unsure of how to approach a reflective practice without expecting something profound from each session; I feared that the product would be a failure if it revealed nothing of interest or consequence.

**Challenges with personal identity.** It required a great deal of humility and vulnerability to expose the less flattering aspects of my thoughts and practice. However, as I did, I noticed I was able to write much more freely realizing the process was not about exposing what I thought, or knew, it was about understanding who I am.

**Amber reflects on the process**
The use of black and white photos initiated and peaked my interest in moments of reflection, however, it was during the writing of the field notes, narratives, and the crafting of the autoethnography that I experienced unexpectedly profound opportunities to reflect. Writing an autoethnographic account of my journey allowed me to extend my reflection throughout the duration of my research as autoethnography is “a process of discovery” (Ellis, 2004, p. 3). I was constructing and observing at the same time. I was intimately involved in the process, yet could stand back as though I was an observer as well. Connecting with photos, recalling memories and negotiating the text of the vignettes allowed me to explore my thoughts and experiences intuitively, emotively, and in manageable pieces. As I did, my understanding of self, my identity, and my practice gradually evolved.

**Focus on the future**
At the end of this cycle of research, we are reminded of Eliot’s (1968) thoughts:

> “We shall not cease from exploration  
> And the end of all our exploring  
> Will be to arrive where we started  
> And know the place for the first time” (p.208).

As we consider Amber’s work, we agree that the exploration of one’s identity is imperative for educators wishing to teach more effectively and critically (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007; Yang & Bautista, 2008). Amber engaged in arts-based self-reflection, observed its impact, evaluated and reported on outcomes to contribute to and expand upon the knowledge of her practitioner self. There is a sense of vulnerability here that not all researcher-artists can undertake from start to finish.

While the images and the creative writing process that motivated and inspired one educator may not produce the same effect for others, we advocate a key construct revealed through this process. Exposing educators to first-person action research under the guise of an arts-based approach offers an alternative means to building a more reflective and reflexive practice. As we create deeper senses of selves for our practice we further support our students who have the most to gain from enlightened practitioners.
REFERENCES


**Biographical note:**

Amber Dawn Clarke works for the Saskatoon Health Region as a Workforce Planning Specialist who broadly supports learning, engagement, and retention initiatives. She received her MEd from Yorkville University, New Brunswick, where she did the work for this study. Her research interests include hope as a predictor of engagement for internationally educated health professionals, and the ways that the arts can be used to illicit reflection and growth.

Dr. Darryl Daniel Bautista holds the position of Graduate School Teaching Associate MYA at the University of New Brunswick with courses in Curriculum Theory and Development. He received his Ph.D. from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto (2005). His research interests involve teacher identity negotiations via the approach of arts-based educational research (ABER). On occasion, he supervises graduate students in the Yorkville University MEAE program.