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Abstract

To Assemble and Stitch a Research Dissertation When I learnt the art of patchwork quilting, the elderly teacher bemoaned the need to hold a quilt together with stitches. The joy in quilting, she explained, stems from a delight in fabrics, colours and the quilt design. She joked that were it possible to 'whack a quilt together' with glue, it would be preferable to the labour-intensive process of assembly by stitching. However, to 'short-cut' the assembly process would not produce a quilt likely to be appreciated for its beauty, stability or warmth. I extend this notion to the doctoral thesis process.

Keywords

qualitative, voices, research, into, patchwork, quilt, "stitching"

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“STITCHING” VOICES INTO THE PATCHWORK QUILT OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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To Assemble and Stitch a Research Dissertation

When I learnt the art of patchwork quilting, the elderly teacher bemoaned the need to hold a quilt together with stitches. The joy in quilting, she explained, stems from a delight in fabrics, colours and the quilt design. She joked that were it possible to ‘whack a quilt together’ with glue, it would be preferable to the labour-intensive process of assembly by stitching. However, to ‘short-cut’ the assem-

bly process would not produce a quilt likely to be appreciated for its beauty, stability or warmth. I extend this notion to the doctoral thesis process.¹

Beginning doctoral research after more than twenty years as an early childhood teacher, the complex task of layering and constructing a piece of work with value for both myself and my colleagues in the early childhood sector demanded a methodological approach that would appreciate and

¹ The terms thesis and dissertation are used interchangeably in this chapter to discuss the written and illustrated doctoral thesis developed by a PhD research candidate.

feature the voices of participants, while acknowledging my own labour of love in crafting the research. I intuitively sought ways to retain my identity, while making sense of the complexities of research design and satisfying the expectations of the academy. As a quilter, I found myself increasingly applying familiar quilting terminology to visualise research processes and elements. Advised by my supervisors to investigate the arts-based educational research paradigm, I consequently embraced the invitation by Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis and Grauer (2006,) to “muse on the aesthetics, consider the ambiguity, and reside in the divergence,” which ultimately led me to visually deconstruct qualitative research and the dissertation construction process using a quilting metaphor (p. 1254).

Much like a quilt, the construction of an effective research design requires the methodological alignment of questions, aims and methods wherein the elements of the research project are joined together as a “cohesive whole” rather than “fragmented” parts (Creswell, 2013, p. 50); and where the methodological choices align with, and are informed by, the philosophical and theoretical assumptions of the study (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Kramer-Kile, 2012). My desire to conduct iterative research that appreciates the complexities of the case to reflexively evoke meaning (Flannery, 2001; Koelsch, 2012) was concurrently tempered by the suggestion that to credibly interpret and articulate the beliefs and interests of both participants and researcher requires a carefully-

constructed, intentionally pieced research design (Creswell, 2013; Kramer-Kile, 2012; O’Sullivan, 2015). Inspired by O’Donoghue (2015), these imperatives compelled me to embrace the provocative mind-set of an artist to articulate my ideas visually and to connect the familiar to the unknown in order to make sense of the world (and the research context) through artful design. Consequently, the dissertation process, envisaged as a *patchwork quilt*, was articulated and diagrammatically constructed from card, text, thread and transparent parchment to position the researcher as *quilt-maker*.

This chapter describes and illustrates how my thesis operates as a qualitative patchwork quilt, a metaphor developed to guide arts-based educational research that aims to not only appreciate and respectfully disclose the visual arts beliefs and pedagogy of early childhood educators, but to examine, interrogate and articulate my own voice, interests and methodological reflections within the complex construction of a PhD thesis by compilation.² These voices, stitched into the patchwork layers of the research, informed an emergent and reflexive exploration of the visual arts beliefs and pedagogy of Australian early childhood educators. In addition, I propose that not only is my rendered researcher’s voice the stitch that holds together the assemblage of research findings, but also that my intentionally hidden voice, slip-stitched into the seams and in-between spaces of the research story, further strengthens and stabilises the dissertation. The complex layers and processes of re-

² A higher degree research thesis by compilation enables the PhD candidate to include published or publishable journal articles and book chapters in their thesis.

search design and thesis construction are metaphorically aligned with the notions and elements of quilt making to propose a reversible research quilt where the pieced construction of an enlightening conceptual framework features equally with the research findings as a contribution to the academy.

The imperative to undertake a PhD thesis emerged from my own “professional” and “educational” life (Sinner et al., 2006, p. 1237) and was underpinned by my desire to present research “that matters for others” (Chambers, 2004, p. 7, cited by Sinner et al., 2006, p. 1238). After two decades as an early childhood teacher I was concerned about the pedagogical impacts of an apparent lack of visual arts confidence and content knowledge amongst early childhood educators. My research therefore presents an examination, appreciation and articulation of the visual arts beliefs and pedagogy of twelve early childhood educators located in four early childhood education and care settings in two regional communities in New South Wales, Australia. A comparative case study design utilised interviews, observation, document analysis, environmental audits and photography to gather rich data. At the same time

my research aims to stitch together a dissertation that connects the expectations of the academy with my own desire for expressivity. Supporting this desire, Eisner (1997) encourages researchers to align qualitative methods with their personal interests, strengths and aptitudes. My use of familiar quilting terms progressively demystified the complexity of research design and enabled me to embrace my identity as a researcher and align it with my identity as a teacher and artist.

Quilt Layers and Research Layers

While others have previously utilised a quilt metaphor to linguistically describe the assemblage of research data (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Flannery, 2001; Khalfa, 2003;

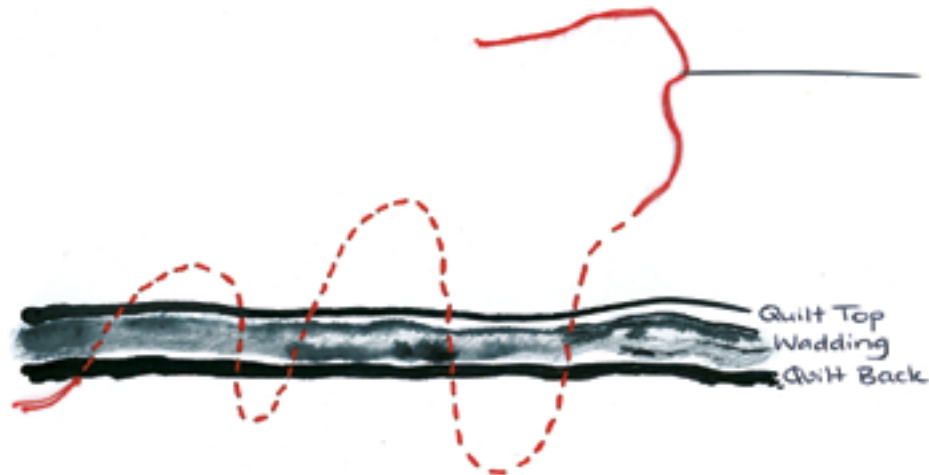


Figure 1. The quilting stitch holds three constructed layers together.

Koelsch, 2012; Parr, 2010), I extend the metaphor to interrogate and a/r/tographically (Sinner et al., 2006) visualize the layered components and construction of research dissertation. Parsons' (2015) suggestion that metaphors can be visually illustrated inspired me to construct stitched diagrams from card, text, thread and transparent parchment to enlighten the layers and components of the research design process. Indeed, the images presented in this chapter offer a methodological metaphor by aligning visual makings and text.

A patchwork quilt is constructed from a decorative, pieced top layer, a fabric backing and, between these layers, a piece of wadding. The three layers are sandwiched and held together by a decorative running stitch known as the quilting stitch (see Figure 1). Aligning quilting with research, Flannery (2001) suggests that the quilt top represents the research data that is seen by others and that the backing of the quilt, while not readily visible, aligns with the knowledge and expertise that underpin processes of inquiry. She further aligns the completed quilt with the publication of findings (Flannery, 2001). While my research design shares several metaphorical design elements with Flannery's imagery, it extends upon these ideas to consider both the component layers of the research design as well as the thesis construction. I now share my emergent journey as a researcher, aligning quilt-making layers

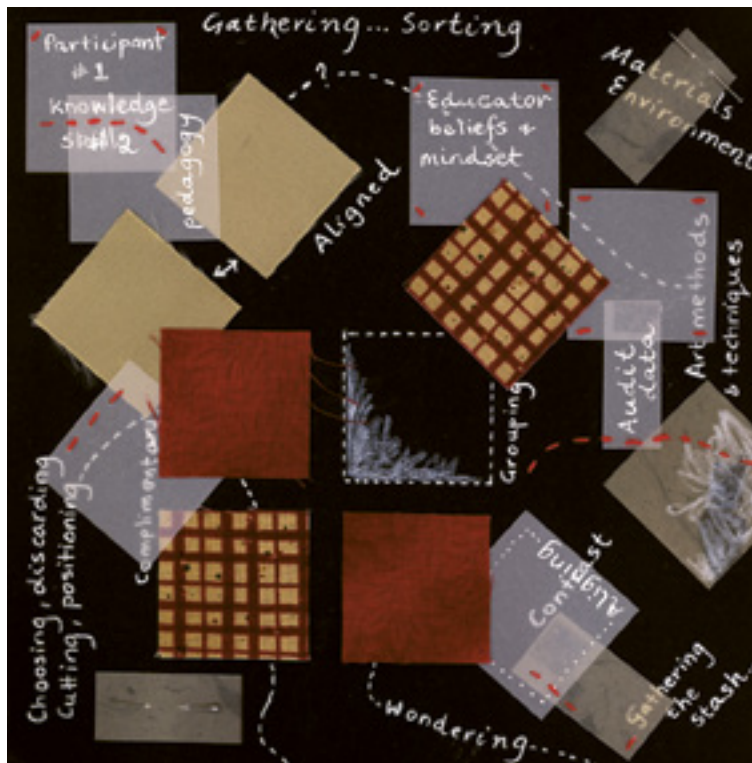


Figure 2. Gathering data and theories.

and steps within my research study and positioning myself as the stitch that constructs, connects and embellishes the multiple elements of the research.

Commencing the Construction of a Qualitative Research Quilt

The first phase of my research journey was an overwhelming tangle of confrontation between my prior knowledge and experience, my desire to gather information that would matter, my developing identity as a research student and the demands of constructing

a PhD proposal within the new and unfamiliar constraints of academia. The processes of reading, wondering, data collecting and musing, alongside the multitude of decisions to determine theory, epistemology and methodology are aligned with the early stages of quilt construction (see Figure 2). This helped me to appreciate the necessity in gathering, sorting and even rejecting some of the ideas I collected. Choices must be made in the construction of patterned blocks of data. Therefore, rather than becoming overwhelmed by the choices before me, the quilt metaphor enabled me to accept this messy reality as vital to the research process.

Valuing Voices: Research as an Emotional Construct

To value the experiences and voices of research participants requires that personal stories, knowledge and experiences be acknowledged, both within the data and within the researcher's interpretation of the data. My intention to honour both the voices of the participants and my own voice as a pre-school teacher and researcher was informed by Dewey's (1934) ideas about inquiry and uncertainty. Dewey explained that clear understandings of the dominant themes within examinations of lived experience might not develop "without exclamations of admiration, and stimulation of that emotional outburst often called appreciation" (p. 2). Mindful of the responsibilities and the risks in selecting, appreciating and disclosing the beliefs of the research participants, I sought

to present patterns of data to support the reader to question and interpret the phenomenon through my eyes (Eisner, 1998). Drawing upon Dewey's notions of holistic inquiry, Siegesmund (2012) proposes a/r/tography as a methodology that joins together "brain and heart, spirit and flesh, conscious and unconscious" (p. 103). Similarly, while I pragmatically employed the research principles and methods of traditional case study design, I consciously valued my experiences as a teacher and sought ways to express the construction of my research dissertation with artistic sensitivity. This desire to sensitively envelop and inform the research



Figure 3. Sorting and piecing data.

problem through the presentation and theoretical interpretation of each participant's lived experience aligns with the quilt-making process in which fabric is collected, selected, layered, pieced and stitched to form a patchwork construction.

Sorting and Piecing Together the Collected Stash of Data

A quilt top is constructed from pieces of plain or patterned fabric that have been cut and stitched together to form patterned blocks. Similar to Flood's (2009) "textsapes" and "threadsapes," the constructed "patchwork blocks" within my research heuristically



Figure 4. Thematic assemblage and overlay.

represent the visual arts beliefs, pedagogical content knowledge and stories of the research participants (p. 59). I therefore sought to feature participant voices without judgement to enable the reader to interpret the shade and pattern of educator beliefs about visual arts pedagogy. Yet, data is a delicate, sometimes slippery, fabric; prone to fray unless the researcher

skilfully aligns, and shapes it into narrative patterns and summary blocks. Just as there would be no quilt without a quilt-maker, there would be no research were it not for the intent, action and purpose of the researcher. Consequently, it

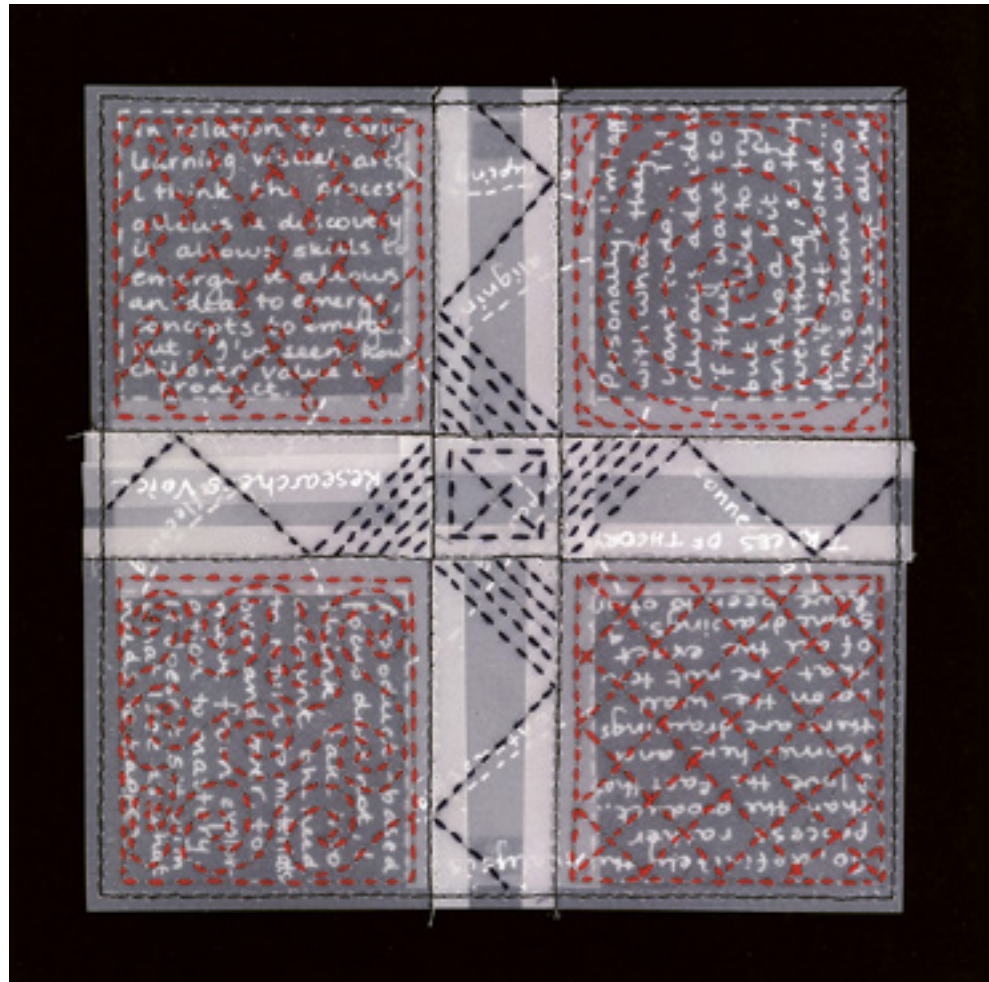


Figure 5. Seen and unseen stitching.

was also necessary to acknowledge my own role in stitching threads of connection between the audience, participants and myself (Flood, 2000) as I drew upon my knowledge and experience, along with the conceptual framework, to analyse, compare, connect and stitch together the case study narratives (see Figure 3).

Conceptual Backings: A Reversible Research Quilt

In a real quilt the backing is the bottom layer of the quilt 'sandwich.' It is traditionally comprised of a large piece of fabric that serves the dual purpose of stabilising the quilt and encasing the messy stitches and frayed raw edges of the pieced quilt top. However, in seeking a single theoretical framework to guide and inform data analysis in my study, existing theoretical lenses were as unsatisfying to me as a plain singular stretch of fabric backing on a patchwork quilt. Instead, the foundational backing of my research is comprised of an intricately pieced socio-political, historical and conceptual synthesis of the art-centric pedagogical values jointly articulated by John Dewey and the Italian Reggio Emilia educational approach (Lindsay, 2015; 2016). This conceptual lens inspired, guided and anchored my analysis and discussion of the visual arts beliefs and pedagogy of early childhood educators, just as the fabric quilt backing on a quilt stabilises the whole quilt. (see Figure 4).

The pieced data and the pieced conceptual framework in my dissertation contribute equally to the research field and to my desire to create contexts for pedagogical reflection about early childhood visual arts beliefs and pedagogy. Indeed, my socio-

political and historical analysis of Dewey's influence on educational philosophy and pedagogy in Reggio Emilia constitutes an academic contribution to early childhood visual arts research in its own right. I therefore determined that my dissertation should be positioned as a flipped or reversible quilt, where both the research findings and the constructed conceptual framework are presented with equal value, and where the presentation of research data is concurrently enlightened and stabilised by constructed layers of theory.

The Researcher as Both Seen and Unseen Stitch

A quilt is made up of countless stitches that connect many pieces of fabric that subsequently form the quilt blocks and layers. Once complete, a final decorative quilting stitch anchors the quilt layers together, concurrently strengthening the quilt and enhancing the design (see Figure 5). This embellishing stitch, while adding another layer of complexity to the design and drawing attention to particular blocks, also enables the quilt to withstand examination and use. Applying this notion to my research, Barone and Eisner's (1997) ABER conception of the researcher as a connoisseur and critic of the case positions my researcher's voice, formed through years of pedagogical experience and informed by the constructed conceptual framework, as the stitch that both holds together and enriches the complex layers and elements of the research.

At the same time, I heed Irwin, Beer, Springgay, Grauer, Xiong and Bickel's (2006) notion that rich learning occurs in the "interstitial" and "in-between-spaces" (p. 72). I

acknowledge that it would be impossible to express every element of my research journey, including the multiple reflections about which threads of data and findings should feature and be explicitly rendered in the dissertation. Instead, this background work on my part remains located in the seams and wadding of the research quilt. I explicitly reveal that in constructing my dissertation there were times when I deliberately placed the threads of my overt voice and opinion into the seams of the research data – as the unseen stitch - to intentionally strengthen and feature the fabric of participant voices and beliefs. Sinner et al. (2006) affirm that arts-based research, in sharing lived experience, seeks to “include voices in research that may not otherwise be heard” (p. 1249). I contend this sometimes demands a disciplined silence on the part of the researcher. Though not always visible, I am still there; still explicitly involved in the construction and strengthening of the dissertation.

Satisfying and Disrupting the Expectations of the Academy

Recognising the ongoing “tensions in the academy concerning arts-based inquiry” (Sinner et al., 2006, p. 1227), my approach to PhD research sought to both satisfy and disrupt the dissertation requirements within my academic context. Although arts-based educational research and a/r/tographic methodologies are well established in some academic communities, such as those articulated by Sinner et al. (2006) and LeBlanc, Davison, Ryu and Irwin (2015), I identify with Bogumil, Capous-Desyllas, Lara and Reshetnikov’s (2015) view that such method-

ologies remain neglected in some contexts.

In my own research journey, I initially perceived a subtle expectation that PhD dissertations should follow traditional research design patterns. Additionally, although presented with the option to develop a thesis by publication, few guidelines were provided to support the non-linear piecing together of traditional thesis chapters and published articles in order to satisfy external examination. Amidst this ambiguity, and despite the fact that my thesis must undergo external examination, I was emboldened by the notion that ABER is located in the “liminal space” between traditional approaches to research and artistic practice and should not be “judged according to predetermined criteria” (Sinner et al., 2006, p. 1229). Additionally, Dewey’s (1934) philosophies about aesthetic inquiry and experiential learning have inspired my determination to construct a dissertation of “genuine artistry in scientific inquiry” where I proceed “neither by rule, nor yet blindly, but my means of meanings that exist immediately as feelings having qualitative colour” (p. 125). Similarly inspired by Dewey, Siegesmund (2012) suggests that because a/r/tography is a “methodology that seeks to capture, record and artistically re-present” new perceptions and wisdoms, it supports researchers to embrace uncertainty and put aside externally imposed pre-occupations with “production of knowledge” (p. 106).

However, located as I am in the seam allowance between traditional research expectations and my own ABER aspirations, it was necessary that I carefully align and stitch my preference for a creative, dynamic and emergent process of inquiry together with traditional patterns for qualitative re-

search. Sinner (2006) also combined traditional qualitative research methods with ABER to tell “a subjective story of lived experience” that may have otherwise been overlooked in more traditional paradigms (p. 369). Therefore, while I employed traditional case study and data collection methods, I positioned the research process as an emergent, flexible and responsive practice to embrace my own creative inquiry and to shape assumed dissertation formulas into more satisfying patterns. I applied quilting imagery and metaphors to not only make sense of methodological processes for myself, but to provoke the academy within my context to consider the visual articulation of research methodologies, so that my dissertation might offer a localised platform for expanding approaches to educational research. In crafting a dissertation that stitched connecting threads between traditional case study design and my own desire to artistically express research “practice, process and product”, I sought to “trouble the understood framework of qualitative research” and redefine “methodological vehicles” in my own educational research context (Sinner et al., 2006, pp. 1255; 1225).

Quilting the Dissertation

The construction of a research dissertation is a long, intricate process. As with a traditional quilt pattern, once the research design is established and the methodical collection and construction of data is underway, the principles of rigour and trustworthiness, along with the external expectations of dissertation examiners, discourage significant deviation from the plan. However, as with quilts, not all research is traditional. While

basic standards of sound design and construction must remain constant, contemporary quilters employ processes akin to art design, where play with fabric, form and colour align with visual arts processes, and where the quilt artist intuitively develops the quilt design in response to the gathered materials and intent of the project. Similarly, ABER and the methodology of a/r/tography encourage me to reflexively situate my “own presence and contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process” (Bogumil et al., 2015, p. 3).

My research journey highlights the complex patterns and layers of interpretative meaning-making embedded within a research design and aims to appreciate and articulate the research process in ways accessible to both researchers and practitioners. By metaphorically visualising the elements of research design as the pieced fabrics, layers and stitches of a quilt, the often-alienating language of research inquiry is rendered accessible not only to the early childhood educators that this research aims to inform, but to researchers seeking a reflexive expression of their own identity.

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