

# Cultivating Methodology Through Somaesthetics

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A gardener wouldn't dream of cultivating her plot with just a trowel, nor would a chef cook with just a knife, so why do many academics rely on prose as their only means of representing their work? I will explore how educational theory and practice might be cultivated through praxis in the context of the fundamental basis of all place-based learning – the body through which we all experience the world. I will use three interrelated representations to explore the linkage between contemplative practice and the development of teaching and learning as a process: poetry, art and prose. The roots of my investigation are threefold: my recent experience of a three year Iyengar yoga teacher training program which represents the contemplative component, an exploration of mixed media *métissage*, and my ongoing work as a high school teacher in an inner city setting using experiential learning to stimulate interaction in my classes. These educational perspectives are further nested among personal interests in wilderness expeditions, gardening and artwork that delve into my ecological connectedness with the world and my responses to it.

The etymology of the word investigate is *vestigia*, a Latin root meaning tracks or footprints. This process-orientation is central to both my methodology and teaching practice since it indicates that the teacher's role is to act as a support for the student's learning process. Central to all three roots is the concept of embodied learning – I choose to use the Greek term “soma” to indicate the full engagement of “the sentient lived body rather than merely a physical body” (Shusterman, 2012, p. 5). My personal commitment to embodied learning is to start my day with Qi Gong or yoga – this is akin to Shusterman's (2012) and Kabat-Zinn's (2005) notion of a body scan as a tool for embracing formal meditation practice. Qi Gong practice is performed outdoors among plant life whenever possible to act as a reminder of the reciprocity of plant and animal life. This morning routine sets my intention for the day, prompting me to listen to my

whole body and remember that space is available for contemplation if I choose to sidestep the rush of chronological time. Both practices entail attentiveness to my breath as a fundamental methodological tool. Jardine states that “the word for perception or sensation in Greek was *aethesis*, which means at root a breathing in or taking in of the world” (2012, p. 101). Utilizing the Greek etymology and my bodily participation in the world, my yoga and Qi Gong practice becomes an aesthetic engagement with my situation. As a doctoral student, a further dimension of my environs is the academic readings that I am working with to deepen my understanding of “the act of education” (Jardine, 2012, p. 8), so the creation of bodily, mental and contemplative respite allows a space for digestion of such texts. I address the language-based representation of my process through writing in different genres and the explicit dimension through artwork – a hermeneutic process that I characterise as mixed media *métissage*. However, my primary approach is somaesthetic, “where cultivation of improved aesthesis means ‘feeling better’ both in the sense of enjoying better feelings but also in the sense of perceiving what we experience more accurately and clearly” (Shusterman, 2012, p. 111). The interweaving of these threads of being a student, an educator and a contemplative practitioner resemble Bentz and Shapiro’s (1998) mindful inquiry in the sense that they provide a basis to investigate multiple perspectives in a cyclical process that incorporates an interdisciplinary approach.

**Emerging...**

Each seed planted  
 an act of faith  
 trusting this tiny parcel  
 friable yet hardy  
 to the dirt.

Germination  
 invisible undertaking  
 deep in the dark  
 nurtured by the damp  
 unleashed by warmth.

How often we overlook  
 the earth’s role  
 its myriad microorganisms  
 teeming beneath our gaze  
 elemental ecosystem.

Interconnecting decomposing recomposing  
 detritivores at work  
 recycle each season’s sloughed off remnants  
 liberating nutrients  
 a cooperative economy in its own right.

Spotting the tender shoot  
magical green unfurling  
we hurry to water  
rarely considering the loam  
from which it springs.

A novice  
focused on the novel  
barely aware of the context  
interdependent co-arising  
as above so below.

Shoots & roots  
inextricably interwoven  
unseen workings  
anchoring visible change  
life line.

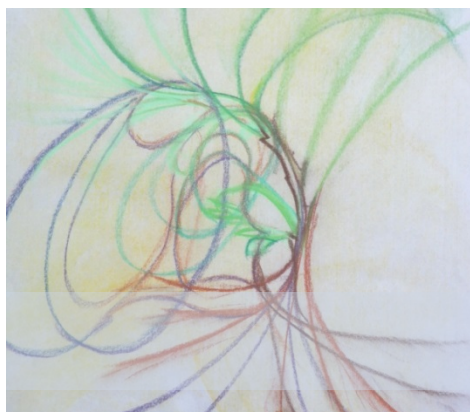
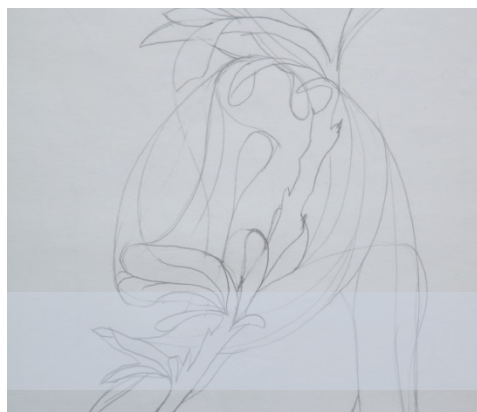
Seedlings stabilize  
seemingly static  
roots establishing themselves beneath  
until suddenly  
a burst of growth frothing forth.

I pause in wonder; faith renewed  
re-generative power reflecting back  
re-commit to play my part  
release my fear-full grip  
stand once more empty handed.

Tend my plot  
with loving kindness  
nurturing my own germ with compassion  
letting go  
allowing context to give me shape  
in emergent co-arising.

My most recent formalised learning about embodied cognition stems from an Iyengar yoga teacher-training program. Foundational to my work to qualify as a yoga teacher is the cultivation of physical stances called *asanas*. Asanas have no existence of themselves but only through the expression of our bodies. In this sense learning to teach an asana is an investigation within the student's body and, in the case of a group working together, the student body. Thus, as student teachers we track our responses to and relationships with the prescribed poses. Asana practice is about expansion and restoring spatial relationships within the body as a whole. Thus, part of the work of

becoming a teacher is to come to know (and extend) one's own bodily limitations in order to better accommodate those of others. Additionally, the overarching idea is to find the pose and then meditate in it focusing on the breath. Thus, the central tenet hinges around the creation of space and the interaction of the asana with one's own body. In this light, the asanas are living work that remains open to future extension, rooted in both each individual's capabilities shaped by their past, and emergent from a collective tradition. We are invited to dwell in the poses at the same time that we embody their very existence. My growing familiarity with this type of internalisation as a way of knowing resonates with Jardine's suggestion that "memory is topographically composed and in composing memory, one is so to speak, composing oneself, gaining composure in the face of the world" (p.167). *Be-coming* a yoga teacher involves knowing one's way around the asanas in a way that incorporates them into our sense of *be-ing*; in some sense it changes how we present ourselves in the world. Fettes (2013) might say that it provides an opportunity to "grow into the world."



It was in this frame of mind that I began my doctoral journey. The first encounter on this pathway was "Aesthetic Ways of Knowing" which incorporated life writing, *métissage* and studio time for visual representation. As part of the arts-based inquiry process, one of the assigned texts was "Life Writing and Literary *Métissage* as an Ethos for Our Times" (Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt and Leggo, 2009). Their experience is that *métissage*, including life writing, can "open apertures for understanding and questioning the multiple conditions and contexts which give rise to our experiences; and the particular languages, memories, stories and places in which these experiences are located and created" (Chambers, Donald, Hasebe-Ludt, 2001). While the initial levels of my investigation and incorporation are within my immediate sensibilities, the subsequent explorations take me further afield into the nested bodily systems, within which we exist, while webbing new concepts in a structure that might be characterised as co-dependently arising. This type of approach falls into the category of interpretive inquiry, or hermeneutics, based on my reading of Jardine (1998) and Bentz and Shapiro (1998). I continue to use writing in both prose and poetic forms in addition to sketching to shift con-texts within my interpretation of assigned readings. At its best, such re-locations create a space that acknowledges the limitations of each form while allowing me to make my own sense of the academic readings. As such, it parallels my yoga practice in which a specific asana is studied by intentionally moving my aware attention to different areas of my body in order to extend and expand into the pose from within.

Such work vivifies the material allowing me to connect it to my life on all levels including my work as an educator, my participation in various discourses, and my affinity for the outdoors. By using an exploration of mixed media forms to re-present my growing understandings, I attempt to take up my “entangled embeddedness in the world and its ways, and [take] responsibility for questioning the locales of [my] living” (Jardine, 2012, p. 8). I believe it is reasonable to extend the definition of *métissage* to broaden the palette of representational strategies beyond the written word in the spirit of seeing curriculum theory as a truly interdisciplinary area for the study of educational experience.



### **Harvest Owl**

Circling cacophonous cawing crows  
an out of sorts morning chorus  
black shadows darting amongst fall's acid shades.  
The weather cycles  
lashing torrents dash our spiders web awry  
windblown clouds reveal snow clad slopes  
skies open and close  
a window to the heavens  
admitting a sunny blessing to our closing market  
the last packing of stalls for this season.  
Home car heaped with produce  
harvest is in  
full tide of squash, crated apples, boxed peppers  
ristra rally rows of hot peppers.  
Dropping a neighbour bunched beets for borscht

her child takes me by the hand pointing excitedly upward  
she reveals the cause of the cacophony  
a huge owl perched neck-craningly high level with the top floors.  
Harbinger of death  
herald of winter in-waiting.

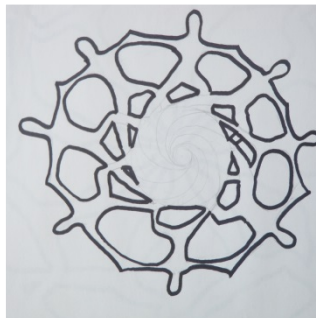
Lastly, my work as a high school educator provides me with a rich environment in which to germinate and apply my new understandings of curriculum theory. There are two main threads to my use of experiential strategies with my classes. The first is the ongoing implementation of agriculture and yoga courses in my current alternate setting. The other was the expansion of an international citizenship program at my previous school that incorporated a group wilderness expedition in addition to individual voluntary service, skill development and a fitness components. Based on Gadamer's concept that "understanding begins when something addresses us" (Jardine, 2012, p. 109), I undertook my methodological process with the question of how experiential education is reinforced by being shared and realized that I had recent personal familiarity with this concept through my Iyengar teacher training work. This widened my focus on embodied education beyond a notion of a singular physical body with its environment to include social bodies. Generally, it is assumed that interpersonal interaction will be mediated by language, however, in the case of yoga practising the asanas with a group has a collective feel that does not rely on the spoken word. It was this unspoken aspect of a collective intention that appeared to deepen and broaden the educational experience which invited me to further investigate what Fettes (2013) might call the harmonic understanding of both my own and the group expedition collaborative experiences.



My goal in braiding the three roots detailed above is "through presence and intention, [to] allow for a release of new meaning to occur" (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998, p.51). One of the tensions for my process is characterised by Smith (2011) as "the

temporal enframement of human action” (p. 176). My first step in interpretation through writing and sketching is to locate connections between my lived experience and the course material. I use my daily contemplative practices to remember that there is *kairos*, a “sense of things having their own time beyond the capacities of specific measurement” (Smith, 2011, p. 176). At this stage my aim is “to let go rather than struggle to achieve some particular state of activity” (Varela et al, 1999, p. 29) in order to move towards mindful awareness of my overall context without overly stressing a need to produce. By purposefully engaging in “the phenomenological goal of going “to the things themselves” ...[I]... attempt to break with conventional and preconceived ideas to arrive at genuine knowledge of the world, of society, and of [myself]. We can do so by focusing rigorously on what we and others actually experience...” (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998, p. 165). Ironically my best work is usually a result of not grasping at a particular end but rather examining the material while tracking my own responses seeking a “means to learn to let things stand *there*, not here under the shadow of my wanting and doing” (Jardine, 2012, p. 128). My attempt to locate my stance within a larger field of possibilities might then raise my awareness of potential angles and constraints of various approaches that might be fruitful in applying theory to my teaching practice. Jardine (1998) suggests that “interpretive work is pedagogic: it is concerned with the regeneration of meaning and is therefore disruptive of fossilized sedimentations of sense, desiring to open them up and allow “the new” to erupt and thus allowing the old and already established and familiar to regenerate and renew itself” (p. 49).

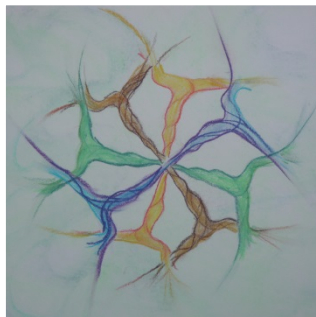
“Double Description” [Bateson]



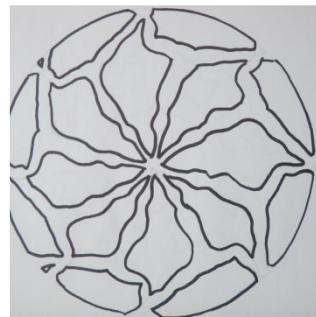
Extended Attention



Expansive Intention



“Free Space”[Jardine]



**Re-composition: spiral stanced**

Learning to  
extend beyond the physical  
not assume  
nor presume  
connection  
find a balance  
between emergent interests  
and enactive engagement  
compare notes  
interpret responsibilities  
seek common ground  
a place to belong.

Practise  
daily acquaintance  
be-coming family  
incorporating the asanas  
corporeal familiarity  
feeling my way in  
making sense from within  
broadening my reach  
gradually spreading awareness  
to my extremities  
consciously finding the contours  
topography  
top to tail  
mastery through touching  
each facet of my embodied form  
composing stance elementally  
inside out  
and outside in.

Studying myself  
charting current limits  
planning for extension  
moving beyond injuries  
slowly but surely  
vivifying my existence  
opening to other  
animating my exist-stance  
literally making space



un-doing old harms  
dis-charging emotional lock downs  
releasing patterns  
holding me prisoner  
tasting freedom  
one pose at a time  
independence  
a state of knowing  
when to seek help.

Aging in the Iyengar tradition  
carries response – abilities  
modelling for a next generation of students  
sharing stances  
talking through strategies  
outlining priorities  
dis-covering the meaning of line-age  
rehearsing for assessment  
teacher and taught  
turn about  
an ongoing spiral of reciprocity  
embodying a spirit of generosity  
(opened by asana)  
giving my all  
receiving no less  
tracking our moves together  
trusting in a gentle reception  
re-viewing our lived experience  
in the light of the sutras  
moving into the moment.

Each repetition  
re-turning to the themes  
be-coming educated  
this pose is not just here for me  
nor in me  
asana in re-pose  
while we merely com-pose  
cultivating our collective action  
re-membling it within ourselves  
re-composing in each moment  
the ebb and flow  
our stances

in-formed  
by the cycle of our breath.

Belonging on a (k)new level  
spiraling through a process  
deeper digestion  
unlocking insights  
interpretation whiles [*Jardine*]  
clearing a-way  
in-tell-ectualization  
revealing action's worth  
held still  
in contemplation  
strengthened  
through collaboration.

The third stanza of this poem sums up my methodological process – the goal in presenting a range of media in this paper is to illustrate my cultivation of an embodied mode of inquiry. It requires of me to make time to locate matters within the living field from which they arise in order to identify my own points of connection or foci rather than simply charting a path (or locus). In this way I seek to experience the conceptual field in a way that Orr describes as “not simply a matter of cognitive grasping but rather involves that totality of one’s experience” (2012, p. 80). Within somaesthetic methodology I literally work to embody my coursework and figure out what central element(s) coalesce for me in my multiple roles – educator, student, group participant, writer, gardener, artist. Finding value through interpretation and synthesis of other’s work and my own experience is characterised by Jardine (2012) as “whiling over a topic – working at it, composing it, composing ourselves over it, remembering and cultivating one’s memory of it” (p. 175). This act of finding time to investigate a topic – from Greek *topos*, a common place - speaks to me of the possibility of multiple foci emerging from within the interstices of collective somaesthetic explorations and exemplifies Gadamer’s notion of education as finding one’s way around. Jardine (2012) further links “whiling” to the work of hermeneutics through the need of contemplation in the very act of interpreting other’s work. This implies an openness that is inherent in good pedagogy and, in Jardine’s words, “predisposes us to seek free spaces of open, convivial possibilities in *whatever* might come to meet us” (2012, p. 228). It is to this end that I aspire, through somaesthetic methodology to represent my learning through different media, leaving the final interpretive act open to the viewer as a witness to my process.

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