

Writing into the Unknown: Speculative, Arts-Based Writing as Creative Composition and Design Research Method

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Abstract

How do arts-based writing endeavors catalyze generative thinking and support research development in design students' thesis endeavors? This paper offers reflections from an industrial design masters student, a graphic design masters student, and their arts education professor in a School of Design at a Research I institution. Informed by theoretical and historical contexts of the design discipline and perspectives from composition studies and fine arts practice, we explore the potential of arts-based writing as an evocative, speculative tool and a distinctive form of reflective practice for the development of graduate design research. We suggest that arts-based writing's iterative process, dialogic engagement, and speculative approach to knowledge-construction provide critical, reflective structures for working through uncertainties and thus are uniquely responsive to the evolving epistemologies of the transdisciplinary university. Three focal questions guide this reflection: What is arts-based writing? What role does arts-based writing play in students' design research endeavors? How can arts-based writing practices support the growth of speculative and pragmatic design research?

Keywords: arts-based writing; art education; reflective practice; design thinking; design research; transdisciplinary

Art is not a world, but a knowing of the world. Art prepares us.

~Muriel Rukeyser

How do arts-based writing endeavors catalyze generative thinking and support research development in design students' thesis endeavors? Two masters of design students and their instructor respond to this question with analytic reflections on the arts-based writing methods used in developing the students' design thesis projects. Sharing evocative glimpses of the students' arts-based writing processes along with their reflections on this work, we seek to create a space of speculative discourse about how writing might be taught and perhaps (re)conceptualized in design education contexts.

The overarching goal of this paper is to explore and consider how writing activities emerging through/around arts processes occurring in a graduate-level, transdisciplinary writing course stimulated the development of students' design research. To this end, three focal questions

structure the paper: What is arts-based writing? What role does arts-based writing play in students' design research endeavors? How can arts-based writing practices support the growth of speculative and pragmatic design research? In responding to these questions, we first define the concept of arts-based research writing and establish its pedagogical and practical relevance in the development of design research. Next, we provide exemplars of the students' arts-based writing and share insights that resulted from their composing process. The paper concludes with a discussion of the unique affordances of arts-based writing methods and the potential they hold for engaging student researchers in sustained critical inquiry and reflective practices that lead to robust awareness and complex comprehension of wicked design problems (Marback, 2009; Leverenz, 2014).

The arts-based writing examined in this paper originated in *The Art of Words: Writing Visual Culture*, a graduate-level course offered within a School of Art at a research-intensive university. A focal aim of the *Art of Words* course is to facilitate the development of a reflexive, critical composing process that builds from students' studio practices and research interests. The course melds art theory and practice into a seminar-workshop. In this environment, students experiment with form and content of written expressions through the creation of artifacts and texts and through engagement in dialogues about the artistic, conceptual, disciplinary, and political contexts of writing and communication. Arts-based writing processes provide a structure of iterative experimentation that strengthens the articulation and representation of complex phenomena in students' research projects and studio practices.

Literature Review

Our consideration of arts-based writing unfolds within current, multidisciplinary discourses on research methodologies occurring throughout design, fine arts, and art education, and among scholars of arts-based methods (Bresler, 2013; Eisner, 2008; Cole & Knowles, 2008; Leavy, 2015) and qualitative research more broadly (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Another strand of discourse is contributed by the composition studies movements of *writing to learn* and *writing across the curriculum*, bringing attention to the pedagogical use of writing as a disciplinary learning tool (Thaiss & Zawacki, 1996). An evolution of writing theory and practice through the vital influences of critical race theory, critical literacy, postcolonial and indigenous methodologies (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008; Madison, 2005) further shape the project of critical reflexivity embedded in arts-based writing methods.

Engaging discussion of arts-based writing methods within the context of design studies is undertaken with equal measures of optimism and caution. Ken Friedman's warning about the haste with which design theories rise and fall provides a necessary dose of skepticism (2008) for any researcher in any discipline. We find support in Friedman's affirmations of documentation and its role in making tacit knowledge visible toward the eventual construction of explicit knowledge and theory. Yet at the same time, we acknowledge the necessity of making room for "research whose contribution to knowledge cannot be stated fully or precisely by the researcher," knowing that "some contributions are necessarily generative, providing a point of departure for others" (Rust, 2007, p. 75). Within the push and pull of debates that contribute to the design discipline's vibrant criticality, optimism, and pragmatism,

we find nodes and intersections where the concept of arts-based writing offers value as a critical, reflective practice (Bayazit, 2004; Kelly, 2004). We strive to generate documentation-data that could potentially translate tacit knowing into explicit knowledge and theory, yet we also embrace speculative, arts-based processes of writing into the unknown.

Research Methods

As an interpretive study of two individual thesis projects and the process of their development, the overarching goal of this paper is to describe, explore and reflect upon a particular phenomenon rather than produce generalizable results. This exploratory and descriptive approach is appropriate when observing a phenomenon in a real-life context for the purpose of generating an holistic account of its significant characteristics (Yin, 2003). Therefore, rather than seeking clearly defined outcomes, this essay aims instead to build a layer of reflective practice evidence (Harper, 2008) within which the role of arts-based writing processes in design research pedagogy can be deeply considered, studied, and potentially integrated into existing pedagogical methods for mentoring design research.

Writing as a Form of Inquiry

Sociologist Laurel Richardson's (2003) research of writing as a form of inquiry establishes a methodological foundation for this study. Taking the perspective that human language is a site of contestation, invention, and action, we concur with Richardson's assertion that a multitude of discourses "divide up the world and give it meaning in ways that are not reducible to one another" (p. 508). The fluidity and infinity of language, of writing, pulls us into a space of *allatonicness* (Berthoff, 1981) where the plentitude and pliability of language become a rich resource. As a speculative tool and medium of expression, writing is a rich material for thinking with and through problems. For students in the course, writing's immaterial materiality not only catalyzed meaning(s), releasing them from containment, it also functioned as "the very hinges of thought" (Richards, 1959, p. 24). As a focal object of this study as well as a method of inquiry used in each of the thesis projects, *arts-based writing as inquiry* creates sites of colliding and interpenetrating discourses. By facilitating opportunities for discourses to bump up against one another, unravel and even recombine to create new discourses, we experience how writing can be a conveyer of communication as well as a catalyst of transdisciplinary dialogues.

Sample

Two thesis projects created between September, 2016 and May, 2017 by Davida and Olivia, co-authors of this paper, provide focal data in this case. Reflections on these projects emerged from open-ended conversations among the participant-authors within ongoing explorations of the writing processes and artifacts that emerged during the course. Because this inquiry is concerned with expanding and enriching the understanding of writing occurring during a defined context, the documents and associated reflections constitute a purposive sample of unique, information-rich exemplars. Davida's and Olivia's involvement, as co-reflective practitioners and authors, provide specific, reflective data that help to illuminate the focal issue of the research: the function of arts-based writing practices in design thesis research. This is an exploratory approach that intends to build thick description and

understanding of a phenomenon (Polkinghorne, 2005). Additional insights, resulting from the “writing as a form of inquiry” method used in developing this paper, substantiate the benefits of a layered, collaborative reflective writing practice.

Defining Arts-based Writing

The phrase “arts-based writing” emerged by necessity to identify the burgeoning, hybrid art and writing endeavors that developed around the curriculum in *The Art of Words: Writing Visual Culture*, a graduate-level writing course offered in a College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning at a Research I institution (Stout & Daiello, 2018). As a bricolage wrought from the goals, methods, and outcomes of arts-based research (Cole & Knowles, 2008; Eisner, 2008; Leavy, 2015), Schön’s (1983) theories of reflective practice, and Elbow’s (1973, 1998) low-stakes writing methods, the phenomenon of arts-based writing fundamentally emphasizes an iterative development of dynamic relationships among thought, expression, reflection, and action. Embracing writing as a form of inquiry (Richardson, 2003), as artistry (Goldsmith, 2011), and as a poetics of practice (Rukeyser, 1996; Sheppard, 2008;), arts-based writing employs reflexivity and artifact-making as sensitized tools that guide the composition of meaning across (and through) expressive practices. Integrating the aims and qualities of conventional composition methods (Berthoff, 1983; Carter, 2007), phenomenological attunement (Merleau-Ponty, 1989), and the disciplined, imaginative, and generative qualities of arts practice in research (Stout & Daiello, 2018), arts-based writing not only functions as a tool of research inquiry (Richardson, 2003) it also serves as a methodology steeped in the material processes of art.

The arts-based writing processes experienced in the *Art of Words* course are transferable to other contexts and other uses. The art and writing methods employ familiar pedagogical tools from fine arts, composition studies, and writing across the curriculum contextualized within a qualitative research setting. Iterative, low-stakes assignments include consistent documentation of and reflection on process (workshopping with peers; multiple drafts and revisions, journaling, critiques); experimentation with materials, forms and purposes of expression (thumbnail sketches, mock-ups; critical analysis); and, research methods (observation and documentation; production of reflexive narratives; recursive analyses to identify themes and patterns). Key to arts-based writing is an emphasis on the development of a personal research methodology that both pursues and questions the representation of tacit knowing through sustained critical consciousness about the contingencies of the known and unknown (Harper, 2008, p. 165). These processes are not only applicable across disciplines, they are also scholarly habits that support the production of, and reflection upon, data through careful, critical methods sustained throughout the duration of a project.

Iterative writing experiments inspired by Peter Elbow’s concept of low-stakes writing (composition assignments characterized by their frequency and informality) were employed throughout the course, strengthening the articulation and representation of complex phenomena in students’ research projects. Often ungraded, a low-stakes writing assignment is designed to compel students to “regularly spend time reflecting in written language on what they are learning from discussions, readings, lectures, and their own thinking” (Elbow, 2000, p. 351). *Writing Negative Space*, an *Art of Words* low-stakes writing activity inspired by

Rachel Whiteread (an artist who makes solid casts of the empty spaces existing around and within objects) prompted students to create narratives about places unrelated to their research topic. In fact, most of the low-stakes writing projects assigned in the course had no overt relationship to the students' topics. The point of the activity wasn't to produce written material for the thesis but to give students opportunities to *experience* the *process* of exploring and crafting ideas *through* writing and other materials. The artifacts and texts that resulted from the low-stakes prompts were shared and discussed in class, sometimes leading to thought-provoking conversations about the research topic, other times simply generating a steady stream of interesting material that, when later examined with a critical eye for patterns and themes, often generated valuable insights. Composing research writing in this way has much in common with Tim Brown's (2009) definition of design thinking: multiplying options to create choices.

Low-stakes writing and experimentation with art processes changed the pacing and focus of students' work, allowing time and space for attending to details that otherwise might go unnoticed. By remaining immersed in the fuzzy front end of a topic, the students developed a greater tolerance for uncertainty and not knowing. Producing texts and artifacts that could potentially communicate these nebulous explorations challenged the students to take risks in their work, to trust in the tacit and evocative (Igweonu, Fagence, Petch, & Davies, 2011). In turn, they developed more sensitized awarenesses of the affordances and limitations of expression, perception, and action. Heightened attentiveness to an audience's role in influencing expression and affirming ideas followed naturally. In short, a sustained practice of pushing and stretching ideas into communicable forms, or striving to understand and respond to the expressions of others necessitated a distinctive kind of design thinking—design as a poetics of process that bears witness to “vividly competing ideas about what it means to be human” (Buchanan, 1995, p. 55-56). In this way, arts-based writing in the *Art of Words* course provided a foundation of poetic, critical consciousness that advanced students' abilities to use writing more sensitively and strategically in their work as designers and researchers.

Arts-based writing, in sum, is a productive, reflective practice that stimulates the development of diverse artifacts and divergent paths of thought while expanding a researcher's capacity for working within uncertainties and learning from sites of precarity. In agreement with composition theorist Paul Lynch's (2012) expansive perspective on composition, we see value in “making writing “messier and baggier...more open to complexity and even confusion” knowing that “what we lose in precision...we will make up for in inclusion; what we lose in focus, we will make up for in richness” (p. 465). Viewed in this way, arts-based writing offers designers and arts practitioners more pathways for seeking and affirming new worlds, identifying new ways of thinking, seizing sensitized nodes of awareness, and pursuing accelerating complexities.

Reflection on Arts-based Writing in Practice

The arts-based writing artifacts and texts created by Olivia and Davida provide a view of the holistic, expansive dialogues among *self-other-world* that grow within and around research projects. Although the objects that emerged from their arts-based writing practices were not intended for an art exhibition, they were nonetheless tangible, viewable, analyzable displays

of sustained conversations with wicked design problems. Bringing the elusive qualities of thought into material form can be particularly useful at the outset of a project. In the initial stages, before a clear thesis trajectory is identified, novice researchers can feel flooded and even paralyzed by the *allatonicness* (Berthoff, 1981) and endless possibilities of a topic. As Davida confirms below, deciding what to pay attention to or disregard can be exceedingly difficult for a new researcher. Pressured to define a research topic quickly and decisively, students often disregard experimental pathways choosing instead to pursue ideas likely to yield consequential results.

Following Roland Barthes' (1992) philosophy that the assumed "inconsequentialities" of a situation can be a potential gateway, a sensuous text born of the light of a landscape or the languor of a day, Olivia's arts-based writing experimentation led her to a research portal of a surprising form: a cantaloupe's skin (Figure 4). Deeply inscribed with a poem, the fragrant, textured surface of the fruit offered up subtleties about subjectivity, presence, and interaction that might have been lost to the "coarse filter" of academic methodologies (Barthes, 1992, p. 8). Likewise, reflection on the proliferation of layers in Davida's research journal (layered papers of varying thicknesses, layered mark-making practices atop pleated pages) provide glimpses into her experiments with narrative multiplicity. Grappling in her journal with the complex relationship of identity and trust-building among pregnant teens and social service workers, these layered texts are a precursor to the *empathy sliders* tool eventually proposed in her research. In short, the phenomenological materiality of arts-based writing creates evocative data that have the potential to shift inconsequential qualities of a situation into revelatory focus.

In the examples below, Olivia and Davida reflect upon the entwinement of writing, thinking, and design practices in their research projects. While their arts-based writing methods generated different pathways of insight, both gained greater awareness of how their own methods of writing and patterns of expression formed a dialogue with the world—and that this dialogic relationship is a sensitized research tool—a kind of divining rod—with the potential to reveal contours of tacit knowledge.

Davida

While there are few rules within design regarding how to arrive at a final solution, there is an implied criterion of expected modes of discovery and communication. As an industrial designer, I have seen a forward momentum where product designers are increasingly juxtaposed with engineers, quality control management and marketers within the workforce. In this corporate- focused, industrial design culture where validation and exactness are expected of proposed ideas and concepts, low-stakes writing methods are a surprising paragon of innovation that bring both disruption and clarity to the interplay of research and problem-solving.

My Master's thesis developed tangible design tools that awaken empathy and trust between low-income, African-American, single mothers and their social service workers. However,

early-on I found it difficult to translate copious amounts of literature research and consumer narratives toward the development of a pragmatic and actionable product solution. Arts-based writing provided a space of possibility that allowed the curiosity of my mind to wrestle with the systematic dilemmas revealed in research, insights from my study's participants, and my own personal creativity on an equalizing plane. In this space of experimentation, abstract thought could be visualized and manipulated alongside aesthetic conceptualization through textual means. My thoughts, captured in the midst of becoming meaningful form, were tangible modes of creative insight that could be further ideated and visualized using traditional design methods. The production of these thought-artifacts allowed for end-results which could be carefully traced back to their origins to be directly validated by the research or insights from which they emerged.

It is unfortunate that the idea of using writing as a design tool had never occurred to me. Prior to the Art of Words course I relegated writing only as the medium through which a design could be explained. Thus, writing usually occurred after all the design efforts had concluded, functioning to justify the design process or explain the product in order to placate skeptics.

These post-process writings were seldom personally meaningful—a mere garnish to conceptualization and production of the design. Conversely, through art-based writing, my textual explorations quickly become meaningful with my research notebook for the class taking the form of a visual journal (Figure 1) used to catalyze my thoughts as I pursued the development of a design intervention.

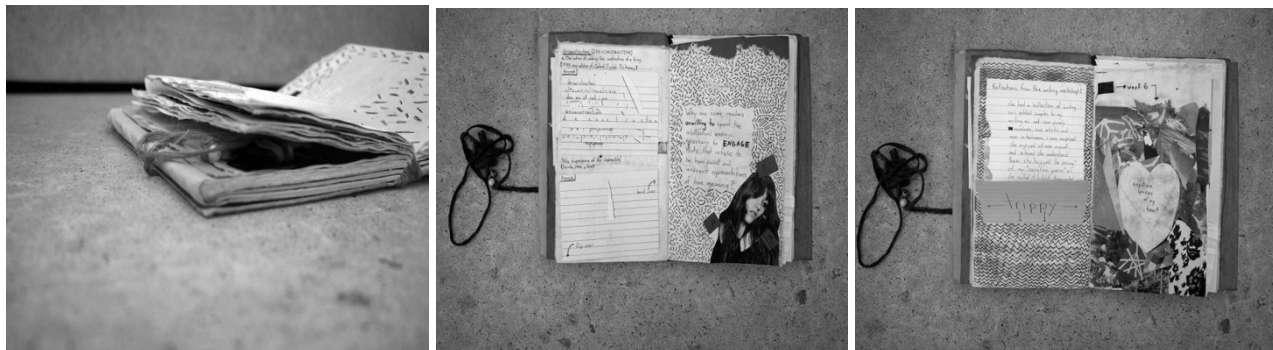


Figure 1: Personal Writing journal from Art of Words (2016)

As an example, in one activity in the Art of Words course, I experimented with the layered complexities of social stigmas surrounding teenage pregnancy as opposed to generic motherhood and childhood. Through surveys, I collected terms and phrases that people associated with childhood, motherhood and teen pregnancy. I assembled imagery of these words into collages (Figure 2) and juxtaposed these with illustrations from an artist based on perceptions of childhood. The assembled series (Figure 3) shows the progressive attitude shift of society from childhood (on the left) toward motherhood (on the right) with a figurative “bridge” (middle) representing language associated with the perceived, unstable state of teenage motherhood. Visualizing the theoretical thoughtscape of Americans towards young motherhood helped me deeply connect the displacement of identity within the social

phenomena of teen motherhood and was invaluable in propelling me towards a final product solution that was tailored towards bridging trust gaps between an insecure, young mother and her social service provider.



Figure 2: Tapestries of Motherhood (2 of 4) (2016-2017)

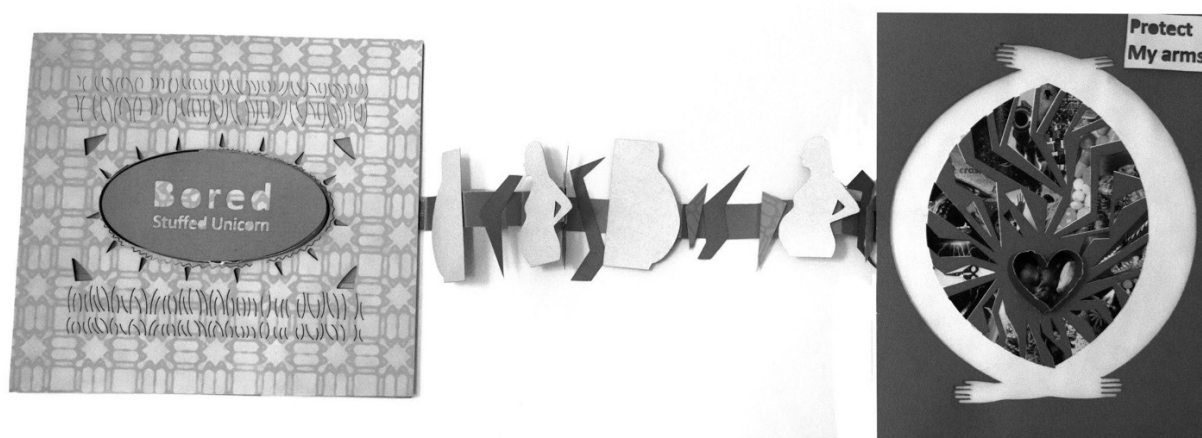


Figure 3: Tapestries of Motherhood (3 of 4) (2016-2017)

Art-based writing is potent creative discovery. I believe my familiarity with the iterative process of discovery as a designer enabled me to ease in and out of arts-based inquiry seamlessly—discovering to write, writing to discover. No longer just a complement to my creative process, art-based inquiry continues to push me towards deeper and more directed discovery even after the course ended and I continue research on my thesis topic.

Olivia

While researching my Master's thesis topic of haptic (hand-driven) reflection in graphic design education last year I was afforded the opportunity to navigate the ambiguous nebula through the writing exercises, texts, and mentorship of the Art of Words course. Chapters and excerpts from selected authors and philosophers sparked a dialogue that manifested into written reflections inspired by the power of writing's tactility, the beguile of embodied meaning-making, and drawn expressions. Throughout the semester, I engaged in a

metaphorical dialogue with the ideas of philosophers Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of desire, the becoming-self, and haecceity were provocations that challenged me to reflect on my writing process and, in time, persuaded me to conceptualize my writing and design research as a relational space—a locus where the impossibilities of ever-expressing my ideas completely or perfectly revealed surprising new forms of creative possibility: a cantaloupe inscribed, a mirrored text, and a tiny package of drawings, among others. I strove to express the Deleuzoguattarian ideas of embracing the transiency of living (the becoming-self), desire as a “process of increasing expansion, connection and creation” (Colebrook, 2002, p. xxii) and haecceity (the inherent thisness of an individual/thing) conceptually, and through reflection.

Exercising my characteristic pre-crastination and introspective penchants, I strategically crafted the idea behind each of the creative pieces in the Art of Words course. This work classifies as conceptual, for the planning and process were decided upon before production. But unlike conceptual art, I did not consider the actual making of these artifacts completely perfunctory—the execution of the work was just as much a thoughtful, embodied process as was the front end.



Figure 4: Moon engraving poem (2016)

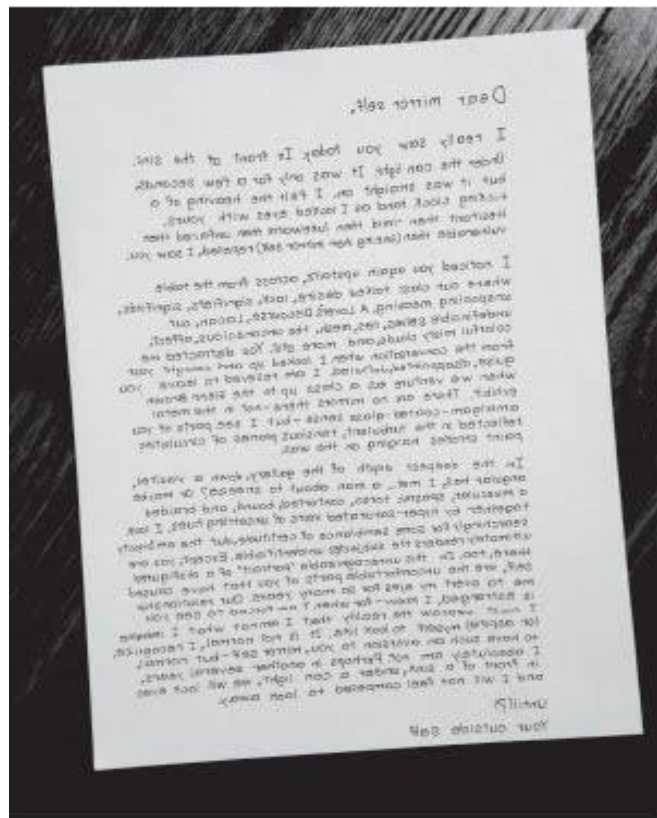


Figure 5: CAC epistolary articulation (2016)

The articulative projects from the Art of Words also represent the virtually limitless possibilities of haptic writing. With the poem-inscribed cantaloupe (Figure 4), for example, I was writing to explore a process. The moon poem engraving symbolizes my Deleuze and Guattari- inspired articulation of desire, the moon's cratered surface signifying a sense of lack. The conscious selection of a three-dimensional form gave the poem's words a whole other realm of meaning. My intention in carving the poem into the surface was to make its interpretation interactive—both in rotating the sphere to read the narrative and in running your fingers over the words, filling the trenches of letterforms, making the void whole with your presence. Aliteral reflection, the epistolary articulation from an Art of Words class excursion to the local Contemporary Arts Center (Figure 5) represents another manifestation of a dialogue with an experience, and a defamiliarization of the familiar and interloping into the unknown. Again, as with the cantaloupe inscribed, the letter's decryption is interactive—in order to interpret its content fluently the reader needs to hold up the page before a mirror, and it is there in the reflection that the message is cast. The moon engraving poem also ties into the designer's process of thinking and of generating ideas. The poem itself and its manifestation on the cratered fruit validates those twists and turns, the risks designers take off the beaten path that help create better ideas. For, sometimes these side trips and excursions that we make are the most productive—but the value of the journey is never realised until it has been actively reflected upon.

From ideating through sketches and scrawls on paper, to the sensorial challenge of inscribing the melon with my poem, to ciphering the experience through written reflection, each phase of the process-journey was inherently embodied. Being that it was handwritten and placed on a three-dimensional fruit, the melon-moon poem forced a unique synthesis of thought and presence in the moment that resulted in a deliberateness of action and sensory stimulus that often is missing from routine, repetitious graphic design tasks. The moon engraving poem and other activities from Art of Words speak to what one does as a person in their lived experience, how these experiences intersect with what one does in the professional setting, and how the spectrum of these activities informs professional output.

Discussion

Operating from the premise that design is an inherently social activity that arises from, engages critically with, and acts upon the sociocultural contexts within which it is situated (Barzdell & Barzdell, 2013; Richter & Allert, 2017), a critical, reflexive design approach that is exercised through the practice of writing provides opportunities to explore the dialogic, speculative (Dunne & Raby, 2013), and precarious nature of meaning-making. Instead of proceeding from the assumption that meanings are immutable and truths are verifiable, a critical, reflexive practice of composition such as arts-based writing opens up a conversation among people, texts, materials, and meanings.

Art and design students who establish an arts-based, critical, reflective writing practice in relation to their design research create the conditions for the development of an internally persuasive discourse that brings greater confidence in, and clarity of expression of ideas. Borg (2004) draws from Bakhtinian theory to differentiate an internally persuasive discourse which is mutable and an authoritative discourse, which is static. Explaining that “(t)he words of another can be either authoritative – recited by heart – or internally persuasive – retold in one’s own words,” Borg offers that an internally persuasive discourse can effect a “more profound relationship” between an artist and the “discourse of another” (Borg, 2004, p. 195). Specifically, an internally persuasive discourse involves a transformation of subjectivity. That is, by incorporating the discourse of the other (a theory paradigm, or an expert’s knowledge, for example) into one’s own lifeworld schema, the discourse and the subject themselves are transformed through the revisions and negotiations of meaning that occur in the process. For Olivia and Davida, arts-based writing and the creative artifacts that emerged in the process, were agents of speculative dialogue that shaped and affirmed an internally persuasive discourse in each of their research projects.

Arts-based writing practices, such as the low-stakes, hybrid art/writing activities used in the *Art of Words* course are uniquely responsive to the evolving epistemologies of the transdisciplinary university. Specifically, by pairing the processes of writing and experimentations with materials toward the expression of an idea, and employing these processes within an iterative, reflective practice, the messiness and uncertainty of human expression and communication are foregrounded. By bringing the precarity of communication into the foreground, and by producing tangible evidence of the multiple ways an idea can be expressed, received, understood, and valued, we expand the possibilities for designers, researchers, stakeholders to “see” and “hear” one another. There are myriad languages through

which we might know and understand one another. For example, as artist Lynda Barry observes: “Drawing is a language. It’s hard to understand what that really means until you’ve ‘spoken’ and ‘listened’ to it enough in a reliable, regular way” (in Halliday, 2015, para. 9). In essence, “the more languages we have access to, the greater our capacity to intensely experience, translate experience, to know and to communicate” (Cynthia Vascak, in Haust, 1998, p. 30).

Conclusion

Poet Muriel Rukeyser’s observation, “*Art is not a world, but a knowing of the world. Art prepares us*” provides a meditation on the methodologies and conditions of *knowing*. In essence, the challenges of art offer context and preparation for working within the messiness, flux, and uncertainties of being. Blunted or honed, the edges of our fallible, human understandings are tools that cut paths through perceptions, revealing, for better or for worse, a visible world. The experimentation and speculation inherent in arts-based writing practices prepare us to approach research as a dialogue among multiple realities, materials, and diverse ways of knowing. And in emphasizing speculative methods of expression and meaning making, arts-based writing prepares us to approach the production and representation of knowledge as an ethical response-ability (Oliver, 2000) requiring sustained, creative interrogation and critical reflection throughout the research endeavor.

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