
Arts-Based Research Practices

Designing Research That Is Useful for the Public



Here in the union of arts, humanities, and science, finally, we find the true origin of all encompassing wisdom. Wisdom is often transitory. It may be experienced just as brief glimpses or flashes of revelations that reveal eternal insights and lead to moments of comprehension. Such mental experiences have enormously stimulated the development of all human activities from the arts to religion, and to science.

—Richard R. Ernst (2000, 127)

Arts-based research (ABR) practices emerged from the 1970s to 1990s¹ and now constitute a significant methodological genre (Sinner et al. 2006).² Arts-based research developed out of a confluence of factors including but not limited to: the effects of the social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the rise in autobiographical data across the social sciences, critical theoretical perspectives, advances in embodiment theory, and moves towards public scholarship (Leavy 2009). Technology has further propelled advances in ABR via innovations including digital imaging, digital cameras, the Internet, PhotoShop, sound files and so forth. With respect to moves towards public scholarship, it is here that I think arts-based research may have the greatest potential to facilitate transdisciplinarity and thereby address real-world issues and problems of import.

As I noted in an earlier work, arts-based research has developed in a transdisciplinary methods context involving the crossing of disciplinary

borders as well as cross-disciplinary collaborations (Leavy 2009). It is important to note that while ABR practices developed in a transdisciplinary methods context, not every inclusion of “art” in a research project qualifies as a transdisciplinary enterprise. In order for a project to be transdisciplinary the same principles noted throughout this book must be present in some combination: the bringing in of multiple disciplinary sources, holistic approaches to research, responsive methodological strategies, and so forth. With this said, I define arts-based research practices as

a set of methodological tools used by qualitative researchers across the disciplines during all phases of social research including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation. These emerging tools adapt the tenets of the creative arts in order to address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined. Arts-based methods draw on literary writing, music, performance, dance, visual art, film, and other mediums.... Although a set of methodological tools, this genre of methods also comprises new theoretical and epistemological groundings that are expanding the qualitative paradigm. (Leavy 2009, 2–3)

For social researchers the appeal of the arts is in their ability to transform consciousness, refine the senses, promote autonomy, raise awareness, and express the complex feeling-based aspects of social life (Eisner 2002, 10–19). Arts-based research also draws on the oppositional, subversive, transformational, and otherwise resistive capabilities of the arts.

Free from academic jargon and other prohibitive barriers, the arts have the potential to reach a broad cross-section and to be both emotionally and politically evocative for these diverse audiences. The arts, at their best, can move people to see things in new ways. This is because the arts connect with people in sensory ways—reaching people on a level of humanness which extends far beyond the reach of the confines of any one discipline. Moreover, the arts can promote dialogue which cultivates understanding or critical consciousness, can problematize dominant ideologies, and can unsettle stereotypes. In these ways and others arts-based research practices can be used in community-based research projects, for example, as a means of sparking conversation and mutual learning. The capability of artistic forms to convey information to public audiences in understandable and even resonant ways makes ABR useful as a representational vehicle in many kinds of transdisciplinary projects, particularly when the research results in multiple outcomes, as is generally the case.

There are a range of genres of arts-based research that draw on different artistic practices. The genres of ABR include, but are not limited to:

- narrative inquiry
- fiction, literary and experimental forms of writing
- poetic inquiry
- the dramatic/performing /theatre arts
- music
- dance and movement
- visual art and photography
- audiovisual arts and film
- other mediums or combinations of mediums

While numerous methods within any of the genres can be employed in service of transdisciplinary goals, in this chapter I focus on examples from theatre arts. Recent research in this genre has signaled great potential to address issues of import. At times performance-based practices are also highly congruent with the goals of community-based research. (For a full discussion of the major ABR genres please see my book *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* 2009.)

Transdisciplinary approaches to research allow researchers to produce useful knowledge that addresses real-world issues or problems. In recent years there has been a rapid increase in research that employs practices that draw on theatre arts. I suggest these practices facilitate making research open to the publics we aim to serve and are therefore congruent with transdisciplinarity. Moreover, these practices require the merging of multiple disciplinary lenses (theatre arts, qualitative approaches to social research, and any number of disciplinary perspectives) in order to create something that exists beyond those disciplines. This set of research practices thus developed in a transdisciplinary environment and can be employed to further transdisciplinary visions.

Performances are accessible to diverse audiences and constitute an exchange or transfer between the audience and performer(s)/ researcher(s). Moreover, the “exchange” may involve a complex negotiation of meanings (Leavy 2009). This interaction between the performer and audience also varies depending on the environment and mood (Langellier & Peterson 2006).

In social research, performance can serve many research purposes, including:

- consciousness-raising
- empowerment
- emancipation
- political agendas
- discovery
- exploration
- education
- information sharing

Though often considered a representational form, performance can be used as an entire research method, serving as a means of data collection and analysis as well as a (re)presentational form. Moreover, theories of performance are often entangled with methodological practices. Performance is therefore an investigation *and* a representation (Worthen 1998). McLeod (1988) suggests that there are five ways of making meaning (word, number, image, gesture, and sound) which Norris (2000) proposes are all integrated in drama. Performance methods are congruent with the *holistic views* of the research process that characterize transdisciplinarity. Methodologically, research-based plays can be created from data collected with traditional research methods, including, but not limited to, interviews, focus groups, large-scale quantitative surveys, and/or document analysis (Leavy 2009; Nisker 2008; Norris 2009).

Over the past few decades researchers in theatre arts, in collaboration with researchers across the disciplines, have pioneered multiple methods that rely on the dramatic arts, including:

- ethnodrama
- ethnotheatre
- performance ethnography
- performance texts
- playbuilding
- popular theatre
- health theatre
- “theatre of the oppressed”³
- Reader’s theatre

I go into greater detail about playbuilding throughout this chapter as an example of these kinds of approaches because I believe that this approach draws on the tenets of both arts-based research and community-based research, and thus retains enormous potential to advance transdisciplinarity. For these and other reasons to be explicated I will suggest that playbuilding is necessarily a transdisciplinary approach to research.

Core Principles and Research Design Issues

In order to understand the potential of arts-based research as a transdisciplinary undertaking it is important to first review the core principles of ABR, which, as with community-based research, can actually vary greatly from project to project. I should also note that there is a large and rapidly emerging body of literature on arts-based research which I cannot replicate here. This is merely an overview of the core principles of ABR which when taken seriously can facilitate transdisciplinarity.

Creativity and Innovation

All things must change to something new, to something strange.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

The recent growth in arts-based research practices across the social sciences, health studies and education has been propelled by qualitative researchers analyzing the similarities between scientific research and artistic practice. To do so, some have exposed the false polarization of art and social inquiry (see Saarnivaara 2003). For example, both scientific research and artistic practice are fuelled by creativity (Ernst 2000; Janesick 2001). In this regard, Janesick suggests the term “artist-scientists” (2001). Saldana (1999) rightly observes that both research and artistic practice require thinking conceptually, symbolically and metaphorically. Innovation, intuition and flexibility all play key roles in both the scientific and artistic communities. The principles underscoring these practices are thus the same. Moreover, both communities aim to discover, explore and illuminate. To summarize, key principles in both artistic and scientific practice include:

- thinking conceptually and building conceptual structures
- thinking symbolically

- using metaphors and metaphorical analysis
- innovation
- intuition
- flexibility
- discovering, exploring, illuminating

As I wrote in an earlier work, attention to creativity and innovation allows us to think in terms of “new research structures” (Leavy 2009, 258). Arts-based practices are on the methodological cutting-edge—researchers are “carving” new practices and creating “new ways to see” (Leavy 2009, 254). Methodologically, arts-based research practices lend themselves to innovation because the “incubation phase” of research, when ideas are generated and given space and time to percolate, is generally afforded significant attention in projects relying on ABR (Hunter et al. 2002). This may lead to the development of new ideas and approaches. Here another link between ABR and transdisciplinarity can be drawn out. Transdisciplinarity also fosters greater attention to early idea generation. For example, as noted in the last chapter transdisciplinary approaches to community-based research often demand extensive preparation time, allowing stakeholders to be brought together to share ideas, expectations and disciplinary perspectives. This often leads to a negotiation process and the emergence of new ideas. Here the example of playbuilding is illustrative.

The highly collaborative nature of playbuilding promotes great attention to idea generation and creativity. Playbuilding as research is the practice of collaboratively producing evocative texts which are performed (Barone 1990; Norris 2000, 2009; Tarlington & Michaels 1995). Joe Norris (2000, 2009) has worked extensively on developing this practice, so I draw considerably on his groundbreaking work.

Playbuilding is a topic, issue- or problem-centered research strategy (which is why I suggest it can serve transdisciplinary needs). This method involves assembling a group of people to discuss and research a topic of mutual interest (Norris 2009). Norris refers to this group of people as A/R/Tors, denoting actors-researchers-teachers and building on the A/R/tography (artist-researcher-teacher) framework developed by Irwin and de Cosson (2004). I suggest that in a transdisciplinary project not all of the collaborators would need to be actors nor would all need to participate in the performance. There may be many different ways to configure a given project drawing on the tenets of playbuilding while not

following Norris's method prescriptively. Irrespective of how the group is ultimately configured, it is important to understand that all participants are stakeholders in the process—collaborators, partners, co-creators and co-authors (Norris 2009). This research strategy therefore raises similar issues with respect to collaboration as addressed earlier in regards to community-based research (which will not be repeated here), and thus I suggest that playbuilding merges the tenets of arts-based research and community-based research.

Once a research team of A/R/Tors is assembled the group brainstorms about the topic at hand. The group draws on autoethnographic observations and often data from other sources as well, including literature reviews, newspapers and/or fiction (Norris 2009). I suggest that in a transdisciplinary project the research team would *necessarily* conduct a literature review (bringing in multiple disciplinary perspectives) and may incorporate data found in numerous pre-existing sources or original data collected in any number of ways (e.g., interviews, surveys, document analysis). It is also possible that when applying a transdisciplinary approach the literature review could take center stage in the knowledge-building process and become the basis for the scripting process.

Over the past decade and a half the topic of bullying has received considerable attention from researchers and the national media in response to major incidents of school violence as well as more recent highly publicized incidents of bullying and cyber bullying that have led to a startling number of teen suicides. As noted in earlier chapters, this problem has many different components, for example:

- psychological
- sociological
- technological (e.g., social networking, camera-phones, etc.)
- legal
- educational
- economic
- status characteristics (race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, physical/mental well-being)
- and others

Therefore, research that hopes to make progress towards dealing with this issue needs to be transdisciplinary by design. No one discipline holds the keys to combating bullying. A number of projects exploring

bullying have been conducted via performance-based methods. From these studies we can learn strategies for incorporating ABR into large-scale transdisciplinary investigations of bullying. Here an excellent example comes from Norris's work on bullying.

Norris has been involved in the development of more than two hundred performance pieces through his group, "Mirror Theatre." The group has tackled numerous transdisciplinary topics including bullying. The program "*What's the Fine Line?*" presented a workshop and performance on bullying (Norris 2009). In order to create this program the team of A/R/Tors assembled and shared their own experiences regarding bullying. Then they drew on existing literature and a cross-national study conducted by Smith, Morota, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalano and Slee (1999, in Norris 2009). The study included data about girl-on-girl bullying which often occurs in changing rooms (Norris 2009). Female cast members (team members) shared their personal experiences about girl-on-girl bullying with the group (Norris 2009). From this combination of data and several discussions within the group about the data, the scene "*The Girls' Locker Room*" was created (Norris 2009).

It is important to acknowledge that the creativity and innovation promoted by ABR can, at times, also be the target of criticism from the larger scientific community. Some fear that innovation will lead to a free-for-all where "anything goes" and scientific standards fall by the wayside. In this vein Jones (2006) notes that "novelty" can make people "uncomfortable." However, the history of science and art is very much based on novelty—pushing and expanding the borders. Progress requires innovation. Progress demands continued exploration, discovery and creativity. I am reminded of the famous quote by Ramsay Clark: "Turbulence is life force. It is opportunity. Let's love turbulence and use it for change." The merging of transdisciplinary vision and arts-based practices has great potential to advance research agendas, but to do so we must be unafraid to innovate. I elaborate on these issues in the next chapter.

Holistic Approach with Evolving or Responsive Methodologies

At their best, arts-based research practices are employed as a part of a *holistic* or *integrated* approach to research (Hunter et al. 2002; Leavy 2009). When ABR is employed in a transdisciplinary project that is driven by transdisciplinary vision, it promotes this kind of holistic

approach. As noted earlier, a holistic approach to research design explicitly links each phase of a research project, while merging theory with practice. Moreover, a holistic approach to research is a process-oriented view of research (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2011; Leavy 2009). In this regard, the intuition and flexibility needed to foster ABR is enabled methodologically through evolving or responsive approaches to methodology (as reviewed in chapter 3). Transdisciplinary approaches to ABR can promote highly thoughtful, reflexive and responsive methodologies where new insights, new learning, unexpected data (and possibly ongoing group conversation) propel cycles of going back to re-analyze data and/or revise aspects of the research design as needed. Again, the methodological recursive process of playbuilding is illustrative. The playbuilding process typically goes as follows (as was evidenced in the example of “*What’s the Fine Line?*”):

First, is data collection (generation), followed by data analysis (interpretation), and concluded with dissemination (performance). Such is the case with ethnodrama, where data is traditionally collected, analyzed, and then disseminated through an “alternative” form of representation. With Playbuilding, data is generated and interpreted in a different manner, and, at times, these three phases are simultaneous. (Norris 2009, 22)

The outcome of playbuilding is a live performance which may in turn generate new data or interpretations of the data as audience members are brought into the process (Norris 2009). For example, post-performance discussions or focus groups can be used to generate new data for the next phase in a mixed or multi-method project (which transdisciplinarity often results in). Here, again, there is a clear parallel to the process that typically occurs in community-based research where new interpretations are generated through an iterative process.

Conceptual Issues, Multiplicity and Engaging Diverse Publics

There are innumerable transdisciplinary real-world issues and problems which arts-based research practices may be useful in addressing. For example, ABR has been used in projects about such topics as: Hunger (Thomas 2008); Race/racism/discrimination/prejudice (Denzin 2003; Gatson 2003; Norris 2009; Thomas 2008); Violence (Hershorn 2005; Norris 2009); Poverty (Diamond 2004); Health/health care (Bergum & Dossetor 2005; Gray, Fitch, Labrecque & Greenberg 2003; Locsin,

Barnard, Matua & Bongomin 2003; Mienczakowski 1994; Nisker & Bergum 1999; Picard 2000; Poindexter 2002); Eating disorders/body image/the “body” (Chan 2003; Leavy 2010; Norris 2009; Snowber 2002); Trauma (Harvey, Mishler, Koenan & Harney 2000); Grief (Vickers 2002); and Bullying (Norris 2009; Thomas 2008). In all of these instances ABR facilitated the exploration, description or public understanding of a transdisciplinary topic of considerable import. Of course this list is far from exhaustive and is merely illustrative. With respect to facilitating transdisciplinary efforts, I think ABR offers three primary advantages.

First, ABR is particularly useful for accessing highly conceptual fundamental dimensions of social life (Sinner et al. 2006). For example, ABR can be used to get at feelings like grief, shame or love, which are core aspects of humanity. ABR can also be used to access attitudes that shape experience, such as bias, prejudice or compassion. One could easily argue these kinds of feelings and attitudes are aspects of topics such as poverty, violence, bullying, living with illness, and so on. For example, a photograph or other visual art installation may jar spectators into seeing an issue like racism or homophobia from different perspectives, forcing viewers to reflect on their own attitudes and assumptions. Similarly, an exhibit that expressly challenges stereotypes about gender roles or what a “family” looks like may propel viewers into (re)considering previously taken-for-granted assumptions. Therefore, holistic transdisciplinary approaches to these topics may aim to tap into these hard-to-get-at issues. ABR may be particularly useful in these circumstances.

Second, ABR opens up multiplicity in meaning-making instead of pushing authoritative claims. For example, a piece of visual art can be interpreted in different ways depending on the viewer (his or her attitudes, values and prior experiences) as well as the context of viewing. There is no one way to make sense of a piece of art. In this respect research-produced artworks can democratize meaning-making and decentralize academic researchers as “the experts.” This may be important in transdisciplinary efforts considering that the stakes may be high for many different groups. Here we can turn to some examples of using performance-based methods in health studies.

Performance-based approaches to research are increasingly being employed in health research projects. Often these efforts involve goals ranging from educating the public to challenging stereotypes to exploring emergent ethical issues to including various groups (often disenfranchised

groups) in health policy development. These projects typically necessitate bringing multiple stakeholders into the process and thus could be greatly enhanced by transdisciplinary approaches to research.

Some research-based plays tackle emergent ethical and moral health care issues. In these circumstances the performances can help bring together various differently situated stakeholders, including the public at large, to explore the human side of new scientific capabilities. For example, with funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and Health Canada, Jeff Nisker (2008) wrote “Sarah’s Daughters” about predictive genetic testing and “Orchids” about testing in vitro embryos for genetic markers. “Orchids” was performed sixteen times in English and French (Nisker 2008), indicating the potential for research-based plays to reach relatively large public audiences.

There are also research-based plays that explore issues like mental illness, such as Abi Bown’s (2004) “Mind the Gap” (Nisker 2008). Projects like this often are a means of challenging stereotypes, curbing stigmatization and highlighting the need for effective public services. Jim Mienczakowski has been at the forefront of this kind of research, and so I elaborate on an example from his collaborative work.

Mienczakowski, Smith and Morgan (2002) developed a health theatre performance based on interviews conducted with people diagnosed with schizophrenia. The show was titled “Syncing Out Loud” (1992/1994) and enabled the audience to learn about the experience of schizophrenia from the perspective of the research participants who live with it. The performance challenged misconceptions and prejudices attributed to schizophrenia and mental disorders in general. Based on their experience in this area, Mienczakowski and colleagues assert that a performance-based methodology within health studies creates a space for the voices of marginalized health care recipients and caregivers (professional and personal). Theatre can therefore be used to access and present subjugated voices, to educate, and to confront and work through stereotypes and misunderstandings. Moreover, theatre has the potential to emancipate (Mienczakowski 1995). I believe that transdisciplinarity, as a guiding perspective, can further this potential as well as facilitate the tenets of community-based research as appropriate to a particular project.

There are considerable ethical issues to be mindful of. Health theatre is a form of *public performance*; therefore, the researchers bear responsibility for the impact the performance has with regard to audience

well-being after the performance, just as qualitative researchers have an obligation to protect their informant's confidentiality and to leave informants and their environment unharmed (see Bailey 1996, 2007). The need to create ethical guidelines has arisen out of incidents in which audience members were put at risk as a result of witnessing an ethnodramatic performance (Mieczakowski, Smith & Morgan 2002).

Nisker suggests that various stakeholders should be given drafts of the script for feedback, "reality checks" and to uncover differing perspectives (2008, 619). This feedback piece, in some form, is necessary in transdisciplinary projects in order to actively engage with and negotiate multiple viewpoints. Mieczakowski and colleagues suggest having a preview performance with an audience of people who possess knowledge about the topic under investigation. They also note that "post-performance forum sessions" can be used to analyze audience responses to the performance, in order to assess the show's impact (2002, 49). This also seems vital in any kind of community-based research project where community members are being educated about a health care issue. During this session understanding/misunderstanding can be uncovered and addressed. As noted earlier, in many projects additional data is gathered post-performance, through a group conversation, focus groups or other debriefing/coming together formats and serves as an example of applying transdisciplinarity in arts-based research. Data unearthed during this time may inform future performances, other data collection and/or the findings or distribution of findings. Therefore, this phase of post-performance debriefing and/or data collection is a part of a responsive methodology. Nisker (2008) suggests taking a short break in between the performance and any post-performance dialogue so that audience members can begin to process new information and create some space from any immediate visceral reactions. In these ways, as researchers confront ethical issues, they also create measures for maximizing the credibility of the usefulness of the research.

Inviting stakeholders and/or community members into the drafting process as well as pre- and post-performance dialogue is more than an ethical safeguard. These phases surrounding a performance are opportunities for building trust and rapport with differently situated stakeholders. Likewise, the research team can negotiate their cross-disciplinary perspectives. These are therefore opportunities for building understanding. Further, in accord with a responsive and participatory

approach to research, these times in the process create spaces for revision and (re)negotiation. In a CBR project these spaces may also serve to help combat potential retention problems. These phases are important opportunities for learning and validating differing viewpoints which in turn may inspire continued participation. In projects with a proactive educational component this may be particularly important.

These examples and ethical quagmires also highlight two tensions that may be present in ABR projects. Researchers have to deal with the ambiguity, or potential ambiguity, of art's messages (the multiple meanings that may emerge). First, this means researchers need to balance their needs to present specific interpretations of the data against the possibilities for multiple interpretations of the data to emerge. Second, researchers need to be ethically mindful of how various interpretations may impact research participants, those who are exposed to the art, and any broader implications (with respect to public policy and the like). This is tricky as all of the possible interpretations of a work of art can not necessarily be known in advance. However, strategies to apply include:

- bringing key stakeholders into the process
 - ▷ Soliciting the input of differently positioned stakeholders and non-stakeholders at various points, cycling back and incorporating that feedback into the project
- sharing preliminary findings
 - ▷ Soliciting feedback, debriefing with those who shared feedback and following-up with them

By using these strategies researchers can go a long way towards understanding the varied interpretations and implications of the work they are putting out, and, to some extent, determining how large the universe of possible meanings will be.

The issue of democratizing knowledge production and dissemination brings me to the third advantage of ABR: engaging diverse publics with the products of research. ABR can be used to extend public scholarship because it is free from prohibitive jargon and has a greater likelihood of being accessible to broad audiences. Here a clear connection between community-based research and arts-based research can be made. ABR can be used in a CBR project. This can occur in many ways.

For example, during idea generation the various stakeholders (researchers, CBO personnel, community members) can use “concept

mapping” as a way of collaboratively building and negotiating their ideas and perspectives. To do so, all that would be needed would be a large poster board/large sheet of paper/whiteboard with color magic markers. The process might look like this:

- A major concept, issue or problem pertinent to the study could be written in black ink in the center of the sheet (such as “health intervention,” “community violence” or “bullying”).
- Then, group members could talk about connected concepts, issues and problems from their perspective. Different color markers could be used to extend out from the initial concept with the ideas generated in the group.
- Connections could be made between concepts. Depending on how much energy is invested in this process, solid or spotted lines could be used to denote the strength of relationships between concepts or problems.

This is just one example of how to implement a visual strategy during idea generation. This process may also serve as a team-building exercise in community-based research.

An arts-based method of data generation may also be used in a transdisciplinary CBR project. For example, playbuilding and other performative methods can be used to gather and/or interpret data. In this regard and as noted throughout this chapter, ABR is often employed as a part of a participatory research design (which again makes ABR congruent with the goals of some CBR projects). Finally, an arts-based form of representation may be used in a CBR project in order to disseminate the research findings to the communities of interest in resonant ways (such as an art exhibition in a local community center, art gallery or local businesses or a public performance). Arts-based forms of representation often function to raise critical consciousness and promote understanding and thus may be very useful in some CBR studies. Here an excellent example comes from Suzanne Thomas’s research on bullying.

Suzanne Thomas (2008) used performance-based research as a part of a community-based arts education project aimed at studying bullying. This project brought together an academic researcher with pre-service teachers and community members. The group built a conceptual structure for the project that addressed issues of inequality. The project, titled “*Bullying Inside Out*,” culminated in a performance

“in which teachers investigate emotional, physical, and psychological dimensions of bullying and explore the dynamics between the bully, bullied, and bystander.... Interweaving of role-playing, song, and dance... reveals multiple dimensions of bullying and its silent forms in cyber space” (Thomas 2008, 78). Such an approach to this topic could be used in a transdisciplinary investigation into bullying as a part of a mixed or multi-method approach. For example, a multidisciplinary team of researchers could conduct a transdisciplinary literature review and collect data via a large scale survey, a smaller sample of in-depth interviews and/or focus groups, and perhaps ethnographic observation (on school playgrounds, in school cafeterias, or online). Other stakeholders could be brought into the process, for example:

- parents
- teachers
- guidance counselors
- social workers
- school administrators
- after school programming staff members
- public school bus drivers
- local leaders
- and others

The script writing could serve as a part of idea generation and negotiation. The performance(s) could serve as part of the dissemination of the research findings (and could also be used to stimulate conversation during post-performance discussion or focus groups, which may result in the generation of additional data). Differing from academic prose, which is difficult for most people to read and understand, the performance could be geared towards a wide audience with respect to age, education and other relevant factors. Moreover, different performances could be targeted to different groups such as:

- students in elementary schools
- students in secondary schools
- students and peer leaders in college and university settings
- parents and PTO members
- teachers, guidance counselors and school social workers

- professors and college administrators
- community leaders and policy makers

Performances could occur in public school auditoriums, colleges or other accessible community locations.

Aesthetics

At their best the arts can be evocative, provocative, thought provoking, illuminating and even arresting. The arts can tap into dimensions of knowing and feeling that are hard to get at other ways and can draw people into seeing things differently. The arts can also provide joyful experiences where people's senses are heightened and they experience pleasure. However, it is important to acknowledge that this ideal is probably rarely met even in the art world. Rather, the aesthetic or *artful* quality of art exists on a continuum. When working with an arts-based approach to research it is important to be mindful of the *artfulness* of the resulting work. To do so one must pay attention to the craft from which he or she is borrowing (Leavy 2009). Transdisciplinarity has the potential to improve the artistic merit of arts-based research because cross-disciplinary expertise (from literature and/or collaborators) is brought into the process in a meaningful and sustained way. Arguably, this is yet another advantage of ABR—pushing researchers towards disciplinary cross-pollination. Despite the value of considering and attempting to achieve artistic merit, it is important to do so in relation to the goals of the study. This is not art simply for the sake of art, but rather is a part of a larger research project. The research issue or problem remains at the center of all practices.

Returning to the example of playbuilding we can see the role of “artfulness” at play. Playbuilding has to draw on the tenets of the dramatic arts in a meaningful way as it represents the data. Norris explains this part of the process as he reviews going from *data to drama*: “The A/R/Tors take the generated data and judiciously take artistic license, using metaphor, composites, and theatrical styles to create a verisimilitude of lived-experiences to create texts (theatrical vignettes) that evoke conversation” (2009, 35). In other words the tenets of dramatic script writing are employed, even though the raw data comes from personal, secondary, and empirical sources. Researchers can engage in a process of characterization, dialogue/monologue construction, plotting, storylining, and

setting the scene (Saldana 1999). Moreover the group has to decide which moments to emphasize or draw out.

While some researchers suggest that art works created in social research must meet aesthetic and artistic criteria developed in the arts (for example, see Faulkner 2009), I disagree. While ideally research-driven artistic works are attentive to the craft they are adapting, they need not be “great” works of art per se in order to be useful (Leavy 2010). In trans-disciplinary research, which is necessarily issue- or problem-centered, the issue is *usefulness*. The questions then are:

- What is your goal?
- Are the art works produced effective tools with respect to the research objectives?
- Has the research issue or problem stayed at the center of the ABR process? (The artistic qualities of the work should not supersede meeting the research objectives.)

Table 5.1 Summary Table of ABR Principles and Design Issues

Creativity and Innovation	Creativity, intuition and flexibility are employed. Researchers may build new research structures and new ways to see.
Holistic Approach with Evolving or Responsive Methodologies	Integrated approaches to research design that link theory and practice, and responsive or iterative methodologies that promote reflexivity.
Conceptual Issues, Multiplicity and Engaging Diverse Publics	Taps into hard-to-get-at issues (at times, highly conceptual topics), opens up meaning-making and can engage diverse publics through inclusiveness, inventive representational forms and multiple venues for the distribution of findings.
Aesthetics	Artfulness in relation to the usefulness of research findings for stakeholders, paying attention to the craft of the artistic practices used with usefulness in mind and creating evocative, provocative, illuminating and sensory representations of findings.

I suggest when evaluating research-driven art that researchers shy away from questions like “Is it a good piece of art?” and rather ask “What is this piece of art good for?” (Leavy 2010). The issue of aesthetics and artistic merit are briefly revisited in the next chapter during the discussion of evaluation.

Policy Implications

Augusto Boal has been at the forefront of promoting the political capabilities of theatre in his pioneering works *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1985) and *Legislative Theatre: Using Performance to Make Politics* (1998). Boal (1985) asserts that theatre is a highly effective political weapon that can educate, inform, and incite people to action.

There are many possibilities for how transdisciplinary approaches to research-based performance, or other forms of ABR, can be used to affect public policy. Primarily, the greatest potential centers on involving the public in the policy development process. Public policies are power-laden and develop in power-rich political contexts that may be masked as neutral (Wedel et al. 2005). Often various stakeholders are cut out of the policy development process (just as community members may be cut out of their own development processes). One of the persistently difficult challenges in policy research is developing effective strategies for citizen participation in policy development (Nisker 2008). Policy researchers need new tools for engaging the public in this process (Nisker 2008), including agenda setting (McTeer 2005). In this regard Nisker writes that “theater can be such an instrument, as it is able to engage, cognitively and emotionally, large numbers of citizens of diverse perspectives, provide them relevant information...and provide a forum where citizens are able to air and debate their opinions for policy research purposes” (2008, 614).

Performances created in a transdisciplinary context carry great potential to involve relevant stakeholders and the public more generally in the policy development process. First, transdisciplinarity requires bringing in multiple viewpoints. Second, participatory designs are often sought, as is the case in community-based research. Third, theater has the potential to:

- challenge stereotypes or jar people into thinking about an issue differently
- build bridges across differences

- access and illuminate differences
- inform and educate (by providing information or proactively intervening in a social problem)
- connect with people deeply thereby “reaching” them and helping them to feel invested in the issue

There are numerous examples of health policy researchers harnessing the power of performance to address major healthcare issues. Examples of plays created as tools for health policy development include a production titled “Practicing Democracy” written by Diamond in 2004 which explores how poverty impacts health; as noted earlier, a play titled “Mind the Gap” written by Bown in 2004 which explores mental illness; a play titled “Sarah’s Daughters” written by Nisker in 2001 which explores the ethical issues relating to adult predictive genetic testing; and a play called “Orchids” also written by Nisker in 2001 which explores testing in vitro embryos for genetic markers (Nisker 2008). There are many other examples of using the possibilities of performance in this manner, including research-based plays about HIV/AIDS, breast cancer, dementia, and Alzheimer’s disease to name a few (Nisker 2008).

Health policy researchers are actively drawing on the potential of the dramatic arts to engage and inform people in order to involve different segments of the public in the development of health policy (Nisker 2008). Nisker writes:

Theatrical productions, focusing on the persons at the center of a health care issue, can bring all who ought to be responsible for its policy development (e.g., patients, their family members, the general public, health professionals) to a better understanding of the new scientific possibilities, ethical issues, and most important, the persons immersed therein. (2008, 615)

For example, beyond health care conditions per se, there are many contemporary ethical issues and questions emerging at the intersection of science and technology (McTeer 2005), such as in vitro embryo testing, stem cell research, cloning, and many other examples. These questions are transdisciplinary by nature and profoundly impact the public. Therefore, researchers must find ways to bring the public into these discussions in informed ways.

One could imagine how transdisciplinary performance-based studies on many different topics could be used to bring the public into the

policy development process. For example, as a result of some highly publicized tragic incidents there has been a surge in public interest in issues surrounding school bullying and cyber bullying. Differently positioned stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, school administrators, after school programming staff, school bus drivers and others, could be brought into the policy process through information sharing, agenda setting and creating documents detailing concerns and proposed remedies. The possibilities are limitless.