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## TEACHING FOR THE AMBIGUOUS, CREATIVE, AND PRACTICAL: DARING TO BE A/R/TOGRAPHY

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Delane Ingalls Vanada is an Assistant Professor of Art + Design Education and Visual Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her research focuses on integrative, learner-centered pedagogies as well as the role of self-beliefs in creativity and learning. Her paintings tell the integrated self-story of an artist-designer/researcher/teacher.

**ABSTRACT:** This purpose of this inquiry is to explore how the a/r/tographic model of shared inquiry led to deeper insights about learner-centered pedagogy. Invited to teach and redesign a very large undergraduate “Art and Society: Visual Arts” course, the author’s commitment as a constructivist teacher led to a more active, non-lecture, art-as-experience approach. The author also sought to understand how learner-centered practices enhance students’ balanced thinking and perceptions about their abilities as creative learners. Arts-based methods of inquiry highlighted both students’ and researcher’s lived experiences, informed praxis, and resulted in new art forms. The author’s Mixed Parallaxic Praxis method emerged from this study. Key findings indicate students’ increased openness to other perspectives, increased engagement, increased creative and critical thinking, a personal desire/thirst to create art, and a personal confidence to analyze art—despite most students’ lack of former experience with art making or art instruction in high school.

**KEYWORDS:** arts-based inquiry, learner-centered pedagogy, ambiguity, self-beliefs

## Introduction

A chief goal in learner-centered educational philosophy is the development of lifelong learners capable of independent thinking, collaborative engagement, personal responsibility, and self-motivated inquiry which benefits their success not just in learning, but in all of life (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000; Claxton, 2007; Cullen, Harris & Hill, 2012; Ingalls Vanada, 2011; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2000).

Counter-productive to these goals, however, is the observation that today's college students are often more comfortable with teacher-directed learning and a one-right-answer approach that does not advance these skills and dispositions. Some blame the notorious testing-rich culture of the United States education system, plus traditionally siloed, non-integrated, disciplinary approaches (Constantino, 2002; Eisner, 2002; Freedman, 2007; Gardner, 2007; Ingalls Vanada, 2014; Robinson, 2001). Sternberg (2008) points to the need for teachers to advance students' "successful intelligence"—a balance of creative, critical and practical skills. Yet, even in art and design education, a discipline that invites constructivist approaches, not all teachers adopt a learner-centered pedagogy that goes beyond end products and academic-aligned achievement.

Many arts-based researchers are attempting to redefine visual arts learning in terms of the critical, strategic, and generative learning opportunities that the arts offer all students (Eisner, 2002; Freedman, 2007; Gardner, 2007; Marshall, 2014). This is important because it is in the process of inquiry and creation that meaning-making, critical curiosity, and resilience are built. These ideals are shared by more contemporary, transdisciplinary, and systems-thinking views of education which are natural to "art-centered integrated learning" (Marshall & Donohue, 2014, p. 11). More traditional teachers that resist socially-embedded and inquiry-based learning miss out on opportunities to foster students' deeper capacities to create and respond in meaningful and integrated ways (Eisner, 2002; Freedman, 2007; Gardner, 2007; Marshall, 2014). I am not one of them, thus, the study reported in this paper began with my belief that arts-based learning can and should be used to promote cognitive and affective skills.

## Art and Society: A Learner-centered Study

As a full-time, tenure-track professor in the department of Art and Art History at a large State university, I teach both Art Education courses and a very large "Art and Society" liberal studies (LBST) course. I was tasked with engaging 181 students with the visual arts in the context of society—how visual arts shape, reflect, provide insight, or critique society and how our global society, with a multiplicity of value systems (social, political, educational, etc.), influences artists and art. The class offers unique opportunities for building students'

awareness about the importance of artistic expression in society as a reflection of social issues and as a foundation upon which to reflect on society.

***“...interacting with art provides opportunities to disrupt preconceived notions and is a way to challenge students in how they are not just consumers, but also creators—change agents for a better society.”***

Students are required to take two LBST classes in their general studies requirements, choosing from visual arts, dance, theatre, or music. Traditionally, these courses assume a lecture-style and bubble-test assessment format, with students memorizing facts and occasionally visiting art museums or performances. As a constructivist teacher, I agreed to this unique post with the understanding that I am not a lecturer. I proposed that I redesign and engage students in active learning investigations evolving around critical issues and enduring ideas of humanity, visual art, and society (Noddings, 1992). I wanted students to experience, engage with, and make art, not just gain exposure through lectures—an art-as-experience approach (Dewey, 1934). I also believe that interacting with art provides opportunities to disrupt preconceived notions and is a way to challenge students in how they are not just consumers, but also creators—change agents for a better society. It was also important to make the content personally relevant; thus, pertinent readings were assigned rather than a specific text (which made me more dependent on the online management/communication system and technology, which often did not work).

As typical of learner-centered pedagogues, I conceptualized a community within which students might engage in more critical and creative thinking as shared inquiry and dialogue, one that capitalized on the inherent assets of this culturally and ethnically diverse community of learners. The course goals were aligned with three pillars of a learner-centered philosophy: (1) inquiry; (2) connection-making; and (3) self-directed learning (Bransford et al., 2000; Cullen et al., 2012; Doyle, 2011; Fink, 2003; Ingalls Vanada, 2011; McCombs & Miller, 2008; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2000). To activate students' critical, creative, and practical thinking and action, or balanced thinking, I included a purposeful level of ambiguity in the projects and learning investigations.

Wrestling with ambiguity is often difficult for students in an age in which they have been trained to produce one right answer to pass a test, yet we know that doing so promotes their critical thinking abilities (Constantino, 2002). Eisinger (2011), Dean of Liberal Studies at Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD), claims that K-12 and university students alike

lack in abstract and ambiguous thinking. Eisinger is known for his challenge to SCAD professors to design purposeful, “untidy open-ended exercises” and to “teach ambiguity” (p. 2). Winner and Hetland (2007) remind us that the arts are uniquely positioned to teach critical modes of seeing, imagining, investing, and thinking beyond facts:

If our primary demand of students is that they recall established facts, then the children we educate today will find themselves ill-equipped to deal with problems like global warming, terrorism, and pandemics. Those who have learned the lessons of the arts, however—how to see new patterns, how to learn from mistakes, and how to envision solutions—are the ones likely to come up with the novel answers needed most for the future. (p. 1)

In this large “Art in Society” class of 181 students, I wanted to explore whether a more learner-centered, active, non-traditional, art-as-experience pedagogy might positively affect students’ balanced intelligence: creative, critical, and practical (Ingalls Vanada, 2011). I also wanted to explore students’ perceptions of themselves as learners in this class. There was no intent to remove my expertise as a researcher or my former experiences as a K-20 (kindergarten through college) learner-centered teacher (Buffington & McKay, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 2006). Students’ creative and critical thinking, their personal “voice,” and open-mindedness and willingness to take risks in all projects (dispositions of creativity) were encouraged, although many expressed in class that they did not consider themselves “creative.” As we dialogued about the importance of learning from mistakes, many students expressed that their former educational experiences had not prepared them for independent thinking.

***“As we dialogued about the importance of learning from mistakes, many students expressed that their former educational experiences had not prepared them for independent thinking.”***

Having never attempted to enact my learner-centered, constructivist philosophy in such a large arts-based class, I wondered: How might this group of students perceive their learning? Would learner-centered practice in this context lead to more holistic and balanced thinking and learning? Would they grow in creative confidence? Was it doable? As great as my desire, how would I reach and challenge them all? Was it folly to attempt this as a tenure-track professor?

## Theory and Philosophy

Inspired by Sternberg's "Successful Intelligence" theory (2008), I first wanted to understand how students' abilities in this learner-centered (LC) Art and Society course might be directed toward greater creative, analytical, and practical thinking. The following research questions emerged:

- How might the teaching of a large Art and Society undergraduate course, when designed to be more learner-centered, enhance students' creative, critical and practical thinking?
- How does teaching such a course, as a learner-centered artist/researcher/teacher affect praxis?
- How are students' self-perceptions about their learning affected by being in this learner-centered class?

The theoretical framework of successful intelligence or balanced intelligence is a good model for developing and also assessing students' critical, creative, and practical thinking skills and dispositions (Ingalls Vanada, 2014; Sternberg, 2008; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2000). This theory supports cognitive science research which views learning and intelligence as a complex, expandable, flexible system that is modifiable and not fixed at birth (Resnick, 1999). Research also indicates that one's balanced intelligence is affected by self-beliefs and the culture in which one learns, which in turn, affects motivation (Bransford et al., 2000; Gardner, 2007).

Successful or balanced intelligence theory (Ingalls Vanada, 2011; Sternberg, 2008) says that every person possesses critical, creative, and practical thinking skills. All three are needed and support each other. Critical thinking refers to the processes of analyzing and evaluating, solving problems, and/or reasoning with evidence. Creative thinking occurs when one uses imagination, finds new solutions, and/or designs or creates a new idea or product. Practical thinking involves applying new knowledge in real life situations (including knowledge learned tacitly) in ethical ways, and it can be identified as social-emotional intelligence or one's ability to present ideas to others (Sternberg, 2008). Learner-centered philosophy correlates with Sternberg's ideals of building students' creative, critical, and practical thinking skills (Ingalls Vanada, 2011). See Figure 1.

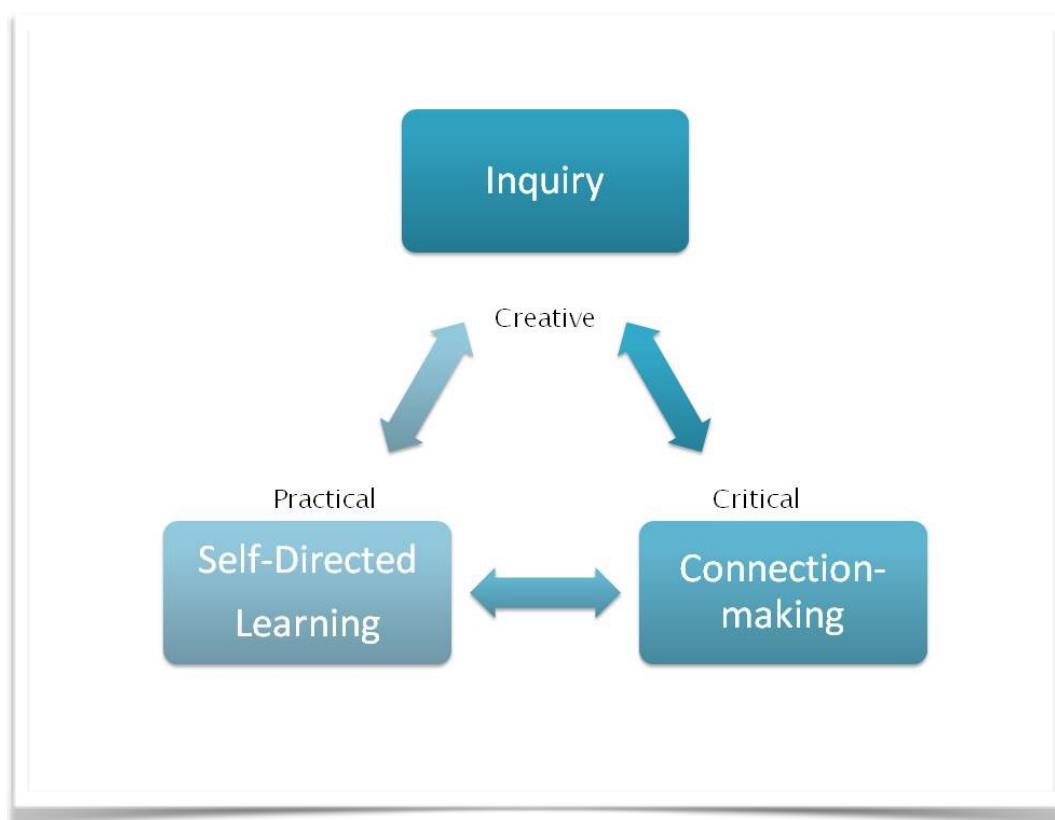


Figure 1. Balanced learning environments

## Learner-centered Pedagogy

Learner-centered pedagogy is far from new. It shares ideals with the constructivist philosophy promoted by Dewey (1938), and is informed by a vast research base that continues to document its effectiveness in driving deeper meaning and understanding (Bransford et al., 2000; Fink, 2003; McCombs & Miller, 2007), and more continues to be written about the impact of a learner-centered focus in the undergraduate classroom (Cullen et al., 2012; Doyle, 2011; Fink, 2003; Ingalls Vanada, 2014).

LC teachers forego passive learning and rote memory for more social, contextual, and exploratory learning organized around problems or issues rather than discipline content alone (Cullen, 2012, p. 57). The focus is more on complex, big ideas: philosophical issues or theories of social concern (Constantino, 2002; Cullen, 2010; Noddings, 1992). In these big idea classrooms, students use critical thinking to make connections from disparate sources and across disciplines, developing what Gardner (2007) calls “a synthesizing mind” (p. 45).

LC teachers focus their efforts on gradually shifting most of the work of learning to students as an intentional strategy that serves to develop students' personal autonomy, creative confidence, ability to manage ambiguity, and a sustained motivation—factors that are found to further predict and effect levels of learning and achievement (McCombs & Miller, 2007). The LC mantra is “the one who does the work, does the learning” (Doyle, 2011, p. 7).

In an LC/constructivist classroom, the teacher role also shifts from being the source and dispenser of knowledge to a facilitator, not a sage on the stage (Brien, 2011; Cullen, 2012). LC teachers believe that “teaching” is less about imparting knowledge or content, and more about empowering students to be more in charge of finding the problems *they* wish to solve and take on more responsibility for their own learning. After all, we are all learning throughout life (McCombs & Miller, 2007). Figure 2 compares a more traditional teacher-focused model of learning to a learner-focused one in an LC classroom.

	Traditional Teacher Focus	Shift to Learner-centered Focus
Course Design	What do I want to teach?	What do students need to learn?
Teacher's Role	What will I do to teach this material?	What will students do to learn this material? How will students be given more choice in what and how they learn?
Success Criteria	How well do I perform in the classroom?	How well do my students perform in and out of the classroom now and in the future?

Figure 2. Learner-centered shifts (adapted from Fink, 2003)

## Structuring Learner-Centeredness

In this large class of 181 students, my first priority as an LC instructor was to build group trust—a key element of creativity. I began by asking students to pick their seating for the semester. A seating chart allowed me to better learn students' names and reward their attendance, and to develop student groups that would collaborate consistently throughout the semester. In this way, students built familiarity and safety with the same peers through

group projects and in-class assignments. To bridge the physical distance I felt in the large lecture-style space, I sought out wireless technology that would allow me to move about the room and interact with my students (versus distancing myself behind a lectern).

I frequently told students, from day one, that this class would be taught differently than the “lecture” classes they might encounter in college, and that their opinions, creativity, risk-taking (especially in terms of allowing their voices to be heard), and self-direction would be valued. We dialogued about my expectations as an LC teacher that “I bring something; they bring something.” I wanted them to understand how my instructional design choices match with a philosophy that deep and meaningful learning does not happen through memorization of facts, and that the class was designed to put students in charge of their own learning. They were asked to set goals, assess their own work, and reflect on their efforts and ethics.

The content of the class was organized around themes or “big ideas” about the ways in which society influences art, and conversely, how art influences society. The assignments and projects were intended to actively engage students in opportunities to: (a) create (artistically and in aesthetic response through journal entries, artworks, creative writing, and multidisciplinary projects); (b) make connections through inquiry into big ideas of social, political, cultural concern, and the ways in which society influences art, design, and creativity (and vice versa, how art influences society); (c) collaborate and communicate with others (verbal dialogue, online and written peer feedback, and using strategies such as design thinking); and (d) reflect on their own creative, critical, and practical skills and dispositions (in verbal, visual, and written ways). Personal creation was elevated as a rich experience, allowing students to explore the aesthetic or emotional component of art-making and writing, bringing their whole selves into a learning experience (Dewey, 1934), and thereby increasing purpose and motivation.

Students were quite honest about how active learning was not the way they have been taught to “learn,” which led to subsequent dialogue about how traditional educational systems have not prepared them for creative action, critical thinking (including wrestling with ambiguity), and risk-taking.

## Research Methods

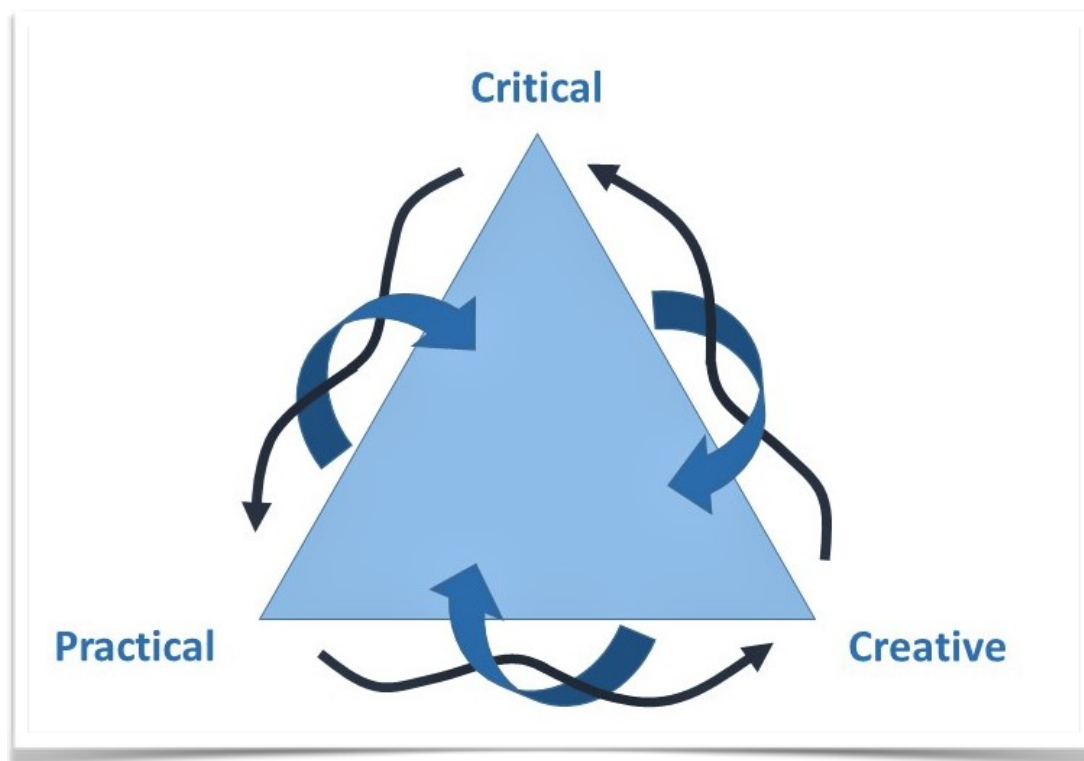
From the social sciences and education, there has been an increase in literature addressing arts-based research (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Irwin & Springgay, 2008; Leavy, 2013; Marshall, 2014; Sameshima, 2007; Sameshima, Vandermause, Chalmers & Gabriel, 2009; Springgay, Irwin, & Wilson Kind, 2005; Sullivan, 2005). The research design for this study is grounded in a/r/tography, a type



of practice-based research that involves the aesthetic, intertwined practices of artist, researcher, and teacher (a holistic entity)—a folding together of knowing, doing, and making (Irwin & Springgay, 2008). A/r/tography has strong links to action research (Buffington et al., 2013; Irwin et al., 2004), with a/r/tographers committed to being reflective and reflexive in action (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Action research (and a/r/tography) is a deeply hermeneutic and postmodern living practice that acknowledges “the importance of self and collective interpretations...always in a state of becoming” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. 110). A/r/tographers seek not to distance themselves from who or what they are researching; their lived lives in concert with others is important to this living practice of ongoing inquiry or “living inquiry” (Springgay et al., 2008, p. 902)

Sameshima’s Parallaxic Praxis paradigm (2007; 2014) inspired data collection methods used in this study, and is a model for researching grounded in arts-integrated inquiry and phenomenological theory. Parallaxic Praxis follows a hermeneutic approach to research with a focus on lived experience with multiple methodological perspectives used together with arts-based methods of analysis. Sameshima and colleagues (2009) state that “multiple methods, media, and disciplines provide broader, deeper understandings of questions of meaning. The infusion of arts into research inquiry, offers a reach into the paradoxical and the mysterious, a move toward knowing better that which is important to know” (2009, p. 3). In Parallaxic Praxis, *parallax* refers to a pedagogical belief that all knowledge, learning, and understanding is incomplete and can only be found through multiple perspectives. Truth is not constructed by distancing ourselves from those we want to study, but rather with direct engagement and subjectivity being as important as objectivity. *Praxis* is the dynamic relationship between theory and practice, impacted by our “theories in use” (Argyris & Schön, 1996)—belief systems that we develop through lived experiences (in my case, as artist-designer, researcher, and teacher, as well as my roles as mom, wife, daughter, and community member, among others).

As a form of a/r/tographic inquiry, Parallaxic Praxis focuses on the researcher’s artmaking/researching/teaching (a/r/t) experiences as living inquiry (Irwin et al., 2004) or “an embodied encounter constituted through visual and textual *understandings and experiences* rather than mere visual and textual *representation*” (Springgay et al., 2005, p. 902). Because artistic and social phenomena often reside in abstract and more overlooked or hidden ways of knowing, creative writing and poetry are a way to research and report on that phenomena, rather than traditional reporting surrounding more obvious facts (Sameshima, 2007). Parallaxic Praxis addresses the importance of looking within and between the obvious—the nexus spaces—to report data that reside in images, situations, or use of language (Figure 3). For instance, what has been left unsaid? What are the outliers in the data? What are the hidden, more affective catalysts of learning? What issues of importance to students might surface between their critical, creative, and practical thinking capabilities?



*Figure 3. Looking within and between*

Parallax Praxis is transdisciplinary, usually incorporating various research methods including arts-informed research, and poetic and narrative inquiry (Sameshima, 2007). Parallaxic Praxis works with data in an artful way, utilizing a variety of art mediums (video production, art making, poetry, et cetera) toward integrative sense-making. Out of the data, artifacts are produced that provoke deeper understanding. For this study, Parallaxic Praxis provided a wider lens to understanding the varied data by tapping into student writing as a primary mode of inquiry, student art-making as data, and re-creation of that data to promote deeper understanding and analysis.

## Data Gathering

In the first weeks of class, students were made aware of my intent to conduct a research project during the semester. They were given full permission to opt out of participation, but none did so. 181 students participated. Class ethnicity consisted of 53% Caucasian, 35% African American, 4% Asian, 3.5% Hispanic, 2% American Indian and 2.5% other, representing a wide range of cultural and religious backgrounds, typical of a large State university. Half of the students were male, half were female, and 64% of the students were in the first two years of their college experience. One of the most important factors was their level of former visual art learning: the class was largely made up of non-art majors, with

56% of the students having only one year or less of former visual art experience (24% claimed 2-3 years and only 20% claimed to have 4 or more years of experience).

To understand and operationalize students' critical, creative, and practical thinking and dispositions, multiple forms of data were used: (1) textual data (i.e. "Showing/Seeing" + museum papers; (2) student narratives, comments, and reflections; (3) teacher reflections and anecdotal notes; and (4) visual data (i.e. journal entries, artworks). While Parallax Praxis (Sameshima, 2014) framed the data collection and analysis methods designed at the outset of the study, I later realized another means for understanding students' self-perceptions as learners in this class, other than time-consuming qualitative interviews, would be necessary.

## Reflexivity in Research Design

I realized that the complex set of research questions I had set out to explore—especially in the case of students' beliefs and understandings about their learning in this more constructivist course (research question #3)—required more information. Individual personal interviews were not an option due to time constraints, and most students cannot report on their metacognitive processes without prompting (Eisner, 2002). It became necessary for me to be open and exercise reflexivity in action (Argyris & Schön, 1996). I adopted a more pragmatic approach for appraising students' self-perceptions, an approach that would complement, not necessarily converge, qualitative and quantitative data (Hickman, 2008; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). I employed a 15-question self-rated "Visual Art and Thinking Survey" based on Robert Burden's "Myself As a Learner Scale" (MALs) (1998) developed during my doctoral dissertation work (Ingalls Vanada, 2010). The Visual Art and Thinking Survey asks students about their perceptions of themselves as creative, analytical, and practical learners and problem-solvers using Likert-type self-rating questions.

## Tensions Reconsidered

While the word "survey" can evoke quantitative studies aimed at numerical frequencies, individual student self-ratings or surveys can also be a pragmatic method for finding meaning, not just fact-finding (Johnson et al., 2004). Guba & Lincoln (1998) introduce the idea of "qualitative surveys," especially for post-positivist studies that work to provide meaningful diversities or variations of some topic of interest within a given population and not for the purposes of statistics alone. Classical pragmatists (e.g. Dewey) also remind us that purist research approaches should take a back seat to the importance of answering the research questions.

Arts-based researchers, Siegesmund and Cahnmann-Taylor (2008), agree that the methods used for a process of inquiry are determined by the questions we strive to answer and that hybrid forms “might include scientific methods as well as arts-based methods” (p. 232). Broom (in Buffington et al., 2013) say that one particular research methodology over another is not as important as “determining which methodology is best suited to answer the questions that guide your investigation” (p. 73). As we try to imagine something new, either path—qualitative, and yes, quantitative—can serve in this purpose.

It is with this mindset, a mixed methods approach evolved. The research design became a more postmodern, integrative approach for explaining, elaborating, and providing multi-method validity to the study (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008; Tashakkori et al., 1998). The design answers Palmer and Zajonc’s call (2010) for more integrative approaches in teaching and research that advance holism and plurality. I named the research design method, Mixed Parallaxic Design (Figure 4).

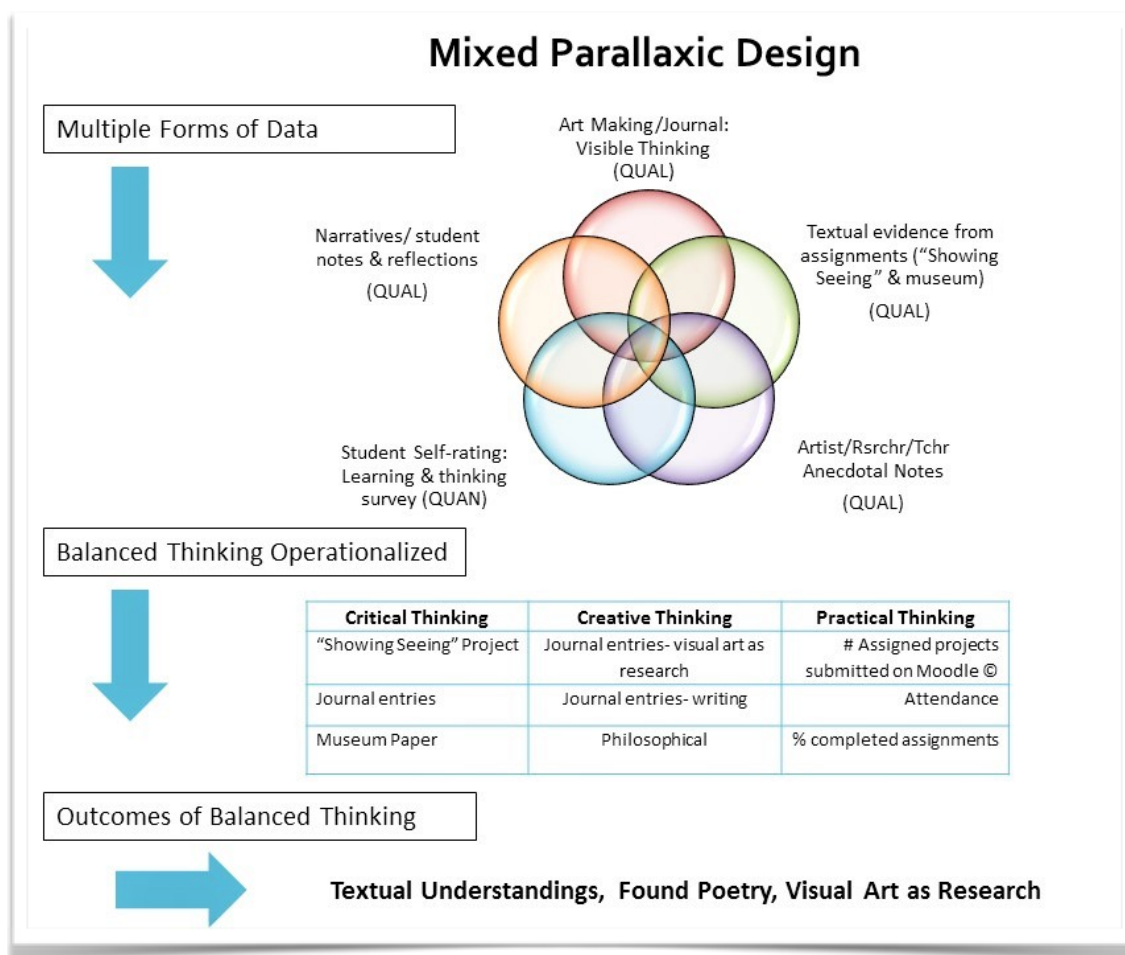


Figure 4. Mixed parallaxic design

## Qualitative Data Analysis

To understand students' creative, critical and practical thinking *and* their lived experiences in this course, qualitative data in various projects (narrative/textual and visual) were analyzed using a hermeneutic cycle of interpretation. The various projects will be explained in subsequent sections of this paper. I wanted to understand students' perception about their learning through understanding, interpretation, and critique of their direct experiences (Gadamer, 1975). An inductive, open-coding method, and repeated readings of the data allowed for naturally occurring patterns and meanings to be uncovered in specific assignments explained below. After collecting and transcribing students' writings, I printed them out and placed the written text on the floor, looking for patterns regarding students' critical or creative thinking; categorizing words and phrases to synthesize findings; looking "in between" for inferences in student and teacher reflections; recoding, re-synthesizing, and reducing all data into overarching themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Color-coding was used to determine commonalities among themes. Then I re-read and recoded until patterns emerged from the data.

## Textual Data: Museum Papers and Showing Seeing

Students' art museum visit essay assignments served as a source of textual data for critical thinking and experiential learning. 15 of the students reported never having been to an art museum before. Although assigned and mandatory, would they actually go? Would I hear evidence of deeper learning? It was a challenge to read and provide feedback on 178 museum essays (only three did not turn in the assignment), but I trusted the process—the value of putting students in charge of their learning and in authentic experiences with art. In the end, I was pleasantly surprised at the connections students made between artworks they viewed in museums and galleries to what they had learned and discussed in class!

Key themes (in descending order) resulting from students' museum visits had to do with students' "increased openness" to: others' opinions, perspectives, and personal creativity; and to experiences relating to art and society as a whole (culture, philosophy, history, or personally). A second key theme was that of "increased engagement": First, in interest and enjoyment of art; second in a personal desire/thirst to create and explore; and third, in personal confidence to analyze art. A few students' discoveries are anonymously shown in the following examples:

*... this helped me use a part of my brain that I'm not use to using. This is the one thing I have learned about art and viewing art; that you have to be open to others opinions even if they're not ones you are familiar with yourself.*

*I now realize that art is just like a history lesson, but told in the point of view of the artist. There were no overdressed snobs in there like I had imagined.*

Textual data were also gathered from an assignment called "Showing Seeing," inspired by Mitchell (2002, p. 176). Students were asked to consider an aspect of what it means to "see" and to write about and represent their idea as a physical object. The ambiguity of the project design caused some student anxiety and initial pushback as they were challenged to look beneath or under the literal meaning of "seeing" for deeper meaning. In the end however, students' metaphoric investigations offered deep awareness and advanced critical thinking, with many reporting this assignment being their favorite. A few examples:

*An object that I believe displays a process of seeing is a mirror. The way we view things is one part but the way we see it after it is gone is another. ... In order for us to truly see something, we have to take the time to process and reflect. Seeing may have many parts to it but what we do with what we see is a part of the process.*

*When you use a gardening shovel you are digging deeper into the soil to see what you can discover... Likewise, when one looks at anything in visual culture it is necessary to dig deeper to really "see" and understand what you are looking at. ...not just glancing...*

About the assignment, one student also wrote, *"This is the assignment that I will always remember. It taught me to look behind and reach for the true meaning...."*

## Textual and Visual Data in Journals

Most students in this class were non-art majors with little art background, yet I was inspired and amazed by the results of their assigned journal entries and artworks, which made their thinking visible. It was in viewing their journals that I truly felt I came to know my students. Even students who did not think art was their "thing" found satisfaction in making-to-learn and using their creativity. For instance:

***"It was in viewing their journals that I truly felt I came to know my students."***

*This way of experiencing and making increased my awareness...by bringing me out of my comfort zone. Art wasn't my thing before, but now it is at least a part...*

*Being able to take the concepts and apply them to myself was very helpful in learning about art in society. I personally was able to experience the ideas, conflicts, topics, etc.*

*This [Journalling] was one of my favorite things to do in this class because a lot of art classes do not involve actual art. I like being hands-on in class and this was a fun way...*

Likewise, students' responses to a prompt about their most meaningful journal assignments, and how the class experience had influenced their views of the role, function, and power of art in society, revealed reoccurring themes regarding their personal, cultural, ethical, spiritual, and societal viewpoints and concerns. A primary finding regarded the multiple ways that journaling had "increased awareness" and fostered students' abilities for: (1) self-awareness (of their own values); (2) other-awareness in terms of the visual world and culture; (3) connectedness to personal memory and values (e.g. *"to see inside myself and see what I'm passionate about"*); and (4) renewed personal creativity and self-expression (e.g. *"a truly amazing way to express yourself"*).

***"Typical of a/r/tographic research, the photo-montage of students' artwork was also a form of disrupting practice, especially as it showcased deep meaning within a community of belonging."***

As is often the case with parallaxic data, the visual artifacts from students' journal entries and assignments resulted in the creation of new artwork—a digital photo montage/slide production created by the researcher. This work served to enhance and corroborate data analyses in a way that more traditional texts and images could not (Sameshima, 2007). The journal entries that led to this photo-montage on art and its relationship to society were those that addressed issues the students had felt less free to speak about in class—becoming a sort of sense-making tool for both students and researcher. Typical of a/r/tographic research, the photo-montage of students' artwork was also a form of disrupting practice, especially as it showcased deep meaning within a community of belonging. Examples of student work included in the montage are seen in Figures 5-7.



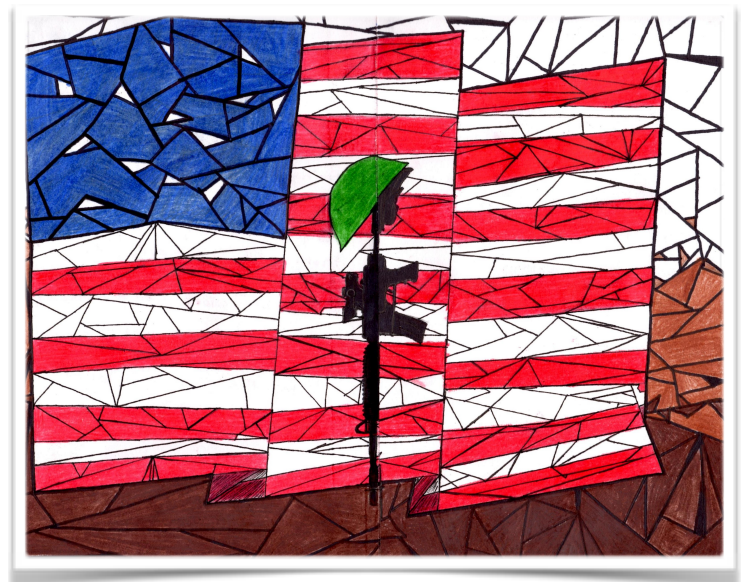
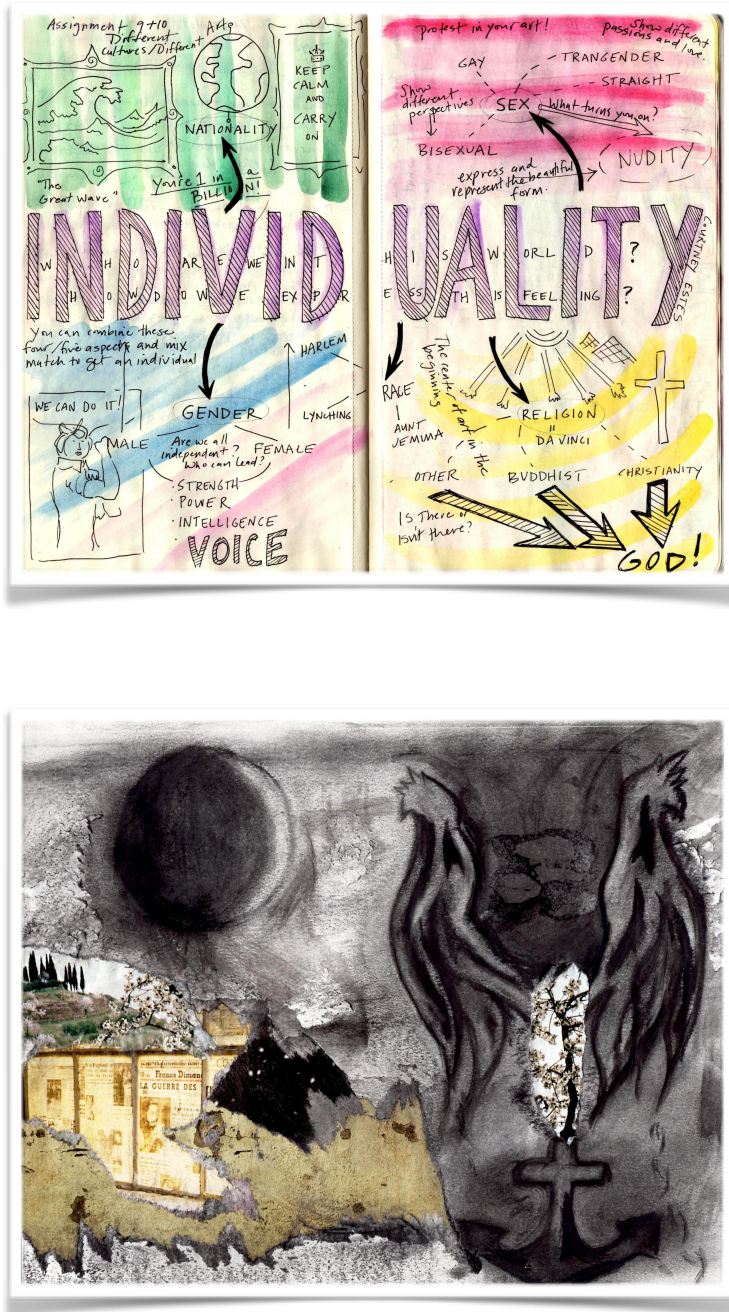


Figure 5. 6. 7. Student Journal Entries



## Found Poetry

After compiling and sifting through textual data from assignments and students' journal reflections, I created found poetry to highlight their essential ideas and questions (Commeyras & Montsi, 2000). After removing every third line as a way to not play favorites with the text and to provide randomization, then repeating the process, a new form of art resulted (Sameshima, 2007; Springgay et al., 2005), one that provided insight into students' lived experiences. This is not something that I had planned in advance, but by playing with students' experienced truths and ideas in this way, and by pushing the normal boundaries of text, hidden themes began to surface. Students' individual and collective voices emerged in a way they could not in traditional text as this was a form of social praxis and shared inquiry.

I had been introduced to found poetry during my master's program at Lesley University many years prior. Leavy (2013) writes that creative writing, including poetry is an authentic form of research that helps to make the familiar strange, drawing others to think in new ways about their world and their values. Barone and Eisner (1997), in considering the use of creative writing in arts-based research, encourage researchers to use it to: 1) create virtual reality; 2) highlight ambiguity; 3) use expressive language; 4) utilize vernacular language; 5) promote empathy; 6) personalize the researcher's voice; and 7) promote aesthetic form.

As recontextualized into *Found Poem: Students' Reflections on Journal Making in a Large Art and Society Class*, this excerpt is featured:

...It pervades every area of our life  
 individuals and how intricately and undividable  
 effects, subliminal or otherwise, that art has...  
 rearrange the thoughts of people...can bind people together  
 ...to emotions while creating it.  
 notice how important art is to the function of our society  
 and they do carry a message. These hidden messages  
 in learning about art in society.

I personally was able to experience  
 everyday life. It made me become more aware of my surroundings  
 we don't notice what's around us  
 even I am "artistic," which I didn't think I was coming into this  
 ...and then watch it come together  
 the journal opened my eyes to new ideas and new ways of thinking  
 obtaining our creations. Forming ideas and expressing them

you don't have to be a talented artist to create  
I needed to do it, and now I love it.

...

this was one of my favorite things to do in this class  
easy way to learn about art and society and I recommend  
change nothing  
irritating at times...but I think that they were refreshing in a certain sense  
did help my awareness  
on how important art is in the world  
has truly opened my eyes to the art world  
changed out of my comfort zone.  
Art wasn't my thing before, but now....

## Art and Thinking Survey

Students' success in learning, and life, is tied to their self-perceptions as creative, critical, and practical learners, and the role of their efforts toward improvement. Students' perceptions of their abilities, along with the regulatory role of emotions, are critical factors in motivation and behavior; their self-beliefs about learning and their capabilities affect their behavior, resilience, and persistence in the face of challenge (Ingalls Vanada, 2011).

As previously mentioned, in order to answer the research question, "How are students' self-perceptions about their learning affected by being in this more learner-centered class?" the *Visual Art and Thinking Survey* was used. Students' self-perceptions about their learning provided complementarity (not seeking convergence) insights to the qualitative and arts-based data.

This qualitative survey (Guba & Lincoln, 1998) was employed as a pragmatic, postmodern way to explore students' perceptions about their learning in four main categories: (a) critical and creative thinking; (b) art and its relation to society; (c) active learning and connection-making; and (d) meaning-making and big ideas. Taken during the final week of the semester, students rated the degree to which their learning and thinking had been enhanced in the class. On a Likert-type scale from 1- 4, students were asked to strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree to questions regarding their learning.

In respect for a substantive arts integration perspective (Marshall et al., 2014) in this mixed method study, data from the survey were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), a computer software analysis program. Questions were deemed internally reliable (.94 at the .05 level).

Viewed in a holistic way, the survey indicated that students were positive about their creative and critical thinking, their ability to make connections and be more active learners, and that the class had both expanded their awareness of visual art and its impact on society, and their awareness of others' diverse perspectives on societal issues (as related to art). Viewed more numerically, of the 145 out of 181 of the students (80%) reported that they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the course had advanced their thinking and use of skills in the following ways: (a) critical thinking in relation to art and society; (b) their own creativity; (c) expanded awareness of visual art and its human significance; (d) connection-making and active involvement in their learning; and (e) greater awareness of diverse perspectives. In this study, students were enlightened through an "art-as-experience" approach (Dewey, 1934). This felt like success, especially since 56% of the students had only one year or less of former visual or creative arts experience.

## Reflections from my Lived Experience

As artist/researcher/teachers, we can affect change by shifting power in the classroom and empowering students' abilities and voices as creators, not just consumers. In my journey as an artist/researcher/teacher and as a learner-centered pedagogue who accepts the challenge to care (Noddings, 1992; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010), I admit that my personal commitment to each student's success and growth created an inner personal conflict for me at times. Sometimes it hurts to care—when you have 181 students and realize it is physically impossible to get to know each one in class or maybe remember their name...or that you cannot help a student care about their learning...or help them find the courage to make their voice heard in the room.

It hurts to have students judge my whiteness, gender, or age; it also hurts to admit when my whiteness might be getting in the way. Yet I strive to decentralize power (actual or perceived), embrace teachable moments toward fostering understanding, and dialogue, and work to build empathy. In teaching this class, I faced my weaknesses and worked to capitalize on my strengths—what Sternberg (2008) says is essential to activating successful intelligence. I invited my students to do the same.

All the active learning strategies in the world cannot help students care, and we cannot control that. However, it is important to meet students where they are, and to accept and encourage their efforts, celebrate their creative leaps, and honor their attempts at independent and critical thought—especially in a community of 181 students that are learning to be community. Building group trust and respect is so important. I admired these students, learned from them, and yes I cared. Caring cannot be divorced from my teaching. I share a few of my journal entries here:

*As I acknowledge my daily fears (not usually to the students, although I must be willing to when appropriate)—of failing in this new role, of not being able to answer their questions, of all that I don't know and have to learn as new faculty ... and pressing through with my convictions, both the students and I were rewarded.*

*Oh, how I want things to be different...to create a culture...a place where it is safe to ask questions and wonder...How to reach 200 students?... and to challenge them all...This creates an inner, personal conflict for me, because I CARE! Yet not one student mentioned this; it is personal and relevant meaning that they seem to crave.*

*Journals/reading them was like a window into the soul of the class. What had worked/what didn't/what students were thinking as they created (or didn't). This is where I got to know my students... I reveled in the reading...*

*I have been teaching for 21 years, but being put outside of my comfort zone with a class this size and staying true/authentic to who I am as a teacher and my commitment to constructivism (as much as possible) has been exhausting (is this sustainable???) and incredibly stretching.*

For others who teach these large humanities courses, for reasons of sustainability they may forego more active learning environments and maintain traditional lecture-style teaching and formal bubble-test assessment methods. It is easier, safer, and less time consuming to lecture. However, my lived experience in this work is that for all the time it took to give 181 undergraduates the freedom to create and write about their creative efforts and feelings about doing so, to read and provide individual feedback on their work, and to create new works based entirely on their creations and ideas, it was still sustaining for me as an LC teacher. It was in the *making* that I felt sustained and inspired. In the exhaustion, it was also life giving as an a/r/tographer.

## Ending Thoughts and Significance

In this study, my students and I experienced art as a way of learning, understanding, and as a means of communicating. For me, as the artist/researcher/teacher, art was both a vital pedagogical tool and a research tool. The creative arts were used as a vehicle for educational research in both the data-gathering phase and the reporting phase (Hickman, 2008). Since this study was situated within a university liberal arts course, it furthers the importance of “the use of the arts not only as a tool to research within the arts, but to research with the arts, humanities, and social sciences in general” (Hickman, 2008, p. 20). Creating art from students’ work—after compiling evidence of their living experiences

through found poetry and video montage, plus sharing it with the class at the end of the semester—became an inspiring and unifying, sense-making tool for our learning community. The act of creating the poems and video montage further deepened my emotional connections with this class, and students shared their deep connection to the work as they listened to the collective voice they had become.

In a postmodern culture, we need to be “bilingual” in our research methods. Even when our first preference is the deep and rich story that qualitative study provides, we can learn from student voices that emerge from other means (in this case students’ self-ratings about their perceptions of their learning in a more learner-centered class).

Corroborative evidence from multiple sources and methods, as well as new art forms resulting from the qualitative data, indicate that engaged, learner-centered teachers can foster transformative spaces of change for students to explore their creative, analytical, and practical potential. Looping back to the original research questions, I end with the following theory to practice findings:

1. Students’ critical, creative, and practical thinking was evident in multiple ways within a more learner-centered classroom. Despite the large class size, visible and written documentation suggests students’ greater awareness, enjoyment, and engagement in the learning experience.
2. Survey analysis showed positive statistical significance and confirmation of students’ self-perceptions in relation to their application of knowledge and understanding in a balanced learning environment.
3. From the artist/researcher/teacher’s lived experience, constructivist pedagogy in large classes is sustained by hands-on engagement with students’ demonstrations of knowledge (while also threatened by size and lecture-style seating). Learner-centered connection-making, personal inquiry, and self-direction improved engagement.

Along with the positive outcomes, I also reflected on what I might do differently. How might I shift even more of the responsibility for and assessment of learning to students? Certainly, the vast amounts of grading at the end of the semester is not sustainable long term (along with the other responsibilities of tenure-track faculty), so it would be necessary to implement more self and peer group assessment, reduce the overall number of learning investigations, propose a team teaching approach, and request a non-lecture style classroom. Particular to LC teaching in large, traditional lecture classes, the inclusion of a variety of student self-assessments is also necessary for promoting students’ abilities as creators, inquirers, and connection makers. Lastly, while student journals allowed a more private way to explore new media and develop their creative confidence, it would be

beneficial to include the group projects utilizing design-thinking processes earlier in the semester. This would jumpstart team building and group trust.

## More Ending Thoughts

In the final days (and nights) of teaching this course, along with two other upper level art education classes, I found a way to manage reading and grading all of students' journals with wit and humor. I told my students that I would be taking their journals to key landmarks in the city, providing feedback, and photo documenting my journey. On the final day I would show them all the places I had been with their journals through a slideshow. They loved it, and it was great fun for me too. We both learned more about our city in the process! Since "planking" was a big deal at the time, here is a picture of me with all 181 journals and a big smile on my face (Figure 8).



*Figure 8. Planking 181 LBST journals*

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