REVIEW ESSAY


Reviewed by Chuck Egerton, University of Manitoba

Arts-based research (AbR) is a cross-disciplinary “set of methodological tools” (p. ix) utilizing the principles of the creative arts, that can be applied to all aspects of social research from cultivating data, to analysis. Patricia Leavy’s (2015) *Method Meets Art: Arts-based Research Practice* (MMA) is an in-depth exploration of AbR practices. Why is arts-based research important to action research practitioners? Perhaps it is the profound and untapped potential artistic practices can offer to further human knowledge, understanding, and problem solving through the inductive arts-based action research approach. Not only for artists, Leavy presents an argument that AbR offers rich new approaches and practices beneficial to all researchers.

Leavy’s (2015) *Method Meets Art: Arts-based Research Practice* (MMA), first published in 2008, is now in its 2nd edition. Her work provides an artist and non-artist friendly gateway to understanding and utilizing arts-based methodologies in action research. The book’s success, including upcoming Chinese, Korean and Polish translations, reveals the upsurge of interest among researchers worldwide to contribute these artistic lenses to research. Leavy’s writing has been in the avant-garde of qualitative action research texts emerging in the decade after the term arts-based research was coined by Elliot Eisner (p. 11).

Patricia Leavy is an award winning independent sociologist and best-selling author, formerly an Associate Professor of Sociology, and founding Director of Gender Studies and Chairperson of Sociology & Criminology at Stonehill College. She received her Ph.D. in Sociology from Boston College in 2002. Her authorship and public scholarship includes “social fiction” novels that build on her sociological research work.
It is important to place Leavy’s MMA in the context of other major publications in this emerging field. Her book nests well with other major companion texts in the field. The 2008 edition of MMA preceded McNiff’s (2009), Arts-based Research, which speaks to an arts-based therapy and clinical approach. Another book focuses on educational research at the doctoral level, Arts-Based Research in Education: Foundations for Practice, by Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegsmund’s (2008). Barone and Eisner’s (2011) Arts-based Research, is a comprehensive overview of AbR from two of the pioneers in the field. Rolling’s (2013) Arts-based Research Primer is another extensive survey of AbR’s theory, contributions and practices. Jagodinski and Wallin’s (2013) Arts-Based Research: A Critique and a Proposal seeks to challenge AbR practitioners to stretch even farther, to a new paradigm. A final but significant companion to Leavy’s book is A/r/tography: Rendering Self through Arts-based Living, (De Cosson & Irwin, 2004) which blends the identity of the artist/teacher/researcher with the researched in context of artistic practice. All these works make important advances in understanding the practice of AbR.

AbR as described by Leavy fits comfortably within the context of action research. Arts-based action research is local, relational and social change oriented (p. 234). AbR as participatory action research often pairs researcher with participants to create works of art as, or for, research as a “holistic and engaged” approach to research questions “in which theory and practice are intertwined” (p. ix). Leavy stresses that AbR is needed in academic research because it brings about “new ways of seeing and experiencing, and illuminating that which otherwise would remain in darkness (p. ix),” and can hold up to critical academic rigor and theory.

The second edition of MMA builds on the first by tracing the evolution of AbR over the past decade as an ever-increasing number of scholars utilize it. The new edition is organized around genre specific chapters demonstrated by examples of AbR projects in each genre. These six chapters form an arc from “word to image” (p. x). As a text-based artist, Leavy begins with the fiction-based, narrative and poetic inquiry, and then moves through music, dance/movement, theatre/drama, film, ending the arc in the visual arts genre. It is encouraging to see new sections on how AbR relates to arts impact on learning, neuroscience, creative arts therapies and its philosophical/theoretical underpinnings. These new sections include a discussion on evaluation criteria for AbR, which will be enormously helpful for practitioners. Leavy caps off her overview of each genre with suggested activities, discussion questions, checklists, and references to external resource materials to provide practical guidance for researchers interested in incorporating AbR.

MMA is structured as both an overview of AbR methodologies and a guide for practitioners. Each genre-specific chapter introduces basics of that art form, contextualizes the art form within research traditions, and highlights distinct contributions that art form has made and can make to AbR. The breadth, depth and accessibility of the text make it an excellent resource for graduate classes and emerging researchers.

In the new chapter, Evaluation Criteria for AbR (chapter 8, pp. 266-289), Leavy describes evaluation of AbR projects as “messy terrain” (p. 268). Central to this is a resistance to
establishing a “gold standard” (p. 267) for evaluation of AbR work because it is so diverse and individualized. This is a contested space with many practitioners arguing that rigid standardization criteria would limit the uniqueness of each AbR approach and final products. The argument of “usefulness over artfulness” (p. 267) depends on the point of view, original intent, and questions such as: Who is evaluating the work? Are they a social scientist or an artist practitioner? And, who is the audience? However, Leavy does not shy away from evaluative issues such as translating between text and art in data analysis, transparency and explicitness, trustworthiness and authenticity, accessibility to public audiences, participatory and audience responses, and ethical practice. In this chapter, Leavy is careful not to prescribe solutions but offers a cogent and systematic presentation of current thinking and evaluation practices.

The closing chapter of MMA, Bridging the Art/Science Divide (chapter 9, pp. 290-305), addresses the ongoing contention between qualitative and quantitative approaches to research within the context of AbR. Leavy writes that to consider art as the “universal language is a romanticized view” (p. 291) ignoring that art is created within a cultural context of social and historic systems, values, markets and technologies. The author summarizes the unique artist/researcher’s skillset to include: flexibility, openness/intuition, conceptual thinking, ethical practice and values.

Method Meets Art is a must read for all who teach about or research within action research methodologies. AbR unlocks a treasure chest of artistic tools for greater inclusion, engagement and interaction to accompany research participants and can help explore and uncover rich new depths of data on human knowing and understanding.

REFERENCES


