



Love Letters, Post Cards, and Post-it Notes

About Pedagogy, Ways of Knowing,
and Arts-Based Research

Vachel Miller
Katrina Plato
Kelly Clark/Keefe
John Henson
and Sally Atkins



POIESIS: A Journal of the Arts and Communication
Volume 15, 2013 • ISSN 1492-4986/2013
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Dear John, Summer 2012

I am having the most amazing time at EGS. In a moment I will be giving the community lecture here and I am nervous, but also exhilarated, having met so many of the students, staff, and faculty associated with this magical school in the Alps. I want to write more, and will later, but for now I just wanted you to know that I am carrying your question about the role of creativity and the arts in inquiry into my lecture. As with all things art, I intend to go into the lecture expecting the unexpected and hope I will come out the other side with new insights.

More soon, Kelly.

To: Master John Henson
 Doctoral Program
 App State Univ.
 Boone, NC U.S.A.

What do you love Kelly?
 -John

John,

I love so many things; inquiry, collaboration, creativity, artistic expression, binaries, starting from the middle, multiple representations of truth!

Kelly

Kelly,

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT? While I am deeply moved by thoughts of creative forms of inquiry, I am also burdened with thoughts of needing to create a credible dissertation. Shouldn't I be concerned with conforming to the socially accepted forms/discourses of writing and research that dominate the world of academics? Isn't a dissertation designed to provide doctoral students with an opportunity to conduct research and formal writing in a way that will prepare them for the type of work they will likely be asked to do in when working in higher education? If I am seeking employment at the university level, shouldn't I stick to socially/professionally acceptable forms of inquiry?

- John

REGISTERED * FIRST CLASS CHARGING CIRCLES, U.S.A.
 PLEASE REPLY TO THE POST OFFICE
 HORTICULTURE
 To: Kelly Clark-Keefe
 Lofly Land of Academics
 College of Education
 Boone, NC 28607

HAND CANCEL





Dear John,

In many ways, I feel as though you are carrying the questions of so many, perhaps most, graduate students who have dared enter into this conversation about arts-based research; questions of legitimacy, transferability, and the like. I wrote in my own arts-informed dissertation, completed in 1999, that engaging creativity while doing research was not for the faint of heart. When last we met, you wondered with a bit of worry; "Shouldn't I be concerned with conforming to the socially accepted forms of writing and research that dominate the world of academics? Isn't a dissertation designed to provide doctoral students with an opportunity to conduct research and formal writing in a way that will prepare them for the type of work they will likely be asked to do when working in higher education?" I think you are prudent to ask these questions, John. I also think, alongside you, that it is important for graduate students to understand and become skilled at what most would recognize as conventional academic research and reporting prose. And yet I am halted by the words in your query; "that will prepare them for the type of work they will likely be asked to do when working in higher education." It is precisely what has become "likely" in higher education—a climate of having to do "science as usual"—which compels me to introduce and encourage arts-based alternatives. It is the less likely that I hope to foster. Do you think engagement in the arts can bring forth what we currently cannot recognize by way of positive affiliations and peaceful solutions to social and human problems? Do you see potential value in learning and practicing creative approaches to research, despite or perhaps precisely because of its marginal status in the academy? Still, it may be too much, too risky. I am anxious to hear what you believe.

Love, Kelly



Kelly,

I am simultaneously bursting with excitement to explore creative forms of expression; multi modality potential, video production, eBooks, as well as physically tangible forms of creative expression.

Academic research can become locked in concrete reference to a specific time, place, and event. I feel that artistic expression has the potential to shed this concrete baggage in exchange for a mode of communication (or a language) that transcends the specific moment in time to connect the reader's mind, body, and soul thus creating a more compelling, perhaps more generalizable, text.

- John

To: Dr. Kelly Clark-Keefe
The Ivory Tower
Fourth Floor Window
Boone, NC 28608



Cohort 20, RCE
Room with a View
Boone, NC 28607



John,

Dr. Sally Atkins has just published an article about mentoring arts-based dissertations. Be sure to take a look. I believe it will inform our methods of research project.

- Katrina

Dear Students,

I am honored that you found my article, "Where Are the Five Chapters," useful. I hope I have pointed out some of the pitfalls as well as some of the potential learning and joy that can come in exploring the possibilities of arts-based research.

As you can tell, I am very excited about this field, the most excited I have been in a long time about a research methodology. My students at ASU and EGS are also excited about it. In our field of expressive arts therapy there is a strong resonance between these research methods and our theories about the arts and healing. Narrative, ritual, musical, performative, visual, movement and poetic forms of enquiry offer ways of exploring and sharing the kinds of existential questions that many people are asking about their lives. In my field of expressive arts therapy there is an emphasis on art making as a way of bringing to light both personal issues and societal problems. Art making in a therapeutic context offers a way of finding new awareness and insight and for recognizing both internal and external resources to meet life's challenges. I hope that you will be inspired to explore this methodology and to articulate why and how you have used it when you are asked why you have not shaped your dissertation into the traditional five chapters.

Love, Sally



On Wed, Oct 24, 2012

Katrina & John,

It's wonderful to see your energy around arts-based research and alternative inquiry. A couple of years ago, I drafted an article about alternative dissertations which is now gathering electronic dust in my computer. Would you be interested in expanding this piece together? Perhaps let's play.

Unconventionally yours,
Vachel

Atkins, S. (2012). Where are the five chapters?: Challenges and opportunities in mentoring students with art-based dissertations. *Journal of Applied Arts & Health*, 3 (1), pp. 59-66(8). Intellect Ltd.

I ask, is pleasure worth an A?

An educator who wrote his dissertation in the form of a novel, Jason Lukasik, argues that a publicly accessible form of scholarship invites dialogue with a broader audience. Writing in the form of story enables the scholar to produce more animated work. Lukasik reflects on his own motivation to write a novel: "I seek to move beyond the iron bars of traditional academic writing" (2010, p. 86). By moving beyond those bars, Lukasik is able to "fuse the literature of the mind with the literature of the soul, the language of scholarship with the language of spirit" (2010, p. 91). This brings us to a root question: is there space for soulfully engaged scholarship? In a radical moment, I imagine new criteria for evaluating the quality of a dissertation: is it intellectually provocative and enjoyable to read? Is there pleasure—including the pleasure of uncomfortable questions—waiting to be found in the encounter with this text? Or non-text?

Vachel



Dear Katrina, John, and Sally,

Well, Vachel has done it again. Did you three get his last note? Incitement this time comes in the form of questions about pleasure in relation to dissertation scholarship. He wonders about soulfully engaged scholarship and begins imagining new criteria for evaluating such work. Incorporating pleasure into a rubric for deciding quality and worth in doctoral studies? Revolutionary maybe, but shouldn't we be concerned about inviting a moral panic? Michalinos Zembylas (2007) asks a similar question, installing an enduring caution as well as a note of hope along the way: "Can desire be pedagogically useful as that which produces and seduces imaginations instead of being associated simply with repression and coercion?" (p. 332) Mobilizing desire may be risky. Grading pleasure may be only nearly possible and certainly quite radical.

Yours in desire, Kelly

Lukasik, J. (2010). Beyond these iron bars: An emergent (and writerly) inquiry into the public sphere. In J. Burdick, J. Sandlin, & B. Schultz (Eds.), *The handbook of public pedagogy*, pp. 82-92. New York: Routledge.

Zembylas, M. (2007). Risks and pleasures: A deleuzo-guattarian pedagogy of desire in education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(3), 331-347.

Saks, A. L. (1996). Should novels count as dissertations in education? *Research in the Teaching of English*, 30(4), 403-427.



POST CARD



Kelly & Sally,

Danger ahead. Opening spaces for creative, integrative inquiry in doctoral programs may place faculty "at the edge of incompetence" (Saks, 1996, p. 412) -- a place many of us would rather not go. How do I evaluate and support aesthetically-oriented work that I don't have the talent or training to produce myself? Can I stand on that edge with any scholarly confidence? Arts-based inquiry, as much as sophisticated statistics, reminds me how narrow the bandwidth of my competence is. I need to stick to text, even while I hope you can go beyond it.

Limitedly yours,
Vachel



Dear Vachel and Sally,

I wanted to write and tell you that in my courses, I am witnessing Katrina and John, along with several other doctoral students, as deeply creative souls who are beginning to soar with the possibilities of doing inquiry and writing in the academy anew! You two and I have seen this before; the arts take a hold and a transformation of sorts is set in motion. As you know, I am with you in terms of opening spaces for creative, integrative inquiry in doctoral programs. I am also, though, asking similar questions as you both about whether we should be encouraging students to work at the edge of incompetence. What responsibility do we have in warning students (and protecting ourselves) from the naysayers; the many, many others who would deem efforts toward non-traditional approaches as mere play or worse, as irresponsible counsel?

Love, Kelly



Dear Kelly & Vachel,

I do want to work at the edge of incompetence where surprises can happen and where I must risk being vulnerable. I am longing for a different kind of conversation than the politically and economically driven assessment drivel that dominates the current landscape of higher education in America. I want to be a co-learner with my colleagues and with my students about ideas that matter, not just the ones that can be observed and measured. How do we do this?

Love, Sally



Kelly & Sally,

At a symposium a few weeks ago, a graduate of our program recalled a children's book from the 1940s that admonished a young locomotive to "Stay on the Rails No Matter What." For doctoral students, to stay on the rails means to complete a dissertation, using an established methodology and organizing one's work in the conventional five-chapter format.

Staying on the rails may be expedient for completing a degree, but how does it constrain our students' analytic courage and creative spark? How does it limit the kind of knowledge that matters in the world, the kind of people who can create scholarship, and to whom our scholarship speaks?

Going off the rails,

Vachel

Is a dissertation a good assignment? Why write the thing? Why do we continue to require a form that has limited circulation and limited usefulness? Duke and Beck (1999) point out that the dissertation, as a genre, has no generalizability for the writer, i.e., the writer is unlikely ever to write a dissertation again. The only similar genre with such limited generalizability might be the writer's last will and testament (Duke & Beck, 1999, p. 32). Is a dissertation a poor investment of student and faculty effort, since the learning does not transfer fluidly to future academic/professional writing? Why not offer an assignment that is more authentic to students' work in the world?

A few doctoral programs have opened alternative models for the dissertation, including policy papers or consulting reports. Despite their relevance, such alternatives remain rare, indicating the caution graduate faculty feel about maintaining traditional standards of rigor encoded in the dissertation.

We guard the tradition, and so how do we open a deeper epistemological diversity in the nature of inquiry and presentation of insight? What about forms of inquiry that throw empirical convention to the wind? How do we know what constitutes good work?

Hi, Kelly

This year I attended the 43rd annual Art Therapy Association conference and noticed several more lectures introducing arts-based research methodology. I was privileged to talk with two art therapists who used arts-based research methodology in their dissertations. You were a pioneer with a dissertation including your paintings and prose. I chose this doctoral program because you and Vachel invite this evolving method of research.

Katrina

How do we ensure a student has done the work to earn the degree? I'm stuck in these tensions between safeguarding legitimacy, enabling relevance, and liberating creativity.

Help me out.

Yours, Vachel

Duke, N. K. & Beck, S.W. (1999, April). Education should consider alternative formats for the dissertation. *Educational Researcher*, 28(3), 31-36.

Crampton, G., & Tibor, G. (1972). *Tootle*. New York, NY: Golden Books Pub. Company. (Original work published 1945)

Post Card

Friends,

This is what I see as the core argument for deep rethinking of the nature of knowledge production available to doctoral students. When professional educators experience legitimacy, even passion, in the integration of spiritual insight, poetic awareness, creative expression, and rational empiricism, they may feel emboldened to valorize, and themselves encourage, such integrative being and knowing in their own work as educators.

In short, doing the dissertation differently holds a key for a broader transformation of educational purpose and practice.

This is bigger than us.

A narrowly objectivist mode of knowing causes humanity to lose our sense of communion, our belonging, with the world (Wilshire, 2006). We no longer experience other inhabitants in the world as “fellow subjects” who co-participate in the life of the planet. The cost of being modern for Wilshire, is the loss of a lived experience of inter-being with all that surrounds us. Wilshire explains the effect of an exclusive reliance on objective knowledge:

The enwombing cohesiveness of the sights, sounds, smells of the place one is in, along with the enticements, opportunities, responsibilities, the cohesiveness of the place—the elemental—deserts us. I mean the cycling continuities of Nature actually going on in every place: the humming of crickets in the warm night air; the methodical hooting of owls at midnight; the rutting and whistling of elk; the splashing of fish as one assembles the fishing rod; the age-old freshness of the dawn; the inexorable appearance of the sun. (2006, p. 103).

In his poetic evocation of the wonders of awareness, Wilshire is not advocating for a return to a “primitive” mode of being. Rather, he calls for integrative knowing, i.e., having the capacity to engage multiple modes of knowing, i.e., to narrow our vision for the sake of objective knowledge, with all its uses, while reinvigorating our capacity to “dilate” our knowing, to experience our surroundings as a humming whole. An inclusive approach to knowledge does not deny the importance of objective knowledge, but places it within a broader appreciation of multiple ways of understanding and being in the world. As Wilshire says succinctly, “There are many ways of speaking the truth, and we need them all” (2006, p. 110). Integrative knowing involves an openness to multiple forms and fonts of knowledge: empirical observation, wisdom traditions, self-reflection, and the fleeting moments of intuition—the stuff of poetry, receptive contemplation, and dwelling in a larger field of interconnection with the world.

What if we asked our students to widen, widen, widen? Not to widen their questions to an unmanageable scope, but to widen their awareness, to widen the span of their ways of knowing, to widen their ways of presenting meaningful insights, to widen the possibilities for engaging their audience?

Yes, This is bigger than us.

Vachel

Wilshire, B. (2006). Ways of knowing. In S. Awbrey, D. Dana, V. Miller, P. Robinson, M. Ryan, & D. K. Scott (Eds.), *Integrative learning and action: A call to wholeness*, pp. 101-116. New York: Peter Lang.



... pay attention...

Response to "Dilated knowing"

Thank you, Vachel, for sharing the ideas Wilshire with us. His poetic words resonate with me and with many other writers in the fields of ecotherapy and ecophilosophy. Our objectivist mode of knowing, along with our western economic metanarrative, I believe, lie at the heart of our current ecological crises. And we are participatory in teaching the superiority of this way of knowing in higher education. I want a lived experience of belonging in the world, a sense of communion that such writers invoke. I want an epistemology of the senses.

Love, Sally



Vachel Miller
Open Door
College of Education
Boone, NC
28608

POST CARD



Sally,

YES! To all your questions! And YES! to all the beauty and love you bring to education, the arts, and alternative ways of knowing this world and knowing each other. A deep bow, Sally, for being such a real human being. I think that's what you're talking about...why can't we be embodied sensory poetic dancing discovering broken-hearted human beings becoming belonging-in-the-middle of all we do as researchers/teachers?

Why have we let ourselves be less, why have we let education become less, all dry and shriveled, with the false hope that narrowing our scope of being will make life richer? Perhaps all the measurements just bring us closer to bankruptcy.

Life flows through you, and adores your presence. A great big hug of crazy epistemological comrades!

Your friend, Vachel

Vachel,

John and I are inspired to facilitate an art-making experience on research methodologies with our cohort. We believe an arts-making experience will best demystify the often non-discursive arts-based method of gathering and interpreting data towards a new way of knowing.

Following your invitation, we will adapt Laura Rendon's (2009) research box project as a practical exploration of arts-based research. We hope the research box project will be a successful means for individuals to discover the nature and value of arts-based research for themselves.

My box example describes my journey down the rabbit hole of research. Rabbit ears represent my love of ethnography. Outside the box, the contour portrait represents myself as the researcher. Inside the box, a brain image symbolizes my interest in researching how the arts facilitate the processes of acquiring knowledge.

In Gratitude for the Opportunity,

Katrina

Rendon, L. (2009). *Sentipensante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy: Education for Wholeness, Social Justice and Liberation*, pp. 76-80. Stylus Publishing, L.L.C.: Sterling, VA.



Dear Cohort:

12/4/2012

Tonight will be the last time we gather around this table. This weekly assembly, this late and tired Tuesday, where you come for your credits, and I, for my contract, but in that meeting, we find something else emerging.

What is our work here? This work—actually, this serious play—is about opening. The opening of ideas that were closed to us before, the opening of a space where we can claim love of inquiry, love of the world, and a certain love of each other as our purpose.

Committed lovers lay claim to each other's lives. I don't want that much, nor do I offer that much. I only want you to know that you are free to proclaim what you most deeply believe—properly cited, of course—and call it legitimate knowledge; free to explore the world in ways that are most life-giving to you; free to represent your knowing in ways that don't fit in those five chapters that Dr. Creswell told you about. Because that's what friends do for each other. They help each other believe in themselves, and remind each other to play.

The risk, of course, is that you will realize how little I really know; that I don't speak with a French poststructural eloquence; and that all that qualifies me to be your teacher is that I got my degree just a few years before you, not by virtue of being any smarter or having read all the books on my shelf (I haven't; I just keep them there, because my house is full of children.)

What else could we call this, besides critical friendship? One of my patron saints, Parker Palmer, talks about knowing as a form of love, of "intimacy that does not annihilate difference." I've long believed that teaching and learning is the reciprocal flow of love, that deep affirming YES we say to each other, that field of shining regard in which I want to hold you, and how I long to be held.

So how shall we name what happens around this table together? Perhaps it is not to be named, only felt. Not knowledge to be discovered, or constructed, or deconstructed. But two hours to enjoy each other's company; as companions, not one leading the other, just holding each other, and in the holding, opening the world.

Epistemologically yours,

Vachel

Vachel,

I am already missing our time together. The serious play we participated in during our class time together has transformed my understanding of what it means for a text to be considered academic. I am comforted by your encouragement to communicate the things we most deeply believe in ways that are both meaningful to us, and hopefully will prove meaningful to our readers. Individuals participating in a heuristic experience with a text may find themselves compelled to act as an agent of change. I want to create academic works that raise as many questions as they provide answers. I strive to find a way to extend the information and ideas I work with, to a community that expands past the walls of academia. But how? If we experience the world through all of our senses, then why do we constrain academic texts to mere words? I want to create texts that evoke passion and a desire to act within all who participate in the experience.

Lovingly,

John



Never have I felt more inspired or encouraged to pursue what I love within an educational institution. Have you noticed how my eyes glisten when you invite me to participate in creative collaborations? I may be older in years, but your wisdom of holding and opening speaks to eons of experience.

Warmly, Katrina



Dear Vachel,

Priorities
Thank you so much for sharing your beautiful and intimate letter to your cohort of doctoral students. You remind me of so much that I care about and value in this privileged relationship of teacher and students, co-learners on a winding and uncharted path. Thank you for reminding me of Parker Palmer's idea of knowing as a form of love, the kind of intimacy that can hold difference, rather than destroy it. If we could live this and teach it, how would it change the academy, the world? Yes, let's practice holding each other in this field of shining regard and in this holding, opening the world!

Love, Sally



...everything knows...



Confidential fragile

All postcards and notes were designed by the authors, with additional design work by Emily Miller, Susan Reed and Kristin Briggs.

You are cordially invited to add your voice to our conversation

Please seal all the open edges of your
postcard to ensure being accepted
by the postal service.
Many thanks.



fold along this line

Love Letters: Reader Response
c/o Dr. Sally Atkins
ASU Box 32075,
Appalachian State University,
Boone, NC
28608
U. S. A.



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**postcard back page
do not add text
here--leave blank**

Sally Atkins is a poet and core faculty at EGS. She is Professor of Human Development and Psychological Counseling at Appalachian State University where she teaches expressive arts therapy and serves on the doctoral program committee. Her most recent book of poetry, with Margo Fuchs Knill, is *And When We Speak*.

Kelly Clark/Keefe is Associate Professor and Doctoral Faculty in the Reich College of Education at Appalachian State University. An arts-based researcher, she uses material feminist and poststructural theories to examine the role of bodies, subjectivity, and creativity in education and in social scientific research. She is the author of *Invoking Mnemosyne: Art, Memory, and the Uncertain Emergence of a Feminist Embodied Methodology*.

John Henson brings a background in professional photography, video production, technology integration, and curriculum design to his work as both a doctoral student and instructor at Appalachian State University. He is working to incorporate media production and design elements into his research to create texts that are both creative and academically relevant.

Vachel Miller is an Assistant Professor in the Reich College of Education at Appalachian State University. He teaches courses in research methodologies, leadership, and globalization in the doctoral program in educational leadership. He worked as a research/policy specialist on a regional child labor project in East Africa from 2005-2008.

Katrina Plato is an art therapist and art educator. She is presently pursuing a degree in Educational Leadership through Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina, as well as the doctoral program in Expressive Arts at EGS. Katrina is passionate about creative arts-based community collaborations in education research.