# Arts-Based Inquiry with Art Educators through American Freeform

**Popular abstract:** In my dissertation, *Educational Communities, Arts-Based Inquiry, & Role-Playing: An American Freeform Exploration with Professional & Pre-Service Art Educators*, I explored one application of larp as arts-based research. This paper summarizes that experience, and in so doing presents opportunities to researchers interested in pursuing similar goals, methods, and concepts. My research focused on the creation of a community of play formed with professional and pre-service art educators. This community used a series of American freeform games to examine how participants thought and felt about relationships in educational communities, such as schools. Doing so presented an opportunity for embodied reflection and discourse that encouraged a reaching out towards perspectives other than the participants own, which made barriers of understanding within educational settings such as time, location, and social status more permeable. American freeform was ideal for this purpose because it had few rules, encouraged players to draw on real-life experiences, presented techniques that incorporated both player and character perspectives, and was geared toward a style of play that was culturally appropriate for our group. The experiences provided a reflexive illustration of our understandings of the systems we occupied in our daily lives, and the techniques seem ripe for application in teacher preparation and development courses. As one participant said, "There is no textbook, there is no traditional class, that would have provided that learning."

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I discuss arts-based research through larp by summarizing my dissertation, *Educational Communities, Arts-Based Inquiry, & Role-Playing: An American Freeform Exploration with Professional & Pre-Service Art Educators* (Cox 2015). During my research, I worked with professional and pre-service art educators to develop a community of play that used American freeform games (Stark 2014) and reflective discourse to examine relationships within a collaboratively imagined educational community, such as a K-8 school. I reasoned that in enacting alternative roles present in their professional contexts (such as those of parents, administrators, students, faculty, and staff), that the links between context and perception would provoke insight and empathy in the participants (Sullivan 2010), which would in turn erode mental, emotional, and social barriers that isolated them from the other members of their real-life educational communities. To penetrate those barriers, we used the lived experiences of the games and critical discourse as a community of play (Cox 2015) to "begin with the overly familiar and transfigure it into something different enough to make those who are awakened hear and see" (Greene 1988, 129).

## 2. ARTS-BASED INQUIRY

I called the methodology that I developed "participatory arts-based inquiry through American freeform," a term that incorporated both the means of research and the method through which it was enacted. The means in this case was arts-based research, which research scholar Patricia Leavy (2009) says is especially suited for projects that "aim to describe, explore, or discover", that they offer a mirror to social and emotional contexts, and that they facilitate discourse and understanding (12–13). Arts-based inquiry includes three different forms of research, which consists of data and analysis that is *on*, *for*, and/or *through* the arts (Borgdoff 2006). Research *on* art is a reflective interpretation that doesn't involve direct creation or manipulation of art. Research *for* art examines practices, typically aiming to make some concrete alteration to the processes of creation. Research *in* the arts uses the arts as tools for reflection and expression, a notion that challenges pre-existing notions of what is meant by "research". I utilized each of these avenues in my work to analyze American freeform's capabilities, how its techniques could be applied as artistic experiences, and what made those experiences meaningful.

The core of my methodology drew on a combination of ABER (arts-based educational research), which enhances perception of human activities and that is defined by the presence of art (Barone and Eisner 1997), and a/r/tography, in which practitioners use shifts between frames of reference as artists, researchers, and teachers, as tools for inquiry (Sullivan 2010). Into these I incorporated jagodinski and Wallin's (2013) *Arts-based research: A critique and a proposal*, a critical examination of arts-based research that maintains that the arts should not be viewed as objects, but as events that are encountered. I also included elements of participatory action research

(PAR), specifically the use of multiple modalities to generate and collect data (McIntyre 2008) and a transparent and reactive structure (Stringer 2014), which positioned participants as collaborators and stakeholders, rather than as subjects.

## 3. AMERICAN FREEFORM

The form of role-playing I used as an artistic media in my research was American freeform, which draws from a combination of Nordic freeform/short larps, indie tabletop, and US-based chamber larps (Stark 2014, 3). I had made the case for regarding role-playing as an art form prior to my dissertation (Cox 2014), a concept that had certainly not originated with me (Stenros 2010), but that had heretofore not been widely considered within the field of Art Education. Critical to this analysis was the premise that art represents a form of non-linguistic knowledge. As Eisner (2008) explains "The evocative has as its ambition the provision of a set of qualities that create an empathic sense: of life in those who encounter it, whether the work is visual or linguistic, choreographic or musical" (6), connections that provide opportunities to share lived experiences. This concept dovetails with Markus Montola's (2008) description of larp as a collaborative and interactive social art form in that it draws on imagination and empathy.

As with most larps, American freeform presents embodied collaborative experiences that are generally inaccessible outside of the context of the game. This collective experience generates an inter-subjective space of "shared symbolically-mediated meanings" (Parsons 1994), which enables a community of play to create and recreate individual and communal identities, a blurring of lines between what is real and what is not that allowed the experience to be more than "just a game," and to effect real change on the extra-diegetic world (Gee 2005).

American freeform had several traits that made it particularly appealing for my research (Stark 2014). Firstly, it doesn't have many rules or pre-existing expectations, which made it inviting for players with different levels of experience. Secondly, it incorporates lived experiences from outside the game, which encouraged the diversity of perspective that was crucial to examining the systems of power participants observed in educational communities. Lastly, American freeform employs meta-techniques, tools that are used for "letting players communicate without letting characters communicate" (Stark 2014, 6), and which create a degree of uncertainty that disrupts familiar assumptions and narratives. The "American" connotation to American freeform

mattered because the scenarios we created were explicitly American in origin. Though many of the meta-techniques we used originated from outside of the country, our community of play was American, our practice included the focus on player safety common to American larp culture (Stark 2014), and the contexts and concepts of the game were specifically situated in our understandings as pre-professional and professional art educators who worked within American school systems.

The purpose of our games was distinct from those in most educational role-playing games and edu-larps. While role-playing has been seen as a tool for critical thought and altered perspectives (Bean 2011; Andresen 2012), it generally does so by constraining the roles to "positions in a social structure rather than persons (with personal attributes) in an imaginary world" (Fine 1983, 11). While our games were situated in an imaginary school system, it was the shifting of relationships within that context, rather than any pre-determined educational goals, that we focused our attention on. Furthermore, edu-larp and educational role-playing seek to "impart pre-determined pedagogical or didactic content" (Balzer & Kurz 2015), after which the play is ended so as to not detract from that purpose (Nickerson 2008). For the purposes of my research it was important that that the ideas, emotions, and experiences that explored by the community be the emergent result of collaborative discourse and play, rather than as the result of a power dichotomy not truly representative of the beliefs of the players (Freire 2005).

We had five players in our games, including myself, each of whom was either a pre-service art educator or professional art educator. *What to do About Michael?* (Cox 2014), which I had designed to illustrate Michel Foucault's (1984) theories about the nature of power, provided the initial framework for our games during the research. It places players in the roles of teachers and administrators meeting to discuss a student named "Michael," whose struggles are based on Foucault's actual lived experiences (Miller 1993), and who has attacked one of his classmates. I modified the basic game, opening it to player agency by incorporating the principles and techniques laid out in *Play with Intent* (Boss & Holter 2012) and the *Pocket Guide to American Freeform* (Stark 2014).

The school in our narrative was collaboratively designed, and each player described a trait that contributed an interesting avenue of exploration, which resulted in a suburban private school with great economic diversity, a well-regarded arts program, and a recent change in leadership. Within that imagined context, the community of play

developed over twenty different characters to represent the school's students, parents, teachers, and administrators, and played in eleven different scenes. The community experimented with eight different meta-techniques that we modified to develop the story, promote introspection, and use for our collective enjoyment. These included the "ball of yarn" technique (Nilsen & Lindahl 2013), in which players threw a ball of yarn to each other while declaring relationships to determine and display character relationships, the "voices in my head" technique (Andresen 2012), which allowed "Michael" to directly confront his conflicted emotions as personified by the players, and a "locked-eyes" technique we borrowed from Ars Amandi (Wieslander 2004; Stark 2011) to enhance the intensity of one on one discussions between characters by maintaining eye-contact throughout a scene, such as in the confrontation between parents and administrators over "Michael's" continued enrollment.

## 4. DATA

In order to identify and record shifts in perspective, I created a group of "research puzzles" (Hunter, Emerald, & Martin 2013) at the beginning of the research that the community of play returned to at the close of each session, and which they could help modify throughout. A research puzzle differs from a research question in that it focuses on observable reactions and responses constructed through the engagement of the participants, rather than "answers," a concept which centers those meanings locally to those participants. My research puzzles highlighted how power affects relationships and ideas in an educational community, as well as the role American freeform could play in exploring those concepts.

I collected data in several forms: videos of the sessions; reflective dialogue during each session's pre-brief and debrief; visual artifacts that were created between sessions by the community of play; and entrance and exit interviews from each participant. Each piece of data represented a "snapshot," a form of narrative inquiry (Schwandt 2007) collected from different times and places, and in different forms, to provide multiple representations of how participant perceptions and feelings about the games, and the world they referenced, developed (Stone-Mediatore 2003, cited in Hunter, Emerald, & Martin, 2013, 96). I used this information to enact a grounded theory (Schwandt 2007) approach to meaning-making, beginning with the data and using the emergent themes to construct understandings as represented by in-vivo codes (Given 2008). I applied

discourse analysis (Lichtman 2013) to these codes, and used that analysis to create rhizomatic maps (Deleuze & Guattari 1987) in order to describe the fluid nature of relationships and ideas (Latour 1999). The artifacts and conclusions I produced were subject to member checks (Marshall & Rossman 2011), both to ensure accuracy and to determine the direction of the research.

## 5. FINDINGS

In our community of play, power was seen as a contextually specific element whose exertion is intrinsic to the identity of an authority. As one participant expressed it, "we all say that we are just here for the students, but what that means really varies a lot. And in the end, we are pretty much controlled by where our authority comes from, where our power comes from." This was also true for collective representations of authority, such as with parents uniting for their child or teachers deciding what to do in a given circumstance. However, exercising the authority of a collective meant suppressing a number of individual voices, which in turn restricted flexibility and independence that in many respects would have been more effective in stating and attaining specific goals. This perception highlighted a concept of education as an ongoing discourse between structure and uncertainty.

American freeform was seen by the community of play as informative and exciting, and participants agreed that *knowing* about the difficulties and barriers faced by members of educational communities was not the same thing as *living* them. Jenny F. expressed this when she said "Obviously I was projecting my own life experiences into my characters. But I was reaching, trying to reach, into what might be going on in other students' lives." Juniper M. similarly stated that she "was able to come to understand these really intricate relationships, and drives, and desires of administration, and parents, and teachers, and students… I just don't know that I could have gotten that any other way other than actual life experience. There is no textbook, there is no traditional class that would have provided that learning."

Community members stated that future games had potential for application in pre-service education and in professional development inside and outside of the arts, a tool that disrupted assumptions and increased awareness of others similar to the "Role Method" of process drama (Landy and Montgomery 2012, 199), in that it allows people to identify and explore roles that may be difficult for them to understand. I maintain that to do so would require the following from participants: that they trust each other, that

they are willing to accept that the games have value, and that they recognize the techniques don't attempt to "solve" a problem, but to surround it (Sullivan 2010, 31). These games must focus on exploration and imagination, rather than to create a completely believable simulation, to maintain the generative uncertainty that has already proven productive.

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**BIO**

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